

We are the Music Makers by *Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy*

1. About the poem

The Ode, popularly known by its first line '*We are the music makers*' is the first poem in the collection *Music and Moonlight* (1874) by Arthur

O'Shaughnessy. This ode is a treatise to artists across different realms. It uses various euphemisms like "music-makers", "dreamers of dreams", "movers and shakers" to implore the artists and serenade their achievements. It describes the life of an artist, the beauty of their artworks and their impact on their surroundings and on the world outside.

This poem is the origin of the popular phrase 'movers and shakers'. Although the original version has nine stanzas in total, it is believed only to be three stanzas long due to the abridgment in Palgrave's collection.

2. Ode by Arthur O'Shaughnessy: form and language

The *Ode, We are the Music Makers* is written in stanza form in sprung rhythm where seven and eight syllable lines alternate. The rhyme scheme is abababab with a variation in the second stanza: aabbcdcd. The odd-numbered lines have feminine rhyme while the even-numbered lines have masculine rhyme, giving them a greater emphasis. Most of the lines start with either a conjunction or a preposition to give the poem a forwarding impetus. The use of alliteration in the first stanza (**m**usic **m**akers, **d**reamers of **d**reams) further enhances the musical effect.

3. We are the Music Makers: Analysis of the poem

First Stanza

**We are the music-makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams,**

The poem makes a straightforward appeal to the artists across different realms. Calls them 'the music-makers', and 'dreamers of dreams'. Since it avoids mention of a particular art-form, it applies equally to artists across the globe, across different segments. And, thus the massive appeal ! So, this poem gives art an encompassing definition.

Wandering by lone sea-breakers
And sitting by desolate streams;

In these lines, the poet describes the artists and their soul-searching. How they wander alone by sea-breakers, and sit by the desolate streams. The poet tries to focus on the desolation of spirits of these artists, an ache in their hearts that actually shapes up their creativity which is worth such admiration.

**World losers and world forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams;**

O'Shaughnessy now builds upon the travails that these artists go through. He calls them 'World losers' and 'world forsakers'. This highlights the difficult life the artists lead to shape up their creation. Often it gets difficult to survive solely on their art. 'The pale moon' points to the little or meagre sustenance they manage to gain for themselves through their art. This strikes chords with most of the artists who look for a patron for their art in absence of a hefty inheritance or good fortune.

**Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world for ever, it seems**

Despite that, the poet says these artists are the 'movers and shakers' of the world. By the phrase, he means someone who colours outside the lines — people who show the world a face outside the societal norms and ethos — people who are capable of moving and shaking the world and possibly building a new one — those who bring dynamicity to an otherwise static world.

Second Stanza

**With wonderful deathless ditties
We build up the world's great cities.**

In this stanza, the poet highlights the effects of the artistry on the world. The wonderful, immortal (deathless) songs created by the artists' soul are capable of building the world's great cities. They are capable of building and rebuilding new cities, new settlements, new civilizations by arousing radical thoughts, feelings and realizations in people's mind.

**And out of a fabulous story
We fashion an empire's glory:**

Similarly, out of a fabulous, mythic story they can fashion a glorious empire. This means that the fantasy that comes to an artist's mind can shape up things he builds. It is after all poems, stories, songs, paintings and other arts that mark the glory of a civilisation. We often talk about the artistic height of an empire to judge its greatness.

**One man with a dream, at pleasure,
Shall go forth and conquer a crown;
And three with a new song's measure
Can trample an empire down.**

The poet further says that one man with a dream and adequate opportunity (pleasure) at hand can give that dream a concrete structure. He is the one who shall go ahead and conquer a crown. It is the element of fantasy and something mythic, that revs anyone to move forward and outdo themselves. The 'crown' refers to an extraordinary achievement.

The poet adds to say if more (three) people come together on any such new, novel idea (new song's measure), they can trample an empire down. That huge is the potential of artistry!

At its symbolic height, it reminds one that popular adage — 'The pen is mightier than the sword'. The artists can bring more change in people's mind than anyone else.

Third Stanza

**We, in the ages lying
In the buried past of the earth,
Built Nineveh with our sighing,
And Babel itself with our mirth;**

In the third stanza of the *Ode, We are the Music Makers*, the poet continues to applaud the power of artists. The artists were present in all ages (in the ages lying). In the past the artists built the ancient city of Nineveh that was abandoned in 612 BC (in the buried past). 'Sighing' probably means the torture those enslaved people received to build the buildings, streets and all. Again, Babel (Babylon) was created with mirth, with the artists like the architects and sculptors working together happily.

**And o'erthrew them with prophesying
To the old of the new world's worth;
For each age is a dream that is dying,
Or one that is coming to birth.**

O'Shaughnessy says that the artists are capable of overthrowing the old world with their prophecy of a new world. According to him, each age is the result of dream of these artists; this is again replaced by another dream of their own. So, their dream is capable of replacing themselves to give birth to a new dream — dream of a new modern world.

This highlights the chain reaction that such an idea initiates. It goes on. To kill art is, thus, not possible. Art survives when nothing does. And the men who think and dream — the music makers — are really important and immortal in this world.