

Critical appreciation of the poem 'To a Skylark' by P.B. Shelley

Shelley's 'To a Skylark' is one of the most wonderful lyrics composed in 1820 when Shelley and his wife spent a week or two near Leghorn. They heard the song of a skylark on a beautiful evening, while strolling around the lanes lined with hedges on which fire-flies gleamed. This song inspired this poem. Wordsworth praises the poem as the 'expression of the highest to which Shelley's genius has attained. It reveals some of the beautiful traits of the poet's genius. The first thing that strikes us is the soaring idealism of the poet that transcends all actuality. The skylark and its song are wonderfully described and the description brings out the poet's superb imaginative power.

Shelley can never conceive of the skylark as creature of flesh and blood but it is a spirit of joy. Its song is the symbol of spiritual aspiration of 'universal expansion'. As it rises higher and higher and loses itself in its melodious song it seems to the poet to be the very spirit of joy, unbodied and aspiring, that has not been touched with the sorrows of the years. It is a corner of the ground and ever remains in the sky, which is its proper place. It is an abstraction. It is a symbol of 'illimitable thirst drinking in illimitable sweetness'.

The bird is everything that man is not. It is a better philosopher with an intuitive sense of the mystery of life and death which is denied to rational man. Its joy is free from weariness and annoyance or satiety. It must have a truer idea of death than man has. Man is always yearning for what is unattainable. Hence all his joys are touched with sadness. His sweetest songs are those that express thoughts of sorrow. But the bird is a symbol of eternal joy and remains ever untouched with sorrow. It is in this pure and untroubled joy of the bird's song that the poet finds inspiration for this poem. He becomes identified with the bird.

The imaginative idealism of Shelley reaches its highest point in the stanzas which describe the bird. The poet describes the bird's flight- its upward soaring through the blue deep of the sky. It springs from the earth like 'a cloud of fire'. It soars 'like an unbodied joy'. As it soars higher, its song permeates the earth and air even as Heaven is overflowed with the rays of the silvery moon. The poet draws colourful pictures to describe the bird. Here is a glittering picture of the moon:

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“ Keen as are the arrows
Of that silvery sphere,
Whose intense lamp narrows
In the white dawn clear... ”

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Shelley describes the bird's nature through a series of exquisite images. The songs of the birds are like bright drops of rain falling from 'rainbow clouds'. The bird, in the poem, is like 'a poet hidden in the light of thought'. It is like 'a high-born maiden' soothing the love-laden soul with song in her secret bower. It is like a 'glow-worm golden in dell of dew' and 'a rose embowered in its own green leaves'. All these pictures have a keen sensuous appeal.

The poet praises the bird's song in a series of images conceived with an intensity of power, conjured with a vividness of colouring. Its song surpasses all the rains in spring as well as to the flowers refreshed by the rains. It far excels in marriage songs as well as the songs of victory. It is free from dullness or grief, and the bird loves but does not know 'love's sad satiety'. The poet aspires to know the secret of its song, because he will sing such inspired song that the world will listen to him as he is listening to the song of the skylark. As so from being a spirit the bird unconsciously is brought down to the earth in order to inspire the poet and scatter healing influence upon grief-stricken humanity. The idea that there is yet hope for the world in it will pay heed to the poets is only a poetic rendering of the thought that the world as it is can be converted into the world as it ought to be.

Wordsworth's conception of the skylark is contrasted with that of Shelley. The main difference between Shelley's conception and Wordsworth's is that Wordsworth thinks mainly for the bird, and its song as only a musical tie that binds the bird to its nest. Shelley forgets the bird and thinks only of its divine melody. Hence Shelley has no touch of the earthiness that we find in Wordsworth. He is lost in the clouds of sublime idealism whereas Wordsworth has his mind fixed upon the earth.

INTRODUCTION TO THE POEM To a Skylark :

"To a Skylark" was written in 1820 when P. B. Shelley and his wife spent a week or two near Leghorn. On a beautiful evening, while wandering among the lanes lined with hedges on which fireflies gleamed, they heard the song of a skylark, and it was that song, which inspired Shelley's poem. This is one of Shelley's finest lyrical poems. The stanzaic form and thymn suggest the soaring flight of the skylark. The lark rises almost vertically into the sky singing all the time. The skylark as Shelley is convinced is a symbol of illimitable thirst drinking in illimitable sweetness. It is a winged desire always rising, aspiring, singing, like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun. The skylark is not a bird but a spirit. Its song is the symbol of divine longing, of spiritual aspiration. It surpasses everything that is joyous, clear and fresh. The poem with its swift change of moods, its rapid succession of imagery, its rich melody and lofty idealism defies all analysis. The first four lines of each stanza represent the gradually rising pitch of that song and the long fifth line overflows in a rain of melody.

SUBSTANCE OF THE POEM "To a Skylark":

TO Shelley, the skylark is not a bird, but it is a bodyless spirit, the very embodiment of joy. It springs from the earth like a cloud of fire; its flight begins at dawn and is continued even in the evening and it soars "like an unbodied joy". As it soars higher, its song fills the earth and air as Heaven is overflowed with the rays of the silvery moon. The songs of the bird are like bright drops of rain falling from rainbow clouds. The bird is like a poet hidden in the brilliance of his conceptions. It is like a high born maiden soothing the love-laden soul with song in her secret bower. It is like a golden glow-worm scattering its faint light from under the cover of flower and grass. It is like a rose concealed in her bower of leaves, the sweet perfume of which is carried by the wind and scattered all through. Its song surpasses all things that are "Joyous and clear and fresh". The sound of the spring showers pattering upon the grass, the beauty of flowers refreshed by the rain, songs sung in praise of love or wine, songs of marriage and songs of triumph cannot be compared with the rapture or ecstasy of its song. The bird's song is free from dullness or grief, and the bird loves but does not know 'love's sad satiety'. The bird knows truer and deeper things about death and the hereafter than we, human beings, do. It is untroubled by useless repining for the past and vain longing for the future. The bird's song is superior to all the melody and harmony of human speech and all the piled-up stores of human wisdom. The poet's appeal to the bird is to teach him half its inspiration so that he could entrance the world as he is entranced by the song of the skylark.



THEME OF THE POEM "Q To a Skylark":

Shelley conceives of the bird not as a creature of flesh and blood, but as an unbodied spirit. The bird is a symbol of eternal joy. Its song is symbolic of spiritual aspiration, of universal expansion'. The bird remained untouched by the sorrows of the years. Its melody is so divine that the poet cannot believe that it can have any connection of the weariness and the annoyance and the dark shadow of death with which man is for ever worried. He finds inspiration for his poetry in the divine melody produced by the bird. He becomes identified with the bird. His imaginative idealism reaches its highest point in the stanzas which describe the bird. The bird is an image of Perfection and Truth. It is an incomparable creature without flesh and blood. It is an abstraction. It is a symbol of "illimitable thirst drinking in illimitable sweetness". The comparison of the skylark to a poet hidden in the light of thought whose singing converts the world to "sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not" might be construed as evidence of Shelley's continued hopefulness about the possibility of the redemption through the powers of human thought when it is given memorable expression in poetry.