

# *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

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## **Type of Work:**

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is—as the title indicates—an elegy. Such a poem centers on the death of a person or persons and is, therefore, somber in tone. An elegy is lyrical rather than narrative—that is, its primary purpose is to express feelings and insights about its subject rather than to tell a story. Typically, an elegy expresses feelings of loss and sorrow while also praising the deceased and commenting on the meaning of the deceased's time on earth. Gray's poem reflects on the lives of humble and unheralded people buried in the cemetery of a church.

## **Biographical Information:**

Thomas Gray was born in London on December 26, 1716. He was the only one of twelve children who survived into adulthood. His father, Philip, a scrivener (a person who copies text) was a cruel, violent man, but his mother, Dorothy, believed in her son and operated a millinery business to educate him at Eton school in his childhood and Peterhouse College, Cambridge, as a young man. He left the college in 1738 without a degree to tour Europe with his friend, Horace Walpole, the son of the first prime minister of England, Robert Walpole (1676-1745). However, Gray did earn a degree in law although he never practiced in that profession. After achieving recognition as a poet, he refused to give public lectures because he was extremely shy. Nevertheless, he gained such widespread acclaim and respect that England offered him the post of poet laureate, which would make him official poet of the realm. However, he rejected the honor. Gray was that rare kind of person who cared little for fame and adulation.

## **Setting:**

The time is the mid 1700s, about a decade before the Industrial Revolution began in England. The place is the cemetery of a church. Evidence indicates that the church is St. Giles, in the small town of Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire, in southern England. Gray himself is buried in that cemetery. William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, once maintained a manor house at Stoge Poges.

## **Years of Composition and Publication:**

Gray began writing the elegy in 1742, put it aside for a while, and finished it in 1750. Robert Dodsley published the poem in London in 1751. Revised or altered versions of the poem appeared in 1753, 1758, 1768, and 1775.

### **Themes:**

#### **Death: The Great Equalizer**

Even the proud and the mighty must one day lie beneath the earth, like the humble men and women now buried in the churchyard, as line 36 notes: The paths of glory lead but to the grave. Lines 41-44 further point out that no grandiose memorials and no flattering words about the deceased can bring him or her back from death. Can storied urn or animated bust Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath? Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust, Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

#### **Missed Opportunities**

Because of poverty or other handicaps, many talented people never receive the opportunities they deserve. The following lines elucidate this theme through metaphors: Full many a gem of purest ray serene, The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear: Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen, And waste its sweetness on the desert air. Here, the gem at the bottom of the ocean may represent an undiscovered musician, poet, scientist or philosopher. The flower may likewise stand for a person of great and noble qualities that are "wasted on the desert air." Of course, on another level, the gem and the flower can stand for anything in life that goes unappreciated.

#### **Virtue**

In their rural setting, far from the temptations of the cities and the courts of kings, the villagers led virtuous lives, as lines 73-76 point out: Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife, Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray; Along the cool sequester'd vale of life They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

#### **Summary of *Elegy Written in A Country Churchyard***

"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 favorite 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.

### **Elegy Written in A Country Churchyard—Word Notes:**

“Curfew”— During the time that this poem was written, English towns had a “curfew,” the time when a bell was rung in the evening that signaled for people put out their fires and go to bed.

“Knell”— The use of the word knell is symbolic because it is used when describing the type of bell rung at funerals. This use of the word gives the poem a very solemn and reflective tone. This reflective tone continues through the second and third stanza. Gray's writing style gives a tone of grief and the poem is filled with sorrow.

“Parting day”— refers to the day's end such as dusk, twilight, or the dying day .

“Now fades...”— reveals that the landscape is becoming increasingly harder to see, it's fading from sight.

“Save”— throughout the poem it means ‘except’.

“Drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds”– This line refers to the serene sounds coming from a bell that hangs around the neck of a male sheep that leads the flock. “Fold” refers to a flock of sheep. “Ivy-mantled”– means covered, dressed, or fashioned with ivy.

“The moping owl does to the moon complain”– When Gray writes the the owl complains, he is reminding his readers of the sorrow and grief the poem is revealing. “Molest”– refers to bothering the owl as it keeps a watchful eye over the country churchyard. “Ancient solitary rein”– is a metaphor that compares the owl to a queen. “Mouldering”– means decaying or crumbling. “Rude”– means robust, sturdy, hearty and stalwart. “Hamlet”– refers to village. “Breezy call...”– refers to the morn, or morning, as a living thing. There is personification in this line; as the wind carries the pleasant smells of morning, it calls and breathes. “Narrow Cell”– The narrow cell refers to the buried coffins in the ground. The poem continues on saying in the fifth and sixth stanza how no longer will these people be able to live the life they used too. “The envied kiss to share”– is an anastrophe, a figure of speech that inverts the normal order of words, it should read as “to share the envied kiss”. “Glebe”– refers to earth. “Jocundly”– means cheerfully. “For them no more...” (Stanza 6)– This stanza reminds the reader of all the things one leaves behind when they die, including their wife, children and house. “Destiny obscure”– refers to the common peoples’ humble fate and everything that they accomplish that is not glorified or announced. “Simple annals of the poor”– Gray also brings up the issue of social classes in his poem. Gray shows how the poor take pride in what they create and even though they may not have much money, they are proud of their hard work and the nature that surrounds them. The ‘annals’ refers to their history and stories . “Boast of heraldry...”– refers to the boastfulness of the upper class in regards to their aristocratic/royal family tree and well as their snobby attitude about having power. “Pomp”– refers to the elite ceremonies, rituals, and luxurious surroundings that royalty and nobles enjoy. “The paths of glory lead but to the grave” – Gray wants us to be reminded that it does not matter if we are rich or poor, we all will die. No one is able to escape death. “If memory o’er their tomb no trophies raise”– Gray wants his readers to be reminded that the rich should not look down on the poor for their simple and humble tombstones. “Long-drawn aisle and fretted vault”– This refers to a carved arched ceiling inside of a church where important people are buried. “Can Honour’s voice provoke the silent dust...”– Gray explains that nothing can bring the dead back to life. Honors and flattery are no competition for death. The wealthy’s riches will not save them or benefit them in any way once death approaches. “Some hearts once pregnant with celestial fire”– Gray wonders what types of people are buried in the graves. He ponders the idea that maybe if a farmer was given the means of

opportunities, what the farmer may have become. He wonders if a great poet may be buried beneath the ground and never was given the means to accomplish what he was meant to do. "Living Lyre"- Refers to a stringed instrument. More importantly the people in the cemetery could have been great musicians. "Knowledge to their eyes her ample page"- They did not gain knowledge through (ample page) books. "Froze the genial current of the soul" – Refers to the lack of ideas. "Gem"- Once again Gray wonders what hidden "gems" are buried in the graves that were unable to shine and wasted away because of their poor status in life(answers.com). Gray is comparing the village people to undiscovered gems in caves in the the ocean and to undiscovered flowers in the desert. "Some village Hampden"- For a third time, Gray hints that someone buried in the graveyard could have had the ability to be a Hampden. Hampden referring to a parliamentary leader. He also compares the buried poor to other prominent figures as well. "Milton"- (1608-1674) A famous English poet and scholar. "Their lot forbid"- This refers to the villagers and even though they alleviate suffering and provide plenty across the land they will receive no praise from politicians because of their way of life. This is continuing the same thought from stanza 17. "Their crimes confined"- Gray in this stanza is saying the their "lot" not only prevents them from good deeds, but bad ones as well; such as killing and showing mercy. "Muse's flame"- Refers to Greek and Roman mythology and the allusion of Goddesses that inspire writers, musicians, historians, dancers, and astronomers. "The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide"- Refers to the villagers and their unwavering dedication to staying common. "Noiseless tenour"- Refers to their quiet life. "Frail memorials"- Even though the poor peoples graves may be simple and not embellished, they still are remembered and receive the same amount of sorrow and "sighs" as others who have died. "Their name, their years"- Refers to their name and age that appear but there were no extravagant tributes. "Unletter'd Muse"- uneducated engraver. "She"- Refers to a Muse. "Rustic moralists"- "pious villager". "Warm precincts of a cheerful day"- These poor people died having the same regrets and longings as everyone else. They also longed to live longer and enjoy the days that would come in the future. "Parting soul Relies"- Gray states how when people are dying they depend on their friends to write a statement on their tombstone. Gray states how even people's spirit after they die want to be remembered. "For thee"- Gray begins referring to himself in the poem. "Art-less tale"- Gray is telling his readers the stories of the forgotten lives in the grave-yard. Gray is saying that the lines of his elegy is their story. "Hoary-headed swain"- Gray is refereing to a "gray haired country fellow who lives in the region" and is asking about Gray's life after Gray dies. "Listless length"- tired body. "Rill"- Stream. "One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill"-

Gray continues the story by having the old man in the poem not remember seeing the speaker and wonder what happened to him and why he was not in his usual spot. “Dirgres”- “funeral songs”. “Lay”- Gray is referring a short poem. In other words, the epitaph written. “Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne”- The old man now sees the speaker's body being carried to the grave yard. The speaker asks his friend to read the epitaph on the tombstone. “Parting soul relies”- Gray explains that it is extremely important that the living honor the dead and remember their lives. “Large was his bounty and his soul sincere”- Gray/the speaker hopes that people remember him for being a generous and sincere man. He is thankful that this old man is taking the time to remember his soul. “There they alike in trembling hope repose”- The poem ends by saying that the speaker hopes not to be judged on earth for any of his flaws but to be remembered and instead be judged by God who he now lives with. Once again Gray reminds us that no matter what type of honors we receive on earth, we are all buried and on the same level when we die.

### **Meter and Rhyme Scheme:**

Gray wrote the poem in four-line stanzas (quatrains). Each line is in iambic pentameter, meaning the following:

1..Each line has five pairs of syllables for a total of ten syllables.

2..In each pair, the first syllable is unstressed (or unaccented), and the second is stressed (or accented), as in the two lines that open the poem:

.....The CUR few TOLLS the KNELL of PART ing DAY .....The LOW ing HERD  
wind SLOW ly O'ER the LEA .....In each stanza, the first line rhymes with the third and the second line rhymes with the fourth (abab), as follows:

a.....The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,

b.....The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,

a.....The plowman homeward plods his weary way,

b.....And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Stanza Form: Heroic Quatrain A stanza with the above-mentioned characteristics—four lines, iambic pentameter, and an abab rhyme scheme—is often referred to as a heroic quatrain. (Quatrain is derived from the Latin word *quattuor*, meaning four.) William Shakespeare and John Dryden had earlier used this stanza form. After Gray's poem became famous, writers and critics also began referring to the heroic quatrain as an elegiac stanza. Inversion For poetic effect, Gray frequently uses inversion (reversal of the normal word order). Following are examples: Line 6: And all the air a solemn stillness holds (all the air holds a solemn stillness) Line 14: Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap (Where

the turf heaves) Line 24: Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share. (Or climb his knees to share the envied kiss) Line 79: With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd (deck'd with uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture) Syncope Omitting letters or sounds within a word. Gray also frequently uses a commonplace poetic device known as syncope, the omission of letters or sounds within a word. The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea (line 2) Now fades the glimm'ring landscape on the sight (line 5) Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r (line 9) The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed (line 18) Figures of Speech: .....Following are examples of figures of speech in the poem. Alliteration Repetition of a Consonant Sound The plowman homeward plods his weary way (line 3) . The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn (line 19) . Nor cast one longing, ling'ring look behind? (line 88) . Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn (line 107) . Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love. (line 108) Anaphora Repetition of a word, phrase, or clause at the beginning of word groups occurring one after the other And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave (line 34) Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd muse (line 81) Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries, Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires. (lines 91-92) Metaphor Comparison between unlike things without using like, as, or than Full many a gem of purest ray serene, The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear: Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen, And waste its sweetness on the desert air. (lines 53-56) Comparison of the dead village people to gems and flowers Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride With incense kindled at the Muse's flame. (lines 71-72) Comparison of flattering words to incense Metonymy Use of a word or phrase to suggest a related word or phrase To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land Land stands for people. Personification A form of metaphor that compares a thing to a person 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. (lines 29-32) Ambition and Grandeur take on human characteristics. But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll (line 49-50) Notice that Knowledge becomes a person, a female. Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth, And Melancholy mark'd him for her own. (lines 119-120) Science and Melancholy become persons. Study Questions and Essay Topics: 1. 1.Gray was the only one of twelve children who survived childhood. Do you believe the memory of his dead brothers and sisters influenced him in the writing of his poem? 2. 2.What was Gray's opinion of high-born persons vis-a-vis the lowborn? 3. Write an essay that develops the idea expressed in line 36: The paths of glory lead but to the grave. 4. 3.Read "Ozymandias," a poem by another English



writer, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Then write an essay that compares and contrasts Shelley's idea of posthumous glory with Gray's.