

ENGLISH

TOPIC: TO A SKYLARK

1. The poem was inspired by an evening walk in the country near Livorno, Italy with his wife Mary Shelley. Mary Shelley described the event that inspired Shelley thus-

“In the spring we spent a week or two near Leghorn (Livorno). It was a beautiful Summer evening and while wandering we heard the caroling of the skylark.”

2. Written in 1820 and published in Prometheus Unbound Volume in 1820.
3. Shelley’s skylark represents absolute joy and happiness that the poet is desperately seeking.
4. Blithe spirit means joyous spirit.
5. “ Bird thou never wert.”- Means the skylark is not an identifiable bird, of say, a bird of flesh and blood. It is more an essence or spirit- a metaphysical abstraction of absolute joy and happiness.
6. “That from heaven or near it.” – this substantiates that his skylark is a celestial visitor and not an earthly bird. The lark is singing either from paradise itself or some ethereal sphere of its equal height.
7. “Pourest thy full heart.”- It means the skylark is giving free expression to the joyous feelings with which its heart is overflowing.

8. “ Profuse strains of unpremeditated art.”- unpremeditated art refers to the spontaneous, effortless music of the skylark. Incorporates Wordsworth’s theory of spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions.
9. “Like a cloud of fire...” Simile. Shelley here compares the skylark’s upward flight to a cloud of fire. When the bird goes up and up, it looks like a flame surrounded by smoke.
10. “And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.” The line means the skylark soars and sings simultaneously.
11. “In the golden...thou dost float and run.”- By ‘sunken sun’ Shelley means perhaps means the time of sunset when the golden glow of the sun brightens the clouds below.

Again some interpretations say that ‘sunken sun’ means the rising sun or the sun below the eastern horizon.

12. “Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.”- Shelley’s skylark perhaps begins its journey with the rising of the Sun. Unbodied joy is an example of transferred epithet. The joy is not unbodied. Instead the bird itself is unbodied because it is more a spirit than an essence of flesh and blood.
13. “The pale purple even melts around thy flight.”- The time is evening. The sun is going down and, as such, the light in the sky is fading. As a result of the sunlight getting diminished gradually, the bird also becomes obscured in the pale purple sky.

The less accessible the bird becomes, the more we realize that this poem is about the poet’s longing to possess the same poetic powers Shelley has bestowed upon the bird.

14. "Like a star of Heaven...delight." The stars that we see at night remain invisible to us so long as daylight reigns in the sky. Likewise, the skylark being a divine, disembodied spirit remains unseen but its delightful music pervades the universe. SIMILE. 3 Shri11 delight is a case of synecdoche (abstract for the concrete: Delightful song.)

15. "Keen as are arrows ...it is there."- Silver sphere refers either to Moon or to Venus. Simile. Has been compare with the skylark. Venus looks dim and seems invisible because the bright rays of the rising sun conceals it from our view. Likewise, the skylark being a divine disembodied spirit remains invisible, but it is ever present like Venus. Also a case of periphrasis.

(The arrows of Cupid, the Greek god of love, are possibly made the source of imagery to illustrate the song of the skylark.)

16. "All the earth and air.....Heaven is overflow'd." – Shelley here means to say that the whole universe is made resonant with the mellifluous music of the skylark. The effect of the music is like the rays of moon that rains down from heaven. Simile.

17. " When night is bare,/From one lonely cloud/ The moon rains out her beams and Heaven is overflowed." Metaphor. Moonbeams to raindrops. The lonely cloud symbolically seems to represent the unique nature of the skylark's song. The sky flooded with moonlight denotes the effect of the skylark's song on the minds of people.

18. " What thou art we know not/ What is most like thee? Shelley is mesmerized to hear the mellifluous melody of the nightingale and, as such, he is curious to know about the bird. But it being the divine, disembodied spirit remains beyond reach of the understanding of the ordinary mortals like Shelley.

19. "From rainbow cloud there flow not / Drops so bright to see/ As from thy presence showers a rain of melody."- Simile. Shelley here means to say that the song of the skylark is sweeter to the ear than the multi-coloured rainbow is to the eye.

20. "Like a poet...heeded not."- Simile. Compares the skylark with a poet. A poet himself remains unknown. Man gets a glimpse of his ideas through his poetry. Likewise, the skylark remains unseen, but its delightful music makes us feel its very presence. (Singing hymns unbidden means singing the poet's inner urge.)
21. "Like a high-born maiden...overflows her bower."- Simile. A high born maiden living all alone in the palace tower sings at the dead of night to soothe her love-lorn heart. The singer remains unseen, but her presence is felt by her song. Likewise,....
22. "Like a glow-worm ...screen it from the view."- Simile. A glow-worm in a dell of dew remains hidden from our view. But its presence is perceived by its scintillating hue. Likewise,...
23. "Like a rose.....heavy winged thieves."- Simile. A rose remains hidden behind its thick green leaves, but its fragrance makes us perceive its presence. Likewise,...(" Heavy winged thieves" refer to the warm winds. They are heavy-winged as are overcharged with the perfume of a rose.)
24. "Sound of vernal showers...surpass."- 'Thy music' here refers to the music of the skylark which, according to Shelley, surpasses all such beautiful things on earth like the sound of spring-flowers on the twinkling grass and the beautiful rain-awakened flowers.
25. "Teach us Sprite or Bird...rapture so divine."- By 'praise of love or wine' Shelley perhaps speaks of human songs sung in praise of love or wine. Shelley fancies that the skylark which is either a spirit or a bird possesses sweet thoughts and is ignorant of the thorns of life, otherwise it cannot sing so sweetly which surpasses songs of the mortals.
26. "Chorus Hymenal...hidden want."- According to Greek mythology, Hymen is god of marriage (Song of nuptial celebration is called epithalamium.) once again Shelley here compares the song of the skylark

with human songs like marriage songs of victory or marriage songs. ('Hidden want' means lack of perfection, spontaneity, satisfaction and immortality)

27. "What objects...pain"- "Thy happy strain" refers to the mellifluous melody of the skylark. Shelley here fancies that the skylark is singing with such an elan and elegance perhaps because of its ignorance of mortal pain and sorrow or of its love of its own kind.
28. "With thy clear joyance...sad satiety."- Satiety means feeling of boredom born out of excessive enjoyment. Shelley here idealizes the bird skylark and contrasts its happiness with that of mankind. Unlike the skylark which always remains jubilant without getting bored in its love for its own kind or young ones, man's power of enjoyment soon reaches the level of satiety and the object of love turns stale.
29. "Waking or asleep...crystal stream."-Rhetorical question. Metaphor: The lark's music is compared to the flowing current of a river. Shelley here looks upon the lark as a philosopher who has a clear insight of the mystery of death. Thus , having no fear of death it has joy in life and therefore it can sing in such pure and sweet strains.
30. "We look before ...fraught." Shelley here explains the cause of supreme happiness of the skylark and contrasts it with that of human beings. Unlike the skylark which remains ever content and ever dwells in the present, man is always haunted by a sense of yearning for the inaccessible and regret for what is not. Therefore, his sweet songs are always tinged with tragic overtones.
31. "Our sweetest songs....thoughts.- Epigram. Same thing has been said in his 'Defense of Poetry' -"Pleasure that lies in pain is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself."
32. "If we could scorn.....near." While explaining the supreme happiness of the skylark, Shelley says this. As per him, if man could eliminate sorrow, hate,

pride or fear from his life, even then he could never have equaled the matchless ecstasy and rapture of the skylark's song.

33. "Better than...ground."-Shelley here once again speaks of the matchless ecstasy and rapture of the skylark's song. It is sweeter than all sweet melodies or the wisdom and delight found in books.

His skylark is a scorner of the ground because this earth is too full of the sad realities of life. The phrase 'thy skill to the poet' refers to the unparalleled power of singing of the skylark.

34. "Teach us...listening now.' The phrase 'harmonious madness' is an example of oxymoron because madness or insanity arises out of disharmony. But here poetic inspiration and the ecstasy it causes is described as madness. There is artistic and melodious beauty in such madness, which is much superior to mere mundane sanity.

Shelley wants to share such harmonious madness so that he would be able to mesmerize the world and make it listen spellbound to his songs just as he is listening to the melody of the lark at present.

"The world' refers to the people of the world. Synecdoche.

35. "Such harmonious madness/ from my lips would flow/ the world should listen then – as I am listening now."- The phrase harmonious madness is an example of OXYMORON. Literally it means melodious madness. However, it here implies poetic frenzy.

Shelley is wonder- struck to hear the mellifluous madness of the skylark. Metaphorically Shelley also wants to be internally mad. Simultaneously, he needs external harmony because without harmony there can be no creation. Only then the world would listen to his prophetic vision. Thus, he would be able to sing for the restoration of mankind.

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