



Prose and poetry techniques: Elegy

Form

An elegy has no set form.

Characteristics

An elegy is a lament for a loss: of a person, place or thing. More generally, it can also be a poem of sombre reflection on life's vicissitudes and the vanished past.

Examples

This poem moves from consideration of an object (here, a log of wood burning on the fire) through memories of the past until it becomes an elegy for the poet's sister:

Logs on the Hearth, A Memory of a Sister

The fire advances along the log
Of the tree we felled,
Which bloomed and bore striped apples by the peck
Till its last hour of bearing knelled.

The fork that first my hand would reach
And then my foot
In climbings upward inch by inch, lies now
Sawn, sapless, darkening with soot.

Where the bark chars is where, one year,
It was pruned, and bled
Then overgrew the wound. But now, at last,
Its growings all have stagnated.

My fellow-climber rises dim
From her chilly grave
Just as she was, her foot near mine on the bending limb,
Laughing, her young brown hand awave.

Thomas Hardy

Although it is not precisely a lament, the following poem has elegiac qualities:

Old Furniture

I know not how it may be with others
Who sit amid relics of householdry
That date from the days of their mothers' mothers,
But well I know how it is with me
Continually.

I see the hands of the generations
That owned each shiny familiar thing
In play on its knobs and indentations,
And with its ancient fashioning
Still dallying:

Hands behind hands, growing paler and paler,
As in a mirror a candle-flame
Shows images of itself, each frailer
As it recedes, though the eye may frame
Its shape the same.

On the clock's dull dial a foggy finger,
Moving to set the minutes right
With tentative touches that lift and linger
In the wont of a moth on a summer night,
Creeps to my sight.

On this old viol, too, fingers are dancing
As whilom just over the strings by the nut,
The tip of a bow receding, advancing
In airy quivers, as if it would cut
The plaintive gut.

And I see a face by that box for tinder,
Glowing forth in fits from the dark,
And fading again, as the linden cinder
Kindles to red at the flinty spark,
Or goes out stark.

Well, well. It is best to be up and doing,
The world has no use for one to-day
Who eyes things thus no aim pursuing!
He should not continue in this stay,
But sink away.

Thomas Hardy

Advice

Elegy may be an appropriate form for certain kinds of reflections evoked by relics of the past or inspired by old memories.