

Pastoral Poetry

"Pastoral" (from *pastor*, Latin for "shepherd") refers to a literary work dealing with shepherds and rustic life. Pastoral poetry is highly conventionalized; it presents an idealized rather than realistic view of rustic life. Classical (Greek and Latin) pastoral works date back to the 3rd century B.C., when the Greek poet Theocritus wrote his *Idylls* about the rustic life of Sicily for the sophisticated citizens of the city of Alexandria. In the first century B.C., Virgil wrote Latin poems depicting himself and his equally sophisticated friends and acquaintances as shepherds living a simple, rural life. Shakespeare's knowledge of pastoral conventions was drawn both from his humanist education (which included Virgil and possibly Theocritus) and from his familiarity with the works of contemporaries who imitated the ancients by writing pastoral poetry in English.

Common topics of pastoral poetry include love and seduction; the value of poetry; death and mourning; the corruption of the city or court vs. the "purity" of idealized country life; politics (generally treated satirically: the "shepherds" critique society or easily identifiable political figures). A common pastoral poetic genre is the *eclogue* (a dialogue between two shepherds). This conversation may be between a shepherd and the shepherdess he loves (generally his attempt to seduce her); a "singing contest" to see which shepherd is the better poet (a third may act as judge); or sophisticated banter between two supposedly "rude swains" who discuss a lady, their flocks, or a current event; lament a dead friend (a *eulogy* or *elegy*); or praise a notable individual. Laudatory poems, laments upon a death, songs of courtship and the complaints of a lovesick shepherd also occur as pastoral monologues. An important subgroup of the pastoral eclogue or monologue is the *elegy*, which expresses the poet's grief at the loss of a friend or an important person.

Conventional features of pastoral elegies include: the invocation of the Muse; expression of the "shepherd"-poet's grief; praise of the dead "shepherd"; invective against death; effects of the death upon nature (disruptions in climate etc. as expressions of a personified Nature's grief and sympathy); and ultimately, the poet's acceptance of the inevitability of death and hope for immortality. Pastoral elegies may also include such elements as a procession of mourners; digressions on a topical issue (frequently satirical); flower symbolism; the use of a refrain; rhetorical questions. The pastoral elegy was still practiced by 19th-century Romantic and Victorian poets; see e.g. Shelley's *Adonais* and Arnold's *Thyrsis*. Shakespeare's contemporaries revived and imitated the topics and forms of classical pastoral poetry. Both Spenser's and Milton's pastoral poems include satirical elements.

Renaissance poets not only imitated these classical topics and forms, they also expanded the pastoral mode to include the romance and the drama. (for ex. Shakespeare's *As You Like It*)