To a Skylark

POEM TEXT

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.

SUMMARY

The speaker passionately calls out to a skylark, praising it as a joyous "spirit." The speaker goes on to explain that the skylark was never really a bird. Rather, the skylark is a creature from Heaven—or at least *near* Heaven—and from there, the skylark spontaneously pours out its emotions in plentiful, artful strings of musical notes.

The bird continues to soar, rising higher and higher from the earth, which reminds the speaker of billowing flames. The bird glides throughout the vast, blue sky, flying as it sings and singing as it flies.

The sun begins to set, giving off a golden light that illuminates the surrounding clouds. The bird drifts about the glimmering sky, as if it's a disembodied form of happiness only just beginning a race.

The faint purple evening makes way for the skylark's flight, dissolving around it and enveloping the bird. The skylark is like a bright star in the sky that can't be seen during the day. The speaker can't see the bird, but still hears its high-pitched song.

The speaker deems the skylark's song as bright and piercing as moonbeams, whose powerful glow is dimmed by the bright white of the morning sky. Although its light is difficult to make out, the speaker notes, people still perceive that it is present.

The skylark's rich calls seem to fill the whole sky and earth below, reminding the speaker of the moon on a clear night—its rays stream out from a solitary cloud, appearing to fill the sky until it overflows.

As human beings do not truly understand the power of the skylark, the speaker asks the bird for help finding a worthy comparison for it, asking the skylark what other creature or thing is most like itself. The speaker explains that even the light-reflecting water droplets of rainbow clouds pale in comparison to the showers of beautiful music that the skylark rains down.

The speaker compares the skylark to a poet enveloped in a deep thought. The poet writes uninvited lyrics—brought about by pure creative instinct—until humankind is made sympathetic to the hopes and fears it has previously disregarded.

Next, the speaker compares the skylark to an aristocratic young woman who secretly sings from the tower of a castle to comfort her soul, which is burdened by love. Her songs are as delightful as love itself, and they fill her chambers.

According to the speaker, the skylark is also similar to a radiant glow-worm in a small, dew-covered valley. Not out of obligation, but rather of its own free will, the glow-worm distributes its glowing light among the plant life, which hides the insect from view.

Finally, the speaker likens the skylark to a rose that is sheltered by its own leaves before warm gusts of air sweep them away. The overwhelming sweetness of the flower's perfume intoxicates nearby bees.

The speaker goes on to list all the pleasant sounds that cannot compare to the skylark's song—light springtime rain falling on

glistening grass, flowers brought to life by rainfall, and everything else that has ever been happy, sharp, and vibrant.

Unsure whether the skylark is more like a bird or a fairy, the speaker asks the skylark to educate humankind about its pure, delightful thoughts. The speaker claims to have never heard human communication—lyrics worshiping things like romance and wine—that was as heavenly as the skylark's impassioned outpourings of emotion.

In the speaker's eyes, when measured against the birdsong, even wedding hymns and songs celebrating victories are nothing but hollow boasts that hint at an unspoken desire for something more.

The speaker wonders aloud about the sources of inspiration behind the skylark's calls, asking the bird which objects have been the source of its joyful melodies—specific stretches of open land, bodies of water, or mountain ranges? Formations of sky or grassland? Love of other larks or unfamiliarity with suffering?

Due to the clear, intense happiness in the skylark's song, the speaker cannot imagine that it is exhausted or has known any trace of irritation. The speaker concludes that the skylark loves but has never experienced the sadness that excessive love can bring.

Moreover, the speaker believes that the skylark—whether conscious or not—must consider matters of death more deeply and insightfully than mere mortal human beings could imagine. The speaker wonders what else could explain how the skylark's music flows forth with such beauty and clarity.

The speaker elaborates on the differences between human concerns and those of the skylark—people look towards the past and the future and long for what they don't have. Further, even the most genuine human laughter contains some degree of suffering, and the most pleasing songs that people compose also express the most misery.

Even if humankind was incapable of crying and could reject hatred, vanity, and fear, the speaker still does not believe that it would be able to approximate the skylark's bliss.

Addressing the skylark as a creature who dismisses earthly matters, the speaker explains that, to poets, the skylark's skill is greater than the rhythm of any beautiful sound or any precious piece of information that can be found in a book.

The speaker makes one final plea to the skylark, asking the bird to share half the knowledge of happiness that it must have. The speaker believes that gaining such knowledge would cause melodious chaos to spill from the speaker's mouth. Furthermore, the speaker believes that humankind would listen to such verses, just as the speaker listens to the skylark.

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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-105

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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-5
- Lines 59-105

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

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.

The speaker begins by calling out to the skylark in praise, "hailing" it. The speaker then claims that the skylark was never merely a bird, as its spectacular song originates from the far, divine reaches of the sky.

The speaker's early language choices suggest that nature contains great spiritual power. The skylark itself is called "Spirit," and the speaker refers to the upper portions of the sky as "Heaven." Both of these words are capitalized, which draws the reader's attention to them while also recalling the capitalization of pronouns related to divine beings in religious texts. The formality of the speaker's language, including the use of "thy," helps to elevate the skylark.

The speaker's initial characterization of the skylark also highlights its emotions. The bird is "blithe," or happy and without a care. The speaker states that the birdsong is an outpouring of the skylark's "full heart," suggesting passion. Moreover, the speaker accentuates the aesthetic impact of the bird's song by likening it to "strains" (the sound of music being

performed) and "art."

This stanza—and especially the last two lines—features chains of interlocking consonance:

> Pourest thy full heart
> In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

The dense groupings of /p/, /r/, /t/, and /s/ sounds reflect the skillful intricacy of the birdsong. In line 2, consonance and assonance combine to create slant rhymes ("Bird thou never wert"), drawing the reader's attention to the otherworldly power of the skylark's calls and increasing the poem's musicality.

This stanza also establishes the poem's song-like form. In particular, each stanza contains four lines of trochaic trimeter (six syllables in an alternating stressed-unstressed pattern) followed by one longer line of iambic hexameter (twelve syllables in an unstressed-stressed pattern). The fact that most lines begin on a stressed beat gives the speaker's address to the skylark an insistent, passionate feel. The rhythm might be said to reflect the bird's flight—quickly flapping its wings before coasting along—or the lilts of its song. The poem also features an ABABB rhyme scheme that enhances the atmosphere of harmony and beauty.

Finally, the speaker directly addresses the skylark, who cannot respond—a technique known as apostrophe. As such, the audience witnesses a personal exchange, in which the speaker's passions are aimed at their source. In this way, apostrophe heightens the poem's emotional stakes. The use of the second person (in this case, "thee") also gives the impression that the speaker is addressing the audience, building intimacy between the speaker and the reader. At the same time, apostrophe puts the audience in the bird's place, subtly inviting the reader to identify with the bird. In short, the directness of the speaker's pleas places the audience in the crosshairs of an emotional exchange.

LINES 6-10

> *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.*

The next two stanzas describe the skylark soaring into the sky, singing all the while. The speaker compares the bird's emergence from the earth to "a cloud of fire." This simile creates an image of billowing flames and emphasizes the bird's innate power.

The audience sees the skylark transcending the earth—the world of human beings—so that it can traverse the sky, which is associated with divinity. By referring to the sky as "the deep blue," an example of metonymy, the speaker plays up its physical beauty and the sense of wonder it inspires.

The diacope created by the repetition of "higher" emphasizes the bird's increasing distance from the earth. The fact that "higher" appears at both the beginning and the end of line 6 accentuates the extreme heights that the bird is capable of reaching. Shortly thereafter, the speaker uses antimetabole:

> And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

Here, "sing" and "soar" appear in an interlocking ABBA pattern, emphasizing their connection. The ability to sustain its full, beautiful song for long periods of time, especially while flying, is the skylark's defining feature. As such, the use of antimetabole here increases the audience's awareness of the bird's unique skill—an effect that is reinforced by rhymes between "springest," "wingest," and "singest." The lyrical flow of sibilant /s/ sounds in line 10 ("And singing still dost soar") plays up the grace of the skylark's flight and sonically reinforce the link between the bird's song and flight.

LINES 11-15

> *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 bird keeps soaring into the sky as the sun sets. The speaker refers to the sunset as the "golden lightning / Of the sunken sun." This metaphor likens sunset to a precious material (i.e., gold), while "lightning" evokes nature's intense, and potentially destructive, might.

Such strong imagery underscores nature's unparalleled majesty. In turn, the skylark itself seems all the more powerful and fierce, soaring as it is through this "lightning." The alliteration of "sunken sun" draws further attention to the image at hand.

The clouds "are bright'ning" over this sunlight, subtly reinforcing the association between the sky and divinity; light traditionally represents wisdom and spirituality (while the sun itself may be symbolically connected to God). And through it all, the little skylark "dost float and run."

The poem's third stanza then concludes with another simile, which contains assonance and consonance in the form of repeating /uh/ and /n/ sounds:

> Thou dost float and run;
> Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.

According to this comparison, the skylark moves with both speed and carefree agility—so much so that it appears unburdened by a physical form. The repetition of sound here

builds rhythmic momentum to highlight the swiftness of the bird's movements.

This passage then closes with the phrase "just begun," hinting at the persistence of the birdsong—the grandeur that the speaker has already detailed is just a sliver of its capabilities.

LINES 16-20

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,

At this point, the bird has flown so high that the sky seems to envelop it. The speaker uses vivid imagery to explain that, although the bird cannot be seen anymore, the speaker can still feel its presence.

The alliteration created by repeating /p/ sounds calls attention to the beautiful image of the night sky ("even" here is short for "evening") covering the bird:

> The pale purple even

The sky "melt[s]" around the skylark—it lazily accommodates the bird, slowly opening up only as much as necessary to enclose it. This image establishes a tranquil mood, suggesting that the harmonious interaction between the bird and its environment soothes the speaker.

Next, the speaker uses a simile to liken the now-invisible bird to a "star of Heaven" during the day. In other words, the bird is like a star whose intense glow can't be seen during daylight hours. "Heaven" here is simply a poetic way of referring to the sky, but it also once again links the skylark—and the natural world itself—to divinity, infusing nature with a sense of holiness.

The speaker then refers to the skylark's song as its "shrill delight," noting the powerful, piercing quality of its voice. "Shrill" usually has negative connotations, but here the speaker is just highlighting the birdsong's ability to penetrate the atmosphere—perhaps to the point of overwhelming the speaker.

LINES 21-25

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.

The speaker turns to another astrological simile, calling skylark's calls as "keen as"—or as sharp and piercing as—the light emitted by the moon ("that silver sphere"). By likening the moon to a precious metal, this metaphor further glorifies the cosmos. Meanwhile, the moonlight being metaphorically compared to "arrows" plays up the piercing quality of both the skylark's song and those moon beams.

Consonant /r/ and sibilant /s/ and /z/ sounds again call attention to the poem's imagery:

> Keen as are the arrows
> Of that silver sphere,

The musicality here accentuates the aesthetic force—the sheer beauty—of the moonlight.

This stanza contains two other images of potent, cosmic light as well:

1. The moon's "intense lamp."
2. "The white dawn clear."

Literally, the speaker is talking about the way that the moonlight starts to fade ("narrows") as the sky brightens at dawn. Symbolically, this image reaffirms the divinity of nature. Recall that light is traditionally associated with divinity and spiritual insight, which these comparisons layer onto both the sky and the skylark. In other words, the natural world is again linked to deep spiritual knowledge.

In the final line of this stanza, the speaker introduces the collective pronoun "we":

> Until we hardly see, we feel that it is there.

While the previous stanza notes the skylark's continued ability to be *heard*, the speaker now shifts the focus to *feeling*. In doing so, the speaker suggests that the birdsong has emotional impact—listening to the skylark's calls is not a purely aesthetic experience, but it also prompts meaningful introspection.

The use of the collective pronoun "we" also suggests that the speaker's experience can be extended to include all humankind. For the reader, the repetition of "we" includes the audience in the speaker's address, drawing the reader into the poem's narrative.

Finally, the fifth line in this stanza contains assonant long vowel sounds:

> Until we hardly see, we feel that it is there.

This line is, of course, already about twice as long as the preceding four, as is the case in every stanza. The lengthiness of this line, exaggerated here by all that assonance, reinforces the persistence of the skylark's song.

LINES 26-30

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.

The speaker describes the skylark's song completely filling its environment, from the sky above to the land down below. The speaker again compares the skylark to the moon, whose light fills the otherwise empty sky from behind a cloud.

The speaker also personifies both the moon, who "rains down her beams," and the sky's sole cloud, which is "lonely" (technically, calling the cloud "lonely" is an example of pathetic fallacy). The natural world thus becomes an active force rather than a passive backdrop in the poem. The terms "bare" and "lonely" further suggest that the sky is tragically empty, creating an image of desolation until the moonlight (and by extension the skylark's song, to which moonlight is being compared) fills this vacancy.

The speaker once again refers to the sky as "Heaven" in line 30, linking the great heights that the skylark reaches with spirituality. The skylark's comparison to the moon also gives these associations a mystical dimension. In turn, the simile plays up the skylark's otherworldly power, which is beyond human comprehension. Further, the moon is known to regulate life on earth by providing varying levels of light, controlling the tides, and so on. The comparison thus also indicates that the skylark's song has a massive impact on its audience.

The description also contains a great deal of consonant /n/ and /l/ sounds as well as assonant /ow/ and /uh/ sounds:

> From one lonely cloud
> The moon rains out her beams [...]

The clusters of repeating sounds draw the audience's attention to this image, accentuating its beauty.

LINES 31-35

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.

Even after all these similes and metaphors, the speaker still does not feel that any of the comparisons fully capture the skylark's majesty. The speaker has such difficulty finding an example of natural beauty that will approximate the skylark's power that the speaker actually requests the bird's help, asking, "What is most like thee?" This rhetorical question reveals that the speaker does not simply appreciate the skylark, but also wants to *learn* from the bird.

The speaker goes on to claim that human beings cannot classify the skylark's unique power, remaking, "What thou art we know not." The collective pronoun "we" again includes the audience—and all humankind, for that matter—in the speaker's sentiment, while alliterative /n/ sounds (i.e., "know not") highlight the ignorance of humanity.

Finally, the speaker uses yet another example of cosmic imagery to show how delightful the bird's song is. In particular, the colorful haze of "rainbow clouds" cannot compare to the skylark's song. Assonant long /oh/ sounds in "rainbow," "flow," and "so" increase the lyricism of this description, which nevertheless still fails to live up to the skylark's beauty.

Also note how the speaker contrasts the tiny "drops" of the clouds' vapor with the "rain of melody" that the skylark "showers" onto its audience. The descriptions of clouds and rain recall similar imagery in the previous stanza, emphasizing the insufficiency of those comparisons. As such, the audience comes away from this passage feeling the speaker's struggle to characterize the birdsong.

LINES 36-40

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:

Over the course of the last several stanzas, the speaker has found it next-to-impossible to find an appropriate comparison for the skylark. Still, this passage introduces a series of similes that attempt to do just that.

First, the speaker likens the skylark to "a Poet hidden / In the light of thought." This description is almost an oxymoron, as light typically *reveals* objects rather than *hides* them. In this case, light represents the poet's unique knowledge and introspection, which isolates the poet from the rest of humanity. The speaker refers to the poet's verses as "hymns unbidden," emphasizing the spiritual insight of the skylark's organic, spontaneous songs.

The speaker goes onto suggest that the role of poetry in society is to illuminate truths that humanity has overlooked or disregarded:

> Till the world is wrought
> To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:

This is another example of personification, as the earth is said to experience "sympathy," reinforcing its association with human concerns. However, the speaker indicates that gaining this sympathy—that is, persuading people to appreciate overlooked knowledge—is very difficult. Often used in reference to metalwork, the term "wrought" (an archaic form of the verb "work") suggests great effort. The speaker asserts that the poet—and by extension, the skylark—is a kind of dedicated craftsperson.

Assonant short /ih/ sounds pervade the portrayal of the poet, where they reinforce the meter. Here is a look at lines 36-38:

> Like a Poet hidden
> In the light of thought,
> Singing hymns unbidden,

By placing additional emphasis on stressed syllables (as in "hidden"), the repeating /ih/ sounds exaggerate the bouncy rhythm, heightening the lyrical feel of these lines.

LINES 41-45

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:

Next, the skylark is compared to a lovesick, aristocratic young woman who secretly sings to comfort herself. The speaker's choice of a "high-born maiden" who lives in a "palace-tower" emphasizes the great heights that the skylark reaches. Moreover, her song is said to "overflow" the tower, recalling the moonbeams that "overflow" the Heavens as well as the skylark's "rain of melody." Her quarters are called a "bower," which typically refers to a shady area beneath tall plants. The speaker links all of these metaphors to display the interconnectedness of the natural world.

This passage is very musical, reflecting the beauty of the poet's verses, the maiden's song, and the skylark's calls. For instance, the description of the maiden contains clear consonance of the /l/, /s/, /z/, and /w/ sounds:

> Soothing her love-laden
> Soul in secret hour
> With music sweet as love, which overflows her
> bower:

Finally, the repetition of the phrase "Like a" (which first appeared in the previous stanza) brings anaphora into the poem and connects all the similes to come. Both the poet and the maiden, for example, are people hidden away from the rest of society and improves her environment by filling it with beautiful verse. As such, these comparisons highlight the same qualities in the skylark.

LINES 46-50

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:

This passage continues the series of similes that the speaker uses in an attempt to capture skylark's genius. Next, the skylark is compared to a glow-worm that distributes its light amongst the plant life of a small valley. The speaker describes its light as "golden," elevating the insect by comparing it to a precious metal.

The sun's rays were called "golden lightning" earlier in the poem (see line 11), and now the speaker also refers to the glow-worm's "aëreal hue." As such, the speaker associates the insect with the sky, itself closely connected to divinity throughout the poem.

Moreover, light has traditionally represented spiritual knowledge. Therefore, this image presents a small, seemingly insignificant creature as a radiant beauty, glorifying the natural world while reinforcing the spiritual insight that the skylark offers. The glow-worm is also "unbeholden," suggesting freedom from any obligation to others. As such, the speaker suggests that the insect and the bird are generous and unburdened, offering their treasures of their own free will.

Additionally, the speaker's description of the skylark contains pleasant sonic effects. For example, lines 10-11 feature assonant long /oh/ sounds, consonant /l/ and /w/ sounds, and alliterative /g/ and /d/ sounds:

> Like a glow-worm golden
> In a dell of dew,

The repeating sounds flow well together, producing a peaceful, charming atmosphere. In turn, this euphony accentuates the beauty of both the glow-worm's light and the skylark's song.

LINES 51-55

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:

The poem's next simile compares the skylark to a rose, which is sheltered within its leaves until a warm wind carries away its petals and it overcomes nearby bees with its scent. A flower's scent typically entices bees to its nectar, but here, the bees become "faint with too much sweet." This image thus seems to emphasize the overwhelming power of the birdsong, as well as the delightfully intoxicating effect that it has on its audience.

As in the description of the glow-worm, sound play magnifies the rose's beauty. Here is a look at lines 52-55, which contain assonant long /ee/ and /ay/ sounds, consonant /w/ and /t/ sounds, and sibilant /s/ sounds:

> [...] own green leaves,
> By warm winds deflower'd,
> Till the scent it gives

Makes faint with too much sweet those
heavy-winged thieves:

Such dense clusters of similar sounds are pleasing to the ear, while also recalling the stunning complexity of the skylark's calls.

The speaker personifies the bees by referring to them as "thieves." By describing the insects in human terms, the speaker encourages the audience to empathize with the bees, or at least see themselves reflected in nature. In fact, the speaker likens the rose to the maiden (described in lines 41-45) in several ways:

- For starters, both the maiden and the rose live within a "bower."
- Both the rose's scent and the maiden's song are described as "sweet."
- Roses are a classic symbol of love, and the maiden is "love-laden."
- Finally, "maiden" and "deflower" were terms used to discuss female virginity when the poem was written.

By drawing fairly direct parallels between the rose and the young woman, the audience encourages the audience to identify with the natural world and generally recognize the interconnectedness of all living things.

Anaphora heightens this effect, as the phrase "Like a" introduces all of these images, linking them through repetition. This device invites the reader to consider the similarities among the seemingly disparate points of comparison for the skylark. In turn, the audience might notice that all are living things, are hidden away, have an innate gift, and improve their environments by distributing that gift. In turn, the parallels between these creatures reveal that these qualities are what the speaker finds most compelling about the skylark.

Throughout this string of similes, the speaker also gradually transitions away from comparing the skylark to human beings. It would be reasonable to assume that the speaker gets closer and closer to approximating the skylark's power with each attempt. Interestingly, this would make the poetry *least* like the birdsong, highlighting the speaker's feelings of linguistic insufficiency in this moment, as well as the universal limitations of human communication.

LINES 56-60

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.

Having just compared the skylark to a number of wonderful living things, the speaker clarifies that the skylark's song surpasses them in greatness. For starters, the speaker mentions the sound of spring ("vernal") rainfall onto grass and flowers, recalling the "rose" in the "dell of dew" from the previous stanza.

The speaker again uses vivid imagery to evoke the splendor of the natural world, mentioning the "twinkling" of the grass, for example, and the way the rain seems to "awaken[]" the flowers as if they were sleeping people (making this another moment of personification). Yet despite the lyricism of the rainfall, it is still inferior to the birdsong. Moreover, the skylark's song has repeatedly been likened to rain, so its reprise here illustrates the inadequacy of the speaker's earlier attempts to describe the skylark's power.

Indeed, far beyond the sound of rainfall, the birdsong is greater than "all that ever was / Joyous, and clear, and fresh." The repetition of "and," an example of polysyndeton, elongates the list to indicate that the skylark's calls are greater than an immense number of things. This dramatic, sweeping claim suggests that any comparison will inevitably fail.

LINES 61-65

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.

The speaker implores the skylark to share its wisdom with humanity, explaining that no form of human communication can match the splendor of its song. The speaker's request begins, "Teach us," the collective pronoun ("us") suggesting that the speaker's desire to learn from the skylark is shared by the audience, and by humankind in general.

The speaker calls the skylark a "Sprite"—a magical creature—and uses the terms "rapture" and "divine" in reference to the birdsong. As such, the speaker reinforces the skylark's supernatural power.

Also note that the speaker describes the skylark's thoughts as "sweet," a term that is also used when the speaker likens the birdsong to a maiden's music (line 45) and the scent of a rose (line 55). The reappearance of this term subtly suggests that the speaker is not satisfied with the earlier comparisons and seeks additional information to amend them. In particular, the speaker would like to know the inspiration behind the birdsong, as the speaker has never come upon "praise of love or wine" that were so magnificently joyful. Here, "love" and "wine" stand in for classic human passions—relationships, sensory pleasures, etc.—that have been the muses behind many poems and other literary works.

According to the speaker, such verses have never "panted forth a flood of rapture so divine." The term "panted" suggests excitement or exertion to the point of breathlessness, perhaps

highlighting how overcome the speaker is by the skylark's song. Further, it gives the impression that human communications do not have the same stamina as the birdsong, which persists even as the skylark soars through the sky.

The speaker uses water-related imagery throughout the poem to describe the force of the birdsong, and this metaphor of the skylark's song as a "flood" reinforces their association. The alliterative /f/ sounds in "forth a flood" draw the reader's attention to this image, which again presents the birdsong as something overflowing and overwhelming.

LINES 66-70

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.

The speaker goes on to provide additional examples of human communication, particularly victory marches and wedding hymns (that's what "Chorus Hymeneal" refers to; in ancient Greek mythology, Hymen was the god of marriage). In other words, the speaker is talking about celebratory music.

But while these things might be outwardly joyful, the speaker insists that they are actually just "an empty vaunt" (meaning an empty boast) because they contain "some hidden want." In short, the birdsong makes the speaker realize how hollow, or at least incomplete, human verses are.

Once again, the speaker uses a collective pronoun ("we") to describe this longing for something more than human songs inspire. In this case, the speaker plays up the lack of emotional fulfillment that all people apparently experience lest they turn to nature.

The conclusion to this passage contains consonant /w/ and assonant short /ih/ sounds:

> A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.

Here, assonance appears within stressed syllables (as in "A thing wherein"), accentuating the poem's bouncy rhythm. The consonance throughout the passage adds yet more lyricism and melody to the speaker's verse—which nevertheless still pales in comparison to the skylark's song.

LINES 71-75

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?

After contrasting the skylark's mastery of song with the limitations of human communication, the speaker seeks more information about the origins of the bird's power. The speaker asks the skylark a series of questions and guesses the sources of inspiration for its delightful song, which are called "the fountains / Of thy happy strain."

This metaphor suggests that the skylark's muses are abundant, powerfully bursting forth like a jet of water (note how, once again, the bird is linked to water-based imagery). The comparison to a "fountain" also suggests that nature itself inspires the skylark's calls.

The speaker tosses out a number of possible sources of inspiration for the birdsong, inundating the skylark with five rapid questions, one right after the other. Each begins with "What," creating anaphora. The repetition creates a forceful, insistent tone, displaying the speaker's urgent desperation to understand the skylark and replicate its skill.

The speaker initially presumes that the skylark must be inspired by natural beauty such as "fields, or waves, or mountains [...] shapes of sky or plain." These descriptions of the skylark's landscapes are much briefer and more basic than the surrounding accounts of the natural world. As such, the speaker seems to come up with them on the fly rather than carefully crafting elaborate images.

The repetition of "or" supports such an interpretation, as the use of polysyndeton gives the speech an increased conversational feel. The repetition also increases the urgency behind the speaker's questions. In general, the speaker seems to be so bewildered by the skylark, and so fixated on understanding it, that confusion and frustration well up within the speaker's mind, creating the outburst of sorts that appears in these lines.

The speaker also imagines that the skylark's "love for thine own kind" or "ignorance of pain" might explain the pure joy of its song. The phrase "thine own kind" suggests that humans and skylarks are fundamentally different breeds—with the skylark's "own kind" being more inspiring than people, of course.

While offering possible sources of inspiration, the speaker repeats long /ay/ and /i/ sounds. For instance, here is a look at assonance in lines 74-75:

> What shapes of sky or plain?
> What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of pain?

The repeating long vowel sounds draw out the speaker's line of questioning, making it appear all the lengthier. In turn, assonance highlights the speaker's confusion and desire to understand the bird.

LINES 76-80

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.

Of course, the speaker receives no response from the skylark explaining the inspirations of its artistry. Ultimately, the speaker concludes that the skylark has not known any suffering or sadness ("languor") whatsoever. This is the only explanation that the speaker can find for the bird's elation, or its "clear keen joyance."

The alliterative hard /k/ sounds within this phrase call the reader's attention to the purity of the bird's joy (note that the word "keen" itself just means sharp, clear, or acute). Accordingly, the speaker supposes that the bird is unaffiliated by a "shadow of annoyance." This metaphor suggests that a mass of darkness and irritation hangs over humankind—or perhaps humankind leaves such a grim cloud in its wake.

Earlier in the poem, the speaker suggested that the skylark experiences love. In particular, the speaker compared the skylark to a "love-laden" young woman (line 43) and guessed that the skylark's "love of [its] own kind" (line 75) inspires its song. Here, the speaker concludes that the skylark *does* experience love, but never the sadness that love can bring human beings. It never experiences loss of love.

The term "never" appears twice in this passage, indicating the speaker's absolute ignorance of such human suffering. Its repetition contributes to consonance among /n/ sounds. For example, here is a look at lines 77-79:

> Languor cannot be:
> Shadow of annoyance
> Never came near thee:

The prevalence of /n/ sounds reinforce the idea of negation—that is, the skylark's total *lack* of suffering that the speaker describes. In general, this stanza reinforces the idea that human communications are flawed, at least in part, due to their underlying pain.

LINES 81-85

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?

The speaker goes on to remark that the skylark must have a deeper understanding of death than people do. The skylark's conception of death occurs "waking or asleep"—that is, it's not necessarily formed consciously. Still, it contains more depth and insight than any idea of death that people ("we mortals") "dream." In other words, people cannot even *imagine* what the bird implicitly *knows* about death. The speaker refers to humans as "mere mortals" to underscore their inferior relationship to death.

The speaker then asks, "Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?" In other words, the speaker believes that the only explanation that accounts for the pure elation of the skylark's calls is an absence of the worries that plague humankind, such as heartbreak or fear of death. Still, the fact that this idea is posed as a question suggests that the speaker is unsure about this conclusion—the source of the bird's perfect joy ultimately remains a mystery.

The image of the birdsong "flowing" suggests that it arises organically and is sustained with relative ease. Meanwhile, the term "crystal," a transparent material, reinforces the purity of the skylark's calls. Furthermore, assonant /oh/ and sibilant /s/ sounds contribute to the picturesque description of the birdsong:

> Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?

The euphonic combination of a repeating long vowel sound and the gentle hiss of sibilance heighten the reader's awareness of the birdsong's unadulterated beauty, which has lead the speaker to the conclusions detailed in this passage.

LINES 86-90

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.

The speaker continues to contrast the bird's pure expression of joy with the pitfalls of human communication, which is stained with suffering.

First, the speaker claims that "We look before and after, / And pine for what is not." In other words, people look to the past and the future for guidance. They are always searching for something more, perhaps because they are unsatisfied with what is in front of them or unable to find truth in it. Regardless, according to the speaker, the immediate experiences and resources of humankind are critically deficient. The term "pine" emphasizes this extreme longing for something that is absent and recalls the "hidden want" (line 70) that poisons even the most celebratory human songs.

Expanding on this idea, the speaker claims that the "sincerest" expressions of human joy contain pain. Further, "our sweetest songs" are born from the "saddest thought." Interestingly, the term "sweet" appears throughout the poem to characterize the birdsong. The speaker recycles it here to suggest that the human songs that come closest to replicating the bird's pure joy still contain extreme suffering.

The juxtaposition of these superlatives—the *most* joyous and the *most* sorrowful—reinforces the speaker's message that *all*

human communication is flawed. The sibilance and consonance of "sweetest songs" and "saddest" draw attention to this juxtaposition, highlighting the speaker's claim that even the most pleasurable expressions of human emotion are critically flawed.

The speaker again uses collective pronouns to express the universality of this affliction. More specifically, this stanza begins with "We," and "Our" initiates two successive phrases, creating anaphora. The prominence of these collective pronouns highlights the ubiquity of the human suffering that the speaker describes—according to the speaker, *no one's* communications, including those of the reader, are free from pain.

LINES 91-95

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.

The speaker suggests that even if humans were not plagued by such pain, people still wouldn't be able to replicate the bird's joy. The speaker's difficulty imagining that humans could approximate to the bird's pure expression emphasizes the speaker's own failure to mimic the skylark's lyrical prowess.

The speaker provides examples of human emotions that stand in the way, including "Hate, and pride, and fear." Polysyndeton—the unnecessary repetition of "and" here—draws out this line, suggesting the list of human failings could go on and on. The repetition of "if," meanwhile, heightens the reader's awareness that the elimination of these factors is *hypothetical*—far from reality. In other words, people are never likely to "scorn," or reject, things like hatred.

Finally, alliterative /n/ sounds in the phrase "know not" emphasize the speaker's disbelief that humans could ever approach the skylark's bliss. As a whole, this passage underscores the insurmountable flaws of human communication.

LINES 96-100

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!

The speaker explains that the skylark's mastery of verse is greater than the work of any poet. The speaker again uses anaphora, repeating the phrase "Better than all" at the beginning of lines 96 and 98 to emphasize the supremacy of birdsong above *every* lyric *ever* produced by humans.

Similarly, the speaker refers to the greatest artistic works as "treasures," suggesting that they are some of humanity's most valuable possessions. Still, they pale in comparison to the skylark's song. This metaphor thus reinforces the limitations of human communication, which touch even the finest, most beautiful, and insightful lyrics.

The speaker cleverly notes that poets agree with this view. Poets presumably have some of the best-trained ears for sound, immense appreciation for books, and most to lose by admitting their own failures. As such, the speaker invokes a credible source to persuade the audience that the skylark's lyric abilities tower over those of human beings.

Finally, the speaker refers to the skylark as "scorner of the ground." This marks the first time that the skylark is seen as actively antagonistic to humankind. Therefore, as the poem draws to a close, the skylark's skill is more directly contrasted with human failures. The harsh alliteration of "skill" and "scorner" in relation to the skylark (which contains the same initial sound!) adds emphasis to the bird's superior artistic prowess.

LINES 101-105

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" concludes with one final plea to the bird: the speaker asks that the skylark "teach me half the gladness / That thy brain must know." The terms "teach," "brain," and "know" call attention to the skylark's wisdom, which still eludes the speaker, despite deep contemplation of the skylark's skill. Accordingly, the speaker does not just request but actually instructs the bird to share its knowledge. This command displays the speaker's desperate and persistent desire to learn from the skylark.

In fact, the speaker makes a similar appeal earlier in the poem, asking the skylark to "teach us" its knowledge of joy. Here, the speaker makes a rare shift from collective to personal pronouns (i.e., from "we" to "I"). As a result, these final lines reveal what the speaker personally hopes to gain by observing and addressing the skylark. The speaker wishes to replicate the "harmonious madness" of the birdsong, emphasizing the beauty within its chaos. Moreover, the speaker longs for such organic expressions of emotion, which "flow" so freely from the bird.

But ultimately, what the speaker really wants is for humankind to heed the ideas expressed in the speaker's verses. The repetition of "listen," an example of diacope, link's the speaker's audience ("the world") with that of the skylark ("I"). The speaker hopes that people will consider the speaker's own verses with the same fascination and consideration that the speaker displays throughout the poem.

In this way, the speaker implicitly requests the reader's utmost attention, imploring the audience to take the ideas expressed in the poem to heart. Moreover, the speaker refers to humankind as "the world," which also occurs in line 39. In both cases, the speaker discusses "the world's" need to listen to the essential yet often disregarded truths that can be found in poetry.

These final lines contain assonance, alliteration, consonance, and sibilance. For example, note the long /ee/ and /ah/ sounds in:

> Teach me half the gladness
> That thy brain must know,

The following lines then contain repeating /s/, /m/, /n/, and /l/ sounds:

> Such harmonious madness
> From my lips would flow

These dense, complicated chains of repeating sounds display the speaker's attempt to replicate the skylark's "harmonious madness." They are also difficult to read, slowing the audience down. In turn, the sound devices encourage readers to observe the speaker's request that they fully consider the ideas expressed in the verse.

SYMBOLS

THE SKYLARK

Much of "To a Skylark" is spent describing the delights of the bird's song, which is characterized as piercing, heavenly, and beautiful. Through such descriptions, the skylark becomes a symbol of unmitigated joy, freedom, and spiritual fulfillment—things that are out of reach for human beings, the poem implies, who instead remain forever weighed down by sadness and pain.

The bird soars through the air, its "music" better than "All that ever was / Joyous, and clear, and fresh." Unlike people, the bird is "ignoran[t] of pain" and "ne'er knew love's sad satiety." It represents a state of total bliss that human beings will never "come near," because to be human is to feel "Hate, and pride, and fear."

The speaker wants to learn from the bird, because the speaker longs to experience the happiness and seeming spiritual fulfillment that the skylark represents. The bird is also closely linked to divinity, soaring as it does through "Heaven" throughout the poem. Alas, the disappointments that are implied to be inherent to human life prevent the speaker, and everyone else, from ever being like the skylark. Its joyous spirit will forever remain mysterious.

Also note how the speaker searches and searches for an appropriate comparison for the bird but finds none. The speaker contrasts the purity of the skylark's calls, which are spontaneous and unburdened by pain, with the limits of human communication. As such, the birdsong can also be seen as symbolic of nature's purity of expression—that is, of the perfection of natural communication and art.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-105

LIGHT AND THE SKY

Both light and the sky in the poem represent spiritual insight and knowledge. From the speaker's very first mention of the sky, it is depicted as celestial—called "Heaven," immediately linking the sky with divinity. The speaker also depicts many natural objects and forces that exist within the sky, such as stars and weather, as magnificent and ethereal. For instance, the moon becomes "that silver sphere" that "rains out her beams and Heaven is overflow'd."

The speaker reinforces the association between the sky and divinity through images of light and illumination, which are often associated with spiritual insight in literature. For example, the skylark soars "in the golden lightning / Of the sunken sun, / O'er which clouds are bright'ning."

The skylark itself is, of course, intimately connected with the sky because this is where the bird flies, far above the human world below. All this imagery implies that the bird gets its artistic inspiration, its pure joy and fulfillment, from its connection with a sort of divine realm beyond human understanding.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-13:** "In the golden lightning / Of the sunken sun, / O'er which clouds are bright'ning,"
- **Lines 18-20:** "Like a star of Heaven, / In the broad day-light / Thou art unseen,"
- **Lines 21-24:** "Keen as are the arrows / Of that silver sphere, / Whose intense lamp narrows / In the white dawn clear"
- **Line 30:** "The moon rains out her beams, and Heaven is overflow'd."
- **Lines 36-37:** "Like a Poet hidden / In the light of thought,"
- **Line 46:** "Like a glow-worm golden"

WATER, RAIN, AND FLOODS

The speaker repeatedly uses water-related imagery to describe the power of the skylark's song. It's a

"flood of rapture," "a rain of melody," and "a crystal stream," for example. Through this imagery, water comes to represent many things, including intense, overwhelming emotion; artistic inspiration; and the *communication* of that emotion and inspiration.

The idea of water as a symbol of inspiration is perhaps the clearest in the poem. Think of how the speaker's asks the bird about the "fountains" of its melodies, meaning the source of its song. Water also gets symbolically linked to art itself (specifically music), given that the skylark's song is repeatedly likened to a shower of rain onto the earth. Rain, of course, comes from the sky—a symbol of divinity and spiritual insight in the poem—and this imagery suggests that the bird is bringing pure truth and beauty down into the human realm.

Other things in the poem are linked to water as well, and specifically flooding: the "moon rains out her beams," for example, until the sky itself "is overflow'd" with light, and the "maiden's" lovely music "overflows her bower." Spring showers liven up "flowers," too. According to the speaker, the skylark's song surpasses all these things, but they are nevertheless linked with inspiration and insight in their own right.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 30:** "The moon rains out her beams, and Heaven is overflow'd."
- **Lines 33-35:** "From rainbow clouds there flow not / Drops so bright to see / As from thy presence showers a rain of melody."
- **Line 45:** "which overflows her bower:"
- **Lines 56-58:** "Sound of vernal showers / On the twinkling grass, / Rain-awaken'd flowers,"
- **Line 65:** "a flood of rapture so divine."
- **Lines 71-72:** "What objects are the fountains / Of thy happy strain?"
- **Line 85:** "Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?"
- **Line 104:** "From my lips would flow"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

"To a Skylark" contains several examples of anaphora. The most prominent use of this device begins in line 36, when the speaker uses the phrase "Like a" to introduce a series of similes that describe the skylark and its calls.

The bird is likened to a poet, an aristocratic young woman, an insect, and a flower. The repeated phrase links these figures and objects, which at first seem to have little in common. In doing so, anaphora highlights the interconnectedness of all living things.

By inviting the audience to compare these various images, their similarities come into focus. In particular, each simile describes a plant or creature that is hidden away and has some beautiful natural gift, which it distributes throughout its environment. The use of anaphora creates a unified representation of all the skylark's skills, which are showered onto the earth although the bird is high in the sky, shielded from view.

In lines 71-75, the speaker again uses anaphora while asking the skylark a series of questions about the inspiration behind its song, repeating "What [...]?" The speaker's inquiries are literally stacked on top of one another, creating the impression of a "pile-up" of questions. In this way, anaphora displays how overcome with bewilderment the speaker is in the face of the powerful birdsong. The repetition of "what" also places insistence or urgency behind the speaker's pleas, allowing the audience to feel the speaker's intense desire to learn from the bird.

The last two instances of anaphora generally serve to differentiate the bird's calls from human forms of communication. Lines 88-90 describe how even "our sincerest laughter" and "our sweetest songs" are stained with suffering. The repetition of the collective pronoun "our" emphasizes that these flaws are not unique to the speaker, but rather, they burden *all* human communications.

Finally, in lines 96-99, the speaker claims that, to poets, the birdsong is greater than any other sound or text. Here, the repetition of the phrase "better than all" drives home the speaker's point that the skylark's song transcends all human communication, even that composed by the most trained ear.

In general, anaphora also accentuates the regularity of the poem's meter, as the repetition of a word or phrase yields a repeating stress pattern. In this way, anaphora contributes to the poem's harmonious, song-like feel, in turn highlighting the beauty of the skylark's calls.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 31:** "What"
- **Line 32:** "What"
- **Line 36:** "Like a"
- **Line 41:** "Like a"
- **Line 46:** "Like a"
- **Line 51:** "Like a"
- **Line 71:** "What"
- **Line 73:** "What"
- **Line 74:** "What"
- **Line 75:** "What," "what"
- **Line 88:** "Our"
- **Line 90:** "Our"
- **Line 96:** "Better than all"
- **Line 98:** "Better than all"

APOSTROPHE

Throughout the poem, the speaker directly addresses the skylark, using various forms of "you" ("thy," "thee"). This is an example of apostrophe, as the bird cannot respond. Because the speaker's feelings are directed at their source (i.e., the skylark), they come across as increasingly passionate and sincere. In this way, apostrophe intensifies the poem's emotional atmosphere.

The use of the second person ("you") also creates the impression that the speaker is addressing the reader, drawing the audience into the poem's narrative. This apparent "exchange" between the reader and the speaker builds intimacy, engaging the audience and thus heightening the poem's emotional impact. The reader essentially takes the place of the skylark. In turn, apostrophe builds a sense of kinship between the audience and the poem's subject, subtly encouraging readers to compare themselves to the bird. And, through such a comparison, readers might feel the interconnectedness of all living things, or they might realize their own human limitations.

In any case, apostrophe calls attention to the fact that the speaker is communicating with the bird as if it were human. The apostrophe exaggerates the depth of knowledge that the speaker believes the skylark has, as the speaker repeatedly calls out to the bird as if expecting it to understand or respond to these pleas. Along these lines, apostrophe expresses the speaker's desperation to understand the skylark and replicate its skill.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-105

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears throughout the poem. In general, assonance increases the poem's musicality, reflecting the beauty of the skylark's song as well as the harmony of the natural world.

Beyond the simple repetition of similar sounds, assonance achieves this song-like quality by accentuating the poem's meter and creating rhymes. Line 56 contains an example of the former effect:

> Sound of vernal showers

Here, repeating /ow/ sounds ("Sound" and "showers") place additional emphasis on the line's stressed syllables, exaggerating the poem's rhythm. Assonance here also pairs with sibilant /s/ and /sh/ sounds to give this description of natural "music" a greater overall impact. In other words, the sonic devices work together to highlight the imagery in these lines, creating a vivid experience for the reader.

The assonance within lines 33-34 achieves a similar effect:

> From rainbow clouds there flow not
> Drops so bright to see

In this case, the assonant long /oh/ sounds heighten the peaceful, harmonious atmosphere surrounding the charming image of colorful, glowing clouds.

When long vowel sounds repeat, as in the above example, assonance also tends to draw out the corresponding lines, allowing the reader to linger on important images and ideas. For instance, stanza 15 features long /ay/ and /i/ sounds:

> 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?

Here, assonance creates a beautiful and lyrical mood to mirror the natural beauty that the speaker believes has inspired the skylark. Moreover, the long vowel sounds extend this important moment in which the speaker asks the skylark a series of questions. In doing so, assonance makes the series of questions feel even lengthier, highlighting the speaker's mystification in the presence of the awesome birdsong.

Fittingly, repeating long vowel sounds also appear in lines 20 and 25, which describe the persistence of the skylark's calls:

> Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight,
> [...]
> Until we hardly see, we feel that it is there.

In both instances, the speaker explains that the birdsong is so sustained and powerful that it can be heard even when the bird reaches such heights that it is no longer visible. Assonance draws out these lines—which are also the longest in their respective stanzas—to emphasize the power of the skylark's calls.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** "I," "thy," "delight"
- **Line 25:** "we," "hardly," "see," "we," "feel"
- **Line 33:** "rainbow," "flow"
- **Line 34:** "so"
- **Line 56:** "Sound," "showers"
- **Line 72:** "strain"
- **Line 73:** "waves"
- **Line 74:** "shapes," "sky," "plain"
- **Line 75:** "thine," "kind," "pain"

CONSONANCE

Much like assonance, consonance is present throughout the poem and generally contributes to its musicality (we've highlighted select moments of consonance in this guide). The chains of repeating consonant sounds are often lengthy and intertwined, mimicking the complex composition of the skylark's calls. For example, here is a look at lines 4-5, which feature consonance of /p/, /r/, /t/, and /s/ sounds:

> Pourest thy full heart
> In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

In such moments, both the speaker's language and the birdsong it describes are at once chaotic and beautifully, artfully composed. In this way, the speaker approximates the unrestrained, organic beauty of the skylark's song. In fact, the speaker expresses an intent to mimic the "harmonious madness" of the bird's calls in lines 102-105, which also contain intricate consonance:

> That thy brain must know,
> Such harmonious madness
> From my lips would flow
> The world should listen then, as I am listening now.

Such dense clusters of similar sounds can be difficult to read, slowing the reading process down, and even requiring the audience to reread certain lines. As such, consonance calls attention to important moments within the poem, increasing their impact and memorability.

But at other times, the repeating sounds are soft and gentle, flowing well together. In other words, they are euphonic, highlighting the bird's grace as well as nature's beauty. For instance, lines 34-35 describe the skylark's song as more delightful than the vapor of a rainbow cloud:

> Drops so bright to see
> As from thy presence showers a rain of melody.

The soft, sibilant /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds here recall rain showers, heightening this passage's imagery and producing an overall pleasant atmosphere. Lines 46-47 have a similarly euphonic feel:

> Like a glow-worm golden
> In a dell of dew,

Here, the pleasant combination of soft /l/ and /w/ sounds creates a soothing effect to match the insect's gentle glow. Plus, alliterative /g/ and /d/ sounds place additional emphasis on stressed syllables. In turn, consonance accentuates the passage's meter, creating a bouncy, lighthearted rising and falling cadence. In addition to increasing the poem's musicality, then, consonance highlights important images and shapes the poem's mood.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Pourest," "heart"
- **Line 5:** "profuse," "strains," "unpremeditated," "art"
- **Line 34:** "Drops," "so," "see"
- **Line 35:** "As," "presence," "showers"
- **Line 46:** "glow," "worm," "golden"
- **Line 47:** "dell," "dew"
- **Line 102:** "That," "thy," "must," "know"
- **Line 103:** "Such," "harmonious," "madness"
- **Line 104:** "From," "my," "lips," "would," "flow"
- **Line 105:** "world," "should," "listen," "then," "as," "listening," "now"

IMAGERY

The speaker's account of the skylark contains a great deal of imagery. Overall, the elaborate descriptions of the bird and its environment create an atmosphere of praise and grandeur that accentuates the beauty of the natural world.

Generally speaking, vivid imagery allows an audience to imagine a poem's setting, figures, and events, making them appear real and familiar. However, in this poem, the speaker's descriptions also result in the *estrangement* of common images. In other words, by describing the natural world in such intricate and eccentric terms, the speaker often makes the familiar feel new, rather than the other way around. In doing so, the speaker reveals the hidden and overlooked splendors of the natural world, suggesting that it offers infinite beauty.

The speaker elevates everyday natural occurrences such as the patter of rain, which becomes the "Sound of vernal showers / On the twinkling grass," creating a glittering image of spring. Similarly, sunlight is transformed into "the golden lightning / Of the sunken sun" and the light emitted by an insect's luminescent organs becomes "its aëreal hue." All this rich imagery supports the overarching message that the natural world contains unparalleled majesty.

Many of the poem's descriptions of natural beauty rely on references to water and light, as in the above examples. This reflects the interconnectedness of distinct elements of the natural world—creating kinship between a beetle and the sun, for example.

Imagery also shapes the poem's mood, helping to express how looking at the skylark makes the speaker feel. For example, when the bird disappears into the sky, the speaker observes, "The pale purple even / Melts around thy flight." The muted color and steady, lazy "melting" of the sky creates a tranquil and picturesque image, suggesting that the speaker is in a meditative state. Such elaborate descriptions reflect the

speaker's fixation on the bird, as the speaker notices and relays every possible detail, sometimes more than once.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "from Heaven, or near it, / Pourest thy full heart / In profuse strains of unpremeditated art"
- **Lines 6-10:** "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"
- **Lines 11-14:** "In the golden lightning / Of the sunken sun, / O'er which clouds are bright'ning, / Thou dost float and run"
- **Lines 16-17:** "The pale purple even / Melts around thy flight"
- **Lines 21-24:** "the arrows / Of that silver sphere, / Whose intense lamp narrows / In the white dawn clear"
- **Lines 28-30:** "when night is bare, / From one lonely cloud / The moon rains out her beams, and Heaven is overflow'd"
- **Lines 33-35:** "From rainbow clouds there flow not / Drops so bright to see / As from thy presence showers a rain of melody"
- **Lines 41-45:** "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"
- **Lines 46-50:** "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"
- **Lines 51-55:** "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"
- **Lines 56-58:** "Sound of vernal showers / On the twinkling grass, / Rain-awaken'd flowers"
- **Line 65:** "panted forth a flood of rapture so divine"
- **Lines 71-72:** "the fountains / Of thy happy strain"
- **Line 85:** "a crystal stream"

METAPHOR

Metaphors appear throughout the poem as the speaker attempts to describe the magnificence of the skylark. In general, these comparisons contribute to the glorification of the skylark and the natural world more broadly.

For example, the light that the sun gives off at twilight is referred to as "golden lightning," while moonlight is called "the arrows / Of that silver sphere." In comparing both sunlight and moonlight to precious materials, the speaker suggests that these natural elements are highly valuable and glitter with beauty. Moreover, both "lightning" and "arrows" fly through the sky with intensity, stressing nature's exceptional power. Because these comparisons fall within larger similes that describe the skylark, they indicate similar qualities in the bird.

The speaker also uses metaphors to illustrate the ways in which human communication pales in comparison to the skylark's song. For instance, the speaker believes that the skylark can sing with such purity because it has never experienced a "shadow of annoyance." This metaphor creates an image of darkness hanging over or following around humanity.

Later, the speaker claims that the skylark's song is "better than all treasures" found in books. In this case, the comparison of human knowledge and artistry to treasure suggests that they are among the most valuable human possessions. But not even these can stand up against the skylark's song.

Further, the speaker's constant need to speak in approximations when describing the skylark calls attention to the limitations of language, and of human artistic expression in general. In this way, the metaphors display the speaker's struggle and desperation to capture the beauty of the skylark's calls. Plus, within the metaphors, the objects to which the bird is compared are other features of the natural world. For instance, the speaker refers to the birdsong as "a rain of melody" and "a crystal stream," emphasizing its purity and organic origins. Thus, the speaker finds that nothing compares to natural beauty—except maybe other examples of natural beauty.

Finally, metaphors produce compelling and memorable images that increase the poem's impact. The speaker describes the singing skylark as "pant[ing] forth a flood of rapture." Here, the reference to a "flood" recalls earlier images of water as a point of comparison for the birdsong. A flood also suggests an overwhelming amount of something, while "pant" indicates breathless excitement or exhaustion. As a result, this metaphor suggests that the birdsong completely overcomes the speaker. In this way, metaphors make the poem's *emotional* events just as vivid as its physical events—that is, the metaphors help the reader understand not only what the bird is doing, but also how the bird makes the speaker feel.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Pourest thy full heart"
- **Line 9:** "The blue deep"
- **Lines 11-12:** "golden lightning / Of the sunken sun"
- **Lines 16-17:** "The pale purple even / Melts around thy flight"
- **Lines 21-23:** "the arrows / Of that silver sphere, / Whose intense lamp narrows"
- **Line 30:** "The moon rains out her beams, and Heaven is overflow'd"
- **Line 35:** "from thy presence showers a rain of melody"
- **Lines 36-37:** "hidden / In the light of thought"
- **Line 45:** "music sweet as love, which overflows her bower"
- **Line 55:** "those heavy-winged thieves"

- **Line 57:** “twinkling grass”
- **Line 58:** “Rain-awaken'd flowers”
- **Line 65:** “panted forth a flood of rapture”
- **Lines 71-72:** “objects are the fountains / Of thy happy strain”
- **Line 78:** “Shadow of annoyance”
- **Line 85:** “thy notes flow in such a crystal stream”
- **Lines 98-99:** “all treasures / That in books are found”
- **Lines 103-104:** “harmonious madness / From my lips would flow”

PERSONIFICATION

This poem contains several brief examples of personification, which describe the natural world in human terms. This device first appears in line 29, where a cloud is described as "lonely" (making this more specifically an example of pathetic fallacy). By attributing human emotions to the cloud, the speaker encourages the audience to empathize with it, building a greater connection with the natural world.

In fact, the speaker twice refers to humankind as "the world," establishing the earth as a symbol for humanity itself. By equating humanity to its habitat (also an example of metonymy), the speaker stresses how essential the earth is to human identity and existence.

Interestingly, "the world" appears when the speaker describes humanity's failure to recognize important truths, as in lines 39-40:

> Till the world is wrought
> To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:

As such, the personification of the earth suggests that the terrestrial, human realm of nature is critically flawed. The sky, by contrast, is described as perfect and divine. Here is a look at line 30, which personifies the moon:

> The moon rains out her beams, and Heaven is overflow'd.

Here, the moon is an active, female figure who is powerful enough to fill Heaven with her light. Thus, personification contributes to the glorification of the natural world. And by likening various creatures and organic objects to human beings, this device also places all facets of nature on a level playing field, so to speak, so that the speaker can present a specific view of nature's hierarchy—one in which people are far beneath the skylark.

On a more basic level, personification gives rise to original, memorable images. For instance, bees are called "heavy-winged thieves," painting them as lawless collectors of pollen (rather than good-natured facilitators of reproduction), while flowers are "awaken'd" by rainfall. In both cases, personification animates the relationships between living things, creating complex webs of interactions and perhaps encouraging readers to consider their place within it.

Furthermore, the speaker calls out to the skylark as if it can understand and respond to such addresses. This effect is similar to personification, as the speaker grafts human characteristics onto the bird. However, the speaker acts as though the skylark *really does* have human qualities (rather than ascribing them to the bird in a figurative sense). Therefore, it might be more accurate to describe this technique as anthropomorphism, though it's difficult to determine the degree to which the speaker actually believes that the skylark can respond. Whatever the case, the speaker's appeals to the skylark express total wonderment at its skill and grace, as well as a burning desire to understand the source of its power. Indeed, the speaker appears so overcome by the birdsong—so desperate but so unable to comprehend its mastery of verse—that this wonder cannot be contained, bursting out in the form of exclamations and questions.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 29:** “one lonely cloud”
- **Line 30:** “The moon rains out her beams”
- **Lines 39-40:** “the world is wrought / To sympathy”
- **Line 55:** “those heavy-winged thieves”
- **Line 58:** “Rain-awaken'd flowers”
- **Line 105:** “The world should listen”

REPETITION

Several forms of repetition appear throughout this poem (note that anaphora is discussed separately in this guide). In general, recurring sounds and stress patterns create a pleasant, song-like effect that accentuates the musicality of the skylark's calls.

Here is a look at the poem's first example of repetition, which appears in line 6:

> Higher still and higher

This stanza describes the bird's ascent into the sky, and the repetition of "higher," which is specifically an example of diacope, accentuates the great heights that the skylark capable of reaching. In doing so, it highlights both the skylark's physical capabilities and its connection to "Heaven," the divine realm of nature represented by the sky.

The speaker's description of the bird's ascent continues throughout this stanza, which also contains the poem's sole example of antimetabole:

> And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

The interlocking ABBA pattern of repeated terms emphasizes the fact that the skylark sings and soars at the same time.

The next several instances of repetition involve conjunctions, creating polysyndeton. Line 60, for example, notes various forms of beauty that the birdsong exceeds. The repetition of "and," which is grammatically unnecessary, extends the list to suggest that the skylark's calls are greater than *all the* world's wonders:

> Joyous, and clear, and fresh, thy music doth surpass.

Similarly, in line 92, polysyndeton draws out a list of all that humans would have to give up—"Hate, and pride, and fear"—imitate the skylark's joy. As such, the repetition of "and" highlights the many human flaws that stand in the way of pure expression.

Polysyndeton has a slightly different function in line 71, which shows the speaker speculating about the skylark's source of inspiration:

> What fields, or waves, or mountains?

In this case, the speaker seems to search for answers in real-time, tossing out ideas as they arise. The repeating "or," especially paired with the anaphoric "what," has an insistent feel. As such, repetition conveys the speaker's uncertainty about the bird's powers, which is accompanied by a ceaseless desire to learn more.

The poem's final example of repetition occurs in its last line, which suggests that if the speaker can approximate the skylark's "harmonious madness," the world will heed the speaker's verses:

> The world should listen then, as I am listening now.

The repetition of "listen" emphasizes the speaker's desire to replicate the skylark's skill. But beyond that, it calls attention to the speaker's desire to be heard.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Higher still and higher"
- **Line 10:** "And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest"
- **Line 60:** "and," "and"
- **Line 73:** "or," "or"
- **Line 92:** "and," "and"
- **Line 105:** "listen," "listening"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

This poem features several rhetorical questions, which generally express the speaker's awe of the skylark. In fact, the speaker directs each question at the bird as if it is capable of understanding and responding to the pleas. As such, the rhetorical questions display the speaker's passionate—even irrational—glorification of the skylark's wisdom, as well as an equally intense desire to understand its power.

The speaker first questions the bird after struggling to fully describe its beauty. The speaker requests the bird's help coming up with an appropriate comparison, asking, "What is most like thee?" As the speaker's elaborate descriptions have failed to capture the skylark's majesty, this inquiry highlights both the limitations of language and the speaker's desire to overcome them. The question emphasizes the uniqueness of the skylark, as it is beyond comparison.

Later, the speaker grasps at possible sources of inspiration behind the birdsong in lines 71-75:

> 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?

This stanza breaks from the carefully-considered, lyrical descriptions that surround it. As such, the relentless stream of questions comes across as an outburst of sorts. The repetition of "What [...]?," an example of anaphora, places additional emphasis and urgency behind the speaker's pleas. Moreover, the fact that the speaker offers a number of possible sources of the skylark's powerful song shows ongoing consideration in real-time. Taken together, the rhetorical questions create a distinct, passionate moment that offers a glimpse into the speaker's internal dialogue. The audience also gains a greater understanding of the overwhelming effect that the skylark has on the speaker, underscoring its power.

Finally, the speaker believes that the bird must have extraordinary knowledge of metaphysical matters such as death in order to sing with such purity. If this is not the case, the speaker asks, "how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?" Here, the rhetorical question communicates that the bird's transcendent wisdom is the only logical explanation the speaker can find for the pure joy of the skylark.

Due to apostrophe (i.e., the fact that these questions are directed at "you"), the speaker appears to question the readers. But they, too, are incapable of providing the answers that the speaker seeks. In this way, the rhetorical questions encourage the audience to empathize with the speaker's confusion. At the same time, as the recipients of the speaker's inquiries, readers take the skylark's position. The audience is thus also subtly prompted to identify with the bird, perhaps considering how it might respond, were it able to. In effect, the rhetorical questions place the audience in the middle of the speaker-skylark exchange, engaging the audience and heightening the

poem's impact.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 32:** "What is most like thee?"
- **Lines 71-75:** "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?"
- **Line 85:** "Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?"

SIMILE

The speaker's address contains a number of similes, which serve many of the same functions as the poem's imagery and metaphors. In particular, the similes glorify the skylark by comparing its song and movement to powerful forces of nature and living things.

This device first appears in lines 7-8, where the skylark's emergence from the earth and into the air is likened to "a cloud of fire." The reference to fire evokes nature's strength and vitality, while the cloud suggests a large, swirling mass. As a whole, the simile creates a compelling and memorable image of the bird's ascent.

Shortly thereafter, similes link the birdsong to spirituality in lines 18-22:

> 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,

Here, the speaker compares the birdsong to various astral bodies, as each has the ability to impact its audience from great heights, even when it is not visible. The speaker draws on the established symbolism of the sky as a representation of spirituality to emphasize the bird's divinity, creating layers of association that heighten the skylark's grandeur.

The most prominent examples of simile appear in lines 36-55, in which the speaker attempts to approximate the impact of the skylark's calls through a series of comparisons. In particular, the bird is likened to an introspective poet, an aristocratic young woman, a luminous beetle, and a rose that loses its petals. The speaker's repeated efforts to find an appropriate point of comparison for the birdsong display the limitations of the speaker's skill (and language in general), as well as the unmatched magnificence of the skylark.

These similes appear one directly after the other and follow a similar structure—each is introduced by "Like a" and is neatly contained within its own cinquain (five-line stanza). In this way, the audience is encouraged to notice the similarities between the similes, drawing out the parallels between seemingly disparate elements of nature. Plus, each of the similes that appears in this poem contains references to natural beauty in one form or another—whether it be golden sunlight or the innate gift of song. Therefore, the comparisons highlight the interconnectedness of all living things.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "From the earth thou springest / Like a cloud of fire"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Thou dost float and run; / Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun"
- **Lines 18-20:** "Like a star of Heaven, / In the broad day-light / Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Keen as are the arrows / Of that silver sphere"
- **Lines 26-30:** "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"
- **Lines 36-40:** "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"
- **Lines 41-45:** "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"
- **Lines 46-50:** "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"
- **Lines 51-55:** "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"

VOCABULARY

Skylark () - A small, brown songbird commonly found in Asia, North Africa, and Europe. The skylark is known for its full, complex song, which the bird can sustain for long periods, even while flying. For this reason, the skylark is often identified by its distinctive calls before it is seen.

Hail (Line 1) - Call out to someone or something in order to get its attention. Dating back to the Middle Ages, "hail" is an archaic exclamation traditionally used as a greeting, often also expressing great praise and respect, as in, "All hail the queen!"

Blithe (Line 1) - Full of joy and carefree.

Profuse (Line 5) - Plentiful; existing in large quantities, to an unrestrained and extravagant degree.

Strains (Line 5, Line 72) - The music produced by someone or something.

Unpremeditated (Line 5) - Spontaneous; not planned in

advance.

Unbodied (Line 15) - Incorporeal; not contained within a physical, bodily form.

Shrill (Line 20) - Having a piercing, high-pitched sound.

Keen (Line 21, Line 76) - Strong, intense, and penetrating.

Silver sphere (Line 22) - A celestial body that shines brightly. The speaker is probably referring to the moon or a star, because its intensity fades in the bright morning sky.

Narrow (Line 23) - Become more limited; diminish.

Unbidden (Line 38) - Not brought about by a particular request or a conscious effort, but happening instinctively and of its own accord.

Wrought (Line 39) - Formed into a certain shape, usually requiring a great deal of labor and skill. The speaker's use of this term suggests that it takes much effort and artistry (on the part of poets) to heighten humankind's sensitivity to matters that it has ignored.

Heeded (Line 40) - To "heed" something means to pay attention to or consider it, especially something of consequence (like a change or a warning).

Maiden (Line 41) - An archaic term for an unmarried girl or young woman.

Love-laden (Line 43) - Full and heavy with love.

Bower (Line 45) - A shaded spot beneath the cover of tall plants in a lush garden or wooded area. In literature, this term is also used to describe a noblewoman's private quarters.

Glow-worm (Line 46) - A beetle whose organs glow with a bright yellow-green hue. The speaker probably refers to the wingless females, who emit light to attract male mates.

Dell (Line 47) - A small, secluded valley, typically blanketed with grass and/or trees.

Unbeholden (Line 48) - Not indebted to anyone; having no obligations.

Aëreal (Line 49) - Related to the air and/or the atmosphere. The speaker indicates that the glow-worm's light permeates the atmosphere.

Embower'd (Line 51) - To "embower" means to shelter or envelop, as if under the cover of tall plants (i.e., within a bower). The use of this term links the glow-worm simile with the maiden simile.

Deflower'd (Line 53) - Removed the flowers (of a plant). "Deflower" is also an outdated term used to denote the taking of a woman's virginity. As such, its appearance here highlights the connection between the glow-worm and the maiden of the previous stanza.

Vernal (Line 56) - Occurring during, relating to, or reminiscent of springtime.

Surpass (Line 60) - Outshine, be better or greater than someone or something.

Sprite (Line 61) - A small mythical creature with magical powers, such as an elf or fairy.

Rapture (Line 65) - An impassioned expression of pleasure or emotion.

Hymeneal (Line 66) - Relating to marriage.

Vaunt (Line 69) - An archaic term for "boast," or an inappropriately excessive expression of pride.

Plain (Line 74) - An large, flat area of land without any trees.

Ignorance (Line 75) - A lack of awareness or sufficient understanding of something.

Joyance (Line 76) - An archaic term meaning enjoyment or delight.

Langour (Line 77) - A state of tiredness and lack of energy, usually in an indifferent and/or relaxed manner.

Satiety (Line 80) - A state of being totally satisfied; having been given as much (if not more) as one can take. In context, the phrase "love's sad satiety" indicates a woeful state arising from fully experiencing love—its wonderful and tragic elements—possibly to excess.

Deem (Line 82) - Consider or judge.

Pine (for) (Line 87) - Have a strong, longing desire for something that is beyond reach.

Fraught (Line 89) - The phrase "fraught with" simply means "full of." Appearing on its own, "fraught" indicates anxiety, stress, and discomfort. These connotations intensify the negativity undertones of human laughter, which the speaker says is full of pain.

Scorn (Line 91, Line 100) - Look down on, reject, and/or ridicule.

Measure (Line 96) - The rhythm of poetry or music; a certain metrical unit (e.g., a poetic foot) or grouping of beats.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Shelley developed a unique structure to suit the distinctive birdsong that the poem describes. The poem's 105 lines are arranged into 21 cinquains, or stanzas containing five lines. Each stanza also consists of four shorter lines followed by a significantly longer fifth line.

The length of the final line—about double that of the preceding four—prevents the poem from becoming too monotonous, while also evoking the natural variations or lilts in both the skylark's song and its flight. At the same time, the fact that the poem never deviates from this format (it is consistent in its

inconsistency) is another possible testament to the persistence of the skylark's song.

"To a Skylark" is also an ode, an elaborate poem that celebrates or praises something—in this case, the skylark. The ode is a very old form that dates all the way back to ancient Greece, and it was popular with Romantic poets like Shelley because it connected their work to a long, storied literary tradition. The fact that this poem is an ode implicitly elevates the subject at hand; the humble skylark becomes something magnificent and worth celebrating.

METER

"To a Skylark" utilizes two different meters. The first four lines of each stanza are written in trochaic trimeter, meaning there are three trochees (poetic feet with a stressed-unstressed syllable pattern; DUM-da) per line. This gives the poem a very energetic, forceful feel. As an example, take lines 36-39:

> Like a | Poet | hidden
> In the | light of | thought,
> Singing | hymns un- | bidden,
> Till the | world is | wrought

As these lines show, the poem's trochaic trimeter lines are often catalectic—a fancy-sounding word that simply means that a line is missing its final syllable (as with "thought" and "wrought" above, which lack the unstressed beat to make the trochees complete). This adds yet more energy and excitement; the speaker can hardly wait to get to the next line in praise of the skylark.

The meter of the first four lines in each stanza thus places force and emphasis behind the speaker's statements, allowing the audience to feel the passion behind the speaker's praise of the bird as well as the urgency of the speaker's desire to learn from the skylark.

The last line of each stanza is then written in iambic hexameter—a meter of six iambs, or da-DUMs (an iamb is essentially the opposite of a trochee). As such, these final lines begin with unstressed syllables and are about twice the length of the preceding lines. For instance, here is a look at the meter of line 25:

> Until | we hard- | ly see, | we feel | that it | is there.

While the shorter lines are choppy and exciting, the longer lines allow rhythmic momentum to *gradually* build, culminating in a stress. This steady "rising" effect of the iamb might be said to reflect the bird's ascent into the sky.

Whatever the case, the regular meter contributes to the poem's song-like feel, which in turn accentuates the musical quality of the skylark's call. Indeed, like the poem's meter, the skylark's voice is sustained and dynamic—repetitive enough to be enchanting, but never monotonous. The poem's rhythm is consistent but the stress pattern is not rigid, reflecting the constant changes of the skylark's song.

Plus, because so much of the text is distinctly "poetic" in terms of sound and language (inverted word order, lengthy descriptions, use of rhyme, etc.), the deviations from the standard meter preserve some sense of being conversational, as the speaker is, after all, meant to be *talking* to the bird. Still, Shelley sought to maintain a relatively consistent cadence, evidenced by the removal of vowels ("O'er which clouds are bright'ning"), presumably so that the audience might appreciate the musicality of the birdsong.

RHYME SCHEME

"To a Skylark" features a simple and consistent rhyme scheme. The first and third lines within each stanza rhyme, as do the second, fourth, and fifth lines, creating the pattern:

> ABABB

Most of the poem's lines are quite short, making these end rhymes all the more prominent and densely packed. The poem feels intensely musical as a result, which reflects the beauty and harmony of nature as well as the delightful song-like quality of the skylark's calls. Other forms of sound play such as assonance and consonance heighten this effect (check out the "Poetic Devices" section of this guide for more on these).

Most of the rhymes within this poem are perfect, but this isn't always the case. For instance, lines 66-70, which describe the flaws of music created by humans, contain slant rhymes such as "Hymeneal" with "all" and "chant" with "want." Here, the imperfect rhymes call attention to the insufficiencies of human forms of expression, which pale in comparison to the purity of the birdsong. In general, slant rhymes highlight the speaker's inability to fully capture the skylark's beauty and skill.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is left anonymous—an unnamed commentator who hears the calls of a skylark and stops to contemplate the incomparable beauty and power of its song. The speaker being nonspecific makes sense, in that this helps to keep the poem's focus squarely on the skylark.

Both the splendor of the skylark's song and the speaker's struggles to fully capture the bird's artistry in the poem act as reminders of the speaker's own limitations as a human being. In turn, the encounter with the skylark reinforces the speaker's view that human forms of expression are flawed. This is not to say that the speaker passively *accepts* the limitations of human communication. Instead, the speaker wishes to learn from the skylark, directly asking the bird to "teach us."

The address to the skylark contains references to art, music, and literature, suggesting that the speaker is an artist of some

kind. Indeed, the speaker wishes to replicate the birdsong in order to effect change in society, or at least be heard.

Shelley's reverence for the natural world, appreciation of its spiritual power, and belief that (proper) artists convey essential truths to humankind are all qualities he shares with the speaker. Moreover, Shelley wrote this poem after hearing the calls of a skylark, so it's reasonable to conclude that the poem's speaker is very close to its author. Still, the speaker's concerns have been shared by many intellectuals and creatives throughout history, so the speaker can also be thought of as some more generalized stand-in for artists and their plight.

SETTING

The poem has a nonspecific setting. It is unclear at what point in history the poem's events are meant to take place, and their physical location is similarly indistinct. Skylarks can be observed across Asia, Europe, and North Africa, but beyond that, the audience only knows that the poem's events take place outdoors, likely at sunset. Still, the speaker spends much of the poem fondly describing the scenery, showing a great appreciation for everyday natural occurrences such as the movement of the planets.

Repeatedly referred to as "Heaven," the sky becomes a symbol of spirituality, while the earth, to which the speaker is confined, represents the lesser, *human* realm of nature. The skylark bridges the two, and the wider setting thus captures the distance between humans and the divine, as well as nature's ability to bring them closer.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"To a Skylark" was published in 1820, just two years before Shelley's tragic death by drowning. It appeared with *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley's lyrical drama (a play written in verse) about the mythological titan Prometheus Many of Shelley's greatest poems also appeared alongside this drama, including "Ode to the West Wind," "The Cloud," and "Ozymandias."

These works all feature vivid imagery and focus, at least in part, on the spiritual power and mystery of the natural world. In fact, these features can be observed across Shelley's writing. "To a Skylark" encapsulates other Shelley-esque stylistic features as well, such as his use of symbolism, imagery, exclamatory statements, questions, and other highly emotive language. His work also often features an interplay of joy and despair as well as tension between the all-important role of the poet and the limitations of language.

Together with William Blake ("The Sick Rose"), Samuel Taylor Coleridge ("The Eolian Harp"), William Wordsworth ("I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"), Lord Byron ("Prometheus"), and John Keats ("Ode to a Nightingale"), Shelley has become almost synonymous with the British Romantic movement. The Romantics were known for their glorification of nature, whose awe-inspiring beauty was said to bring about deep introspection. The ode was also popular among the Romantics, as it elevates and praises its subject, often through an emotional direct address (as in "To a Skylark").

Shelley's "To a Skylark" was preceded and influenced by Wordsworth's "To the Skylark," which also features a direct address to the bird. Like Shelley, Wordsworth uses rhetorical questions, compares the birdsong to a "flood," and posits that the bird disdains the earth, which is full of human worry. English writer (and Shelley acolyte) Thomas Hardy ("The Darkling Thrush") composed "Shelley's Skylark" in the late 19th century while on a trip to Italy. Hardy's poem imagines what has come of the skylark that Shelley describes, using its immortalization (in verse) to express his own devotion to Shelley.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Shelley wrote "To a Skylark" while living in Italy with his wife, writer Mary Shelley. During an evening walk through the port city of Livorno, they heard the calls of the skylark, which inspired the poem. Mary Shelley recounted the incident nearly two decades later:

> It was on a beautiful summer evening, while wandering among the lanes, whose myrtle hedges were the bowers of the fire-flies, that we heard the caroling of the sky-lark, which inspired one of the most beautiful of his poems.

Shelley was writing during the Romantic era, the transition to which occurred alongside a string of cultural, economic, and political upheavals across Europe. While the Age of Enlightenment championed logic and reason above all else, the Romantic era saw an increased focus on mystery, doubt, and speculation, as well as the elevation of individual expression, subjectivity, and imagination. Meanwhile, rapid industrialization reshaped landscapes, working and living conditions, and the way people interacted with one another.

The Romantics were generally sympathetic to radical, revolutionary politics and had an anti-elitist worldview (at least during their younger years), and Shelley was no exception. A life-long rebel, Shelley was nicknamed "Mad Shelley" as a child and his atheistic writings ultimately got him kicked out of Oxford University. Shelley was personally much more interested in individual spirituality (and its connection to the natural world) than institutionalized religion, which he found tyrannical and hypocritical. Despite the ire they were met with, Shelley continued to produce political pamphlets throughout his later years.

In general, Shelley was strong-minded in his literary output, resisting the influence of sales and critics (who were often harshly negative and commented on his perceived moral depravity). Indeed, Shelley believed that poetry was the most powerful and effective companion to social change. For instance, the Peterloo Massacre occurred the year before this poem was written. The incident greatly troubled Shelley, who addressed it in both lyrics and prose. However, many of his political poems of this period were too dangerous to be published at the time. Nature poems such as "To a Skylark" allowed Shelley to promote his worldview in a subtler and safer format.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a live reading of Shelley's "To a Skylark." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=voZhd2qRkxQ&t=20s&ab_channel=CaliforniaLove)
- Biography of the Poet — Take a deep dive into Shelley's life and works, courtesy of the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/percy-bysshe-shelley)
- An Introduction to British Romanticism — Learn more about the Romanticism, including its historical context, themes, and key contributors. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/152982/an-introduction-to-british-romanticism)
- What's So Special About a Skylark? — Browse a summary of the skylark's defining features—such as its habitat, behavior, and conservation status—alongside images of the bird. (http://www.oiseaux-birds.com/card-sky-lark.html)
- The Skylark's "Shrill Delight" — Listen to recording of a skylark's calls, layered over video footage of skylarks in their natural habitats. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssEZWMsQg_8&ab_channel=WildlifeWorld)
- Primary Sources — Take a look at original documents related to the poem, including an early printing, from the collection of the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-to-a-skylark)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY POEMS

- England in 1819
- Love's Philosophy
- Mutability
- Ode to the West Wind
- Ozymandias
- Song to the Men of England
- Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Soa, Jackson. "*To a Skylark.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 2 Oct 2020. Web. 16 Aug 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Soa, Jackson. "*To a Skylark.*" LitCharts LLC, October 2, 2020. Retrieved August 16, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/percy-bysshe-shelley/to-a-skylark.