ADONAIS :

1. AS A PASTORAL ELEGY
2. APPLICATION OF MYTHOLOGICAL ELEMENTS

“*Adonais*(1821), Shelley’s elegiac tribute to the dead Keats, pursues the idea of the poet as hero, here triumphant even in the face of death and ‘awakened from the dream of life’.”

* Andrew Sanders

A pastoral elegy is a mournful poem bewailing the death of some person or persons. The setting of the poem is pastoral, with the quiet and beautiful aspects of nature all around. The setting of ‘Adonais’, which is also an elegy is centered on the heavenly rustic life. A poem of this nature is written in a somber tone to express disappointment in the demise of a loved one. A modest rural setting is the background upon which a pastoral elegy is written. Generally, in pastoral elegies life of shepherds and farmers , -their affection and death form the subject. ‘Adonais’ was also composed by Shelley after the convention of pastoral elegy. It was composed upon the demise of John Keats, whom Shelley had highly admired. Shelley, as an admirer of Keats held the belief that Keats died as a result of cruel and depressing reviews and unwanted criticism of his poetry (Milton’s Lycidas is also another of the same kind in memory of his friend Edward King, a talented youth with abundant intellect, who in the view of Milton, died before his time).

The poem also uses that aspect of a pastoral elegy in which a shepherd is to lament upon the demise of another. The poet also makes references to the two lovers of Adonis: Aphrodite and Persephone, in order to highlight the eventual joy of Keats upon his own death and the resultant immortality which he could secure through it.

The widespread depiction of the shepherd subjects and descriptions makes ‘Adonais’ pastoral. However, ‘Adonais’ employs mythology as another principle that determines the structural and thematic features of the poem.

The mythical angle:

In ‘Adonais’ the poet emphasizes the immortality of John Keats whose life lasts after death through the fame his poetry has brought to him. In the burial scene at the end of the poem, he, for example, emphasizes the concept of immortality achieved through an archetypal revival of vegetation.

‘Adonais’ opens in a Dionysiac mode in which the society of Gods is found taking the demise of Adonais seriously enough. After announcing in the first lines of the poem: "I weep for Adonais–he is dead!”,the speaker begins to create a divine scene by bringing various deities into the scene. He introduces Venus (the "mighty mother"), Urania, Echo, Phoebus, Hyacinth and Narcissus et al in this regard. The poem also harkens us back to the mythical age. This background is created by the poem's title, imagery and structure. Indeed the very 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), who is invoked to weep the death of Adonais who is "pierced by the shaft which flies / in darkness" (11-12). The poem then moves through a number of other tragic archetypes and different cycles of time.

Shelley Employs the Greek pastoral elegiac convention of Bion and Moschus in the poem, which is shown by his giving the name of Adonais to the deceased. Adonais was beloved of Aphrodite, who was slain by a wild boar. This way of bringing in older traditions furthers the crystallization of the coveted emotional appeal of the readers. In the Greek legend, Adonis was attacked and killed by a bear. It is said that every year Greek women observe rituals to commemorate the young prince in which they also rejoice on his resurrection. This myth forms the foundation of this poem since Shelley sees that just as Adonis, Keats too died at a younger age.

The poem begins with a feeling of dejection. The sorrowful and mournful tone is expressed at the very outset in the words: “I weep for Adonias- he is dead.”The beginning indicates the impulse from which the poem has originated- the poet then devotes the main bulk of the poem to the expression of the feeling, thoughts, reflections, speculations, fears, hopes in association with that impulse. From such a beginning, the emotion gradually keys up to a pitch and then inevitably relaxes to a statement. In ‘Adonais’ there is a tone of reconciliation to the event at the end which is made by the larger metaphysical affirmation: “The One remains, the many change and pass;/Heaven’s light forever shines. Earth’s shadows fly…” That is to say: the poem ends in optimism with the poet realizing that Keats takes party in the eternal (which means he does not die). This realization helps in the eventual happiness or the change in the feelings in him: from sadness to optimism. The persona in the poet affirms that by his death Keats “is made one with nature”. The poet even dares those still in mourning to join in celebrating Keats newfound immortality. Those who do not quit mourning are in danger of finding themselves in a tomb: states he. Shelley finds satisfaction in that Keats by his death has become a light that shines an inspiration to the world. He will continue shinning and like Adonis, he will never be forgotten.

The persona in the poem calls upon the mourners to recognize for themselves how even nature has come to mourn over Adonais as the wind and oceans stop to pay tribute to the fallen hero. In the middle of the poem Shelley blames the critics whose objections led to the death of Adonais. The poem reaches its climax cum end with a sudden change in the tone –that is: when the persona realizes that his friend is in heaven safe from his enemies.

In the poem, images of the death of nature accompany the death of Adonais, and signify the natural cycles associated with the myth of vegetation. ‘Adonais’ thus draws heavily on images, symbols and mythical patterns derived from nature.

‘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. 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. The similarity between the cyclical process of the birth and death of nature and the death and resurrection of Adonis thus makes substantial contribution to the formation of the background of the poem.