“ADONAIS”: SUBSTANCE AND INTERPRETATION -1

P.B. Shelley wrote his ‘Adonais’ (1821) as an elegy after the death of the poet Keats, whom he adored very much. Keats died in Rome on 23 February,1821 and Shelley in his elegy imagines that Keats was Adonais (a personation of Adonais)- the son of the widowed Urania (her youngest and dearest son) and that he was slain by a nightly arrow—pierced by the shaft which flies in darkness. Shelley took two particular Greek authors, and two particular Greek poems, as his principal model: the Elegy of Bion on Adonis, and the Elegy of Moschus on Bion.

The poem by Shelley is read for its poetical structure and value, its ideal or spiritual significance, and its particular imagery and diction.

The poet imagines - at the time of his death Urania was in her paradise (pleasure-garden), slumbering, while Echoes listened to the poems which he had written as death was impending and Urania should now wake and weep, though:

 'He is gone where all things wise and fair descend.'

He nurtured Dreams as a herdsman tends his flock and now the Dreams are mourning around him. One of Dreams had the illusion for a moment as if a tear shed by itself came from the eyes of Adonais; he therefore got an indication that Adonais might still remain alive. There was afterwards a procession of others—Desires, Adorations, Fantasies, &c. besides a beeline of lamenting Morning, Echo, and Spring. Seeing Dreams and Echoes in such state, misery aroused Urania; she sprang up, and sought the death-chamber of Adonais. As she arrived, Death was, as it were, feeling ashamed for a moment and, as it were, Adonais breathed again. But to her utter dismay she saw how immediately afterwards 'Death rose and smiled, and met her vain caress.' Urania would have liked to die along with Adonais; but, chained as she was to Time, this was denied her. She is sad that Adonais diid not wait till the day of his maturity.

Then came the Mountain Shepherds, bewailing Adonais: the Pilgrim of Eternity. Among others, one frail form, a pard-like spirit also came. Urania asked the name of this Shepherd: he then made bare his branded and ensanguined brow, which was like Cain's or Christ's.

Another Mountain Shepherd: 'the gentlest of the wise,' leaned over the deathbed.

Adonais has drunk poison. Let the murderer live on in remorse and self-contempt. We should rather not weep for his death as Adonais now has 'fled far from these carrion-kites that scream below.' His spirit flows back to a portion of the Eternal.

Indeed, he is not dead nor sleeping, but 'has awakened from the dream of life.' Not he decays, but we. Let not us, nor the powers of Nature, mourn for *Adonais* for he has just mingled with Nature.

‘Unapparent' to the others’ eyes, he was being greeted by Chatterton, Sidney, Lucan for their company and by many other immortals, and was hailed as the master of a 'kingless sphere' in a 'heaven of song.' Shelley says that as for the other mourners, they should go to Rome, and visit the cemetery.

If any heart shrinks by sorrow, it would amount to alienating Adonais from it. So, one should not do such things that might isolate him. The soul of Adonais beacons to thee 'from the abode where the Eternal are.'

In his elegy, Shelley feels that the soul of Keats like a star has been blazing bright in the sky and is trying to guide him (Shelley) onto himself:

“I am borne darkly, fearfully afar;

Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,

The soul of Adonais, like a star,

Beacons from the abode where the eternal are.”

INTERPRETATION:

Urania in the poem is represented as the mother of Adonais (Keats), and the chief mourner for his untimely death. In mythology the name Urania is assigned to two divinities. The first is one of the nine Muses, the Muse of Astronomy: the second is Aphrodite (Venus).

There are basically three current of thoughts that go into the composition of the poem:

I. The sense of grievous loss in the death of John Keats the youthful and aspiring poet, cut short as he was approaching his prime; and the instinctive impulse to mourning and desolation.

2. The mythical or symbolic embodiment of the events in the laments of Urania and the Mountain Shepherds, and in the denunciation of the ruthless destroyer of the peace and life of Adonais.

3. The rejection of mourning as one-sided, that is done only by those who are ignorant of the divine destiny of Keats. Shelley by writing this elegy while recognising the eternal destiny of Keats also expresses his own yearning for being at one with Keats -in the mansions of the everlasting.

- Such is the evolution of this Elegy; from mourning to rapture: from consideration of death as something of a destined entity to the illumination of the individual spirit which contemplates the eternity of spirit as the universal substance. Keats as a mortal man has succumbed to 'the common fate' of every man but he is endowed with immortality of his spirit and thus he has ascended to the stature of a vital immaterial essence surviving the death of the body. Human soul is integral to the Universal Soul. The universal soul connects with the human soul by subjecting the later to all the things of sense: the illusions, the dreams and the nightmares; and it is after the death of the body that the human soul continues to be eternally integral to the Universal Soul. The poem encapsulates Shelley's belief on the universal or super soul. Mankind is the microcosm. The universe is the macrocosm. Thus mankind is distinguished from the rest of the universe. As long as a man's body and soul remain in combination, his soul pertains to the microcosm: when this combination ceases with the death of the body, his soul, in whatever sense it may be held to exist, lapses into the macrocosm.

' David Daiches in his “A Critical History of English Literature” says:

“Adonais”, the well-known elegy on the death of Keats, profits from having to concentrate on another’s death. Here Shelley marshals his neo-Platonic symbols with a splendid poetic energy, and even when, at the end, he must return to himself and his own unhappy condition he does so in such a way as to focus attention on Adonais, who has soared beyond this night.”