

William Shenstone

Jeslin Bal, Simon Fraser University

Born in 1714 at his father's farm in Halesowen, England, William Shenstone was best known as a landscape gardener and poet. His poetry is characterized by its lyricism and focus on themes of nature and rural life. In 1744, Shenstone began investing his time and money into developing the farm into the Leasowes Estate, a project which embodied his pastoral visions and remained his passion until he died in 1763.

Shenstone's literary career began with his most famous work, *Poems upon Various Occasions* in 1737. This collection featured "The Schoolmistress," a poem profoundly influenced by the English countryside. In 1742, *The Judgement of Hercules* was published featuring a revised version of the "The Schoolmistress," and was well received. In 1788, Richard Graves (who also has a poem in this anthology), a friend of Shenstone's, published *Recollections of William Shenstone* because he believed Shenstone's poetic and landscaping contributions were under appreciated.

Shenstone's love of pastoral themes is evident in his first elegy, "He Arrives at his Retirement in the Country, and Takes Occasion to Expatriate in Praise of Simplicity — To a Friend," as well as "The Pastoral Ballad." Shenstone's self-perception is reflected in a "Prefatory Essay on Elegy" in which, amidst the farms, meadows, and man-made caves, he describes himself as a shepherd. In 1765, Shenstone's collaborative work with Reverend Thomas Percy on *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* was printed, and it had some influence on the ballads of the Romantic poets. Shenstone also assisted local poets, including Mary Whateley of Walsall, Joseph Giles, and James Woodhouse, all of whom praised Shenstone and his estate. Throughout his life and after his death, the Leasowes estate was admired by many, although, apart from "The Schoolmistress," Shenstone's poetry did not achieve the same level of influence as other poets of his time.

The poem "The Dying Kid" (1758) is written in iambic tetrameter couplets. While not strictly an elegy, it is typical of Shenstone's poetry in being elegiac, expressing grief. He writes the poem from the perspective of male hermit about a woman, Delia, who mourns the "kid," a young goat, highlighting her loss of Strephon's love as well.

Further Reading

- Baines, Paul. "Writing, Gender, and Discipline in Shenstone's 'The School-Mistress: 'Tway Birchen Sprays.'" *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2003, pp. 167–87.
- Jung, Sandro. "Shenstone, Woodhouse, and Mid-Eighteenth-Century Poetics: Genre and the Elegiac-Pastoral Landscape." *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 1–2, 2009, pp. 127–49.

The Dying Kid.¹¹²

Optima quaeque dies miseris mortalibus aevi
 Prima fugit —
 VIRG.¹¹³

A Tear bedews my Delia's¹¹⁴ eye,
 To think yon playful kid¹¹⁵ must die;¹¹⁶
 From crystal spring, and flowery mead,
 Must, in his prime of life, recede!

5

Erewhile,¹¹⁷ in sportive circles round¹¹⁸
 She saw him wheel, and frisk, and bound;
 From rock to rock pursue his way,
 And, on the fearful margin, play.

10

Pleas'd on his various freaks¹¹⁹ to dwell,
 She saw him climb my rustic cell;¹²⁰
 Thence eye my lawns with verdure bright,
 And seem all ravish'd at the sight.

15

She tells with what delight he stood,
 To trace his features in the flood:
 Then skip'd aloof with quaint amaze,¹²¹
 And then drew near, again to gaze.

20

See tells me, how with eager speed
 He flew, to hear my vocal reed;¹²²

¹¹² *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes: By Several Hands*, edited by Robert Dodsley, Vol. V, printed by J. Hughs, 1763, pp. 36–37. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

¹¹³ From the *Georgics* by the Roman poet Virgil. Latin for “the best days of poor mortals’ lives fly soonest.”

¹¹⁴ *Delia*: frequently used name in pastoral poetry to represent a shepherdess or idealised lover.

¹¹⁵ *Kid*: young goat.

¹¹⁶ *Must die*: young male goats are usually slaughtered for meat.

¹¹⁷ *Erewhile*: “formerly” or “not long ago” (*OED*).

¹¹⁸ *Sportive circles round*: referring to the goat playfully running in circles.

¹¹⁹ *Freaks*: referring to the goat's playful and energetic actions.

¹²⁰ *Cell*: hermitage.

¹²¹ *Quaint amaze*: a feeling of surprised curiosity or innocent wonder by the kid at seeing his reflection in the water.

¹²² *Vocal reed*: poetic term for a musical instrument, particularly a pipe or flute.

And how, with critic¹²³ face profound,
And steadfast ear, devour'd the sound.

His every frolic, light as air,
Deserves the gentle Delia's care; 25
And tears bedew her tender eye,
To think the playful kid must die. —

But knows my Delia, timely wise,
How soon this blameless era flies?
While violence and craft succeed; 30
Unfair design, and ruthless deed!

Soon would the vine his wounds deplore,
And yield her purple gifts¹²⁴ no more;
Ah soon, eras'd from every grove
Were Delia's name, and Strephon's¹²⁵ love. 35

No more those bow'rs might Strephon see,
Where first he fondly gaz'd on thee;
No more those beds of flow'rets find,
Which for thy charming brows he twin'd. 40

Each wayward passion¹²⁶ soon would tear
His bosom, now so void of care;
And, when they left his ebbing vein,¹²⁷
What, but insipid age,¹²⁸ remain?

Then mourn not the decrees of fate,
That gave his life so short a date;
And I will join thy tenderest sighs,
To think that youth so swiftly flies!

¹²³ *Critic*: suggests that the goat is listening attentively and perhaps critically (carefully) appraising the music.

¹²⁴ *Purple gifts*: grapes, which are purple when ripe, and a metaphor for something valuable the vine produces.

¹²⁵ *Strephon*: conventional name for a rustic lover.

¹²⁶ *Wayward passion*: uncontrolled or impulsive emotions.

¹²⁷ *Ebbing Vein*: referring to blood slowly leaving the body, metaphorically indicating his declining love.

¹²⁸ *Insipid age*: refers to a life devoid of passion, joy, or excitement.



[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

© Jeslin Bal, 2024