

M.A. Semester II

Course 5: Poetry II

(Wordsworth to Arnold) ENG-201

Note: Dear students these notes have been prepared from scholarly e-resources available online. These notes include important points from various essays and articles available online. I intended to circulate these notes in your class but since there are no classes going on I have compiled a file for it. I have edited and skipped certain sections from e-copies in order to make it easier for you to understand without missing out any important point.

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Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats **by PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY**

The poem is made up of a lot of imagery and allusions.

Character list:

Adonais

Urania

Pythian

Apollo

Introduction

Shelley characterizes Keats as "Adonais", a god which dies and resurrects as a flower. By characterizing Keats as Adonis, Shelley wants him to be immortal like Adonis is.

Shelley also alludes John Milton's "Paradise Lost". He repeatedly talks about paradise and the lost angel.

He also alludes to many other poems, myths, and stories.

Shelley alludes many of Keats' work such as:

- Ode to a Nightingale
- Isabella
- To Autumn

It is an elegy for John Keats.

An elegy is a kind of poem that is meant to be read at a funeral.

John Keats and Percy Shelley were both poets and very close friends.

Shelley admired Keats' work.

Pastoral means having simplicity, charm, and serenity; commonly dealing with nature.

The poem starts out with grief and sadness, then progresses to admiration and recognition of Keats' work, and finally to positive and hopeful thoughts and acceptance towards his death.

- It is a pastoral elegy.
- It is made up of 55 stanzas.
- Adonais, in Greek mythology, was a beautiful young man. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, fell in love with him. He was killed by a wild boar while hunting. Aphrodite's grief over his death was so great that Zeus (the chief god) allowed him to spend six months in the year with her. Aphrodite was worshipped in Greece both as Aphrodite Urania (the goddess of the sky) and as Aphrodite Pandemos, (the goddess of all the people, or goddess of marriage and family life). Later the distinction acquired a new meaning: Aphrodite Urania became that goddess of higher and purer love; Aphrodite Pandemos, the goddess of sexual lust. Shelley in this poem changes the spelling of "Adonis" to "Adonais", and he makes Urania the mother of Adonais, not his beloved, in order to keep out the erotic element from his elegy.

- Adonais is Shelley's elegy on the death of John Keats. Keats died at Rome, aged twenty-five, on 23rd February, 1821, of tuberculosis. Shelley got the impression that Keats's death had been hastened by the brutal attacks of an anonymous reviewer in the "Quarterly Review" on his poetry. Shelley came to know the true facts of Keats's death only when he had finished writing Adonais which he called "the image of my regret and honour for poor Keats".

DETAILED EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

Stanza 1

Shelley laments the death of Keats to whom he gives the name of Adonais. Shelley wanted by this name to point out the connection of his poem with the Greek poet Bion's famous "Lament of Aphrodite For Adonais". He changed the form of the word "Adonis" to "Adonais". This change was probably made to correspond with the change of the spirit of Shelley's poem.

Stanza 2: Urania was absent when her son, Adonais (or Keats), was killed by the cruel criticism of this work by anonymous reviewers and commentators. Urania was at that time sitting in her Paradise. Urania or the incarnation of the Spirit of Heavenly Love loved her son like any other mother in this world, the poet says, Keats was loved and regarded as the son of Urania, but he was killed by the savage unsigned or anonymous criticism of Keats' poetry.

The word "Urania" means "Celestial". Urania sat in her Paradise, while Keats sang his exquisite songs in a soft loving voice on earth. With these songs or poems, Keats embellished and hid the approaching heavy figure of death. His songs were like flowers which are heaped over a dead body and which, by their beauty and fragrance, seem to mock the dead body.

Stanza 3: Let Urania weep over Keats's death. And yet her tears will be of no use. Keats is gone to the deep region of death and will never return to the earth.

The "melancholy Mother", the reference is again to Urania, "Yet wherefore?"—Yet it is of no use Urania's shedding tears. Let Urania withhold her burning tears of grief.

Let Urania not imagine that Proserpina, the Queen of the regions of death, will restore Keats to the earth. The amorous Deep refers to Proserpina, the goddess of the under-world. "Amorous" because death is too fond of its victims to let them go back to the world of the living. The vital air means air breathed by the living

Death is happy that Keats can no longer sing his songs. Death mocks the grief of those who are mourning Keats's departure from this world.

Stanza 4: Let Urania weep over the death of Keats. Milton, who was the third greatest epic poet died, but his spirit yet reigns over the earth. Urania is the goddess not only of heavenly love but also of poetry and song.

When the poet says “He died” the reference is to Milton: *who was the Sire of an immortal strain* – Milton, who was the author of an immortal poem (Paradise Lost).

Blind, old, and lonely – Milton became blind at the age of 46. His old age was lonely because he lived to see the total collapse of the great principles of freedom and religious faith and the triumph of the reactionary forces under Charles II.

The poet says, “when his country’s pride..... of lust and blood – The priest, the slave, and the liberticide crushed the proud independence of Milton’s country with their hateful deeds of greed, cruelty, and bloodshed. The priest here represents the Anglican Churches; the slave represents the Royalist Party; and the liberticide – the murderer of freedom—refers to Charles II.

The poet says, “he went, unterrified/into the gulf of death” – Milton met his death fearlessly, “*but his clear Spirit/Yet resigns o’er earth*” – Milton died, but his pure spirit continues to hold sway over the earth. The poet says, “the third among the songs of light – the third greatest epic poet. Homer was the first, and Dante the second, epic poet, and third was Milton.

Stanza 5: All poets dared not attempt to rise to Milton’s lofty status. Poets who cherished no lofty ideals and are yet famous are happier than Milton was. Some poets met a premature death because they felt victims to the cruelty of jealous men. Some poets yet live and are struggling against heavy odds to achieve fame.

When the poet says, “Not all to that bright station dared to climb – he means that happier are those lesser poets who never tried to emulate Milton’s example, who wrote no epics, cherished no high ideals, and are yet famous. Some tapers or candles continue to burn through the darkness of time although many suns have completely been lost. In other words, certain inferior poets are still remembered while some of the greatest poets (of antiquity) are known today by name only, their works having been lost.

In his Defence of Poetry, Shelley: “Ennius, Varro, Pacuvius, and Accius, all great poets have been lost”.

“envious wrath – jealous and resentment. And “others more sublime..... refulgent prime—some poets of superior gifts have died in

their early career because of the jealousy and resentment of their fellow poets or because of the cruelty of fate. These poets had won glory but died prematurely. Here the meaning of “refulgent prime” is early glory, glory that they won in their early life. Shelley here refers to the fate of Lucan, Chatterton, and of course Keats.

By the lines, “And some yet live, treading the thorny road, Which leads, through toil and hate, to Fame’s serene abode”, the poet says that some poets, who are yet alive, are bravely struggling against heavy odds. They are being attacked by critics but they are facing these attacks with courage and they will ultimately reach their destination where they will be greeted by Fame. Shelley here refers to Leigh Hunt and Byron, and also perhaps to Coleridge and Wordsworth who were bravely facing the attacks of critics and who were to reach the serene abode of Fame. Shelley here also predicts everlasting fame for these poets.

Stanza 6: In this stanza, the poet says that let Urania, the most musical of mourners, weep over the death of her youngest and dearest son whose poetic genius has now been rendered utterly waste. By the lines like: The nursling of thy widowhood—the poet says that Keats is regarded as having been reared during the widowhood of Urania. The idea is that Keats, a child of the Muses, was born in an unpoetic age.

Like a pale flower by some sad maiden cherished, the poet compares Keats to a pale flower looked after by some grief-stricken damsel. This is a reference to the story of Keats’s poem “Isabella”, or “The pot of Basil”, in which a young girl keeps weeping over a plant growing in a pot in which the head of her murdered lover was buried.

The poet further says that “Thy extreme hope” –the last hop of Urania was namely Keats only, but “the broken lily lies: meaning Keats has died in the prime of his life.

Stanza 7: In this stanza, the poet says that Keats met his death in the city of Rome where many poets and artists have their memorials. Let Urania not try to wake him up because he is taking his fill of sleep.

Here the meaning of “High Capital” is the city of Rome where Keats died, whereas by “Where kingly Deathand decay – the city of Rome is regarded as the Court of Death because it is full of the memorials of departed artists and writers.

By “He came... Among the eternal”, the poet means that Keats came to Rome and, at the cost of his own pure life, obtained a grave in the company of the dead artists who lay buried in that city.

Further, when Shelley says, “Haste, while the vault..... Charnel-roof” he calls upon Urania to come away and take a look at the dead Keats while he still lies unburied under the dome of the blue Italian sky.

On the other hand, by lines: “Awake him not.....forgetful of all ill”, the poet says that let Urania not try to wake up the sleeping (or dead) Keats because, forgetful of all the evil of the world, he is enjoying a deep and restful slumber.

Stanza 8: Through this stanza, the poet says that Keats will wake up no more. Corruption waits to mar his body, but corruption will have to wait till he is actually buried in his grave.

By the lines: “Invisible Corruption waits.....dwelling-place – he means: soon the dead body of Keats will be marred by Corruption. The idea is that the dead body will begin to rot soon.

Here, corruption is personified. And by lines like: The eternal Hunger sits...the mortal curtain draw—the poet means the corruption is ready to mar Keats’ beauty. But this action of Corruption is being delayed by pity and awe which are trying to diminish the fury of Corruption.

Nor can Corruption dare to touch the dead poet till he is laid away in the darkness of the grave. Till the time of his burial in a grave, he will lie unpolluted. Here, “She” is referred to Corruption. In other words, Corruption is personified as a woman.

Stanza 9: In this stanza, the poet says that the poetic thoughts and conceptions of Keats, which would have been communicated by him to other minds, are now fading away. By the lines like: “The quick Dreams.....or find a home again”—he means that the quick dreams are

the thoughts and fancies which Keats nursed in his mind. Had he lived longer, he would have communicated these thoughts and fancies to the minds of other people. These thoughts and fancies are described as the flocks of which Keats was the herdsman.

Now these thoughts and fancies are fading at their very source. They are unhappy over their sad fate, and they are lamenting their unhappy lot round the cold heart of dead Keats. These thoughts and fancies are fading with the man who created them, but the pain that they are experiencing is sweet because death is coming to them in an easy form.

These dying thoughts and fancies can never be revived and they can never find another home. Here the thoughts and fancies of which Keats was the creator have been personified. With the death of the creator, his products are also about to die.

Stanza 10: In this stanza, the poet says that one of Keats's poetic thoughts has shed a tear over Keats's dead body and after shedding a tear, has vanished. By the lines: "And one with trembling hands.....her moonlight wings", he says that the personification of Keats's thoughts and fancies ("the quick Dreams") continues. One of these thoughts and fancies holds the cold head of Keats with her trembling hands and flutters her moonlight wings in order to fan her dead creator. As we know, "the quick Dreams" are personified in the forms of women.

By the lines: "Lost Angel of a ruined Paradise" – The thought or dream, conceived by Keats before his death, is here regarded as the lost angel. The mind of the dead Keats was the Paradise which is now a wreck. And through lines: "She knew not....outwept its rain", the poet means that this thought did not realize that the tear on the silken fringe of Keats's eye was shed by herself, that is, by that very thought (which has been personified as a woman). Then, in an instant, this thought vanished in the same manner as a cloud vanishes after it has dissolved itself in rain. The thought left no stain just as a dissolving cloud leaves no trace behind.

Stanza 11: Shelley, through this stanza, says that another poetic thoughts of Keats seems to have embalmed Keats's dead body with glittering dew. Another has thrown a wreath of her loose locks over his dead body. Yet another has broken her weapons.

Here, by the word "One" the poet means "one of the Dreams or fancies. And by the words like: 'lucid urn", he means bright and shining pot or vessel. When the poet says, "of starry dew" he means—containing dew which glitters like the stars.

Through the lines: Washed his light limbs as if embalming them, Shelley says that one of the Dreams washed the light limbs of Keats with the glittering dew taken from a bright urn. It seemed that the Dream was trying to embalm the dead body of Keats so that it should not rot even after burial.

In the lines 94 to 99, when the poet says, "Another clipped her profuse locks..... against his frozen cheek", he means that another dream clipped her loose locks of hair and threw them upon Keats's dead body to serve as a wreath. This wreath was decorated not with pearls but with the frozen tears of that Dream. Yet another Dream broke her weapons (bow and arrows) in sheer grief. It was the intention of this Dream to diminish the intensity of her grief over Keats's death by inflicting on herself some lesser pain (such as the breaking of her weapon).

Through lines: "And dull the barbed fire," in line 99, he means that and deaden the pain caused by the flame-like arrow; and deaden the pain caused by Keats's death.

Stanza 12: The poet talks about a splendid poetic fancy, which would have delighted the hearts of Keats's readers, has met its end. In line 100, when he says, "Another Splendour on his mouth alit", he means that "Another splendour" stands for another thought or poetic conception. The word "Splendour" here refers to the sublime or shining quality of that thought. It descended on Keats's mouth, while the mean of alit is alighted; descended.

From lines 101 to 104, such as: "That mouth, whence it was wont.....and with music", he means that when Keats was alive, this thought or poetic conception would have been changed into a spoken or written word. As

such, this thought would have been able to gain an entrance into the mind of Keats's listeners or readers and would have reached their hearts and touched their feelings. This thought would have found expression in brilliant, vivid and musical language. And when he says, "to pierce the guarded wit", he means to get entry into the closed mind of some listener or reader, whereas by "panting heart" he means that heart throbbing with feelings." The meaning of "with lighting" he means in brilliant vivid language, and "with music" on the other hand, stands for in a melodious voice.

When the poet says, "the damp death/Quenched its caress upon his icy lips, he means that the dewy death extinguished the thought, which, in other words, means that the thought, instead of drawing life from Keats's lips, died of the contact.

In lines from 106 to 108, he says that the thought is here compared to a meteor, and the dead body of Keats to a moonlit cloud, lying across the cold night sky. As the meteor fades, the sky is reddened for a moment by its glow. In the same manner, the thought seemed to pass through Keats's cold and pale limbs and then fade into nothingness. Here the meaning of word "clips" is "embraces". As the night embraces the cloud, so Keats lies in the embrace of Death.

Stanza 13: This stanza talks about the Desires and Adorations, Glooms, Incarnations of hopes and fears that come in a slow procession to mourn Keats's death. When he says: "And others came—he means that other thoughts, poetic conceptions and splendours appeared on the scene, while Desires and Adorations...and twilight Phantasies—are all personifications of the thoughts of the human mind.

By the lines like: "And Pleasure, blind with tears...in slow pomp", he means that pleasure had changed to mourning, and was almost blind because of her tears, but a faint smile still lingered on her lips. She moved forward solemnly, led not by her eyes which were blinded by tears, but by the light of her fading smile.

The line as: "the moving pomp might seem/Like pageantry autumnal stream" he means that in an exquisitely ethereal simile, the moving

processing of figures, such as Desires, Adorations, Splendour, Glooms, etc., is compared to the mist which is sometimes seen rolling along over the surface of a stream in autumn (in England, of course). It is possible to trace a procession of figures in the clouds of mist, which keep moving with the current of the stream and which seem to change their shape every moment.

Stanza 14: In this stanza, the poet says, “The Morning, the Thunder, the Ocean, the Wild Winds – all these and others mourned Keats’s death. All these are personifications.

From lines 120 to 123, when he says, “Mourning sought.....eyes that kindle day,” he means that the Morning was also grief-stricken over Keats’s death. As she appeared in the east, her hair was loose and untied. Her tears (that is, the dew-drops), which should have fallen upon the ground to decorate it, took the shape of clouds which darkened the sky. When he says, “dimmed the aerial eyes that kindle day, he means darkened the sky which should have been bright on account of sunlight.

From lines 124 to 126, when he says, “Afar the melancholy thunder.....sobbing in their dismay, he means that Thunder, the ocean, and the winds were all lamenting the death of Keats.

From stanza 3 to 29, the poet elaborates the myth and the ideas introduced in the first two stanzas. All through these stanzas, he continues the appeal to Urania who is asked to wake up and weep for Adonais. As discussed above, Urania is called “the most musical of mourners” and she is told that her youngest, dearest son, “the nursling of her widowhood” has perished. The poet who is dead was the third among “the sons of light” that is, the third greatest epic poet. From stanza 7 to 17, he talks about a large number of abstractions, as discussed above; grieve for Adonais, such as Dreams, Splendours, Desires, Adorations, Persuasions, Glooms, veiled Destinies, twilight Phantasies. All these come in slow pomp to express their grief. Echo feeds her grief amid the mountains and will no more reply to any sounds. Adonais was dearer to Echo than Hyacinth was to Pheobus, or than Narcissus to himself. Albion (or the spirit of the English nation) feels more grieved over the death of Adonias than is a nightingale over the loss of its mate. May the curse of Cain descend upon the head of the reviewer whose cruel criticism hastened the death of Adonais!

Further in the stanza, from 18 to 31, Shelley expresses his own sorrow, and speaks of the return of spring when all objects of Nature are happy and throb with a new life. Nothing that we know, ever dies, says Shelley. The soul too cannot die, though the body certainly turns cold and inanimate, whereas from stanza 29 to 32, the poet says that this lamenting stings Urania to action. Stricken by sorrow and fear, she rises and sets out for the place where the dead Keats lies

Eternal flowers spring from the drops of blood which fall from her feet along the rough route which she follows.

Urania appeals to the dead Adonais to speak to her and give her a kiss. She asks the dead man why he had ventured upon the path of poetry too soon. The savage and brutal critics, who killed Adonais, did not have the courage to face Byron when they were attacked by him in his satirical poem, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*.

From stanza 30 to 35, Shelley says that contemporary poets, in the guise of mountain shepherds with “garlands sere” and “magic mantles rent”, come to pay their tribute. The poet chooses Byron and Moore as the first two mourners. It is to be noted here that Byron and Moore did not really feel the sentiments which Shelley attributes to them.

Amongst the less distinguished mourners is Shelley himself. The poet here makes a striking image out of the legend of Actaeon, the hunter who was turned into a stag and haunted by his own hounds because he had watched the naked Diana bathing in a pool.

Shelley devotes four stanza, such as; 31 and 34 to this self-analysis. He calls himself a “pard-like spirit beautiful and swift”, “a Power girt round with weakness”, “a dying lamp”, “a breaking billow”, a solitary and companionless figure. These stanzas are characterized by the feeling of self-pity which we also find in several other poems of Shelley. Yet the stanzas are memorable ones, with some fine images, and the real objection to them is that they should not have been there at all. A briefer mention of himself would have been more appropriate. In 34, he speaks of his “branded brow” which, he says, was like Cain’s or Christ’s. In the stanza that follows he refers to Leigh Hunt, lost in grief, one of the sincerest of Keats’s friends.

In order to counterbalance his over-praise of the poet-mourners, Shelley heaps invective on the suspected murderer, the reviewer, while in stanzas 36 and 38, he warns him that he will live to be haunted by feelings of shame, remorse, and self-contempt, while the pure spirit of Adonais will flow back to the radiant fountain from which it had come. There is no need to weep, as Keats has joined the company of the illustrious dead, and his soul has become a portion of the eternal.

The last seventeen stanzas of the poem, that is, from 39 to 55, are an exultant denial of death's victory, from a typically Shelleyan angle. This is the best part of the poem in which the pastoral convention is abandoned. We are told, in stanza 39 to 43 that we should not mourn for Keats. Keats is not dead, but has achieved a true life. He has climbed to a height where he is absolutely secure from all evil. There is no need for Nature to lament the death of Keats who has now become one with Nature and whose presence is therefore to be felt and known in all aspects and phenomena of Nature. Keats has been absorbed into the immutable One Spirit, the Platonic prototype which is the source of all worldly forms. The spirit of Keats has been fused with the One Spirit which injects the essence of beauty into all things by forcing stubborn material into approximately of the ideal forms, observed by us as "Nature".

The fame of men of high intellectual gifts can never be totally extinguished, says Shelley (in stanza 44). The spirits of the great dead poets live in the lofty thoughts of the young readers. Shelley compares the great poet to the stars of the sky. Death in the case of these poets is "a low mist which cannot blot the brightness it may veil".

Further in the stanzas 45—46, the great poetry-stars of the past, especially the "inheritors of unfulfilled renown", who died in the prime of their life, rises to meet Adonais as he approaches his new celestial abode. These, Chatterton, Sidney, Lucan, "and man more whose names on earth are dark" tell him that the sphere which he is to rule as its king has been waiting for him. He is Vesper because he is the latest, and also perhaps because he is to be the brightest of their company.

In stanzas 47 to 51, Shelley advises anyone who persists in mourning to visit Keats's grave in the beautiful Protestant cemetery at Rome. Keats needs no reflected glory from the ages, empires and religions which lie

buried at Rome “in the ravage they have wrought.” Rather Rome will gain some more glory because Keats lies buried there. Then follows a famous image in stanza xxx, when the poet says, “*The One remains, the many change and pass.*” “*Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, stains the white radiance of Eternity, until Death tramples it to fragments.*” This image has been called “the best epigrammatic expression of Platonism in English poetry”, and has been interpreted variously.

In the stanzas 53-55, Shelley now gets ready to join Keats in his heavenly abode. He imagines that divine light and divine beauty are shining upon him and preparing him for his departure from this mortal world. Here Shelley accurately foretells his own death which came a year later. But he is visiting Adonais only in fancy; so it is a chance prophecy, arising because he liked to travel by boat in fact as well as in fancy.