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Mrs. Cain

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The Realization of the Romantic in "Adonais"

In every life, there comes a moment when one wonders if a greater meaning exists beyond this mundane, often sordid world. Is man merely the sum of countless inane struggles, or is there a loftier purpose towards which he can strive? Romanticism is an attempt to answer this question, and is shaped by the belief that there is indeed a more perfect plane which humans yearn to reach. Few works embody the spirit of this movement as well as Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1821 elegy for John Keats, "Adonais." By alluding to a Platonic world, idealizing nature, and expressing an attraction to death, "Adonais" unequivocally characterizes itself as a Romantic work.

Shelley's frequent references to another plane, which is truer than the temporal world, most prominently mark the poem as Romantic. When speaking of Keats, he explains that contrary to appearances, "He is not dead, he doth not sleep – / He has awakened from the dream of life." His declarations suggest that the mortal world is not real; rather, it is only after death that one passes to true existence. This idea fits neatly with Plato's concept of a plane, which can only be briefly glimpsed during life, where everything exists in its perfect form. As the Platonic world is a cornerstone of Romantic thought, "Adonais" begins to reveal itself as part of that movement even in the beginning of the four stanzas. Shelley continues to expound upon this motif by comparing Keats with those who still live, writing that "Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep / With phantoms an unprofitable strife." Through the imagery of a foggy, ethereal world, he conveys the sense that what occurs in life is not real; humans are "lost", their vision

clouded, and thus rendered unable to pierce the veil behind which pure reality lies. As a result, though man wars against his troubles, he does so futilely, for that which he sees and fights is but a shadow of the truth. Due to the contrast between Keats's awakening after death and the blind, pointless struggles of the living, the poem confirms the idea of a separate Platonic world where reality lies.

Another Romantic aspect of "Adonais" can be seen in the idealization of nature. Shelley perceives the natural world to be not a frightening and fickle force, but a beautiful and powerful one. Accordingly, when he describes it, he focuses on its positive aspects, on how "there is heard / [Keats's] voice in all her music, from the moan / Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird." Although he respects nature's power, it is its beauty which he highlights, as a symphony untainted by the imperfections of man. Furthermore, by evoking the sounds of sweet birdsong, Shelley creates a contrast to previous images of death and decay conjured by lines like "the contagion of the world's slow stain"; he thereby makes Keats's union with nature, and by extension nature itself, a positive occurrence. Nature is also portrayed as a benevolent force, one "which wields that world with never-wearied love, / Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it from above." The choice of "love" causes the reader to see the natural world as a nurturing force which tries to support life, not crush it. This life-giving role is then emphasized as all-encompassing, reinforcing the earlier praise. To Shelley and the Romantics, nature is lovely, powerful, and benign, the ideal from which man should learn.

Shelley also articulates a fascination with death which distinguishes the poem as Romantic. At the end of "Adonais", after reflecting on the passing of his friend, he wonders, "Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart? / Thy hopes are gone before: From all things here, / They have departed; thou shouldst now depart!" His words show that he sees no intrinsic

value in life; it is the presence of others which makes it worth living, and when they are gone, it is only logical for him to also wish for death. Alone, he is trapped in an unreal world, with no reason to remain, for death is the path to the ideal plane. As he ponders this idea, he at last comes to the conclusion that he should “Hasten thither, / No more let Life divide what Death can join together.” This decision clearly illustrates his desire to die and gain all that death can provide, namely a reunion with all the lost loves and friends in his life. It is also a reflection, even judgment, on life, since his resolution rests heavily upon the realization that “what still is dear / Attracts to crush” – everything that matters in the world will only cause suffering in the end. Therefore, the poet expresses a Romantic interest in death, which he sees as the only place where he will be free from worldly struggles and pain.

The description of a Platonic world, idealization of nature, and fascination with death all combine to make “Adonais” a quintessentially Romantic work. Shelley first introduces another, truer world, separate from our own living one, which is reached after death. He then glorifies one of the manifestations of that world, nature, before eventually concluding that he too should journey to the other plane through death. By exploring the idea that there is a true, desirable world which lies beyond our earthly lives, he and the Romantics give answer to the universal yearning to be reconciled with death, and find meaning in existence.