

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Gray spent most of his life as a scholar in Cambridge, and only later in his life did he begin travelling again. Although he was one of the least productive poets (his collected works published during his lifetime amount to less than 1,000 lines), he was, besides William Collins (1721 - 1759), the predominant poetic figure of the middle decades of the 18th century. In 1757, he was offered the post of Poet Laureate, which he refused. In 1768 he succeeded Lawrence Brockett as Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, a sinecure.

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.

In a simple sense elegy is a poem of lamentation in which a mourner mourns the death of his near and dear one. The elegiac tradition dates back to the Anglo-Saxon period. It was a serious meditative poetic form that complained the passing of earlier better times. Later, Christian beliefs were introduced in this tradition. Then the elegy has been used to lament the death of a particular person. If we analysis famous elegies in English literature we can trace some conventions that are usually followed in them. Thus, while a sense of loss is prevalent in an elegy there is also closing consolation. A close look at Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" will reveal that it is an elegy in the true sense of the term. The elegy is certainly the most complete of Gray's works and the greatest poem of the mid-century.

The opening of the elegy is in keeping with the elegiac tradition. The poet is in a country churchyard. It is an approaching evening. The poet hears the evening-bell

ringing, making the end of the day. The Ploughman's day is over and now tired, he is now returning home. The herds are going back to their shelter. In this way the poet is left alone in the scene. Such words as curfew, tolls, knells, and parting day refer to a burial ceremony. A melancholy tone is made up by a careful choice of details and slow movement. For instance, in the first line the accents of the iambic verse echo the tolling of the bell.

Time and place are conducive of meditation and Gray laments the death of the forefathers of the hamlet. The sight of the tombs calls up in the poet's mind images and sounds of humble country life, the noise of animals, the villagers, home coming, their farming and their vigorous wood-cutting. These images make Gray meditate on the leveling power of death. This slips away human difference. From his realization the poet says that "paths of glory lead but to the grave" the villager's life had been uneventful. But their work had been useful, so the people have no right to despise them, even if they haven't had solemn burial ceremonies or a monument to keep their memory alive.

Gray laments not only the death of the "rude forefathers of the hamlet" but also their unfulfilled potentialities. These people were very promising but poverty blocked the fulfillment of their power. In this place may be a person who might have become a leader like Cromwell or a poet like Milton. The poet compares them with the gem like the sea's wealth which was lying under the sea.

However, while lamenting the fate of these people, Gray finds a consolation too. Although poverty prevents their success, it also prevents them from doing any wicked deeds. Then hamlets fate prevents them from seizing power through slaughters and from falling victims to lust and corruption. The poet focusing again on the humble tombs which nevertheless require a little remembrance, as it is natural that those who are dying hope on living in their beloved's memory.

In Gray's elegy the sequence of thought progresses from the general to the particular. Thus, he ponders on his own death. It may be that a spirit similar to his will come and ask after him. In that case an old shepherd may give an account of the poet's life. As he will be already buried under an old hawthorn, the epitaph, which is written but the poet himself and sums up the poet's life, may still be read. It shows he like a man of low birth unknown and melancholy but generous and sincere blessed with a friend.

In the poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" the poet laments the death of all people. He laments the inevitability of death on this earth. At the same time, the illiteracy made the promise of these dead people 'unfulfilled'. The poem ends

with an epitaph for a particular person, the poet himself. The poet finds consolation through his Christian belief in God. Considering all these, the poem can fairly be term as an elegy.

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is written in heroic quatrains. A quatrain is a four-line stanza. Heroic quatrains rhyme in an ab, ab 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. Consider, for instance, the first line of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard":
"The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day."

Over the years, Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" has received extensive critical attention. Critics have long recognized Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" for its restrained and dignified expression of simple truths. In *Lives of the English Poets*, Samuel Johnson praised the poem for its universal appeal and its originality: "The 'Churchyard' abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo are to me original.... Had Gray written often thus, it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him."

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.