

# Elegy

("EL-uh-gee")

The elegy is one of the oldest poetic forms, going back at least to the ancient Greeks, when it was written to express the sadness of a death. The word *elegy* comes from the Greek word *elegeia*, which means "song of mourning," and these poems were popular in the Greek tragedies.

While there is such a thing as an elegiac stanza — a fairly structured four-line stanza written in iambic pentameter and rhymed *abab* — the elegy itself has no given form. A poem is called an elegy because of what it says, not how it says it. However, a loose structure or pattern can be seen in the classical elegies of the Greeks. Classical elegies start out with a statement of the subject (usually a specific death), followed by the lamentations or mourning of this death, and finally consolation, as the poet came to accept the loss.

The first person to write an elegy was probably Mimnermus of Colophon, a Greek who lived in the seventh century B.C. It's hard to be sure that he wrote the first one, because it is so long ago, but there are fragments still existing from his two books of elegies. In his poems, he wrote about how wonderful it was to be young and alive, and how horrible the thought of death was to him.

Among the Romans in the first century B.C., love chased death from the elegy, and the elegy became instead the preferred poetic form for love poetry. Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid were the three principal Latin love elegists. This Latin influence was felt in France in the 1500s, when Clément Marot published the first book of love elegies in French. The French poets, Pierre de Ronsard and Louise Labé also wrote love elegies during this same period.

Elegies have been written throughout the ages in many countries, including Italy, Germany, Spain, France, and England. It was in England in 1611 that the connection between the elegy and death was reintroduced with Donne's use of a funeral elegy. This idea of elegy as a lament for the dead was picked up by the German poets Goethe and Schiller.

Then in 1750, the English poet Thomas Gray wrote his well-known poem, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." It wasn't about any particular death, but rather Gray's thoughts and feelings while sitting among the graves. Toward the end of the poem, he imagines the death of a man and the poem ends with this epitaph, "He gave to Misery all he had — a tear; He gain'd from Heaven ('twas all he wish'd) a Friend." Other well-known English elegies are Milton's "Lycidas" and Shelley's "Adonais."

Another famous writer of the elegy was Rainer Maria Rilke, a German poet. In 1912, he began a series of ten poems called the "Duino Elegies," written in a castle at Duino, in Austria. The poems are about art and death and how humans struggle with both these ideas. Another modern elegy is Federico Garcia Lorca's "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías."

A good example of an elegy is Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." He wrote this poem in 1865, shortly after the Civil War. Whitman served as a nurse during the war and saw many young soldiers die. The poem shows Whitman finally accepting the nation's loss and his own, the death of Abraham Lincoln and the death of the soldiers. By the end of the poem he sees death's place in the natural cycle of life. It's a long poem, written in sixteen sections. Here are the first two sections:

1

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,  
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,  
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,  
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,  
And thought of him I love.

2

O powerful western fallen star!  
O shades of night — O moody, tearful night!  
O great star disappear'd — O the black murk that hides the star!  
O cruel hands that hold me powerless — O helpless soul of me!  
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

Throughout the poem Whitman never names the people he is mourning, but he compares their death to a star disappearing into the

black sky of night and he compares his grief to a harsh surrounding cloud.

In its broadest sense, an elegy is a poem about something ending: either love or life or a moment. Try to write a poem about something that has ended for you. The poem could be about a person you love who has died, or it could be about the end of a day. In this poem, show how you feel by comparing this ending to other endings, the way Whitman does.

See also: EPITAPH.

