

How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
 Their homely joys and destiny obscure; 30
 Nor Grandeur hear, with a disdainful smile,
 The short and simple annals¹³ of the poor.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
 And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
 Awaits alike the inevitable hour¹⁴. 35
 The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye Proud, impute to these the fault,
 If Memory o'er their tomb no trophies¹⁵ raise,
 Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted¹⁶ vault
 The pealing¹⁷ anthem swells the note of praise. 40

Can storied¹⁸ urn or animated bust
 Back to its mansion¹⁹ call the fleeting breath?
 Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
 Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid 45

Some heart once pregnant with²⁰ celestial²¹ fire;
 Hands that the rod²² of empire might have swayed,
 Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
 Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll²³; 50
 Chill Penury²⁴ repressed their noble rage,
 And froze the genial²⁵ current of the soul.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
 The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
 Full many a flower is born to blush unseen 55
 And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Some village-Hampden²⁶ that with dauntless breast
 The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
 Some mute inglorious Milton²⁷ here may rest,
 Some Cromwell²⁸ guiltless of his country's blood. 60

¹³ annals: historical records

¹⁴ the inevitable hour: the hour of death

¹⁵ trophies: a structure erected as a memorial

¹⁶ fretted: decorated with carvings

¹⁷ pealing: ringing, resounding

¹⁸ storied: with stories depicted on it

¹⁹ mansion: refers to the body

²⁰ pregnant with: full of

²¹ celestial: heavenly

²² rod: staff

²³ unroll: refers to unrolling a scroll

²⁴ Penury: poverty

²⁵ genial: creative

²⁶ Hampden: John Hampden (1594-1643), English politician who resisted the demands of King Charles I and who fought for civil liberty.

²⁷ Milton: John Milton (1608-1674), English writer and polemicist, famous for *Paradise Lost*.

²⁸ Cromwell: Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), lord protector of England, Scotland, and Ireland.

The applause of listening senates to command,
 The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
 To scatter plenty²⁹ o'er a smiling land,
 And read their history in a nation's eyes,

Their lot forbade: nor circumscribed alone 65
 Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;
 Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
 And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide, 70
 To quench³⁰ the blushes of ingenuous shame,
 Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
 With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

Far from the madding³¹ crowd's ignoble strife
 Their sober³² wishes never learned to stray;
 Along the cool sequestered vale of life 75
 They kept the noiseless tenor³³ of their way.

Yet even these bones from insult to protect
 Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
 With uncouth³⁴ rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,
 Implores the passing tribute of a sigh. 80

Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered muse,
 The place of fame and elegy supply:
 And many a holy text around she strews,
 That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who to dumb Forgetfulness³⁵ a prey, 85
 This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,
 Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
 Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies, 90
 Some pious drops³⁶ the closing eye requires;
 Ev'n from the tomb the voice of nature cries,
 Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted³⁷ fires.

For thee who, mindful of the unhonoured dead,
 Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
 If chance, by lonely Contemplation led, 95
 Some kindred spirit shall inquire³⁸ thy fate,

Haply some hoary-headed³⁹ swain⁴⁰ may say,
 'Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
 'Brushing with hasty steps the dews away
 'To meet the sun upon the upland lawn. 100

²⁹ plenty: a noun, meaning 'more than enough of something'

³⁰ quench: extinguish

³¹ madding: frenzied

³² sober: moderate

³³ tenor: course

³⁴ uncouth: awkward

³⁵ Forgetfulness: oblivion

³⁶ drops: tears

³⁷ wonted: customary

³⁸ inquire: inquire after

³⁹ hoary-headed: grey-haired

⁴⁰ swain: farm-labourer, rustic

'There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
 'That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
 'His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
 'And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

'Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn, 105
 'Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove,
 'Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
 'Or crazed with care, or crossed in hopeless love.

'One morn I missed him on the customed hill,
 'Along the heath and near his favourite tree; 110
 'Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
 'Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

'The next with dirges⁴¹ due in sad array
 'Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne.
 'Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the lay⁴², 115
 'Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.'

THE EPITAPH

*Here rests his head upon the lap of earth
 A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.
 Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,
 And Melancholy marked him for her own.* 120

*Large was his bounty⁴³ and his soul sincere,
 Heaven did a recompence as largely send:*

*He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,
 He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend.*

*No farther seek his merits to disclose, 125
 Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
 (There they alike in trembling hope repose)
 The bosom of his Father and his God.*

Headnote and notes by Heidi Thomson.

Recommended resource: www.thomasgray.org

⁴¹ dirges: service for the dead

⁴² lay: short lyric

⁴³ bounty: virtue