

# Elegy

## Elegy Definition

Elegy is a form of literature that can be defined as a poem or song in the form of elegiac couplets, written in honor of someone deceased. It typically laments or mourns the death of the individual.

Elegy is derived from the Greek word *elegus*, which means a song of bereavement sung along with a flute. The forms of elegy we see today were introduced in the 16th century. *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, by Thomas Gray, and *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, by Walt Whitman are the two most popular examples of elegy.

## Features of Elegy

Usually, elegies are identified by several characteristics of [genre](#):

Just like a classical epic, an elegy typically starts with the invocation of the muse, and then proceeds by referencing traditional mythology.

It often involves a poet who knows how to phrase thoughts imaginatively in the first person.

Questions are raised by the poet about destiny, justice, and fate.

The poet associates the events of the deceased with events in his own life by drawing a subtle [comparison](#).

This kind of [digression](#) gives the poet space to go beyond the main or crude subject to a deeper level where the connotations might be metaphorical.

Towards the end the poet generally tries to provide comfort to ease the pain of the situation. Christian elegies usually proceed from sorrow and misery, to hope and happiness because they say that death is just a hindrance in the way of passing from the mortal state into the eternal state.

An elegy is not always based on a plot.

## Examples of Elegy from Literature

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**Example #1: *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* (By W. H. Auden)**

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“With the farming of a [verse](#)  
Make a vineyard of the curse,  
Sing of human unsuccess  
In a rapture of distress;  
In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.”

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**Example #2: *O Captain! My Captain!* (By Walt Whitman)**

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“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; 10  
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: 20

Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!  
But I, with mournful tread,  
Walk the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.”

Whitman wrote this elegy for Abraham Lincoln (16th president of the United States).

## **Function of Elegy**

Elegy is one of the richest literary forms because it has the capacity to express emotions that deeply influence people. The strongest of the tools elegy uses is its reliance on memories of those who are no more. Most of the poets who wrote elegies were evidently awed by the frailty of human beings, and how the world completely forgets about the deceased at some point.

However, the function of elegy is not as limited as it is thought. Whenever we take a look at elegy examples, what comes to mind are feelings like sorrow, grief, and lamentation; but, a study of the Latin elegy tells us otherwise. A great deal of genre created in western literature was inspired by Latin elegy, which was not always so somber. The most famous elegiac poets in Latin literature, such as *Catullus*, *Ovid*, and *Propertius*, used [humor](#), [irony](#), even slotted narratives into a poem and still called them elegy.