

Q. Consider Shelley's Adonais as a pastoral elegy.

Ans: The pastoral elegy is a poem about both death and idyllic rural life. Often, the pastoral elegy features shepherds. The genre is actually a subgroup of pastoral poetry, as the elegy takes the pastoral elements and relates them to expressing grief at loss. It is a pastoral elegy which Shelley wrote on the death of his contemporary poet John Keats. Like Milton's 'Lycidas', it is an English adaptation of the classical form of elegy perfected by poets as early as the classical Greek times of Homer and Virgil. 'Adonais' is written mainly in the classical pattern. The setting is dramatic.

The poem begins with an invocation and mournful tone; then it describes the nature's participation in the bereaved shepherds/poets' mourning for the deceased one; there follows a procession of mourners wherein Shelley himself and Lord Byron remain present. The speaker then attacks on the worst literary critics who damaged the self-esteem and honor of the growing artist Keats, before moving to the consolation as a conclusion.

From grief to comfort as the poem approaches its end, the mood gradually shifts. Shelley makes Keats spirit one with the Eternal; after viewing the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, Shelley presents his philosophic concept related to Plato's doctrine of the ideal: Life, like a dome of many colored glasses. Shelley claims that Keats death in glory is far better than the inglorious and shameful life of his murderer, the savage critic. He also feels that he is being called by the spirit of John Keats in the immortal world: in fact, Shelley died after about two years of Keats death!

The title 'Adonais' comes from classical sources. Adonis in Greek mythology is a beautiful mortal youth beloved by the two goddesses Aphrodite and Proserpine. After being slain by a wild boar while hunting, he was restored by the god Zeus for Aphrodite. But since he was kept for so long by Proserpine, Zeus decreed that Adonis should spend the winter months with Persephone in Hades and the summer months with Aphrodite. The story of his death and resurrection is symbolic of the natural cycle of death and rebirth.

The above adheres to all the traditional formal pastoral constraint in producing his elegy. In keeping with the tradition, he does not identify the characters by their actual names, but by their shepherd names or by characteristics typical of natural rather than the social environs. Since the tradition is Greek, he harks back to classical myth and imagery. Keats poetic efforts, as noted previously, are his flocks. The procession of mourners is appropriately arrayed with flowers and other vestiges of spring; even in the depths of his grief, the poet never fails to remind the reader that it is in fact the springtime of the year.

The elegiac pastoral is compelled to render the experience positive by the end of the poem, for while no poet can deny the undeniable reality of bodily death, the pastoral's very idealizations require one to imagine a transcendent reality as the true locus of all human hopes and aspirations. In its spirited exultation that light shall triumph over darkness, that the truth shall endure the violence done them through hatred and spite, resurrections that can take the breath away, Adonais reaffirms life in the very act of lamenting an individual's death