

4. Mortal Immortal
by
Mary Shelley

1. Writer's introduction:

Mary Shelley (née Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, often known as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley) was an English novelist, short story writer, dramatist, essayist, biographer, travel writer, and editor of the works of her husband, Romantic poet and philosopher Percy Bysshe Shelley. Mary Shelley uses a narrative style called the epistolary; this means that the entire text is written in letters. Mary Shelley's best-known book is *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. She wrote several other novels, including *Valperga* (1823), *The Last Man* (1826), *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830), *Lodore* (1835), and *Falkner* (1837).

2. Story's Introduction:

"The Mortal Immortal" is a short story from 1833 written by Mary Shelley. It tells the story of a man named Winzy, who drinks an elixir which makes him immortal. At first, immortality appears to promise him eternal tranquility. However, it soon becomes apparent that he is cursed to endure eternal psychological torture, as everything he loves dies around him. The story explores the themes of the consequences of immortality, the burden of eternal life, and the loss of humanity through endless time.

3. Summary of the story

Mary Shelley's *The Mortal Immortal* is a thought-provoking short story that explores themes of immortality, isolation, and the burden of eternal life. Told as a first-person narrative, the story follows the life of Winzy, a man who inadvertently gains immortality and comes to regret it.

Winzy's Youth and the Potion of Immortality

The story begins with Winzy, now 323 years old, recounting his experiences and lamenting his eternal existence. As a young man, he worked as an apprentice to the alchemist Cornelius Agrippa, a mysterious and powerful figure. Winzy was deeply in love with a woman named Bertha, but their relationship was threatened by his poverty. Bertha's family encouraged her to marry a wealthier suitor, which tormented Winzy.

Cornelius, engaged in secretive experiments, warned Winzy not to disturb a special elixir. One day, believing the potion to be a cure for sorrow rather than an immortality draught, Winzy impulsively drank it in a moment of emotional despair. Initially, he felt revitalized and blissfully happy, confident that his troubles were over.

The Consequences of Immortality

At first, Winzy's life seemed to improve. He married Bertha and was overjoyed in his love. However, as years passed, he noticed something strange—while Bertha aged normally, he remained youthful. At first, this amused and delighted her, but as she grew older and weaker, she became bitter and resentful. People in their community began to whisper about Winzy's unnatural youth, fueling rumors that he had made a pact with dark forces.

As Bertha aged and Winzy stayed the same, their love turned into a source of pain. Bertha, once the joy of his life, now saw him as a curse. The couple was forced to move frequently to escape suspicion. Bertha eventually grew old and frail, and when she finally died, Winzy was left utterly alone, grieving and tormented.

The Burden of Eternal Life

As centuries passed, Winzy came to despise his immortal existence. While he had once feared death, he now saw it as an unattainable release. He watched generations come and go, unable to form lasting bonds or escape the loneliness of outliving everyone he loved.

"I am a very miserable man. Others are condemned to die, but I—"

This line encapsulates his suffering. His eternal youth, once a blessing, became an unbearable burden. He realized that immortality was not the gift he had once imagined, but rather a curse that stripped life of its meaning.

By the end of the story, Winzy wanders the earth, uncertain if he is truly immortal or if he will eventually die. He hopes for an end but fears that he may be doomed to an endless existence. His tragic tale serves as a cautionary reflection on the consequences of seeking eternal life, reinforcing Shelley's theme that mortality gives life its value.

The Mortal Immortal is a haunting meditation on the isolation and suffering that come with unnatural longevity, reminding readers that immortality, far from being a blessing, can be a curse.

4. Characters in the story

1. **Winzy** – The narrator of the story, Winzy is a mortal man who becomes immortal after drinking the elixir of life given to him by Spaldoni. He grapples with the consequences of his immortality and the loneliness that comes with outliving his loved ones.
2. **Bertha** – Winzy's wife, Bertha plays a significant role in the story as one of Winzy's loved ones who ultimately passes away, leaving him to face the reality of his immortality alone.

3. **Spaldoni** – The alchemist who grants Winzy immortality, Spaldoni is a mysterious and enigmatic figure who plays a pivotal role in the transformation of Winzy's life. His experiments with alchemy and the elixir of life set the events of the story in motion.
4. **Leta** – Spaldoni's daughter, Leta adds another layer to the story as Winzy falls in love with her, further complicating his immortal existence. Their relationship explores themes of love and attachment in the face of immortal life.

5. Themes

Mary Shelley's *The Mortal Immortal* explores profound themes such as the burden of immortality, love and loss, isolation, and the dangers of unchecked ambition. Through the tragic journey of Winzy, the story serves as a cautionary tale about the unintended consequences of defying nature.

i. The Burden of Immortality

The central theme of the story is the overwhelming curse of eternal life. Winzy, who drinks the potion unknowingly, initially believes he has found happiness. However, as time passes, he realizes that immortality is not a blessing but a burden. He is forced to watch his loved ones age and die while he remains unchanged.

"I am a very miserable man. Others are condemned to die, but I—"

This quote expresses Winzy's despair, emphasizing how immortality leads to endless suffering rather than joy. His eternal youth becomes a source of pain, making him an outsider in a world where everything else changes.

ii. Love and Loss

Winzy's love for Bertha is another key theme. At first, immortality seems beneficial, allowing him to be with Bertha despite their differences in social status. However, as she grows old while he remains young, their love turns into sorrow. Bertha resents his youth, and their relationship deteriorates.

"She grew old—while I, alas! I remained young."

This quote highlights the inevitable gap between them, showing how immortality ultimately leads to loss. Winzy is trapped in an endless cycle of grief, forever losing the people he cares about.

iii. Isolation and Loneliness

Winzy's unnatural existence isolates him from society. People begin to suspect him of witchcraft, and he is forced to move constantly. His inability to connect with others makes his immortality a form of punishment.

"Men fear me—women shun me."

This line reflects how Winzy's gift of eternal life separates him from the rest of humanity. Unlike mortals, who share the experience of aging and death, he is forever alone.

iv. The Dangers of Unchecked Ambition

The story also warns against the reckless pursuit of knowledge and power. Cornelius Agrippa, the alchemist, represents the dangers of scientific ambition. Although he sought to unlock the secrets of life, he created something unnatural. Winzy, in his ignorance, suffers the consequences of this ambition.

"He bade me beware of the draught—he called it precious—he spoke of it as not yet fit for use."

This moment foreshadows the disastrous effects of the potion, reinforcing the idea that meddling with nature can lead to unintended suffering.

The Mortal Immortal is a haunting exploration of the human condition, emphasizing that mortality gives life its value. Through Winzy's tragic fate, Shelley warns against the dangers of unchecked ambition and the unbearable loneliness of living forever. The story leaves readers questioning whether eternal life is truly a gift or an endless curse.

6. Literary Devices

Mary Shelley employs various literary devices in *The Mortal Immortal* to enhance the story's themes and emotional depth. Through the use of first-person narration, symbolism, irony, foreshadowing, and imagery, Shelley creates a haunting and thought-provoking tale about the curse of immortality.

i. First-Person Narration

The story is written as a first-person narrative, allowing readers to experience Winzy's emotions and struggles firsthand. This perspective makes his suffering more personal and immediate. By directly addressing the reader, Winzy creates a confessional tone, reinforcing the idea that his immortality is a burden rather than a blessing.

"I am a very miserable man. Others are condemned to die, but I—"

This direct expression of despair draws the reader into his inner turmoil, making his suffering more poignant.

ii. Symbolism

Shelley uses symbolism to represent deeper meanings, particularly through the potion. The elixir symbolizes humankind's desire for power and the consequences of tampering with nature. Initially perceived as a cure for sorrow, the potion ultimately becomes a source of endless suffering.

"He bade me beware of the draught—he called it precious—he spoke of it as not yet fit for use."

This warning foreshadows the disastrous effects of the potion, symbolizing the dangers of unchecked scientific ambition.

iii. Irony

Irony plays a crucial role in the story, especially situational irony. Winzy believes he is drinking a potion to cure his sadness, yet it dooms him to centuries of misery. His eternal youth, which might seem desirable, becomes his greatest curse.

"I never dared to estimate the period that yet must pass before age effects me."

This ironic statement highlights his realization that what he once thought was a gift is actually a punishment.

iv. Foreshadowing

Shelley uses foreshadowing to hint at Winzy's tragic fate. Early in the story, Cornelius Agrippa warns him about the potion, and Winzy's impulsive decision to drink it without understanding its effects sets the stage for his suffering.

"I was thirsty, and I drank—I looked at Bertha, and I thought not of death."

This seemingly innocent act foreshadows his eventual realization that he has condemned himself to outlive everyone he loves.

v. Imagery

Vivid imagery enhances the emotional weight of Winzy's suffering. Shelley's descriptions of Bertha aging while Winzy remains unchanged create a striking contrast between mortality and immortality.

"She grew old—while I, alas! I remained young."

The visual contrast emphasizes the unnatural nature of his existence, making his isolation even more tragic.

Through first-person narration, symbolism, irony, foreshadowing, and imagery, Mary Shelley crafts a powerful exploration of immortality's consequences. These literary devices deepen the reader's understanding of Winzy's suffering, reinforcing the story's central theme: that immortality, rather than being a gift, is an endless curse.

7. Writing Style of Mary Shelley in 'The Mortal Immortal'

Mary Shelley's writing style in *The Mortal Immortal* is characterized by a gothic and melancholic tone, vivid imagery, first-person narration, philosophical reflection, and emotional depth. Through these stylistic elements, she creates a deeply introspective and haunting tale about the burden of immortality.

i. Gothic and Melancholic Tone

Shelley employs a gothic tone throughout the story, emphasizing themes of isolation, supernatural elements, and the tragic consequences of defying nature. The melancholic tone reflects the protagonist's eternal suffering, making the reader feel his loneliness and regret.

"I am a very miserable man. Others are condemned to die, but I—"

This line sets the tone of despair and regret, characteristic of gothic literature, where the supernatural leads to human suffering rather than empowerment.

ii. First-Person Narration and Confessional Style

The story is presented in the form of a personal confession, giving readers direct access to Winzy's thoughts and emotions. This first-person perspective makes his suffering more intimate and relatable, allowing Shelley to explore deep existential questions about life and death.

"Why did I not expire with her?"

This rhetorical question highlights Winzy's inner turmoil and regret, drawing readers into his emotional pain. The confessional style makes his narrative feel more like a personal lament, reinforcing the theme of eternal suffering.

iii. Vivid Imagery

Shelley's use of rich and descriptive imagery brings the story to life, particularly when contrasting Winzy's immortality with the natural aging of others. The description of Bertha's transformation from youth to old age while Winzy remains unchanged emphasizes the unnatural consequences of his immortality.