Analysis of Thomas Gray’s Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Thomas Gray may have begun writing [*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44299/elegy-written-in-a-country-churchyard) as early as 1746. He discarded four stanzas of an early version, which were probably read by his friend Horace Walpole, and planned to title the work simply “Stanzas” until his friend William Mason suggested “Elegy” instead. A meditation in a burial ground proved a popular theme of that era, and Gray may have first thought of recording his thoughts about a graveyard while living next door to a cemetery in Peterhouse. However, the description of the grounds matches those of the churchyard at Stoke Poges, where his mother and aunt lived and he often visited. He mentions “unhonoured dead,” which suggests members of a rural community, rather than the distinguished occupants of graves in Cambridge; in addition, the scenery as described by Gray matches the Stoke Poges cemetery, particularly that of two yew trees. Although Gray did not at first intend the poem for publication, it so impressed Walpole that he immediately began to circulate it in manuscript form.

While the sharing of his poem dismayed Gray, he became even more dismayed when contacted by an editor of a disreputable periodical titled the *Magazine of Magazines* who planned to publish the work. He appealed to Walpole to help prevent an initial publication in that source, at which point Walpole immediately published the elegy in a quarto-sized pamphlet, which sold for the cost of sixpence, the day before the magazine published a copy filled with spelling errors. The quarto sold out, to be reprinted multiple times over the following years. In the opinion of the critic A. L. Lytton Sells, no such brief poem has ever received the attention garnered by Gray’s work; for decades English schoolchildren had to commit it to memory. The language, more than theme, captured the imagination of not only the ordinary reader, but also poets including George Gordon, Lord Byron, and Alfred Lord Tennyson. Gray borrowed liberally for his creation, the most often quoted line, “The paths of glory lead but to the grave,” from his good friend Richard West, to whom the poem proved a tribute.

With a total of 32 four-line stanzas in iambic pentameter, the elegy contains three voices, with the first 23 stanzas spoken by the dead youth, a voice many imagine to be fashioned on that of West. The following five lines Gray speaks, while lines 98–116 are spoken by a “hoary-headed swain,” or country man, and Gray supplies the concluding 12-line epitaph. Some critics have ventured that Gray imagined his own final days and writing his own epitaph. Most of the lines represent a mixture of Gray’s and West’s expressions, but they also borrow heavily from Latin, Italian, and English poets who wrote during the 1740s. Although some feel the length to be excessive, Gray desired to include multiple variations on his main idea, which suggested that although the dead in the graveyard are uncelebrated, they also lie peacefully, having enjoyed uneventful lives filled with no crime, guilt, or anguish. The poem may be envisioned in four balanced sections following the first three stanzas that so wonderfully describe the churchyard setting. The first of the four deal with the humble nature of the lives of the dead, the second four contrast their lives with the lives of the celebrated, the third four focus on fate’s depriving any of the dead villagers of greatness, while the final four celebrate the fact that the villagers did not have to suffer the effects of crime or negative emotions.

The poem opens with the melancholic tone most readers immediately notice, as words and phrases such as “curfew” and “tolls the knell of parting day,” “The plowman homeward plods his weary way, / And leaves the world to darkness and to me” prepare for the topic of death. In the second stanza, “the glimmering landscape” fades, while the air holds “a solemn stillness,” again emphasizing endings. Even the sound imagery creates a sense of life winding down, as the beetle drones and “drowsy tinklings lull” the herds of sheep, the tinklings referring to bells tied around some of the sheep’s necks and inspired by the Italian poet Dante. The pastoral scene soon is bathed in moonlight, its stillness broken only by a “moping owl” complaining to the moon. By the third stanza the reader understands that a graveyard is the subject. The speaker describes an area “Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree’s shade, / Where heaves the turf in man a moldering heap,” the heaps being graves. Each body lies in its own “narrow cell” and the group are identified as “forefathers of the hamlet,” with Gray adopting the traditional figurative language of metaphor to compare death to sleep.

The next stanzas describe all that the forefathers no longer experience, including sounds of the “swallow twittering” from a shed, a cock’s call, and an “echoing horn,” that of a hunter. They will no longer experience a “blazing hearth” at home or observe a “busy housewife” plying “her evening care,” nor hear children or enjoy those children climbing into their laps. Gray describes various activities in which the dead participated, including harvesting and chopping down woods with “their sturdy stroke.” After noting these unsingular images and duties, the voice cautions against “Ambition” mocking “their useful toil” or “Grandeur” listening “with a disdainful smile / The short and simple annals of the poor.” Gray begins to emphasize his theme, praising the simple life of those now at rest in the churchyard. They may never have experienced “The boasts of heraldry, the pomp of power” or immense wealth, but those who did trace “paths of glory” will fi nd those paths also lead “to the grave.”