

## The Un-bodied Voices in Shelley's "To a Skylark" and Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"

Kul Bahadur Khadka

Associate Professor of English, Saraswati Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University

email : kb425812@gmail.com

---

### Abstract

*P. B. Shelley and John Keats are noted Romantic poets and their works are celebrated. In this article, Percy Bysshe Shelly's "To a Skylark" and John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" have been appreciated. The skylark and the nightingale seem to be similar birds while reading the poems simultaneously. Shelley glorifies the skylark's song and Keats immortalizes the nightingale due to its melodious song. The article, structured in four headings- Introduction, Appreciating, The Un-bodied Voices and Conclusion, introduces the poets and their aforesaid poems. It indicates the contrasts and commonalties between the birds; highlights the major themes in the poems; states the poets' concepts of imagination and analyses the un-bodied voices in the poems. It makes a quest for how the un-bodied voices in the poems represent idealism in contrast to the harsh reality of life. To appreciate the poems and further strengthen the ideas, the poets' respective poems and books by various writers have been consulted. The article concludes that the songs of the skylark and the nightingale are the un-bodied voices which symbolize beauty, purity, perfection and freedom. These un-bodied voices are in contrast to the harsh reality of human life on the earth.*

**Keywords:** distance, harsh reality, perfection, pure expressions, un-bodied voices,

### Introduction

Percy Bysshe Shelley, born in Sussex, England in 1792, is a major Romantic poet. He was a revolutionary poet. He wanted to see parity and justice in the society. However, he did not write for the people. He embraced his own idealistic passion. He breathed his last in Italy in 1822. His major works include To a Skylark, A Defence of Poetry, Adonais, Hymn to Intellectual Beauty, Mont Blanc, Prometheus Unbound and The Cenci. John Keats, born in London in 1795, stands as a genius in the Romantic period in the history of the English literature. Poverty, tuberculosis and worry weakened him. He died in Rome in 1821. His major works include Ode to a Nightingale, Isabella, Sleep and Poetry, The Eve of St. Agnes, Endymion, Lamia and Hyperion.

Shelley and Keats both loved humanity. As to the Romantic poets, Ruston (2008b) has written, "One of the most universally acclaimed abilities of poets during this period was their ability to feel for others, to imagine themselves in others' situations and predicaments" (p. 60). Shelley's gloom is his concern about other suffering people and Keats' fret is every neglected person's pain. The un-bodied voices of Shelley's skylark and Keats's nightingale signify a beautiful world which is beyond the world where humans reside. The imagination is a defining feature of the Romantic poetry. Like Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron, Shelley and Keats were great imaginative poets and poetic theorists. On all fronts Britain fought a war with France, which began in 1793 and ended in 1815. The

Romantic poets had good feelings for others. Their days were difficult but they were optimistic. They hoped to see a better world in reality. Wu (1998a) has stated, "The six canonical male writers believed that a better world was possible- and, moreover, that it could be attained not in the afterlife, but in the real, material world that they inhabited . . ." (xxxii). Nothing would remain from anticipating for better world.

Shelley composed *To a Skylark* in 1820 when he was in Italy. It was the season of summer. In this poem, the poet hears the music of a skylark unseen, soaring in the sky in the sunset. The music delights the poet. He highly appreciates the music of the bird. He asks the bird to teach him its sweet thoughts. He asserts that the bird has no idea about pain but humans' sweet songs are also amalgamated with sad thoughts. He wishes the world would listen to the music of the skylark as he is listening to it.

Keats composed *Ode to a Nightingale*, one of his great odes, in May 1819. In this ode, the poet with pain and sorrow hears a nightingale unseen, singing in a moonlit night, more probably flying over the still stream up the hillside. The music of the bird which has no knowledge of fret entertains him. He imagines flying with the bird and feels relieved of pain. When the music fades and disappears down the valley, the poet is back to his self. Then he is in a dilemma whether he was awake or asleep.

*To a Skylark* and *Ode to a Nightingale* are not simply about birds and their songs. They are the poems to search for light and truth. The un-bodied voices help dig out for the knowledge of pain-pleasure reality. The poets entertain the un-bodied music which is gratifying and immortal.

### **Appreciating *To a Skylark* and *Ode to a Nightingale***

Keats in his *Ode to a Nightingale* bears pain. He is unhappy. He is listening to a nightingale singing. This music delights him. The bird is happy. He is happy in the bird's happiness. Keats seems to shun his own phrase 'negative capability'. As to this, Bloom (1993) has made a comment on Keats, "He can't sustain his own "negative capability" in this case: he has yielded his being too readily to that of the bird" (23). He can't detach himself from the bird. He imagines flying with the bird. His imagined company with the bird makes him feel that he is healed or he has also gained ecstasy. He is lost in the music of the bird.

Everything including creatures is a part of nature. Man is associated with nature; a bird is also a part of nature and nature includes light and darkness. The poets, the birds, the time, the space etc. are connected with nature. The music of the skylark and the nightingale in the poems is soothing and entertaining. It is of course pleasurable and it is so amazing that the poets' experiences of pangs and frustrations in their real lives are transformed into pleasure and hope. The poets are here on the earth. The birds are there in distance. They are invisible. The skylark is soaring and singing in the sky. The nightingale's location is not specified but it may be singing in a nest, forest or sky. The distance between the poets and the birds is very significant to understand the reality of life. When things are viewed from a close distance, the truth is hidden, when they are viewed from maintaining a distance, they are clearly seen. The eyes can't see the letters when a book is brought very close to the eyes.

The birds are away from the poets. They are the sources of joy for them. The birds' world is ideal, whereas, the poets' world is real. The distance connects the real with the ideal. The real world is full of hate and fret. The ideal world is free of pain and sorrow. To a Skylark reads:

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. (Shelley, n.d., p. 241)

The stanza stipulates the distinction between pain and pleasure. Shelley adores the skylark. The difference between the joy of the bird and its ignorance of pain strikes the poet. Keats's Ode to a Nightingale reads:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs, . . . (Keats, n.d., p. 246)

These lines also deal with the pain-pleasure reality of life. Keats appreciates the nightingale. He stipulates the distinction between his painful world and the bird's joyful one. Thus, Shelley's skylark and Keats's nightingale both are unique and ideal. Shelley's bird soars but Keats' bird dives into a valley.

Shelley prioritizes pity and forgiveness. He also has strong feelings of humanity. He thinks humanity is a unity. He wants hatred and hostility to transform into a harmonious soul, that is, a feeling of love for mankind. Ruston (2008a) has quoted T. E. Hulme's argument, ". . . instead of believing in God or heaven, the Romantics believe in man as a god and a heaven on earth" (p. 111). Shelley believes in man's power. His poetry often embraces the power of a superhuman. He refuses the role of God in human behavior. However, Daiches (1990a) has argued:

Though Shelley was expelled from Oxford as an atheist, he was never, even in his most rational Godwinian phase, a real atheist, and his idealistic, myth-making mind, haunted by Plato and indeed by Greek literature and civilization as a whole, soon led him from any simple belief in Utopian revolution to a more symbolic view of how good will eventually overcome evil. (p. 908)

He can be regarded to have awful doubt- amalgamated feelings of respect and skepticism. In fact, many people are in a dilemma about the presence of divine power. A person sometimes thinks that there is God but the same person sometimes in some circumstances may think God doesn't exist.

Shelley was neglected and frustrated. He experienced lots of pain and gloom. That is why he asks the skylark to teach him its sweet thoughts. The poet's real experience in life and the listening to the music come opposite to each other. The poet, a gloomy fellow, gets delighted by the sweet music of the bird. Wu (1998b) has asserted:

The poet in Shelley's work is always a sufferer, Christ-like figure, doomed and neglected, and that, to a large extent, is how he perceived himself. Despite his best efforts, the literary world took little notice of him. In the essay "On Love" he observed, "I have found my language misunderstood like one in a distant and savage land". (p. 822)

Shelley feels isolated. He worships love. He strongly opines that love is an effective means to battle hate and revenge. He prioritizes the unique value of love which he regards as Liberty, Intellectual Beauty or Spirit of Nature. Intellectual beauty comes from poetic inspiration or creative imagination. Bradley (1999a) argued, "The skylark . . . free from our sorrows, not because it is below them, but because, as an embodiment of that perfection, it knows the rapture of love without its satiety, and understands death as we cannot" (p. 153). Shelley's world is gloomy but that of the bird is free from sorrows. The bird is hidden but its glorious power or perfection, by which it knows what the poet can't, immensely delights him.

For Shelley, poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds and that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Bradley (1999b) further wrote, "Imagination is, for Shelley, 'the great instrument of moral good'" (p. 171). The Shelleyan view is that poetry benefits men and benefits them morally. What he stresses is the glorious power of imagination. Poetry enhances imagination which automatically promotes morality.

Keats well knows the traumatic situation that prevailed in his time. He is of the opinion that the world is full of suffering, sickness and suppression. He suffered from worry, tragedy and sickness. The nightingale's un-bodied voice delights him but it vanishes. The poet again comes back to the real ugly world. The absence of the un-bodied voice brings the poet into a dilemma.

The Keatsian view is that the power of poetry or imagination evokes a sense of optimism and beauty. Bate (1977) quoted Keats's assertion:

"I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination- What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth- whether it existed before or not- for I have the same Idea of all our passions as of Love they are all, in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty..." (p. 196)

A thing to ponder is all the things in the universe have an association with each other. There is a partnership between renders and receivers. Things are beautiful. To appreciate the beauty, imagination is needed. The human mind's imaginings establish good connections between parts of nature. The skylark and the nightingale are beautiful and symbolic. Their music is luring and symbolic. The poets' power of imagination connects themselves with the birds invisible.

The poets celebrate the grandeurs of the birds but this celebration is implicit. They cannot make the music audible to others. Pirie (2003) has asserted, "You may find it useful to compare the closing lines of both 'To a Skylark' (where what the poet hears he cannot make audible to the world) and..." (p. 43). The un-bodied voice comes from the ideal world. The poet with zeal listens to it but in the real world,

nobody listens to him even if he has learnt or gained the marvelous music of the bird.

### **The Un-bodied Voices**

The World of Shelley and Keats is confined and full of fret and gloom. It is the land of mortality and tragedy. The birds' world is free and full of joy and zeal. It is a space of immortality. The birds' songs connote ecstasy, openness and freedom. The birds in the poems are invisible. Simply put, a skylark and a nightingale are common birds. They are not so serious in ordinary people's concern. But in the poems, the poets make these birds legendary and immortal. To a Skylark reads- "Bird thou never wert, .../Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun" /... "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought" (Shelley, n.d., pp. 241 & 243). Ode to a Nightingale reads- "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" (Keats, n.d., p. 247). Every creature is a material entity. The birds are presented in such a way that they possess some divine qualities. They are ignorant of pain. Their songs are ideal whereas on the earth even sweet music has the amalgam of sadness. The skylark and the nightingale are physically absent. They are singing. The presence is their mellifluous music. The music is the un-bodied joy the poets enjoy.

Shelley and Keats both glorify their birds. Actually, they ignore the body and adore the voice. The voice joyful and sweet is ringing. The un-bodied voices of Shelley's skylark and Keats's nightingale have multiple meanings. They speak of joy, pain, life, death, art, light, darkness and the universe. These voices signify the contrasts between presence and absence, light and darkness, embodiment and un-bodiness, pain and pleasure, and matter and essence. Daiches (1990b) has contended, "... Art and death are both escapes from time and change, and the relation between art, death and life is the true theme of the poem" (p. 920). The nightingale is invisible. The poet is lost with the un-bodied song of the bird. Likewise, Shelley's skylark is absent; only its music is present. The un-bodied voice is idealized. Solve (1977) mentioned:

Shelley's tendency to idealize nature is as clearly shown in his 'Skylark' as anywhere. Really, the actual bird which may have suggested the poem has little place in it. Shelley is interested in an 'unbodied voice' which never was a bird. Yet there is the connection with the world of sense...., (p. 211)

The disembodied or un-embodied voices of the birds are ideal. The voices are unique and free. The unseen birds know nothing about the poets' suffering. They have not experienced any fret and gloom. Their songs are full of just joy and sweetness. Shelley wishes he would sing like the skylark. Keats misses the nightingale's song. The poets embrace these songs as they are auspicious, healing and ideal. They are not concerned about where and in which positions the birds are singing. They ignore the presence of the birds but they adore the un-bodied voices which evoke ecstasy, freedom and beauty. The poets express their feelings to adore the birds' music.

### **Conclusion**

Shelley and Keats are earthbound. Their birds are free. The location where the poets reside in is full of fret and fever. It is full of misery, cruelty, oppression and gloom. The poets are in the world of

harsh reality. By virtue of their imaginative power, they create the birds invisible, which sing and their songs are glorified. The glorified songs speak of perfection and purity. Shelley's skylark sings in distance, higher in the sky. Keats' nightingale invisible sings in distance. The songs energize the poets. The healing power of the songs of both birds is very ideal, temporary and extraordinary. To a Skylark and Ode to a Nightingale are the poems to search for light and truth. The un-bodied voices in the poems are pure expressions to contrast between the ideal and the real.

## References

- Bate, W. J. (1977). *The romantic imagination*. Macmillan.
- Bloom, H. (1993). *The visionary company*. Cornell University Press.
- Bradley, A.C. (1999). *Oxford lectures on poetry*. Atlantic Publishers.
- Daiches, D. (1990). *A critical history of English literature*. Allied Publishers.
- Keats, J. (n.d.). Ode to a nightingale. In Francis Turner Palgrave (Ed), *The Golden Treasury* (pp.241-243), Oxford & IBH Publishing.
- Pirie, D. B. (2003). *Shelley*. Viva Books.
- Ruston, S. (2008). *Romanticism*. Continuum.
- Shelley, P. B. (n.d.). To a Skylark. In Francis Turner Palgrave (Ed), *The Golden Treasury* (pp.241-243). Oxford & IBH Publishing.
- Solve, M.T. (1977). *The romantic imagination*. Macmillan.
- Wu, D. (Ed.). (1998). *Romanticism*. Blackwell Publishers.