



## To a Skylark<sup>1</sup>

Percy Bysshe Shelley  
(1820)

*This ode is the expression of wonder one feels when a skylark sings, even if it is too high for visibility. Shelley is, however, less interested in the natural element, the skylark, than in the manifestation of something beyond it.*

- Hail<sup>2</sup> to thee, blithe<sup>3</sup> Spirit!  
 Bird thou never wert<sup>4</sup>,  
 That from Heaven, or near it,  
 Pourest<sup>5</sup> thy full heart  
 5 In profuse strains<sup>6</sup> of unpremeditated art.
- Higher still and higher  
 From the earth thou springest  
 Like a cloud of fire;  
 The blue deep thou wingest<sup>7</sup>,  
 10 And singing still dost soar<sup>8</sup>, and soaring ever singest.
- In the golden lightning  
 Of the sunken<sup>9</sup> sun  
 O'er which clouds are bright'ning,  
 Thou dost float and run,  
 15 Like an unbodied<sup>10</sup> joy whose race is just begun.
- The pale purple even<sup>11</sup>  
 Melts<sup>12</sup> around thy flight;  
 Like a star of Heaven  
 In the broad daylight  
 20 Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill<sup>13</sup> delight:
- Keen as are the arrows  
 Of that silver sphere,  
 Whose intense lamp narrows<sup>14</sup>  
 In the white dawn clear  
 25 Until we hardly see – we feel that it is there.
- All the earth and air  
 With thy voice is loud<sup>15</sup>.  
 As, when night is bare<sup>16</sup>,  
 From one lonely cloud  
 30 The moon rains out her beams, and heaven is overflowed<sup>17</sup>.
- What thou art we know not;  
 What is most like thee?  
 From rainbow clouds there flow not  
 Drops so bright to see  
 35 As from thy presence showers a rain of melody.
- Like a poet hidden  
 In the light of thought,  
 Singing hymns unbidden<sup>18</sup>,  
 Till the world is wrought<sup>19</sup>  
 40 To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not<sup>20</sup>:

- 1 skylark. Allodola.  
 2 Hail. Salve.  
 3 blithe. Lieto.  
 4 wert. Were.  
 5 Pourest. Effondi.  
 6 strains. Canti.  
 7 wingest. Voli.  
 8 soar. Innalzi.  
 9 sunken. Tramontato.  
 10 unbodied. Incorporea.  
 11 even. Sera.  
 12 Melts. Si fonde.  
 13 shrill. Garrulo.  
 14 narrows. Si restringe.  
 15 is loud. Echeggia.  
 16 bare. Limpida.  
 17 overflowed. Inondato.  
 18 unbidden. Liberi.  
 19 is wrought. Sia indotto.  
 20 it heeded not. Ignote.



Like a high-born maiden<sup>21</sup>  
In a palace tower,  
Soothing<sup>22</sup> her love-laden  
Soul in secret hour  
45 With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower<sup>23</sup>:

Like a glow-worm<sup>24</sup> golden  
In a dell of dew<sup>25</sup>,  
Scattering unbeholden<sup>26</sup>  
Its aerial hue  
50 Among the flowers and grass, which screen it from the view:

Like a rose embowered<sup>27</sup>  
In its own green leaves,  
By warm winds deflowered,  
Till the scent it gives  
55 Makes faint with too much sweet these heavy-winged thieves.

[...]  
With thy clear keen joyance<sup>28</sup>  
Languor cannot be:  
Shadow of annoyance  
Never came near thee:  
60 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,  
65 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;  
70 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,  
75 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,  
80 Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner<sup>29</sup> of the ground!

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

21 high-born maiden. Fanciulla regale.

22 Soothing. Consola.

23 bower. Ritiro.

24 glow-worm. Lucciola.

25 dell of dew. Valle di rugiada.

26 unbeholden. Inosservata.

27 embowered. Chiusa.

28 joyance. Gioia.

29 scorner. Dispregiatrice.

**LITERARY COMPETENCE****> VOCABULARY****1 READ** the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- |   |                      |    |                           |
|---|----------------------|----|---------------------------|
| 1 | piena .....          | 7  | oppressa dall'amore ..... |
| 2 | tesa, inquieta ..... | 8  | raggi .....               |
| 3 | disprezzare .....    | 9  | violata .....             |
| 4 | riversa .....        | 10 | luminescenza .....        |
| 5 | guizzi .....         | 11 | considerare .....         |
| 6 | fluttui .....        | 12 | nascondono .....          |

**> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT****2 MATCH** the following groups of stanzas with the main concepts listed below in random order.

- A Stanzas 1-6 (lines 1-30).  
B Stanzas 7-11 (lines 31-55).  
C Stanzas 12-17 (lines 56-85).

- 1 The poet tries to define the bird's song by comparing it to a series of human experiences and natural phenomena.
- 2 Shelley affirms the bird's song is superior to any beauty created by man.
- 3 Shelley describes the mystery of the bird's song since he does not see the skylark.

**3 ANSWER** the following questions.

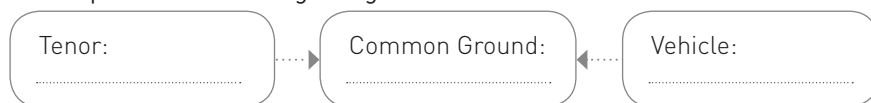
- 1 How is the bird greeted in stanza 1?
- 2 Is the bird near the poet? Where is it in stanza 2? What is the bird's singing simultaneous with?
- 3 Where is the skylark floating in stanza 3?
- 4 What does the poet create to frame the bird in stanzas 3-5?
- 5 How is the poet's relationship to the bird established in stanzas 6-11?
- 6 What is the difference between the bird's life and the human one in stanzas 12-16?
- 7 Does Shelley's last address to the skylark destroy the distance between the poet and the bird?
- 8 What does the poet ask at the end? Might the learned 'gladness' bring about a transference of power from the bird to the poet?

**> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT****4 WRITE** down the rhyme scheme. What can you observe?**5 UNDERLINE** run-on lines. What do they suggest?**6 CONSIDER** the visual layout. Is it effective? Is there any relationship between the poem's visual pattern and its meaning?**7 LOOK** for examples of alliteration and assonance. What do these devices point out?



**8 CIRCLE** the similes and metaphors linked to the world of nature used to describe the skylark in the first part of the poem.

1 Explain their meaning filling the chart below.



2 How does the bird contrast with the nature around him?

3 State the aim/s of these linguistic images. Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ They frame the bird as if to arrest its flight.
- ☐ They stress the joyful quality of the bird's song.
- ☐ They underline the bird's visual absence.

**9 LIST** all the similes of the second part used to define what is 'most like' the bird. Then answer the question below.

.....

.....

How do they connote the bird?

**10 NOTICE** that Shelley never says what the subject of the song is: he only stresses the differences between the bird and man.

- 1 What human feelings does he mention in stanza 15?
- 2 How does the poet's mood contrast with the skylark's happiness and innocence?

**11 DEFINE** the language Shelley uses to describe the 'unseen nature' of the bird. Tick as appropriate from among the following and give reasons for your choices quoting from the text.

- |                                    |                                       |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Abstract. | <input type="checkbox"/> Factual.     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Concrete. | <input type="checkbox"/> Referential. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Archaic.  | <input type="checkbox"/> Emotive.     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Simple.   | <input type="checkbox"/> Visual.      |

**12 TRY** to define what the bird stands for and justify your answer by quoting from the text.

➤ **COMPETENCE: FINDING AND UNDERSTANDING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIP**

**13 REMEMBER** that the poet hopes to sing like the skylark which sings 'Like a poet' (line 36). Here he is idealised, as one hidden by 'the light of thought' (lines 37-38). Then in the last stanza the poet asks the bird to teach him his 'gladness' (line 81) and communicate it to the other human beings. State what

- 1 the idealisation of the poet symbolises;
- 2 the role of the poet among mankind is.