

P. B. SHELLEY
(1792-1822)

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To A Skylark

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit !
Bird thou never wert,
That from heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

In the golden lightning
Of the sunken sun,
O'er which clouds are brightening,
Thou dost float and run;
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.

The pale purple even
Melts around thy flight;
Like a star of heaven
In the broad daylight
Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight,

Keen as are the arrows
Of that silver sphere
Whose intense lamp narrows
In the white dawn clear,
Until we hardly see—we feel that it is there.

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All the earth and air
With thy voice is loud,
As, when night is bare,
From one lonely cloud
The moon rains out her beams, and heaven is
overflow'd.

What thou art we know not;
What is most like thee ?
From rainbow clouds there flow not
Drops so bright to see,
As from thy presence showers a rain of melody.

Like a poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden
Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:

Like a high-born maiden
In a palace tower,
Soothing her love-laden
Soul in secret hour
With music sweet as love, which overflows her
bower :

Like a glow-worm golden
In a dell of dew,
Scattering unbeholden
Its aerial hue
Among the flowers and grass which screen it from
the view :

Like a rose embowered
In its own green leaves,
By warm winds deflowered,
Till the scent it gives
Makes faint with too much sweet these heavy
winged thieves:

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Sound of vernal showers
On the twinkling grass,
Rain-awaken'd flowers,
All that ever was
Joyous, and clear, and fresh, thy music doth surpass. 60

Teach us, Sprite or Bird,
What sweet thoughts are thine;
I have never heard
Praise of love or wine
That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine: 65

Chorus Hymeneal
Or triumphal chant
Matched with thine would be all
But an empty vaunt,
A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want. 70

What objects are the fountains
Of thy happy strain ?
What fields, or waves, or mountains ?
What shapes of sky or plain ?
What love of thine own kind ? what ignorance of
pain ?

With thy clear keen joyance
Languor cannot be—
Shadow of annoyance
Never came near thee:
Thou lovest; but ne'er knew love's sad satiety.

Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must deem
Things more true and deep
Than we mortals dream,
Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal
stream ?

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We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest
thought.

Yet if we could scorn
Hate and pride, and fear;
If we were things born
Not to shed a tear,
I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

Better than all measures
Of delightful sound,
Better than all treasures
That in books are found,
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the
ground !

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
The world should listen then as I am listening
now !

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TO A SKYLARK

Shelley composed *To a Skylark* in 1820, when he was in Italy. "It was on a beautiful summer evening, while wandering among the lanes whose myrtle-hedges were the bowers of the fire-flies, that we heard the carolling of the Skylark, which inspired one of the most beautiful of his poems." (Mary Shelley's note).

The poem is an invocation to the Skylark as the spirit of the air. In this lyric Shelley seeks to know the hidden source of joy that makes this 'sprite or bird' sing so spontaneously and melodiously. Perhaps the idea of the Skylark singing in the sky to represent a spiritual power that can spread its influence throughout the world may have come from Plato. To the poet, the song of the bird is an expression of the profound knowledge of the universe and a blissful ignorance of the pain. The poet expresses his own inability to attain the state of happiness or the height of the knowledge enjoyed by the Skylark. With all its inspiring attributes, the bird may be taken as the symbol of Shelley's poetic inspiration which rested on idealism.

There are a number of qualities which add grace and charm to the poem : spontaneity, romantic ideal and visionary spirit, lyricism, consciousness of the sorrow and problems of life, love of nature, myth-making and the sense of mystery and wonder. Abstract images and similes which bring the familiar and unfamiliar together lend a unity of thought to the poem.

The metre of the poem suits the subject. It contains twenty one stanzas of five lines each where the first four lines are trochaic trimetre and the fifth line is an Alexandrine.

Notes :

The Skylark is a small bird that flies very high on warm days and stays up in the sky while it sings. Usually it does not perch on trees.

Lines :

1. *blithe* : happy, cheerful, The word is now used only poetically. To Shelley, the Skylark is not a bird but the spirit of joy.
2. *Bird thou never wert* : Shelley started calling the bird spirit, and listening to its song, he is convinced of its unearthliness i.e. the bird is devoid of flesh and blood.
4. *Pourest* : express.
thy full heart : the feelings of your heart.

NOTES

5. *Unpremeditated* : spontaneous, effortless.
8. *Like a cloud of fire* : The Skylark springs from the earth towards heaven like a flame of fire, like a cloud illuminated by the setting sun, or like a column of fire that soars into the sky. Shelley emphasizes the disembodied nature of the Skylark, i.e. the Skylark is insubstantial in terms of flesh and bone.
9. *The blue deep* : the blue sky.
10. *And singing.....ever singest* : The Skylark, unlike other birds, feels no strain in singing and soaring at the same time.
15. *Like an unbodied.....begun* : Shelley uses abstract for concrete. The bird is an abstract spirit of joy which is just born and is ready for a race towards heaven.
16. *The pale purple even* : Evening gathers round the bird as it soars and the sky and the earth are surrounded by darkness. The poet describes evening as 'pale and purple'. "Shelley watches the Skylark rise until he loses it in the evening sky".
18. *Like a star of Heaven* : Venus, the morning star, which becomes invisible in day light.
20. *shrill delight* : the loud and clear notes of the Skylark.
21. *Keen* : Which is as keen.
- 21-25. *Keen as.....it is there* : "He (Shelley) knows Venus is still there, too, in daylight, as surely as he would if she were shooting arrows at him—the arrows of her son Cupid, which are as sharp as the Lark's notes are clear" (Desmond King-Hele).
22. *silver sphere* : A number of critics have, almost traditionally, interpreted the 'silver sphere' as the moon. But critics like Desmond King-Hele maintain that it is a misreading "partly because 'intense' applies better to Venus than to the moon, and partly because the moon can easily be seen by day".
27. *loud* : full.
- 28-29. *As when.....lonely cloud* : Shelley intensifies the barrenness of the night by introducing a solitary cloud.
- 36-37. *Like a Poet.....thought* : The Skylark is compared here to a poet who is absorbed in the light of his own fancies. While seeking to understand the secret of bird's joy, Shelley mentally surveys areas of real happiness and comes upon the poet, who emerges from himself by projecting nothing but his illuminating thoughts.
38. *hymns unbidden* : spontaneous songs.
39. *wrought* : worked into shape or condition; hence moved or affected.
40. *hopes and fears* : ideas and message given by the poet.
it : the world.
heeded not : the world did not care to take notice of the message of the poet.
- 41-45. *Like a highborn.....bower* : (Though the bird is invisible, its song always makes its presence felt). Here Shelley conjures up the vision of a medieval love-story of some princess imprisoned in a palace tower where she comforts her sad heart with sweet and spontaneous

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music. The picture immediately takes us to the fairy land of wonder and romance— to 'faery lands forlorn' as described by Keats.

51. *embowered* : enclosed, surrounded by leaves.
53. *deflowered* : The warm wind strips the rose of its fragrance and scatters its petals.
55. *heavy winged thieves* : the winds are thieves as they steal away the sweet smell of the roses. The sweetness of the fragrance carried by them makes them faint and heavy.
56. *vernal* : of the spring season.
57. *Rain-awakened flowers* : The spring showers make the flowers fresher and brighter.
65. *That panted forth.....divine::* In all the poetry of the past which was written on the themes of love or wine, there was nowhere such heavenly ecstasy and naturalness as there was in the song of the Skylark.
66. *Chorus Hymeneal* : Hymen was the Greek god of marriage. Hence Hymeneal means 'of marriage' and the phrase means 'choric song sung on the occasion of marriage; song sung at wedding.
67. *triumphal chant* : the song of the victorious forces.
69. *empty vaunt* : vain boasting which has no real worth.
70. *hidden want* : unknown deficiency.
76. *joyance* : an outdated expression for 'joy'.
77. *Languor* : fatigue.
80. *love's sad satiety* : The Skylark knows no sorrow or frustration in love. When too much, man gets weary even of love; his love turns to disgust and he feels frustrated. Hence the passion of love cherished by the Skylark is superior to that of human beings.
- 82-84. *Thou of death.....dream* : Skylark knows more of life and death than we mortals can ever know. While man envisages death in his dream-like fancies, the bird has a profounder and truer insight into the mysteries of death. Therefore, the notes of the bird are natural, delightful and charming.
85. *crystal stream* : The song of the Skylark is so clear because it has a better understanding of death and its mind is not confused.
89. *fraught* : charged.
- 91-92. *Yet if...fear* : even if we could conquer the passions of hate, pride and fear, the three evils Shelley always fought.
100. *Scorner of the ground* : Shelley's Skylark scorns the ground; its home seems to be the high sky. It is a symbol of high aspiration.
103. *harmonious madness* : musical songs composed in an inspired state. Cf. Shelley's version of Plato's Ion. 'For a poet is indeed a thing ethereally light, winged and sacred, nor can he compose anything worth calling poetry until he becomes inspired and as it were mad.....'.