

To a Skylark

by Percy Bysshe Shelley

'To a Skylark' by Percy Bysshe Shelley is a twenty-one stanza ode that is consistent in its rhyme scheme from the very first to the last stanza. The piece rhymes, ABABB, with varying end sounds, from beginning to end.

This strictly formatted pattern is also consistent in the metre. The first four lines of each stanza are written in trochaic trimeter, meaning that a stressed syllable comes before an unstressed (trochaic). Additionally, each of the first four lines has three of these beats (trimeter). Different from the other four, but consistent with the rest of the poem, the fifth longer line of each stanza is written in iambic hexameter. This means that each line has six beats of unstressed syllables preceding stressed.

It is also important to make note of the speaker in *"To a Skylark."* As has been revealed in poems such as "Ode to the West Wind," this piece is based on an actual experience the poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, had. Therefore, the poet himself will be considered as the speaker of the poem.

Summary of *To a Skylark*

"To a Skylark" by Percy Bysshe Shelley is an ode to the "blithe" essence of a singing skylark and how human beings are unable to ever reach that same bliss.

The poem begins with the speaker spotting a skylark flying above him. He can hear the song clearly. The bird's song "unpremeditated," it is unplanned and beautiful.

Shelley is stunned by the music produced by the bird and entranced by its movement as it flies into the clouds and out of sight. Although he can no longer see it, he is still able to hear it and feel its presence. The bird represents pure, unbridled happiness that Shelley is desperately seeking. This desperation comes through in the next stanzas.

The poet then embarks on a number of metaphors through which he is hoping to better understand what the bird is and what he can accurately compare it to. He sees the bird as a "high-born maiden" that serenades her lover below her and spring, or "vernal," showers that rain on the flowers below. The skylark is like "rainbow clouds" and the epitome of all "Joyous" things.

The next section of the ode is used to ask the skylark to reveal what inspires it to sing such a glorious song. Is it, the poet asks, "fields, or waves, or mountains?" Could it be, he speculates, "shapes of sky or plain?" Whatever it may be, Shelley has never seen anything that could force such sounds from his own voice.

He states that for a creature to have the ability to sing in such a way, it must know nothing of sorrow or "annoyance." The bird must have the ability to see beyond life, understand death, and feel no concern about it. This is why humans may never reach the same state of happiness that the skylark exists within. "We" pine for things that we do not have, and even our "sweetest songs" are full of the "saddest thought[s]."

The poem concludes with the poet pleading with the bird to "Teach [him] half the gladness / That thy brain must know." Even that small amount would provide Shelley with the ability to

produce “harmonious madness” that would force the world to listen to him must as raptly as he is listening to the skylark now.

Analysis of *To a Skylark* First Stanza

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.

“*To a Skylark*” begins with the speaker, Percy Bysshe Shelley (as was detailed in the introduction), pointing out a skylark in the sky. He calls out to the bird, not in greeting, but in reverence, “Hail to thee.”

He is amazed at the sight, and as the reader will later discover, the song of the bird. He refers to the bird as “blithe Spirit,” meaning happiness or joyful. More details will follow, but Shelley sees this bird as the epitome of joy. It is less a bird, and more an essence, a “Spirit.”

It is the best of all birds, it appears so beautiful to Shelley at that moment that he claims it has come from “Heaven,” or at least from somewhere “near it.” The bird is swooping in the sky and “Pour[ing]” from its “heart” a song that is described as “profuse,” or abundant, and full of “unpremeditated art.” It is an artful song that is not planned or scripted and is, therefore, all the more beautiful.

Second Stanza

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 second stanza of the poem, Shelley makes some additional observations. The bird is not stopping its ascent, it is flying “Higher still” as if it has sprung up from the earth. He compares the skylark to “a cloud of fire.” It is powerful and unstoppable. Perhaps the bird is returning to the “Heaven” from where it first came.

Even though the bird is still ascending, it also keeps up its song. It does the two simultaneously, it “still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.”

Third Stanza

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

The bird is ascending up towards the “golden lightening” of the sun. The sun is “sunken” or low on the horizon, a most likely setting for the day, giving the scene greater ambience as sunrise and sunset have always been seen as magical times.

It flies up over the clouds that are closest to the sun. It is as if the bird is “float[ing] and run[ing].” Behind the skylark is the power of “unbodied joy” that does not run out of energy, it’s “race is just begun.”

Fourth Stanza

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

At this point in the poem, the bird becomes obscured in the “pale purple” sky. The sun is truly going down and the light in the sky is changing. It seems to “Melt” around the skylark as it flies.

Shelley compares this scene to one that the reader might come across during the day. As one casts their eyes to the sky during the day it is impossible to see stars, “but yet” one knows they are there. This same thing stands true for Shelley who senses the bird’s presence but can no longer see it. It is as if the bird has become “a star of Heaven,” or perhaps it already was.

Fifth Stanza

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.

In the fifth stanza, Shelley makes a comparison between the bird and the moon. He is directly relating happiness and joy to the beauty of the natural world, a theme that Shelley was not unfamiliar with.

The bird is as “Keen” as the “arrows” of light that emanate from the “silver sphere” that is the moon. At night the moon is “intense[ly] bright,” but during the day, once “white dawn

clear[s]," it is very hard to see. It eventually disappears but we still know and "feel that it is there."

Sixth Stanza

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.

The poet expands on this idea in the sixth stanza: The entire atmosphere of the earth, all the one can see and cannot see, depending on the time of day is made greater when the bird's voice is there. The bird is as the rays of the moon that rain down from Heaven.

Seventh Stanza

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.

It is at this point that the poet will once more return to the idea that the bird is more than just a creature, it is representing something greater. It is the essence of happiness and all that is needed to live a joyful life.

The speaker begins by stating that he does not know exactly what the skylark is, only what he can think to compare it to. He names off a number of things that he could compare the bird to. The first is "rainbow clouds," which sound pristinely beautiful, but the poet quickly dismisses them, as the "Drops" they rain are nothing compared to the "melody" that "showers" from the skylark's presence.

Eighth Stanza

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:

The next couple stanzas continue on this theme as Shelley tries to figure out how exactly to describe the bird.

It is, he states, like a poetic impulse that cannot be restrained. It is “singing hymns unbidden that have unintended, but wonderful, consequences. The song of the bird forces sympathy to surface in the minds of those that have not in the past heeded the “hopes and fears” of others. It is actively and morally improving those who hear its song.

Ninth Stanza

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:

Stanza Nine provides the reader with another comparison. The skylark is said to be like a “high-born maiden” that is locked away in a “palace-tower.” From there, way above her lover, as the bird is above the poet, she is able to secretly “Sooth” his “soul.” Her words, just like the bird’s music, are “sweet as love” and in the case of the maiden, it “overflows her bower,” or bedroom.

Tenth Stanza

Like a glow-worm golden
In a dell of dew,
Scattering unbehoden
Its aerial hue

Among the flowers and grass, which screen it from the view:

Shelley still has a couple more comparisons to share. He sees the bird as a “glow-worm” that is emanating “golden” light in a “dell,” or small valley in the woods, amongst the “dew.” This small moment of beauty is as delicate and important as the moment in which Shelley is living. These natural comparisons are those that bring Shelley the closest to relaying the emotion he felt while hearing and briefly seeing the skylark.

The bird is “Scattering” it’s “hue” or happiness from the sky. It is “unbehoden” to anyone or anything, it’s mind and actions are it’s own. Its joy it raining down “Among the flowers and grass,” it’s essence is becoming a part of everything, not seen, but felt.

Eleventh Stanza

Like a rose embower’d
In its own green leaves,
By warm winds deflower’d,

Till the scent it gives

Makes faint with too much sweet those heavy-winged thieves:

In the eleventh stanza, the speaker presents one final comparison. The sounds, the feeling, and the look of the bird reminds Shelley of a “rose” that is protected, or “embower’d” but it’s own leaves.

The protection does not last forever and “warm winds” can blow off all of its flowers and spread its scent within the breeze. Quickly the “sweet” of the petals is too much even for the winds, “those heavy-winged thieves.”

Twelfth Stanza

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.

The speaker’s metaphor extends into the twelfth stanza. The sound of the bird’s song is beyond everything. It “surpass[es]” everything that ever was before considered “Joyous, and clear, and fresh.” It is better than the “Sound of vernal,” or spring, “showers” landing on the “twinkling grass” and the beauty of the flowers that rain will have “awaken’d.”

Thirteenth Stanza

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.

This is a turning point in the poem where the speaker, having exhausted his metaphors, turns back to the skylark and addresses it.

He is hoping that the “Bird,” or perhaps it is more apt to call it a “Sprite” as it embodies an emotion, what thoughts it is thinking. As a poet, he is trying to relate to this flood of art and has in his life never seen anything that can inspire such beauty. Not “Praise of love or wine.”

Fourteenth Stanza

Chorus Hymeneal,

Or triumphal chant,

Match'd with thine would be all
But an empty vaunt,
A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.

The song of the bird is described as being like a hymn sung by a chorus as well as like a “triumphal chant.” It is suited to all occasions and all contingencies of human life. It can equally outmatch religious or war-time subject matter and inspiration.

Anything that would even attempt to compete with the bird would be “an empty vaunt,” or a baseless boast. Other songs would clearly be missing something, an element that is impossible to name, but clearly not there.

Fifteenth Stanza

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?

Once more the speaker probes the bird’s mind. “What,” he asks, are you thinking about? “What objects,” or visions does your beautiful song come from?

He is determined in his questions, willing the bird with all his might to answer. He believes that just around the corner, with just a few words from the bird, he will have the answer to one of life’s greatest questions. How to find happiness.

He poses a number of options, is your song inspired by “fields, or waves or mountains?” Or perhaps it is given its form by the “shapes of sky or plain,” meaning fields.

He continues questioning. Does your son come from “love of thine own kind?” A love that the skylark has found amongst its own species or just a life blessed without pain.

Sixteenth Stanza

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.

The speaker does not believe that someone who has ever felt pain, the “Shadow of annoyance,” or “Languor” could produce this song of “keen joyance.” In fact, these elements of life can’t have even come close to touching the skylark. He knows, somehow, that the bird has experienced the wonders of love, without “love’s sad satiety,” or disappointing conclusions.

Seventeenth Stanza

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?

From the notes of the bird's song, Shelley continues to make guesses about its interior life. He believes that for the bird to be able to produce such a pure sound it must understand much more about life and death than "we mortals dream." This knowledge must be given from beyond and therefore, the beyond is where the sounds must come.

Eighteenth Stanza

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.

The poem is in its conclusion and the speaker, Percy Bysshe Shelley, continues to make sweeping claims about the nature of the skylark. He compares, in this stanza, the way that humans view death to the way that the skylark must.

"We" are only able to view death as "before and after" while "pin[ing]" for what we don't have. We are incapable of enjoying anything without remembering our own pain. This is clearest through our "sweetest songs" which are not as pure as the skylark's unbridled happiness.

Nineteenth Stanza

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.

The poet continues on, stating that even if the human race was able to shake off their "Hate, and pride and fear" and all the very human things with which we are born, even if we are able to find a state of being in which we "shed" not a "tear," still, we would not know the joy that the skylark does. We would not be able to "come near."

Twentieth Stanza

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

In the final two stanzas of this piece, the poet makes one final plea to the skylark. He begins by saying that the ability to sing and experience happiness as the skylark does is worth more to him than all “treasures / That in books are found.” It is better “than all measures” of other “delightful sound.”

Twenty First Stanza

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.

He asks the skylark to please, “Teach me half the gladness / That thy brain must know.” If Shelley could even know a portion of the bird’s pleasure he believes that from “my lips” a “harmonious madness” would flow. He would be overcome with his own new abilities. His joyful sound would force the world to listen to him as intently as he is now listening to the skylark.

All in all, this piece is about a man’s search for happiness. At points he seems on the verge of desperation, hoping beyond hope that this small bird will answer his biggest question. This poem is notably relatable for this reason. Who has not wanted in their bleakest moments, a quick fix, an instant reprieve or a way into perpetual joy?

About Percy Bysshe Shelley

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born in 1792 in Broadbridge Heath, England. He was raised in the countryside and was educated at University College Oxford. While in school Shelley was well known for his liberal views and was once chastised for writing a pamphlet titled, *The Necessity of Atheism*. His parents were severely disappointed in him and demanded that he forsake all of his beliefs. Soon after this, he eloped with a 16-year-old woman, Harriet Westbrook, of whom he soon tired. It was at this time that Shelley began writing his long-form poetry for which he is best known.

Shelley had two children with Harriet but before their second was born he left her for the future author of *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, Mary Godwin. Mary became pregnant with her and Shelley’s first child soon after and Harriet sued Shelley for divorce.

Soon after this Mary and Percy met Lord Byron, or George Gordon, it was through one of their meetings that Mary was inspired to write *Frankenstein*.

In 1816 Shelley's first wife Harriet committed suicide and Mary and Percy were officially wed. During their time together [Mary Shelley](#)'s only child to live into adulthood was Percy Florence. In early 1818 he and his wife left England and Shelley produced the majority of his most well-known works including, *Prometheus Unbound*. In 1822, not long before he was meant to turn 30, Shelley was drowned in a storm while sailing in his schooner on the way to La Spezia, Italy. Mary was only 24 at the time and would live to the age of 53, dying of brain cancer in London in 1851.