

The Elegy

Elegies are an ancient poetic form built upon a lament. There is a ritualistic quality for most elegies as they move both the poet and the reader from confrontation with a loss through the process of grief and outward to a life that can and should follow the passing. The elegy is primarily about getting in proper relation to the energies that make us understand our own aliveness as we transform ourselves against the powers that seek to destroy us by having us wander too long in the despondency of loss.

Purpose

As an ode the elegy centers around the problem of surviving grief and loss. If done effectively, the elegy reminds us that it is all too easy to be overcome by that grief and to die ourselves by identifying too much with the dead one, or even becoming too lost in the process that we become anxious about showing disloyalty to the person or thing lost. The poem or song is meant as a guide to transform that loss into something life affirming.

Structure

Elegies whether traditional or modern tend to have some common elements of form. Among these are the call to something absent called an **apostrophe**. The power in this device rests in the emotional impact it can have on the audience, especially an audience familiar or sympathetic to the missing person or object. The apostrophe usually opens the poem through some sort of invocation.

A **complaint** may also be used where the persona is overcome by frustration and anger about the situation or perhaps their inability to exercise some sort of authority or power over the events. The complaint may be directed to God, to nature, or even to the absent object or person. Why this death?

The **expression of personal grief** must lead to some sort of transformation as the speaker, and we the reader in communion with that speaker, move from anger toward healing or at least acceptance of the return to some sort of order in life. Though changed the speaker can now move forward rather than remain in stasis.

At times **repetition** and **refrain** may be a part of the elegy. Other poetic devices to look for include the use of **metaphor** as the speaker conflates the enormity of the loss with the enormity of the object lost. It is not unusual for sound devices such as the use of the liquid sounds as well as the mutes (**Liquids**: l, m, n, and r and **Mutes**: b, d, k, p, q, t, and c and g) to end lines and linger in the grief or express the anger and the movement past the grief.

The elegy can be an effective way to navigate death from Loss through understanding and acceptance and finally to renewal.