

M.A. 4th Sem

Romantic Lit Paper Six
"SHELLEY ADONAIIS as Pastoral
Elegy"

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Nature of Grief in 'Adonais'

Keats died on Feb. 1821, and Shelley wrote 'Adonais', a pastoral elegy, one of the greatest of English elegies, to mourn his death, a few months later.

This elegy has been criticised on the ground that the expression of grief in it is not sincere, for one who sincerely mourns expresses his grief directly and does not run after metaphors or figurative expressions. To represent the Dream and Fancies of *Adonais* as his mourners, to bring in the mountain shepherds, and to personify the powers of nature may be good poetry but it is certainly artificial. But, as a matter of fact, *Adonais* is not an expression of personal sorrow. Shelley never claimed it to be so. It is a lament on the loss of a valuable life as 'Lycidas' also is. Keats and Shelley had never been intimate friends, and Shelley did not think highly of any of his works, other than 'Hyperion'. Clutton Brock rightly points out that, "*Adonais* is more an expression of the glory of the art of poetry and the mystery of death, than a lament on the death of a particular poet: Keats remains a thin shadowy figure about whom we know very little from the elegy." *Adonais* is no more an expression of personal grief than is 'Lycidas', "but this is no defect, for Shelley makes no pretence in it of any grief he does not feel."

Shelley was attracted by Keats, because he found in him a poet of promise, and because his sympathy was aroused by the story, though wrong, that he had been killed by the brutal attack on his *Endymion* in the *Quarterly Review*. That is why we are not told so much of Keats as about the Reviewers who are supposed to have caused the death of a great poet. This explains Shelley's

forthright, thundering denunciation of the critics and the use of such abusive language as, 'vipers', 'monsters of life's waste', 'vultures', 'herded wolves', etc. But when he talks of Keats himself, he always does so in vague, general terms.

However, it will have to be admitted that Shelley's expression of grief has a greater ring of sincerity than that of Milton in *Lycidas*, who is more concerned with the fiery attack on the corrupt clergy than with his friend. Shelley is more sincere than Arnold in *Thyrsis*, which was written five years after the death of his friend Clough, because Shelley had himself suffered at the hands of the same reviewers. As he himself tells us, his is a 'partial moan.'

Why Did Shelley Prefer the Pastoral Convention ?

Shelley chose the pastoral convention for his elegy, for he had such noble examples as his precedents as Milton's '*Lycidas*' and Spenser's, '*Astrophel*.' He used the classical form, so that he may connect his theme with the great poetic tradition of the world, and so that he may represent Keats as one of a long series of poets, all natives of the same enchanted country and all children of the same mother, Urania. By using the pastoral tradition, he has removed his work from the plane of immediate reality, and in this way he takes us to remote antiquity, where his flights of fancy seem probable. In this way, he has imparted an air of universality to his expression of grief.

"Adonais" and its Greek Models

Though *Adonais* has close resemblances with *Lycidas*, which cannot be purely accidental, yet *Lycidas* was not Shelley's model. He went directly to the Greek Masters. His elegy is closely based on, and in parts imitated from, Bion's *Lament of Aphrodite for Adonais* and Moschus' *Hymn to Bion*. He may not have directly acknowledged his debt to the Greek sources, but he made it clear by using the name *Adonais* for Keats and by prefixing to the poem four lines from the elegy of Moschus. Shelley uses the name *Adonais* for Keats, for he found many resemblances between the fate of Adonais, the Greek youth who was killed by a wild boar in the prime of youth, and that of Keats. There are also close verbal resemblances. For example, the opening lines of the elegy, "I weep for Adonais", Urania's words, "O, rash and over-bold, why did'st thou go hunting?", "So long but as a Kiss may live", etc., are literal translation from Bion's elegy. The quick dreams of Adonais model their behaviour exactly on the behaviour of

Bion's Cupids and even break their bow and arrows like them. The part of Urania is closely modelled on that of Aphrodite. But in spite of these, and many more clear examples of imitation, Shelley was not a plagiarist. He was a profoundly original genius, and despite all resemblances, the spirit of his work is entirely his own. Just as he changed 'Adonis' to *Adonais* so he changed the spirit of his Greek models by transforming *Aphrodite Cypris* of the Greek elegy to Aphrodite Urania. The Cyprian Aphrodite the beloved of Adonis, and mourns the loss of her lover; the Uranian Aphrodite is the mother of Adonais and she mourns the loss of her last and most beloved son, and in this way, says W.M. Rossetti "carnal relationship and carnal love are transposed into spiritual, relationship and spiritual love." Moreover, high and abstract quality of the thought in *Adonais* is entirely Shelley's own.

The Two Parts of 'Adonais'

As a pastoral elegy, *Adonais* closely follows the classical machinery of the pastoral. It may be divided into two parts. The first running upto the 38th stanza, is cast in the pastoral mould; there is the traditional invocation to weep, sympathetic mourning in nature, procession of mourners consisting of the flocks of the dead shepherd, and his fellow shepherds, personal digression and invective. In the second part, Shelley strikes a modern note. There is a change of mood, and final consolation. A detailed consideration of the two parts separately would throw much valuable light on several aspects of Shelley's art.

The First Part—Its Merits and Demerits

The poem opens with the traditional proposition: "I weep for Adonais", and then the poet proceeds to invoke the readers in general, the Hour of Keat's death, and the goddess Urania represented as the mother of the dead poet, to weep with him at the sad loss. Then is asked the conventional question: Where was Urania when her last and dearest son lay dying? This is followed by the procession of mourners: the Dreams, Desires, Adorations, etc, of Keats (imagined as a shepherd) are represented as his flocks. They are endowed with life. They mourn the death of their master, hover round the bier and speak in sweet wailing voices. There is also sympathetic mourning in nature. Grief stricken Morning flies to her eastern watch-tower so that the sky is dark. The Echo and the Spring, mad with grief, forget to perform the functions proper to them. The Echo sits lost in thought so that

the wench and mountains beside vociferous, and Spring shed her
 back, as the Autumn were'. Urania, the chief mourner, sitting in
 trance in her pyramid, is roused to a sense of her loss, personified
 as Alceus, in her Dreams and by her Echoes. Her behaviour
 closely follows that of Aphrodite in Byron's *Stanzas*. She speaks
 over camps and cities, her invisible feet are injured by the har-
 shness of human hearts and words, and at last she reaches the
 death chamber of Keats. Then follows her pathetic lament begin-
 ning with,

*Stay yet awhile! speak to me once again,
 Kiss me so long but as a kiss may give.*

and containing the fiery invective on 'The monsters of life's woe',
 i.e., the reviewers who were supposed to have caused the death of
 Keats. They are referred to as, 'herded wolves', 'obscene ravens',
 and 'vultures'. The human mourners in *Adonais* are the contem-
 porary poets of England and Shelley himself is one of their com-
 pany. They are dressed as mountain shepherds in keeping with
 the pastoral convention, but their reality can easily be discovered
 by the apt epithets that Shelley has used for them. Says Clifton
 Brock, "No better description of fellow poets exists in literature."
 Here Shelley is really inspired. "This procession of mourners,
 however loftily managed, is purely an ideal one," says Elton, "for
 Byron was not intimate with Keats, and Leigh Hunt was not pre-
 sent at his death." As Symonds points out, there is irony in mak-
 ing Byron and Moor the leading mourners, for Byron had no res-
 pect for Keats and Moor traduced Shelley, and both are of less
 fame to-day than Shelley and Keats. "Shelley's description of
 himself", says Clifton Brock, "is as good an example as could be
 found of ideal poetry, for it conveys a just idea of him without
 any statement of actual facts." Inspired, but highly abstract
 images, following in quick succession, while having a charm of
 their own, add an element of vagueness to Shelley's descriptions.

Weakness of the Pastoral Note

It may also be noted that while the general atmosphere is
 pastoral, the pastoral note itself is weaker and thinner, and less
 consistent in *Adonais* than is the case with *Lycidas* and *Physis*.
 Milton represents himself as a shepherd mourning the death of
 another shepherd who was nursed along with him. "On the self-
 same rill", and who, "fed the same flock by mountain, shade and

rill", and the pastoral note is sustained from beginning to the end. But in *Adonais* the pastoral note is entirely absent from the first eight stanzas, it is struck for the first time in the ninth stanza, continues till the seventeenth stanza, and then ceases for the next twelve stanzas. It again begins in the thirtieth stanza, continues in a magnificent vein for six stanzas, and then dies out altogether.

Part II : The Note of Hope

In the second part of the poem, the note of sorrow changes to one of hope and joy. But the change is not abrupt; it is gradual and the two parts have been artistically blended into a single whole. The transition takes place in the 38th stanza: The readers are asked not to mourn the death of *Adonais* who, 'wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead'. His pure spirit has become a part of the eternal. This thought reminds us of, 'Naught we know dies', of the 20th stanza. In this way the two parts run into each other and the artistic unity of the whole is maintained. Upto now Shelley had been closely following his Greek models, but now he breaks free from their influence. In this respect, too, Milton had led the way; he had also consoled himself with the thought that the soul of his friend had gone to heaven. Says Edmunds, "*Like Milton, Shelley was inspired by the Greek models, and again like Milton, he transmuted the ancient form into a magnificent modern poem. And as the death of Lycidas led Milton upto the triumphant. Puritanism which was the highest spiritual force of its time, so Shelley emerges from his sorrow into a paean of immortality, the victory-song of love, wherein death is swallowed up in life*". It may be noted that no such note of joy is to be found in *Thyrsis*.

Part II : Its Artistic Greatness

"The greatness and beauty of '*Adonais*' are due primarily to that part of it, which steers clear of the pastoral convention." It is so because in the first part Shelley's fancy was chained down by the shackles of convention and in the second part he, 'Soars aloft on mighty wings'. Not that he has managed the first part badly, "The first half of the poem", says Edmunds, "is felt to be most fitting and perfectly satisfying." The representation of the quick Dreams of Keats as his flocks mourning his death is a fine piece of impersonation, and to our minds quickened by Shelley's music, it seems quite natural and convincing. The procession of contem-

poetry parts described as mountain shapes to the last forty
 instance, and Shelley's description of himself is as good an
 example as could be found of ideal poetry, but it conveys a poor
 idea of him without any statement of actual facts. It is interesting
 for its pathos and fidelity to truth. But the first part has also
 some obvious faults. The behaviour of the Furies of Keats in
 breaking their bows and arrows, exactly like the Cupids of Rome,
 seems incongruous. Cupid, of course, has his bow and arrow, but
 it does not become clear why the Furies of Keats should have
 them. There is also some incoherence of thought regarding the
 weapon which killed Adonais. At one place it is the, 'shaft that
 flies in darkness,' at another it is the, 'unpastured dragon,' and at
 still another place we are told that, 'Adonais has drunk poison'.
 The invective in which the reviewers are referred to us, 'Carrion
 Kites' 'herded wolves' etc., strikes a jarring note and, as *O. Elton*
 says, it 'spoils Adonais'. Shelley himself felt it to be so, for he
 wrote, 'I have dipped my pen in consuming fire for his (of Keats)
 destroyers, otherwise the style is calm and solemn.' *Elton* finds the
 style of the first part to be, "marked by a certain note of oratory",
 and *W. H. Rossetti* feels that by the use of the pastoral convention,
 Shelley, "fell into a certain degree of artificiality of structure",
 which comes in the way of a direct expression of grief.

"But when we come to the magnificent peroration", of the
 second part, says *Edmonds*, "we feel that Shelley has given us the
 highest and best that he has to give". We seem to be transpor-
 ted to a different world altogether. It now becomes a hymn to the
 glory of art and the mystery of death. Shelley is now filled with
 an immense hope. First, he is satisfied with a kind of Pantheism
 but then his imagination makes his faith clearer and we get the
 image of, 'the inheritors of unfulfilled renown' welcoming the
 soul of Keats to the realm of the eternal. Indeed, in this part
 Shelley's intellect cooperates with his emotion, his imagination
 works at white heat and we get one wonderful image after another
 like the following :

"Life, like a dome of many coloured glass,
 Stains the white radiance of eternity,
 Until Death tramples it to fragments"

In this part, says *Clutton Brock*, "we are taken into the unknown,
 moving from the ancient pastoral country to Shelley's own un-

trodded wildernesses, and airy heights of thought." We get the most lucid account of Shelley's transcendental philosophy. It combines music with highly abstract thought as it had never been combined before; the style, too, 'becomes rarer and clearer.' Shelley preached in all his poetry the triumph of the spiritual over the material, and in this part of the poem, "it bursts forth into a mighty symphony which voices all the warrants of our immortality in everlasting music." The poem ends magnificently with a prophecy of Shelley's own approaching fate.

Shelley himself considered *Adonais* the least imperfect of his compositions and called it, *a highly wrought work of art*. Critic after critic has agreed with this judgement. There can be no better proof of its perfection than that it has been compared with *Lycidas* and found equal, even superior, to it in some respects. It is brilliant performance and its brilliance arises in a great measure from the accord of its subject with Shelley's genius. In the circumstances of Keats' life and death, he found a subject which excited his sympathy and admiration and which gave full scope for his fondness for abstract thought.