

# Glimpses of Five World Famous Elegies in English Literature.

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## ABSTRACT:

Literature consists of various genres of written works by genius minds of the world, which includes poetry, prose, drama, short stories, fiction and essays. Every genre is famous for its specific characteristics. Poetry is one of the most considerable genre of literature. Poetry is divided into various forms like lyric, ballad, ode, sonnet, epic, satire, and elegy. The elegy began as an ancient Greek metrical form and is traditionally written in response to the death of the person or group. Though similar in function, the elegy is distinct from the epitaph, ode, and eulogy. An elegy is a poem that reflects upon death or loss traditionally it contains themes of mourning loss and reflection however it can also explore themes of redemption and consolation. The word elegy originated from the Greek word 'elegeia' which means to lament or to be sorrowful. In short the elegy is a lament, a lyric of mourning or an utterance of personal bereavement and sorrow and therefore it should be characterized by absolute sincerity of emotion and expression.

**KEYWORDS:** Elegy, mourning song, lament,

## INTRODUCTION:

In literature, elegy covers wide area of work by numerous poets. Every poet has distinct form of expressing their grief, through the variety of diction and symbols. John Milton, Lord Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Gray, P.B. Shelley, could be considered as greatest masters of elegies because of their extra-ordinary way of conveying their melancholy over the loss.

### Lycidas – John Milton.

Lycidas is an elegy written by John Milton in which he mourns on the sudden demise of his pal Edward King who drowned in the shipwreck in the Iris Sea. The poem begins with the speaker collecting leaves for the funeral of Lycidas. He plucks berries and ivy that have not yet ripened, killing them before their season. Like Lycidas, the plants die too young. After collecting leaves for Lycidas, the speaker decides to write an elegy for him, the very elegy that we are reading. He calls upon the muses to fill him with song, as pastoral poets like Theocritus and Virgil do at the beginning of their own poems when they ask the muses to inspire the creation of their poetry.

The speaker recalls the days he spent with Lycidas, invoking rural imagery—images that veil Milton's own memories of his days with Edward King at Cambridge memories. As the poem progresses, the poet realized that those days are gone, due to sudden death of his friend. The poet questioned Nymph, the goddess of wood why she had not prevented him from death.

Further the speaker reaches the first major crisis of the poem. He wonders whether poetry can accomplish anything, and reflects on the limitations of fame on Earth. The sun God- Apollo, arrives to comfort the poet with the promise of fame in Heaven.

Then the speaker imagines a slew of water gods arriving to mourn the death of Lycidas. They have come to answer the call the speaker made to the Muses at the beginning of the poem, when he asked them to fill his urn with water and mourn Lycidas as they passed. Neptune's son, Triton, arrives first, with his winds following behind him. None of them accepts blame for Lycidas's death. They say the winds were good and the water was smooth. The ship sank because it was built during an eclipse and doomed to fail.

St. Peter the Pilot of the Galilean lake, arrives last in the procession to mourn Lycidas. The speech he gives over Lycidas's body quickly turns into a sermon on the wrongs of church leaders, who he imagines as a group of shepherds singing broken songs while their sheep starve. The poet calls upon the flowers to mourn for

Lycidas, then suddenly remembers that Lycidas' body is somewhere in the sea, where there can be no proper funeral.

The poet then imagines the sun setting only to rise again. The image is a metaphor for Christian resurrection. Like the setting sun, Lycidas has died only to rise again in Heaven. Through the image of the rising sun, the poem arrives at its final consolation.

The poem concludes with the shepherd falls silent and a new speaker takes his place. The new speaker describes the shepherd rising to explore new pastures, leaving the place where he grieved for Lycidas.

### **Elegy Written on Country Churchyard – Thomas Gray**

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard is a poem in which Thomas Gray expresses his feelings and mourns the death of the people of the village that lie buried in a country churchyard. In this poem, the poet pays a small tribute to the humble and naive people that lie buried in the graves. The poet says-

*“Full many a gem of purest ray serene,  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.”*

In this line the poet has described, many gems are exceptionally beautiful and unexceptionally bright lie hidden in the dark depths bottomless ocean. Many beautiful flowers bloom in the wilderness where nobody can either see their blushing charm or smell their sweet fragrance

The people lying in the grave were insignificant and more humble compared to the people of the privileged sections of the society. The tone of the poem is mournful, melancholic and thoughtful. The poet says that after death, even the privileged lies under the earth in the same way the poor and ordinary people does. The poor died unsung, unhonoured and unwept. Had they been given the privilege, they would have achieved something with their talents that remained undiscovered. In the end, the poet says that one day the poet too will die and be buried in the same graveyard, and the epitaph that he wrote for himself would be inscribed on his tomb.

### **In Memoriam – Lord Alfred Tennyson.**

In memoriam is an elegy composed by Lord Alfred Tennyson on the death of his friend Arthur Hallam. It is recognized as one of the finest elegies in the English literature, as well as one of the greatest poems of 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is an expression of poet's grief as well as record of doubts and uncertainties which beset his soul as his doubts and fears are also doubts and fears of age in memoriam is also social document of great value and significance.

Arthur Hallam was young man of great promise who was the poet's college mate and who died at Vienna in 1833. The immortal elegy was first published anonymously in 1850, seventeen years after Hallam's death. This shows that the poet brooded long and deep over his loss and ultimately expressed it. It is the history of tender human soul confronted with stern relentless order of the universe and seeming waste and cruelty of death. The poem tresses the progress of sorrow from the valley of death overshadowed by the darkness of unspeakable laws through the regions of philosophic doubts and meditation to the serene heights of resignation and hope, where faith and love trump over death in the confidence of a life beyond and over doubt.

### **Thyrsis – Matthew Arnold.**

Thyrsis is renowned elegy by Matthew Arnold on the death of his friend Arthur Hugh Clough who was also poet. In this poem, the poet expresses his grief on the death of his friend who was his close friend with whom he has spent his early days at the countryside of Oxford. When poet visited again after death of his friend, he found everything was completely changed. He remembers that the elm tree- which they used to observe for a long while and the path they used to roam were completely changed. It was also observed that the girl who helped them on boat was also disappeared. The poet said-

*“Why faintest thou! I wander'd till I died.  
Roam on! The light we sought is shining still.  
Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,*

*Our Scholar travels yet the loved hill-side."*

Here the poet blames his friend for his own death because he left poet alone forever. The poet is in utmost melancholy due to his friend's death and lament for his death, an old elm tree and the girl which were also vanished.

### **Adonais – P. B. Shelley**

Adonais is one the finest elegies by P. B. Shelley in which he laments on the death of his close friend and fellow poet John Keats, who died unexpectedly in Rome due to tuberculosis at the very young age of 26.

*"I weep for Adonais—he is dead!  
Oh, weep for Adonais! Though our tears  
Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head!  
And thou, sad Hour, selected from all years  
To mourn our loss, rouse thy obscure compeers,  
And teach them thine own sorrow, say: "With me  
Died Adonais; till the Future dares  
Forget the Past, his fate and fame shall be  
An echo and a light unto eternity!"*

The mood of the poem begins in dejection, but ends in optimism—hoping Keats' spark of brilliance reverberates through the generations of future poets and inspires revolutionary change throughout Europe. Adonis is the stand-in for Keats, for he too died at a young age after being mauled by a boar. In Shelley's version, the 'beast' responsible for Keats's death is the literary critic, specifically one from London's Quarterly who gave a scathing review of Keats' poem 'Endymion'. Shelley was unaware of the true cause of Keats's death. Urania also known as 'Venus or Aphrodite', who is Adonis' lover in the myth, is rewritten here as the young man's mother, possibly because Keats had no lover at the time of his death. In a sense, Keats is not dead, for like other great poets, he lives within those who benefited from his life and poetry, and he is alive because he is 'one with Nature.' He is even Christ like, a divinity among the best of poets. Even so, he died too soon. In death, he beacons the living to join him in eternity.

### **CONCLUSION:**

After going through the above summaries it is cleared that the genre of elegy covers wide area in literature. It can be easily considered that elegy has the closely attached with human life because it deals with everyday life and incidents of people. Elegy is a kind of mode to express unspoken feelings for loved ones. The elegy also can be described as through which the poet, the speaker, ends the elegy by saying that death is the universal truth in this world. Also, considered as people's efforts and their struggles to succeed in life comes to an end in death. People die, but they left their reminiscences behind which are everlasting. Various poets used this theme in their elegies to keep their loved ones immortal forever.

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