

## Sympathy for the Common Man:-Analysis of the poem Elegy written in a Country Churchyard by Thomas Gray

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### Abstract

One of the most celebrated poems in English literature, An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard by Thomas Grey, first published in 1751. In this poem he made some changes in the form of elegy, that it mourns the death not of great or famous people, but of rustic forefathers of the hamlet who remain unknown and unrecognized. The futility of all human ambition and aspiration is vividly mentioned in the through several comparisons between the lives of the rich and the poor, or the privileged and the unprivileged. He shows how the poor are not in a position to enjoy the luxuries and joys of life in this world. Their poverty proves an obstacle in the path of their progress. But this poverty is a blessing in disguise. If it does not allow people to rise higher, it also restrains them from doing evil, by limiting their power to do so. The rich, on the other hand, possess the power and means to do well to themselves and the world, but they also have powers to do mischief and bring destruction on innocent people.

**KEYWORDS:** Celebrated, Elegy, aspiration, rich and the poor

### Introduction

Thomas Gray, the most important English poet of the mid-eighteenth century and an important figure in the transition from the Neoclassical to the Romantic style in English literature. His famous poems are: Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College, Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes, Ode on the Spring, Hymn to Adversity, Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West, The Progress of Poesy, The Bard, A Long Story, Ode on the installation of the Duke of Grafton, Ode to Mary Magdalene and Hymn to Ignorance. In 1754, his incomplete Ode on Vicissitude was found after his death in a diary .He is primarily remembered for his greatest masterpiece, Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard - one of the best known and most beloved poems in English literature.

Elegy is the poetic expression of sorrow or mournfulness, which is usually associated with death. It has the tone of mourning and it is a song of lamentation. It was usually written to mourn the death of a friend or a dear and near one. Expressive both of personal grief and of preoccupation with universal concerns, it often combines the particular and the general, the emotional and the intellectual, to create the fusions of great poetry. In the words of Coleridge, an elegy “is the form of poetry natural to a reflective mind”.

### Mourning as the Central theme

Gray’s elegy like other elegies of Milton, Shelley, Tennyson or Arnold is also a song of lamentation and mourning. But it is objective mourning whereas in the elegies of

other poets the mourning is too personal. Though written to commemorate gray's friend, Richard West, the poem expresses grief over death in general. But he reflects upon death, the sorrows of life, and the mysteries of human life with a touch of his personal melancholy. And he honors the potentially great people who live and die in obscurity. In this context, Swinburne said "elegy as a poem of high perfection and universal appeal to the noblest depths of human feeling", and remarked as an elegiac poet, gray holds for all ages, his unassailable and sovereign station.

In fact, due to the new form of the elegy and both its theme and poetic techniques, its popularity has transcended the limits of time and place. It deals with the theme of death and the transitory quality of all worldly glory and human achievements. It also deals with the lot of common men on this earth. These universally appealing themes contributed much to the enduring popularity of the poem. The melancholic note of the poem is in keeping with the poetic taste of Gray's age and it enhances its appeal. (Gray's elegy written in the country churchyard, 2011)

It has been widely read and admired in all places and in all times. Grierson and Smith regard it as the most widely known poem of the 18th century along with Oliver Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*. And it is probably still the most popular and the best loved poem in the English language. It has been translated into a large number of languages like Greek, German, Hebrew, Dutch, Spanish, Russian, Latin, Italian, Japanese etc.

### **Dealing with the life of village people**

In this funeral elegy, Gray shows a keen interest in the life of humble people and village craftsmen. These poor, and insignificant people who lie in the churchyard, have in death, become equal to the most famous and prosperous men of all times: death comes to all men. He is able to express how all must die, and it does not matter if one is rich or poor, a noble or a commoner, or a poet or a politician.

There is little originality or novelty of thought or sentiment expressed in the Elegy. It expresses the feeling for the common man, which everybody has. The poet's views about death as an inevitable fact of life are quite common. The presentation of the contrast between the destiny of the rich and the poor is based on conventional views. The thought about fame and obscurity, human ambition and pride are quite old too. The Elegy abounds in what Tennyson calls 'divine truisms that make us weep'. However, Gray has lent great force to these common thoughts and truisms through his unique expression and has done it so beautifully, that they have become universally appealing. The commonest man finds the Elegy echoing his own feelings and sentiments. The poem transcends the limits of time and place, and appeals to people everywhere and in all times.

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 out in the country, stops for a moment to think about the significance of the strangers buried there.

The dominant theme of this poem is death. It deals with the death of the rude forefathers of the village, death as a common occurrence in the world and the anticipated

death of human being. The forefathers of the village are lying buried in the ordinary graves, beneath the rough alms and yew-trees. The graves are on the turf and very small. The ancestors of the villagers were buried long ago. Now they sleep forever in their decaying graves which look like heaps of earth only. Gray reflects not only on the untimely death of young people, but also on the death that comes after a normal life span. Gray talks of youth who might be the poet himself, or his friend West, in whose memory the poem has been written. In fact the shadow of death constantly hovers over the poem.

Gray's elegy begins with the creation of the late evening atmosphere of gloom and melancholy, suitable to an elegy. The poet sits alone in the country churchyard. The darkness is increasing all around and the cattle are returning home for rest. The bell has tolled, the curfew hour is on, indicating the end of day's business. The moping owl, the bird of ill-omen, hoots. The whole poem is filled with images and phrases of despair. The description of the rustic poet also gives a gloomy picture of his life. Thus the pall of death dominates the poem.

In the third stanza of the elegy the poet describes, "Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower, the moping owl does to the moon complain," which demonstrates the night is approaching because owls come out in the darkness of night or death, it also signifies the wealthy people because of the mention of the 'ivy-mantled tower'. This undoubtedly and naturally demonstrates the death of the forefathers and the men being put to rest within their tombs. Also, the use of the term fore-fathers seems to indicate that these men were from various walks of life - farmers, politicians, fathers, from both classes, rich and poor. The poet sees a country churchyard at sunset, which impels him to meditate on the nature of human mortality. The poem invokes the classical idea of memento mori (Memento Mori: The sun sets by the side of the churchyard, making the narrator to ponder over the ultimate fate and nature of human mortality. The narrator tries to bring out the fundamental difference between the great and common man when all lay side by side in their narrow cell. The idea is invoked from a Latin phrase memento mori which states to all mankind, "Remember you must die") (Essencz, 2013), a Latin phrase which states plainly to all mankind, "Remember that you must die." The speaker considers the fact that in death, there is no difference between the great and the common people. He goes on to wonder if among the lowly people buried in the churchyard, had there been any natural poets or politicians, whose talents had simply never been discovered or nurtured. This thought leads him to praise the dead for the honest, simple lives that they lived.

Then in the fourth stanza, Gray uses the churchyard scene to invoke important images: the strength of the elms, death as symbolized by the graves and the comfort provided by the yews giving shade to the bodies that sleep. The poet begins by reflecting on the death of the humble and the lower class.

Gray has the ability to demonstrate the individual and the emotional issues behind death and dying, and also to elevate the common man. In stanza five, he expresses how these forefathers will no longer be roused from their lowly beds by the breeze of the morning, the swallow twittering, or the cock echoing. They are dead and gone forever. He then highlights the fact that it does not matter if one is rich or poor.

In stanza nine he vividly portray the factual truth that death comes to all - the wealthy and the poor. Death doesn't make any distinctions between the high and low. It is an unavoidable event in everyman's life. Death waits even for those who are proud of their noble birth, wealth, social importance and beauty. So, proud and ambitious people should not hate these poor rustic people. They lead simple lives which they spend in useful work. Death comes to all and so the poet concludes that all paths, however glorious, lead only to the grave.

He compares the activities of the rich. It is likely that they would treat with contempt the short and simple history of the poor. Gray asks them not to be proud of themselves because they were ambitious and had achievements to their credit. Despite all their richness, pomp, power and rank, all persons are to die one day. Death closes all. Gray tells them not to be proud of their big monuments over their graves, while the poor have no such things. The poet laments that it is not the mistakes of the poor that they did not have any such monuments over their grave yards. All monuments built in their honour and words spoken in their praise after their death cannot make them come back to life. Death levels every one and there are no distinctions in the grave yard.

He further continues by asking philosophical question to himself, "Can storied urn or animated bust/Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?" Even those that live in mansions, have wealth beyond what the poor can dream of, still die and fall to "the silent dust" as he states in line three. Similarly speeches in honour of the rich dead and the language of flattery cannot please the ears of the dead or restore them to life.

The poet expresses the dead man's nostalgic feeling for the world and his desire to be remembered and honoured after his death in stanzas twenty-two and twenty-three. Life is made up of both pleasure and pain, yet no one wants to die, no one has ever left the bright and happy enclosure of this world without casting one longing lingering look behind. Even the poor when they die wish to be remembered long after their death:

From this elegy, we feel that every dying man desires some dear person to shed tears on his death in his memory with affection, and also desires to be remembered with love and sympathy after his death. Even in the ashes of the dead man, there are the sparks of a craving for love and sympathy of his fellow beings, which is natural in man. The poet describes the fate of himself and he says that now he is intent on honouring the obscure villagers who are dead, and after his death he himself would be buried in just such a humble place.

He mentions how he was quite an unknown person and did not earn any name or fame. He was by nature gloomy. But he had a kind heart and was sincere. He was sympathetic towards those who suffered. Hence he is sure that God would have sympathy for him. It is just possible that accidentally some poet, having feelings similar to his own and inspired by a meditative cast of mind, may happen to come to his grave, and enquire about his fate.

Thus death seems to have overpowered the poet while he was writing about the death of the rustic forefathers of the village and pointing out their desire to be remembered after death. Lyly Glazier believes "each rude forefather of the hamlet has become a type for mankind. There is thus a double for every man in the poem -- the poet observer who is every man still alive and reflecting about death, and each rude forefather, who is every man already dead and underground. They merge together later in the poem, when the poet suddenly projects himself into his own grave and from there reflects about his own hopeless desire for immortality."

At last, Gray points out both the advantages and disadvantages of death. If it deprives man of his chances to become great and renowned and do good to others, it also restrains him from acts involving cruelty, selfishness and violence. In a way, therefore, death is good for man.

### **Gray expresses sympathy for the Common Man**

Gray is the representative figure of sentimentalists. With a classical precision and polish, the poet shows a keen interest in the English countryside and a sincere feeling of the life of common people. Sentimentalism came into being as the result of a bitter discontent among the enlightened people with social reality. The sentimentalists continued to struggle against feudalism, but they sensed at the same time the contradictions in the process of capitalist development. Dissatisfied with reason, sentimentalists appealed to sentiment, to the human heart. They turned to the countryside for its material, and showed great sympathy for the poverty of village people.

The poem may be called an elegy on the premature death of the talents and energies of the poor. Another mark of Gray's originality is that instead of addressing it to the rich, great or privileged men, he addresses this poem about common man, to common men and seeks to elicit a sympathetic response for their common lot.

This Elegy is remarkable for its humanity and its concern for the lot of common human beings on this earth. It may be put alongside Keats's Ode to a Nightingale, which deals with the lot of man on this earth. Although it hints at the inevitability of the end of all human glory and the futility of power, wealth, ambition and pride, it is mainly concerned with the destiny of the common man and seems to lament the loss and waste of so much talent and energy of the poor because of lack of opportunity.

Some of the poor rustics might have become inspired poets or great rulers or statesmen, but poverty stood in the way of the development of their inborn powers. They had no opportunity of using the mental gift with which god might have endowed them. They are not in the position to enjoy the luxuries and happiness of life in the world their poverty proves an obstacle in the path of their progress. Yet the poet says this poverty is a blessing in disguise, because if it does not allow the people to rise higher, it also restrains them from doing evil, by limiting their power to do so. The rich, on other hand possess the power and means to do well to themselves and the world. But they also have the powers to commit mischief, and do bring destruction to innocent people.

Gray seriously thinks about poor or common people, so in stanza eight, he admonishes saying, let not ambitious people look down with contempt and ridicule upon their useful labours, their simple and homely joys, and humble lives of these villagers; let not people, who are great and majestic, hear with a contemptuous smile, the brief and simple life history of these poor people. According to him, all the pride and glory and power associated with beauty, pomp and wealth is transitory and awaits the final doom.

He advises the upper classes, those that are full of ambition, grandeur, power, nobility, and pride, exhorting them not to mock the poor for their simplicity, or for not having elaborated statues on their graveyard memorials. For the great men, after their burial, the loud and solemn sound of the song sung by the choir, in praise of the departed, raises high through long passage, and the arched ornamented ceiling of the church. The poor are born with the same natural abilities as members of the upper classes. The contrast between the rich and the poor, the great and the humble, is referred to in these stanzas. The difference between the rich and the poor is illusory, so far as death is concerned. Death is a great leveler:

Gray thinks of the poor villagers who are lying buried. His heart is full of sympathy for them. He laments for the rustic who died un-honoured, unwept and unsung. The sentiment expressed is universal. He writes of the poor villagers and mankind in general. These rustic people when alive led a very simple life. They were not ambitious. They did not commit the crime which ambitious people commit in order to become rich, but in the end everything is reduced to dust.

However, if these poor people were restrained from becoming great and famous, and their powers of doing good were held in check, their capacity for harming others was also limited by their inability to do much in life. Their fate confined their crimes or forbade them to ascend the throne by violent methods or gaining any other advantage through cruel means. These people did not have to hide the truth or suppress feelings of shame, or foster luxury and pride through flattery.

In the same way, the poet presents a view about the overpowering of life by death, in stanza twelve, which makes any human achievement by the poor people impossible. The dead people buried in the churchyard had much potential for development. If chance had been given, they might have become great men, great politicians, and great poets. But these humble people never got the chance to open the vast book of knowledge which is full of the collective wisdom of the wise men of all ages. Cruel poverty chilled their enthusiasm and prevented their soul from finding expression in noble deeds and sentiments.

In spite of this, the poet compares the dead rustics of the village to the bright gems and pearls that lay hidden and unseen in the depths of ocean. They are akin to the beautiful flowers that bloom in the jungles, but fade away unseen and unrecognized and diffuse their sweet fragrance unnoticed and un-enjoyed. Similarly, the humble villagers with great capacities died unknown in obscurity for want of suitable opportunity. The elements of comparison bring the divine love that Gray had for his village and for the people who lived there.

In the nineteenth stanza of the elegy, the poet describes the life led by the dead forefathers. According to him, they never tried to give up the quiet tenor of their life which was lived in aloofness from the maddening struggles of people in this world. They continuously enjoyed a peaceful course of life in the quite seclusion and peace. The poet thus points to the unambitious life of the poor as contrasted with the life of the rich and great, whose lives are usually full of ambitions, luxury and hectic activities. The poor never cherish high aspirations or ambition and do not hanker after fame and prosperity, because everybody is doomed to death. And, before death, all people are equal. There is no distinction of class in death.

The poet proceeds to think about the simple and poor persons who are buried in this grave yard. He is pained to think that they do not live any more. Their wives kept the fire burning for them and worked hard. When they used to return from their work in the evening, their children would run up to them, lispng their names and eager to have their kisses. They used to harvest the corn, plough the furrow, drive their team of oxen to the field and cut wood with strong axes. All these activities have come to an end for them now.

Gray expresses sympathy with the lot of the common people who lived far away from the madding crowd and spent their days in huts and cottages. He exhorts the proud and ambitious people not to laugh at the simple life and the obscure destiny of the poor. He tells them that they are much like the poor, since they also have to die one day and leave all their glory, wealth and luxuries in this world. The poem lays emphasis on the transitory state of all human glory and the emptiness of all boasts of power and wealth. It also points out the inevitability of death. Gray seems to impress upon us the idea that being poor is not altogether a matter of misfortune. The poor are fortunate in that they do not have to shut the gates of mercy on their fellow beings as the great men choose to do.

### Conclusion

The poem is not merely a lament on the death of a particular person, but of common man. It shows the critical situation of poor people and also the social and economic injustice happening in their lives. Gray very clearly expresses the fact and tells the living upper class people that ultimately it does not matter what glory they achieve, or how elaborate the eulogy upon their tombstones. Death is inevitable. It comes to all and at the end they will also die just like the poor.

It is not a record of personal loss, but is a collection of serious and painful reflections by the side of a village church-yard containing a number of decaying graves. His mourning is not for the famous, the wealthy or the powerful, but for the ordinary people buried in the churchyard. He wonders what they could have become and praises their simple and virtuous lifestyles. Dr. Samuel Johnson, who otherwise was a strong critic of Gray, said of this poem: "the churchyard abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo". The poet's sympathy for the low and the downtrodden is clearly brought out in the poems

Gray's "Elegy" isn't just about death, and it isn't just doom and gloom. It's about the fear of being forgotten after you're gone. Gray looks at the graves of common folks,

and instead of just shrugging and figuring that their lives were not worth remembering, he takes the time to think about what made them tick. And apparently this poem hit a sympathetic chord within the eighteenth-century readers.

. This elegy presents a faithful account of the human condition on this earth, and if that condition turns out to be gloomy, Gray is not to be blamed for this. To him goes the credit for pointing out not only the obscurity of life of the poor, but also their good luck in having escaped, through death, the acts of cruelty and violence that they might have committed had they lived longer.

An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard moves from a meditation in a particular place upon the graves of the poor, to a reflection on the mortality of all humankind and on some of the benefits of being constrained by poverty. The poem alludes to the wish of all people not to die and to the ways in which each is remembered after death. Gray concludes by imagining his own death and how he hopes to be remembered. He finally concludes that he wants the same as the common, ordinary people he has written about.

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