

9th Lecture

Ode to a Skylark- by Percy Shelley

Lines (11- 20) In the golden lightning..... they shrill delight.....

The skylark leaving the earth soaring upward is like a soul that has shed its mortal body and is on its way to heaven. The expression “unbodied joy” means a happy soul that has shaken off its mortal body. As the skylark flies upward, the pale and purple twilight of the morning seems to melt away, giving place to the white light of the rising sun. The skylark becomes invisible as it flies higher and higher. For this reason it is like a star which shines in the sky invisibly during the day time.

Lines (21- 30) Keen as the arrows....is overflowed.

During the night, the moon sheds its white light upon the earth. But this bright light begins to fade with the coming of the morning. In the light of the morning, the moonlight fades away. Although the moon now becomes almost invisible, yet we are aware that the moon is still in the sky. In the same way, the skylark is invisible to our eyes, but listening to its music, we are aware of its presence in the sky. The earth and the sky are flooded with the music of the skylark in the same way as they are flooded with the bright light of the moon.

Lines (31- 40) what thou art.... It heeded not.

As the skylark flies up and up, it sends a shower of rich music to us on the earth. The music flowing from the skylark is much more pleasant and delightful even than the bright rain-drops falling from the clouds. The invisible skylark may be compared to a poet who is hidden from the public gaze by the originality and obscurity of his ideas. The poet goes on singing his songs and expressing his ideas through those songs. He could at last compel people to listen to him and to try to understand him. The idea is that the skylark keeps singing till we are moved to admiration for its songs, even though the skylark is invisible.

Lines (41- 50) Like a high- born maiden..... From the view

The skylark is here compared to a young damsel of high birth. This girl is supposed to be residing in a palace tower where she sings songs of love. The girl herself is not visible to outsiders because she is confined in the tower. But the songs of the girl overflow her apartment, and are heard by people outside the same as the skylark. The skylark is like a beautiful, shining glow-worm flying about among the dew covered grass and flowers. Both the glow-worm and the skylark are invisible but we are conscious of their presence.

Lines (51- 60) like a rose embowered....doth surpass.-

We may not be able to see a rose which is wrapped up in its green leaves, but we shall certainly become conscious of it because of its sweet scent. We are aware of the presence of the skylark because of its sweet songs which are loud enough to reach our ears. The music of the skylark is more joyful than the sound of rain falling on the bright grass, in spring.

Lines (61-70) teach ussome hidden want.

The music of the skylark is full of a rapturous joy which seems to have a divine quality. As compared with the skylark's singing, a wedding song or a song of victory would seem to be meaningless. By comparison with the skylark's song, other songs seem to suffer from some deficiency which we cannot define.

Lines (71-80) what objects.....love's sad satiety.

The poet wants to know what the source of the skylark's happiness is. Is the skylark so happy because it has never known any sorrow or grief? The skylark feels so happy that there can be no question of its ever feeling lazy or indolent. Nor does the skylark ever experience a feeling of the faintest irritation. The skylark does not experience the disillusionment or disgust which human beings experience .

Lines (81-90) walking or asleep.....saddest thought.

Both in its walking and sleeping hours, the skylark must be seeing truer visions of the nature and significance of death than human beings can. And that is the reason why the skylark is so happy and why it can produce such continuous and rapturous music. The life of human beings is full of disappointments and frustration. There is an element of pain mingled even with their most genuine laughter . The sweetest songs of human beings as those that are full of sorrow and grief. The songs of the skylark, on the contrary, are an expression of pure joy.

Lines (91-101) Yet if we could scorn.....as I am listening

Human happiness is marred by feelings of hatred, pride, fear.etc. Human beings were born to suffer sorrows and grief and to shed tears over their misery. The skylark is scornful of the earth. That is why it flies in the higher regions above. Only by acquiring the skylark's musical skill can any poet equal the joyful singing of the skylark. If the skylark could communicate to Shelly even half of its joy, he would feel inspired to write poems that would compete with the songs of the skylark. All that Shelly needs is the feeling of ecstasy which the skylark experiences.

Explanation

The skylark's flight and its song

A skylark, says Shelly, is not a bird but a spirit which pours forth rich melodies of spontaneous music from somewhere in the sky. The skylark flies higher and higher, singing all the time . In the golden light of sunrise , the skylark flies and floats unseen in the aerial regions.

The rich and glorious music of the invisible skylark

The skylark, because of the great height at which it flies, is invisible to human eyes, in the same way as a star is invisible during the day time. The loud, joyous music of the skylark is fully audible.

We feel the presence of the skylark in the sky just as we feel the presence of the moon which is hardly visible to the eyes in the clear light of the morning.

The whole earth and air overflow with the skylark's singing even as the whole sky at night is lit up by the white light of the moon. The real nature of skylark is not fully known to us. The shower of music that descends from the skylark is brighter far than the rain- drops falling from clouds.

A series of similes

Through a series of similes which follow, Shelly suggests the sweetness of the skylark's music, the invisibility of the skylark, and the great height from which the bird sings. The skylark is like the poet who soars to the regions of lofty thought, whose thoughts are not easily understood, but whose music can be fully enjoyed. The skylark is like a high- born maiden pouring forth her love into sweet songs which flow beyond her bower, though she herself is not visible.

The skylark is like a golden glow-worm which is hidden from view by the flowers and grass but whose presence becomes known to us by the light which it scatters around. The skylark is like a rose which is concealed from sight by the leaves around it but whose existence is revealed to us by the sweet scent with which it fills the air.

The perfect joy of the skylark

The singing of the skylark is unsurpassed. Even the happy songs of marriage and the joyous songs of victory are inferior to the singing of the skylark. It is not known what the source of the skylark's inspiration is. There is not the least touch of languor or annoyance in the skylark's joy. The skylark is ignorant of human suffering as also of the sad satiety of love. The skylark seems to have a truer and deeper knowledge of the mystery of death than human beings. That is why music flows from the skylark in such a crystal stream.

The tragedy of human life contrasted with the bird's joy

Human beings yearn for the impossible. There is a touch of sorrow in their merriest laughter, Their sweetest songs are songs of sadness. But even if human life were not so ugly and sorrowful, human beings would never experience that intense joy which belongs to the skylark.

If the poet were to experience even half of this joy, he would feel inspired to compose poems as sweet and irresistible as the songs of the skylark. There is something unique about the skylark's ecstasy, and this ecstasy is at the root of the skylark's exquisite song.

The song of the skylark, rather than the skylark itself, is what holds all the power. It is the song that can have the "light of thought" of "the poet," the "soothing love" of the maiden, invisible existence as the "glow-worm golden," and the aura of "a rose." It is this power to awaken so many different parts in nature, and make them aware to the human mind, that Shelley wants to "be taught."

Model Questions

1- In the singing of the skylark, Shelly finds which is unattainable by human beings.

- A- sadness
- B- depression
- C- ecstasy
- D- ugliness

The correct answer is (c)

2- The skylark is of human suffering as also of the sad satiety of love.

- A- ignorant
- B- aware
- C- knowledgeable
- D- observant

The correct answer is (A)