

Elegy Written In a Country Churchyard

By Thomas Gray (1716-1771)
With an Analysis and Annotated Text of the Great Poem

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Background

Author of the Poem: Thomas Gray (1716-1771)

Type of Poem: Elegy. An elegy is a somber poem or song that praises or laments the dead.

Key Dates: Gray began writing the poem in 1742, put it aside for a while, and finished it in 1750. He was meticulous; everything he wrote had to be just right. He believed that one imprecise word could ruin an entire work. Consequently, in "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," he labored on until all the words were right. The poem was published in [1751](#). Revised or altered versions of the poem appeared later, including [1753](#), [1758](#), [1768](#), and [1775](#).

Setting of the Poem: Churchyard at Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire, England. Gray was buried in that churchyard.

Format of the Poem: Four-line stanzas in iambic pentameter. In each stanza, the first line rhymes with the third and the second line rhymes with the fourth. This stanza form, earlier used by William Shakespeare and John Dryden, is called the heroic quatrain. (Quatrain—from the Latin word *quattuor*, meaning *four*—is defined as a four-line poem.) Because the poem is in iambic pentameter, each line in each stanza has 10 syllables. In each line, the first, third, fifth, seventh and ninth syllables are all unstressed while the second, fourth, sixth, eighth and tenth syllables are all stressed. The opening lines of the poem demonstrate the stressed/unstressed pattern.

.....The CUR few TOLLS the KNELL of PART ing DAY
.....The LOW ing HERD wind SLOW ly O'ER the LEA

After Gray's poem became famous, writers and critics began referring to the heroic quatrain as the elegiac stanza.

Status of the Poem: Scholars regard "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" as one of the greatest poems in the English language. It knits structure, rhyme scheme, imagery and message into a brilliant work that confers on Gray everlasting fame. The quality of its poetry and insights reach Shakespearean and Miltonian heights.

Themes: (1) Life is short, transitory, as Line 36 makes clear: *The paths of glory lead but to the grave.* (2) Because of poverty or other handicaps, many talented people never receive the opportunities they deserve. The following lines elucidate this theme through metaphors:

.....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.

Here, the gem at the bottom of the ocean may represent an undiscovered musician, poet, scientist or philosopher. The flower may likewise stand for a person of great and noble qualities that are "wasted on the desert air." Of course, on another level, the gem and the flower can stand for anything in life that goes unappreciated.

Biographical Information: Gray was born in London on December 26, 1716. He was the only one of 12 children who survived into adulthood. His father, Philip, a scrivener (a person copies text) was a cruel, violent man, but his mother, Dorothy, believed in her son and operated a millinery business to educate him at Eton school in his childhood and Peterhouse College, Cambridge, as a young man. But he left the college in 1738 without a degree to tour Europe with his friend, Horace Walpole, the son of the first prime minister of England, Robert Walpole (1676-1745). However, he did earn a degree in law although he never practiced in that profession. After achieving recognition as a poet, he refused to give public lectures because he was extremely shy. Nevertheless, he gained such widespread acclaim and respect that England offered him the post of poet laureate, which would make him official poet of the realm. However, he rejected the honor. Gray was that rare kind of person who cared little for fame and adulation.

Questions for Discussion: (1) Gray was the only one of 12 children who survived. Do you believe his dead brothers and sisters influenced him in the writing of his poem? (2) What is Gray's opinion of high-born persons vis-a-vis the low-born? (3) Comment on Gray's line, "The paths of glory lead but to the grave." (4) Read "Ozymandias," –a poem by another English writer, Percy Bysshe Shelley—and decide whether he agrees with Gray on the subject of glory.

Selected Poetry: Texts and commentary from the University of Toronto

Graveyard Poetry: The Gothic Literature Page explains how Gray influenced writers of Gothic literature

Samuel Johnson's Lives of the English Poets: Commentary from the great 18th Century scholar and literary critic

Gray's Family Life: Bartleby.com's overview of the Gray's life at home with a difficult father and a hard-working mother

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The Poem

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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,
4. And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Notes, Stanza 1 (1) *Curfew*: ringing bell in the evening that reminded people in English towns of Gray's time to put out fires and go to bed. (2) *Knell*: mournful sound. (3) *Parting day*: day's end; dying day; twilight; dusk. (4) *Lowing*: mooing. (5) *O'er*: contraction for *over*. (6) *Lea*: meadow.

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.

Notes, Stanza 2 (1) *Line 5*: The landscape becomes less and less visible. (2) *Save*: except. (3) *Beetle*: winged insect that occurs in more than 350,000 varieties. One type is the firefly, or lightning bug. (4) *Wheels*: verb meaning *flies in circles*. (5) *Droning*: humming; buzzing; monotonous sound. (6) *Drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds*: This clause apparently refers to the gentle sounds made by a bell around the neck of a castrated male sheep that leads other sheep. A castrated male sheep is called a *wether*. Such a sheep with a bell around its neck is called a *bellwether*. *Folds* is a noun referring to flocks of sheep.

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.

Notes, Stanza 3 (1) *Save*: except. (2) *Yonder*: distant; remote. (3) *Ivy-mantled*: cloaked, dressed, or adorned with ivy. (4) *Moping*: gloomy; grumbling. (5) *Of such*: of anything or anybody. (6) *Bow'r*: bower, an enclosure surrounded by plant growth—in this case, ivy. (7) *Molest her ancient solitary reign*: bother the owl while it keeps watch over the churchyard and countryside.

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.

Notes, Stanza 4 (1) *Mould'ring*: mouldering (British), moldering (American), ad adjective meaning decaying, crumbling. (2) *Cell*: grave. (3) *Rude*: robust; sturdy; hearty; stalwart. (4) *Hamlet*: village.

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.

Notes, Stanza 5 (1) *Breezy call of incense-breathing Morn*: wind carrying the pleasant smells of morning, including dewy grass and flowers. Notice that *Morn* is a personification. (It calls and breathes.) (2) *Swallow*: Insect-eating songbird that likes to perch. (3) *Clarion*: cock-a-doodle-doo. (4) *Echoing horn*: The words may refer to the sound made by a fox huntsman who blows a copper horn to which pack hounds respond.

21. For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
 22. Or busy housewife ply her evening care:
 23. No children run to lisp their sire's return,
 24. Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

Notes, Stanza 6 The meaning of all lines appears to be clear. However, students or researchers with a question about this stanza may query this site for further information by clicking [here](#).

25. Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
 26. Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
 27. How jocund did they drive their team afield!
 28. How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

Notes, Stanza 7 (1) *Sickle*: Harvesting tool with a handle and a crescent-shaped blade. Field hands swing it from right to left to cut down plant growth. (2) *Furrow*: channel or groove made by a plow for planting seeds. (3) *Glebe*: earth.

29. Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
 30. Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
 31. Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
 32. The short and simple annals of the poor.

Notes, Stanza 8 (1) *Ambition*: Personification referring to the desire to succeed or to ambitious people seeking lofty goals. (2) *Destiny obscure*: the humble fate of the common people; their unheralded deeds. (3) *Grandeur*: personification referring to people with wealth, social standing, and power. (4) *Annals*: historical records; story.

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

Notes, Stanza 9 (1) *Boast of heraldry*: Proud talk about the aristocratic or noble roots of one's family; snobbery. Heraldry was a science that traced family lines of royal and noble personages and designed coats of arms for them. (2) *Pomp*: ceremonies, rituals, and splendid surroundings of nobles and royals. (3) *General meaning of stanza*: Every person—no matter how important, powerful, or wealthy—ends up the same, dead.

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.

Notes, Stanza 10 (1) *Impute*: Assign, ascribe. (2) *Mem'ry*: Memory, a personification referring to memorials, commemorations, and tributes—including statues, headstones, and epitaphs—used to preserve the memory of important or privileged people. (3) *Where thro' . . . the note of praise*: Reference to the interior of a church housing the tombs of important people. *Fretted vault* refers to a carved or ornamented arched roof

or ceiling. *Pealing anthem* may refer to lofty organ music.

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?

Notes, Stanza 11 (1) *Storied urn*: Vase adorned with pictures telling a story. Urns have sometimes been used to hold the ashes of a cremated body. (2) *Bust*: sculpture of the head, shoulders, and chest of a human. (3) *Storied urn . . . breath?* Can the soul (fleeting breath) be called back to the body (*mansion*) by the urn or bust back? Notice that urn and bust are personifications that call. (4) *Can Honour's . . . Death?* Can honor (*Honour's voice*) attributed to the dead person cause that person (*silent dust*) to come back to life? Can flattering words (*Flatt'ry*) about the dead person make death more "bearable"? (5) *General meaning of stanza*: Lines 41-45 continue the idea begun in Lines 37-40. In other words, can any memorials—such as the trophies mentioned in Line 38, the urn and bust mentioned in Line 41, and personifications (honor and flattery) mentioned in Lines 43 and 44—bring a person back to life or make death less final or fearsome?

45. Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
46. Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
47. Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,
48. Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre.

Notes, Stanza 12 (1) *Pregnant with celestial fire*: Full of great ideas, abilities, or goals (*celestial fire*). (2) *Rod of empire*: scepter held by a king or an emperor during ceremonies. One of the humble country folk in the cemetery might have become a king or an emperor if he had been given the opportunity. (3) *Wak'd . . . lyre*: Played beautiful music on a lyre, a stringed instrument. In other words, one of the people in the cemetery could have become a great musician if given the opportunity, "waking up" the notes of the lyre.

49. But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
50. Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;
51. Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,
52. And froze the genial current of the soul.

Notes, Stanza 13 (1) *Knowledge . . . unroll*: Knowledge did not reveal itself to them (*their eyes*) in books (*ample page*) rich with treasures of information (spoils of time). (2) *Chill . . . soul*: Poverty (*penury*) repressed their enthusiasm (*rage*) and froze the flow (*current*) of ideas (*soul*).

53. Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
54. The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
55. Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,
56. And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Note, Stanza 14 *Full . . . air*: These may be the most famous lines in the poem. Gray is comparing the humble village people to undiscovered gems in caves at the bottom of

the ocean and to undiscovered flowers in the desert.

57. Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast
 58. The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
 59. Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
 60. Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country's blood.

Notes, Stanza 15 (1) John Hampden (1594-1643). Hampden, a Puritan member of Parliament, frequently criticized and opposed the policies of King Charles I. In particular, he opposed a tax imposed by the king to outfit the British navy. Because he believed that only Parliament could impose taxes, he refused to pay 20 shillings in ship money in 1635. Many joined him in his opposition. War broke out between those who supported Parliament and those who supported the king. Hampden was killed in battle in 1643. Gray here is presenting Hampden as a courageous (*dauntless*) hero who stood against the king (*little tyrant*). (2) Milton: John Milton (1608-1674), the great English poet and scholar.

61. Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,
 62. The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
 63. To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
 64. And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes,

Note, Stanza 16 The subject and verb of Lines 61-64 are in the first three words of Line 65, *their lot forbade*. Thus, this stanza says the villagers' way of life (*lot*) prohibited or prevented them from receiving applause from politicians for good deeds such as alleviating pain and suffering and providing plenty (perhaps food) across the land. These deeds would have been recorded by the appreciating nation.

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

Note, Stanza 17 *General meaning*: Their lot in life not only prevented (*circumscrib'd*) them from doing good deeds (like those mentioned in Stanza 16) but also prevented (*confin'd*) bad deeds such as killing enemies to gain the throne and refusing to show mercy to people.

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

Notes, Stanza 18 (1) *General meaning*: This stanza continues the idea begun in the previous stanza, saying that the villagers' lot in life also prevented them from hiding truth and shame and from bragging or using pretty or flattering words (*incense kindled at the Muse's flame*) to gain luxuries and feed their pride. (2) *Muse's flame*: an allusion to sister goddesses in Greek and Roman mythology who inspired writers, musicians, historians, dancers, and astronomers. These goddesses were called *Muses*.

73. Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
 74. Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
 75. Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
 76. They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Notes, Stanza 19 (1) *General meaning*: The villagers plodded on faithfully, never straying from their lot in life as common people. (2) *Madding*: maddening; furious; frenzied. (3) *Noiseless tenor of their way*: quiet way of life.

77. Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect,
 78. Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
 79. With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,
 80. Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

Note, Stanza 20 *General meaning*: But even these people have gravestones (*frail memorial*), although they are engraved with simple and uneducated words or decked with humble sculpture. These gravestones elicit a sigh from people who see them.

81. Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd muse,
 82. The place of fame and elegy supply:
 83. And many a holy text around she strews,
 84. That teach the rustic moralist to die.

Notes, Stanza 21 (1) *Their . . . supply*: Their name and age appear but there are no lofty tributes. (2) *Unletter'd muse*: Uneducated writer or engraver. (2) *Holy text*: probably Bible quotations. (3) *She*: muse. See the second note for Stanza 18. (4) *Rustic moralist*: pious villager.

85. For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
 86. This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,
 87. Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
 88. Nor cast one longing, ling'ring look behind?

Note, Stanza 22 *General meaning*: These humble people, though they were doomed to be forgotten (*to dumb Forgetfulness a prey*), did not die (did not leave *the warm precincts of cheerful day*) without looking back with regret and perhaps a desire to linger a little longer .

89. On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
 90. Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
 91. Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
 92. Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

Note, Stanza 23 *General meaning*: The dying person (*parting soul*) relies on a friend (*fond breast*) to supply the engraved words (*pious drops*) on a tombstone. Even from the tomb the spirit of a person cries out for remembrance.

93. For thee [32], who mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead

94. Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
 95. If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
 96. Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate [33],

Notes, Stanza 24 (1) *For thee . . . relate*: Gray appears to be referring to himself. Mindful that the villagers deserve some sort of memorial, he is telling their story (*their artless tale*) in this elegy (*these lines*). (2) *Lines 95-96*: But what about Gray himself? What if someone asks about his fate? Gray provides the answer in the next stanza.

97. Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,
 98. "Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
 99. Brushing with hasty steps the dews away
 100. To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.

Notes, Stanza 25 (1) *Haply*: Perhaps; by chance; by accident. (2) *Hoary-headed swain*: Gray-haired country fellow; old man who lives in the region.

101. "There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
 102. That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
 103. His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
 104. And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

Notes, Stanza 26 (1) *Nodding*: bending; bowing. (2) *Listless length*: his tired body. (3) *Pore upon*: Look at; watch.

105. "Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
 106. Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he would rove,
 107. Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
 108. Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.

Notes, Stanza 27 (1) *Wayward fancies*: unpredictable, unexpected, or unwanted thoughts; capricious or flighty thoughts. (2) *Rove*: wander.

109. "One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,
 110. Along the heath and near his fav'rite tree;
 111. Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
 112. Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

Notes, Stanza 28 (1) *Another came*: another morning came. (2) *Nor yet*: But he still was not.

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

Notes, Stanza 29 (1) *The next*: the next morning. (2) *Dirges*: funeral songs. (3) *Lay*:

short poem—in this case, the epitaph below.

THE EPITAPH

117. Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
118. A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.
119. Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,
120. And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.
121. Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
122. Heav'n did a recompense as largely send:
123. He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,
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.

Note, Epitaph: *General meaning:* Here lies a man of humble birth who did not know fortune or fame but who did become a scholar. Although he was depressed at times, he had a good life, was sensitive to the needs of others, and followed God's laws. Don't try to find out more about his good points or bad points, which are now with him in heaven.

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