

Poetry  
Third Year  
By: Hayder Gebreen

*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard (1751)*

*Thomas Gray*

*Lines 1-48 and The Epitaph*

Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" was first published in 1751. Gray may, however, have begun writing the poem in 1742, shortly after the death of his close friend Richard West. **An elegy** is a poem which laments the dead. Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is noteworthy in that it mourns the death not of great or famous people, but of common men. The speaker of this poem sees a country churchyard at sunset, which impels him to meditate on the nature of human mortality. The poem invokes the classical idea of **memento mori**, a Latin phrase which states plainly to all mankind, "Remember that you must die." The speaker considers the fact that in death, there is no difference between great and common people. He goes on to wonder if among the lowly people buried in the churchyard there had been any natural poets or politicians whose talent had simply never been discovered or nurtured. This thought leads him to praise the dead for the honest, simple lives that they lived.

Gray did not produce a great deal of poetry; the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," however, has earned him a respected and deserved place in literary history. The poem was written at the end of the **Augustan Age** and at the beginning of **the Romantic period**, and the poem has **characteristics** associated with both literary periods. On the one hand, it has the ordered, balanced phrasing and rational sentiments of **Neoclassical** poetry. On the other hand, it tends toward the emotionalism and individualism of the **Romantic** poets; most importantly, it idealizes and elevates the common man.

**Analysis:**

*The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,  
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.*

In the first stanza, the speaker observes the signs of a country day drawing to a close: a curfew bell ringing, a herd of cattle moving across the pasture, and a farm laborer returning home. The speaker is then left alone to contemplate the isolated rural scene. The first line of the poem sets a distinctly somber tone: the curfew bell does not simply ring; it "knells" a term usually applied to bells rung at a death or funeral. From the start, then, Gray reminds us of human mortality.

*Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight, 5  
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,  
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,  
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;*

The second stanza sustains the somber tone of the first: the speaker is not mournful, but pensive, as he describes the peaceful landscape that surrounds him. Even the air is characterized as having a "solemn stillness."

*Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower  
The moping owl does to the moon complain 10  
Of such, as wandering near her secret bower,*

*Molest her ancient solitary reign.*

The sound of an owl hooting intrudes upon the evening quiet. We are told that the owl “complains”; in this context, the word does not mean “to whine” or “grumble,” but “to express sorrow.” The owl’s call, then, is suggestive of grief. Note that at no point in these three opening stanzas does Gray directly refer to death or a funeral; rather, he indirectly creates a funereal atmosphere by describing just a few mournful sounds.

*Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree’s shade,  
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,  
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid, 15  
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.*

It is in the fourth stanza that the speaker directly draws our attention to the graves in the country churchyard. We are presented with two potentially conflicting images of death. Line 14 describes the heaps of earth surrounding the graves; in order to dig a grave, the earth must necessarily be disrupted. Note that the syntax of this line is slightly confusing. We would expect this sentence to read “Where the turf heaves”—not “where heaves the turf”: Gray has inverted the word order. Just as the earth has been disrupted, the syntax imitates the way in which the earth has been disrupted. But by the same token, the “rude Forefathers” buried beneath the earth seem entirely at peace: we are told that they are laid in “cells,” a term which reminds us of the quiet of a monastery, and that they “sleep.”

*The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,  
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,  
The cock’s shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,  
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed. 20*

If the “Forefathers” are sleeping, however, the speaker reminds us that they will never again rise from their “beds” to hear the pleasurable sounds of country life that the living do. The term “lowly beds” describes not only the unpretentious graves in which the forefathers are buried, but the humble conditions that they endured when they were alive.

*For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,  
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:  
No children run to lisp their sire’s return,  
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.*

The speaker then moves on to consider some of the other pleasures the dead will no longer enjoy: the happiness of home, wife, and children.

*Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield, 25  
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;  
How jocund did they drive their team afield!  
How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!*

The dead will also no longer be able to enjoy the pleasures of work, of plowing the fields each day. This stanza points to the way in which the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” contains elements of both Augustan and Romantic poetry. Poetry that describes agriculture—as this one does—is called georgic. Georgic verse was extremely popular in the eighteenth century. Note, however, that Gray closely identifies the farmers with the land that they work. This association of man and nature is suggestive of a romantic attitude. The georgic elements of the stanza almost demand that we characterize it as typical of the eighteenth century, but its tone looks forward to the Romantic period.

*Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure; 30  
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile  
The short and simple annals of the poor.*

The next four stanzas caution those who are wealthy and powerful not to look down on the poor. These lines warn the reader not to slight the “obscure” “destiny” of the poor—the fact that they will never be famous or have long histories, or “annals,” written about them.

*The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
Awaits alike the inevitable hour. 35  
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.*

This stanza invokes the idea of memento mori (literally, a reminder of mortality). The speaker reminds the reader that regardless of social position, beauty, or wealth, all must eventually die.

*Nor you, ye Proud, impute to These the fault,  
If Memory o'er their Tomb no Trophies raise,  
Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault  
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise. 40*

The speaker also challenges the reader not to look down on the poor for having modest, simple graves. He suggests, moreover, that the elaborate memorials that adorn the graves of the “Proud” are somehow excessive. In this context, the word “fretted” in line 39 has a double meaning: on the one hand, it can refer to the design on a cathedral ceiling; on the other hand, it can suggest that there is something “fretful,” or troublesome, about the extravagant memorials of the wealthy.

*Can storied urn or animated bust  
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?  
Can Honor's voice provoke the silent dust,  
Or Flattery sooth the dull cold ear of Death?*

The speaker observes that nothing can bring the dead back to life, and that all the advantages that the wealthy had in life are useless in the face of death. Neither elaborate funeral monuments nor impressive honors can restore life. Nor can flattery in some way be used to change the mind of death. Note here Gray's use of personification in characterizing both “flattery” and “death”—as though death has a will or mind of its own.

*Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid 45  
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;  
Hands, that the rod of empire might have swayed,  
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.*

The speaker then reconsiders the poor people buried in the churchyard. He wonders what great deeds they might have accomplished had they been given the opportunity: one of these poor farmers, the speaker reasons, might have been a great emperor; another might have “waked ... the living lyre,” or been a great poet or musician.

#### *The Epitaph*

Poetry  
Third Year  
By: Hayder Gebreen

*Here rests his head upon the lap of earth  
A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.  
Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,  
And Melancholy marked him for her own. 120*

The last three stanzas are, in fact, the speaker's epitaph; the way in which the speaker imagines his epitaph will read. Through the epitaph, the speaker asks the passerby (and the reader) not to remember him as wealthy, famous, or brilliantly educated, but as one who was "melancholic" or deeply thoughtful and sad.

*Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,  
Heaven did a recompense as largely send:  
He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,  
He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend*

The speaker asks that we remember him for being generous and sincere. His generosity was, in fact, his willingness to mourn for the dead. Because he was so generous, the speaker reasons, heaven gave him a "friend"—someone who would, in turn, mourn for him after his death. This friend is unnamed, but we can deduce that it is any "kindred Spirit"—including the reader—who reads the speaker's epitaph and remembers him.

*No farther seek his merits to disclose, 125  
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,  
(There they alike in trembling hope repose)  
The bosom of his Father and his God.*

The speaker concludes by cautioning the reader not to praise him any further. He also asks that his "frailties," his flaws or personal weaknesses, not be considered; rather, they should be left to the care of God, with whom the speaker now resides. The poem, then, is an elegy not only for the common man, but for the speaker himself. Indeed, by the end of the poem it is evident that the speaker himself wishes to be identified not with the great and famous, but with the common people whom he has praised and with whom he will, presumably, be buried.

#### Themes:

**Death:** Gray's "Elegy" is one of the best-known poems about death in all of European literature. The poem presents the reflections of an observer who, passing by a churchyard that is out in the country, stops for a moment to think about the significance of the strangers buried there. Scholars of medieval times sometimes kept human skulls on their desktops, to keep themselves conscious of the fact that someday they, like the skulls' former occupants, would die: from this practice we get the phrase *memento mori*, which we say to this day to describe any token one uses to keep one's mortality in mind.

In this poem, the graveyard acts as a *memento mori*, reminding the narrator to not place too much value on this life because someday he too will be dead and buried. The speaker of the poem is surrounded by the idea of death, and throughout the first seven stanzas there are numerous images pointing out the contrast between death and life. After mentioning the churchyard in the title, which establishes the theme of mortality, the poem itself begins with images of gloom and finality. The darkness at the end of the day, the forlorn moan of lowing cattle, the stillness of the air (highlighted by the beetle's stilted motion) and the owl's nocturnal hooting all serve to set a background for this serious meditation.

However, it is not until the fourth stanza that the poem actually begins to deal with the cemetery, mentioned as the place where the village forefathers "sleep." In the following stanzas, the speaker tries to imagine what the lives of these simple men might have been like, touching upon their relations with their wives, children, and the soil that they worked. They are not defined by their possessions, because they had few, and instead are defined by their actions, which serves to contrast their lives with their

**Poetry**  
**Third Year**  
**By: Hayder Gebreen**

quiet existence in the graveyard. This “Elegy” presents the dead in the best light: their families adored them and they were cheerful in their work, as they “hummed the woods beneath their steady stroke.” The speaker openly admits that they are spoken of so well precisely because they are dead, because death is such a terrible thing that its victims deserve the respect of the living. In line 90, the poet explains, “Some pious drops the closing eye requires,” explaining that the living should show their respect for death with their sorrow.

**Search for Self:** The speaker of this poem goes through a process of recognizing what is important to him and choosing how to live his life (which leads to the epitaph with which he would like to be remembered). In stanza 8, the poem begins naming the attributes that are normally considered desirable but are now considered pointless when compared with the lives of the rustic dead in the country graveyard. Ambition and Grandeur, according to the speaker, should not think less of these people because of their simple accomplishments. He goes on to assert that Pride and Memory have no right to ignore them, and that Honor and Flattery will be as useless to the rich as to the poor when they are dead.

The speaker, an educated person, gives much consideration to the subject of Knowledge, and whether the lack of it made the lives of these country people less significant. Their poverty blocked the way to knowledge, he decides, and the lack of knowledge separated them from vices as well as virtues, so that in the end he does not consider his education a factor in making him better or worse than them either. In the end, having eliminated all of the supposed benefits of the wealthy, educated world that he comes from, the speaker identifies himself with the graveyard inhabitants to such a degree that he winds up in this humble graveyard after his death. In contrast to the simple graves that he pondered over throughout his life, though, the speaker’s grave is marked with a warm-hearted memorial, the “Epitaph” at the end of the poem.

Assuming that such a thoughtful person would not have been so immodest as to write this epitaph for himself, there must have been some other literate person to remember him. He is also remembered by an illiterate member of the farm community, the “hoary-headed swain” who has to ask someone to read the epitaph. Before the death of the poem’s narrator, this Swain established a nonverbal relationship with him, observing him from afar, wondering about him just as the narrator wondered about the country people buried there.

**Class Conflict:** A superficial reading of this poem might leave the impression that the author intends to present members of the lower class as being more worthy of praise than their upper-class counterparts. This would be a reasonable assumption, since so much of the poem is devoted to praising the simple virtues of the poor. In the larger scope, though, the position that Gray takes is that all people, poor or rich, are equal. This is a meditation on death, which has been called the “great equalizer” because no can avoid it. The reason that the poem seems to favor one class over the other is that it is working against the assumption that only those of the upper class are worthy of attention when they die. It is the humble condition of the country churchyard, with gravestones unmarked or possibly marked just with names by illiterate people unable to read, that draws attention to the virtues of the poor and uneducated (which society often forgets), and so much of the poem is spent praising their moral strength. The virtues of the wealthy and famous are not denied, they just are not explored in this poem because they are already so familiar. Evidence of the poem’s evenhandedness about the different classes can be seen in the fact that, while praising the poor country people throughout, Gray also acknowledges that education, which may give them opportunity to develop moral excellence, may also lead them to corruption: as he says in stanza 17, the humble circumstances of the poor limited the growth not only of their virtues but also of their crimes. The poem thus leaves open the question of superiority. Society glorifies the rich, and the poem’s narrator glorifies the poor, but, as he reminds us, “The paths of glory lead but to the grave.”

**Style:** “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is written in heroic quatrains. A **quatrain** is a four-line

**Poetry**  
**Third Year**  
**By: Hayder Gebreen**

stanza. **Heroic quatrains** rhyme in an *abab* pattern and are written in iambic pentameter. An **iamb** is a poetic foot consisting of one unstressed and one stressed syllable, as in the phrase “the world.” Pentameter simply means that there are five feet in each line.

**Historical Context:** When Thomas Gray was writing this poem, the world was going through a period of intellectual development that thinkers of the time dubbed the “Age of Enlightenment.” The **Enlightenment** was a philosophical movement that grew out of the great advances made by scientists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At first, though, the Enlightenment’s enthusiasts were considered dangerous radicals. They rejected tradition that was not backed up with solid rational explanation, and tradition was the basis for most rulers’ political power. Royalty ruled by relation to previous rulers, and landowners feasted while peasants starved because of rights based on inheritance, but rationalism served to undermine such rights and to blur class distinctions. In particular, the Catholic Church, which had been a strong influence in European politics for centuries, was threatened by the skepticism of Enlightenment thinkers who felt society should be organized according to rational rather than religious principles. As religious explanations of the universe lost credibility to scientific explanations that were based on observation, the Church took a defensive position, jailing free thinkers for heresy when they published theories that contradicted church tradition. In earlier times, Galileo, for example, was imprisoned for supporting the Copernican heliocentric view of the solar system. In the early 1700s, the church clashed frequently with Enlightenment theorists who made even minor claims about the nature of man and society that could be considered heretical. By the middle of the century, when Thomas Gray wrote his “Elegy,” Enlightenment rationality had gained enough public support to stand on its own. To some extent, the poem displays Enlightenment principles in the way that the speaker shows faith that the rural poor could be intelligent and successful if they had proper education, reflecting Locke’s theory of the mind as a “blank slate” that is ready to grow. The pessimism he shows, though, regarding the potential for corruption if the poor were educated, is contrary to the standard Enlightenment optimism about the good that will result from education.

In the end, the oppressive system of feudal land ownership was abolished, but only at the end of a bitter struggle that required both sides to focus their attention on jingoistic slogans. The ideal of rationality became lost with the emphasis on the rights of individuals and the belief that the simple, uncorrupt poor know better than the pampered rich. The Enlightenment gave way to the age of Romanticism, which emphasized an almost mystical belief in individuality and the goodness of nature.

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### **Sources**

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