

Revision Guide

The Mountain

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Scrbbley.

“At evening,
something behind me.

I start for a second,
I blench,”

Vocabulary



Blench — To suddenly flinch, in fear or pain. An alternative meaning is to grow pale.

Impenetrable — Something which cannot be penetrated or accessed.

Demarcation — To mark something out (as on a map) or fix the boundary or limits with a dividing line, it can be figurative.

Clambering — Climbing clumsily.

Sifted — When grains are put through a sieve, they become more fine and even.

Story / Summary

Stanza 1: In the evening, the narrative voice (potentially the mountain) notices something behind them. They stop for a moment and flinch, shudder and burn. They do not know their age.

Stanza 2: The morning is different. In daylight, the mountain can see its surroundings, but cannot necessarily decipher them. It asks its age.

Stanza 3: An indefinite amount of time passes and the valleys impede the mountain with mist that blocks the senses, specifically hearing. It doesn't know its age.

Stanza 4: It doesn't want to complain. It is said that the mountain is at fault. It does not get told anything. It asks its age.

Stanza 5: The human made boundaries of the mountain change over time for mountains are not stationary things, this shifting and blurring of boundaries is likened to a tattoo. It does not know its age.

Stanza 6: Night falls and day rises, indicating the passage of time. The mountain gives birth to stumbling souls on their travels, but their state is likened to childhood as it is transient in comparison to the eternal nature of the mountain. It asks its age.

Stanza 7: The mountain witnesses countless deaths; the wings of a bird turn from a petrified state to refined grain (its matter returning back to the earth). The bird's claws are lost and the animal can no longer fend for itself. The mountain still doesn't know its age.



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Speaker / Voice

The mountain is given a voice to speak about its observations of the world, but also its personal feelings and concerns. It observes the life and death of ephemeral entities — the shifting boundaries of human borders, the death and decay of birds. It is particularly preoccupied with the unknown aspect of ageing, and also the access to knowledge around it that cannot be understood — a **metaphor** for our limited capacity to understand the world from a **subjective viewpoint**.

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Form / Structure

- **7 quatrains** that are fairly even and regular.
- **Alternating conclusions to each stanza:** There is a repeated statement and repeated imperative that runs throughout the poem. This creates a regular switch between passive and active that results in a **rocking rhythm**.
- These recurring lines are **monosyllabic** with **basic vocabulary**; Throughout the majority of the poem, the poetic voice of the mountain seems to be articulate, however in these instances it is diminished to a childish state with its lack of knowledge.
- The poem feels like a **broken villanelle** (a form which Bishop liked) but **without the conclusion of a harmonising couplet**, leaving it unresolved. Some lines repeat but in a more fragmented way than a standard villanelle.
- There is **no set rhyme scheme**.
- **Enjambment and end stopped lines are both used:** Many of the stanzas begin with a sense of fluidity but they end abruptly. This seems to symbolise the growth phases of mountains; when they shudder quickly and violently due to shifting tectonic plates. In this way the poem is emulating the natural rhythms of nature.
- The only **caesura** occurs in the opening line of the penultimate stanza. This contrasts the monotonous sense of infinity that the line suggests and draws attention to it.
- 'At evening, something behind me' vs. 'In the morning it is different' - The **antithetical lines** that open the first and second stanzas demonstrate the contrast of night and day.

Themes

- **Eternity vs Ephemerality:** From the perspective of the mountain, humans and their activities are very ephemeral, and the lives of animals pass very quickly. From our perspective mountains seem eternal, but the mountain is preoccupied with its own age, which suggests an anxiety about death or the ageing process.
- **Childhood:** This is a transient state, and the mountain watches its children or some children (young entities) growing up, becoming independent and leaving. To the mountain this process happens too quickly, and this reflects the idea of families; children grow up, and ageing is more evident in children than adults as their physical and mental development is rapid. The older something is, the slower its process of change.
- **Age and the ageing process:** Death, ageing and time are all relative, so perhaps the mountain worries about not knowing its age because of its expiry date, rather than the time it has already lived. It could also relate to the loss of beauty or youth (worries that concern humans). Ageing is also seen as the process by which matter shifts from inert to active. Soil or rock (inorganic forms) is used to build up to organic lifeforms, and back again; this is expressed via the imagery of the deconstructed bird,
- **Death:** The mountain harbours a questioning anxiety about death, but more specifically about when its demise will come. Despite the misconstrued idea that mountains are immortal, there is an acknowledgement that everything has to die in order for other things to be born, this relates to the concept of matter being finite.
- **Boundaries:** The poem defines boundaries between humanity and nature, boundaries imposed on the landscape by humans, the differences between day and night or old and young. The poem seems to undermine the definition of human made boundaries; they seem frivolous and meaningless to nature, as human constraints do not apply.
- **Observation:** The mountain observes the life of its surroundings, births and deaths are emblematic of the transience of ephemerality. It cannot ultimately interfere in the lives of the youth that it watches, as they follow the same path of every other living specimen.
- **Activity / Passivity:** Despite the mountain seeming passive through this observative stance, it shudders and burns - an allusion to the growth of mountains by tectonic plate movements. This is reflected in the alternating final lines of each stanza, from passivity to activity (statement to imperative) concerning its fixation with its own age.
- **Time:** The concept of time is relative to the amount one is given; the mountain does not know how much time it has lived and thus, even though it can see its surroundings changing, it cannot demystify its blurred concept of time.
- **Loneliness:** The mountain lives in solitude, being outside the sense of time's passage that animals and humans experience. Even when its surroundings are revealed, it still cannot relate to the outside world, this creates a feeling of loneliness.

Revision Questions



1. In what ways is the mountain different to the living creatures that it observes?

2. Why does Bishop talk about different times of day throughout the poem?

TASK: Read through the poem make notes about how the structure reflects the meaning in the poem.

PRACTICE ESSAY QUESTION

To what extent does Bishop make you feel that human pursuits are unimportant in 'The Mountain'?