

ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD

Thomas Gray (1716-71)

Life and Works of the Poet: Thomas Gray, the youngest son of Philip Gray, a scrivener, was born in London in 1716. He was educated, mainly through the efforts of his mother, first at Eton, and afterwards at Peterhouse, Cambridge. At Cambridge he resided from 1733 to 1739, and then went out on a continental tour with his friend Horace Walpole, who later became a celebrated writer. Among his other literary friends may be mentioned William Mason, Christopher Smart and Coopers Middleton. But it was the death of his school friend, Richard West, that set his writing the elegy which was to make him immortal. In 1741 his father had died, and his mother, ailing and financially constrained, shifted to the house in Stoke Poges. He wrote quite a few poems in 1742 like *To Spring*, *To Adversity*, *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, *Sonnet on the Death of Richard West*, and a fragmentary drama called *Agrippina*. Gray's life in Cambridge was that of recluse; and he did not pull on well with the members of the university. Thus in 1754, in consequence of a rude practical joke played upon him by the undergraduates—of which hardly any notice was taken by the college authorities—he removed from Peterhouse to Pembroke. Meanwhile in 1747 he wrote a remarkable comic *Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes*, occasioned by the death of Walpole's cat. *The Elegy*, though published in 1751, had been started in 1742, left for a long time, and resumed in 1750. Among other important works of Gray are two Pindaric odes, *Progress of Poetry* and *The Bard* which were published in 1757. He also wrote some poems in imitation of Celtic and Norse verse of which he made special studies. At the death of Cibber, Gray was offered the post of the Poet Laureate, but he refused the offer. In 1771 he died, and was buried in the very churchyard of Stoke Poges, which he celebrated in the *Elegy*, beside his mother's grave.

A Brief Assessment of Gray as a Poet:

The feature of Gray's poetry which strikes even a casual reader is the stateliness of his verse, the matchless melody, dignity and sweetness which marks his

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poetic style. His slow and solemn strains particularly suit odes and elegies. It has been well said of Gray that he has left much that is 'incomplete' but nothing that is 'unfinished'. Retirement and order were of the very essence of his genius, and it is evident in almost every line he has composed, such as 'Thoughts that breathe and words that burn', 'Far from the madding crowd's fantastic strife', 'And Truth severe, by fairy Fiction dress', and 'Tyrant of the dreaming hour'.

Gray belongs to the Transitional Poets in whom readers find a peculiar combination of pseudo-classical and romantic traits. Indeed Gray in his use of poetic forms and techniques as well as in the tendency to monotonize and generalize, and in the excessive use of rhetorical ornaments, especially personification, belongs to the school of Pope. But he anticipates Wordsworth in his selection of the life of simple rustics as poetic subject, and also in his interest in natural scenes and imagery. Moreover, in the infusion of a charm of delicate melancholy in the atmosphere of his poetry he can claim kinship with nineteenth century romantic poets. Finally his indirect effort to express his personal thoughts and feelings, particularly those which are unhappy, he anticipates Shelley and Keats. However, Dryden and Milton seem to have been his chief models. He used to cite Milton as the 'best example of an exquisite ear', and of Dryden, he wrote that if there was any excellence in his own numbers, he had learnt it wholly from that great poet.

One of the great poetic qualities of Gray is depth of imaginative fervour. It is illustrated more in *The Bard* than in *The Elegy*. In that poem we notice the vivid, pictorial imagination which calls up before our mind's eye a series of dramatic and picturesque episodes from English history. Among his defects are the not infrequent artificiality of diction, and insensibility to beauty visible in life and nature.

A NOTE ON THE ELEGY AS A POETIC GENRE

Like the lyric and the ode, the elegy is a form of poetry derived from the ancient Greeks. The Sicilian Greek poet, Theocritus, first shaped elegy primarily as a song of lament for a dead shepherd by his friends in which they called upon Nature to mourn with them. An elegy, in modern parlance, means a dirge, a lyric essentially sad and funeral in character. But the essence of elegy is not particular grief so much as universal sorrow. Here personal

sorrow is generalised, and is felt as the fate of all mankind, from which no one is exempt. The Old English elegy, *The Ruin*, and Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* are representatives of the true elegiac spirit.

Elegy also frequently assumes a memorial or encomiastic character, containing the poet's tribute to some great man, and often a study of his life and character. The best illustrations of Theocritus-like pastoral elegy in English are Ben Jonson's *To the Memory of My Beloved—*, William Shakespeare, Milton's *Lycidas*, Arnold's *Rugby Chapel* and *Thyris*. Often the speculative and philosophic elements become predominant in elegy, e.g. Shelley's *Adonais*, and Browning's *La Saisiaz*. Elegy is a grief recollected in tranquillity. It envisages a position in which sorrow undergoes a sort of intellectual distillation. But for a great elegy, acceptance of loss is not enough; the natural sorrow of man is to be refined and sublimated by art and philosophy. The entire structure of the elegy has a clear architectural pattern. *Lycidas* begins with mourning for the gone happier days, rises to a sorrowful consciousness that the past will never return, and ends with a triumphant consciousness of victory over man's mortality: 'For *Lycidas*, thy sorrow is not dead'. In Tennyson's *In Memoriam* also, there is final vision of joy attained after going through initial pain and sorrow for the death of his dear friend. The dead friend is sublimed and deified. This deification of the subject is an important element in a true elegy.

TEXT

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

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

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:
Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
The moping owl does to the moon complain 10

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Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

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.
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

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.

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 bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

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

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
Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?

Empirical
Rhetoric. Prose

Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,
Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre:

But knowledge to their eyes her ample page
Rich with the spoils of time, did ne'er unroll;
Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,
And froze the genial current of the soul.
Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood,
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country's blood,

Th' applause of his ring senties to command,
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
And read their history in a nation's eyes
Their lot forbade: nor circumscrib'd alone
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;
Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind;

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
To quench the blush'd of ingenuous shame,
Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
With incense kindled at the muse's flame.
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.

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Yet e'en these bones from insult to protect
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,
Explores the passing tribute of a sigh.

Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd Muse,
The place of fame and elegy supply:
And many a holy text around she strews
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who, to dumb forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?
On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
E'en from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
E'en in our ashes live their wonted fires.

For thee, who, mindful of th' unhonour'd dead,
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely Contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,—

Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,
Ofi have we seen him at the peep of dawn
Brushing with hasty steps the dew away,
To meet the sun upon the upland lawn;

There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
His listless length at noon-tide would he stretch,
And pore upon the book that babbles by.
Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove;
Now drooping, woeful-wan, like one forlorn,
Or crazed with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.

One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,
 Along the heath, and near his favourite tree;
 Another came; but yet beside the rill,
 Not up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

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The next walk steges due in sad array
 Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne;—
 Approach and read (for thou must read) his lay
 Grav'd on the stone beneath you aged thorn.

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THE EPITAPH

Here lies his head upon the lap of Earth
 A Youth, to Fortune and to Fame unknown;
 Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,
 And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.
 Large was his beauty, and his soul sincere;
 Heaven did a recompense as largely send;
 He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,
 He gain'd from Heaven, 'twas all he wish'd, a friend.

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

Date of Composition and Circumstances of Publication

Gray began his *Elegy* at Stoke Poges, a little village in Buckinghamshire, in the year 1742. The scene of the poem is the parish churchyard of Stoke Poges. It has been suggested by Mason and Hales that the immediate inspiration for the poem came from the death, in 1742, of the poet's uncle, Jonathan Rogers, who was laid to rest in that churchyard. But most commentators like, Graham Hough, feel certain that the inspiration was the grief caused by the death of Gray's school friend, Richard West, with whom the poet had similarity in nature. For quite a few years the unfinished poem was shelved.

Then the death of an aunt, probably, made him resume the *elegy*, and pour into it further reflections on human mortality. The poem was completed on June 12, 1750, and its process of publication is another history.

On June 12, 1750, Gray sent the completed manuscript of the *Elegy* to his friend Horace Walpole, and wrote to him, 'Having put an end to a thing whose beginning you have seen long ago, I immediately send it to you. You will, I hope, look upon it in the light of a thing with an end to it: a merit that most of my writings have wanted, and are likely to want.' Walpole was immensely delighted with the poem, and circulated it in manuscript form among many of his friends and acquaintances. Somehow a copy got into the hands of the editor of the *Magazine of Magazines*, and he at once wrote to Gray informing him that he intended to publish the poem in his magazine. Gray did not relish the idea that his poem should appear in a magazine. To prevent that, he wrote to Walpole asking him to hasten the printing and publication of the poem in separate book-form. So the poem was published as a thin quarto pamphlet on the 16th of February, 1751. The title was *Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard*. Dodsley was the printer, and the price was fixed at 6d. It may be noted as an interesting fact that the intrepid editor of the *Magazine of Magazines* was not to be defeated in his purpose; and without waiting for the author's permission, he printed the whole of the poem in his issue of the 28th of February. To complete our account, the poem went through four editions within two months. It went through eleven editions in the course of that year and the next. Though Gray was universally known to be its author, yet the poem was first published anonymously. It did not bear his name till in the edition of 1753.

It may be added that two years after the publication of the *Elegy*, Gray's mother died, and was buried in the churchyard of Stoke Poges. It was here again that the poet himself was laid to rest, twenty years after the poem was published.

SUMMARY

1. The Landscape (Stanza 1-3)

It is now evening; the curfew has tolled; herds of cattle can be seen coming across the fields; the weary ploughman after his day's labour, returns homeward. The poet remains seated alone, the darkness of evening gathering round him. Gradually it becomes quiet. A solemn stillness reigns everywhere.

The only sounds heard are the droning of the beetle, the soft tinkling of sheep-bells, and the dismal hooting of the owl from the solitary ivy-mantled tower.

II. The rude forefathers of the hamlet (Stanzas 4-7)

Sitting, surrounded by the graves of the ancestors of the village-folk the poet thinks of how, while alive, they used to be roused from sleep by fragrant morning breeze, and chirping of birds, or the sound of the hunter's horn; and how when they returned in the evening from their toil in the field, young ones vied to have their shares of caress from them. No more will they return to pursue a life of humble but cheerful peasants.

III. A warning to the rich (Stanzas 8-11)

The simple villagers, with their small joys and colourless life, were unknown to the world. But the rich and powerful men should not look down upon them; because all worldly glamour, grandeur power and riches are bound for the grave. Death is the great leveller, making no distinction between the rich and the poor, the famous and the ordinary. And once dead, no man can be brought back to life by any earthly effort or resourcefulness of his friends and relations. Gorgeous and costly monuments are as useless in perpetuating the memory of the deceased, as humble graves.

IV. What these men might have been (Stanzas 12-19)

Perhaps the men buried here had the germs of genius in them. Given the scope and opportunity, they might have become great poets, statesmen and important people of distinction. But poverty nipped their talents even before the bud, and they spent their lives like neglected flowers and dried up rivers. Poverty, however, was a kind of blessing too. It circumscribed both their virtues and vices. It prevented them from growing great, but also saved them from the guilts and sins, like cruelty, dishonesty and shamelessness, which often accompany men of positions. Far from the ignoble hurry and bustle of urban life, they lived a peaceful, uneventful life.

V. The rude memorials over the graves of dead villagers (stanza 20-23)

The poet muses on the rude and humble memorials erected over the graves. On these are inscribed immature rhymes, names in poor handwriting, and, occasionally, lines from the Bible. Even poor and obscure human beings want to be remembered after death. The yearning for human sympathy survives even after leaving this world. The crude tombstones are in their way, a protest against oblivion.

VI. The portrait of the poet who lived in this village (Stanzas 25-29)

If an interested passer-by wants to know about this rhymester, some old villager may inform him how the poet, a lover of Nature, spent his morning walking in the sunny field and his noon by musing under a tree on the bank of a flowing river. He would sometimes look disturbed and melancholy. After some days, absence from his habitual outing, the old villager one day saw his body being carried to the churchyard to be buried there.

VII. The Poet's epitaph (Stanzas 30-32)

It was written on his grave that the person sleeping here was a poor obscure man, without fame or fortune, one who was given to melancholy by nature; that he was a generous-hearted person who cried at other's sorrows; that he had acquired a fair amount of knowledge, but was not ambitious. It was also written that he had no fear of people's judgment; he only trusted that God would know what his virtues and faults were, and treat him rightly when he went to His abode.