




Poetry
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Lecture 31: William Collins

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William Collins(1721-1759)

- Historical and Literary Context
- William Collins
- “Ode to Evening”
- Structure
- The Poem
- Analysis
- Eagleton’s Reading




We are going to discuss William Collins and his famous poem, Ode to Evening in this lecture. William Collins was born in 1721 and he died in 1759 and he had a brief life as you can see. We will look into the historical and literary context briefly, then examine his life again briefly, then read the poem Ode to Evening, paying attention to the structure and then we will give a very interesting reading from Terry Eagleton.

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Historical and Literary Context


- King George I (1714-1727)
- King George II (1727-1760)
- Conflict between Hanoverians and Jacobites
- Publication of *The Seasons* by James Thomson
- The graveyard school of poets
- Wide popularity of Gray’s *Elegy*
- Inspiration for a new kind of poetry
- Much like *The Dead Poets Society* (film)



William Collins lived in the period where we have kings like King George II from 1727 to 1760 that actually covers the period of William Collins. During this period, we have the conflict between Hanoverians supporting King George and his family and the other one supporting Jacobites from the earlier period, restoration period, James II and his dynasty. We also have a famous poem from this period, 'The Seasons' by James Thomson and the rise of 'The graveyard school of poets.'


The most popular poem of this period is of course Gray's Elegy. This graveyard school of poetry gave inspiration for a new kind of poetry much like what we have in 20th century, 'The Dead Poets Society' a film, which is interesting to watch.

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William Collins (1721-1759)

- A transitional or post-Augustan or pre-Romantic poet
- Formally neoclassical but thematically Romantic
- Description of individual emotional experiences
- Started writing poems at 11 and published three volumes
- Mingled with well-known poets of the times, including Dr. Johnson, James Thomson, and Thomas Gray
- Turned melancholic and died early
- Well-known for "Ode to Fear," Ode to Mercy," Ode to Liberty," and "Ode to Evening," among others.



Now let us pay attention to William Collins. He is often considered a transitional or post Augustan or pre-Romantic poet depending on the persuasion that one has. He is formerly a neoclassical poet but thematically a romantic poet. He describes individual emotional experiences in his poems. He started writing poems at the age of 11 and published three volumes in his brief lifetime. He fortunately had the opportunity of mingling with well-known poets of the times like James Thomson, Thomas Gray and the great literary figure, Dr. Johnson.

For some strange reason he turned melancholic and died early. He is known for poems like Ode to Fear, Ode to Mercy, Ode to Liberty and of course, Ode to Evening which we are going to discuss now.

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Ode: a Song

- A lyric poem in the form of an address to somebody or something
- A long lyrical poem of Greek and Latin origins
- Pindaric odes praised people, occasions, etc.
- Horatian odes were calm and meditative.
- Ben Jonson introduced the Pindaric ode into English
- Abraham Cowley introduced the irregular ode.
- Wordsworth used the irregular ode in his *Intimations of Immortality*.
- Collins's poem is a Pindaric ode to the evening time of the day.



What is an ode? It is a song. So, we have some brief ideas about Ode here. Ode is a lyric poem in the form of an address to somebody or something. It is a long lyrical poem of Greek and Latin origins.

We have two kinds of odes; one is called Pindaric odes, other is called Horatian odes. The first one actually was used to praise people and also used in certain occasions but the second one was more calm and meditative, that is personal. Ben Johnson introduced the Pindaric ode into English. Abraham Cowley introduced the irregular ode into English. As you know Wordsworth's famous "Ode on immortality" is an irregular ode. In our case, Collins' poem is a Pindaric ode to the evening time.

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“Ode to Evening” (1748)



- An unusually unrhymed ode with great musical qualities
- Influenced by Milton’s translation of a Horatian ode through the Wharton brothers (Havens, 1910)
- Influenced the Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, etc.
- A most enduring poem of the 18th century
- First published in *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegoric Subjects* (1746/1747)
- Revised for publication in Robert Dodley’s *Collection of Poems by Several Hands* (1748)
- A favourite piece of poets and novelists



Now let us get into this ‘Ode to Evening’ published in 1748. It is an unusually unrhymed ode with great musical qualities. It was influenced by Milton’s translation of a Horatian ode through the Wharton brothers. There is a critical study by Havens, how Collins was able to get this idea of writing this poem through the Wharton brothers.

This poem influences the romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats and many others of course. This is considered to be a most enduring poem of the 18th century. It was first published in odes on several descriptive and allegoric subjects. It was revised for publication in Robert Dodley’s “Collection of Poems by Several Hands” in 1748. It is considered to be a favorite piece of poets and novelists too.

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Structure



- 52 Unrhymed and unequal lines;
- 13 stanzas of 4 lines each
- Each stanza has two long lines and two short lines
- H. W. Garrard identified three divisions in the poem
- I: Lines 1-20; Invocation to evening – one sentence
- II: Lines 21-40; Generalization of Nature
- III: Lines 41-52; Total abstraction



This poem has a specific structure like this. There are of course 52 unrhymed unequal lines, that is irregular lines. We have 13 stanzas, each stanza has four lines, each stanza also has two long lines and two short lines. That is where this irregularity comes in. One critic called H. W. Garrord identified three divisions in the poem. Though everyone may not agree with it, it is useful for us to read the poem and understand it.

First 20 lines are considered invocation to evening, lines from one to twenty, they all belong to one sentence. And similarly, the second one, 21 to 40, it talks about nature in general. And the last lines, 41 to 52 are considered to be total abstraction, some may not agree with it but this is what Garrord has to say about William Collins' poem Ode to Evening.

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Ode to Evening - I



If aught of oaten stop, or past'ral song,
May hope, chaste Eve, to soothe thy modest ear,
Like thy own solemn springs,
4. Thy springs and dying gales,

O nymph reserved, while now the bright-haired sun
Sits in yon western tent, whose cloudy skirts,
With brede ethereal wove,
8. O'erhang his wavy bed;

Now air is hushed, save where the weak-ey'd bat
With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wing,
Or where the beetle winds
12. His small but sullen horn



Ode to Evening - II



As oft he rises 'midst the twilight path
Against the pilgrim, borne in heedless hum:
Now teach me, maid composed,
16. To breathe some softened strain,

Whose numbers stealing through thy dark'ning vale
May not unseemly with its stillness suit,
As musing slow, I hail
20. Thy genial loved return.

For when thy folding star arising shows
His paly cirlet, at his warning lamp
The fragrant Hours, and elves
24. Who slept in flowers the day,



Ode to Evening - III



And many a nymph who wreathes her brows with sedge
And sheds the fresh'ning dew, and lovelier still,
The pensive pleasures sweet
28. Prepare thy shad'wy car.

Then lead, calm votress, where some sheety lake
Cheers the lone heath, or some time-hallowed pile
Or upland fallows grey
32. Reflect its last cool gleam.

But when chill blust'ring winds, or driving rain,
Forbid my willing feet, be mine the hut
That from the mountain's side
36. Views wilds, and swelling floods,



Ode to Evening - IV



And hamlets brown, and dim-discovered spires,
And hears their simple bell, and marks o'er all
Thy dewy fingers draw
40. The gradual dusky veil.

While Spring shall pour his showers, as oft he wont,
And bathe thy breathing tresses, meekest Eve;
While Summer loves to sport
44. Beneath thy ling'ring light;



Ode to Evening - V



While fallow Autumn fills thy lap with leaves;
Or Winter, yelling through the troublous air,
Affrights thy shrinking train
48. And rudely rends thy robes;

So long, sure-found beneath the sylvan shed,
Shall Fancy, Friendship, Science, rose-lipp'd Health,
Thy gentlest influence own,
52. And hymn thy fav'rite name!



Let us read the poem now. There are some archaic words, they are not difficult to understand once we know that they are words which we have to pay some more attention:

Ode to Evening I

“If aught of oaten stop or past’ral song

May hope, chaste Eve, to soothe thy modest ear,

Like thy own solemn springs,

4. Thy springs and dying gales.

O nymph reserved, while now the bright-haired sun

Sits in yon western tent, whose cloudy skirts,

With brede ethereal wove,

8. O’erhang his wavy bed;

Now air is hushed, save where the weak-ey’d bat

With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wing,

Or where the beetle winds

12. His small but sullen horn.

Ode to Evening II

As oft he rises ‘midst the twilight path

Against the pilgrim, borne in heedless hum:

Now teach me, maid composed,

16. To breathe some softened strain,

Whose numbers stealing through the dark’ning vale

May not and unseemly with its stillness suit,

As musing slow, I hail

20. Thy genial loud return.

For when thy folding star arising shows

His paly circlet, at his warning lamp,

The fragrant Hours, and elves

24. Who slept in flowers the day.

Ode to Evening III

And many a nymph who wreathes her brows with the sedge

And sheds the fresh 'ning dew and lovelier still,

The pensive pleasure sweet

28. Prepare thy shad'wy car.

Then lead, calm votress, where some sheety lake

Cheers the lone heath, or some time-hallowed pile

Or upland fallows grey

32. Reflect its last cool gleam.

But when chill blust'ring winds or driving rain

Forbid my willing feet, be mine the hut,

That from the mountain's side

36. Views wilds, and swelling floods,

Ode to Evening IV

And hamlets brown and dim-discovered spires

And hears their simple bell, and marks o'er all

The dewy fingers draw

40. The gradual dusky veil.

While Spring shall pour his showers, as oft he wont,

And bathe thy breathing tresses, meekest Eve;

While summer loves to sport

Beneath thy ling'ring light;

Ode to Evening V

While fallow Autumn fills thy lap with leaves;

Or winter, yelling through the troublous air,

Affrights thy shrinking train

48. And rudely rends thy robes;

So long, sure-found beneath the sylvan shed,

Shall fancy, friendship, science, rose-lipped Health,

Thy gentlest influence own,

52. And hymn thy fav'rite name!"

It is a hymn to evening, it is an ode, it is an ode in praise of the evening time, the twilight time. The poet describes whole evening in his own words using certain poetic devices and rhythmic structure.

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Thematic Contrast


- Evening and Morning
- Spring and Autumn
- Western and Eastern
- Pilgrim and Traveler
- Concord and Discord
- Day and Night
- Pleasures sweet and chill blustering winds



When we pay attention to the thematic contrast, we can understand how the poem begins and progresses and ends. Of course, it is a poem to the evening but it contrasts it with morning. It talks about spring and also about autumn. It refers to western and also eastern sides. Similarly, we have a pilgrim with a focus, with a purpose but at the background we can also think about the traveler who may not have any purpose. There is an element of concord harmony in the evening, at the same time some amount of discord is also indicated.

It deals with the end of the day, beginning of the night, so we have this contrast between day and night. The poem contrast between pleasures sweet and chill blustering winds. Nothing is purely day, purely night, purely evening. There is some mixture of everything. The poet describes all together.



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Poetic Devices


- **Apostrophe:** address to Evening
- **Personification:** Evening as a chaste woman
- **Allegory:** a story of the passage of time
- **Personification:** seasons; spring, summer, autumn, and winter
- **Metaphor:** cloudy skirts (6)
- **Metonymy:** Eve representing Nature
- **Polysyndeton:** 37-38

And hamlets brown, and dim-discovered spires,
And hears their simple bell, and marks o'er all



Poetic Devices - Sounds

- **Alliteration:** some softened strain (16)
rudely rends thy robes (48)
- **Assonance:** If aught of oaten stop, or past'ral song,
- **Onomatopoeia:** (9-10)
Now air is hushed, save where the weak-ey'd **bat**
With **short shrill shriek flits** by on leathern wing,
- **Anaphora:** "while" in three lines (41, 43, and 45)
- **Syncope:** past'ral (1), darken'ng (17)



This is a poem addressed to evening. So, we have this Apostrophe, the evening is not described just as a natural event. It is personified as a woman, a chaste woman. A chaste woman, a beautiful woman, a desirable woman and also there is an Allegory of this passing of time from day to evening, from one day to next day, one season to another season, that is from spring to autumn or from autumn to winter. We have the personification of all seasons; spring, summer, autumn and winter moving from one season to another.

We have some metaphor here and there and we have one example, this metaphor refers to cloudy skirts. Also, we have this metonymy, the whole evening, just one part of a day is representing the whole nature. When this is the case then one part, one small element of this

evening twilight represents whole of nature, that is metonymically it happens. We have a very interesting case of Polysyndeton here:

“And hamlets brown, and dim-discovered spires

And hears their simple bell, and makes o'er all.”

So, whatever is happening around this village in or in the rural area in this natural environment, we have all of them coming together and, and, and; they all come together so quickly; they create some harmony.

We said this poem has lots of musical qualities and the musical qualities can be found here through the analysis of sounds with reference to some examples. Some softened strain, this is a poem oaten song, that is a musical instrument used to sing, to play the music. Some softened strain, poem or song, strain- song, line- poetry rudely rends thy robes, Alliteration we have in these two examples. We have Assonance in the first line, very first line; if aught of oaten stop or pastel song, aught- oaten. We have, also have stop - song, the vowels are repeated, adding to the musical quality.

We have beautiful Onomatopoeia in line number nine to ten:

“Now air is hushed, save where the weak-ey'd bat

With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wing.”

Short shrill shriek flits, it is a case of Alliteration and also it attempts to imitate the bat movement. We have Anaphora in three lines beginning with while, if you go back to the slide you can see in line number 41, 43 and 45. We also have Syncope dropping off, that is, omitting of certain syllables, certain letters: Past'ral, darken'ng. That is of course done for the sake of maintaining the metrical pattern, that is foot.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- **Rhyme:** Unrhymed poem but not blank verse due to variation in foot
- **Internal rhyme:** breathing tresses, meekest Eve (42)
- **Enjambment and Caesura:** 22-23
As oft| he ri|ses 'midst| the twi| light path
Against| the pil| grim, borne| in heed| ess hum:
Now teach| me, maid| composed,
To breathe| some so| ftened strain,
- **Foot:** alternating between pentameter and trimeter
- **Meter:** iambic



We also have more details about this rhyme, rhythm and meter. The whole poem is unrhymed but it is not blank verse; blank verse means iambic pentameter must be there. This poem does not have that, so we have lots of variation, number of lines, number of feet varies from line to line.

We have internal rhyme also in this, that is where the musical qualities are much more; breathing tresses, meekest Eve; evening that is meek, that is breathing. Musically the evening time and also some critics have noted that this eve could be the eve of book of genesis. We also have this Enjambment, that is run on lines and caesura:

“As oft he rises ‘midst that twilight path

Against the pilgrim borne in heedless hum.

Now teach me, there we have the caesura. Now teach me, maid composed, again we have this pause but this comes at the end of the line. So, what comes in the middle of the line we call it caesura. Now teach me, maid composed to breathe some softened strain. We have these two meters actually, one is pentameter, another is trimeter, penta 5 feet and tri 3 feet. The major metrical pattern, rhythmic pattern in this poem is iambic, of course.

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Overall Impression



- A personal descriptive and meditative poem on the evening of a day
- The poem universalizes (allegorizes) a specific evening to the evening of every life.
- Beauty/ Life is evanescent.
- The poet/ speaker/ **pilgrim** observes the vagaries of time with a detached outlook, though attracted to the beauties and dangers of life.
- As long as alive, sing the beauty of evening and the biblical Eve too.



On the whole we can say that this is a poem, this is an ode to evening, it is a personal descriptive and meditative poem on the evening of a day. The poem universalizes, that is, allegorizes a specific evening to the evening of everyday life. We have the major theme of beauty being evanescent or life being short-lived. The poet or the speaker one who we see in the poem is the pilgrim. The poet or the pilgrim observes the vagaries of time with a detached outlook though attracted to the beauties and dangers of life. In fact, many critics have found that the poet is willing to get into the natural scenario but then, he detaches himself, he goes away from the scene of action. As long as we live, let us sing the beauty of evening and the biblical eve too. It appears that the poet is saying this kind of idea in this poem.

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Eagleton's Reading

- Collins uses an elaborately formal diction and solemnly elevated tone.
- He was enamored of ornate poetic figures.
- Eagleton observes that the hut is humble but the poetic language is noble.
- The poet differentiates himself from the landscape he describes using elaborate conventional terms like bright-haired, wavy bed, sylvan bed.
- The poem is not about the human subject or the natural object but about the medium of language.
- It is self-referential; it is a text about the process of writing a poem, especially the invocation to the muse



Terry Eagleton has a very interesting reading of this poem. He says, ‘Collins uses an elaborately formal diction and solemnly elevated tone.’ The language is elevated, of course; and one of the features of this poem is, it uses archaic words. He was enamored of ornate poetic figures. So, Terry Eagleton observes that the hut is, there is one hut to which he goes. The Eagleton says ‘the hut is humble but the poetic language is noble, elevated, grand.’

The poet differentiates himself from the landscape he describes using elaborate conventional terms like bright-haired, wavy bed, sylvan bed. The critic deduces that the poem is not about the human subject nor even about the natural object but about the medium of language, that is where we can say that, this is a kind of deconstructive reading. To Eagleton, it is self-referential, it is a text about the process of writing a poem, especially the invocation to the muse for the poet to write his poem about the evening, about the twilight, about the twilight of our life. Probably Collins was too much aware of his own twilight.

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Summary

- Historical and Literary Context
- William Collins
- "Ode to Evening"
- Structure
- The Poem
- Analysis
- Eagleton's Reading



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To summarize, we have looked into the historical and literary context of William Collins, which enabled Collins to write a poem like this, Ode to Evening. This is a poem considered to be a pre-Romantic poem and inspiration for poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, but it took inspiration from Milton. That is where we can see the poetic tradition from Chaucer and Spencer, Milton to Wordsworth through Collins.

Eagleton's the constructive reading of the poem indicates that, this is a poem about poetry writing using language. So, he gives a reading in which he says this is not about the poet, this is not about the evening but about language itself.

We have many references; you can read whatever you are able to get hold of. But one thing you can understand is, when you collect a list of references like this, you will find some

critics are more interested in certain poets than certain others; like for example this Jung. You can see even in 21st century people are interested in Collins. As long as people live, as long as people are interested in their life, as long as we think about life, language, death, loss, I think we will continue to read poetry. Thank you.