



# Elegy



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Elegy is the poetic form and distillation of our common human response to loss. As an idea, it takes shape in the pastoral laments of Classical Literature, with their strong emphasis on fertility rites, but it retains a powerful influence in contemporary civilization, wherever there is a deeply felt need for consolation and renewal in the face of death. In the literary imagination, elegy functions as a counterpoint to well-established rituals of mourning; it prompts the expression of grief and bewilderment; it idealises the deceased and preserves our memories of them among the living; and it offers consolation and reassurance, finding solace in the seasonal rhythms of nature or in sustaining moral, philosophical and religious ideals. Elegy is founded on paradox and contradiction. It needs to remember the dead, but it also needs to forget them; it holds in suspension the cruel certainty of loss and the assuaging possibility of resurrection. From Classical times to the present, elegiac poetry has functioned as a creative outlet for what Sigmund Freud in his seminal essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917) termed 'the work of mourning'.

The formal conventions of elegy include the ceremonial procession of mourners and the ritual laying of wreaths and floral tributes, the troubled questioning of deities and the anguished appeal to witnesses, the cathartic outbreak of anger, and the symbolic apprehension of light and water as emblems of renewal and return. Some well-known elegies are essentially meditations on lost values and opportunities, or on a lost way of life (Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' is a notable example). However, most of the prominent elegies in the English tradition are lamentations for an exemplary or exceptional figure, often another poet: John Milton's 'Lycidas', Percy Bysshe

Shelley's 'Adonais', Matthew Arnold's 'Thyrsis', Alfred Tennyson's 'In Memoriam', Algernon Charles Swinburne's 'Ave Atque Vale', Thomas Hardy's 'A Singer Asleep'. Poetry itself is frequently a source of consolation, and poetic immortality is proffered as a type of resurrection.

In modern poetry, especially since the First World War, the idealising and consoling tendencies associated with elegy have sometimes been regarded sceptically, if not brutally rejected. The casual insouciance and de-idealising instinct in modern elegy are memorably captured by W H Auden in his affectionate quip to Yeats: 'You were silly like us: your gift survived it all' (In Memory of W B Yeats). In Northern Ireland, in the midst of prolonged political violence, the elegiac impulse has elicited some of the most moving and haunting poems of the late twentieth century from such writers as Michael Longley and Seamus Heaney. The past two decades have witnessed the spectacle of national mourning on a massive, bewildering scale, reminding us that the struggle to make sense of grief and loss is by no means a private preoccupation. Nor is elegy the preserve of published poets. A profound need for some shared sense of consolation prompted hundreds of extravagant elegies for Princess Diana in August 1977, and left us with the unforgettable image of hastily written notes of farewell, forlornly fluttering in the choking New York air in September 2001. ■

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