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**'ELEGY' FROM THE 17<sup>TH</sup> TO 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF JOHN MILTON'S "LYCIDAS" AND THOMAS HARDY'S "GOD'S FUNERAL" AND "THE DARKLING THRUSH"**

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**Abstract**

As a poetic genre rooted in old times, 'elegy' has always been regarded as a means for the consolation of a mourner overcome with grief. In this way, it has been associated with an Arcadian sense of relief and purity pervading through a world far from the traumatizing realities of suffering, disappointment, hopelessness, or melancholia which are all felt at the death of a beloved person. However, as illustrated by the comparison of Milton and Hardy, it is revealed that elegy cannot be assigned a static meaning as providing relief because it has been transformed from a genre providing remedy for the mourner to a genre shaped by unsolvable questions and an irremediable suffering, as a result of which showing what a huge gap there is between the 17<sup>th</sup> century elegy and the 20<sup>th</sup> century elegy. In the light of this, the study analyzes Milton's renaissance elegy "Lycidas" (1637) and Hardy's two 20<sup>th</sup> century elegies, "God's Funeral" (1908-1910) and "The Darkling Thrush" (1900) and argues that although both of them are labeled as elegies, they differ from each other with the change in their meanings and atmospheres, thus portraying the twentieth century man's psychological crisis resulting from the loss of meaning and his difference from a mourner easily consoled by the relieving atmosphere of nature as shown in Milton's traditional form of 17<sup>th</sup> century elegy.

**Keywords:** Elegy, 17<sup>th</sup> Century Elegy, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Elegy, Death, Loss of Meaning, John Milton, Thomas Hardy, "Lycidas", "God's Funeral", "The Darkling Thrush".

As an expression of overwhelming emotions such as anger, pity, frustration, or grief felt at the death of a person, 'elegy' has always remained significant in literary world; however, in the same way with so many genres going through changes within time, it has been subjected to alteration with shifts in its tone from consolation to desperation by the irrecoverable loss of 'meaning' in the twentieth century. Moreover, with such shifts, it has gone beyond fitting into the description of a poetic genre by which people lament the death of a person and it has become a means for the ironic exploration of the paradoxical crisis that people go through in contemporary world where remains no remedy for pains. As a result, there has appeared an unbridgeable gap between the traditional elegy and the twentieth century elegy although both are labeled as 'elegy'. In the light of this, the study aims to analyze the renaissance poet John Milton and the early twentieth century poet Thomas Hardy to reveal the hugeness of this gap. In the pursuit of this, Milton's "Lycidas" and Hardy's two distinguished elegies, "God's Funeral" and "The Darkling Thrush" will serve the study by standing out as perfect epitomes for the transformation of elegy through time. Within this study, the exploration of elegy as a poetic genre will contribute the understanding of the contrast between the seventeenth century

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elegist Milton who conforms to the traditions of 'elegy genre' and the twentieth century elegist Hardy.

Defined in Coleridge's terms as the expression of self-revelation emphasizing "the authority and authenticity of personal feelings", 'elegy' appeared in English, firstly in Alexander Barclay's fifth Eclogue which portrayed a pastoral world with two shepherds discussing the contrast between rural and urban life (cited in Kennedy, 2007: 3; 4) while Greenfield emphasized the individual feeling and grief over death as the important elements of elegy, describing it as a poem "embodying a contrasting pattern of loss and consolation, ostensibly based upon a specific personal experience or observation, and expressing an attitude towards that experience" (qtd. in Klinck, A. L, 1992: 11). In the same way, elegy was associated with the exploration of inner world and it was assigned static definitions, as given below:

The primary conventions include: a pastoral context, the use of repetitions, refrains, and repeated questions; outbursts of anger and cursing; a procession of mourners; a movement from grief to consolation, and concluding images of resurrection. (Sacks cited in Kennedy, 2007: 6)

As shown by the definition given above, 'elegy' was confined to particular features with static elements and it traditionally came to be known as a product of these conventions following the usual order of 'facing the reality of death', 'expressing grief over this death', and finally, 'feeling happy believing in the resurrecting power of nature'.

The strictly-cut definitions assigned to elegy have extended within time, especially in the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In early and mid-eighteenth century, elegy still endured its fame as one of the most popular genres in literary world as Philip Freneau stated in 1790: "No species of poetry is more frequently attempted" (qtd. in Cavitch, 2007: 2), but, although it retained its traditional popularity, it has been exposed to many different criticisms that challenged its conventional form and turned it into a flexible genre, especially in the twentieth century. Different from the old elegists, modernist elegists have viewed elegy not within certain rules but rather as a reflection of the modern world marked by vanity of human wishes and by an irrecoverable loss of solace. As Ramazani states, "modern elegists have tended to attack convention and often leave their readers and themselves inconsolable" (cited in Kennedy, 2007: 6). Thus, stripped off its traditional identity, elegy is now regarded by modern elegists as "open sites of fracture and breakdown" of personal feeling (Kennedy, 2007: 6-7). Moreover, its original identity is satirized for its lack of sincerity and its distance from reality resulting from its mechanical treatment of feelings within fixed conventions: Benjamin Franklin attacks "cultural provincialism" and "institutional hypocrisy" in his "recipe" for traditional elegy:

take one of your Neighbors...., take all his virtues,...To this add his last words,...; Then season all with...Melancholy Expressions,...let them Ferment..., and having prepared a sufficient Quantity of double Rhymes, such as Power, Flower;...you must spread all upon Paper,...then...you will have an excellent Elegy. (qtd. in Cavitch, 2007: 3)

Directing attention to the hypocrisy surrounding the traditional form of elegy and criticizing the artificiality of its conventions, Franklin voices modern century's elegists who are in pursuit of clearing the elegy of its traditional ties.

When the traditional definition given by Kennedy for 'elegy' and the 'recipe' of elegy by Franklin are compared, it is revealed what a long way 'elegy' has taken, by undergoing changes and cutting its ties with its original identity. Lately, 'elegy' neither retains any solace provided by a pastoral setting nor shifts from grief to consolation at the thought of the immortality of the dead by the natural powers. Instead, it reflects the chaos of modern world where "April is the cruelest month, breeding /Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing /Memory and desire" (Eliot, 1922: 1-3). This unbridgeable gap between the 17<sup>th</sup> century elegy and the 20<sup>th</sup> century elegy is revealed openly in a comparative analysis of "Lycidas" and "God's Funeral" and "The Darkling Thrush", bringing to light that while Milton adheres to the conventions of traditional elegy by following the order of facing the death, lamentation, and consolation at the thought of resurrection of the dead along with pastoral elements, Hardy presents a dark world

providing neither solace nor belief in resurrection and reflects man's vanity of wishes as lost in a world of desperation. Also, while pastoral setting gives a healing power in Milton, it reflects the futility of believing in regeneration in Hardy.

Written in 1637 on the commemoration of King Edward who had died in a sea accident in his passage from Chester to Irish Seas, "Lycidas" reflects a pastoral world within a traditional context and it follows the "conventional elegiac triad of lamentation-confrontation-consolation" (Vickery, *The Prose*, 2009: 2). As an epitome of traditional elegy, "Lycidas" shows a strict adherence to conventions, including the mourning of nature at the death of the shepherd-poet, shift in tone from "grief to consolation", and a conclusion with the resurrection of the dead person, accompanied by the elegist's emphasis on his own power to survive, which are all the ethics of traditional elegy (Sacks cited in Kennedy, 2007: 6). In this way, it shifts from darkness to brightness and consolation offered by nature and shows artificiality, different from the twentieth century elegy which gives solace neither at the beginning nor at the end. Shaped by these conventions, "Lycidas" stands as a product of restricting descriptions as it adheres to all of them. Firstly, adhering to the traditional elegy's convention, it opens with a gloomy pastoral scene:

Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more  
Ye Myrtles brown, with Ivy never-sear,  
I com to pluck your Berries harsh and crude,  
And with forc'd fingers rude,  
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.  
Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,  
Compels me to disturb your season due:  
For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime. (Milton, 1637: 1-8)

The scene given above where the speaker surrounded with "Myrtles" and "Laurels" confronts the death of Lycidas does not touch reality as Johnson notes that it "is not to be considered as the effusion of real passion; for passion runs after remote allusions and obscure opinions" and "passion plucks no berries from the myrtle and ivy..." (qtd. in Verity, 1978: xlii). This artificiality reaches to its highest point in the lines given below:

For we were nurst upon the same-self hill,  
Fed the flock, by fountain, shade, and rill.  
Together both, ere the high Laws appear'd  
Under the opening eye-lids of the morn. (Milton, 1637: 23-28)

In these lines, remembering their old days, the speaker explains the brightness of nature when Lycidas was alive and then expresses how everything has changed after his death: "Thee Shepherd, thee the Woods, and desert Caves, /With wilde Thyme and gadding Vine o'regrown, /And all their echoes mourn" (Milton, 1637: 39-41). Moreover, he likens nature to a dark land in the lines below:

The Willows, and the Hazle Corpses green,  
Shall no more be seen,  
Fanning their joyous Leaves to thy soft layes.  
As killing as the Canker to the Rose,  
Or Taint-worm to the weanling Herds that graze,  
Or Frost to Flowers, that their gay wardrop wear. (Milton, 1637: 42-47)

In these lines where the speaker laments Lycidas and questions God by such questions as "Where were ye Nymphs when the remorseless deep/Clos'd o're the head of your lov'd Lycidas?", it is shown Milton's adherence to traditional conventions and revealed that the speaker has still has belief in God as he later realizes that death is inescapable as he asks "Had ye bin there-for what could that have don?" (Milton, 1637: 50-51; 57). Accepting the reality of death, the speaker gets rid of his dark thoughts and begins to feel hopeful for the future as the God of Sun, Phoebus, declares:

Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,  
Nor in the glistering foil  
Set off to th' world, nor in broad rumour lies,  
But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes. (Milton, 1637: 78-82)

Upon Phoebus's reply, the speaker feels no longer unhappy as he begins to believe that Lycidas is to be immortalized by nature that took him away, as given in the following lines:

Weep no more, woful Shepherds weep no more,  
Foe Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,  
Sunk through he be beneath the watry fload,  
So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed. (Milton, 1637: 165-168)

From this moment on, he is consolidated by his belief in Lycidas's resurrection and the mourning nature given at the opening lines turns into a regenerating scene as similar to that of the Garden of Eden in Edenic past:

And now the Sun had stretch'd out all the hills,  
And now was dropt into the Western bay;  
At last he rose, and twitch'd his Mantle blew:  
Tomorrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new. (Milton, 1637: 190-193)

As these lines uncover, the speaker is no more sorrowful for Lycidas as he mentions not frozen flowers or roses afflicted with canker but rather adores "fresh Woods" and "Pastures new" (Milton, 1637: 47; 45; 193). Within this setting where solace survives, nothing dark exists and the speaker undergoes a rapid transformation in his tone from grief to consolation. Thus, finally, enjoying the thought of Lycidas's resurrection, the speaker completes "lamentation-confrontation-consolation triad" (Vickery, *The Prose*, 2009: 2). As the exploration of "Lycidas" within the context of traditional elegy reveals, Milton follows the traditions of pastoral elegy and brings his poem to a consolidating end sounding artificial.

The conventional form of elegy seen in "Lycidas" continued to be used widely in the past; yet, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this consolidating tone could no longer be heard in face of the cruel reality of man's nothingness. As a result, the conventions of traditional elegy such as the movement from grief to consolation, belief in the resurrecting power of nature, and addressing to a particular person have been lost and they have been replaced by an irrecoverable grief, loss of belief in God, and vanity of human wishes which are all accompanied by ironically used images of traditional elegy. Also, the reason behind this alteration has been the gloomy atmosphere of the twentieth century world which developed following the fall of mankind from the cliff of innocence as Vickery (2006) puts forward: "Seminal elements of the modern period-most notably World War I, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the advent of the Holocaust-general responses broadened and diffused the function of elegy" (*The Modern*: 2). As a result of this, elegy has undergone a change:

The result was the development of a pervasive elegiac temper in the age... From such an accrual the movement toward an elegiac temper reflects a growing awareness that loss, ruptures in expectancies and responses, and existential discontinuities may be engendered not only by individual persons but by families, romantic relationships, cultures, and historical ages, as well as, by philosophical *topoi* such as time, self, war, and spiritual consolation. (Vickery, 2006: *The Modern* 2)

Thus, faced with the devastating traumas of the twentieth century, elegy no longer provides any solace and it reflects the loss of 20<sup>th</sup> century man in the middle of nowhere.

As elegies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hardy's "God's Funeral" and "The Darkling Thrush" mirror the torturing reality of modern world and embodying the trauma of mankind, they differ from "Lycidas". Different from "Lycidas", these modern elegies reveal neither any consolation nor any glimmer of hope in the resurrecting power of nature and they are not addressed to a particular addressee. After all, when there are so many losses, they cannot be expected to be addressed to a particular person as W. H. Auden notes in his poem "In Memory of Sigmund Freud":

When there are so many we shall have to mourn,  
When grief has been made so public, and exposed  
To the critique of the whole epoch  
The frailty of our conscience and anguish,  
Of whom shall we speak? (qtd. in Uppal, 2008: 3)

Showing that everyone is lost in his own world, thus, Auden's above lines reflect the reason why the modern elegies are not addressed to a particular person.

As an epitome of the 20<sup>th</sup> century elegy, "God's Funeral" portrays the loss of belief in God. Different from Milton, Hardy does not adhere to the traditions of elegy and he creates a realistic scene surrounded with the difficult experiences of twentieth century man. Of the cruel realities that Hardy mentions, breaking with the artificial scene of traditional elegy, loss of belief in God, irrecoverable loss of meaning in life, and most importantly, man's fallen state within the chains of modern time as deprived of any chance to escape or to survive stand as important elements that create the unbridgeable gap between the traditional and twentieth century elegy. Also, the fact that there is not a particular addressee to whom the elegy is addressed but many addressees as a result of the destruction of everything in twentieth century world makes "God's Funeral" different from "Lycidas".

"God's Funeral" firstly portrays the loss of God regarded no longer as a "Creator" but rather as a "man-projected Figure" (Hardy, 1908-1910: 24) under the psychological tortures of war experiences (Vincent, n.d.: 2). With his loss of belief in God, the speaker thinks that man deceives himself by building trust in God as given below:

And, tricked by our own early dream  
And need of solace, we grieve self-deceived,  
Our making soon our maker did we deem  
And what we had imagined we believed. (Hardy, 1908-1910: 29-32)

Thinking that there is no creator, the speaker portrays the hopelessness of the twentieth century man and thinks that God is nothing more than a product of man's dreams. In this way, "God's Funeral" differs from "Lycidas" which implies the existence of a glimmer of hope with Milton believing that Edward will be resurrected by the nature. Also, the speaker in Milton addresses Nymphs and makes certain allusions to Jesus while Hardy mentions no religious figures as he attends God's funeral. As Vincent (n.d.) states, this scene in "God's Funeral" reflects the paradoxical crisis that modern man is doomed to go through as God in whom they once built trust for salvation now gives no relief (2). As a result, they believe that "God is dead, and so is the power to project a substitute-the power that had been the basis of elegiac consolation" (Ramazani, 1994: 45), contrasting with Milton's belief in God's power.

"God's Funeral" differs from "Lycidas"s traditional form also with its resistance to provide mourners with consolidating images of nature and resurrection. Different from "Lycidas" where King Edward is immortalized by waters and where nature regenerates within an Edenic setting, "God's Funeral" does not shift from grief to consolation and it retains its gloomy atmosphere. Also, although Hardy mentions some light towards the end of the poem as seen in the lines:

Whereof, to lift the general night,  
A certain few who stood aloof had said,  
'See you upon the horizon that small light  
Swelling somewhat?' Each mourner shook his head. (Hardy, 1908-1910: 61-64)

this "small light" (Hardy, 1908-1910: 63) does not imply hope but rather shows regret and a longing for the passed past (Ramazani, 1994: 45) just as "April is the cruelest month, breeding" (Eliot, 1922: 1) for its reminding man of the spring time which is no longer felt. After all, even April does not mean anything to those deprived of any meaning as Ramazani (1994) notes:

This 'small light' is akin to the new sun at the end of "Lycidas"... the earlier elegists had resolved grief through images of continuing energy. But here the light is diminished in its power and in its promise... (45)

Thus, leaving this 'light' in question and emphasizing the uncertainty of man's future, "God's Funeral" is marked by skepticism while Milton leaves no doubt at the end of "Lycidas" about the hopeful future waiting for King Edward, showing that Milton shifts from darkness to brightness at the end while Hardy exposes mourners to a never-ending chaos.

"God's Funeral" differs from "Lycidas" also in terms of its portrayal of man as hopeless. While Milton implies hope in his elegy, Hardy presents man as deprived of any light, which is most clearly seen at the end of the poem where the speaker follows other mourners without having any idea about where he goes:

And they composed a crowd of whom  
Some were right good, and many nigh the best....  
Thus dazed and puzzled 'twixt the gleam and gloom  
Mechanically I followed with the rest. (Hardy, 1908- 1910: 65-68)

Given above, although the speaker moves, this can never be interpreted as a sign for living but rather as a sign for the loss of self because he is "frozen still" and "stalled in his grief" (Ramazani, 1994: 46). In this way, Hardy reflects man's ironic state within the twentieth century world, showing that though lost in the middle of nowhere, he cannot do anything but submits to life's will, accepting to be entrapped within the chains of time like a machine. As a result of this, Hardy differs from Milton whose speaker does not 'mechanically' accept the reality of death but questions everything, which is a sign for his not only physical but also psychological involvement in life, showing how the meaning of the traditional elegy has extended and found a new soul in the twentieth century world.

Hardy's another elegy "The Darkling Thrush" also serves as a perfect epitome for revealing the hugeness of the gap between the traditional and the twentieth century elegy. "The Darkling Thrush" laments the loss of cultural values and its speaker portrays the desperate situation of modern man as lost in the middle of nowhere. Throughout the poem, "looking back on the century whose corpse he sees in the winter landscape, the poet wonders whether the next century will repeat the past" (Zama, 2004: 120) and he cannot find any relief in nature just as the mourner in "God's Funeral" is incapable of getting rid of his distress due to his loss of belief in God and nature. Furthermore, it ironically attacks the pastoral elements of traditional elegy such as 'birds' in order to direct attention to that man cannot find a healing power in the twentieth century world. Thus, "standing at an unbridgeable distance from the prophets of 'Hope'", "The Darkling Thrush" challenges the conventions of traditional elegy (Ramazani, 1994: 46). Similar to "God's Funeral", "The Darkling Thrush" goes beyond the static definition of elegy through addressing not a particular person but the impersonal, its portrayal of man as entrapped within modern world, and its ironic representation of nature showing the uncertainty of man's future in modern world.

"The Darkling Thrush" differs from "Lycidas" firstly in term of its addressee because while "Lycidas" is addressed to a specific person, it laments the death of morality in modern world, addressing the impersonal and portraying all forms of "personal, intellectual, and cultural loss suffered by all humanity" (Vickery, *The Prose*, 2009: 1): the lines "The land's sharp features seemed to be, /The century's corpse outleant" (Hardy, 1900: 9-10) show this huge transformation.

Similarly, "The Darkling Thrush" presents man as doomed to failure with no aim in life, which makes it different from "Lycidas". This embodiment of man's irrecoverable loss of meaning is especially uncovered through his solitary state, as shown by the lines below:

...I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air  
Some blessed hope whereof he knew  
And I was unaware. (Hardy, 1900: 29-32)

In these lines given above, Hardy uses the personal 'I' as a sign for the realistic value of modern elegy and thus challenges the artificiality of Milton.

Most importantly, "The Darkling Thrush" contrasts with "Lycidas" in terms of its portrayal of nature as always dark. While Milton shifts from grief to consolation, Hardy portrays a nature that does not give man any healing power:

I lent upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was spectre-gray,  
And Winter's dregs more desolate  
The weakening eye of day.  
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky  
Like strings from broken lyres  
And all mankind that haunted nigh. (Hardy, 1900: 1-7)

Hardy stresses the isolated state of nature where no hope survives as "broken lyres" imply the infertility of the view without any glimmer of light and "the weakening eye of the day" (Hardy, 1900: 6; 4) refers to the setting of the sun like the loss of hopes (Zama, 2004: 102). Within this gloomy world, the speaker is so helpless that he likens even the wind to a funeral song by such lines as "His crypt the cloudy canopy /The wind is his death lament" (Hardy, 1900: 11-12) (Zama, 2004: 103). In this way, Hardy defies the conventions of traditional elegy where the speaker's distress is cured by the natural powers at the end. Hardy's disbelief in God by ironically portraying the uncertainty of man's future in modern world is also shown in the 3<sup>rd</sup> stanza where a bird appears and begins to sing all of a sudden:

At once a voice arose among  
The bleak twigs overhead  
In a full-hearted even song  
And aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,  
In blast-beruffled plume,  
Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
Upon the growing gloom. (Hardy, 1900: 17-24)

Although the appearance of the 'bird' in this deserted landscape firstly gives the impression that there is still hope, it in fact reveals the paradoxical crisis that modern man goes through and suggests no hope but rather regret for the lost past. Also, the irony lies in the fact that while man supposes refreshment by songs of this bird, he cannot be consolidated because instead of bringing an end to his distress, the song of the bird reminds him of the old good days. Knowing that those days will never return, the speaker feels miserable and cannot build any trust in nature for survival in contrast to the speaker in "Lycidas". As Ramazani (1994) puts forward, modern man cannot rely on "for faith in nature's signs; unable to interpret with certainty either the 'bird' or the landscape, he finally speculates that there 'could' tremble through the bird song" some hope; however, he can never know whether this hope is real or not as he has lost all his belief in life (39-40; 40). While the concluding scene of "Lycidas" strips man off all his grief by the upheaval of nature, "The Darkling Thrush" entraps man within the restricting realities of world and the image of 'bird' is used to show the state of modern man as surrounded by doubts.

Considering all, as elegies from the seventeenth century and the twentieth century, Milton's "Lycidas" and Hardy's "God's Funeral" and "The Darkling Thrush" differ from each other in terms of their tackling the problem of death and lamentation and this contrast between them is mostly marked by the shift in the atmosphere of the world from brightness to an utter darkness within the passage of time. Thus, while Milton, as a renaissance poet, adheres to the conventions of traditional elegy through providing a portrayal of a mourning nature, lamenting the death of a particular person, and finally reaching to a consolidating tone by believing in resurrection, Hardy challenges such conventions and shapes his elegies according to the tension in the twentieth century world by lamenting not the death of a particular person but the loss of cultural values, portraying man as entrapped within the chains of time as lifeless, and most importantly by not moving from grief to consolation, as a result of which implying that modern

man is doomed to suffer as there survives nothing, neither God nor hope, that can help him build trust in life. In this way, Hardy's elegies are aimed for lamenting the death of man himself rather than the death of someone different, given the fact that even the addressers in "God's Funeral" and "The Darkling Thrush" do not exist in life in the real sense although they mourn the loss of God and cultural values, which in turn reveals the ironic existence of man in real world as lost in the middle of nowhere though being regarded as alive due to his physical survival. The desperate state of mankind, thus, marks Hardy, creating an unbridgeable gap between his twentieth century elegies and that of the renaissance elegist Milton shaped within a traditional context. However, this gap existing between Milton and Hardy should never be regarded as unreasonable, considering the fact that the world alienates man even of his self by creating the biggest gap ever experienced.

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