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Great Elegies in English Literature

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THE Word 'elegy' dates back to its derivative origin to Greek word 'Elegos' meaning 'a song of mourning'. Therefore, an elegy is a poem of reflective nature as it is generally a song of lamentation for the dead. The mourner-poet is deeply inspired by some loss that is deemed to him irreparable and unendurable and at the same time thoroughly personal. In an elegy the infusion of both subjectivity and objectivity occurs. Besides, mournfulness and meditateness are also the essential qualities of elegy.

Some leading poets of England composed elegies which are the richest part and parcel of English literature. Of them, Milton, Grey, Shelley, Tennyson and Arnold are eminent. Milton wrote 'Lycidas', in which he laments the demise of his friend, Edward King. Grey composed 'Elegy written in a country churchyard' where the unfulfilled greatness of the rural ancestors is reflected. Shelley's 'Adonais' is a study on the lamentation of the death of Keats. In Memoriam

Tennyson commemorates the death of his friend Arthur Hallam whereas Arnold's 'Thyrsis' is the elegy on his friend, Clough.

Of the elegies, Grey's elegy is impersonal where other four great elegies are personal. Again, except Milton's elegy, other three elegies are written in pastoral convention. Their patterns are more or less identical. They begin with a sorrowing mood as in cumical convention and end in a consolatory and hopeful mood.

Gray's elegy is the best representative of the objective type of elegy. A melancholic reflection on the lot of common man is projected through the poem. Unlike other elegy-composers Gray does not lament the death of any person. The poem is not built on a personal loss, rather it records a number of deeply sad reflections suggested by a hamlet churchyard.

On some fond breast the parting soul relies some pious drops the closing eye requires; E'en from the tomb the voice of nature cries. E'en in our ashes live their wonted fires. Milton's 'Lycidas' is a poem of two hundred lines. It is an invaluable treasure of English poetry and part of Milton's achievement lies in the successful composition of it. 'Lycidas' is a pastoral elegy on young Edward King who was drowned on a voyage to Ireland. Milton expresses

through 'Lycidas' his inner tensions, the very conflict that existed in his own heart. The elegy abounds with mythological allusions and there is religious satire in it. The poem is characterised by its irregular metre, haunting melody of the best Spenserian verse and dignified intensity of passion.

Like Milton's 'Lycidas' Shelly's 'Adonais' is modelled on the ancient Greek pastoral elegy of Moschus, 'A lament for Bion'. On hearing the sad demise of Keats,

Shelley was greatly moved to compose this elegy, full of splendid poetic energy.

The poetic name Adonais which is given to Keats is derived from the name of a beautiful young Greek Adonis loved by both Venus and Proserpine. That Adonis suffered a premature death precipitated by the attack of a wild boar—In 'Adonais' the pastoral and satirical elements were wonderfully fused by Shelley's art and craftsmanship. This non-lyrical elegy, towards its close, rises into sublime hymn to the eternal principle of Beauty. The epigraph to Adonais is a small poem, possibly written by Plato. Shelley has translated thus:

Thou went the morning star among the living,

Ere they fair light had fled;

Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving

New splendour to the dead.

Here the Platonic star-symbol is an important device in the poem. This Hesperus or the evening Star is the guide, beacon-light for Shelly's spirit. So he sings in the closing lines of the poem:

The soul of Adonais, like a star,

Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

'Adonais' contains fifty-five Spenserian stanzas. Shelley believes that Keats was killed

by the cruel and spiteful. Review of 'Endymion'. So Adonais' is Shelley's formal elegy for Keats. It is a description of poetic existence and a song of poetic self-recognition in the presence of death. 'Adonais' is finally a 'dialogue of self and soul' in which the soul wins a costly victory.

Keats was only three months dead when Shelley wrote this poem. Shelley as a man felt for Keats, the very real but remote grief. In 'Lycidas' death is somehow unnatural to Milton, as a Christian poet. To Shelly death is natural and if death dies, Nature will be dead with it.

Tennyson's 'In memoriam' is deemed a great piece of elegiac poetry in English literature. The poem fraught with reminiscences, embodies profuse literary allusions. One of the most learned of English poems, the grand elegy consists of a series of 131 lyrical poems together with an Epilogue. 'In memoriam' enshrines elements of science, religion and patriotism. 'The true theme of the poem is the group of problems which are the soul of all religions. And death inevitably suggests those problems: the death of Hallam. The brilliant mind, the promising career cut short before it was well begun. With the death of Hallam, the poet felt the loss of his friends; he felt the loss of the friends of the whole world. 'In memoriam' preaches the final victory of faith.

Strong Son of God, immortal love,

Whom we, that have not seen thy face,

By faith, and faith alone, embrace

Believing where we cannot prove.

'In Memoriam' is a poetic philosophy of life and death, to the poet God and immortality are the matters of faith.

Tennyson ponders that heart cannot be satisfied without a belief in God and immortality, and this is the central of his thinking. Grief turns the poets thoughts into enigmas of life. The poet tries to embody in the form the floating thoughts of his period doubts, antithesis and paradoxes. On the other hand the poet finds the contrast between troubled human soul and the calm aspect of nature, between mutability and permanence.

Arnold's 'Thyrsis' is a monody of the classical type. The poet as a shepherd mourns the death of his friend Arthur Clough and calls him. Thyrsis; the poem is characterised by a true lyrical grace and a note of poignancy. The poet finds consolation in the immortality of soul through his belief. He also believes his friends voice will often come to soothe his troubled mind:

Let in the voice a whisper often come,

To chase fatigue and fear.

The chief merit of the elegy is the beautiful portrayal of the landscape surrounding Oxford. The poet drawing comfort from the calm and tranquil aspect of Nature, finds contrast between the din and bustle of human life and the peaceful atmosphere of Nature. In the poem while Arnold deals with a personal loss, he gives to the elegy a general character by introducing a 'criticism of life'. Besides being a delightful tribute to Clough, Thyrsis is a wonderful work of art. Of all the elegies discussed above, Grey's elegy is the record of general mourning for the lot of man, while other elegies deal with personal loss. In 'Lycidas', 'Adonais' and 'Thyrsis' both the mourners and the mourned are treated as shepherds. Again in 'Adonais' there is a host of mourners. Shelley has a deep penetrative night into

every Arnold's to the cummo images actual of the beauty warmth "Thyrsis" and "A Lycidas" lofty rh vesper Clough not for l tone' we fulfilled "Lycida King as prospec church. shrines the futu etry. Ar some da prophet remain ems are poets' pe is clear t the perso Milton Rather T sing in h oration o the cha manner, friend to the gener immortal Clough friend o rather t Arnold's b tant Oxfo fact her Keats and and in ca tially valu but Arthi close colle Hallam Tennyson death cu further; l poet in Tennyson death as thus mak row seen t Milton and poetic keats is Shelley an mortality "Lycidas" M on a criti clerical li "Adonais" philosophy Arnold's T presents h etry as 'cr above all, poetic Phi death and as well.