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**Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard**

**Introduction**

[Thomas Gray](https://www.enotes.com/topics/thomas-gray)’s “[Elegy](https://www.enotes.com/topics/literary-terms/complete-index/elegy) Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751), the most important and widely read example of elegiac poetry in eighteenth-century English literature, is Gray’s response to seeing a village churchyard near his mother’s house in the small village of Stoke Poges in England. The [pastoral](https://www.enotes.com/topics/literary-terms/complete-index/pastoral) scene inspired Gray’s meditation on mortality and remembrance among the common people of England’s rural, agricultural society. Gray ends his exploration on a personal note. Using the persona of an observer, an old villager, Gray describes himself from a distance and discloses how he hopes to be remembered by creating his own epitaph.

“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” which Gray began to compose in 1742 and published in 1751, is considered the best example of elegiac poetry in English literature of the eighteenth century. Gray’s elegy explores the nature of mortality and remembrance and also suggests the poet’s own view of how he wishes to be remembered. Gray wrote two versions: the first as early as 1742 after the death of his friend Richard West, and the second around 1748 after the death of an aunt. The published poem of 1751 contains major revisions, notably a shift in focus at the end of the poem to Gray’s own reflections on how posterity will remember him as a poet.

Elegies are generally poems that center on the death of a specific person, such as Milton’s “Lycidas,” but Gray uses the elegiac form to explore death as a universal experience that mankind must understand and accept. Elegies can take any poetic form, but Gray uses the “elegiac stanza,” which came into style during his time and which he perfected. The elegiac stanza form consists of four-line stanzas, or quatrains, written in iambic pentameter and with an *abab* rhyme scheme. Iambic pentameter is often considered the most natural English meter. In the case of the elegiac stanza form, iambic pentameter helps the poet create a pensive and stately rhythm that mirrors that solemnity of the subject. The gently rolling terrain of the country graveyard is reflected in the regularity and sweep of Gray’s pentameter, allowing [syntax](https://www.enotes.com/topics/literary-terms/complete-index/syntax) and sense to blend naturally.

“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” can loosely be divided into five groups of stanzas. Stanzas 1–5 explore the landscape: the country graveyard and its sounds, terrain, flora and fauna and, most importantly, the physical and metaphorical stage on which Gray’s meditation will play out. Stanzas 6 and 7 briefly but emotionally describe the familial and rustic activities that the “rude forefathers” can no longer enjoy. In stanzas 8–18, the most sustained discussion of death as the great equalizer of social class, Gray explores the contrast between the wealthy classes and the common laborers, all of whom are made equal in death. Stanzas 19–23 center on the village’s deceased rustic people and their inherent value as objects of memory. The last group, stanzas 24–32, includes the speaker’s own epitaph and describes the speaker’s meditation on how his poetic life will be remembered.

The poem begins by depicting the landscape on which the speaker will begin his meditation on death. The scene is of the eponymous rural churchyard at dusk, when the “lowing herd wind slowly o’er the lea” and the plowman “plods his weary way,” leaving the surroundings to the speaker alone. The [diction](https://www.enotes.com/topics/literary-terms/complete-index/diction) is solemn and formal, incorporating images of pastoral life, balanced by Gray’s iambic pentameter, which is suited to describe the gently rolling terrain.

The speaker’s attention shifts from the living to the dead, specifically the “rude forefathers” who are forever in their “narrow cell.” Here, Gray establishes the principal characters in the elegy: rural villagers who spend their lives growing crops and raising livestock and whose lives are bound by the confines of their small villages. Their “lowly bed” in death mirrors the “straw-built shed” they and their families live in. Their quiet death contrasts with scenes from their lives in which children cry out on “their sire’s return” to shower him with kisses.

In stanzas 8-18, the speaker shifts from his depiction of rural life and death to a sustained defense of the rustic villagers against the wealthy and powerful classes.

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,

Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;

Nor Grandeur with a disdainful smile

The short and simple annals of the poor.

The [personification](https://www.enotes.com/topics/literary-terms/complete-index/personification) of ambition and grandeur creates concrete targets for Gray’s continued attack on these abstract attributes of the wealthy and powerful. Gray contrasts these attributes with the simple, honorable qualities of the rustic villagers—“their useful toil” and “homely joys”—and concludes with the stark reality that “the paths of glory lead but to the grave.” Ambition and Grandeur and the villagers’ domestic joys all come to the same end.

In this group of stanzas, Gray also introduces the argument that death, the great leveler, is indifferent to social classes among men, as evidenced by the memorials with which they hope to be remembered. The villager who lies in the grave without a monument, or with only a “rude” monument, is in the same state as the wealthy person whose grave is marked by the “storied urn or animated bust.”

Continuing his meditation on death and social status, Gray adds another dimension to his commentary. He observes that among the deceased villagers are some who had the potential to be brilliant or powerful but were denied those things by accident of birth. Perhaps someone buried in the churchyard had a “heart once pregnant with celestial fire” (indicating a potential poet) or “hands, that the rod of empire might have sway’d.” These people, however, are denied their potential because “Chill Penury repress’d their noble rage.” That is, relentless poverty reduces them to a life in which higher pursuits are not practical. Making his argument more concrete, Gray alludes to figures like Milton and Cromwell who exemplify literary and political achievement, respectively.

In Stanzas 19–23, Gray elaborates the benefit of having been born into a simple rural life, “Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife.” This sentiment further confirms that the speaker’s sympathies are with the common people, not the wealthy. More importantly, however, rural life—“the cool sequester’d vale of life”—keeps the villagers free from “the blushes of ingenuous shame,” the corruption inherent in urban life. In this section, Gray insists on an imperative: no matter what social class one is in, one must be remembered and have a marker to memorialize one’s death.

In stanzas 24–32, Gray’s speaker imagines how he will be remembered. Gray uses the character of a villager to describe his speaker’s behavior and death as the village poet. The epitaph on his tombstone describes his essential characteristic—that he was “mark’d” by melancholy and that he was, like the other villagers, “a youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.”