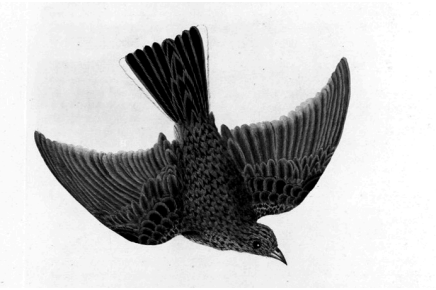
Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



To a Skylark

by Percy Bysshe Shelley

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.1, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.4

This Romantic lyric uses twenty-one five-line stanzas. Its speaker addresses the skylark directly, imagining its inner life rather than making a scientific account of birds. Distinguish the speaker's idealized bird from an actual animal.

THE POEM

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 daylight
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 overflowed.

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 aereal hue
Among the flowers and grass, which screen it from the view!

Like a rose embowered
In its own green leaves,
By warm winds deflowered,
Till the scent it gives
Makes faint with too much sweet those heavy-winged thieves:

Sound of vernal showers
On the twinkling grass,
Rain-awakened 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,
Matched 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.

VOCABULARY

blithe — cheerful and carefree

profuse — abundant

unpremeditated — not planned beforehand

vernal — relating to spring

rapture — intense delight

satiety — the state of having had enough

fraught — filled or burdened

languor — weariness or lack of energy

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does the speaker call the bird a “blithe Spirit” rather than simply a bird?

2. Choose two comparisons from the stanzas beginning with Like. How can something unseen still affect people?

3. What is the effect of the repeated requests beginning with Teach?

4. Explain the contrast between the bird and humanity in the stanza beginning “We look before and after,”.

5. What does the speaker hope to gain in the final stanza? Is this merely a description of nature?

WRITING PROMPT

Write 12–16 lines addressing a natural sound as a teacher. Use two different similes and end with a request for something you wish to learn.

To a Skylark — Answer Key

1. The greeting makes the bird seem joyful and almost supernatural. Its song seems to flow freely, beyond ordinary human limitations.
2. Accept the hidden poet, maiden, glow-worm or rose. Each is partly concealed but communicates through song, light or scent; the bird likewise affects the listener without being visible.
3. The requests turn praise into an appeal for instruction. The poet becomes a student of the bird's joy and artistic freedom.
4. People remember and anticipate, longing for what is absent. Even laughter contains pain, whereas the speaker imagines the bird's joy as undivided. This is a poetic projection, not a fact about birds.
5. He asks for even half its gladness so that his own poetry could command listeners. The poem explores creativity and the limits of human happiness as well as birdsong.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/to-a-skylark-percy-bysshe-shelley/