

ADONAIS

Among the greatest elegies in our language Shelley's *Adonais* holds a conspicuous place with Milton's *Lycidas* and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. In its thought and expression and mythical illusions it has a striking similarity to *Lycidas*, although Shelley cannot reach the sublimity and beauty of the great master. The poem was inspired by one of the saddest events in literary history—the death of Keats, at the threshold of manhood and greatness. Shelley had never been an enthusiastic admirer of Keats, in fact he had criticized several of his earlier compositions as modelled on narrow principles; but the poet's sad death, which was hastened, if not caused, by the savage and brutal criticism *Endymion* received in the *Quarterly Review*, aroused the sympathy and ire of a brother poet. Shelley was greatly incensed against the writer of this criticism. In the preface to *Adonais* he writes:—

“Miserable man! you, one of the meanest, have wantonly defaced one of the noblest specimens of the workmanship of God; nor shall it be your excuse that, murderer that you are, you have spoken daggers, but used none.”

Perhaps these facts aroused that never-latent sympathy in Shelley, and gave to *Adonais* the stirring lines for which it is famous.

In the opening verses of the poem Shelley shows his determination to use the mythical element which Milton had already so successfully employed in his elegy, *Lycidas*. He invokes the mighty Mother of the Universe, *Urania*, (presumably *Venus*, who in this instance he considers more as the goddess and patron of Art, than as the mighty queen of Mythical Olympus) to awake her mournful lyre for the death of Keats, the young *Adonais*,—*Adonais*, whose songs were sung but to express the beauty of the wild things of nature, of the glories of the heavens, and of all things that she loved. He has fallen—pierced by the shaft of envy, while she sat, “mid listening Echoes,” in her *Paradise*, and did not see him fall. Let her arise and weep, if it is not too late for tears. *Adonais* is gone—gone to return no more. He has gone “where all things wise and fair descend.”

Shelley's sorrow is genuine. His feelings are fully aroused by a pathetic theme, and he goes on, carried away by his feelings and by his thoughts.

The next verse contains a beautiful tribute to Milton, and is at the same time an eulogy to Keats. He describes Milton as the "Sire of an Immortal strain" who, blind and lonely, "went unterrified into the gulf of death," and "whose spirit still reigns over the earth, the third among the sons of light." The sons of light are no other than Homer, Dante, and Milton himself. By an exquisite parallelism Shelley invokes the goddess to weep anew for the youthful Adonais, and to shed for him those tears which fall only for the best and greatest.

He describes Keats as one who had reached the bright station to which so few dared to climb: as one who, struck by the envious wrath of man, sank in his refulgent prime; as a bloom whose petals were nipt before they blew; as a lily which lies broken after the storm has passed.

In the next verse there is a tribute to Rome, the city where Keats died and was buried, and where the ashes of the lamented Shelley himself, were, but a few months later, to find their last resting place. He calls it a place "where kingly Death keeps his pale court in beauty and decay," as a spot where Adonais would find a fitting grave among the eternal.

The verses which follow are examples of the subtlety of Shelley's style. From the thoughts of death in its darker aspects he considers it in its truer and more consoling sense, and, turning with charming grace once more to the mythical, he describes the mourning of the "Dreams" and "passion-winged ministers of thought," on which the spirit of Adonais fed, and their sorrowing and lamenting for the death of Keats. He sees in spirit these denizens of the air hovering around the dead Adonais, wailing and weeping, and scattering garlands o'er the silent form. He sees the Desires, the Adorations, the winged Persuasions, and the veiled Destinies, the Splendors, Glooms, and Phantasies—all that Keats had loved and moulded into thought: he sees Sorrow and Pleasure with a multitude of spirits, all moving in solemn pomp, like a "pageantry of mist," and lamenting o'er the dead Adonais.

Morning arose with her countenance dimmed with misty tears; the pale Ocean lay in unquiet slumber; and the wild winds sobbed in their dismay.

"Lost Echo sits amid the voiceless mountains and in grief recalls the well-remembered lay."

Spring is wild with grief since he who always welcomed her approach with joy and gladness is no more.

Thus he continues, expressing the lamentations of all things of Nature, which even the quickening life of Spring cannot forego. Then he relapses once more into the soliloquy of his own thoughts till again he resumes the thread-like theme.

Urania has heard the wailing of countless spirits, and rises from her ambrosial rest. Enveloped in the mists of sorrow and fear she is swept to the place where Adonais lies. Vain all her tears, they cannot rouse the dead, and in passion deep she pours forth a lamentory wail.

She ceases, and then others come upon the scene to mourn with her. The Pilgrim of Eternity, (a striking name for Byron,) comes, "veiling the lightning of his song in sorrow," and the sweet lyrist from wild Ierne, who, no doubt, is the poet Thomas Moore. Amongst many others of less note is one frail form, "a phantom among men" whose wont it is to roam over the world's wilderness with his own thoughts—and this is undoubtedly no other than Blake, the mystical poet of nature.

Here we find one of the best known pieces of poetic invective to be found anywhere, for Shelley breaks from his theme, as he does frequently, to express his own thoughts, and inserts a scathing criticism against the unnamed critic. It is however but a momentary burst of feeling, one of Shelley's sudden flights, and he as soon relapses into his sorrowful lament.

The pure spirit of Adonais has flown back to the burning fountain whence it came. He is not dead, he has but awakened from the dream of life. He is made one with nature, and his spirit still lives in the trees and flowers, in the forests and grassy-places. He is now but a portion of that loveliness which he once made more lovely.

The splendors of the firmament may be eclipsed, but are not extinguished—the heart of Adonais is stilled in death but his spirit still burns with unabated ardor on the earth.

From their thrones, far in the Unapparent, rise Chatterton, Sydney, the sublimely mild Lucan, and many others who in life were great but unknown. They rise clothed in dazzling immortality and call upon Adonais to assume his winged throne in the Heaven of Song.

The last nine verses are perhaps the most beautiful and inspiring of the whole poem. They seem to express more than the others that sweetness of feeling which is the best in Shelley; that sympathy which strikes the golden chord in the poet's soul and brings forth the melodious harmony of his sublimer poems. To express them adequately we cannot do in other words. They are the outpourings of a soul carried away on the wings of noble poetic thought. The first verse is not only a beautiful culmination to the poetic theme, but in them the poet seems also to have reached the summit of his inspiration.

“The breath whose might I have invoked in song
Descends on me; my Spirit's bark is driven
Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng
Whose sails were never to the tempest given;
“The massy earth and spired skies are riven!
I am borne darkly—fearfully—afar;
Whilest burning through the inmost veil of Heaven
The soul of Adonais, like a star,
Beacons from the abode where the eternal are.”

Shelley's lyrics stand apart from the rest of his works, and it is upon these that his fame mainly rests. Impulsive, overflowing, restless in their spontaneity, they make us forget all the rest in Shelley and show us his world-weary yet still aspiring soul. The Ode to the West Wind is ranked as the most perfect and perhaps Adonais comes next. The first seems to flow from the pathos of the poet's own spirit, and from a perfect unconsciousness of self, while the latter, emanating from his personal sorrow, does not reach the heights of self-abasement. Shelley's poetry is sublime, melodious and enchanting. He has a charm which is immediate and constant. “Subtlety and sublimity of idea were never better represented than in his free and fluent lines. His element is the air, whither it is sometimes fatiguing to follow his flights, and whence one returns with a sense of relief to the more mundane world, to rest on the glen-side with Scott, or to buffet the sea-billows with Byron.”

Elegiac poetry should express the feelings of the soul and be an utterance of the heart. It must be an harmonious and imaginative expression of real feeling. These essentials are all found in Adonais; but in this poem, Shel-

ley's chief defects—vagueness, unreality, and pomp are also to a certain extent apparent.

Shelley seems to have been naturally fitted, more than any other poet of the time, to write an elegy on Keats. His extreme sentiveness of the beautiful and pathetic, his similarity to Keats in their love of nature, together with his roving imagination and flightful fancy, all combine to this end.

Adonais has well withstood the test of time, and still remains—a lasting memorial to Keats and to the author's genius—one of the greatest elegies in our language.

—F.C.C.'26.



“Be noble; and the nobleness that lies
In other men sleeping, but never dead,
Will rise in majesty to meet thine own.

—Lowell.

We live in deeds, not years; in thoughts, not breaths;
in feelings, not in figures on a dial. We should count time
by heart-throbs. He most lives who thinks most, feels
the noblest, acts the best.

—Bailey.

There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the vovage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries;
We must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

—Shakespeare.

Music hath charms to soothe the savage heart
To soften rocks, or beard a knotted oak,
By magic number and persuasive sound.

—Congreve