UNIT 14  P.B. SHELLEY

Structure

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

After having read this unit you will be able to:

- know about Shelley’s life and work;
- appreciate ‘Ode To The West Wind’; and
- ‘To A Skylark’.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit we have discussed Shelley’s life and work because his eventful as well as unconventional life has influenced his writings and probably an understanding of his life may help you in analyzing and appreciating his poetry in general and the prescribed poems in particular.

The first poem ‘Ode to the West Wind’ is a lyric of great complexity and consummate artistic design. Shelley glorifies the west wind because it destroys to preserve, and his optimism is also evident in the last line, ‘If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind’?

The second poem ‘To a Skylark’ is an impassioned invocation to the invisible bird which pours out its heart ‘In profuse strains of unpremeditated art and singing still dost sour and soaring ever singest’. It is a very famous lyric in which the poet glorifies the blissful life of the skylark, a heavenly bird, and contrasts her fate with human suffering.
14.2 PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY (1792-1822)

P.B. Shelley was one of the greatest romantic poets of early nineteenth century. He was an uncompromising rebel. He continued his struggle for the cause of individual liberty, social justice and peace. He wished to bring social reforms by his inspiring and courageous works of literature. He dreamt of an ideal society in which there should be no slavery and no exploitation.

Shelley was born on 4 August 1792 at Field Place, Broadbridge Heath, near Horsham, West Sussex, England. He was the eldest legitimate son of Sir Timothy Shelley — a Whig Member of Parliament for Horsham from 1790 -1792 and for Shoreham from 1806- 1812; and Elizabeth Pilford, a Sussex landowner. Shelley had four younger sisters and one much younger brother. He received his early education at home, tutored by Reverend Evan Edwards of nearby Warnham. He spent a happy and contented childhood largely in country pursuits such as fishing and hunting.

In 1802, he entered the Syon House Academy of Brentford, Middlesex. In 1804, Shelley entered Eton College, where he performed poorly, and was subjected to an almost daily mob torment at around noon by older boys. Surrounded, the young Shelley would have his books torn from his hands and his clothes pulled at and torn until he cried out madly in his high-pitched voice. This daily misery could be attributed to Shelley’s refusal to take part in fagging and his indifference towards games and other youthful activities. These idiosyncrasies acquired him the nickname ‘Mad Shelley’.

On 10 April 1810, he matriculated at University College, Oxford. It is said that Shelley attended only one lecture while at Oxford, but often read sixteen hours a day. His first publication was a Gothic novel, Zastrozzi (1810), in which he voiced his early atheistic view through the villain Zastrozzi. In 1811, Shelley published his second Gothic novel, St. Irvyne and a pamphlet called The Necessity of Atheism. The latter gained the attention of the university administration and he was called to appear before the College’s fellows, including the Dean, George Rowley. His denial to disclaim the authorship of the pamphlet resulted in his expulsion from Oxford on 25 March 1811.

After four months of his expulsion from Oxford, on 28 August 1811 the nineteen year-old Shelley eloped to Scotland with the sixteen year-old Harriet Westbrook, a pupil at the same boarding school as Shelley’s sisters, whom his father had forbidden him to see. Harriet Westbrook had been writing Shelley passionate letters threatening to kill herself because of her unhappiness at the school and at home. Shelley, heartbroken after the failure of his romance with his cousin, Harriet Grove, cut off from his mother and sisters, impetuously decided to salvage Harriet Westbrook and make her his beneficiary. The Westbrooks pretended to object but secretly encouraged the elopement. Sir Timothy Shelley, however, annoyed that his son had married below his status cancelled Shelley’s allowance and refused ever to receive the couple at Field Place. Shelley was also at that time involved in an deep spiritual relationship with Elizabeth Hitchener, a twenty eight year-old unmarried school teacher whom Shelley called the ‘sister of my soul’ and “my second self”. She became his muse and soul mate in the writing of his philosophical poem Queen Mab.
Shelley was gradually unhappy with his marriage to Harriet and essentially disliked the influence of her older sister Eliza, who discouraged Harriet from breastfeeding their baby daughter. Shelley accused Harriet of having married him for his money. Longing for more intellectual female companionship, he initiated spending more time away from home, among other things, studying Italian with Cornelia Turner and visiting the home of William Godwin.

William Godwin had three highly educated daughters, two of whom, Fanny Imlay and Claire Clairmont, were his adopted step-daughters. Godwin’s first wife, the celebrated feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, had died giving birth to Godwin’s biological daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, named after her mother. Fanny had been the illegitimate daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and her lover, the diplomat speculator and writer, Gilbert Imlay. Claire was the illegitimate daughter of Godwin’s much younger second wife, Mary Jane Clairmont Godwin, whom Shelley considered a vulgar woman – not a proper person to form the mind of a young girl. Mary was being educated in Scotland when Shelley first became acquainted with the Godwin family. When she returned, Shelley fell madly in love with Mary.

On 28 July 1814, Shelley abandoned Harriet, though pregnant with their son Charles, he ran away to Switzerland with Mary, then sixteen, inviting her stepsister Claire Clairmont, who was also sixteen, along because she could speak French. The older sister Fanny, was left behind, to her great disappointment, for she, too, had fallen in love with Shelley. The three sailed to Europe, and made their way across France to Switzerland on foot. After six weeks, homesick and destitute, the three young people returned to England. In mid-1816, Shelley and Mary made a second trip to Switzerland. They were prompted to do this by Mary’s stepsister Claire Clairmont, who, in competition with her sister, had initiated a liaison with Lord Byron. Regular conversation with Byron had an invigorating effect on Shelley’s output of poetry. While on a boating tour the two took together, Shelley was inspired to write his *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, often considered his first significant production since *Alastor*.

After Shelley and Mary’s return to England, Fanny Imlay, Mary’s half-sister and Claire’s stepsister, despondent over her exclusion from the Shelley household and perhaps unhappy at being omitted from Shelley’s will, travelled from Godwin’s household in London to kill herself in Wales in early October. On 10 December 1816, the body of Shelley’s estranged wife Harriet was found in an advanced state of pregnancy, drowned in the Serpentine in Hyde Park, London. On 30 December 1816, a few weeks after Harriet’s body was recovered, Shelley and Mary Godwin were married.

Early in 1818, the Shelleys and Claire left England to take Claire’s daughter, Allegra, to her father Byron, who had taken up residence in Venice. In 1818 and 1819 Shelley’s son Will died of fever in Rome, and his infant daughter Clara Everina died during yet another household move. A baby girl, Elena Adelaide Shelley, was born on 27 December 1818 in Naples, Italy and registered there as the daughter of Shelley and a woman named ‘Marina Padurin’. However, the identity of the mother is an unsolved mystery. However, Elena was placed with foster parents a few days after her birth and the Shelley family moved on to yet another Italian city, leaving her behind. Elena died 17 months later, on 10 June 1820.
Shelley completed *Prometheus Unbound* in Rome, and he spent mid-1819 writing a tragedy, *The Cenci*, in Leghorn (Livorno). In this year, prompted among other causes by the Peterloo massacre, he wrote his best-known political poems: *The Masque of Anarchy* and *Men of England*. These were probably his best-remembered works during the 19th century. Around this time period, he wrote the essay *The Philosophical View of Reform*, which was his most thorough exposition of his political views.

In 1820, hearing of John Keats’ illness from a friend, Shelley wrote him a letter inviting him to join him at his residence at Pisa. Keats replied with hopes of seeing him, but instead, arrangements were made for Keats to travel to Rome with the artist Joseph Severn. Inspired by the death of Keats, in 1821 Shelley wrote the elegy *Adonais*. On 8 July 1822, less than a month before his 30th birthday, Shelley drowned in a sudden storm while sailing back from Leghorn (Livorno) to Lerici in his boat, *Don Juan*. He was returning from having set up *The Liberal* (*a magazine*) with the newly arrived Leigh Hunt.

Shelley’s most remarkable poems are *Ozymandias*, *Ode to the West Wind*, *To a Skylark*, *Music, When Soft Voices Die*, *The Cloud* and *The Masque of Anarchy*. His other major works include long, visionary poems such as *Queen Mab*, *Alastor*, *The Revolt of Islam*, *Adonais*, the unfinished work *The Triumph of Life*; and the visionary verse dramas *The Cenci* (1819) and *Prometheus Unbound* (1820).

### Self-check Exercise 1

a) When was Shelley born? How was his childhood?

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b) Why was Shelley expelled from Oxford University?

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c) When and where did Shelley die?

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d) Name the three important works of Shelley.

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e) Write the name of other two great Romantic poets who belonged to younger generation of 19th century English poetry along with P.B. Shelley.

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14.3 ODE TO THE WEST WIND

14.3.1 The Background of the Poem

In order to know the background of the composition of Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’, it is relevant to know what the poet says in this regard. The poem was inspired by his life at Arno near Florence in 1819. Shelley’s note says: ‘This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains. They began, as I foresaw, at sunset with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to cisalpine regions’. His mythopoetic imagination seized on scientific facts and phenomena and transformed them into beautiful images; his iconoclastic intellect tore at all outdated and meaningless conventions of society, religion and politics. His revolutionary zeal burns through his great ‘Ode to the West Wind’.

14.3.2 The Text

O Wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence- stricken multitudes: O thou
Who chariostest to their dark wintry bed
The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow
Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill;

Wild Spirit which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preservers; hear, O, hear!

II

Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,

Angles of rain and lightening; there are spread
On the blue surface of thine airy surge,
Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge
Of the horizon to the zenith's height
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge

Of the dying year, to which this closing night
Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,
Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere
Black rain, and fire, and hail, will burst: O, hear!

III

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams,

Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers
Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know
Thy voice and suddenly grow grey with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves: O, hear!

IV

If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be
The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
Scarce seemed a vision, I would ne’er have striven

As thou with thee in prayer in my sore need.
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

V

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Glossary

**Hectic red** : an unhealthy red as though flushed with fever.

**Winged seeds** : seeds with wing-like growths which enable them to be blown away and scattered.

**Azure sister** : the warm west wind (the Zephyrus of the Poets) which blows from the clear blue skies.

**Clarion** : trumpet. The spring wind wakes them up as the angel blows its trumpet to summon the dead on the Judgment day.

**Destroyer and preserver** : The West Wind combines in himself the role of destroyer & preserver: it destroys the old decaying leaves; it scatters the seeds and thus preserves life.

**Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean** : The whole universe should be shaken up—the air and the sea as well as the earth, both horizontally and vertically. The Wind seems to let loose the clouds as he blows off the dead leaves.
The locks : the rain clouds are the wind’s locks of hair.

Thou dirge : The sound of the wind becomes a funeral song (dirge) for the dying year; the dark clouds become the dome of a vast tomb (sepulcher). The forces of destruction will erupt from these ruins. The poet prophesies the destruction of an old order and the birth of a new one.

O, hear! : The poet seems to warn us with a prophetic zeal.

his : the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean is a symbolical of the wealthy aristocracy who live a voluptuous life of indolence cut off from the living stream of reform and change.

coil : murmur. The word generally means commotion or tumult.

Crystalline : clear and transparent

intenser day : clearer light.

azure : blue.

the Atlantic level powers : the smooth waters of the Atlantic ocean.

While far below……

despoil themselves : Shelley’s own note may be given in explanation: “This phenomenon…is well-known to naturalists. The vegetation at the bottom of the sea, of rivers and of lakes, sympathizes with that of the land in the change of the seasons, and is consequently influenced by the winds which announce it.”

oozy woods : the vegetation on the oozy bed (the soft mud at the bottom) of the sea.

despoil themselves : deprive themselves; they change colour and fall off even as the leaves shed themselves from trees in winter.

O, hear! : The first three stanzas end on this note of prophetic warning: the poet calls upon the powers of the earth, the sky and the sea to listen the clarion call of reform and change.

When to outstrip….Vision: In my boyhood I did not consider it a mere vision to go faster than you” (west wind).

Skiey speed : your speed through the sky.

Make me thy lyre : Let me be the poet of revolution, reform and change.

Be thou me : Here the poet identifies himself completely with the tumultuous west wind.
The poem begins in a tone of impatient indignation and then passes on to a state of utter helplessness and sadness but ends on a note of hope. Gloom will be followed by hope as surely as winter will be followed by spring.

14.3.3 Analysis

The poet invokes the wild West Wind of autumn, which scatters the dead leaves and spreads seeds so that they may be nurtured by the spring, and asks that the wind, a ‘destroyer and preserver,’ hear him. He calls the wind the ‘dirge / Of the dying year,’ and describes how it stirs up violent storms, and again implores it to hear him. The poet says that the wind stirs the Mediterranean from “his summer dreams,” and cleaves the Atlantic into choppy Chasm.

The second section of the poem deals with the sky. Like withered leaves, the loose clouds fall from the unseen forests of the heaven into the river of the west wind. Suddenly, the imagery of the leaves is replaced by the human imagery. The clouds become hair of a huge giant. The west wind then becomes transformed into a mournful tune. And the rapidly encroaching night becomes the dome of an extensive sepulchre, canopied by the unifying power of the west wind.

The third section presents the effects of the wind on the sea. Here the placid Mediterranean is personified- asleep, dreaming of old palaces and towers which are only reflections. The west wind drives away unreal thoughts of the Mediterranean Sea. The under-water vegetation feels the arrival of the wind and sheds the leaves.

The poet says that if he were a dead leaf that the wind could bear, or a cloud it could carry, or a wave it could push, or even if he were, as a boy, “the comrade” of the wind’s ‘wandering over heaven,’ then he would never have needed to pray to the wind and invoke its powers. He pleads with the wind to lift him “as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!”—for though he is like the wind at heart, untamable and proud—he is now chained and bowed with the weight of his hours upon the earth.

The poet asks the wind to ‘make me thy lyre,’ to be his own Spirit, and to drive his thoughts across the universe, ‘like withered leaves, to quicken a new birth.’ He asks the wind, by the incantation of this verse, to scatter his words among mankind, to be the “trumpet of a prophecy.” Speaking both in regard to the season and in regard to the effect upon mankind that he hopes his words to have.

The last section of the poem presents the details of this identification sought to be established between the poet and the west wind. He desires to become the mouth piece of the west wind, as the forest is the lyre on which it plays the rustling tune. He asks the west wind to drive his old dead ideas which will form the manure to help the blossoming forth of new conceptions. The poet wants that the prophetic note of the west wind should spread throughout the world through his mouth. The optimistic prophecy, ‘If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind’? makes the poem full of optimism and new hopes.

In short, Shelley invokes the wind magically, describing its power and its role as both ‘destroyer and preserver,’ and asks the wind to sweep him out of his torpor
'as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!' In the fifth section, the poet then takes a remarkable turn, transforming the wind into a metaphor for his own art, the expressive capacity that drives ‘dead thoughts’ like ‘withered leaves’ over the universe, to ‘quicken a new birth’—that is, to quicken the coming of the spring. Here the spring season is a metaphor for a “spring” of human consciousness, imagination, liberty, or morality—all the things Shelley hoped his art could help to bring about in the human mind. Shelley asks the wind to be his spirit, and in the same movement he makes it his metaphorical spirit, his poetic faculty, which will play him like a musical instrument, the way the wind strums the leaves of the trees.

14.3.4 The Stanza Form

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

Self-check Exercise II

Answer the following questions in the given space:
a) What is the rhyme scheme in the first stanza of the poem?

b) Why does the poet call the west wind destroyer and preserver?
c) ‘Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed’!
Explain the meaning of these lines in your own words.
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d) ‘If winter comes, can spring be far behind’? What does the poet want to convey?
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e) Give two examples of simile and one example of personification being used in the poem Ode to the West Wind.
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14.4 TO A SKYLARK

14.4.1 The Background of the Poem

The sources and influences which stimulated Shelley’s imagination when he composed the Skylark are not merely significant in themselves, but also essential in understanding its meaning. Let us see the natural observations which led Shelley to compose his poem ‘To A Skylark’. From June 15 to August 5, 1820, Shelley, Mary, and Claire Clairmont stayed at Casa Ricci, the Leghorn home of John and Maria Gisborne. In a note of 1839 Mrs. Shelley says: ‘In the spring we spent a week or two near Leghorn, borrowing the house of some friends, who were absent on a journey to England. It was on a beautiful summer evening while wandering among the lanes, whose myrtle hedges were the bowers of the fireflies, that we heard the caroling of the skylark, which inspired one of his most beautiful poems’.
14.4.2 The Text

Hail to thee, blithe spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from heaven, or near it
Pour'st thy full heart
In profuse strain 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 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 un behelden
Its aerial 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 these 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 chaunt,
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 scorners 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!

Glossary

blithe spirit…… Bird thou : The Skylark is symbolical of the Romantic poet who considers poetry as “a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.”

Cp. Wordsworth’s To the Skylark: “Thou dost pour upon the world a flood/of harmony”

the blue deep thou wingest : you fly across the blue sky.

unbodied joy : At its great height the bird is invisible; therefore it seems to be an ‘unbodied joy’.

Whose race is just begun : before the misery of the world has crowed upon him.

even : evening.

the arrows/of that silver sphere : the shafts of the light or rays from the silver-white Venus. By implication, it may also mean the shafts of love. The bright planet shrinks and finally becomes invisible in the growing light of day.

Like a poet : A poet keeps himself in the background but allows his thoughts to flash out over the world. It was Shelley’s own wish to stir the world with human sympathy and hope to
rouse it from its callous indifference to oppression and misery.

unbidden : spontaneously.
deflowered : ravished; robbed of their flowers or their scent.
heavy winged thieves : the winds laden with scent and moving slowly.
spirit or bird : whether you are a bird or a spirit.
chorus hymeneal : songs of marriage; Hymen, in classical mythology is the god of marriage.
empty vaunt : mere boast.
joyance : joy, rejoicing (poetic and archaic).
languor : indifference (i.e. to the problems of life).
satiety : excess to the point of disgust.

14.4.3 Analysis

In the poem ‘To a Skylark’ the poet has addressed a skylark (little bird) that soars up at a great height and sings so sweetly that the world is enchanted and bewitched by its sweetness. The skylark symbolizes high imagination, eternal happiness and harbinger of peace and progress. It is a spirit. Though it is unseen, yet it pours forth profuse sweetness. It stands for idealism and newly built society – free from corruption, exploitation and economic slavery. The Skylark’s sweet note and ideal message spread everywhere in the atmosphere. It is heard by the poet who is highly impressed. He boldly claims that the skylark is a superior thing in the sky. The cloud, the stars, the moon, the sun – all are left behind and the skylark dominates by its excellent tune and soothing voice.

The poet himself does not know what the skylark actually is. The mystery of the Skylark is still unsolved to the poet. But he is sure of the fact that he can learn a message of welfare from it and can spread in the world for recreation of the society. The poet had drawn beautiful comparison. In such comparison, he has proved his imaginative quality and an extraordinary talent.

He has compared the beauty and sweetness of the skylark to a highly born beautiful girl who lives in her tower like palatial building and sings sweet love songs. Similarly, its comparison with golden glow-worm among the flowers and grass and with rose having soothing scent is excellent and befitting. The poet is so confident about the sweetness and joy of Skylark’s song that he says that even the rainbow clouds do not spread as bright drops as the presence of the skylark spreads a rain of melody. In short, the music of the Skylark surpasses every pleasure of nature.

The poet wishes to get instruction and messages from the skylark. So he asks it to teach him its sweet thoughts. The poet is confident that the skylark is pouring out a flood of rapture which is divine.

The line, “Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought” is very meaningful. It tells the philosophy of Shelley’s life. What Shelley wants to convey here is that we like a song dealing with pleasure no doubt but it has a
transitory effect. We forget the happy moments of life very soon. It does not impress us for long. But on the other hand, tragedy of life leaves a powerful stamp on our life. It becomes eternal in its appeal because it affects our heart emotionally. We are lovers of tragedy because we cannot escape it. Sorrow is part and parcel of human life. Naturally, sad thoughts impress us in a greater degree than happy thoughts we like to sing or listen to a tragic song more eagerly than a pleasant song.

The skylark scorns the nasty habits of the earth and stands for bliss, joy and prosperity of the world. The poet is of cosmopolitan outlook. He is restless to preach his idealism in the world. Therefore he earnestly requests the skylark to teach him the message.

Some critics say that P.B Shelley was not a practical man. He was far away from realism. So his skylark always flew higher and higher and did not come to the earth, like the skylark of Wordsworth. Shelley’s skylark can achieve perfection because it is ‘scorner of the ground’. This is where we find the difference of attitude of the two Romantic poets, Shelley and Wordsworth. Shelley’s skylark is an inhabitant of purely ethereal world and is a symbol of perfection. On the other hand, Wordsworth’s skylark in his poem ‘To the Skylark’ is an inhabitant of both earth and ether: ‘Type of the wise who soar, but never roam; /True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home’!

On the whole, ‘To a Skylark’ is one of the best lyrics of P. B. Shelley The flow of art, the similes, the flight of imagination and lyrical quality make this poem unparalleled in romantic poetry.

**Self-check Exercise III**

Now you have already read the poem ‘To a Skylark’. Answer the following questions in the space provided:

a) Why does the poet address the skylark ‘a blithe spirit’?

b) Explain the expression ‘profuse strains of unpremeditated art’.

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Self-check Exercise III

Now you have already read the poem ‘To a Skylark’. Answer the following questions in the space provided:

a) Why does the poet address the skylark ‘a blithe spirit’?

b) Explain the expression ‘profuse strains of unpremeditated art’.

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c) Explain the simile ‘Like a cloud of fire’.

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### 14.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you have read Shelley’s life and work with a focus on his poetic genius. You have also read about Terza Rima which has been used in his ‘Ode to the West Wind’ successfully. Finally, you have gone through his two famous poems carefully and critically. Now you are able to analyse and discuss Shelley’s poetry in general and the two poems in particular.

### 14.6 SUGGESTED READING


### 14.7 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

**Self-check Exercise I**

a) See second paragraph of 14.2  
b) See fifth paragraph of 14.2  
c) On 8 July 1822 Shelley drowned in a sudden storm while sailing back from Leghorn to Lerici in his boat.  
d) See last paragraph of 14.2  
e) John Keats and Lord Byron

**Self-check Exercise II**

a) aba bcb cdc ded ee.  
b) See glossary ‘Destroyer and preserver’  
c) See fourth paragraph of 14.3.3  
d) See the sixth paragraph of 14.3.3  
e) Read critically any stanza of ‘Ode to the West Wind’.
Self-check Exercise III

P.B. Shelley

a) Shelley is listening to the song of a bird, which is itself invisible. It seems to the poet that the bird, while singing, soaring high above the ground, has lost its physical existence and has become a spirit.

b) The birds are ‘unpremeditated’, that is, natural or spontaneous in the sense that those are not preconceived or pre-planned, unlike the human art, generally, or more specifically, the poet’s art, which is preconceived.

c) The skylark in its venture up in the sky is compared to a cloud lit up by the rays of the setting sun at twilight. Shelley links the bird to the image of fire in order to emphasise the bird’s abstract existence as a quality having the power to purify the human mind.

d) Shelley seeks to convey the idea that in its flight for singing, the bird, as if, has found a new life, a life of abstract delight which is possible only by transcending the body and becoming a spirit.

e) In a poem the presence of the poet can be felt in the radiance of the thoughts and ideas s/he intends to convey to the reader. As a poet remains physically absent yet spiritually present in a poem, the skylark remains hidden in the sky while singing.

f) The poet is very much pained to find his own world filled with sorrows and anxieties whereas the skylark remains untouched and unaffected by all these things. To him the bird is a bodiless embodiment of joy, and that is why he seeks inspiration of “sweet thoughts” in its song.

g) What Shelley wants to convey here is that we like a song dealing with pleasure no doubt but it has a transitory effect. We forget the happy moments of life very soon. It does not impress us for long. But on the other hand, tragedy of life leaves a powerful stamp on our life. It becomes eternal in its appeal because it affects our heart emotionally. We are lovers of tragedy because we cannot escape it. Sorrow is part and parcel of human life. Naturally, sad thoughts impress us in a greater degree than happy thoughts we like to sing or listen to a tragic song more eagerly than a pleasant song.

h) Wordsworth’s skylark in his poem ‘To the Skylark’ is a creature of flesh and blood, while Shelley’s skylark is a philosophical abstraction. It despises the cares and anxieties of the world while Wordsworth’s has its eyes fixed on its nest on the ground.