

## *The Elegy*

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### Overview

**A**n elegy is a lament. It sets out the circumstances and character of a loss. It mourns for a dead person, lists his or her virtues, and seeks consolation beyond the momentary event. Despite this, an elegy, unlike a metrical form, is not associated with any required pattern or cadence or repetition.

For this reason, the structure of an elegy is less visible than a regulated form such as a sonnet or a villanelle. But the structure is there nonetheless—made of the slowly evolving customs and decorums, the coral reef of what each society expects a public poem of lament to contain and an elegiac poet to focus on.

Therefore—despite lacking a characteristic metrical structure—the elegy is a crucial formal link with the history and tradition of public poetry, serving notice that there was once a past where the corridor between the public utterance of poetry and cultural assumptions was both charged and narrow.

Because of its public role, the elegy is also one of the forms that can be said to have been coauthored by its community—so powerfully shared are the household gods it salutes. Interestingly, as the role of the public poet has altered, the elegy has altered also, and turned inward. Several of the formidable elegies of the last two centuries—Auden's for Yeats is included here—are for poets by poets.

In the traditional elegy, the grief the poet expresses is rarely a pri-

vate one. More often it is a cultural grief: the lamented and lost subject of an elegy is shown to be possessed of social virtues, as in Milton's "Lycidas," or manifest pieties as in Tennyson's "In Memoriam." In all societies, death constitutes a cultural event—with all the superstitions and household gods of such an event—as well as an individual loss. That the elegy speaks to this: that it locates the cultural customs of death in whichever society it occurs, adds greatly to its power. The best elegies will always be sites of struggle between custom and decorum on the one hand, and private feeling on the other.