Overview

An 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.

WALT WHITMAN

O Captain! My Captain!

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
 But O heart! heart! heart!
 O the bleeding drops of red!
  Where on the deck my Captain lies,
  Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
 Here Captain! dear father!
  This arm beneath your head!
  It is some dream that on the deck,
  You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
 Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!
 But I, with mournful tread,
  Walk the deck my Captain lies,
  Fallen cold and dead.

MATTHEW ARNOLD

Dover Beach

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanched land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.