

## Summary

The speaker invokes the “wild West Wind” of autumn, which scatters the dead leaves and spreads seeds so that they may be nurtured by the spring, and asks that the wind, a “destroyer and preserver,” hear him. The speaker calls the wind the “dirge / Of the dying year,” and describes how it stirs up violent storms, and again implores it to hear him. The speaker says that the wind stirs the Mediterranean from “his summer dreams,” and cleaves the Atlantic into choppy chasms, making the “sapless foliage” of the ocean tremble, and asks for a third time that it hear him. The speaker says that if he were a dead leaf that the wind could bear, or a cloud it could carry, or a wave it could push, or even if he were, as a boy, “the comrade” of the wind’s “wandering over heaven,” then he would never have needed to pray to the wind and invoke its powers. He pleads with the wind to lift him “as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!”—for though he is like the wind at heart, untamable and proud—he is now chained and bowed with the weight of his hours upon the earth. The speaker asks the wind to “make me thy lyre,” to be his own Spirit, and to drive his thoughts across the universe, “like withered leaves, to quicken a new birth.” He asks the wind, by the incantation of this verse, to scatter his words among mankind, to be the “trumpet of a prophecy.” Speaking both in regard to the season and in regard to the effect upon mankind that he hopes his words to have, the speaker asks: “If winter comes, can spring be far behind?”

## Form

Each of the seven parts of “Ode to the West Wind” contains five stanzas—four three-line stanzas and a two-line couplet, all metered in iambic pentameter. The rhyme scheme in each part follows a pattern known as *terza rima*, the three-line rhyme scheme employed by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*. In the three-line *terza rima* stanza, the first and third lines rhyme, and the middle line does not; then the end sound of that middle line is employed as the rhyme for the first and third lines in the next stanza. The final couplet rhymes with the middle line of the last three-line stanza. Thus each of the seven parts of “Ode to the West Wind” follows this scheme: ABA BCB CDC DED EE.

## Commentary

The wispy, fluid *terza rima* of “Ode to the West Wind” finds Shelley taking a long thematic leap beyond the scope of “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” and incorporating his own art into his meditation on beauty and the natural world. Shelley invokes the wind magically, describing its power and its role as both “destroyer and preserver,” and asks the wind to sweep him out of his torpor “as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!” In the fifth section, the poet then takes a remarkable turn, transforming the wind into a metaphor for his own art, the expressive capacity that drives “dead thoughts” like “withered leaves” over the universe, to “quicken a new birth”—that is, to quicken the coming of the spring. Here the spring season is a metaphor for a “spring” of human consciousness, imagination, liberty, or morality—all the things Shelley hoped his art could help to bring about in the human mind. Shelley asks the wind to be his spirit, and in the same movement he makes it his metaphorical spirit, his poetic faculty, which will play him like a musical instrument, the way the wind strums the leaves of the trees. The thematic implication is significant: whereas the older generation of Romantic poets viewed nature as a source of truth and authentic experience, the younger generation largely viewed nature as a source of beauty and aesthetic experience. In this poem, Shelley explicitly links nature with art by finding powerful natural metaphors with which to express his ideas about the power, import, quality, and ultimate effect of aesthetic expression.

Shelley appended a note to the "Ode to the West Wind" when it appeared in the *Prometheus Unbound* volume in 1820: "This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains. They began, as I foresaw, at sunset with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions."

The note is interesting in that it shows that the poem came out of a specific experience. The imagery of the poem suggests a natural phenomenon that is observed while it is taking place. The fact that it was written near Florence, Dante's city, may explain why Shelley used *terza rima*, the stanza of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but rare in English poetry, in the ode. *Terza rima* is a series of triplets with interlocking rhymes, aba, bcb, cdc, etc. Shelley modified the pattern by ending each of the five sections of the poem with a climactic couplet. In keeping with his *terza rima* stanza, he concentrates on the effects of the west wind on three classes of objects: leaves, clouds, and water. The combination of *terza rima* and the threefold effect of the west wind gives the poem a pleasing structural symmetry.

In the ode, Shelley, as in "To a Skylark" and "The Cloud," uses the poetic technique of myth, with which he had been working on a large scale in *Prometheus Unbound* in 1818. The west wind is a spirit, as is the skylark. It possesses great powers and for this very reason Shelley can pray to it for what he feels he is deeply in need of. He falls "upon the thorns of life," he bleeds; a "heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed" him. It was Shelley's belief that poetry, by appealing to the imagination, could stir the reader to action in a given direction. With Shelley, this direction was liberty and democracy. In *Prometheus Unbound*, he sketched the wonderful world of freedom that he dreamed of; readers, fascinated by Shelley's glowing descriptions, would be stimulated to want such a world too.

Unfortunately, readers seemed uninterested in his poetry, and democracy was not making progress in the Europe of 1819, when he wrote the poem. Shelley was profoundly discouraged, chained and bowed by a "heavy weight of hours." If he had the power possessed by his west wind's mythical divinity, readers would listen and freedom would prosper. "Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My spirit / Be thou me, impetuous one! . . . Scatter . . . my words among mankind! / Be through my lips to unawakened earth / The trumpet of a prophecy!" By using the poetic device of myth, Shelley is able to indulge in wish-thinking without seeming to and, at the same time, he can strengthen the virtue of hope in himself. The poem ends optimistically: "O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" Freedom will grow, no matter what obstacles there may be, and Shelley's words will help it grow.

Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is a good example of Shelley's poetic mind at work, and when it is at work, it is heaping up similes and metaphors. It is Shelley's extravagant fondness for metaphorical language that makes him all too often obscure and his subject matter thin.

# To a Skylark

BY [PERCY BYSSHE 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 day-light  
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 overflow'd.

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

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:

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.

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,  
Match'd 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.

## • “To a Skylark” Introduction

- One of Percy Bysshe Shelley's most famous poems, "To a Skylark" describes the powerful grace and beauty of the skylark's song. Shelley wrote "To a Skylark" in 1820 after hearing the bird's distinctive calls while walking through the port city of Livorno, Italy. The poem's speaker addresses the bird directly and praises the purity of its music, later contrasting it with sad, hollow human communication. As an ode to the unmatched splendors of the natural world, and especially its spiritual power, "To a Skylark" remains a quintessential example of Romantic poetry. The poem's unconventional form features a song-like **rhyme scheme** and bouncy rhythm that subtly mimics the skylark's calls.

### Summary

A skylark soars into the sky singing happily. As it flies upward, the clouds of evening make it invisible, but its song enables the poet to follow its flight. All the earth and air is filled with its song. The unseen but still singing skylark is compared to a poet composing, a maiden in love, a glowworm throwing out its beams of light, a rose in bloom diffusing its scent, and the sound of rain on twinkling grass. Songs sung in praise of love or wine or music played for a wedding or a celebration cannot compare in loveliness with the song of the skylark.

What accounts for the happiness of the song of the skylark? It is free from all that gives pain to man. It knows what lies beyond death and has no fear. Even if man freed himself from hate, pride, and fear, man's joy would not equal the skylark's. The secret of its capacity to sing so happily would be an incomparable gift for the poet. If the skylark could communicate to Shelley half its happiness, then he would write poetry that the world would read as joyfully as he is listening to the song of the bird.

### “To a Skylark” Themes

Themes :

The Majesty and Divinity of Nature

The poem's speaker addresses a skylark: a small, brown bird known for its impressive song, which the bird can sustain continuously even when in flight. The speaker praises the beauty and power of the skylark's calls, repeatedly highlighting the bird's connection to the glory of the natural world. In doing so, the speaker champions the skylark as an example of nature's divinity and majesty—something, the poem implies, that human beings will never fully understand.

The speaker lovingly describes the intensity and beauty of the skylark's song, playing up the calls' musical quality to drive home just how captivating they are. For example, the speaker describes the birdsong as cascading down onto its listeners in "a rain of melody." Likewise, the speaker wonders how the bird's "notes flow in such a crystal stream."

The speaker indicates that the skylark's music powerfully envelops or "washes over" its audience, and later compares it to "music sweet as love" that a maiden uses to comfort herself when she is lonely. But the sound of the skylark is even "better than all measures" that the speaker has heard produced by human beings. In other words, the power of its organic melody is unique to the natural world—it cannot be matched by the sounds of human civilization.

And it's not just the skylark itself that the speaker details in highly complimentary terms, either; images of natural beauty fill the poem, and they are directly linked to the bird. All this suggests that the skylark embodies the universal splendor of the natural world. The speaker uses a series of similes to compare the skylark's beauty to that of other living things, for example, with the bird releasing its song likened to "a glow-worm golden" spreading its light amongst the plant life "in a dell of dew." The skylark is also compared to a rose whose leaves are swept away by the wind, distributing its sweet scent, which intoxicates nearby insects.

Religious language appears throughout the poem as well to describe the bird and its setting, imbuing nature with a kind of divine presence. For instance, the skylark's calls come "from Heaven, or near it." By stating that the skylark originates from Heaven or is at least "near" God, the speaker suggests that the bird is similar to a divine being. And in continuing to refer to the sky as "Heaven" throughout the poem, the speaker implies that nature offers spiritual insight, perhaps even salvation.

The skylark is further linked to divinity in that its calls are so strong that even when the bird is "unseen," the speaker still hears its "shrill delight." Here, the word "shrill" highlights the piercing quality of the skylark's voice, while "delight" emphasizes the

beauty of its song. The speaker then reinforces the strength of the bird's calls in the next stanza, stating that "until we hardly see, we feel that it is there." As such, the speaker expresses a deep reverence for the skylark, marveling at its ability to captivate its audience even from great heights. Like God, it doesn't need to be seen directly for it to profoundly affect the human world below.

In this way, the skylark—and nature in general—might be seen as a bridge between humankind and the divine. In any case, the speaker's address to the skylark details the splendors of the natural world, suggesting that humankind should recognize and celebrate its wonder and majesty.

### The Limits of Human Communication

Throughout the poem, the speaker is awestruck by the skylark, and especially by the purity of its song. The speaker contrasts this purity with the emptiness and insufficiency of human forms of expression. As a poet, the speaker seeks to learn from the joyful skylark, suggesting that the natural world contains truths that conventional forms of human communication—burdened in the poem by sadness and disillusionment—are unable to express.

The speaker describes the beauty of the skylark's song as something innate—that is, as something integral to its nature. The bird "pourest [its] full heart / In profuse strains of unpremeditated art," the speaker says, meaning that the skylark's "art" is a spontaneous act that comes naturally to the bird. It is "unpremeditated," rather than carefully planned ahead of time.

What's more, the birdsong is born out of pure, unadulterated joy. In fact, the skylark is first addressed as "blithe Spirit" and later compared to "an unbodied joy." The skylark is, in fact, completely free of pain—or, as the speaker puts it, "Thou lovest: but ne'er knew love's sad satiety." The speaker posits that the bird's "ignorance of pain" has helped to create its beautiful songs. By contrast, even the "sweetest songs" that human beings have produced are stained with suffering and "tell the saddest thought."

The speaker continues to elevate the bird's pure, joyous expression over human communication with its many shortcomings. The speaker has "never heard / Praise of love or wine"—typical subjects of human artistic expression—that are as compelling and dignified as the birdsong. Even poetry is no match for the skylark's calls. To poets, the skylark's lyric mastery beats "all treasures / That in books are

found." In other words, the skylark's song is better than anything human beings have ever written.

This presents a bit of a problem for the speaker of this poem, of course, who struggles to find adequate means for expressing the bird's beauty in human terms ("What is most like thee?" the speaker asks). The reader gets the sense that no verse could fully grasp the magnificence of the skylark, and thus feels that human beings—and artists in particular—have much to learn from the bird.

The speaker even directly calls on the bird as a sort of mentor figure, imploring, "Teach us [...] What sweet thoughts are thine." The speaker closes the poem by asking again, "Teach me half the gladness" that the skylark has known, so that the speaker, too, might share such melodious chaos with the world. The speaker believes that if this is achieved, the world will listen to such verse, just as the speaker listens to the skylark.

As an artist, the speaker feels kinship with the skylark and believes that the bird can offer unparalleled insight into pure expression—art with the ability to powerfully illuminate truths in the way that human communication, burdened by sadness and artificiality, cannot.

#### Form

The eccentric, songlike, five-line stanzas of "To a Skylark"—all twenty-one of them—follow the same pattern: the first four lines are metered in trochaic trimeter, the fifth in iambic hexameter (a line which can also be called an Alexandrine). The rhyme scheme of each stanza is extremely simple: ABABB.