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"ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD"

BY THOMAS GRAY



UNIT OVERVIEW: The next author you will be studying is Thomas Gray. Thomas Gray wrote “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” a poem considered to be one of the best known in the English language. The content of the poem is based upon the lives and deaths of the poor and the obscure. The poem is filled with much description and detail, from the description of the countryside and the churchyard, to the speaker imagining the words carved on his own tombstone.



Now answer questions 1-5

Now let's read the poem...



Thomas Gray (1716-1771)

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

1 The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
2 The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
3 The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
 And leaves the world to darkness and to me.
4
5 Now fades the glimm'ring landscape on the sight,
6 And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
7 Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,

8 And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;
9 Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
10 The moping owl does to the moon complain
11 Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,
12 Molest her ancient solitary reign.
13 Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
14 Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
15 Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
16 The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.
17 The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
18 The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,
19 The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
20 No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.
 For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,

21

Or busy housewife ply her evening care:

22

No children run to lisp their sire's return,

23

Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

24

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,

25

Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;

26

How jocund did they drive their team afield!

27

How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

28

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,

29

Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;

30

Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile

31

The short and simple annals of the poor.

32

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,

33

And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,

34

Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.

35

36

The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

37

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

38

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

39

Where thro' the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault

40

The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

41

Can storied urn or animated bust

42

Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?

43

Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,

44

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

45

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid

46

Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;

Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,

47

Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre.

48

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page

49

Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;

50

Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,

51

And froze the genial current of the soul.

52

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,

53

The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:

54

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

55

And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

56

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast

57

The little tyrant of his fields withstood;

58

Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,

59

Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

60

Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,

61

The threats of pain and ruin to despise,

62

To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,

63

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

64

Their lot forbade: nor circumscrib'd alone

65

Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;

66

Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,

67

And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

68

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,

69

To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,

70

Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride

71

With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

72

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,

73

Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;

74

Along the cool sequester'd vale of life

75

They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

76

Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect,

77

Some frail memorial still erected nigh,

78

With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture
deck'd,

79

Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

80

Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd muse,

81

The place of fame and elegy supply:

82

And many a holy text around she strews,

83

That teach the rustic moralist to die.

84

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,

85

This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,

86

Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,

87

Nor cast one longing, ling'ring look behind?

88

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,

89

Some pious drops the closing eye requires;

90

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

91

Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

92

For thee, who mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead

93

Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;

94

If chance, by lonely contemplation led,

95

Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,

96

Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,

97

"Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn

98

Brushing with hasty steps the dews away

99

To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.

100

"There at the foot of yonder nodding beech

101

That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,

102

His listless length at noontide would he stretch,

103

And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

104

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

105

Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he would rove,

106

Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,

107

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

108

"One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,

109

Along the heath and near his fav'rite tree;

110

Another came; nor yet beside the rill,

111

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

112

"The next with dirges due in sad array

113

Slow thro' the church-way path we saw him borne

114

Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,

115

Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn."

116

THE EPITAPH

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth

117

A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.

118

Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,

119

And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.

120

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,

121

Heav'n did a recompense as largely send:

122

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

123

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

125 *No farther seek his merits to disclose,*

126 *Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,*

127 *(There they alike in trembling hope repose)*

128 *The bosom of his Father and his God.*

See the following website for a summary of the poem, click here:
<http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/ThoGray.html> or [PDF](#)
Notes and Annotation by Michael J. Cummings...© 2003



Now answer questions 6-15

See the following website for additional information about the author **Thomas Gray**:
<http://www.thomasgray.org/>