

A Symbol of Death in Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

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Abstract

Elegy written in a country churchyard poem written by Thomas Gray which is an elegy written on mourning for the death of his friend Horace Walpole. Where the death has been symbolized, that death never knows the difference between rich and the poor; it is common for all. And also it is general, on one day everybody should face the death. According to Gray, if a man remembers death everyday he will follow a good path in his life. He mourns for the death his friend in the beginning stanzas. Later, he realizes that death is common and everybody should undergo it; when their time comes.

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Introduction

Thomas Gray (1716- 1771), born into a prosperous but unhappy home, Gray was the sole survivor of 12 children of a harsh and violent father and a long-suffering mother, who operated a millinery business to educate him. A delicate and studious boy, he was sent to Eton in 1725 at the age of eight. Horace Walpole , the son of the prime minister; the precocious poet Richard West, who was closest to Gray; and Thomas Ashton. The style of life Gray developed at Eton, devoted to quiet study, the pleasures of the imagination, and a few understanding friends, was to persist for the rest of his years.

In 1742, Gray settled at Cambridge. That same year west died ,an event that affected him profoundly. Gray had begun to write English poems, among which some of the best were *Ode on the spring*, *Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West*, *Hymn to Adversity*, and *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*. They revealed his maturity, ease and felicity of expression, wistful melancholy, and the ability to phrase truisms in striking, quotable lines, such as *where ignorance is bliss, Tis folly to be wise*. *The Eton ode* was published in 1747.

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 Neo classical poetry. It tends toward the emotionalism and individualism of the Romantic poets; most importantly, it idealizes and elevates the common man.

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. "The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep. The breezyNo more shall rouse them from their lowly bed." (*Elegy written in a country churchyard* 7).

In 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 this lines, "Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?"

On some fond breast the parting soul relies, Some pious drops the closing eye requires;" (*Elegy written in a country churchyard* 12) the poet explains, Some pious drops the closing eye requires, explaining that the living should show their respect for death with their sorrow.

In *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*, Thomas Gray demonstrates deep thoughts on the death and class in society with many perspectives. Also the use of powerful symbols and thoughts alerts the readers about the death. It is recommended to visit graveyards every so often in my country to remember death, to know that you will not live forever. Because the one who remembers death , would thing of god more often and would end up doing more good deeds than bad. He would also be less likely to act arrogant, and more likely to be humble. One being an Ode, other being an elegy, the end is all the same.

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