

Semester- V
CC - VIII: British Literature (18th Century)
Study Material of *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

Prepared by Mahananda Barman

Introduction:

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard is a poem by Thomas Gray, completed in 1750 and first published in 1751. The poem's origins are unknown, but it was partly inspired by Gray's thoughts following the death of the poet Richard West in 1742. Originally titled *Stanzas Wrote in a Country Church-Yard*, the poem was completed when Gray was living near St Giles' parish church at Stoke Poges. It was sent to his friend Horace Walpole, who popularised the poem among London literary circles. Gray was eventually forced to publish the work on 15 February 1751 in order to preempt a magazine publisher from printing an unlicensed copy of the poem.

The poem is an elegy in name but not in form; it employs a style similar to that of contemporary odes, but it embodies a meditation on death, and remembrance after death. The poem argues that the remembrance can be good and bad, and the narrator finds comfort in pondering the lives of the obscure rustics buried in the churchyard. The two versions of the poem, *Stanzas* and *Elegy*, approach death differently; the first contains a stoic response to death, but the final version contains an epitaph which serves to repress the narrator's fear of dying. With its discussion of, and focus on, the obscure and the known, the poem has possible political ramifications, but it does not make any definite claims on politics to be more universal in its approach to life and death.

Claimed as "probably still today the best-known and best-loved poem in English", the *Elegy* quickly became popular. It was printed many times and in a variety of formats, translated into many languages, and praised by critics even after Gray's other poetry had fallen out of favour. Later critics tended to comment on its language and universal aspects, but some felt the ending was unconvincing—failing to resolve the questions the poem raised—or that the poem did not do enough to present a political statement that would serve to help the obscure rustic poor who form its central image.

“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” As a Representative of Sorrow:

This poem is about the writer's meditations on the mysterious countryman sleeping in the churchyard. The poet describes both auditory and visual sensations he observes and feels in that churchyard. The mournful sounds of the owls remind him of the dead resting in their graves. He laments they will be unable to enjoy the fruits of life: the happiness of home, wife, and work. He also comments on the fame and honors rich people enjoy in their lives. To him, the poor souls

would have also accomplished great tasks only if they had the opportunity. Now, they are peacefully sleeping in their cells, and their plain graves reflect their simplicity and morality. In contrast, he describes the lavish funeral momentums of the rich that are prominent in the same churchyard. But nothing can restore life. Even in his epitaph, he asks us not to remember him as a wealthy, educated and great person. He wants to be remembered as a melancholic, serious and sad person. He desires to be known as a common man whom he has praised and with whom he was going to be buried.

Major Themes in “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”:

Death, the transience of life and memento mori are the major themes of this poem. Surrounded by death, the poem provides various images pointing out the contrast between life and death, the mortality and the difference between different classes after death. Throughout the poem, he develops the idea that every glitter becomes rusted on the face of death. He intends to present that the members of the lower class are worthy of praise as compared to the upper class even in the post-death period. Their simple, unreadable graves give a clue to their miserable lives. The poet refrains from glorifying the virtues of the wealthy and famous because they enjoyed fame while they were alive. He prefers acknowledging the morality and decency of those who led woeful yet satisfied life.

As an Elegy:

Greek origin word 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”.

There is quite a difference in the writing of today's Elegies and Ancient Greece. Elegies from Ancient Greece were not written about death, but written about one's "true love." (Turner) At that time, the term denoted a particular rhythmic pattern rather than specific subject matter. The most famous Latin love-elegists, Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid became models for poets of the English Renaissance, who used humor, irony, even slotted narratives into a poem and still called it elegy. They also composed funeral elegies of the type with which modern readers are familiar. Propertius wrote many of his elegies to his lover Cynthia, the prosperous member of ancient Greek society. (C.bevota, 2014)

Until the 16th Century, the definition of elegy becomes a poem that is somber and melancholy in tone. ‘Shed No Tears’ is a poem that adheres to the definition of elegy. It is somber in tone and is a tribute to someone who has passed, but lives on in the heart of the writer. But at that time, elegy was only written on the death of celebrated and famous persons. Milton's Lycidas on the death of his friend Edward King and Tennyson's In Memoriam at the death of A.

H. Hallim are the celebrated elegies. Walt Whitman wrote the famous elegy O Captain! My Captain! As a tribute to slain President Abraham Lincoln and P.B. Shelley's *Adonais* mourns the death of John Keats.

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 tenderest and 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).

A Representative of the Impersonal Class of Elegies

Gray's elegy is the best representative of the impersonal class of elegies. Here the poet doesn't lament at the death of a particular person; he mourns in a general manner for the lot of man. It mourns the death not of great or famous people, but of common men. The poet sees a country churchyard at sunset, which impels him to meditate on the nature of human mortality. He considers the fact that in death there is no difference between great and common people. He goes on to wonder if among the lowly people buried in the churchyard there had been any natural poets or politicians whose talent had simply never been discovered or nurtured. This thought leads him to praise the dead for the honest, simple lives that they lived. Gray did not produce a great deal of poetry; the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* however, has earned him a respected and a well-deserved spot in literary history. The poem was written at the end of the Augustan Age and at the beginning of the Romantic period, and the poem has characteristics associated with both literary periods. On the one hand, it has the ordered, balanced phrasing and rational sentiments of Neo-classical poetry. On the other hand, it tends toward the emotionalism and individualism of the Romantic poets; most importantly, it idealizes and elevates the common man. He provided a bridge between the Neo-classical style of his time and the Romantic era of John Keats. (Gray, 1751)

Interest in the Life of Humble 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. He is also able to elevate the common man with the elegy as a tool and his own freedom in the use of word power and poetic style. (Be, 2008) 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.

Summary and Analysis of the entire Poem

The poem begins musically with a description of the setting, the evening time, when the church bells ring out the day and the 'plowman homeward plods his weary way'. The glimmering twilight is fading, and a 'solemn stillness' fills all the air. The only sound that is heard is that of the beetles and of the moping owls. The poet now passes on to describe the churchyard which is dotted with elm trees and where most of the tombs have crumbled down. The sorrowful atmosphere created, the poet goes on to tell the lives of the 'rude forefathers' of the hamlet who now sleep in the yard, each in his narrow cell. The lamentation deepens as the poet points out that they will not wake up to the breezy call of the fragrant morning or the twittering of the swallows or the shrill clarion of the cocks. Our heart wrings in pain as he narrates that now that they are inside the grave forever, the blazing hearth will not burn for them nor will the housewives, on their husbands' return from work, will be busy to entertain them. No children will run to lisp their sire's return nor will they vie with one another for the first kiss. They were common villagers who worked in the field, cut wood, and tended cattle. Their joys were homely, their destiny was obscure. No grandeur they had and their annals were short and simple, poor men as they were. The poet, however, suddenly becomes philosophical and glorifies the annals of the poor. In a mood of generalization, he focuses on the stark truth of life:

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
All that beauty, all that wealth ever gave;
They pass on to the inevitable hour,
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Even though memorials are raised, anthems in their praise swell the cathedral hall, no dead soul can be brought back to life. Songs of glory cannot induce the silent dust to resuscitate them nor can any amount of flattery prevail upon Death to release them out of its prison.

The poet again swings back to the lives of the poor villagers who lay at rest in the neglected spot that the churchyard was. The men were poor and humble, but some had hearts pregnant with celestial fire, some would even make good emperors, some even were great connoisseurs of lyre which filled them with ecstasy. But as chill penury repressed their noble rage, and froze the genial current of their soul, they did not have access to knowledge and their potentiality could not flourish, and they remained hidden in the privacy of their glorious darkness. They remained obscure and away from the glare of eminence like the gems of purest ray serene that remain under the deep ocean or like the sweet flowers that blush and waste their sweetness in the desert. Some of them, if given scope, could have become Miltons and Cromwells, but their promise did not sprout as their lot forbade. The poet, however, is not remorseful that they remained unknown Miltons and unsung Cromwells because basically they were simple people who shunned ambition and who avoided the gory path that leads to power. They lived far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife, away from the shrines of Luxury and Pride. Their wishes were sober, and they lived quietly, avoiding fuss. The pity of their life becomes more touching when the poet mentions that some friends in order to protect them from ignominy erected frail memorials on the graves with epitaphs in uncouth rhymes. Those who pass by these shapeless sculptures cannot but heave a sigh of tribute to these humble children of God. They have gone, preys of dumb forgetfulness but they are still remembered by their folks still alive. The tone of pathos becomes deeper when the poet describes how they vanished, one after another. To a question, a hoary-headed swain would say that here was the man who would hastily walk at the peep of dawn through the dewy grass to meet the sun upon the upland lawn. That man would occasionally stretch out his body at the foot of a nodding beech tree to cool his tired nerves at noon, and with wonder watch the brook that babbled by. Sometimes, he would be seen by the wood with a scornful smile on his face, muttering wayward fancies. When old, he was a drooping frame, a man afflicted with cares or crossed in hopeless love, a woeful wan, now deserted by all. One morning he would be missing from his favourite haunts – the heath, the tree, the hill, the lawn or the wood. Instead, he would be seen being borne through the churchway path with mourners singing dirges. His body is now in the grave under the stone covered with thorns.

On the stone is written an epitaph that tells that the man in the grave was a youth, to fortune and fame unknown, who lived a difficult life, who was deprived of the benefit 'fair science'. But he was a large-hearted man, a sincere soul whom God, in lieu of a tear shed in woe, gave him a friend which only he wanted. There is no use discussing farther his merits or his frailties as he like his team-mates in the graveyard is now anxiously waiting to be taken into the bosom of his Father and his God.

The poem in its attempt to work thus in universal terms and in its unrivalled purity, propriety and harmony of diction is a great realization of the ideals of its day: in its placid melancholy and rustic setting, it is perhaps slightly romantic. Although in its treatment of the common man it is heroic and even majestic, it has not the tone of Wordsworth. The poem is

compact of what Tennyson called “divine truisms”, and these are universally, if decorously, affecting. Among poems embodying the noble ideal of

What oft was thought but never so well expressed

the **Elegy** must always rank high. Persons with an aversion to reflective commonplaces in poetry may, as T. S. Eliot has done, question the subtlety of the **Churchyard** ; but critics who admit both clarity and subtlety as merits will be content with the noble and finished transparency of this poem. Its achievement is , of its very nature, the opposite of facile : “divine truisms” are not so easily come by !