

Poetry
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Lecture 30
Thomas Gray

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Thomas Gray (1716-1771)



- Historical and Literary Context
- Gray
- The Graveyard Poets
- “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”
- Selected Passages
- Analysis
- A Syntactical Reading
- A Poststructuralist Reading



In this lecture on Thomas Gray and his Elegy, ‘Elegy Written in the Country Churchyard.’ we will begin with a historical and literary context, discuss Gray’s life with reference to you a few key points, then discuss the number of graveyard poets who were able to form a movement called Graveyard School of Poetry; discuss the selected passages from the Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard. We also have a syntactical reading focusing on the sentence structure used in this poem to deal with the theme of death. And finally, we will have a poststructuralist reading which tells about the self referentiality within this poem.

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Historical and Literary Context



- Robert Walpole (1676-1745)
- The first 'Prime Minister' of England under Kings George I and George II
- An astute politician and businessman
- Father of **Horace Walpole**, a friend of Thomas Gray, a pioneer of the gothic novel
- Many writers were able to survive with the good will of Robert Walpole and Lord Hervey .
- Alexander Pope survived despite them.
- But Gray had no interest in the politics of survival.
- He refused the poet laureateship and public lectures.
- Gray reflected profoundly on the human condition because of many deaths in his family.



A few key points we can recall in the context of Gray's writing. Robert Walpole, was the first Prime Minister of England under two kings, King George I and King George II. Robert Walpole was a very astute politician and businessman; he was able to manage many different kinds of political situations and he was the father of Horace Walpole, a close friend of Thomas Gray. And Walpole was incidentally a pioneer of the gothic novel which also has something to do with this Graveyard School of Poetry and pre-romantic movement in writing in England at that time.

Many writers were able to survive with the good will of Robert Walpole and Lord Hervey. In this difficult time Alexander Pope survived despite the presence of Walpole and Harvey, but Gray had no such interest in the politics of survival, in fact, he refused the poet laureateship when it was offered to him and also rejected the demand for some public lectures. He went on to reflect profoundly about the human condition because of the many deaths in his own family.

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Thomas Gray (1716-1771)



- By nature, a withdrawn and melancholic person
- Pursued higher studies and received a degree in law, though he did not practice law
- Wrote in Latin, translated from Latin
- A poet of contemplation rather than action
- Brought to recognition by Horace Walpole
- Close friend of Robert West and William Mason
- Known for “The Progress of Poesy,” “The Bard” and primarily for “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”



Thomas Gray by nature, was a withdrawn and melancholic person; he was thinking about life deeply because of the many deaths in his own family. However, he pursued higher studies and received a degree in law though he did not become a lawyer and practice it. He loved writing, so he wrote in Latin, translated from Latin, he wrote in English. He was contemplating about life, so he was more of a poet of contemplation than of action.

He was able to get recognition widely because of his friend Horace Walpole who sent the manuscript to different groups, circles in London. Gray was a close friend of Robert West and also William Mason, West unfortunate died and in fact he was one of the reasons for writing this “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”. Later on, William Mason was publishing all the poems of Thomas Gray. Gray was known for a few poems like “The progress of Poesy” and “The Bard” but primarily he was known for this “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.”

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The Graveyard Poets

- A serious phenomenon of the late 18th century
- Graveyard or churchyard setting
- Death and loss as a major theme
- Highly introspective and meditative
- Precursors of Romantic poetry
- Prominent poets and their poems
- Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"
- Thomas Parnell's "A Night-Piece on Death"
- Robert Blair's *The Grave*
- Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*
- Young: "Read nature; nature is a friend to truth."
- Young: "We are all born originals."



Who are these graveyard poets? What did they do? This graveyard school of poetry was a series phenomenon of the late 18 century. The poets of this group had their setting in a graveyard or a church. Death and loss were the prominent themes in their poems. They were highly introspective and meditative and as a group they became the precursors for romantic poetry in 19th century. We have a number of prominent poets and their poems. Of all these, Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" stands apart.

We have Thomas Parnell's, "A Night-Piece on Death," Robert Blair's, 'The Grave,' Edward Young's, 'Night Thoughts.' We have two quotations Young's poetry, one says "Read nature; nature is a friend to truth" and the second one goes like this, "We are all born originals." Originality will become a key theme of the romantic poetry unlike the neoclassicals, who spent more time for reading the Greeks and Latins and imitated them.

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Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard



- One of the greatest memorial poems in English literature
- **Two versions:** the Eton manuscript and the 1751 manuscript
 1. "Stanzas Wrote in a Churchyard"
 2. "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"
- An elegy with a difference, that is more like an ode
- Reflective and meditative
- Rural setting with poor and illiterate people
- ❑ **Gray:** "The paths of glory lead but to the grave."



When we come to this poem 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,' we understand that this is one of the greatest memorial poems in English literature. There are two versions actually, one is called 'Eton manuscript' and 'the 1751 manuscript.'

The first one had this title, "Stanzas Wrote in a Churchyard" and the second one had this title, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" Whether first version or second version, this is not exactly an elegy, it is an elegy with a difference, it is more like an ode, it is more reflective and meditative, it has its setting in a rural village and it deals with poor and illiterate people. One of the most famous lines from this poem is, "The paths of glory lead but to the grave" this line is a meditation at its best about life and death.

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More about the Elegy



- 32 stanzas of 4 lines each = 128 lines
- A poem: 29 stanzas = 116
- An epitaph: 3 stanzas at the end = 12 lines
- A quatrain with the rhyme scheme of ABAB
- Also called **elegiac stanza** after this poem
- Theme of Death (but not desolation)
- The poem finds an echo in every bosom (Johnson)
- “The **tone** of melancholy claims that ... we ought to accept the injustice of society as we do the inevitability of death.” (Empson)



We have something more to learn about the Elegy. There are 32 stanzas of 4 lines each totally making up 128 lines. The poem as such has 29 stanzas, that is 116 lines. At the end of the poem we have an epitaph, it consists of 3 stanzas and that means 12 lines. The entire poem is in the form of quatrains with this rhyme scheme ABAB, because of this structure this stanza is known as ‘Elegiac Stanza.’

As we mentioned earlier, the major theme of this poem is, theme of death, but it is not exactly of desolation. There is some consolation that immortality will be there for the poet, some kind of continuity will be there. According to Dr. Johnson, the poem finds an echo in every bosom, everyone can be connected with this poem as it deals with the common theme of death that all of us will have to face. The tone of melancholy claims that ‘we are to accept the injustice of society as we do inevitability of death,’ that is what William Empson says about this famous elegy.

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Elegy, Stanzas 1-2



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

Now fades the glimm'ring landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds; (5-8)



We have some selected passages now; we will begin with stanzas 1 and 2 and continue reading and then do some analysis.

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

Now Fades a glimm'ring landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds. (5-8)

Some underlining like this we have done for day and way to indicate the kind of rhyme that this poem has. The first stanza is very famous for the exact typical iambic pentameter that we have in English literature. It also has many other complications; many critics have pointed out that different kinds of difficulties, the challenges this particular poem poses.

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Elegy, Stanzas 3-4



Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,
Molest her ancient solitary reign. (9-12)

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



Next stanza, 3 and 4.

“Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r.

The mopping owl does to the moon complain

Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,

Molest her ancient solitary reign. (9-12)

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,

Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,

Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,

The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep. (13-16)

Now, we can see that the setting is the graveyard, the route forefather, these ancient forefathers that is, the unlettered, unsophisticated people of the village, they all lie in the graveyard.

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Elegy, Stanzas 5-6



The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
The swallow twit'ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.
(17-20)

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:
No children run to lisp their sire's return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share. (21-24)



“The breezy call of incense breathing Morn,
The swallow twit’ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock’s shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed. (17-20)

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:
No children run to lisp their sire’s return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share. (21-24)

Here again, we have indicated some kind of assonance and alliteration in the first two lines. Breezy and breathing assonance and swallow, straw, shed indicating this alliteration. Lowly bed referring to some kind of transferred epithet having lot of ambiguity within this bed which lies below the earth or bed that belongs to people from the lower stat of the society.

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Elegy, Stanzas 7-8



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 bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

(25-28)

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)



“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 bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke! (25-28)

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)

Obviously, the poet is concerned with the history of the poor people who are normally neglected by the mainstream of the society. These people may not have ambition, they may not have something grandeur that we find in other places particularly in towns and cities but they have their own way of life, sweet life.

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Elegy, Stanzas 9-10



The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave. (33-36)

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If Mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
Where thro' the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.
(37-40)



“The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow’r
And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave,
Awaits alike th’ inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave. (33-36)

That is where Thomas Gray makes this comparison between rural people and urban people or rich people and poor people saying ‘all will have all kinds of glories but all of them will have one place that is grave,’ the grave does not make any distinctions between glories of the poor or the rich.

“Nor ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If mem’ry o’er their tomb no trophies raise,
Where thro’ the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.” (37-40)

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Elegy, Stanzas 12, 14



Neglected Village Talents

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,
Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre. (45-48)

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.
(53-56)



One of the most important points about this poem we have to remember is, Gray is talking about the neglected talents of the village people.

“Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,
Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre. (45-48)

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear;
Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.” (53-56)

Some villagers may have had extraordinary talents to rule this empire, England was expanding its rule all over the world, he has this imperial rule at the back of his mind and also some of them could become great poets; living liar, they could sing poems, but these people are not recognized or they did not get this kind of opportunity that people may get in towns and cities.

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Elegy, Stanzas 24, 25



The Kindred Spirit and Hoary-Headed Swain

For thee, who mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,

(93-96)

Haply some hoary-headed swain 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. (96-100)



This poet who is thinking about this passing of time and the people being dead and buried and thinking about his own life or death, he believes that some kind of kindred spirit will continue his own life that is remembrance of his own life. Now, this poet having come from town, he is in this village and he is talking about, thinking about these people and somebody else would come after him and think about him and writes about him in some poem or other.

So, he says,

"For thee, who mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead,
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate,
If chance by lonely contemplation led
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate." (93-96)

"Haply some hoary-headed swine 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." (96-100)

This poet is now moving around this village and somebody, some hoary headed swine, some shepherd or a rustic person would say one day, that there was a person moving around in this town or in this place.

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Elegy, Stanzas 28, 29

Death of the Narrator and Dirge



“One morn I miss’d him on the custom’d hill,
Along the heath and near his fav’rite tree;
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

(108-112)

“The next with dirges due in sad array
Slow thro’ the church-way path we saw him borne.
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,
Grav’d on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.”

(113-116)



The swine may say further like this,

“One morn I miss’d him on the custom’d hill

Along the heath and near his fav’rite tree;

Another came; nor yet beside the rill,

Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;” (108-112)

“The next with the dirges due in sad array

Slow thro’ the church-way path we saw him borne.

Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,

Grav’d on stone beneath yon aged thorn.” (113-116)

This is a kind of dirge, the song of sorrow that the hoary swine or the rustic may sing about this person who has disappeared, who is dead, who is no more.

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The Epitaph, Lines 117-128



*Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own. (117-120)
Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heav'n did a recompense as largely send:
He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,
He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend.()
No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose)
The bosom of his Father and his God. (125-128)*



What is interesting about this poem is, the poem ends with an epitaph. The hoary swine may say something like this, this may be written and inscribed on the stone.

“Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth

A youth to fortune and to Fame unknown

Fair science frown'd not on his humble birth,

And Melancholy mark'd him for her own. (117-120)

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,

Heav'n did a recompense as largely send:

He gave to mis'ry all he had, a tear,

He gain'd from heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend, (121-124)

No farther seek his merits to disclose

Or draw his frailties from their dread aboard.

(There they alike in trembling hope repose)

The bosom of his Father and his God. (125-128)

There are 12 lines in this epitaph, we have indicated the line numbers for each stanza. Obviously, we can see that melancholy and misery these two words dominate this epitaph, which stands for the poet who was passing by this village.

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Thematic Contrast

Life and Death	Memory and Forgetfulness
Morning and Evening	Realized & Unrealized Talent
Refined and rude	Serenity and Restlessness
Village and City	Freedom and Tyranny
Home and Graveyard	Virtue and Vice
Husband and Wife	Truth and Falsehood
Parents and Children	Loneliness and Community
Sowing and Harvesting	Educated and Unlettered
Joy and Sorrow	Fortune and Misfortune
Poor and Rich	Loss and Gain
Ambition and Apathy	Melancholy and Sanguinity
Glory and Shame	Elegy and ?



As usual we will attempt a thematic contrast in this poem. A number of contrasts can be noted: life, death, morning, evening, refined, rude, village, city, home, graveyard, husband, wife, parents, children, sowing and harvesting, joy and sorrow, poor and rich, ambition and apathy, glory and shame. Dualities or binaries like this we can further see; memory and forgetfulness, realized and unrealized a talent, serenity and restlessness, freedom and tyranny, virtue and wise, truth and falsehood, loneliness and community, educated and uneducated or unlettered, fortune and misfortune, laws and gain, most importantly melancholy and sanguinity.

Melancholy refers to the sad contemplative mood of the poet and the sanguinity indicates the opposite of melancholy, that is, some kind of optimistic feeling that he also will be remembered by other people of the village or somebody like him, somebody will pass by and write about him in some lines, as this poet has done. There is also an inbuilt thematic contrast between two forms of poetry one is elegy and what is the rest? Find out, this is an exercise for you.

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Poetic Devices

- **Transferred epithet:** his weary way (3)
- **Zeugma like:** “And leaves the world to darkness and to me” (4)
- **Hyperbaton:** “And all the air a solemn stillness holds” (6)
- **Onomatopoeia:** “drowsy tinklings” (8)
- **Metaphor:** cell, sleep (15, 16)
- **Personification:** Ambition, Grandeur (29, 31)
- **Alliteration:** “the pomp of pow’r” (33)
- **Anaphora:** “And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave” (35)
- **Epigram:** “The paths of glory lead but to the grave” (36)
- **Personification:** Knowledge, Penury (49, 51)
- **Allusion:** Hampden, Milton, Cromwell



We can observe a number of poetic devices in this poem. How does Thomas Gray communicate his serious thoughts about the theme of death in this elegiac poem? First, we begin with transferred epithet, ‘his weary way,’ the way itself is not weary but who is walking tired, it refers to the person who is walking tired. Almost like Zeugma we have one line, “And leaves the world to darkness and to me.” Critics have noted that, this is a only place where we have this personal pronoun ‘me,’ in all other places we do not have. It is more about objective kind of discussion on whatever is there in the village.

Hyperbaton is inversion as you know, “And all the air a solemn stillness holds,” this is again a problematic sentence, sentence structure it has and many critics have noted we will come to it when we do a reading of this poem, critical reading of this poem a little later. The, this poem is actually written in English but it uses Latin syntax in which words can be placed anywhere, but in English if we place words in different places because of word order meaning will differ.

We have an example of Onomatopoeia, “drowsy tinklings,” the drowsiness and the tinkling sound are together brought in here. We have the metaphor of cell and sleep even sleep standing for death, that is going up to the level of symbol. We have many personifications like ambition and grandeur; even this whole idea of melancholy itself is personified in this poem. We have this alliteration. Many examples are there just we have one here in line number 33 “the pomp of power” We have the case of anaphora in one line, “And all that beauty, and all that wealth gave.”

And the most important line we said is this, this is epigrammatic, “The paths of glory lead but to the grave.” When we read a poem like this at least one or two lines we can remember. This is one memorable line from a memorial poem or a memorable poem from Thomas Gray.

We have further personification in knowledge and penury. There is also an interesting allusion to the civil wars in England. During this Cromwell period, there was one Hampden who died for freedom opposing the king, he did not want to pay tax. And similarly, Milton was participating in that civil war taking the side of Cromwell and this whole civil war was led by this Oliver Cromwell. Some people like this from the Villages, from different places may have come up but they did not get a chance to grow, that is for the society to think about.

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Poetic Devices

- **Rhetorical questions:** 40-44

“Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour’s voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flatt’ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?”

- **Metaphor, Ambiguity, and Paradox:** 53-56

“Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom’d caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flow’r is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.”

- **Metonymy:** land for people (63)
- **Personification:** Fair Science, Melancholy (119, 120)



We have more number of rhetorical devices or poetic devices in this poem. We have a stanza full of questions and they are in fact rhetorical questions;

“Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour’s voice provoke the silent dust,
Or flatt’ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?”

Answer is of course, No. We have metaphor, ambiguity, and paradox in these lines;

“Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
 The dark unfathom’d caves of ocean bear:
 Full many a flow’r is born to blush unseen
 And waste its sweetness on the desert air.”

We have this gem, we have this flower, we have this connection between gem and ocean, caves of ocean, unfathomed caves of ocean, dark ocean. And we also have this flower born to blush, but unseen. That is, the villager who is born and dead here, he is not at all seen glowing or becoming a person of greatness with some opportunity for realizing his or her own talent. We also have this metonymy, the entire rustic land or rural land stands for the people of this rural area.

And the last one is personification, fair science and melancholy. The poet is able to use many of these devices to drive home the point that death is something which does not differentiate between urban and rural people, poor or rich people. What we can do in this life is to find some way to realize our own talents, if there is a possibility then we should do it.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- **Rhyme:** ABAB; Alternating rhymes in all 32 stanzas
- **Tone:** sober, melancholic
- The best exemplar of iambic pentameter, Stanza 3
- **Caesura, Enjambment, and End-stopped line:**

Save that | from yon | der i|vy- man|tled tow'r ➤
 The mo | ping owl | does to | the moon | complain ➤
 Of such, | as wan|d'ring near | her se|cret bow'r,
 Molest | her an| cient so | lita | ry reign.

□ **Variation:** Trochee: save that; Pyrrhic: does to



We now, we will look into this rhyme, rhythm and meter. As we already indicated this poem has his rhyme scheme of ABAB with alternating rhymes in all 32 stanzas. The tone of this poem is sober and melancholic, this is a poem that gives a best example of iambic pentameter. First

stanza is often discussed in critical studies, but we have chosen the third stanza here and indicated how the material analysis is done.

“Save that from yonder ivy mantled tow’r
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as wandering near her secret bow’r
Molest her ancient solitary reign,

we indicate the metrical pattern through these lines, that we have indicated.

Next, we are able to see the enjambment here from tower in the first line to the moping and similarly from complain of such we are able to see that, at the end of the stanzas we have this full stop that means the line ends there. So, all the three examples we have in this stanza. We also notice variation in this metrical pattern that is measure or meter in addition to this I am dominant, iambic meter. We have this trochee and also pyrrhic in examples like, save that and does to. In the case of trochee, we find the stressed syllable comes in the first word save and in the case of pyrrhic, there is no stress.

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Metrical Exercise



The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
The swallow twit’ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock’s shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:
No children run to lisp their sire’s return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.



Here is a passage for us to do this analysis. This we are not doing, but it will be good for you to do that on your own as we did in the previous slide. You can read it and count the number of syllables and draw the line like this, vertical line like this and see the number of syllables; every

line will have 10 syllables and there will be one unstressed syllable, another stressed one normally iambic; some variation may be there you can do it yourself.

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A Syntactical Reading (Hutchings)

- The Elegy is an English poem but uses Latin syntax and causes confusion for the reader.
- The major problem is the loss of distinction between the subject and the object in the sentence structure.
- Tolls in line 1: transitive or intransitive
- Possibility of rearranging lines in the first stanza
- Herd in line 2: singular or plural
- Extraordinary degree of instability about the poem
- ❑ The fluid syntax is the key to Gray's elegy.
- "And all the air a solemn stillness holds" (6)
- Death means turning the subject into object.
- Death is certain but we are uncertain about it.



Now, let us move to this syntactical reading offered by Hutchings. This elegy is an English poem but it uses Latin syntax and causes confusion for the reader. Such kind of syntactical difficulty we would find in Milton as well or any poet who is deeply influenced by Latin grammar or Latin language. The major problem in this poem is a loss of distinction between the subject and the object in the sentence structure. If we do not maintain that word order properly, then which is the subject? which is the object? we will not know. So, the subject and object they are collapsed because of this ambiguous word order.

Similarly, some verbs are used in different ways. In this case, we have an example 'Tolls' in the first line, is it used transitively or intransitively; both meanings could be derived, that is what critics have attempted. Similarly, the whole stanza can be rearranged; possibility of rearranging lines in the very first stanza many critics have pointed out. Further we find problems with the part of speech, whether the word is singular or plural, for example 'herd,' we have some difficulty. So, with all these difficulties syntactic, lexical, verbal difficulties the poem poses extraordinary difficulty causing or leading to instability in the poem.

And Hutchings calls it 'fluids syntax' and his claims that is this fluid syntax is a key to understanding Gray's Elegy. One example that he gives is this, "And all the air a solemn stillness

holds.” we use this as an example of inversion. And all the air a solemn stillness holds- it could be like this; rearranged like this ‘and a solemn stillness holds all the air’ and it could be rearranged in some other way depending on somebody's critical viewpoint.

What this whole poem is about death, how do we achieve death, in the poem itself? that is what is something interesting many critics have observed. Death means turning the subject into object and death is certain but we are uncertain about it, that is a beauty of this poem and also of our life.

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A Poststructuralist Reading (Bygrave)

- Two common readings:

- The poem becomes the epitaph it claims to
- The poem “dramatizes the Augustan ideal under stress, incapable of being extended to accommodate certain forms of personal rather than common or social experience.”

- Bygrave offers a poststructuralist reading:

- Gray, unable to belong to the city, comes to Stokes Page, a village. But then, he is an outsider here too, though he glorifies the rustic environment.
- Gray promises immortality, but, he denies it paradoxically.
- Gray is implicated in his own irony and his elegy is a paradigm of the Romantic conversation poem.



We have a poststructuralist reading from a critic called Bygrave. He begins giving the two common readings normally readers have towards this poem. First, the poem becomes the epitaph it claims to become; the whole poem of 29 stanzas attempt to become this epitaph. That is one reading. Another reading is, “the poem dramatizes the Augustan ideal under stress incapable of being extended to accommodate certain forms of personal rather than common or social experience.”

We saw in the case of Dryden and Pope, more of social experience is brought into their poems. That is where we saw Pope was able to accommodate some personal experiences, but when we come to pre-romantic poetry, we find more efforts to bring in the personal. This particular poem dramatizes the conflict between the two. And then Bygrave offers a poststructuralist reading. Gray, unable to belong to the city comes to Stokes Page, that is a village, but then, he is an

outsider here, though he glorifies the rustic environment. What we find in Gray is that he is not able to belong to the town, nor to the village. So, he has to find a way of establishing himself through this achievement of immortality. Gray promises immortality, but he denies it paradoxically because he dies and then whether somebody would come and memorialize him as well.

Gray is implicated in his own irony and his elegy is a paradigm of the romantic conversation poem. We find that the poet talks to himself and then there is a speech from this hoary swine. So, this conversation also takes place between the reader and the writer and the character that is brought into the poem and many other voices are brought into the poem: villagers, people from town, the civil war heroes and many others.

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Summary

- Historical and Literary Context
- Gray
- The Graveyard Poets
- “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”
- Selected Passages
- Analysis
- A Syntactical Reading
- A Poststructuralist Reading



To summarize, we saw the historical and literary context in which Thomas Gray was writing, the period of King George II. There was a movement called ‘Graveyard School of Poetry’ to which Gray also belonged because, most of them were writing about graveyard and the theme of death. This poem, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is an example of this Graveyard School of Poetry and also this is an exemplary poem for this elegiac tone, if not elegiac form.

Actually, that is why we say that this is an elegiac poem with a difference. We looked into some passages from this poem and analysed, read the poem with reference to poetic devices, thematic contrast, rhyme, rhythm meter and then finally offered two readings, one is syntactic reading,

actually the reference is called syntax of death, it is a very interesting article I would suggest you to read it. You can see that reference; just now you can see that. Then we have this poststructuralist reading from Bygrave saying that, Gray implicates in his own irony and he denies the immortality that he talks about.

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References



Bygrave, S. 2009. "Gray's Elegy: Inscribing the Twilight." In *Post-Structuralist Readings of English Poetry*, eds. R. Machin and C. Norris. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. pp.162-175.

Carper, Thomas R. 1977. "Gray's Personal Elegy," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 17 (3): 451-462.

Hutchings, W. 1984. "Syntax of Death: Instability in Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,'" *Studies in Philology*, 81 (4): 496-514.



Here are the references particularly the one on Hutchings, I enjoy reading much more, "Syntax of death: Instability in Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.'" Hope you too enjoy reading about the syntax of death in Gray's poem elegy. Thank you.