



“Elegy Written in a Country  
Churchyard” by Thomas Gray

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# Acknowledgements

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- Jack, Belinda. "Poetry & Remembrance: Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." Lecture presented at the Museum of London. April 14, 2015. Youtube video, 47:12. Posted May 15, 2015.  
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# Timeline

TARDIS, commissioned to transport Eng. Lit. students to various points in the past to study the works of literature from those eras



1 AD

5<sup>th</sup> cent. BC



18<sup>th</sup> cent.



Thomas Gray (1716-1771)



Present

# Bite as much as you can chew

- Gray's elegy is a long poem: there are 32 stanzas (including the epitaph at the end) and each of them is four lines long (total:  $32 \times 4 = 128$  lines)
- So let us try to divide the poem into sections according to what the poet talks about in each of them and how he develops his arguments across the length of the poem

# Section 1: Introductory stanzas

The first three stanzas establish the setting; they set the poem and the poet/speaker in a rural ("country") graveyard, at the end of the day ("curfew", "parting day", "darkness", etc.). The poet/speaker is alone

1

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,

The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea,  
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,

And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

2

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,

And all the air a solemn stillness holds,  
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,

And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds:

3

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower

The moping owl does to the moon complain  
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,  
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

## Section 2: The dead villagers

**Section 2 comprises stanzas 4-7. The fourth stanza introduces the dead villagers who lie in coffins in the graveyard. The fifth and sixth talk about what their absence means.**

4

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,  
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

5

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.

6

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.

## Section 2 (continued)

The seventh stanza talks about what the dead villagers (“the rude forefathers of the hamlet”) used to do when they lived. As humble men, they carried out humble tasks, such as

- i) Harvesting
- ii) Clearing the fields and farming (with furrows, and with a team of men and animals)
- iv) Cutting down forests.

7

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,

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!

The description of humble tasks will lead to a meditation in the next section on how ambition can (but should not) mock the villagers, untouched by grandeur, power, beauty, etc., followed by the realization, the rich and the poor alike must die

## Section 3 (Stanzas 8-11): All must die

8

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.

9

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

10

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.

11

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



## Section 4: Fame thwarted

**Stanzas 12-14 talk about the ways in which the humble villagers might have been prevented from being famous and achieving glory**

12

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 waked to ecstasy the living lyre:

13

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.

14

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.

# Section 5: Unknown but innocent

**Stanzas 15-19 are about how the villagers might have failed to achieve fame but did not at least cause any great harm. To illustrate the point, Gray namechecks famous Englishmen such as:**

**1. John Hampden**, a member of Parliament under King Charles I. Hampden refused to pay a tax on his ships because he believed that it was unfair. He became one of the Five Members of Parliament that King Charles illegally tried to arrest for their dissension. Hampden's arrest in 1642 helped spark the English Civil War.

**2. John Milton**. During the English Civil War, Milton was a statesman who served under Oliver Cromwell. He wrote treatises supporting the revolution and justifying the execution of Charles I, despite the King's status as a divine right monarch.

**3. Oliver Cromwell**, leader of the Parliamentary forces against Charles I, and, later, Lord Protector of England during what is known as the Commonwealth Interregnum. Gray believed that Cromwell was guilty of a great deal of bloodshed, but in the poem he suggests there might be a "guiltless" Cromwell in the graveyard.

## Section 5 (Stanza 15)

15

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.

**When thinking about famous Englishmen, Gray only talks about those who opposed the King in the Civil Wars about a hundred years before his elegy was composed.**

**The English Civil Wars (1642–51): the fighting that took place in the British Isles between supporters of the monarchy of Charles I (and his son and successor, Charles II) and opposing groups in each of Charles's kingdoms, including:**

- i) Parliamentarians in England (Hampden, Milton and Cromwell belonged to this group)**
- ii) Covenanters in Scotland**
- and iii) Confederates in Ireland**

# Stanzas 16-19: The harmless villagers

16

Th' applause of listening senates 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

17

Their lot forbad: nor circumscribed alone  
Their growing virtues, but their crimes  
confined;  
Forbad to wade through slaughter to a throne,  
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind;

18

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

19

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 tenour of their way.

## Section 6: Memorials & memory

Section 6 comprises stanzas 20-23. It is about the humble memorials erected on the graves of the villagers and what they mean. Like the dead whom they commemorate, these memorials are artless (decked with “uncouth rhymes” and “shapeless sculpture”). All they have in place of poetic eulogies are the names and years of the dead villagers, and quotations from the scriptures (“holy text”). However, their aim is the same as that of any grand memorial: to remind the living of the dead.

20

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

21

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.

## Section 6 (contd.): Stanzas 22-23

The memorials, even if humble and unsophisticated, leave their mark on the consciousness of the living. This brings in another point that the poet/speaker will expand on in the next few stanzas: the dead (“the parting soul”) must depend (“rely”) on the empathy of the future generations to remember them. So the poet/speaker himself, if were to be remembered after he is dead and gone, must introduce another character apart from himself to do that for him (see below for an explanation).

22

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?

23

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.

## Section 7: With a little help from friends

**In stanzas 24-29, the poet/speaker first addresses himself (“thee, who...dost in these lines...”) and then adds another voice, of an old villager (“hoary-headed swain”) and goes on to imagine what that man may say when the poet is dead.**

24

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 enquire thy fate, —

25

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

26

‘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 brook that babbles by.

## Section 7 (contd.): The villager's tale

The quotation mark at the start of each stanza points out that these lines are someone else's (the old villager), who remembers the poet when he lived till the point when he is dead and carried to the church.

27

'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.

28

'One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,  
Along the heath, and near his favourite  
tree;

Another came; nor yet beside the rill,  
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

29

'The next with dirges due in sad array  
Slow through the church-way path we saw  
him borne, —  
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the  
lay  
Graved on the stone beneath yon agèd  
thorn:'



## Section 8: The poet's epitaph

The last section of the poem, stanzas 30-32, are the epitaph the poet imagines for himself (remember the poet had already imagined himself dead and being carried to the church in the previous section).

30

### *The Epitaph*

Here rests 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.

31

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere;  
Heaven did a recompense as largely send:  
He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,  
He gain'd from Heaven, 'twas all he  
wish'd, a friend.

32

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

# The personal angle

- Thomas Gray was born in London
- His father was a scrivener (someone who arranged loans)
- His mother and her sister (Gray's aunt) were milliners (i.e. they sold women's hats)
- Gray was the fifth of twelve children, but **the only one who survived**

# What kind of an elegy is it?

- The poem identifies itself as an elegy (see the title, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”).
- Let us look at the various definitions of elegy and see where and how Gray’s poem fits into them.

# The origins of the term 'elegy'

In Greek and Latin verse, the term referred to the metre of a poem (alternating dactylic hexameters and pentameters), not to its mood or content: love poems were often included. Gray knew enough Latin to write poems in the language while at Cambridge.

- However, Gray's poem is written in iambic pentameter; it is divided into heroic quatrains, rhyming abab.

# 'Elegy' in English literature

Since Milton's "Lycidas" (1637), the term in English has usually denoted a lament (in the sense of a poem expressing profound grief or mournful regret for the loss of some person, often a friend or a public figure)

- But Gray's poem does not mourn any single person, but all men, including himself.

# So is Gray's elegy an elegy at all?

- Look at the last part of the modern definition of elegy

“Elegy is an elaborately formal lyric poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure, or **reflecting seriously on a solemn subject.**”

— *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*

## It is an elegy after all

- In that broader sense (of reflecting seriously on a solemn subject), an elegy may be a poem of melancholy reflection upon life's transience or its sorrows, as in Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751)

# What about the women?

- Unfortunately, Gray only seems worried about the transience of male lives; the only women who are mentioned in the poem are the wives of the departed. Leaving them aside, all the rest – the dead and the living, the humble and the famous, the insignificant and those who are important enough to be considered part of the life of the nation – are men. From that point of view, Gray's elegy is a very male-centric poem that pays scant attention to women, who form one half of society.



# Appendix-1: Elegy

- **Elegy**, an elaborately formal lyric poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure, or reflecting seriously on a solemn subject. In Greek and Latin verse, the term referred to the metre of a poem (alternating dactylic hexameters and pentameters in couplets...), not to its mood or content: love poems were often included. Likewise, John Donne applied the term to his amorous and satirical poems in heroic couplets [a rhymed pair of iambic pentameters). But since Milton's "Lycidas" (1637), the term in English has usually denoted a lament (although Milton called his poem a 'monody'), while the adjective 'elegiac' has come to refer to the mournful mood of such poems....

## Appendix-1 (contd.)

- ...Tennyson's *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850) is a long series of elegiac verses (in the modern sense) on his friend Arthur Hallam, while Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865) commemorates a public figure – Abraham Lincoln – rather than a friend; Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1939) does the same. In a broader sense, an elegy may be a poem of melancholy reflection upon life's transience or its sorrows, as in Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751).... The elegiac stanza is a quatrain of iambic pentameters rhyming abab, named after its use in Gray's *Elegy*. In an extended sense, a prose work dealing with a vanished way of life or with the passing of youth may sometimes be called an elegy.

## Appendix-2: Epitaph ≠ Elegy

- **Epitaph:** A form of words in prose or verse suited for inscription on a tomb – although many facetious verses composed as epitaphs have not actually been inflicted on their victims' graves. Epitaphs may take the form of appeals from the dead to passers-by, or of descriptions of the dead person's merits.