

Thomas Gray
*Elegy Written in a Country
Churchyard*

U3A – 25 October 2016
Dr Heidi Thomson (VUW)

Thomas Gray — *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*



Thomas Gray: 1716-1771

Born in London

Only surviving child of 12

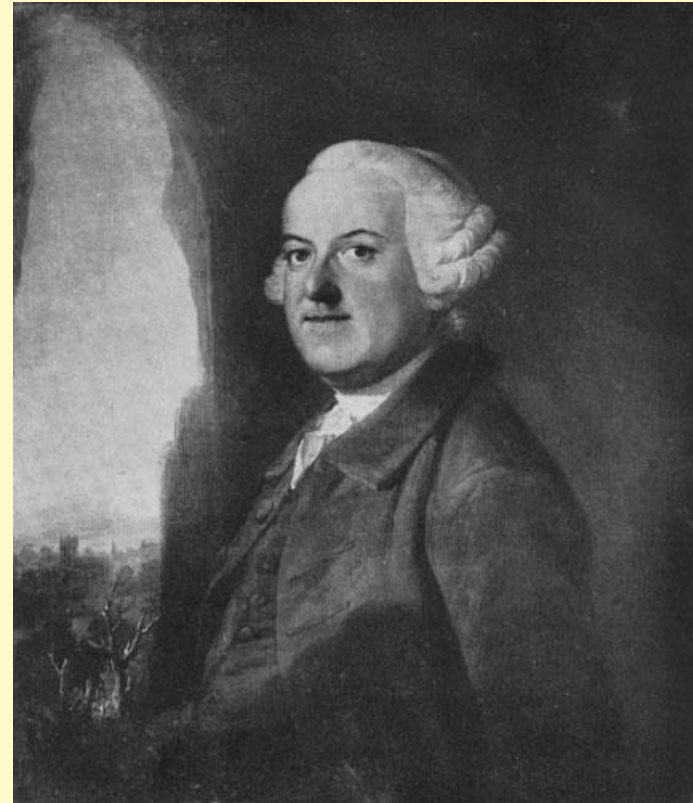
1725-1734: Eton College (this portrait was painted during those years)

1735-1739: Cambridge

1739-1741: Grand Tour

1742-1771: Cambridge

Thomas Gray – *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*



Thomas Gray – *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*



Thomas Gray

A recommended resource:
texts, bibliographies, scholarship

www.thomasgray.org

Thomas Gray and the Age of Sensibility

- Middle of the eighteenth century: a shift in emphasis, away from 'Reason' (Age of Enlightenment)
- Emphasis on the individual mind
- Emphasis on the imaginative response to the environment

Thomas Gray and the Age of Sensibility

- Emphasis on emotional impressions
- Emphasis on the vulnerability of the individual
- Sympathetic response to plight of others (prison reform, insane asylum reform)

William Hogarth
(1697-1764)

Plate 8 from *The Rake's Progress*: Scene
in Bedlam

1766: no sightseers
allowed



Thomas Gray and the Age of Sensibility

- Reason versus Sensibility
- Cultivation of melancholy: vague grief, difficult to define, mental state
- Sigmund Freud's essay about 'Mourning and Melancholia':
"In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 14.246).
- Danger of sentimentality > pejorative connotation

Thomas Gray and the Age of Sensibility

Conflicting strains: removal from the group (“far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife”, line 73 in *Elegy*) > isolation, loneliness

BUT also: the importance of sympathy and fellow feeling

- Kindness to animals, children, women
- Beginnings of anti-slavetrading movement; slavetrade abolished in 1807
- anti-slavery movement; slavery abolished in 1833

Thomas Gray and the
Age of Sensibility

Anti-slavery
medallion, Wedgwood
(1787): 'Am I not a
Man and a Brother'



Thomas Gray and the Age of Sensibility

Time and setting: evening, twilight and darkness; a certain flirtation with terror; graveyard; natural, rural setting (as opposed to urban, 'civilized' context).

Death as a leveller: the vanity of human wishes and human endeavour.

A more inclusive literature? Focus on the rural poor, farm labourers; focus on those who in terms of status rank well below the literate and educated.

Thomas Gray and the Age of Sensibility

- Antiquarianism (Thomas Gray was a lifelong scholar of antiquities, one of the first regular users of the newly (1759) opened British Museum): interest in the past
- Primitivism > accounts of voyages; history; artefacts
- Study of childhood
- Ideas of innocence and experience; privileging of 'innocence' (untainted by experience or civilization)

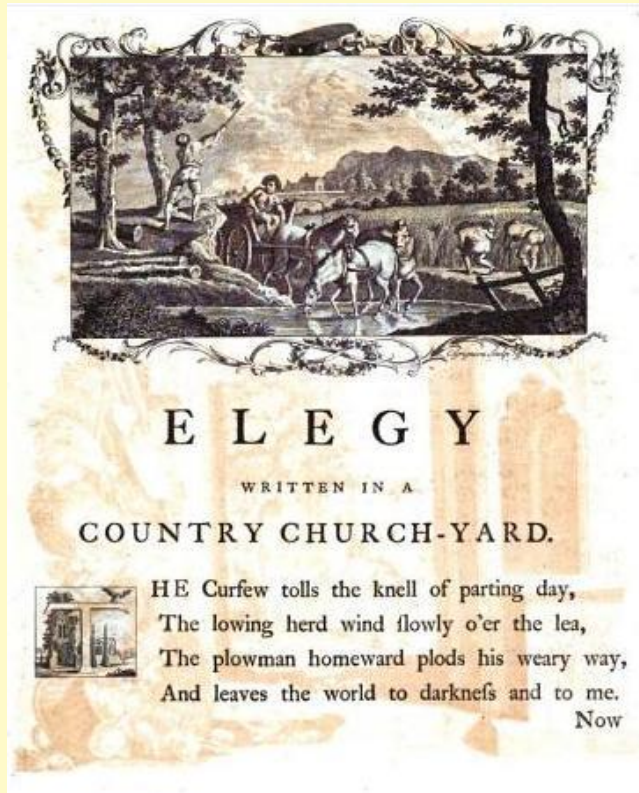
Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard (1750)

- one of the most famous, memorized poems of the nineteenth and early twentieth century; committed to memory by thousands (millions?) of school children > popularity based on genre, inclusiveness
- Genre and setting: *elegy* and *country churchyard*
 - > restful, contemplative, and social > church going, graves around the church, reading epitaphs

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

- Country churchyard: emphasis on the community of the living and the dead
- the elegy commemorates the rural poor and the young poet (who would have belonged to a different class altogether)
- Opening stanza, paints a twilight scene: a transitional moment between day and night:

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard



Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me. (1-4)

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

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> Suggestion of closure and departure

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard



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And leaves the world **to** darkness and **to me**. (1-4)

- the cattle (lowing)
- the ploughman (plodding)
- the poet-speaker (taking it all in?)

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

The ploughman leaves the world

➤ to darkness

➤ to me

- The parallel construction of 'darkness' and 'me' highlights the isolation of the poet-speaker
- Leaving the site, leaving the day's work, leaving the world into another realm: departure and handing over

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

The night creatures and their sounds:

- Droning flight of the beetle (7)
- Drowsy tinklings of the bells of the sheep (8)
- Hooting owl (10)

- Solitary, melancholy presence of the poet-speaker in this setting

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Shift from the general setting to the graveyard and its graves:

- vegetation associated with death
- organic imagery > the buried parishioners are part of the site
- note: the rich or notables are buried in the church, not in the churchyard

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Beneath those rugged **elms**, that **yew-tree**'s shade,
Where heaves the **turf** in many a mouldering heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep. (13-16)

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

**Tomb of Lady Elizabeth Cecil in
Westminster Abbey**



Grave of John Clare



Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

The dead are no longer responsive to the noises of the morning:

swallow and rooster (17-20) > 'no more shall rouse them from their lowly bed' (20)

- 'lowly bed': both in life and death
- portrayal of the farm labourer as a family man

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Oft did the harvest **to their sickle yield**,
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe **has broke**;
How jocund **did they drive** their team afield!
How bowed the woods beneath **their sturdy stroke**!
(25-27)

- Labour: stewardship; forceful control over the land
- Contrast: now they are buried beneath it

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

The invisibility of country labourers in their graves
mirrors their invisibility during their lives,

BUT a warning follows:

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

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

- personifications: Ambition and Grandeur
- the hollowness of the pursuits of the rich in contrast with the characterization of the poor

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

- “ye Proud” (37)
- “Memory” (38)
- “Honour’s voice” (43)
- “Flattery” (44)
- None of these can avoid or ignore “Death” (44)
 - Lines 29-44: the rich are warned not to despise the poor
 - Lines 45-60: loss of potential because the poor had no access to education > their lives focused on survival, not on poetry or politics

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

(53-56)

- natural imagery to convey lost development of potential
- sentimental *and* radical

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Lines 57-72:

The lives of the poor are circumscribed by their social and economic conditions > *both* their achievements and their crimes are limited

They cannot abuse great power, because they do not have any power.

They cannot lead lives of dissolute luxury, because they have no assets.

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
Along the cool sequestered vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

(73-6)

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

- the lives of the rural poor: harmonious, quiet, serene?
- idealized isolation?
- Thomas Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874)

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Lines 77-92: What are the memorials of the poor like?

- “frail” (78)
- “with uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked” (79)
- name and dates ‘spelt by the unlettered muse” (81)
- “many a holy text around she strews” (83)

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

- The need for a mourner; the importance of being remembered
- The departure from life parallels the end of the day (as at the start of the poem)

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Lines 93-116:

- Story within a story: a voice now addresses the poet speaker who has been commemorating the rural dead.
- A reversal: the voice imagines that if somebody were to enquire after the poet, he hopes that 'some hoary-headed swain' (97) may reply sympathetically.
- The reply: lines 98-116

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard



Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Lines 98-116:

- Setting: the peep of dawn
(compare with beginning of the poem)
- Characterization of the poet
- Setting: burial

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Lines 98-116:

Characterization of the young poet:

- Solitary but observed by the rustics
- 'listless' and idle
- 'muttering his wayward fancies' (106) > unintelligible
- Sad, melancholy, and a suggestion of insanity
- dead

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Lines 115-128

‘Approach and read (for thou can’t read) the lay,
Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.’
(115-6)

- an invitation to read the **epitaph**
- the farm labourer is illiterate

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Lines 117-128: The epitaph of the young poet

- a variation on the graves of the rural poor
- lack of reputation ('to fortune and to fame unknown')
- intelligent and melancholy > poetic sensibility
- generous and sincere
- poor (in material terms)
- modest grave

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

