


<b>Shelley's <i>Adonais</i>: a Fryean Archetypal Perspective</b>			<b>Literature</b>
<b>Amjad Alsyouf</b>		<b>Lecturer of English Literature. Department of English Ajloun University College. Al-Balqa' Applied University – Jordan</b>	
<b>Abstract</b>			
<p>This research attempts at approaching Shelley's poem, <i>Adonais</i>, using Frye's archetypal criticism. This offers a different reading of Shelley whose poetry has been frequently approached as part of the Romantic literary tradition exhausted by an overemphasis on the conventional Romantic features supposed to be found in Romantic poetry. The Fryean approach to Romantic poetry frees it from the restrictions traditional approaches to literature impose on Romantic literature. From a Fryean perspective, works of literature are treated as part of a universal literary body – a quality that allows a comprehensive reading and treatment of literature. The research concludes with an emphasis on the significance of the Fryean perspective in approaching literature, and in highlighting its role in emphasizing the universality of Shelley's poetry.</p>			

## 1. Introduction

*Adonais* is an elegy in the pastoral convention in which Percy Bysshe Shelley commemorates John Keats who died young. Keats's death is presented through a ritualistic course of events that echo the poetry of the pastoral tradition. The poem lies within poetry's anagogic phase, in which "poetry imitates human action as total ritual, and so imitates the action of an omnipotent human society that contains all the powers of nature within itself" (Frye, 1957, p. 120). Nature's view in the poem deviates from those presented by Shelley's contemporary Romantic poets. Shelley relies on nature as a source from which he derives his poetical structure through the employment of myths and rituals the ancient people associated with nature. The title refers to Adonis, the vegetation Greek deity who "was the subject of a ritual lament in Mediterranean religion, and has been incorporated in the pastoral elegy since Theocritus..." (Frye, 1957, p. 121). Images of the death of nature in the poem accompany the death of *Adonais*, and signify the natural cycles associated with the myth of vegetation.

Nature is significant in the Romantic poetic tradition. It has been differently treated by scholars of Romanticism. In the Fryean perspective, criticism "should lead us, not simply to admire works of literature more" by passing "value-judgments" (Frye, 1970, p. 65). The business of the critic of Romantic poetry in this respect should not be limited to the investigation and appreciation of the way the poet depicts nature or its influence on man in a literary work. However, he should be concerned "with myth as the shaping principle of a work of literature" (Frye, 1963, p. 127). *Adonais* draws heavily on images, symbols and mythical patterns derived from nature. Frye (1963) identifies these symbols when they frequently recur in literature as archetypes. He defines the archetype as "a literary symbol, or cluster of symbols, which are used recurrently throughout literature, and thereby become conventional" (Frye, 1963, p. 120). Accordingly, the interpretation of *Adonais* from a Fryean perspective should essentially depend

on identifying these archetypes within the poem; investigate their implications; and define the role they play in shaping it.

## 2. Discussion

Adonais lies within a group of poems that follow the mythical structure of the ritualistic elegy in the pastoral convention. The structure of these poems is distinguishable by a group of symbols or archetypes they share. The poem, therefore, defies the conventional ways of interpreting Romantic poetry. It frees itself from the tendency of stressing some conventional aspects, such as the transcendence and idealism of nature, reflected in some Romantic poems. It claims a sublimity that identifies it within the wider and more universal realm of literature that is capable of containing life itself, and therefore classifies itself within the anagogic phase of poetry. Frye (1957) states that "the anagogic view of criticism thus leads to the conception of literature as existing in its own universe, no longer a commentary on life or reality, but containing life and reality in a system of verbal relationships" (p. 122). In this sense, the meaning of Adonais is identified through the intertextuality it establishes with those texts within the same literary tradition, and can be determined by studying it as part of the larger world of literature.

The subject of Adonais is associated with the fertility myths in general, and with the myth of Adonis in particular. Adonis is the fertility Greek deity who dies in winter, what results in the death of vegetation, and returns to life again in spring, what brings vegetation back to life. In this respect, the employment of Adonis is significant because of those powers he possesses that make him capable of bringing nature back to life. The similarity between the cyclical process of the birth and death of nature, that accompanies the death and resurrection of Adonis, and the cycle of the human life attracted the attention of man including poets. Moreover, the quality of nature's rejuvenation, which man lacks, enticed those poets who have expressed a fascination with man's ambitions of revival and continuity. Therefore, different poets have associated man's cycle of life, from birth to youth to age and death, with the cycle of nature that moves from Spring through Summer and Autumn to Winter. Adonais is one of those poems that draw upon, and emphasize the significance of, the cyclical rhythms of nature and the concept of rebirth.

Shelley identifies Keats, the subject of the poem, with Adonis. Such identification functions in giving Keats and his death the universality Adonis enjoys. Classical gods have been always identified with the unlimited power that controls the universe and its phenomena, and such divine power is endowed to man through poetry by a group of poets including Shelley. Frye (1957) argues that "the ethos of art is no longer a group of characters within a natural setting, but a universal man who is also a divine being" (p. 120). In other words, the use of Adonis in the poem functions in emphasizing the illimitable godly powers the subject of the poem owns. This bestows Keats with qualities the classical gods possess.

The meaning of Adonais should not be disturbed with questions about the intention of the poet. The poem is basically a mournful elegy on the death of Keats. It employs the myth of the classical god Adonis for the presentation of its subject. In this respect, the poem lies within the anagogic phase of representation that is a universal impersonal one. Its scope cannot be confined to the notion of an individual's death and rebirth. The meaning of the poem, in this sense, escapes

the limitations of any single interpretation, local dimension or personal representation. It can hardly confine itself to restrictions of time, place or belief.

Adonis in classical mythology is part of the society of gods. Ancient people beheld life through an eye that believes in the intervention of gods in the world, including in nature and its cycles. Frazer (1907) states that "Under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially vegetable life, which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead" (p. 5). With a similar respect, Frye (1957) examines the associations between the divine activity and the different processes resulted from the cyclical rhythm of nature. He states that

In the divine world the central process or movement is that of the death and rebirth, or the disappearance and return, or the incarnation and withdrawal, of a god. This divine activity is usually identified or associated with one or more of the cyclical processes of nature. The god may be a sun-god, dying at night and reborn at dawn, or else with an annual rebirth at the winter solstice; or he may be a god of vegetation, dying in autumn and reviving in spring, or (as in the birth stones of the Buddha) he may be an incarnate god going through a series of human or animal life-cycles. As a god is almost by definition immortal, it is a regular feature of all such myths that the dying god is reborn as the same person. Hence the mythical or abstract structural principle of the cycle is that the continuum of identity in the individual life from birth to death is extended from death to rebirth. To this pattern of identical recurrence, the death and revival of the same individual, all other cyclical patterns are as a rule assimilated. (Frye, 1957, pp. 158-9)

Frye also distinguishes different worlds associated with particular cycles including "the fire-world of heavenly bodies," "the human world," "the vegetable world," and the world of water. The movement of the heavenly bodies creates the daily cycle that begins with morning and goes through noon and evening to end with night. The cycle of the human life moves from birth, through youth and age, to death. The yearly cycle of the four seasons is supplied by the vegetable world, and is identified with the vegetation god that dies in Autumn with the gathering of harvest, disappears in Winter, and then reborn in Spring. The water also runs in a cycle that goes through rains, to fountains, to brooks and rivers, ending finally in the sea or the winter snow. All these cycles keep recurring in nature, resulting in a successive rebirth (Frye, 1957, pp. 159-60).

Ancient civilizations exerted considerable efforts to understand the different phenomena of the world, including the changing cycles of nature. As a result, they created gods and composed stories about them. The collection of the stories about gods was identified later as mythology. "Later on, mythology began to emerge into literature, and myth then became a structural principle of story-telling" (Frye, 1969, p. 110; emphasis added). Adonais, as part of the literary tradition, is not an exception. It employs mythology as the main principle that determines the structural and thematic features of the poem.

Guerin et al. (1979) argue that Frazer's motif concerning the death and rise of a fertility god is relevant to "the archetype of crucifixion and resurrection" (pp. 165-6). Adonis, in this respect, is associated with Christ in that Adonis's ritualistic death and rebirth parallel Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Tarnas (1998) argues that Adonis is assimilated to Christ in the Western thought. He states that:

The Christian assimilation of the mysteries extended to the various pagan deities as well, for as the Greco-Roman world gradually embraced Christianity, the classical gods were

consciously or unconsciously absorbed into the Christian hierarchy... Their characters and properties were retained but were now understood and subsumed in the Christian context, as in the figures of Christ (Apollo and Prometheus, for example, as well as Perseus, Orpheus, Dionysus, Hercules, Atlas, Adonis, Eros, Sol, Mithra, Attis, Osiris)... (pp. 110).

Therefore, the employment of Adonis-structure in literature potentially functions in giving sacrificial and even sacred qualities to the subject of the literary work. The meaning of the poem, however, surpasses the limitations of the singularity of its subject. The notion of life and immortality in the poem, from one point of view, is only significant when it features the immortality of the human soul, or, in different words, when it emphasizes that "the grave is a gate to a higher existence" (Abrams et al., 1993, p. 718). From another point of view, and with respect to that the main subject of Adonais is a poet, the concept of immortality after death can be viewed as the immortality the poet achieves through the literary production he leaves after death.

The identification with Adonis essentially functions in associating Keats with "the cyclical rhythms of nature" (Frye, 1963, p. 119). Frazer (1907) states that "the spectacle of the great changes which annually pass over the face of the earth has powerfully impressed the minds of men in all ages, and stirred them to meditate on the causes of transformations so vast and wonderful" (p. 3). Shelley shows a fascination with these changes in other poems as well. His rhetorical question "if Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" with which he closes "Ode to the West Wind" shows his obsession with the annual changes of nature's face. The poem depicts the changing course of life, using vivid imagery derived from the cycles of year and water. Shelley's persona in the poem expresses his "sore need" for the identification with the west wind that has the power to turn the wheel of life:

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;  
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;  
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share  
The impulse of thy strength... (43-46, pp. 677-8)

Both "Ode to the West Wind" and Adonais employ archetypes associated with the cycle of nature for similar reasons. Adonis is the deity who returns from the dead. His story is part of the mythical world, what renders the return from the dead a metaphoric motif. In the Ode, the speaker expresses his own need for the immortality achieved through the identification with the cycle of nature. Since the immortality of the body is a myth, the poem implies that a poet's immortality can be achieved through writing poetry that outlives him. Adonais, in a similar respect, can be read as a poem that emphasizes the immortality of John Keats whose life lasts after death through the fame his poetry has brought to him.

Adonais opens in a Dionysiac mode in which the divine world of Adonais's tragedy is introduced through a society of gods. His tragedy is announced quite early from the poem's first line: "I weep for Adonais—he is dead!" The speaker then begins to create a society of gods by bringing other deities into the scene. He introduces Venus (the "mighty mother"), Urania, Echo, Phoebus, Hyacinth and Narcissus, blaming some for and asking some to lament the death of Adonais:

Where wert thou mighty Mother, when he lay,  
 When thy Son lay, pierced by the shaft which flies  
 In darkness? Where was lorn Urania  
 When Adonais died? With veiled eyes,  
 'Mid listening Echoes, in her Paradise  
 She sate, while one, with soft enamoured breath,  
 Rekindled all the fading melodies,  
 With which, like flowers that mock the corpse beneath,  
 He had adorned and hid the coming bulk of death. (10-18, p. 719)

Parallel to the involvement of gods in the poem is the use of different cycles of life, particularly the daily cycle, the yearly cycle and the cycle of water, with an aim of drawing an analogy with the cycle of the human life. Nature's yearly cycle, among others, appears early in the poem with Autumn introduced into the scene, with what death and destruction it brings as part of the cycle of nature, to intensify the sense of demise and loss:

But now, thy youngest, dearest one, has perished—  
 The nursling of thy widowhood, who grew,  
 Like a pale flower by some sad maiden cherished,  
 ...  
 The bloom, whose petals nipt before they blew  
 Died on the promise of the fruit, is waste;  
 The broken lily lies—the storm is overpast. (46-54, p. 720; emphasis added)

The opening of Adonais introduces the reader to the passage of time, where the hours are personified in the character of "sad Hour" in line four. Adonais's disappearance and dissolution is manifested by the coming of Autumn and Winter implied in the images of the "frost" (3), the "pale flowers" (48) and the "dead leaves" (138). While these images derived from the natural cyclical movement serve in initiating the theme of death, they also imply an eagerness for a desirable rebirth. The character of Adonais signifies the notion of revival; therefore various images continue to occur later in the poem to complete the course of the cycle, turning it back from death to birth.

Imagery featuring the cycle of water is established with Adonais going "unterrified / Into the gulph of death" (34-5). The image suggests a place where water finally pours, and therefore ending its cycle. It emphasizes the notion of termination, and the need for a new beginning expressed in the "cloud" that "outwept its rain" (90). The cycle of the day is firstly depicted in the poem with the "night of time / In which suns perished" (40-1). The speaker later expresses the need for this cycle to move on by asking "young Dawn" to "splendor" (362-3). Images associated with the three cycles of day, year and water alternate then, signifying man's cycle of life. Frye (1957) depicts the association between the different stages of the cycles under consideration stating that cyclical symbols are usually divided into four main phases, the four seasons of the year being the type for four periods of the day (morning, noon, evening, night), four aspects of the

water-cycle (rain, fountains, rivers, sea or snow), four periods of life (youth, maturity, age, death), and the like. (pp. 160)

Images of the "pale flowers" (48) and "dead leaves" (138) appear also to imply autumnal qualities, and harmonize with the disappearance of Adonais. Parallel to these images also are tragic vegetable archetypes of the "ruined paradise" (88), and "the world's wilderness" (277). All these tragic images are replaced with "a light of laughing flowers along the grass," (441) in the burial scene at the end of the poem, to emphasize the concept of immortality achieved through an archetypal revival of vegetation in the poem. Similarly, the "night of time" (40), the "twilight" (65), "the starless night" (223) and "the dying lamp" (284) give place to "heaven's light [that] forever shines" (461) in the burial scene, allowing the daily cycle to turn its wheel and push life towards a rebirth.

Adonais also draws upon images associated with the cycle of water, parallel to the stages of the cycle of life. The word "fountain" keeps recurring in the poem. Frye (1957) associates fountains with maturity (p. 160). Keats died young, and this explains why the fountain in Adonais is a "burning fountain" (340) and a "fountain of mourning" (454), since it features the death of youth. The speaker, in another place, announces that it is "Death" who is dead, not Adonais, ordering fountains to stop their mourning and "Dawn" to splendor, signifying the birth of a new day:

He lives, he wakes -'tis Death is dead, not he;  
 Mourn not for Adonais. -Thou young Dawn,  
 Turn all thy dew to splendour, for from thee  
 The spirit thou lamentest is not gone;  
 Ye caverns and ye forests, cease to moan!  
 Cease, ye faint flowers and fountains, and thou Air  
 Which like a mourning veil thy scarf hadst thrown  
 O'er the abandoned Earth, now leave it bare  
 Even to the joyous stars which smile on its despair! (361-9, pp. 727-8)

Parallel to the use of the three archetypal cycles of year, day and water in Adonais is the employment of different demonic archetypes that establish the poem's elegiac mode. Frye (1957) distinguishes between different types of imagery used in literature including the "apocalyptic imagery" and the "demonic imagery". The apocalyptic imagery represents the world of heaven and of human desire. For example, the form imposed by human desire on the vegetable world is that of the garden, farm, grove or park; the animal world is desired as a world of domesticated animals; and the desirable mineral world is that of the city (Frye, 1957, p. 141). Opposite to that is the demonic world. It is the world of "the nightmare," of "the scapegoat," of "bondage," and of "pain and confusion" (Frye, 1957, p. 147). Adonais, in this respect, draws on the demonic imagery. In his discussion of the demonic world, Frye (1957) states that:

The animal world is portrayed in terms of monsters or beasts of prey. The wolf, the traditional enemy of the sheep, the tiger, the vulture, the cold and earth-bound serpent, and the dragon are all common... The vegetable world is a sinister forest like the ones we meet in Comus or the opening of the Inferno, or a heath, which from Shakespeare to Hardy has been associated

with tragic destiny, or a wilderness like that of Browning's *Childe Roland* or Eliot's *Waste Land*. Or it may be a sinister enchanted garden like that of *Circe* and its Renaissance descendants in *Tasso* and *Spenser*... The inorganic world may remain in its unworked form of deserts, rocks, and waste land. Cities of destruction and dreadful night belong here, and the great ruins of pride, from the tower of *Babel* to the mighty works of *Ozymandias*... Here too are the sinister counterparts of geometrical images: the sinister spiral (the maelstrom, whirlpool, or *Charybdis*), the sinister cross, and the sinister circle, the wheel of fate or fortune. (pp. 148-50; emphasis added)

Imagery used in *Adonais* is derived from different worlds, particularly the animal world, the vegetable world, the mineral world and the inorganic world. It functions properly and meaningfully in the poem, situating it within the poetic elegiac tradition. In this respect, images of wild animals and birds of prey are used to signify death, including the images of "snake" (161), "monsters" (243), "wolves" (244), "reptiles" (253), "raging hounds" (279), "pardlike Spirit" (280), "carrion kites" (335) and "beasts" (387). Tragic images of the vegetable world, including "the thorny road" (44), "the world's wilderness" (277) and the "weeds" (436), imply the harshness of nature and the concept of death. Other images are derived from the demonic mineral world that opposes the apocalyptic mineral world of "the city," and so consist of images that feature death like "charnel-roof" (60), "dying meteor" (106), "voiceless mountains" (127), "cities rough with stone, and steel" (209), "abandoned Earth" (398) and "Desolation's nakedness" (437). The last group includes images featuring the inorganic world, signifying a sense of disturbance and chaos that follows the death of *Adonais*. This group includes such images as "unimprisoned flames" (162), "stormy mist" (206), "thunder" (274), "billow" (285) and "tempest" (490).

Works of literature, according to Frye (1970), should not be treated as separate. They are well-connected by a solid structure no matter how removed from each other in time or distance. Frye (1970) argues that myth and the language of myth form the "stubborn" structure that holds literature together (p. 17). He also states, in his discussion of poetry, that "every poem must be examined as a unity, but no poem is an isolatable unity. Every poem is inherently connected with other poems of its kind, whether explicitly... or implicitly..." (Frye, 1963, p. 126). The treatment of *Adonais*, in this respect, should pay attention to the place the poem establishes for itself within the tradition of pastoral elegy.

*Adonais* harkens back to the mythical age. Evidences on that can be found in the poem's title, imagery and structure. The story of the lamented *Adonais* in the poem mirrors the story of the mythical figure *Adonis*. The poem begins with *Venus*, the Roman name for goddess *Aphrodite*, being invoked to weep the death of *Adonais* who is "pierced by the shaft which flies / in darkness" (11-12). The poem then moves through the different tragic archetypes and cycles formerly discussed, finally announcing that "he lives, he wakes," to feature *Adonais*'s return to life, parallel to the return of *Adonis* permitted by *Zeus*. *Stevenson* (1981), in *The Myth of the Golden Age in English Romantic Poetry*, identifies *Adonais* within the tradition of the pastoral elegies that follow the "myth of the Golden Age". He states that

*Adonais*, Shelley's pastoral elegy on the death of *John Keats*, stands in the same relation to the myth of the Golden Age as a gold ingot to a load of bullion. Employing the pastoral elegiac convention of *Bion* and *Moschus* and *Milton's Lycidas*, Shelley gives *Keats* a name partly based on that of *Adonais*, beloved of *Aphrodite*, who was slain by a wild boar and permitted by *Zeus* to

spend half the year in the underworld and half on earth, thus representing the vegetative cycle. (p. 87)

Although the use of the mythical structure and different archetypal patterns locates Adonais within the pastoral elegiac convention; however there are other distinguishable common features that share in relating the poem to the pastoral elegiac tradition. Those who are familiar with Shelley's Adonais and Bion's Adonis can note the similarities between the two poems. William Michael Rossetti, in his commentary on Adonais, states that "the relation of Shelley's Elegy of Adonais to the two Elegies written by Bion and by Moschus must no doubt have been observed, and been more or less remarked upon... Shelley himself made a fragmentary translation from the Elegy of Bion on Adonis..." (as cited in Shelley, 2006, pp. 38-9). Rossetti goes on to append that the following passages from Bion's Adonis are "directly related to Adonais":

I mourn Adonis dead — loveliest Adonis—  
 Dead, dead Adonis — and the Loves lament.  
 Sleep no more, Venus, wrapped in purple woof—  
 Wake, violet-stoled queen, and weave the crown  
 Of Death,— 'tis Misery calls,— for he is dead.  
 ... Aphrodite  
 With hair unbound is wandering through the woods,  
 Wildered, ungirt, unsandalled— the thorns pierce  
 Her hastening feet, and drink her sacred blood.  
 \* \* \* \* \*  
 The flowers are withered up with grief.  
 \* \* \* \* \*  
 Echo resounds, . . "Adonis dead!"  
 \* \* \* \* \*  
 She clasped him, and cried ... "Stay, Adonis!  
 Stay, dearest one,...  
 And mix my lips with thine!  
 Wake yet a while, Adonis—oh but once!—  
 That I may kiss thee now for the last time—  
 But for as long as one short kiss may live!" (as cited in Shelley, 2006, pp. 38)

By reading Shelley and Bion's poems, one can notice that the first line in them is almost identical. In both of them Venus is involved right from the beginning of the poem. In addition, there are some lines in the poems that use similar imagery, but with different vocabulary. For example we read in Bion's poem: "The flowers are withered up with grief," and this is similar to Shelley's "like a pale flower by some sad maiden cherished" (48). In other place in Bion's poem also we read: "unsandalled— the thorns pierce her hastening feet." This line is obviously echoed in Shelley's line: "and some yet live, treading the thorny road" (44).



### 3. Conclusion

In *Fables of Identity* (1963), Frye poses the question: "who is Lycidas?" He answers stating that Lycidas "is a member of the same family as Theocritus' Daphnis, Bion's Adonis, the Old Testament's Abel, and so on. The answer goes on building up a wider comprehension of literature and a deeper knowledge of its structural principles and recurring themes" (p. 124). Attempting a question similar to Frye's, I would ask: who is Adonais? The search for an answer has to draw upon Frye's reflections on Lycidas, and then I would say that Adonais is a universal archetype. Frye (1963) goes on with another set of questions, followed with a note, attempting to emphasize the universality of literature. He says that "if we ask, who was Edward King? What was his relation to Milton? How good a poet was he? we find ourselves moving dimly in the intense inane" (p. 124). In like manner, if we ask who was John Keats? What was his relation to Shelley? How good a poet was he? We find ourselves then confined with restraints of an intentional fallacy that distorts the meaning and the implications of the text. Shelley does not allude in any part of the poem to the life or times of John Keats. Instead, he employs a universal myth and universal figures that function as an allegory for reality. This emphasizes the universality of literature and of literary appreciation on the one hand, and establishes Adonais as an elegy that contributes to the integrated body of literature on the other.

### References

1. Abrams, M. H. et al, eds. (1993). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. (6th ed., vol. 2). New York: Norton.
2. Frazer, James George (1907). *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. (2nd ed., part IV, subtitle: Adonis, Attis, Osiris: Studies in the History of Oriental Religion). London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd.
3. Frye, Northrop (1957). *Anatomy of Criticism: four essays*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
4. \_\_\_\_ (1969). *The Educated Imagination*. Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press.
5. \_\_\_\_ (1963). *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.
6. \_\_\_\_ (1970). *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society*. New York: Cornell University Press.
7. Guerin, Wilfred L. et al. (1979). *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. (2nd ed.). New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
8. Shelley, Percy Bysshe (2006). *Adonais*. Edited with introduction and notes by William Michael Rossetti. Middlesex: The Echo Library.
9. Stevenson, Warren (1981). *The Myth of the Golden Age in English Romantic Poetry*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
10. Tarnas, Richard (1998). *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*. London: Pimlico.