



Nothing Poems Can Stay: Ephemerality as Postmodern Poetics from Frost to John Ashbery

Komi Amedokpo

Article history:

Submitted: Oct. 10, 2025

Revised: Nov. 25, 2025

Accepted: Dec. 10, 2025

Keywords:

Ephemerality, John Ashbery,
postmodern poetry, change,
transience

Abstract

This study theorizes ephemerality as a postmodern poetics logic, instead of simply a theme of loss or nostalgia. It traces a genealogy of transience from Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens, on impermanence, and Sigman Freud's reflections on value, and lastly, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's "enduring ephemeral." The study places ephemerality into a context that positions meaning as temporally contingent and fundamentally unstable. Therefore, the article argues that John Ashbery radicalizes ephemerality as he translates it into poetic form. With syntactic disjunction, temporal drift, indirection, and resistance to closure, Ashbery performs impermanence rather than representing it in his poetry. Meaning, therefore, becomes provisional and distributive, which engages the reader in a continual process of interpretation. In this way, ephemerality functions as both an aesthetic style and an epistemological condition of the postmodern poetry.

Corresponding author:

Komi Amedokpo,

Université de Lomé

E-mail: amedokpok@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7841-4011>

Uirtus © 2025

This is an open access article under CC BY 4.0 license

Introduction

My first, and perhaps most brutal lesson about how quickly life can break was a regular Friday afternoon of playing football in my village that ended with me finding my grandmother lying in her own blood. That memory shattered the naïve notion I had harbored in childhood that the people I cared about would always be around. I learned a hard truth due to her unexpected absence: nothing is guaranteed in this world. After this experience, ephemerality was no longer a concept. I began to realize how everything in the world was temporary. People, animals, flowers, even the seasons, and my own body all transformed, disappeared, or changed ultimately. The world, which once seemed stable, revealed itself as a vast theater of change.

This study considers Ashbery's work through the lens of postmodern ephemerality: loss, change, and ephemerality are more than thematic elements and represent the structuring logics of all loss and change; the logics of change itself, whether meaning, time, or form, and culminate in Ashbery's refusal of closure, coherence, or any stable reference. It again examines how poets like Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and John Ashbery, as well as thinkers such as Freud, Brehm, and Chun, confront the unsettling truth that all beauty is fleeting. Simultaneously, it poses a provocative question: if everything is transient, does that render life meaningless—or, conversely, does it enhance the significance of each fleeting moment? By blending personal memory with critical analysis, this study suggests that ephemerality is not only the doom of all things but also the hidden condition that gives them their radiance. In facing the certainty of change, we may find not just loss but a new perspective on beauty, time, and ourselves.

From Gold to Dust: Poetic and Philosophical Genealogies of Transience

The framework of Ashbery's poetry is built on a solid foundation of ephemeral poetry and a stream of consciousness writing style, which he has developed and applied over his career. But we have to appreciate that he is not working in a vacuum and his poetry of ephemerality has its roots in a long philosophical and poetic tradition. With his writing in ephemeral poetry, he explores a long-standing domain of the poetic craft that deals with the transient character of life and the ephemeral quality of memories. We have a long cultural and literary tradition that explores the same uncomfortable,

unsettling truth that Ashbery is working with: what we most cherish, what we hold onto hardest, is on its way to vanishing. This section reads Frost's bleakly stated transiency, "nothing gold can stay," and Stevens's "death is the mother of beauty" against Freud's transience.

Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay" establishes the context of this section because it adequately epitomizes ephemerality. Frost's poem reveals the evanescent aspect of life. Thus, in early spring, the fresh buds on trees are gold, and many flowering plants bloom. According to the speaker, "Nature's first green is gold, / Her hardest hue to hold. / Her early leaf's a flower" (222). The metaphor of "gold" emphasizes the flowers' shining beauty. However, the sad reality is that this colorful and beautiful picture quickly disappears from the natural world. In point of fact, the fresh blossoms on trees represent flowers, yet these flowers also disappear. Soon enough, these flowers become leaves, which fall to the ground shortly thereafter. The poet compares this to the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden. And this is also compared to the promising early light of morning, which vanishes during the day. The poet demonstrates that nothing beautiful, fresh, or pure can last forever. To emphasize flowers' shortness, the speaker maintains that they last only an hour. Consequently, one can see these transitions portrayed:

Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay. (222-23)

The poem's title gets a straightforward meaning that every potential reader can easily understand. According to Robert Frost, nothing – no exception to gold – can transcend momentariness. The poet uses nature and the Garden of Eden symmetrically as metaphors to demonstrate that, no matter how beautiful something might be, it is ephemeral and will last only for a short time. The poet designates nature as a symbol of impermanence, the idea that all the good and beautiful things in life will sooner or later disappear. Nature is often identified by its beauty. Robert Frost, recognizing this ephemeral aspect of nature, decides to make his view clear. Gold is one of the most preferred ores because of its glamorous beauty. But Frost believes that even gold cannot stay permanently. It will one day fade away. Eventually, Frost corroborates the fact that gold's radiance does tarnish and scratch over time. It obviously will disappear, just as the old leaf slowly declines to give way to a

new one.

Similarly, the poet uses the imagery of the Garden of Eden. According to the biblical story about the creation of human beings, the first created man was put into the garden known as Eden. Since not everything lasts forever, the paradise-like garden turned into grief due to the fall of man. Man's happiness in the garden melted as he was banned from the garden. Later in the whole Bible, readers can only see a very few mentions of this garden, except for some allusions. Actually, the poet mentions Eden in this poem to let us see how ephemeral it was. One must not forget how the ephemeral transformation of *dawn* (emphasis mine) into day. As the leaf, the flower, and the garden have witnessed transformation due to their transiency, "So dawn goes down to day," as you can see in the seventh line. Dawn used here may allude to the whole day. In fact, dawn lasts only for a short time. On using dawn alongside leaf and flower, the poet wants us to question their transitory aspect. Laconically, Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay" extensively explores ephemerality and change.

Demonstrating the importance of transiency, Wallace Stevens also anthropomorphizes death, which he considers to be the mother of beauty. In his famous poem "Sunday Morning," the poet resonates that "Death is the mother of beauty" (Stevens 68). I believe that Wallace's concern in this statement must be seriously considered. In fact, this anthropomorphism parades death's value in the fact that it catalyzes beauty. In this poem, the poet takes death to be the change-maker. Therefore, it must be admitted that Wallace Stevens envisions questioning death and change since he thinks that death begets change. Let us consider how the poet describes this fact in the sixth stanza of the poem:

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
They never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang? (Stevens 69)

Starting the stanza with the interrogation strongly demonstrates Stevens's interest in the question of death and change. In fact, the three question marks symbolize the poet's interest in change or transition. As the poet asks: "Does

ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs / hang always heavy in that perfect sky, / Unchanging...?" These are rhetorical questions that do vindicate Stevens' perception of how change characterizes almost everything in the world. As a rule, the ripe fruit is liable to change position, dropping from the tree and finding another location on the ground. This fruit will compulsorily metamorphose as soon as it hits the ground. It can either be eaten or it perishes. Sometimes, the seeds can germinate to give new plants, and the cycle continues. Likewise, it is impossible and maybe miserable to see the bough of a tree remains unchanging over time. To be real, the boughs do change as long as they are strongly attached to the trunk of living trees. By the changing process, the boughs of the tree grow to yield fruits. These allusions made by the poet reveal the fact that Wallace Stevens wants the reader to reconsider change as enacted, especially in the poem by death.

In other respects, the aesthetics of nature lies in death. Since death begets comeliness according to this famous poet, every beautiful thing will have to die or disappear someday to give birth to another beautiful one. The opposite, therefore, will render unto the immortality some unconceivable ugliness. Truly, immortality is ugly or unpleasing. If something does not undergo change and is static, it becomes unattractive. Actually, from Stevens' death-hailing lines, it is evident that nature's beauty is generally defined in death. The poet's paradox appears to be difficult to believe, but a careful analysis of nature yields a clear-cut and promising result. For instance, it is when one flower dies that other blossoms with a new and good-looking appearance. Let us assume that all the flowers or leaves that once sprang out on a tree do not fade away or die until this day. You can imagine how monotonous and unpleasant the aesthetics of that tree will be. There will be no change. And one will be unable to appreciate the beauty of change. Ultimately, beauty shows well when there is constant change in the appearance of the viewed thing, especially in nature. According to Freud,

Transience value is scarcity in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment. It was incomprehensible, I declared, that the thought of the transience of beauty should interfere with our joy in it. As regards the beauty of Nature, each time it is destroyed by winter it comes again next year, so that in relation to the length of our lives it can in fact be regarded as eternal. (Freud 305)

This is how the philosopher even values transience. In fact, if things were not

subjected to ephemerality, it would be very difficult to appreciate their beauty. For instance, if all the dead people, including animals on the planet Earth, were still alive physically, the beauty of this world would be polluted, and it would probably be very difficult for creatures in general to live with a little peace. Precisely, if my late grandmother, who died many years ago, were still alive, time would sabotage her beauty. Even before her death, I witnessed that her appreciated beauty had been disappearing due to her age. This lets us reconsider elderly people's lives. Once they were very fresh and beautiful, but now the law of change decreases their beauty. In fact, beauty disappears with time. You cannot fail to admit the fact that your beauty or handsomeness is declining in the course of time. It will never be static but flickering. And this is what sustains natural beauty, according to Sigmund Freud, because when one beauty disappears, another comes. In the end, Wallace Stevens eventually raises the question of ephemerality. Emphatically, the poet reveals how death shortens the lifespan of things, including living creatures. Surely, death maintains the aesthetics of our nature.

Indeed, Frost's short and thought-provoking poem of forty words summarizes this essay. Again, the speaker claims that nothing good or beautiful will transcend time. Even the great Claudius Ptolemy confessed the ephemeral aspect of humanity. Exclusively, he admits the fact that he is himself ephemeral. As a matter of fact, he says: "I know that I am mortal by nature and ephemeral, but when I trace at my pleasure the windings to and fro of the heavenly bodies, I no longer touch earth with my feet. I stand in the presence of Zeus himself and take my fill of ambrosia" (Ptolemy, quoted in Gingerich 55). This clear-cut confession of the mortality of the human species showcases Ptolemy's awareness of human ephemerality. Even today, Ptolemy can only be recalled as a great figure in human history. It is impossible to see him physically and actively in any human activity today. As a physical figure, he was cleansed from the face of the earth forever. It becomes so obvious to acknowledge his ephemerality, too. Besides, reading the introduction to *The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness and Joy*, I come across John Brehm's outstanding statement that

The breath arises and falls away, sounds appear and disappear, bodily sensations vibrate in one spot and then another, thoughts leapfrog over each other and are gone—*everything changing* (italics mine), coming into form, and slipping into formlessness again. In the external world,

it is no different. A stone may occupy reality longer than a fruit fly or a thought, but a difference in duration is not a difference in destination or destiny. In time, the thought, the fly, and the stone all arrive at the same place. (xxiv)

This far-reaching statement justifies Robert Frost's portrayal of change. Actually, Brehm describes the flickering aspect of everything on Earth. The author uses *enumeration*, which is a rhetorical term for the listing of details – a type of amplification to show the importance – to supersize the sense of ephemerality. In fact, the breath, the sounds, bodily sensations, and thoughts respectively change because of their instability. Truthfully, these enumerated things are never stable but transitory. This quote lets us believe Brehm wants us to be convinced that everything is changing and is subject to transition. By the way, the mentioned things in the passage change their forms and manifestations again and again. That is why, a stone which seems to be eternal because of its endurance in the course of time will at last vanish as time goes by, just like the way thoughts are always fleeting in the mind. Boldly, Brehm explains that even stones are never immortal. They are instead ephemeral in their essence because a difference in duration does not necessarily mean a difference in destination or destiny.

Considering the rising of the sun and its going down, it is worth noting the manifestation of ephemerality. It is always wonderful when the sun rises after a long and cold night. Yet, with no surprise, the sun will effortlessly disappear again after some hours. Equally, seeing a blossomed flower gladdens the heart, but after some sunshine, the aesthetics of the flower sadly fade away. Again, the example of the evanescent nature of flowers strongly reveals the ephemeral aspect of everything on the face of the earth. Leaning on Even Ryōkan, who considers the ephemeral side of flowers to be a timeless truth, I want to believe that there is nothing on this planet that cannot be hugely influenced by this timeless truth. This timeless truth is also acknowledged in Pierre de Ronsard's "Of Ode à Cassandra," where the poet stresses flowers' transience. In fact, Ryōkan highlights: "I sought a timeless truth: the flower's glory is just another form of dust" (quoted in Brehm 6). Emphatically, despite the magnificence of the flower, it will fade away and turn to nothing but dust. The flower might be exuberantly good-looking, but in the course of the day, it will die out, and it is expected to be thrown into a garbage can. And only their memories will remain. Undeniably, this poet's

standpoint discloses the reality not only about flowers but also humans, who, as we know, can be equated with the flowers since, according to the biblical sense of the creation, humans are formed out of the dust of the earth, and they must therefore become dust.

Accordingly, for a better understanding, a biblical metaphor is given to strengthen the idea that humans are ephemeral. Thus, “All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away” (1 Pet. 1.24, *King James Version*). Flesh in this quote stands for all beings, including animals as well as humans. In this way, the author likens human beings to the flower of grass. As people are convinced by the natural facts that the flowers of the grass do not always endure in time, it is likely to note that all humans will fade away just like flowers that never last in their coming into the world. And this strongly testifies to our being ephemeral in all things. Some might argue against the conception of transiency as being considered in this study, but my worry for them lies in the fact that they forget to see all the changes that occur around them. Even the system of human respiration reveals transiency.

The question is to know why humans constantly breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. You can agree that the air that we breathe into our lungs does not stay there eternally. As it happens, this air is exhaled and renewed after a second. And if we fail to do so, it means that we are disappearing from this physical world, and if nothing is done quickly about this situation in the medical domain precisely, we will quickly and definitely cease from living on the earth because we are irrefutably ephemeral. Now, the truth of the matter is that everything about us is doomed to transit because of our incapacity to stay eternally. All without exception do last but for a very short period. Let us take, for example of the diplomas and the certificates that our famous Ashbery once got and was very proud of. They are probably of value when the poet himself was alive. Nevertheless, since the latter died on that very September 3, 2017, all these highly cherished documents have become things of less value. In the same way, the documents that we always struggle to possess will one day cease to fulfill their purposes because the owners have been victimized by their ephemerality. As concerning Ashbery's files, they might only serve as objects of recollections of the giant Ashbery's past; nevertheless, they will no longer serve their genuine value as they had when the poet was once alive. In other words, their value has drastically

changed.

For good reason, the American writer Alexandra Elle portrays the ephemerality that flowers harbor in her poem entitled “Rebirth.” The poem’s title spotlights the flickering side of flowers, too. Rebirth literally stands for metempsychosis, which is the passing of the soul at death into another body, either human or animal. The latter is supposed to live as the substitute for the dead one. This also showcases a transitory essence that the poetess is giving to the flower. Definitely, flowers seem to be the most appropriate metaphor for humans when it comes to discussing immortality. The poem itself reads:

There will be moments when
you will bloom fully and then
wilt, only to bloom again. (Elle 52)

Again, Elle’s septet (seven-line poem) exhaustively displays transiency, even as it can be seen with the flower. In fact, this poem is a straightforward address to every reader who might be ignorant of his or her ephemeral life, though the writer’s purpose seems to encourage readers who might be going through some very tough hardship to be resilient because problems are fleeting. In this very way, the poetess compares the difficult situations of every human being to the ways flowers blossom and shortly fade away. The metaphor joins Robert Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay.” Truly speaking, the situations that we encounter in this life are never meant to be eternal in our lives. They are transitory.

Besides, the personal pronoun “you,” the reference, represents the reader who will bloom in a moment and wilt or fade in another. In this manner, the poet compares human life to that of a flower. This comparison is called “chremamorphism,” a literary technique meant to compare a human being to an object. While flowers have the capacity to irreversibly bloom afterward, the human species is liable to die or disappear once and for all. This literary device reminds us of the fact that we are ephemeral, just like flowers. Even if the poet’s formal intention is to invite us to learn from flowers’ resilience to resist whatever suffocating situation that we might encounter in our lives, I believe that he portrays the temporary life of humanity that we all need to consider carefully.

Accordingly, almost everything in this world is subject to impermanence. My grandmother, who was once very sturdy and lively and beautiful, is no more. And all her beauty and her entire being have

disappeared, and she will never come back here again physically. Never has she been able to appear again in this world so far. Even though, in my community, some people (traditionally) believe in reincarnation, we have not been able to behold her regenerated until today. And in case her reincarnation is identified, this will never be the full replication of my grandmother. They could share some physical or psychological characteristics; however, the so-called regenerated being will not be able to utterly equalize the dead one. This idea about reincarnation is just a soothing ideology invented to ease the pain of loss generated by the momentariness of human beings. In *On Transience*, Sigmund Freud recounts an experience he had with a poet while going on a summer walk through a smiling countryside. As they were viewing the beauty of nature, the poet suddenly looked disturbed as he realized that all this beautiful sight of nature was fated to disappear with the arrival of the winter season. On commenting on this incident, the philosopher said:

The poet admired the beauty of the scene around us but felt no joy in it. He was disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and all the beauty and splendor that men have created or may create. All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom ... But this demand for immortality is a product of our wishes too unmistakable to lay claim to reality: what is painful may none the less be true. I could not see my way to dispute the transience of all things, nor could I insist upon an exception in favour of what is beautiful and perfect. But I did dispute the pessimistic poet's view that the transience of what is beautiful involves any loss in its worth. (Freud 305)

Freud sums it all up when his above statement is considered. According to the statement, the poet and the philosopher come to understand that with no exception, all is doomed to go through the process of ephemerality. It is well known that nature reveals its beauty during the summer season. In point of fact, in summer, nature is full of bright colors, everything around is flourishing, including singing birds; plants and trees bear fruit, and many flowers bloom in various colors. Everyone can feel the amazing scent in the air. However, the poet's worry comes to this wish to experience the blessedness of nature. And that wish will never be granted because after some

days, the changing aspect of nature will demonstrate, causing this pleasing state of nature to disappear as soon as autumn comes. This season of the year, which is highly appreciated, can never stay eternally due to the changing principle of nature itself. As a consequence, nothing ever beautiful will be able to escape this sword of Damocles. The famous philosopher shows that there is no point in arguing against the fact that all is ephemeral because it is a timeless truth.

In other respects, the visual artist and writer Mary O'Neill believed that the ephemeral art is not political but an art of mourning, that is, a way to work through the pain of bereavement, disenfranchised grief, and ambiguous loss (quoted in Purpura 13). If Mary O'Neill claimed that ephemeral art is intended to mourn a loss, I would maintain that most art cocoons evanescence because we often mourn someone dead. And this death shows the person's mortality, and this person can vanish quickly in the course of time. In fact, every living thing is in one way or another influenced by ephemerality. Almost everything changes as time passes by. As a result, a tree planted today may not have the same height as days go by. As long as there is life in the tree, it will always keep going through metamorphoses. In fact, any tree that is alive and planted in the ground will continuously change. Considering human beings on the same basis, there is an ever-changing attitude. An individual who has never witnessed impermanence does not exist. The evidence shows that I am not quite the same person as I was when I was a babe on my mother's lap. I have actually gone through multiple transformations, and that is what proves that I am alive.

Otherwise, considering the technological development, it seems like the machines that we create try to entertain us with the illusion that we now have the capacity to overcome ephemerality. However, despite the advent of the industrial revolution, which enabled humans with some sophisticated machines, having some temporary memories to keep things enduring in time, we still encounter the problem of temporality. Nevertheless, what human beings have to keep in mind is that most of these machines will not last forever. They could be enduring in the course of time. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun explains how technology makes the ephemeral look enduring in the process of time. For him, "If our machines' memories are more permanent, if they enable a permanence that we seem to lack, it is because they are constantly refreshed so that their ephemerality endures, so that they may store

the programs that seem to drive our machines” (Chun 167). I believe that humans come to the use of machines as our last resort because we acknowledge our incapacity concerning ephemerality. Human beings are ephemeral, which is why they resort to machines. Chun furthermore reveals that “Memory, with its constant degeneration, does not equal storage; although artificial memory has historically combined the transitory with the permanent, the passing with the stable, digital media complicates this relationship by making the permanent into an enduring ephemeral, creating unforeseen degenerative links between humans and machines” (148). All this proves that ephemerality transcends all and has influence on almost everything in the world of sense.

John Ashbery and the Open-Ended Poem: Form as Ephemerality

A shift in Ashbery’s poetry moves from thematic reflections of transience to a postmodern poetics defined by a structurization of ephemerality through indeterminacy, syntactic disjunctions, and temporal drifts. His poetry doesn’t stabilize a singular meaning; rather, it brings forth the contingent nature of perception and interpretation and symbolizes impermanence in the structural form. Where previous poets speak of transience, Ashbery makes it the principle of his artistic craft. His works talk of both time and change, but they also perform time and change with disjunctive syntax, constantly shifting perspective, and an absence of closure. Ashbery claims he finds “no direct statements in life,” and in his own way, imitates life. This section argues that with seemingly open-ended poems, Ashbery creates a world of transience, a world in which the poem becomes a site where meanings arrive, flicker, and dissipate, much like lives and moments in time.

Ashbery is eventually affected by the question of life and transience. The reason he chooses to make his poems open-ended and multiple in meaning is to metamorphose the complexity of life itself. To back up his philosophy, he confessed to Bryan Appleyard in an interview: “I don’t find any direct statements in life. My poetry imitates or reproduces the way knowledge or awareness comes to me, which is by fits and starts and by indirection. I don’t think poetry arranged in neat patterns would reflect that situation. My poetry is disjunct, but then so is life” (quoted in Blair). In this, the poet cautions us to consider poetry as life. Most of the time, life is complicated because some of the things pertaining to it are unpredictable.

And for Ashbery, as there are no direct statements in life, poetry should imitate this. Consequently, writing poetry should be more focused on jotting words and statements down in the same way things happen in real life, with spontaneity. Therefore, giving oneself some regulations about the writing techniques limits the flow of that spontaneity which characterizes life. Poetry should follow the pattern of life. That is, writing poetry should be much like describing that constant change or shift as revealed in life experiences.

Interestingly, these disruptions trigger sudden formal instabilities—changes in sentence structure, shifts in the point of view, and alterations in the meaning of the language used—so that the reader does not reach interpretive closure, and instead remains positioned within the postmodern economy of meaning that is provisional, fragmented, and perpetually deferred. For instance, by considering the first seven lines of Ashbery’s “Worsening Situation,” it is obvious that the poet shows nature’s ephemeral aspect:

Like a rainstorm, he said, the braided colors
Wash over me and are no help. Or like one
At a feast who eats not, for he cannot choose
From among the smoking dishes. This severed hand
Stands for life, and wander as it will,
East or west, north or south, it is ever
A stranger who walks beside me. O seasons (3)

There are two important images to be considered in these lines. The first is “rainstorm” and the second one is “feast.” Both images translate transience. For instance, a rainstorm – a natural situation whereby strong wind and perhaps heavy rain are demonstrated – can never last eternally. The rainstorm always disappears after some time. Therefore, the Ashberian allusion to this natural condition reveals the poet’s portrayal of ephemerality. Again, this image is used in a simile. In fact, the poet compares braided colors by the presence of the preposition “like,” which shows that both elements being compared share the same characteristics. Since Ashbery alludes to a rainstorm, I believe his usage of the term “braided colors” pictures a rainbow. A close consideration of rainbows shows how ephemeral this natural phenomenon is. As soon as the rainbow – represented in this poem by braided colors – appears in the sky, it quickly vanishes after a short time. Truly, this natural phenomenon does not prove itself to be static. Even though it reappears on some other day, a revealed rainbow can never stay eternally because it is

ephemeral and has to undergo changes.

In addition, Ashbery especially employs apostrophes to call readers' attention to focus more on the problem of change and ephemerality rather than anything else. He blatantly points to the seasons that irrefutably symbolize change. "O seasons" (3), the poet calls out. This apostrophe reinforces the very importance the poet gives to the changing aspect of things in his poetry. The use of the terminology of "seasons" strengthens Ashbery's consideration of change because "season" holds a profound meaning in human life. A season stands for a division of the year based on weather changes, ecology, and daylight hours in a given region. It is in the rainy seasons that we can see herbs, plantations, and trees in their beautiful green shapes. The more it rains, the greener the weather is. And it is in this time that farmers and growers are happy seeing their plantations growing healthily. Here comes another time when the clouds refuse to melt into water. And at this time of the year, which is called dry season, the weather entirely changes the greener look. Farmers cannot properly grow at these times, or maybe it is the time for harvesting what has been cultivated during the rainy season. Considering the fact depicted above, we cannot dare deny the changing aspect of the weather. These latter changes in the course of the year. Therefore, if the poet uses this terminology, we might conclude that he is poetically evidencing change in his poetry. For him, poetry needs to shift from one topic and/or style to the other. The writer should not be incarcerated in a specific topic or style. This restricts the poet's creativity and imagination.

Besides, Ashbery metaphorically compares life to a ride. To ride means to travel or move from a given location to another using a horse, bicycle, or any other vehicle. This entails a change of location. Let us consider how the speaker of Ashbery's "Worsening Situation" puts it:

I am because of you but in the meantime the ride
Continues. Everyone is along for the ride,
It seems. Besides, what else is there?
The annual games? //
I've tried recreation,
Reading until late at night, train rides
And romance. (3)

First, there is a dependence in life. For instance, I am because of my parents. Had it not been my parents, I should have had nothing to do here on earth.

They brought me here. In the same way, every creature lives due to nature. I wonder how humanity can survive without being endowed with nature. We are the products of nature. And since nature is never static and life is characterized by metamorphosis, Ashbery thinks of metaphorizing life and ride. When I ride my bicycle or any kind of motorized vehicle, I do not remain in the same location. There is always a movement forward. Therefore, the poet highlights the movement of life, which is changing over time. Otherwise, the poet's magnificent intelligence and wisdom are void and worthless without the reader. The reader plays a vital role in the life of the writer as well as the viewer in the life of the artist. Truly, the reader helps shape the poetry or the art. This readership influence describes the change in the output of the artist.

Besides, I think both Ashbery and Kelly Clarkson in the song "Because of You" show similarly how the influence of someone could and should alter another. In this song, which I take to be a parody of Ashbery's "I am because of you" in the poem "Worsening Situation," Kelly Clarkson expresses her fear of losing the people she loves because she has had a first-hand experience of a failed relationship (Shelton). As a child living with her parent who suffered the challenges of divorce, she believes that life thrives on relationships, which is why she will never jeopardize hers because of the sense of dependence that lies in a relationship. This joins Ashbery's strong statement that his existence depends on the other. Therefore, I always need the other person in my life because they generally define who I am. If this dependency is evident, just as both Ashbery and Clarkson maintain, we must not see it as difficult to believe I change because of you. Even nature dictates this change. It is your strongest expectations of me that dictate my ways of living. For instance, in the Harmattan season in my country, Togo, you will see a lot of people wearing pullovers owing to the coldness of weather. Besides, you and I cannot go out in winter without multiple clothes put on in certain parts of the world, mostly Europe (Oymyakon, Russia) and America (Maine, Vermont, Montana, and Wyoming). All this sustains the idea that we all change due to the seasons. It is because seasons are ephemeral that they change. Similarly, our changing aspect dramatizes our ephemerality.

When we come back to our former quote from the poet, we plainly see that the ride *continues*. It is rotating. Ashbery claims that poetry should imitate the Water Cycle because everyone (including poetry) is along for the ride. Since the poem is being written by the one who is always on the ride and

is constantly changing locations, there is no point in writing about a fixed idea or being subject-focused. Poetry should also go for the ride to explore many terrains. I think there are many things out there to explore that are so rich and useful for the benefit of all. The poet's mind stands as the universe wherein there are billions of ideas flowing like a river. For Ashbery, to abide by all these meticulous rules and regulations about writing a poem is a waste of time and resources. Although John Ashbery has indeed been introduced to all these restrictions, he breaks the laws to explore the unreached places. The poet maintains: "I know all this/ But can't seem to keep it from affecting me" (3). He does let himself be controlled by any outside movement but only that one within him.

Besides, in "As You Came from the Holy Land," the poet utilizes the adverbs of time denoting the change or temporality. For instance, the incessant use of "yesterday", "today", and "tomorrow" is to be seriously considered. Yesterday symbolizes the past and today denotes our present time, and tomorrow stands for the next generation. We can call this era, which is known as a time period of indeterminate length and generally more than a year. We can deduce here that Ashbery is talking about the poets before his career as a poet. The poet under scrutiny has just laid emphasis on the recurring changes observed through the years. In fact, the existence of a poet or an artist lasts for a period. And after this, they will exist no more. The Ashberian poems epitomize the ephemerality of life. This temporary aspect of life characterizes the essence of human life. And this is an undeniable truth.

Moreover, in the same poem, Ashbery could not hesitate to clearly describe change. Still in "As You Came from the Holy Land," the poet reminds us of how the seasons of the year change. This allusion strongly demonstrates that the poet wants us to reconsider the ephemeral aspect of the world. As evidence, the speaker maintains:

as from other times other scenes that were taking place
the history of someone who came too late
is hatching as the *seasons change* and tremble
it is finally as though that thing of monstrous interest were happening
in the sky
but the sun is setting and prevents you from seeing it. (7)

Effectively, history is produced through the changing of seasons. My history, for example, hatches when I go through changes in time or age. An

individual's history constitutes an assemblage of seasons that metamorphose through time. Since we cannot talk of change without seasons, human history is the agglomeration of ephemeral situations that occurred in his or her life. Human life spun is itself ephemeral. This explains the fact that a series of events in one's life is never eternal but temporary. This temporariness is "knowing as the brain does it can never come about / not here not yesterday in the past / only in the gap of today filling itself / as emptiness is distributed / in the idea of what time it is / when that time is already past" (7). Admittedly, the mind does symbolize ephemerality. In this regard, the mind is considered as something "driven by fluctuation, transformation and open-endedness" (Rush 60). You can never stabilize ideas in your mind. As one idea jumps in, the other is already popping up as times change. Ashbery is just calling our attention to how thoughts are transitory and ephemeral.

Furthermore, in "A Man of Words," John Ashbery uses the image of a dream to pinpoint ephemerality. In this poem, the speaker showcases the temporality of dreams in a person's life. Dreams are never eternal. They come to the individual interchangeably. For the poet, "Other dreams came and left while the bank / Of colored verbs and adjectives was shrinking from the light ... But most of all loved the particles / That transform objects of the same category / Into particular ones" (9). The image of dreams – ideas – which are always changing in the mind of the poet himself, reveals his interest in discussing the ephemeral aspect of the mind in general. Just like ideas refuse to be static in the mind, dreams do not want to come and stay forever. Additionally, the poet's usage of the ironic phrase "the bank of colored verbs and adjectives" is meaningful. This metonymy represents nothing but the poem, which is constituted of verbs, adjectives, and other parts of speech. In fact, the bank is used here metaphorically. Defined as a financial institution, the bank is a secure place for keeping valuable things like money, will, title deed, to mention a few. In banks, people make deposits, and these are not supposed to be kept there for life. Money is never static in a bank. It is always deposited to be withdrawn over time. I think Ashbery decided to employ this terminology to symbolize poetry. Poetry, therefore, is a bank wherein verbs, adjectives, and other parts of speech are piled together by the poet. The withdrawer stands for the reader who collects or withdraws words or data to use in the creation of meaning from the poetry.

Conclusion

From the death of my beloved grandmother to the fading of flowers, from the rise and fall of seasons to the slow aging of the human body, this article has shown that ephemerality is the rule rather than the exception. The poets and thinkers discussed here repeatedly return to the same insight: nothing gold can stay, yet it is precisely this inability to stay that makes the gold precious.

Frost and Stevens reveal how nature and paradise themselves are marked by decline; Freud and Brehm insist that transience intensifies, rather than destroys, value; Chun exposes the illusion of technological permanence by unveiling the “enduring ephemeral” at the heart of digital memory; and Ashbery’s restless, shifting poetry performs on the page the unstable flow of time and consciousness. Together, they testify that change is not an accident added to life, but its very structure. If immortality were to condemn us to monotony and stagnation, then death and change, however painful, are also what make beauty possible. The flower is beautiful because it will wilt; a summer landscape moves us because autumn is already approaching; a life is meaningful because it will end. To recognize our own ephemerality is therefore not simply to mourn what we cannot keep, but to awaken to the strange and fragile glory of what we are briefly given.

In the end, ephemerality is both our wound and our gift. We are dust, yes—but dust that blooms, thinks, loves, creates, and vanishes. Addressing this allows for an appreciation of the present moment, a lengthy acceptance of the moment, while understanding the fleeting nature of the present. Accepting the perpetual nature of the moment, in the endless cycle of manifestation and disappearance, allows for the acceptance of the fact that one can create transient beauty. Thus, one can argue that Ashbery’s poetry does not just inherit the tradition of ephemerality from Frost and Stevens, but also reconfigures it as a postmodern poetics where transience is the very condition of form, reading, and meaning.

Works Cited

- Ashbery, John. *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Viking Press, 1975.
- Blair, Virginia. “John Ashbery – The Painter.” *Louisville English* 300, 24 Oct. 2011, <https://louisvilleenglish300.wordpress.com/2011/10/24/john-ashbery-the->

[painter/#:~:text=His%20poetry%20is%20open%2Dended,that%20is%20unintelligible%2C%20even%20meaningless.](#)

- Brehm, John. *The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness, and Joy*. Wisdom Publications, 2017.
- Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. "The Enduring Ephemeral, or the Future Is a Memory." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2008, pp. 148–171.
- Elle, Alexandra. *Neon Soul: A Collection of Poetry and Prose*. Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2017.
- Freud, Sigmund. "On Transience." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by James Strachey, vol. 14, Hogarth Press, 1957, pp. 305–307.
- Frost, Robert. "Nothing Gold Can Stay." *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem, Henry Holt, 1969, pp. 222–23.
- Gingerich, Owen. *The Eye of Heaven: Ptolemy, Copernicus, Kepler*. American Institute of Physics, 1993.
- Purpura, Maria. *Ephemeral Art and Mourning: Aesthetic Responses to Loss*. Routledge, 2018.
- Ronsard, Pierre de. "Ode à Cassandra." *Odes*, 1550.
- Rush, Dana. "Ephemerality and the 'Unfinished' in Vodun Aesthetics." *African Arts*, vol. 43, no. 1, [Regents of the University of California, UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center], 2010, pp. 60–75, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29546086>.
- Shelton, Chris. "Because of You by Kelly Clarkson Song Meaning and Background." *Songfacts*, Tamarac Publishing, www.songfacts.com/facts/kelly-clarkson/because-of-you.
- Stevens, Wallace. "Sunday Morning." *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1954, pp. 66–70.
- The Holy Bible*. King James Version, Oxford University Press, 1998.

About the Author

Komi Amedokpo holds a PhD and an MA in American Studies. He also got trained as a translator and conference interpreter. His academic training combines literary and cultural analysis with professional expertise in multilingual communication. In parallel, he is engaged in language education

as a language coach, supporting the development of advanced linguistic competence across multiple areas. His research interests include American poetry, postmodern poetics, ephemerality and form, and the intersections of literature, philosophy, migration, nature, and theory. His interdisciplinary background informs his scholarly approach to language, interpretation, and literary studies.

How to cite this article/Comment citer cet article:

MLA: Amedokpo, Komi. "Nothing Poems Can Stay: Ephemerality as Postmodern Poetics from Frost to John Ashbery." *Uirtus*, vol. 5, no. 3, December 2025, pp. 413-431, <https://doi.org/10.59384/uirtus.dec2025n20>.