

Bright ideas

ART



CORBIS

A key component of any landscape, clouds have been recreated visually, orally and through the written word by virtuosi of all art forms throughout the ages. Louise Hoffman explores the cultural troposphere

Dramatic, aesthetic, mesmerising, and appearing in manifold forms during their perennial performance in the grand theatre of the sky, it's no wonder that clouds have inspired artists, musicians and writers across the globe, ever since they first picked up a paintbrush, camera, instrument or pen.

As English artist and printmaker Norman Ackroyd CBE RA told me, "the sky can be the most important part of a landscape, and therefore the dominant part of the image. In fact, cloud formations can sometimes be the reason you start making a picture".

I think it's safe to say that this was certainly the case for the artists whose work is pictured here – and for the writers whose words are quoted, as they too are image-makers.

"The air up there in the clouds is very pure and fine, bracing and delicious. And why shouldn't it be?--it is the same the angels breathe."

– Mark Twain, *Roughing It*

ALAMY





3

- 1 Ansel Adams cloud photograph
- 2 *From Malin Head*, by Norman Ackroyd
- 3 Vincent van Gogh, *Wheatfield, with Cypresses*, 1889: © The National Gallery, London
- 4 Installation by Eduardo Coimbra, photo by Zeka Araujo

“He stepped outside and looked up at the stars swimming in schools through the wind-driven clouds.”

John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*



ALAMY



LITERATURE

The lure of clouds within literature and mythology is evident right back to 423BC, with the comedy *The Clouds* written by celebrated Greek playwright Aristophanes – the name making reference to the chorus of the play, which is made up of clouds, the patron goddesses of thinkers and idle individuals.

Meanwhile, two rather beautiful interpretations of clouds are to be found in the poem *The House of Clouds* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in which she creates a fantastical building with sunset-crowned columns, thunderous porches





and misty windows, and the short story *The Cloud and the Sand Dune*, which appears in Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho's *Like the Flowing River* and is a heart-warming tale of selfless love. When a cloud is blown across the Sahara he falls instantly in love with one of the sand dunes, and sacrifices his own life by raining on her to fulfil her wish to be covered with grass and flowers.

The following day, the little dune was covered in flowers. Other clouds that passed over, heading for Africa thought that it must be part of the forest they were looking for and scattered more rain. Twenty years later, the dune had been transformed into an oasis that refreshed travellers with the shade of its trees. And all because, one day, a cloud fell in love, and was not afraid to give his life for that love."

– Paulo Coelho,

The Cloud and the Sand Dune

Above. Dust jacket of *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell

MUSIC

Equally inspired have been musicians and composers – from all corners of the globe and from all genres.

Most recently, a young folk-rock singer-songwriter from Minnesota in the USA rose to fame for his single *Clouds*, which was released shortly before his death in May 2013 as he battled with bone cancer. The song, which describes his experiences of fighting the disease, using clouds figuratively within the lyrics, went viral when it was first released as a YouTube video in December 2012.

The song has also featured in the Billboard Hot 100 in the US, with 156,000 copies sold up to that point, and has since enjoyed chart appearances in the UK, Canada, France and Belgium, and more than 10 million hits on YouTube. Proceeds from sales of the single have been donated to the Zach Sobiech Osteosarcoma Fund.

And we'll go up, up, up
But I'll fly a little higher
We'll go up in the clouds because
the view's a little nicer
Up here my dear
It won't be long now, it won't
be long now

– Zach Sobiech, *Clouds*

Clouds have proved to be an interesting lyrical device for many artists. The Temptations, for example, made use of a well-known idiom in *Cloud Nine*, while Chaka Khan used them as a metaphor in her lamentation of a failing relationship, entitled *Clouds*.



Clouds
In the distance
Coming to change my plans
All my dreams will
melt like sand

Clouds
The moment that you say good-bye
They're gonna rush right
to the sky

– Chaka Khan, *Clouds*

Clouds or an obnubilating sky are indeed frequently used within all artforms as a symbol for obstacles in life or a deteriorating situation. In *Both Sides Now*, Canadian singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell considers the dualistic nature of clouds – sometimes fluffy and bright, and other times bringing darkness and constraint.



Bows and flows of angel hair and
ice cream castles in the air
and feather canyons everywhere,
I've looked at clouds that way.
But now they only block the sun,
they rain and snow on everyone.
So many things I would have
done but clouds got in my way.

I've looked at clouds from
both sides now,
from up and down,
and still somehow
it's cloud illusions I recall.
I really don't know clouds at all.

– Joni Mitchell, *Both Sides Now*

Cloud references are not only restricted to lyrics, however. Two well-known instrumental pieces that have been inspired by these meteorological marvels are the well-known (even if not by name) classical piece *Clouds* – part of the orchestral composition *Nocturnes* by French composer Claude Debussy – and *Obscured by Clouds* by the internationally acclaimed English rock band Pink Floyd.

The theme has even been captured in a music video by surrealist singer-songwriter Kate Bush. *Cloudbusting* may not feature any lyrical clouds, but might the video be a forecast of the artificial cloud-making described by Ben Parfitt earlier in this publication (page 16). ■

See what you think at youtube.com

