
Percy Shelley's Poetry Analysis

Percy Shelley participated in a European movement that began many decades before his birth, which was aimed at finding new intellectual order in classical literature that might liberate Europe from an oppressive structure of monarchy, aristocracy, and religious dogma of the early 19th century. Because of Shelley's early knowledge of the classic myths acquired during his education at Eton College and later at Oxford, he utilizes many aspects of classical myths in his works such as mythological themes (including death, solitude, incest, narcissism, and unrequited love), plots, names, mythical creatures, and some mythical images. Rather than using poetry only as a platform for retelling earlier myths, Shelley mostly creates his own myths on the principles of creating myths, while also parodying earlier myths, based primarily on the concept of spiritualizing nature.

Among the themes Shelley utilizes, incestuous love along with a tragic ending is prevalent in his poem "Rosalind and Helen". There exist many classic myths that focus on this issue; for instance, the myth of Oedipus is one of the most popular classical stories that talk about a prohibited relationship between mother and son. In other classic myths, there exists a discussion on the themes of solitude as well as narcissism. The myth of a vengeful demon that drives his victims into barren places inspired Shelley to produce a poem entitled "Alastor" after the name of that demon. This is also a poem that shows some allusions to the myth of Narcissus. For this paper, however, the focus will be on Shelley's "Adonais", a long poem that was inspired by an event personal to Shelley, namely the death of one of his acquaintances. This poem was primarily reactionary, and indications of this can be seen throughout in the form of emotionally charged language, as well as his own emotions mirrored through personified characters such as nature and the seasons, meant to make the speaker's (and Shelley's) complex emotions seem simpler. Allusions are also made to the real event and references to those responsible for the real event.

The themes of death and afterlife are especially prevalent in Percy Shelley's "Adonais", which was based on the classic myth of Adonis, the mortal lover of Aphrodite. Adonis dies by being gored by a wild boar. Following Adonis' death, an annual celebration would be held where the Greek women would mourn for Adonis when he died, then rejoice when he was resurrected in the form of the windflower. Shelley however, wrote this long poem as an elegy, or a reflection for the dead, of his acquaintance, John Keats. Adonais is Shelley's own creation, not a historic or mythological figure, but Shelley bases Adonais on the myth of Adonis, and intends Adonais, or Keats, through this symbolic association, to attain mythic proportions, and suggests that Keats shall be as immortal as the young Adonis became through the windflowers. Shelley created the name by combining Adonis, the name for the Greek God of Fertility (and beauty), and the Hebrew word, Adonai, meaning 'our Lord.'

Keats and Shelley were not friends, but more accurately to some, Keats was Shelley's more talented poetic rival. They saw each other occasionally before 1817 when Shelley left England. As other poets noted: "Keats did not take to Shelley as kindly as Shelley did to him." (How close were Shelley and Keats?) Initially, Shelley and Keats were quite critical of each other's work. After reading Keats' first publication, *Endymion* (1818), Shelly wrote to him, admonishing his style: "In poetry, I have sought to avoid system and mannerism." Keats replied: "You might

curb your magnanimity, and be more of an artist, and load every rift of your subject with ore.” When Keats died in 1821, Shelley was significantly affected, and ironically, believed that Keats died as a result of the criticism Keats received to his work, *Endymion*, and compares these critics to the boar that killed Adonis in the preface to his poem *Adonais* and makes a reference to these critics indirectly in the poem itself. Keats was in fact subject to some pretty harsh criticism around the time of his first publishing of *Endymion*, most notably by John Wilson Croker, who appears to be someone Shelley refers to in the poem “*Adonais*”.

Shelley's poem begins with the speaker announcing that *Adonais* has died. The speaker then calls on the mourners to lament *Adonais*' passing. Among the first to be called is Urania, the Goddess of Astronomy and identified in the poem as *Adonais*' mother. Significantly, Venus, the Goddess of Love and Beauty, is also called Venus Urania. Urania leads a procession of mourners to *Adonais*' graveside where mythological and historical figures weep for him, from other poets, Thomas Moore and Lord Byron, to the very forces of nature itself: the Ocean, the Winds, the Morning Dew and even the seasons of Winter and Spring, who are personified and react to the death of *Adonais* with grief. As these mourners cry for the lost *Adonais*, the speaker condemns those he blames for the death. Those enemies, the speaker suggests, will suffer most for their misdeeds, while *Adonais*' spirit lives on eternally.

Personification is utilized by Shelley almost ruthlessly. Time is described as having several emotions, including sadness. Stanza I describes the 'Hour' as 'sad.' Stanza XLVIII describes time as 'decaying,' as if it had a body. Stanza L calls time 'dull.' The speaker's mourning of *Adonais*' lack of time left on earth is transferred to time. Beginning in stanza III, Death is given human attributes. This stanza has Death (made into a proper noun) 'laughing at our despair.' Stanza VII describes Death as 'kingly,' but later says that she is 'shamed' in stanza XXV by the presence of Keats' body. By giving Death a personality, Shelley is able to show that death is no match for the youth's eternal spirit. Nature is personified all over this poem. In stanza XIV, the wind is 'sobbing.' Then we meet the Echoes, which in stanza XXII are singing in grief, and Spring, which gets 'wild' with grief in stanza XVI. The personified grief of nature itself seems to mirror Shelley's own grief towards Keats' death. It is apparent that the purpose of personification throughout this poem is to serve as a vessel for complex emotions to be expressed without associating it with something necessarily human.

Rome is the primary setting of the poem as is apparent through several stanzas. The speaker describes the ruins of Rome sticking out from under the ground like 'bones of Desolation's nakedness' in Stanza XLIX. However, a lot of it is also in otherworldly locations, making references to the heavens and the oceans. Much time is spent describing nature and the surroundings in hypersensitive details. Vivid imagery is provided, mentioning forest, flowers, trees, and the elements. References to nature are especially prevalent in Shelley's “*Adonais*”, which is expected as Shelley is a poet of the romantic period. Numerous mentions are made to “amorous birds” and their mossy homes, and even the seasons as they will tend to come and go as they lament the death of *Adonais*, as if at a funeral procession. Notably, in Stanza XVIII: “Ah, woe is me! Winter is come and gone,/ But grief returns with the revolving year;” or in Stanza XVI: “Grief made the young Spring wild, and she threw down/ Her kindling buds, as if she Autumn were.”

Shelley then proceeds to speak upon *Adonais*' death once again (now not a proper noun), by saying that it is a release to the eternal, rather than something to be fearful of and dwell on during one's life. In Stanza XXXIX, Shelley says: “Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not

sleep,/He hath awaken'd from the dream of life;/... /We decay/Like corpses in a charnel."

The poem, as a lamentation of the death of Adonais, goes through many of the stages of grief, and initially takes on a mood of dejection, but ends in optimism—hoping Keats will become eternalized as Adonis was through the windflowers and will be remembered through the generations of future poets.

As the poem closes, the speaker calls for an end to mourning, recognizing that Adonais has achieved the happiest state of all: He has become one with nature. Shelley's poem is a pastoral elegy or mourning that relies on nature imagery to honor the dead. The poem also notably belongs to the Romantic period. The poem's settings and descriptions and imagery go along with what other Romantic poets were doing, filling their poetry with raw feeling and natural imagery. Romanticism's most important concerns were the forces of nature, the quality of beauty, the study of mortality, and the place of the individual in respect to all these. In the classic myths, Adonis is eternalized by claiming that his grave produces flowers in the spring every year. A consolation comes at the end of both stories. Here we see the very Romantic notion that Adonis/Adonais/Keats is now "one with nature." By Shelley's symbolic association of Adonais with Keats, Shelley portrays him as a spiritual force living in nature forever.