

## 2. An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

(Thomas Gray)

### Introduction

Thomas Gray (1716-71) was a great scholar and poet. He did not write much but what he wrote remained a classic. Gray wrote when the 'heroic couplet', a poetic form had been made very famous by Dryden and Pope. But Gray chose to write in other verse forms. He was deeply interested in the lives of the poor people. He wrote Odes in the model of Pindar and as a classical scholar he wrote them well. But his fame rests mainly on the **Elegy**.

An elegy is a poem of mourning and praising of the dead. Elegies are written mourning the death of individuals. Milton's Lycidas, Shelley's **Adonais**, and Arnold's **Thyrsis** are examples of elegies. Gray's **Elegy** is not on any individual, but on the poor people buried in a village churchyard. Perhaps it is on the poor people of not a

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As their breath  
clough

Edward Young

particular village but any village in any part of the world. The poem talks more about the lack of opportunities for the villagers who might have become great, if given proper education and chances. Identifying himself with the anonymous villagers, the poet imagines his death and writes his own epitaph.

There is nothing new in the idea of Death the Leveller. But this idea remains true in all ages and it is this which adds charm to the poem.

The poem is in four-lined stanzas with the rhyme scheme **abab** and the rhythm is most suited to elegiac and reflective poetry.

## Meanings

**Curfew** – bell rung in the evening warning people to put out fire; **knell** – the ringing of the bell; **herd** – herd of cattle; **lea** – grassland; **plod** – move slowly; **weary way** – the farmer is weary and not the way; **save** – except; **moping** – sad; **molest** – disturb; **rude** – rustic, uneducated; **hamlet** – small village; **incense breathing morn** – morning hour filled with sweet smell of flowers; **horn** – blowing of the horn by the hunters; **ply** – attended to; **lisp** – speak as a child would speak; **stubborn glebe** – hard soil; **jocund** – happy; **sturdy** – hard; **trophies** – (here) memorials; **animated bust** – figure of someone in sculpture so life-like; **provoke** – activate; **celestial** – heavenly; **ecstasy** – great joy; **chill penury** – cold poverty; **rage** – (here) enthusiasm; **Hampden** – John Hampden was a patriot who opposed Charles the First's levy of ship money; **Cromwell** – Oliver Cromwell was the leader of the Parliamentary party during the Civil War against King Charles I. Cromwell became the Lord Protector during the Commonwealth period; **ingenuous** – innocent, natural; **sequestered** – separated, lonely; **thee** – you (here) the poet is addressing himself; **wane** – pale-looking; **Science** – knowledge; **melancholy** – gloomy frame of mind; **a friend** – (here) Richard West; **frailties** – weaknesses.

## PARAPHRASE

The sound of curfew seems to ring the bell for the death of day (and the night coming on). The cattle, making the usual noise move

slowly over the pastureland. The farmer, tired, moves homeward very slowly. The poet is alone in the darkness.

It is getting dark and the landscape becomes less visible. There seems to be a kind of serious silence in the whole atmosphere, except for the droning noise made by the beetle and the sound of the bells tied to the neck of the sleeping sheep in distant sheep folds.

One can also hear the hooting of the owl from the distant tower on which ivy grows. The gloomy owl is complaining to the moon for wandering very near her old nest. The owl feels her nest is in a secret place and she has been ruling the place for long. She does not want her reign to be disturbed.

Under the rough elms, in the shade of the yew trees, where grass grows on heaps of loose soil, each in his narrow grave the illiterate ancestors of the villagers are laid to rest.

The sweet-smelling morning breeze or the twittering of the swallows from the straw-built shed or the cock's shrill crowing or the blowing of the hunters' horn will never wake them from their humble grave.

The house fire will not burn to warm them anymore. The mistress of the house will not be attending to their needs anymore. No children will run indoors to announce in childish accents the arrival of the father. Nor will they climb his knees to share the kiss from father.

When alive, the villagers had harvested the field with the sickle and ploughed deep the unyielding hard soil. They drove their team of cattle quite merrily. The trees bowed to their hard stroke while cutting wood.

The poet does not want ambitious people to mock at the humble but useful work of the villagers, their simple joy and their not-well-known life. He does not want men living grandly listen to the short and simple life of the villagers with a contemptuous smile on their face.

Men boast of their nobility. They show off their power. These, and whatever beauty and wealth have given, wait for the unavoidable hour of death. Nobility, power, wealth and beauty have the same end. The paths of glory lead only to the grave.

Addressing himself to the proud people, the poet says they should not find fault with the poor villagers for not raising memorials in praise of their dead. One may not find well carved tombstones for

the dead villagers raised, while walking through the long aisle of the church which has a decorated roof, and where one can hear the song in praise of Lord.

What use are memorials, asks the poet. Can a memorial urn with carved figures or a life-like bust of the dead person bring back his breath? The respectful terms which one uses to address some big man may not be able to rouse to life when the big man is dead. If one uses flattery to Death it will not prevent him from taking his toll. (Here Death is personified).

Perhaps, says the poet, in this neglected part of the earth, in this less known village churchyard may lie some villager who had the heavenly fire in his heart. Someone worthy enough to rule an empire with a sceptre in his hand may be lying buried there. Someone who is capable of playing on some musical instrument to send audiences to ecstasy might be lying buried in the village.

But knowledge did not unroll her page rich through ages to the poor villagers. (In other words they did not get a chance to be educated). Poverty stopped their enthusiasm and the flow of their natural cheerfulness. (Being poor the villagers were unlearned and many of their natural good qualities did not develop properly).

Many precious stones of pure brightness lie hidden in the dark caves of the ocean unreached by man. Many flowers bloom and waste their sweet smell in some unknown region. So are the villagers, poor and illiterate.

Someone might be lying there buried who opposed tyranny like Hampden did. Some who could have become a great a poet as Milton might be lying buried in the country churchyard. It might be someone who is capable of organizing people against the King as Cromwell did lying buried in the churchyard. (Cromwell, was of course, guilty of shedding the blood of his countrymen).

Being poor and illiterate they got no chance to preside over huge law-making bodies and make speeches. They got no opportunity to show heroism by ignoring any threat of pain and ruin. They did not get a chance to make a country richer through their able rule, and read their progress in the nation's growth.

If their condition prevented them from doing great things it also prevented them from doing certain evils. They were prevented from

wading through the blood of their slaughter to gain power. They did not in their search for power act unmercifully towards fellow human beings.

Their condition prevented them from hiding truth which tries to declare itself to the world. It also prevented them from acting shamelessly. It prevented them from using the art of poetry to praise wealthy and proud people.

They lived far away from the common people and their wretched quarrels. Their desires were modest and they did not go on the wrong path. In the quiet and lonely path of life they lived noiselessly.

The graves were not without memorials. To protect the bones of the dead villagers from any show of disrespect some ordinary kind of memorial was erected. Of course the sculpture of the memorial was shapeless and the verse written showed the lack of education of the villagers. The epitaph asked the passerby to pay tribute of a sigh to the dead person.

On the memorial is written the name and the age of the dead person, perhaps wrongly spelt by the village stone cutter who is illiterate. This is only carved by way of elegy, nothing else. Many quotations from the Holy Bible are carved too on the memorial. The texts have to deal with man's need to meet death with peace.

Life is full of cares but is also filled with pleasures. Who would like to give up life (die) and be forgotten by everybody? Who would like to leave the warm and cheerful world without looking back at everything they are leaving? (This is the reason why memorials are built).

The dying man relies on someone who loves him to remember him even after death. The dying person expects someone to shed tears for him. Even when we are reduced to dust and ashes the desire to be remembered cries out from the grave.

(It is customary for the elegiac poet to think about his own fate after mourning the death of his subject). Gray addresses himself and says that he has been quite concerned about the poor illiterate villagers and told their simple life in the above lines. If by chance someone asks about his (Gray's) fate what will be the answer he gets?

Some gray haired villager will say that they have often seen him at dawn, walking quickly brushing the dew on the grass to meet the sun rising behind the slope.

At the foot of the beech tree there whose roots are seen much above the ground, he will stretch himself lazily at noon and go on looking at the stream that is flowing by.

In the forest nearby one can see him walking with an ironic smile on his face, or muttering something to himself. He will walk with a droop as if in sorrow. He will walk like one who is hopeless or become mad with care, or failed in love.

One morning, the villager would say, he missed him at the usual hill or the heath or the usual beech tree. Another day came and he was not seen by the side of stream, or up the lawn or the forest.

On the next day morning, the villager would say, he saw him (the poet) borne in a coffin with the singing of the funeral song. The villager would ask the person who enquired about the poet to go near the tomb and read the memorial verses written on it. The tomb is under the old hawthorn tree.

The epitaph reads as follows: (Gray writes his own eiptaph).

Here rests upon the lap of the earth his head a youth (the poet) who is not known to Fortune and Fame. His humble birth did not prevent him from gaining knowledge. He was by nature a melancholic fellow.

He was generous by nature and sincere in his soul to help the poor. He gave the poor all he had, and he did not have much to give except tears by way of sympathy. He was well rewarded by Heaven for his sincerity of soul. He got a friend (Richard West) and that was all he wanted.

Do not try to know more about his merits or weaknesses. They are waiting trembling in God's bosom, waiting for God's Judgement.