

# ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD

BY

THOMAS GREY



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## About The Poet: Thomas Grey

### BORN

December 26, 1716

London, England

### DIED

July 30, 1771 (aged 54)

Cambridge, England

### NOTABLE WORKS

“An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard”

“Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College”

“The Bard”

“The Progress of Poesy”

### MOVEMENT / STYLE

graveyard school

## Author Biography

Born in the Cornhill district of London in 1716, Gray was the son of Dorothy Antrobus Gray, a milliner, and Philip Gray, a scrivener. Gray's father was a mentally disturbed and violent man who at times abused his wife. Gray attended Eton School from 1725 until 1734, when he entered Cambridge University. He left Cambridge in 1738 without taking a degree, intending to study law in London. However, he and childhood friend Horace Walpole embarked on an extended tour of Europe. The two separated in Italy in 1741 after a quarrel, and Gray continued the journey on his own. He returned to London later in the year, shortly before his father died. Gray then moved with his mother to Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire, and began his most productive period of poetic composition. In 1742 Gray wrote his first major poem, “Ode on the Spring,” which he sent to his close friend Richard West—unknowingly on the very day of West's death from tuberculosis. In the next three months Gray wrote “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” “Hymn to Adversity,” and “Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West.” It is believed that he also worked on “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” during this time, though this poem was not published until 1751. Gray returned to Cambridge at the end of 1742 and received a Bachelor of Civil Law degree the next year. Gray lived at the university for most of the rest of his life, but he never took part in tutoring, lecturing, or other academic duties; instead he pursued his studies and writing, taking advantage of the intellectual stimulation of the setting. In 1757 Gray was offered the position of Poet Laureate, but he declined it. He moved to London in 1759 to study at the British Museum and remained there for two years. He read widely and earned a reputation as one of the most learned men in Europe. Except for regular trips back to London and elsewhere in England, Gray stayed in Cambridge from 1761 until the end of his life. In 1768 Gray was named Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, an office he held until his death in 1771.

## Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard by Thomas Gray

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.

The poem is an elegy of the common man. It is Gray's masterpiece. The poem is philosophical and emotional at the same time. The beauty of the poem lies in its simplicity. Nonetheless, the poet brings out the ultimate truth about life and death in free-flowing poetic lines.

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

Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," presents the omniscient speaker who talks to the reader. First, he stands alone in a graveyard deep in thought. While there, he thinks about the dead people buried there. The graveyard referred to here is the graveyard of the church in Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire. The speaker contemplates the end of human life throughout the poem. He remarks on the inevitability of death that every individual has to face.

Besides mourning the loss of someone, the speaker in the elegy reminds the reader that all people will die one day. Death is an unavoidable and natural thing in everyone's life. When one dies today, tomorrow, a stranger will see the person's tombstone. Out of curiosity, he will ask about the person buried there to a villager. The villager will reply that he knew the man. He would add that he had seen him in various spots. Sometimes, he will also remark that he had stopped seeing the man one day, and then there was the tombstone.

In the poem, Gray, the poet himself, writes the epitaph of his own. He says that his life is full of sadness and depression. However, he feels proud of his knowledge. He calls it incomparable. In addition to this, he says that 'No one is perfect in this world.' So, he asks the reader not to judge anyone in the graveyard. Each and every soul is different and takes rest for eternity in the graveyard. In conclusion, the poet, through the speaker, ends the elegy by saying that death is an inevitable event in this world. Also, he says that man's efforts and his struggles to succeed in life comes to an end in death. Thus, death conquers man regardless of his successes and/or failures in his endeavors during his life.

### **Analysis of Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard**

#### **Stanzas 1 – 4**

As it opens, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," begins with the description of the evening in a rural place. The evening church bell tells the passing of the day. Cattle bleed as they turn homewards. Tired farmers also follow. Darkness begins to cover the world. The speaker, that is, the poet is standing in a graveyard. All is quiet and. Only the beadle buzzes and the owl hoots. Among a group of elm trees, there is the graveyard. It belongs to the village. There are burials of the villagers' ancestors in the graveyard.

#### **Stanzas 5 – 8**

In these stanzas of "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," the poet goes on to talk about the people buried in the graveyard. They are sleeping in beds that are low to the ground. No sound can wake them up. The twittering of the swallow, the morning call of the cock, even a horn cannot wake them. Their wives and their children, nobody care for them anymore. They were hard-working men when they were alive. Their plowing, their harvesting, and their farming, all were efficient. The speaker asks not to look down upon their simple life and hard work. Ambitious people think of village life as simple. But the villagers had their joy and sorrow much like others.

#### **Stanzas 9 – 12**

Also, the poet says that the poor are not inferior to the rich in death. Invariably, every human life ends in death. The beauty, the wealth, the glory all lead to the unavoidable end. The villager's grave does not have the grandness in ceremonies and tombstones. But, none of that can bring a person back to life. So, there is no use of them. One should remember that no one knew that one of the dead villagers may have achieved greatness in life. Therefore, there may be a ruler or a poet buried in there.

#### **Stanzas 13 – 16**

In these stanzas, the poet remarks, the villagers who were dead would also have talent. There might be a Milton or a Cromwell buried there. They did not get opportunities to prove themselves. Like gems hidden deep under the ocean and like desert flowers, they have perished without notice. Given opportunities, they would have also succeeded. People would have read their deeds in history.

#### Stanzas 17 – 20

To put the content of these stanzas in a nutshell, the villagers did not wish to involve in treachery and deceit. They were honest people and wished to lead simple lives. So, they kept themselves away from the mad crowd of the cities and kingdoms. They were true to themselves. They liked peace and honesty. But still, there were markings to note their memory. The tombstones were simple. The language was ordinary. But, there is truth in their memory.

#### Stanzas 21 – 24

The dead villagers rest in the graveyard without recognition. Also, this poem will be a tribute to them. They lived their lives with morals. They died in the care of a loving person. And, they closed their eyes with prayers in one's eyes. One day, a kind soul may come and enquire after the dead one out of curiosity.

#### Stanzas 25 – 29

If someone asks about the poet who rests in the graveyard, one of the villagers may talk about him. A free-spirited man was the poet. He went to the mountains in the morning, stood under the beach tree sometimes. Then, he went to the brook. Besides, he was sometimes muttering his fancies. The villager would say that he missed seeing the man one day. The poet was missing. The villager did not see him in his usual places. But, he saw the funeral procession and how the man was buried in the graveyard

#### Stanzas 30 – 33

In this part of the poem, he says that his epitaph would read thus: Here lies the young man who was not popular. His life was full of sorrow. Knowledge was his only wealth. He gave his life to misery and all he longed was for a friend to support. One need not look away to know about him. All that he did lies with him, close to god in the lap of earth.

## Themes in Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

The poem, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", speaks of ordinary people. It is an elegy for poor villagers. They are not famous but they are honest. So, the poet has written this poem in honoring them. The poem talks about death as an equalizer. Rich or poor should end in death. Moreover, no man can escape death. In death, all are equal. Besides, nothing including any amount of rich or glory can bring the dead to life. Even poor people deserve respect for their death. Given opportunities, they would have become great men in their times.

### 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 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."

### **Setting of Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard**

As far as the setting and mood go, the time is evening and every living being on earth is retiring for the night. As the poem opens, the speaker is seen at the churchyard; he hears the usual evening sounds. The church bell is ringing. The shepherds and their cattle are returning home after the day's work. The location is rural. The atmosphere is subdued and melancholic. Darkness and silence fill the place except for the hooting of the owl, the buzz of the beetle, and the ringing of the bells. Regardless of all this gloom, the speaker stands in the middle of tombstones in the graveyard. And while there, he imagines the lives of the dead people who silently sleep there.

### **Form and Style of Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard**

#### **Elegy :**

Elegy is a form of literature that can be defined as a poem or song in the form of elegiac couplets, written in honor of someone deceased. It typically laments or mourns the death of the individual.

Elegy is derived from the Greek word *elegus*, which means a song of bereavement sung along with a flute. The forms of elegy we see today were introduced in the 16th century. *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, by Thomas Gray, and *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, by Walt Whitman are the two most popular examples of elegy.

Elegy, meditative lyric poem lamenting the death of a public personage or of a friend or loved one; by extension, any reflective lyric on the broader theme of human mortality. In classical literature an elegy was simply any poem written in the elegiac metre (alternating lines of



dactylic hexameter and pentameter) and was not restricted as to subject. Though some classical elegies were laments, many others were love poems. In some modern literatures, such as German, in which the classical elegiac metre has been adapted to the language, the term elegy refers to this metre, rather than to the poem's content. Thus, Rainer Maria Rilke's famous *Duineser Elegien* (*Duino Elegies*) are not laments; they deal with the poet's search for spiritual values in an alien universe. But in English literature since the 16th century, an elegy has come to mean a poem of lamentation. It may be written in any metre the poet chooses.

A distinct kind of elegy is the pastoral elegy, which borrows the classical convention of representing its subject as an idealized shepherd in an idealized pastoral background and follows a rather formal pattern. It begins with an expression of grief and an invocation to the Muse to aid the poet in expressing his suffering. It usually contains a funeral procession, a description of sympathetic mourning throughout nature, and musings on the unkindness of death. It ends with acceptance, often a very affirmative justification, of nature's law. The outstanding example of the English pastoral elegy is John Milton's "Lycidas" (1638), written on the death of Edward King, a college friend. Other notable pastoral elegies are Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Adonais" (1821), on the death of the poet John Keats, and Matthew Arnold's "Thyrsis" (1867), on the death of the poet Arthur Hugh Clough.

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is written in heroic quatrains. A quatrain is a four-line 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. Consider, for instance, the first line of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard":

*The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day.*

When we scan the line, or identify its stresses, it appears as follows:

TheCur / few tolls / the knell / of part / ing day.

Try reading the line aloud: its regular, steady rhythm helps to create a calm and quiet mood—one appropriate to the meditative nature of this poem.

The poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" consists of 33 stanzas. Each stanza has four lines. As an elegy, this poem mourns the death of ordinary men. In this poem, Gray talks about the death and the lives of the middle-class people, the poem follows all the conventions of the elegiac tradition. Scholars look at this poem as a representative piece of literature for the genre of elegy.

To begin with, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” has heroic quatrains as stanzas. Four lines with iambic pentameter constitute each stanza. A pentameter consists of ten syllables. Also, the first and the third lines rhyme at the ending; the second and the fourth line rhyme at the ending of each stanza. Secondly, the rhyming scheme is abab, cdcd, efef, ... Thirdly and most importantly, the poem follows the conventions of an elegy. There is a pastoral setting; however, there are no pastoral characters. The poem ends in the poet’s own epitaph. In addition to its great content, the poem has beautifully executed figures of speech in the stanza that talks about ‘hidden gems’ and ‘desert flowers’.

### **Critical Overview**

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.” Other writers, such as Samuel Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, also admired the work, although Arnold’s criticism was somewhat cautious. Arnold noted in his *Essays in Criticism* that “the ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ is a beautiful poem ... But it is true that the ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ owe[s] much of its success to its subject, and that it has received a too unmeasured and unbounded praise.”

In the twentieth century, critics have often observed two competing “voices” or attitudes in Gray’s writings. Joseph Wood Krutch, in his introduction to *The Selected Letters of Thomas Gray*, offers a useful comparison of the classical and Romantic tendencies in the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” Krutch maintains that there are certainly strong romantic qualities in the poem, but that it is more clearly identifiable with the eighteenth century: “there is nothing mystical, at least nothing transcendental, in the ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.’ It is everywhere stubbornly rational, even in its melancholy. The simple life, even the life close to nature, is good because it is healthful and free from great temptation, not because God dwells in a sunset.” In more recent years, critical attention has been focused on Gray’s complex use of language. Some critics have noted a degree of ambiguity in Gray’s syntax. One critic, W. Hutchings, argues in an essay in *Studies in Philology* that this ambiguity tends to “undermine” the apparently secure or simple universe that Gray has depicted. Hutchings notes, “there is an

extraordinary degree of instability about [the 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'], one which often expresses itself by making its syntax fluid, even indeterminate. Far from being something to be amended or ignored, this quality is the key to the 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.'" We notice, then, a transformation in the way in which this poem has been viewed: early critics tended to praise the poem for its simple truths; more recent critics, however, have begun to wonder if underneath these apparently simple truths there are more troubling questions.

#### Important Questions for University Examination

1. What is the significance of the epitaph in the poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"?
2. What are some figures of speech in Thomas Gray's poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"?
3. Analyse the poem Elegy written in a Country Churchyard.

Or

Write a summary of the poem Elegy written in a Country Churchyard.

or

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

Or

Make a critical analysis of the Poem Elegy written in a Country Churchyard by Thomas Grey

4. Discuss the major themes that are correlated by Thomas Gray in "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."
5. What is Gray's attitude toward death in "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard?"

or

How is the theme of Death and

6. What is Elegy? Discuss the term Elegy with reference to Elegy written in a Country Churchyard by Thomas Grey.

Or

What is the elegiac tone in "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" by Thomas Gray?

Or

How does the form and structure of "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" shape meaning?

7. What are some neo-classical features in Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"?
8. How did Gray treat nature in Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard?
9. What is Gray's attitude toward the people buried in the cemetery? Toward the rich? Toward the poor?
10. What are the romantic features that can be traced in Thomas Grays's Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard?