

Elegy:

The form of poetry that we term as elegy is an ancient Greek metrical form and is traditionally written in response to the death of a person or group. Though similar in function, the elegy is distinct from the epitaph, ode, and eulogy: the epitaph is very brief; the ode solely exalts; and the eulogy is most often written in formal prose.

The elements of a traditional elegy mirror three stages of loss. First, there is a lament, where the speaker expresses grief and sorrow, then praise and admiration of the idealized dead, and finally consolation and solace. These three stages can be seen in W. H. Auden's classic "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," and "In Memoriam" by A.L. Tennyson. Other well-known elegies in the English language include "Fugue of Death" by Paul Celan, written for victims of the Holocaust, "O Captain! My Captain!" by Walt Whitman, written for President Abraham Lincoln, and "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" by Thomas Gray.

Many modern elegies have been written not out of a sense of personal grief, but rather a broad feeling of loss and metaphysical sadness. Thomas Gray's "*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*" is such a poem.

ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD

THOMAS GRAY

Introduction:

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard is a poem by Thomas Gray, completed in 1750 and first published in 1751. The poem was partly inspired by Gray's thoughts following the death of other poet Richard West in 1742. Originally titled *Stanzas Wrote in a Country Church-Yard*, the poem was completed when Gray was living near St Giles' parish church at Stoke Poges. It was sent to his friend Horace Walpole, who popularised the poem among London literary circles. Gray was eventually forced to publish the work on 15 February 1751 in order to preempt a magazine publisher from printing an unlicensed copy of the poem.

The poem is an elegy in name only but not in form. It employs a style similar to that of contemporary odes, but it embodies a meditation on death, and remembrance after death. The poem argues that the remembrance can be good and bad, and the narrator finds comfort in pondering the lives of the obscure rustics buried in the churchyard.

Gray's life was surrounded by loss and death, and many people that he knew died painfully and alone. In 1749, several events occurred that caused Gray stress. On 7 November, Gray's aunt, died; her death devastated his family. The loss was compounded a few days later by news that his friend since childhood Horace Walpole had been almost killed by two highwaymen. The incident disrupted Gray's ability to pursue his scholarship. As a side effect, the events caused Gray to spend much of his time contemplating his own mortality. Gray questioned if his own life would enter into a sort of rebirth cycle or, should he die, if there would be anyone to remember him. That resulted in the creation of this beautiful poem – *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*.

Q. Critical Analysis of “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”

When Gray designated his work as an elegy, he placed it in a long tradition of meditative poems that focus on human mortality and sometimes reflect specifically on the death of a single person. By setting his meditation in a typical English churchyard with mounds, gravestones, and yew trees, Gray was also following a tradition. Some of the most popular poems in the middle of Gray’s century were set in graveyards and meditated on death.

“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is cast in four-line stanzas, or quatrains, in which the first line rhymes with the third, the second with the fourth in *abab* pattern associated with elegiac poetry. The last three stanzas are printed in italic type and given the title “The Epitaph.”

About the Poem

In "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," the speaker (poet) strides the countryside at dusk, lamenting the deaths of all men, particularly the poor. He evokes the cycles of the natural world to meditate on the inevitability of death for all, including himself.

- The speaker observes the landscape, watching the plowman and his cattle heading home and noting the descending gloom and "moping owl."
- Seeing the grave sites in the shade of a yew tree, the speaker considers the deaths of poor men and rich men alike, lamenting that the poor die before they can make a mark on the world.
- He praises the modesty of the graves in this churchyard and realizes that death consigns all men, poor and rich, obscure and renowned, to a fate of oblivion. He then imagines how a humble old farmer will see him after his own death.

The "Elegy" asks us to honor the lives of common, everyday people—not just rich, famous folks. This idea of glorifying mundane, everyday things becomes central to the philosophies of British Romantics. That's part of why Gray's "Elegy" often gets interpreted as a kind of turning point from the more formal poetry of the 18th century, with its emphasis on rich and famous people, to the more loose, free-form poetry of the Romantics, which focused more on everyday folks.

The "Elegy" was probably inspired in part by Gray's sadness at the death of his friend Richard West. It's not just about death, but how people are remembered after they're dead. Gray muses about what happens after people die, and in the final stanzas of the poem, he admits his own fear of dying. It's a powerful and evocative poem. Even if the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" were the only poem Gray ever wrote, Gray would deserve a place of pride in the literary history books, even alongside heavy hitters like Alexander Pope. He was offered the prestigious post of British Poet Laureate in 1757, but he turned it down. It seems as though he might have lacked confidence in himself as a poet.

Summary

The speaker is hanging out in a churchyard just after the sun goes down. It's dark and a bit spooky. He looks at the dimly lit gravestones, but none of the grave markers are all that impressive—most of the people buried here are poor folks from the village, so their tombstones are just simple, roughly carved stones.

The speaker starts to imagine the kinds of lives these dead guys probably led. Then he shakes his finger at the reader, and tells us not to get all snobby about the rough monuments these dead guys have on their tombs, since, really, it doesn't matter what kind of a tomb you have when you're dead, anyway. And the speaker reminds us, we're all going to die someday.

But that gets the speaker thinking about his own inevitable death, and he gets a little frightened also. He imagines that someday in the future, someone might pass through this same graveyard, just as he was doing today. And that person might see the speaker's tombstone, and ask a local villager about it. And then he imagines what the villager might say about him.

At the end, he imagines that the villager points out the epitaph engraved on the tombstone, and invites the passerby to read it for himself. So basically, Thomas Gray writes his own epitaph at the end of this poem.

Themes of “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”

Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is a meditation about death as the final estate of the human condition, regardless of wealth, position, or power.

The first four stanzas present images of twilight settling over a solitary figure in a small country churchyard. The first line, “The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,” expresses the inevitable presence of death in three words: tolls, knell, and parting. Stanza 4 concludes the opening picture and leaves no doubt about the subject of the meditation: “Each in his narrow cell forever laid,/ The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.”

The next four stanzas continue the theme of death as the end of all individuals by listing the activities the dead used to do but do “no more.” The repetition of “no more” (line 20) and “For them no more” (line 21) emphasizes the fact that all human activity leads to the grave.

The poet has established a dramatic point of view in this poem. The reader sees the world through the eyes of a single figure who is humankind, who sees the truth and sees the destiny of all. Yet each of the “rude forefathers” (the dead villagers) represents humankind as well: Their fate is our own. Thus, one has both the living, contemplating human destiny and death, and the dead, whose destiny is all too clear.

These two merge later in the poem, beginning in stanza 24, where, suddenly, the speaker imagines himself dead and buried, and the reader is invited to read his epitaph (line 115). In the face of inevitable doom, the speaker holds out the hope for immortality by making a friend

of Heaven and by believing that, dead, he rests in “The bosom of his Father and his God” (line 128).

Thus, Thomas Gray’s poem is a reflection on various aspects of death.

Death

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. 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 and the owl's nocturnal hooting all serve to set a background for this serious meditation. However, it is not until 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" then 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.

The poem ends with the narrator turning towards his own fate, accepting his life and accomplishments. The poem, like many of Gray's, incorporates a narrator who is contemplating his position in a transient world that is mysterious and tragic.