

8th Lecture

Ode to a Skylark- by Percy Shelley

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 bright'ning,
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.
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 overflowed.
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 ærial 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-wingéd thieves:
Sound of vernal showers
On the twinkling grass,
Rain-awakened flowers -
All that ever was
Joyous and clear and fresh - thy music doth surpass.
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.
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.
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?
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.

The Ode to a Skylark is one of the most famous poems in the English language. Shelly in this ode idealizes the singing of the skylark. In the singing of the skylark, Shelly finds an ecstasy and rapture which are unattainable by human beings. The poet contrasts the sorrow of human life with the joy of the skylark.

In this poem, Shelly dwells upon the sweet and rapturous singing of the skylark. The music of the skylark has been idealized by Shelly. The poet wants to know what is that inspires the skylark to sing such melodious and ecstatic strains. He contrasts the sorrow and suffering of mankind with the unspeakable joy of the bird. If it were possible for the poet to experience the gladness of the skylark, he would be able to sing songs as sweet and delightful as those of the bird itself.

Summary

The speaker, addressing a skylark, says that it is a "blithe Spirit" rather than a bird, for its song comes from Heaven, and from its full heart pours "profuse strains of unpremeditated art." The skylark flies higher and higher, "like a cloud of fire" in the blue sky, singing as it flies. In the "golden lightning" of the sun, it floats and runs, like "an unbodied joy."

"As the skylark flies higher and higher, the speaker loses sight of it, but is still able to hear its "shrill delight," which comes down as keenly as moonbeams in the "white dawn," which can be felt even when they are not seen. The earth and air ring with the skylark's voice, just as Heaven overflows with moonbeams when the moon shines out from behind "a lonely cloud."

The speaker says that no one knows what the skylark is, for it is unique: even "rainbow clouds" do not rain as brightly as the shower of melody that pours from the skylark. The bird is "like a poet hidden / In the light of thought," able to make the world experience "sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not." It is like a lonely maiden in a palace tower, who uses her song to soothe her lovelorn soul. It is like a golden glow-worm, scattering light among the flowers and grass in which it is hidden.

It is like a rose embowered in its own green leaves, whose scent is blown by the wind until the bees are faint with "too much sweet." The skylark's song surpasses "all that ever was, / Joyous and clear and fresh," whether the rain falling on the "twinkling grass" or the flowers the rain awakens.

Calling the skylark "Sprite or Bird," the speaker asks it to tell him its "sweet thoughts," for he has never heard anyone or anything call up "a flood of rapture so divine." Compared to the skylark's, any music would seem lacking. What objects, the speaker asks, are "the fountains of thy happy strain?" Is it fields, waves, mountains, the sky, the plain, or "love of thine own kind" or "ignorance or pain"?

Pain and languor, the speaker says, "never came near" the skylark: it loves, but has never known "love's sad satiety." Of death, the skylark must know "things more true and deep" than mortals could dream; otherwise, the speaker asks, "how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?"

Form

The rhyme scheme of each stanza is extremely simple: ABABB.

Notes

Lines (1-5) Hail to thee,.....unpremeditated art.-

The poet calls the skylark a cheerful and happy spirit. The skylark is not a bird but a spirit because , flying at a great height, it is not visible. The poet offers a warm welcome to the skylark. He joyfully greets the skylark. The skylark sings spontaneous songs from somewhere near the sky. It sings sweet melodies which express the feelings and emotions of its heart. A continuous stream of rich music flows naturally from the skylark. The skylark sings effortlessly and without any previous preparation.

Lines (6-10): Higher still and higher..... ever singest.-

The skylark leaps upward from the earth and climbs higher and higher into the blue sky. It flies up into the sky like a cloud of fire rising upward. It keeps singing while flying, and it keeps flying while singing simultaneously.