

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Thomas Gray

Thomas Gray is one of the most important English poets of the 18th century. Born in Cornhill on December 26, 1716, Gray was the fifth of 12 children of Philip and Dorothy Antrobus Gray, and the only one to survive infancy. His father, a scrivener given to fits of violence, abused his wife; Dorothy left him at one point, but Philip threatened to pursue her and wreak vengeance on her, and she returned to him. From 1725-1734 Thomas Gray attended Eton, where he met Richard West and Horace Walpole, son of the powerful Whig minister, Sir Robert Walpole. In 1734, Gray entered Peterhouse College, Cambridge University. Four years later he left Cambridge without a degree, intending to read law at the Inner Temple in London. Instead, he and Horace Walpole sailed from Dover on March 29, 1739 for a Continental tour. The two quarreled at Reggio, Italy, in May 1741; Gray continued the tour alone, returning to London in September. In November 1741 Gray's father died; Gray's extant letters contain no mention of this event.

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is the British writer Thomas Gray's most famous poem, first published in 1751. The poem's speaker calmly mulls over death while standing in a rural graveyard in the evening. Taking stock of the graves, he reflects that death comes for everyone in the end, and notes that the elaborate tombs of the rich won't bring their occupants back from the dead. He also commemorates the common folk buried in the churchyard by imaging the lives they might have lived had they been born into better circumstances, and considers the benefits of anonymity. The poem ends with his own imagined epitaph.

Summary of the poem

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard is a Restoration Period poem by Thomas Gray. An elegy, by strict definition, is usually a lament for the dead. Gray's version of an elegy is slightly different—he writes about the inevitability and hollowness of death in general, instead of mourning one person. At first, the poem reflects on death in a mostly detached way, as someone who is resigned to death's outcome. Yet, the epitaph he writes for himself at the end of the poem, reflects a fear of death. Elegy is a renowned English poem, regarded as one of the best of the time, and arguably of all time. It was popular when it was first written and was reprinted many times.

The speaker begins the poem by saying he is in a churchyard with a bell tolling for the end of the day, he uses this image as a metaphor for life and death. He describes the scenery around him, speaking of the sun setting, the church tower covered in ivy, and an owl hooting. He then focuses on the graveyard around him. He speaks of the men who are in the graves and how they were probably simple village folk. They're dead and nothing will wake these villagers, not a rooster's call in the morning, not twittering birds, and not the smell of the morning breeze. The speaker also laments that life's pleasures will no longer be felt by those buried in the graveyard, especially emphasizing the joys of family life.

The dead villagers probably were farmers, and the speaker discusses how they probably enjoyed farming. He warns that although it sounds like a simple life, no one should mock a good honest working life as these men once had. No one should mock these men because in death, these arbitrary ideas of being wealthy or high-born do not matter. Fancy grave markers will not bring someone back to life, and neither will the honor of being well born.

The speaker then wonders about those in the graveyard who are buried in unmarked graves. He wonders if they were full of passion, or if they were potential world leaders who left the world too soon. He wonders if one was a beautiful lyre player, whose music could bring the lyre to life—literally. He laments for the poor villagers, as they were never able to learn much about the world. He uses metaphors to describe their lack of education, that knowledge as a book was never open to them, and that poverty froze their souls.

He speaks of those in the graveyard as unsung heroes, comparing them to gems that are never found, or flowers that bloom and are never seen. He wonders if some of the residents of the graveyard could have been historically relevant, but unable to shine. One could have been a mute Milton, the author of Paradise Lost; or one could have been like John Hampden, a politician who openly

opposed the policies of King Charles. Alas, the speaker mourns again that these villagers were poor and unable to make their mark on the world.

But because they were poor, they were also innocent. They were not capable of regicide or being merciless. They were also incapable of hiding the truth, meaning they were honest with the world. The speaker notes that these people, because they were poor, will not even be remembered negatively. They lived far from cities and lived in the quiet. At least their graves are protected by simple grave markers, so people do not desecrate their burial places by accident. And the graves have enough meaning to the speaker that he will stop and reflect on their lives. The speaker wonders who leaves earth in death without wondering what they are leaving behind. Even the poor leave behind loved ones, and they need someone in their life who is pious to close their eyes upon death.

The speaker begins to wonder about himself in relation to these graveyard inhabitants. Even if these deceased villagers were poor, at least the speaker is elegizing them now. The speaker wonders who will elegize him. Maybe it will be someone like him, a kindred spirit, who wandered into the same graveyard. Possibly some grey-haired farmer, who would remark on having seen the speaker rush through the dew covered grass to watch the sun set on the meadow. The speaker continues to think of the imagined farmer, who would remember the speaker luxuriating on the strangely grown roots of a tree, while he watched the babbling brook. Maybe the farmer would think of how the speaker wandered through the woods looking pale with scorn and sorrow. Possibly the speaker was anxious, or was a victim of unrequited love. The speaker wonders if the farmer will notice he's gone one day, that the farmer did not see him by his favourite tree, near the meadow, or by the woods. He speaks of his own funeral dirges and finally of his own epitaph.

In the speaker's own epitaph, he remarks that he has died, unknown to both fame and fortune, as in he never became famous and was not well-born. But at least he was full of knowledge he was a scholar and a poet. Yet oftentimes, the speaker could become depressed. But he was bighearted and sincere, so heaven paid him back for his good qualities by giving him a friend. His other good and bad qualities do not matter anymore, so he instructs people not to go looking for them since he hopes for a good life in heaven with God.

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Q. Write a critical appreciation of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."

Ans. That Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is a powerful and poignant poem is evinced in its immediate success, as well as in the many imitations of this work. In fact, Samuel Johnson declared Thomas Gray the man who wrote the English poem most loved by "the common reader."

Gray felt that "the language of the age is never the language of poetry." Yet, although he uses archaic diction and distorted syntax at times, Gray's elegy balances Latinate phrases with current English expressions. Moreover, thematically it touches a common humanity that all readers can share. Johnson, who did not care for Gray's poetry, recognized this elegy as one that would last forever:

The churchyard abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo.

In the neo-classical form of an elegiac poem, Gray expresses his individual estimate of the world using eloquent classical diction. The verses carry a lofty tone and are composed of heroic quatrains (four lines of iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme abab). The neo-classical use of personification abounds in this formal work, as well, as in the following stanza, which also exemplifies Gray's lofty tone:

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
The short and simple annals of the poor.

What lends the poem its beauty and poignancy is the moving expression of thought and emotion that is purely Romantic, as it touches upon Nature and sympathy for the unknown in the graveyard. The idea that Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,

And froze the genial current of the soul is a poignant one, indeed, as Gray raises the implicit question of social class at a time when ideas of equality were exceptional. Also, the sentiment of remembrance for the "unhonored dead" who have waged battles of their own but their "lot forbade" their renown is brightened by the Romantic notion that Nature and the Eternal provide hope after death, as the soul reposes in "The bosom of His Father and his God."

This line about the bosom of God is the last of the elegy's epitaph. Traditionally, this elegy has begun solemnly with the poet's lament, but ends with an insight that enables the poet to cope with the loss he senses.