

## 2<sup>nd</sup>-lecture

### Thomas Gray's "*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*"

#### Summary

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.

To read the poem without analysis, click [here](#). You can also read more [poems by Thomas Gray](#).

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

#### Stanzas 1 – 4

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
    The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,  
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,  
    And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

---

Now fades the glimm'ring 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;

---

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r

    The moping owl does to the moon complain

Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,

Molest her ancient solitary reign.

---

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,

Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,

Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,

The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

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

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,  
The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,  
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,  
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

---

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.

---

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!

---

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.

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

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow’r,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave,  
Awaits alike th’ inevitable hour.  
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

---

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,

If Mem’ry o’er their tomb no trophies raise,

Where thro’ the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault

The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

---

Can storied urn or animated bust

Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?

Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,

Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

---

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 wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre.

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

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.

---

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,

The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:

Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,

And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

---

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.

---

Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,

The threats of pain and ruin to despise,  
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,

And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes,

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

Their lot forbade: nor circumscrib'd alone  
    Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;  
Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,  
    And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

---

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.



---

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 tenor of their way.

---

Yet ev'n 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.

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

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.

---

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, ling'ring look behind?

---

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,

Some pious drops the closing eye requires;

Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,

Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

---

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 inquire thy fate,

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

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.

---

“There at the foot of yonder nodding beech

That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,

His listless length at noontide would he stretch,

And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

---

“Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,

Mutt’ring his wayward fancies he would rove,

Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,

Or craz’d with care, or cross’d in hopeless love.

---

“One morn I miss’d him on the custom’d hill,

Along the heath and near his fav’rite tree;

Another came; nor yet beside the rill,

Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

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

“The next with dirges due in sad array  
Slow thro’ the church-way path we saw him borne.  
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,  
Grav’d on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.”

---

## 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.*

---

*Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,*

*Heav’n did a recompense as largely send:*

*He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,*

*He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend.*

---

*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.*

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

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.

## Setting

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

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 lines 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'.