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Poetry for Students

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*Poetry
for Students*

for Poetry Students

Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on
Commonly Studied Poetry

Volume 9

Ira Mark Milne, Editor

Foreword by David Kelly, College of Lake County



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Poetry for Students

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Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Thomas Gray

1751

Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" was first published in 1751. Gray may, however, have begun writing the poem in 1742, shortly after the death of his close friend Richard West. An elegy is a poem which laments the dead. Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is noteworthy in that it mourns the death not of great or famous people, but of common men. The speaker of this poem sees a country churchyard at sunset, which impels him to meditate on the nature of human mortality. The poem invokes the classical idea of *memento mori*, a Latin phrase which states plainly to all mankind, "Remember that you must die." The speaker 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 deserved place 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 Neoclassical 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.



Author Biography

Born in the Cornhill district of London in 1716, Gray was the son of Dorothy Antrobus Gray, a milliner, and Philip Gray, a scrivener. Gray's father was a mentally disturbed and violent man who at times abused his wife. Gray attended Eton School from 1725 until 1734, when he entered Cambridge University. He left Cambridge in 1738 without taking a degree, intending to study law in London. However, he and childhood friend Horace Walpole embarked on an extended tour of Europe. The two separated in Italy in 1741 after a quarrel, and Gray continued the journey on his own. He returned to London later in the year, shortly before his father died. Gray then moved with his mother to Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire, and began his most productive period of poetic composition. In 1742 Gray wrote his first major poem, "Ode on the Spring," which he sent to his close friend Richard West—unknowingly on the very day of West's death from tuberculosis. In the next three months Gray wrote "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College," "Hymn to Adversity," and "Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West." It is believed that he also worked on "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" during this time, though this poem was not published until 1751. Gray returned to Cambridge at the end of 1742 and received a Bachelor of Civil Law degree the next year. Gray lived at the university for most of the rest of his life, but he never took part in tutoring, lecturing, or other academic duties; instead he pursued his studies and writing, taking advantage of the intellectual stimulation of the setting. In 1757 Gray was offered the position of Poet Laureate, but he declined it. He moved to London in 1759 to study at the British Museum and remained there for two years. He read widely and earned a reputation as one of the most learned men in Europe. Except for regular trips back to London and elsewhere in England, Gray stayed in Cambridge from 1761 until the end of his life. In 1768 Gray was named Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, an office he held until his death in 1771.

Poem Text

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.



Thomas Gray

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight, 5
 And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
 Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
 And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;
 Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
 The moping owl does to the moon complain 10
 Of such, as wandering near her secret bower,
 Molest her ancient solitary reign.
 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, 15
 The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.
 The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
 The swallow twittering from the straw-built
 shed,
 The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn, 20
 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.
 Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield, 25
 Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
 How jocund did they drive their team afield!
 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 annals 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 hour. 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 Trophies raise,
 Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted
 vault
 The pealing anthem swells the note of praise. 40
 Can storied urn or animated bust
 Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
 Can Honor's voice provoke the silent dust,
 Or Flattery sooth the dull cold ear of Death?

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid 45
 Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
 Hands, that the rod 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 unroll; 50
 Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,
 And froze the genial 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,
 And waste its sweetness on the desert air. 55

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast
 The little Tyrant of his fields withstood;
 Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
 Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's
 blood. 60

The applause of listening senates to command,
 The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
 To scatter plenty 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
 confin'd;
 Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
 And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

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

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

Yet even these bones from insult to protect,
 Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
 With uncouth 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 Forgetfulness a prey,
 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,
 Some pious drops the closing eye requires; 90
 Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
 Ev'n in our Ashes live their wonted 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 inquire thy fate,

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. 100

"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 custom'd hill,
 Along the heath and near his favorite tree; 110
 Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
 Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

"The next with dirges due in sad array
 Slow through the church-way path we saw him
 borne.
 Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the lay, 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 bounty, and his soul sincere,
 Heaven did a recompense 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.

Poem Summary

Lines 1-4:

In the first stanza, the speaker observes the signs of a country day drawing to a close: a cur-

few bell ringing, a herd of cattle moving across the pasture, and a farm laborer returning home. The speaker is then left alone to contemplate the isolated rural scene. The first line of the poem sets a distinctly somber tone: the curfew bell does not simply ring; it “knells”—a term usually applied to bells rung at a death or funeral. From the start, then, Gray reminds us of human mortality.

Lines 5-8:

The second stanza sustains the somber tone of the first: the speaker is not mournful, but pensive, as he describes the peaceful landscape that surrounds him. Even the air is characterized as having a “solemn stillness.”

Lines 9-12:

The sound of an owl hooting intrudes upon the evening quiet. We are told that the owl “complains”; in this context, the word does not mean “to whine” or “grumble,” but “to express sorrow.” The owl’s call, then, is suggestive of grief. Note that at no point in these three opening stanzas does Gray directly refer to death or a funeral; rather, he indirectly creates a funereal atmosphere by describing just a few mournful sounds.

Lines 13-16:

It is in the fourth stanza that the speaker directly draws our attention to the graves in the country churchyard. We are presented with two potentially conflicting images of death. Line 14 describes the heaps of earth surrounding the graves; in order to dig a grave, the earth must necessarily be disrupted. Note that the syntax of this line is slightly confusing. We would expect this sentence to read “Where the turf heaves”—not “where heaves the turf”: Gray has inverted the word order. Just as the earth has been disrupted, the syntax imitates the way in which the earth has been disrupted. But by the same token, the “rude Forefathers” buried beneath the earth seem entirely at peace: we are told that they are laid in “cells,” a term which reminds us of the quiet of a monastery, and that they “sleep.”

Lines 17-20:

If the “Forefathers” are sleeping, however, the speaker reminds us that they will never again rise from their “beds” to hear the pleasurable sounds of country life that the living do. The term “lowly beds” describes not only the unpretentious graves in which the forefathers are buried, but the humble conditions that they endured when they were alive.

Media Adaptations



- J. Norton Publishers/Audio-Forum has produced an audiocassette entitled *How Shelley Died; Elegy in a Country Churchyard: Two Lectures* (1979) with Gilbert Highet.
- Caedmon has produced an audiocassette set (of 4 disks) entitled *Eighteenth Century Poets and Drama* (1970).
- Spoken Arts Corporation has produced an audiocassette set (of 6 disks) entitled *Great English Literature of the 18th Century* (1971).
- Perspective Films has produced a videocassette entitled *Elegy to Thomas Gray* (1980).
- Monterey Home Video has produced a videocassette entitled *The Poetry Hall of Fame: Volume IV* (1994) from the BBC series “Anyone for Tennyson?”

Lines 21-24:

The speaker then moves on to consider some of the other pleasures the dead will no longer enjoy: the happiness of home, wife, and children.

Lines 25-28:

The dead will also no longer be able to enjoy the pleasures of work, of plowing the fields each day. This stanza points to the way in which the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” contains elements of both Augustan and Romantic poetry. Poetry that describes agriculture—as this one does—is called georgic. Georgic verse was extremely popular in the eighteenth century. Note, however, that Gray closely identifies the farmers with the land that they work. This association of man and nature is suggestive of a romantic attitude. The georgic elements of the stanza almost demand that we characterize it as typical of the eighteenth century, but its tone looks forward to the Romantic period.

Lines 29-32:

The next four stanzas caution those who are wealthy and powerful not to look down on the poor.

These lines warn the reader not to slight the “obscure” “destiny” of the poor—the fact that they will never be famous or have long histories, or “annals,” written about them.

Lines 33-36:

This stanza invokes the idea of *memento mori* (literally, a reminder of mortality). The speaker reminds the reader that regardless of social position, beauty, or wealth, all must eventually die.

Lines 37-40:

The speaker also challenges the reader not to look down on the poor for having modest, simple graves. He suggests, moreover, that the elaborate memorials that adorn the graves of the “Proud” are somehow excessive. In this context, the word “fretted” in line 39 has a double meaning: on the one hand, it can refer to the design on a cathedral ceiling; on the other hand, it can suggest that there is something “fretful,” or troublesome, about the extravagant memorials of the wealthy.

Lines 41-44:

The speaker observes that nothing can bring the dead back to life, and that all the advantages that the wealthy had in life are useless in the face of death. Neither elaborate funeral monuments nor impressive honors can restore life. Nor can flattery in some way be used to change the mind of death. Note here Gray’s use of personification in characterizing both “flattery” and “death”—as though death has a will or mind of its own.

Lines 45-48:

The speaker then reconsiders the poor people buried in the churchyard. He wonders what great deeds they might have accomplished had they been given the opportunity: one of these poor farmers, the speaker reasons, might have been a great emperor; another might have “waked ... the living lyre,” or been a great poet or musician.

Lines 49-52:

The poor were never able to fulfill their political and artistic potential, however, because they were uneducated—they never received the “Knowledge” that would enable them to rule and to create. Instead, “Penury,” or poverty, “froze the genial current of their soul.” That is, poverty paralyzed their ability to draw upon their innermost passions—the very passions that could have inspired them to become great poets or politicians.

Lines 53-56:

In a series of analogies, Gray observes that the talents of the poor are like a “gem” hidden in the ocean or a “flower” blooming in the desert. Just as an unseen flower in the desert is a “waste,” Gray suggests, the uneducated talents of the poor are also a “waste,” because they remain unused and undeveloped.

Lines 57-60:

The speaker then compares these poor, uneducated people to three of the most famous and powerful people of the previous century: John Hampden, a parliamentary leader who defended the people against the abuses of Charles I; John Milton, the great poet who wrote *Paradise Lost* and who also opposed Charles I; and Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England from 1653 to 1658. The speaker suggests that buried in this churchyard might be someone who—like Hampden, Milton, or Cromwell—had the innate ability to oppose tyranny, but never had the opportunity to exercise that ability.

Lines 61-64:

This person, the speaker reasons, with the proper education and resources, might have “commanded” the government as well as any great political leader. Note, however, that Gray gives us two ways in which to consider this power. On the one hand, a great ruler can receive applause and can ignore “threats of pain and ruin.” A great leader can “scatter plenty,” can offer prosperity, to a grateful nation. But on the other hand, if one governs, one is, in fact, exposed to dangerous threats. And simply governing to receive “applause” suggests a shallow and self-serving motive. Moreover, “scattering plenty” implies that the wealth of a nation can be squandered by its rulers. Gray may be suggesting that having power is not as desirable as it seems. Note that the final line of this stanza is enjambed; it continues into the following line—and in this case, the next stanza.

Lines 65-68:

The first line of this stanza continues the thought of the previous, enjambed line. It abruptly reminds us that the impoverished conditions of the poor “forbade” them from becoming great rulers. Gray underscores the abrupt shock of this idea by abruptly interrupting the flow of the line with a caesura. Building on the idea of the previous stanza, the speaker notes that if poverty prevented the country laborers from acquiring the “virtues” of

great and powerful people, it also prevented them from committing the “crimes” often associated with those people—and especially with those people who hold political power. In particular, it prevented them from engaging in the bloody activity associated with the British Civil War.

Lines 69-72:

Because these farm laborers were not in positions of power, the speaker reasons, they never had to ignore their own consciences. Nor did they sacrifice their artistic talents (the gift of the “Muse”) to “Luxury” or “Pride.”

Lines 73-76:

The speaker continues his praise of the simple life of common people. They are “far from the madding crowd” of city and political life. “Madding” here can mean either “maddening” (that is, the source of madness or insanity) or it can mean “mad” (that is, the crowd is itself hatefully insane). In either case, the common country people were removed from this insane world; as a result, they never “strayed” into the immoral acts of the powerful. Instead, they kept steadily to their simple but meaningful lives.

Lines 77-80:

The speaker then reminds us that these common people are, in fact, long dead. He notes that even if they were not powerful or great, and even if they do not have an elaborate memorial of the sort mentioned in line 38, they still deserve homage or tribute. At the very least, he suggests, an onlooker should “sigh” on seeing their graves. Note here the multiple meanings we can attach to the word “passing.” It can refer to the onlooker, who is simply walking or “passing by” these graves. It can mean “in passing”—that someone seeing these graves should take just a moment out of their busy lives to remember the dead. And “passing” itself is a euphemism for death. In a way, then, Gray is suggesting that there is no difference between the person “passing” by the grave and the person who has “passed” away—another reminder that all will eventually die.

Lines 81-84:

Instead of “fame and elegy,” the people buried here have modest tombstones, which display only their names and the dates of their birth and death. These common people were not famous, and no one has written elaborate elegies or funeral verses for them. Still, the very modesty of their tomb-

stones testifies to the nobility and “holy” nature of their simple lives. As such, they provide an example not so much of how life should be lived, but how its end, death, should be approached. The term “rustic moralist” here is open to interpretation. It may refer to anyone who is in the countryside thinking about the meaning of death. But more likely, it refers to the speaker, who is himself moralizing—preaching or contemplating—about the nature of both life and death.

Lines 85-88:

The speaker reasons that most people, faced with the prospect of dying and ultimately being forgotten, cling to life. Note Gray’s use of paradox in line 86: “this pleasing anxious being.” On the one hand, “being” or living can be “anxious,” filled with worries. On the other hand, just being alive—when faced with death—is itself “pleasing” or pleasant. The speaker is suggesting that even the troubles and worries of life are enjoyable in comparison to death.

Lines 89-92:

The dead rely on the living to remember them and to mourn for them. The speaker suggests that this need is so fundamental that even from the grave the buried dead seem to ask for remembrance. In fact, as line 92 suggests, the dead actually live on in our memories.

Lines 93-96:

In this stanza, the speaker addresses himself. He reasons that since he himself has been mindful of the dead, and has remembered and praised them in this poem, perhaps when he is dead someone will remember him. This person, he reasons, will necessarily be a “kindred Spirit,” someone who is also a lonely wanderer in the country, meditating on the nature of death. The speaker then goes on to imagine his own death: he envisions this “kindred Spirit” seeing his (the speaker’s) grave and wondering about his life and death.

Lines 97-100:

In the next five stanzas, the speaker imagines how an old farm laborer might remember him after his death. If, the speaker speculates, the “kindred Spirit” sees the speaker’s grave and wonders about it, perhaps an old man might offer to describe the speaker. The old man would say that the speaker was often seen wandering about the countryside at dawn. Presumably, he was frequently out all night—as, no doubt, he has been in this very poem.

Lines 101-104:

At noon, the old man continues, the speaker would frequently stretch out under an old tree at noon, and stare at a nearby brook.

Lines 105-108:

The old man would have observed that the speaker's moods were changeable: sometimes the speaker would wander about in the nearby woods, "smiling scornfully" and talking to himself; other times, he would appear depressed; then again, sometimes he would look as though he were in anguish. Perhaps, the old man speculates, the speaker had been "crossed in hopeless love."

Lines 109-112:

The speaker continues to imagine this old man remembering him after his death. The old man would have noticed one morning that the speaker was absent: he was not in any of his favorite spots. Likewise, the old man would remember, the speaker did not appear the following day.

Lines 113-116:

The third day, however, the old man and his friends would have seen the speaker's body being carried to the churchyard for burial. (The speaker, then, is imagining himself buried in the very graveyard he once used to wander by.) The old man invites this curious passerby, or "kindred Spirit," to read the speaker's epitaph. Note the reminder that the old man is uneducated: he cannot read, although the passerby can do so.

Lines 117-120:

The last three stanzas are, in fact, the speaker's epitaph; the way in which the speaker imagines his epitaph will read. Through the epitaph, the speaker asks the passerby (and the reader) not to remember him as wealthy, famous, or brilliantly educated, but as one who was "melancholic" or deeply thoughtful and sad.

Lines 121-124:

The speaker asks that we remember him for being generous and sincere. His generosity was, in fact, his willingness to mourn for the dead. Because he was so generous, the speaker reasons, heaven gave him a "friend"—someone who would, in turn, mourn for him after his death. This friend is unnamed, but we can deduce that it is any "kindred Spirit"—including the reader—who reads the speaker's epitaph and remembers him.

Lines 125-128:

The speaker concludes by cautioning the reader not to praise him any further. He also asks that his "frailties," his flaws or personal weaknesses, not be considered; rather, they should be left to the care of God, with whom the speaker now resides. The poem, then, is an elegy not only for the common man, but for the speaker himself. Indeed, by the end of the poem it is evident that the speaker himself wishes to be identified not with the great and famous, but with the common people whom he has praised and with whom he will, presumably, be buried.

Themes

Death

Gray's "Elegy" is one of the best-known poems about death in all of European literature. The poem presents the reflections of an observer who, passing by a churchyard that is out in the country, stops for a moment to think about the significance of the strangers buried there. Scholars of medieval times sometimes kept human skulls on their desktops, to keep themselves conscious of the fact that someday they, like the skulls' former occupants, would die: from this practice we get the phrase *memento mori*, which we say to this day to describe any token one uses to keep one's mortality in mind. In this poem, the graveyard acts as a *memento mori*, reminding the narrator to not place too much value on this life because someday he too will be dead and buried. The speaker of the poem is surrounded by the idea of death, and throughout the first seven stanzas there are numerous images pointing out the contrast between death and life. After mentioning the churchyard in the title, which establishes the theme of mortality, the poem itself begins with images of gloom and finality. The darkness at the end of the day, the forlorn moan of lowing cattle, the stillness of the air (highlighted by the beetle's stilted motion) and the owl's nocturnal hooting all serve to set a background for this serious meditation. However, it is not until the fourth stanza that the poem actually begins to deal with the cemetery, mentioned as the place where the village forefathers "sleep." In the following stanzas, the speaker tries to imagine what the lives of these simple men might have been like, touching upon their relations with their wives, children, and the soil that they worked. They are not defined by their possessions, because they had few, and instead are defined by

their actions, which serves to contrast their lives with their quiet existence in the graveyard. This “Elegy” presents the dead in the best light: their families adored them and they were cheerful in their work, as they “hummed the woods beneath their steady stroke.” The speaker openly admits that they are spoken of so well precisely because they are dead, because death is such a terrible thing that its victims deserve the respect of the living. In line 90, the poet explains, “Some pious drops the closing eye requires,” explaining that the living should show their respect for death with their sorrow.

Search for Self

The speaker of this poem goes through a process of recognizing what is important to him and choosing how to live his life (which leads to the epitaph with which he would like to be remembered). In stanza 8, the poem begins naming the attributes that are normally considered desirable but are now considered pointless when compared with the lives of the rustic dead in the country graveyard. Ambition and Grandeur, according to the speaker, should not think less of these people because of their simple accomplishments. He goes on to assert that Pride and Memory have no right to ignore them, and that Honor and Flattery will be as useless to the rich as to the poor when they are dead. The speaker, an educated person, gives much consideration to the subject of Knowledge, and whether the lack of it made the lives of these country people less significant. Their poverty blocked the way to knowledge, he decides, and the lack of knowledge separated them from vices as well as virtues, so that in the end he does not consider his education a factor in making him better or worse than them either. In the end, having eliminated all of the supposed benefits of the wealthy, educated world that he comes from, the speaker identifies himself with the graveyard inhabitants to such a degree that he winds up in this humble graveyard after his death. In contrast to the simple graves that he pondered over throughout his life, though, the speaker’s grave is marked with a warm-hearted memorial, the “Epitaph” at the end of the poem. Assuming that such a thoughtful person would not have been so immodest as to write this epitaph for himself, there must have been some other literate person to remember him. He is also remembered by an illiterate member of the farm community, the “hoary-headed swain” who has to ask someone to read the epitaph. Before the death of the poem’s narrator, this Swain established a nonverbal relationship with him, observing him from afar, won-

Topics for Further Study



- Do you think the speaker of this poem is sentimentalizing the forgotten people in the country churchyard, or is he giving them the recognition they deserve? Would this poem have the same meaning if it were written in a churchyard in a busy city?
- Visit a cemetery near you, pick the tombstone of a person that you do not know, and write a page about what that person might have been like, focusing on the social changes that person may have experienced. What does the length of that person’s life tell you? What can you tell from where they are buried?
- It could be argued that people in modern society are more likely to remember the accomplishments of poor people than they were in Gray’s time? It is just as possible, though, that we are as preoccupied with the famous and wealthy as people in seventeenth century England were with royalty. Explain what you think about this issue.

dering about him just as the narrator wondered about the country people buried there.

Class Conflict

A superficial reading of this poem might leave the impression that the author intends to present members of the lower class as being more worthy of praise than their upper-class counterparts. This would be a reasonable assumption, since so much of the poem is devoted to praising the simple virtues of the poor. In the larger scope, though, the position that Gray takes is that all people, poor or rich, are equal. This is a meditation on death, which has been called the “great equalizer” because no can avoid it. The reason that the poem seems to favor one class over the other is that it is working against the assumption that only those of the upper class are worthy of attention when they die. It is the humble condition of the country churchyard, with gravestones unmarked or possibly marked just

with names by illiterate people unable to read, that draws attention to the virtues of the poor and uneducated (which society often forgets), and so much of the poem is spent praising their moral strength. The virtues of the wealthy and famous are not denied, they just are not explored in this poem because they are already so familiar. Evidence of the poem's evenhandedness about the different classes can be seen in the fact that, while praising the poor country people throughout, Gray also acknowledges that education, which may give them opportunity to develop moral excellence, may also lead them to corruption: as he says in stanza 17, the humble circumstances of the poor limited the growth not only of their virtues but also of their crimes. The poem thus leaves open the question of superiority. Society glorifies the rich, and the poem's narrator glorifies the poor, but, as he reminds us, "The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

Style

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is written in heroic quatrains. A quatrain is a four-line stanza. Heroic quatrains rhyme in an *abab* pattern and are written in iambic pentameter. An iamb is a poetic foot consisting of one unstressed and one stressed syllable, as in the phrase "the world." Pentameter simply means that there are five feet in each line. Consider, for instance, the first line of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard":

The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day.

When we scan the line, or identify its stresses, it appears as follows:

TheCur / few tolls / the knell / of part / ing day.

Try reading the line aloud: its regular, steady rhythm helps to create a calm and quiet mood—one appropriate to the meditative nature of this poem.

Historical Context

When Thomas Gray was writing this poem, the world was going through a period of intellectual development that thinkers of the time dubbed the "Age of Enlightenment." The Enlightenment was a philosophical movement that grew out of the great advances made by scientists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One key example which

ended up having great influence on the Enlightenment was Sir Isaac Newton's theory of universal gravitation, which proposed laws that explained and predicted the behavior of matter in all circumstances everywhere. Newton published this theory in his book *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* in 1687, and it marked a turning point in the history of science. At the same time, this idea of the power of rationalism was growing in the area of philosophy. Thinkers such as Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) took up the idea of rationalism, attempting to apply the methods of scientific inquiry to the field of philosophy; Descartes' famous statement "I think, therefore I am" represents his attempt to start with the one simple truth that he could be sure of about the world, which was that he himself existed. In political science, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) explored the interrelations of social interactions in such works as *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, and John Locke (1632-1704) explained human intelligence as being the sum of what is learned through experience, not the God-given right of a few.

By the start of the eighteenth century, intellectuals throughout the world were excited about the new Age of Enlightenment, which promised humanity new hope for controlling the world's problems. At first, though, the Enlightenment's enthusiasts were considered dangerous radicals. They rejected tradition that was not backed up with solid rational explanation, and tradition was the basis for most rulers' political power. Royalty ruled by relation to previous rulers, and landowners feasted while peasants starved because of rights based on inheritance, but rationalism served to undermine such rights and to blur class distinctions. In particular, the Catholic Church, which had been a strong influence in European politics for centuries, was threatened by the skepticism of Enlightenment thinkers who felt society should be organized according to rational rather than religious principles. As religious explanations of the universe lost credibility to scientific explanations that were based on observation, the Church took a defensive position, jailing free thinkers for heresy when they published theories that contradicted church tradition. In earlier times, Galileo, for example, was imprisoned for supporting the Copernican heliocentric view of the solar system. In the early 1700s, the church clashed frequently with Enlightenment theorists who made even minor claims about the nature of man and society that could be considered heretical. By the middle of the century, when Thomas Gray wrote

Compare & Contrast

- **1751:** Benjamin Franklin, flying a kite in a thunderstorm with a key at the end of the string, discovered the fact that lightning behaves like electricity and flows through conductive material.
Today: Control of electricity is one of the fundamental principles of our society. Blackouts, when electricity becomes unavailable, create major disruptions.
 - **1751:** Whaling was an important part of the economy of the New England colonies, with more than sixty whaling ships trolling the water off the coast.
Today: Environmental organizations fight to protect the rights of endangered whale species, but the world has much less use for whale meat or for whale oil to light lamps.
 - **1751:** English theologian and evangelist John Wesley was travelling almost 5000 miles every year to spread the word about Christianity, founding the denomination known as Methodism.
Today: Methodism is recognized as one of the mainstream Protestant religions.
 - **1751:** Approximately one-fifth of the people in New England, which was to become America after the war for independence in 1776, were slaves.
1863: Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which made slavery illegal in the United States. It was not accepted in the South until after their defeat in the Civil War in 1865.
Today: Most of the world has laws against slavery, but there are still regular scattered reports of people, usually immigrants and females, who are forced into labor against their wills.
 - **1751:** Denis Diderot published the first volume of the first modern encyclopedia, his *Encyclopaedie, ou Dictionnaire raisonne des sciences, des arts et des metiers, par une societe de gens de lettres*. The work eventually spanned eleven volumes, with the last volume finished in 1772.
Today: Many established encyclopedias, as well as uncollected information that is compiled into encyclopedias, is available from a computer terminal from anywhere on the globe via the Internet.
-

his “Elegy,” Enlightenment rationality had gained enough public support to stand on its own. To some extent, the poem displays Enlightenment principles in the way that the speaker shows faith that the rural poor could be intelligent and successful if they had proper education, reflecting Locke’s theory of the mind as a “blank slate” that is ready to grow. The pessimism he shows, though, regarding the potential for corruption if the poor were educated, is contrary to the standard Enlightenment optimism about the good that will result from education.

The high point for the Enlightenment was the American Revolution in 1776. This marked the beginning of a society based on rationality and fairness, not tradition. The basis for the American Revolution was that people living in North America

would now be better able to decide what was best for them than a king living in England, reflecting a faith in the common person’s ability to reason. The Declaration of Independence is a major philosophical work concerning the rights of human beings to determine their own fates. The end of the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement came soon after, however, with the French Revolution from 1789 to 1799. Like the revolution in America, the French Revolution was an attempt to let individuals control their own destinies, based on faith in reason, which Enlightenment thinkers had been advocating for nearly a hundred years. While the American Revolution created a new society, however, the French Revolution created chaos, a bloodbath of government suppression of revolutionaries

and public executions of deposed government figures. In the end, the oppressive system of feudal land ownership was abolished, but only at the end of a bitter struggle that required both sides to focus their attention on jingoistic slogans. The ideal of rationality became lost with the emphasis on the rights of individuals and the belief that the simple, uncorrupt poor know better than the pampered rich. The Enlightenment gave way to the age of Romanticism, which emphasized an almost mystical belief in individuality and the goodness of nature.

Critical Overview

Over the years, Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" has received extensive critical attention. Critics have long recognized Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" for its restrained and dignified expression of simple truths. In *Lives of the English Poets*, Samuel Johnson praised the poem for its universal appeal and its originality: "The 'Churchyard' abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo are to me original.... Had Gray written often thus, it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him." Other writers, such as Samuel Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, also admired the work, although Arnold's criticism was somewhat cautious. Arnold noted in his *Essays in Criticism* that "the 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' is a beautiful poem ... But it is true that the 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' owe[s] much of its success to its subject, and that it has received a too unmeasured and unbounded praise."

In the twentieth century, critics have often observed two competing "voices" or attitudes in Gray's writings. Joseph Wood Krutch, in his introduction to *The Selected Letters of Thomas Gray*, offers a useful comparison of the classical and Romantic tendencies in the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." Krutch maintains that there are certainly strong romantic qualities in the poem, but that it is more clearly identifiable with the eighteenth century: "there is nothing mystical, at least nothing transcendental, in the 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.' It is everywhere stubbornly rational, even in its melancholy. The simple life, even the life close to nature, is good because it is healthful and free from great temptation, not because God dwells in a sunset." In more recent years, critical attention has been focused on Gray's com-

plex use of language. Some critics have noted a degree of ambiguity in Gray's syntax. One critic, W. Hutchings, argues in an essay in *Studies in Philology* that this ambiguity tends to "undermine" the apparently secure or simple universe that Gray has depicted. Hutchings notes, "there is an extraordinary degree of instability about [the 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'], one which often expresses itself by making its syntax fluid, even indeterminate. Far from being something to be amended or ignored, this quality is the key to the 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.'" We notice, then, a transformation in the way in which this poem has been viewed: early critics tended to praise the poem for its simple truths; more recent critics, however, have begun to wonder if underneath these apparently simple truths there are more troubling questions.

Criticism

David Kelly

David Kelly is an instructor of literature and writing at several community colleges in Illinois, as well as a fiction writer. Here, he examines Gray's "Elegy" as a reflection of social conscience, finding it to be advanced in identifying the problems of a class-based society but lacking in solutions.

The most common interpretation of Thomas Gray's poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is that it is an expression of sympathy and support for those who have the misfortune to be without money or social prestige. When critics do not approach it from this angle, they almost always look at it as a broader philosophical statement about how fortune in this world ends up being no help to the dead, an interpretation that rests almost entirely upon line 36, "The paths of glory lead but to the grave." These are both pertinent ideas that Gray does cover, but they're fairly obvious ideas to readers today, and either could have been adequately dispatched in a poem a third as long. We have to question how obvious such ideas about social rank would have been in the feudal monarchy of Gray's England, circa 1750. If Gray was a thinker ahead of his time, then the ideas that we take for granted may have been unheard of to his peers.

It would be almost impossible to believe that people before Gray wished anything but the best

What Do I Read Next?



- The most authoritative edition of Gray's poetry is the edition originally published by the Oxford Press in 1966, entitled *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray: English, Latin and Greek*. H. W. Starr wrote the introduction and edited the book with J. R. Hendrickson.
- John Dyer is a Welsh pastoral poet who wrote at the same time as Gray. His greatest works, including "Grongar Hill," considered one of the first romantic pastoral poems, are included in the collection *Poems, 1761*.
- Samuel Johnson was the outstanding literary figure of Gray's time. Among his writings was the ten-volume *Lives of the Poets*, which includes a brief biography of Gray, as well as a number of poems that he wrote himself. He is best known today for the biography that James Boswell wrote about him, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, considered one of the best biographies ever and an important source for readers who want to understand the British literary scene in the eighteenth century.
- Gray wrote during the Age of Enlightenment, a period of intense intellectual activity throughout the world. One of the leading thinkers of the

time was French Philosopher Rene Descartes, who is often credited with adding humanity to the age of ideas. His *Discourse on Method and the Meditations* is still considered one of the world's most important philosophical works.

- Thomas Gray is often considered a poet ahead of his time, who predated the Romantic Movement that swept across the globe approximately fifty years later. More than his contemporaries, his contemplative style, and concern for humanity are often compared to the works of William Wordsworth, one of the founders of Romanticism. Wordsworth's "Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13th, 1798," has a much looser structure than Gray's "Elegy," but there is a similarity in the melancholy of both poems.
- Richard Gough's *The History of Myddle* was written between 1700 and 1706, chronicling the lives of people living in the small English town of Myddle in Shropshire. This rural history is probably as close as one can get to reading about the lives of the people discussed in Gray's "Elegy." A 1980 edition of Gough's book is available, with an introduction by Dr. Peter Razzell.

for victims of misfortune. After all, as the word itself indicates, misfortune has two significant characteristics: it is bad, and it happens because of luck or chance, fortune. By its basic definition, people with bad luck cannot be blamed, and that makes them innocent sufferers. To that extent, Gray seems to have brought nothing new to the question of human relations, just the circular argument that those who do not deserve misfortune do not deserve it. The fact is, though, that the issue has never been as clear-cut as that. There is the question of whether the poor, such as the struggling farmers that Gray talks about, have been cast their lot by random chance, or whether they might not actually be collecting exactly what they deserve.

We see this same question arise just as clearly, if not more so, in contemporary America. In our two-party system, the general attitude toward poverty and its related problems, such as poor education and health, shifts from one side of the spectrum to the other every generation or so. One party is dominant during a time when the general public believes that the poor are neglected, and as a result spending for social programs will increase; a few years later, the prevailing mood will hold that the poor are coddled and therefore lack the will to raise themselves out of poverty, and spending then decreases. The issue seems to balance on the question of just how much the people involved are responsible for their own positions as part of the



The ‘Elegy’ has an inconsistency in praising the inherent worth of the simple country people while pretending that their lives are somehow less for having not received the benediction of a poet before.”

underclass, and therefore how much sympathy they deserve.

“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” appeared at one of those cultural moments when change was in the air but had not quite arrived. In a piece celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of the “Elegy”’s publication, Carl J. Weaver provided an inventory of “the originality of Gray’s democratic sympathy”: the American Revolution was twenty-five years away, and the French Revolution forty; it was to be twenty years until Oliver Goldsmith would write of “a bold peasantry, their country’s pride,” and still another twenty-five after that until Robert Burns framed the simplicity of the democratic spirit with “A man’s a man, for a’ that.” Ideas of equality may be at the core of the society we live in, but they were exceptional when Gray wrote.

This apparently was the reason why he felt the need to go to such lengths to help his readers know the simple country people he was writing about. They were not the lazy, stupid brutes his readers would have to believe they were in order to believe that they deserved to live in poverty and obscurity. They worked hard at “useful toil,” their children loved them, and they asked for little in return. These were not easy people to ignore, by Gray’s standard: their virtues should have made them stand out as society’s finest, and he writes with bitterness that they were left to rot in obscurity in tiny churchyards while men and women not nearly as useful or loved rested under marble monuments.

As a vindication of the poor, this poem does excellent work: like all of the best works of social conscience, it knows how to handle its audience, making our hearts swell with pride for the virtues

of the downtrodden. This is where the regular rhythm and unyielding rhyme scheme fit in, by assuring readers of the inevitability of this view of the simple country folk and not just a limited view of one select group. The problem is that, having imagined the greatness of the “rude Forefathers” so well and rendered them so convincingly, Gray did not have any idea about what he should do about their descendants that labored on. He was hardly the revolutionary. As much as he opposed inequity, still he was not ready to call for some sort of Marxist social reorganization that would bring the intellectuals and civil servants to the farms and give plowboys their turn in the House of Lords. The best that Gray could come up with to compensate for the opportunities that had been denied these simple country people was the complaint that they should have memorials on their graves as nice as those that mark the remains of social luminaries, in acknowledgment of the fact that they could have been important too, given the chance.

The problem with having nothing to offer but praise and recognition is that the poem burns up the value of praise on its way to affirming the commoners’ self-worth. “Can storied urn or animated bust / Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?” the poem asks, and the answer, of course, is no. “Can Honor’s voice provoke the silent dust, or / Flattery sooth the dull cold ear of Death?” Since they can’t, then just what *are* we supposed to do about those who died without recognition? The poem expends much of its energy convincing readers that these people lived valuable, useful lives and that memorials are for the Proud and the Vain, but it also wants to stir our sense of pathos over the fact that they do not have grand memorials. As William Empson has pointed out, referring to the fourteenth stanza of Gray’s “Elegy” in his essay “Proletarian Literature,” “a gem does mind being in a cave and a flower prefers not to be picked.” The occupants of the churchyard may have had bad lives, but that is not their own view, it is the judgement of an onlooker, the speaker of the poem: it is the same voice that simultaneously warns us not to be so arrogant as to assume that their lives are worthless.

In the end, there is nothing the speaker can offer but himself. Literary historians have gone back and forth for two-and-a-half centuries about who the young man elegized at the end is supposed to be: Gray, his recently deceased friend Richard West, a townsman, or someone completely new. One thing that seems certain is the bond between him and the speaker of the first 116 lines; the

melancholy of the nightfall in the first stanzas perfectly matches the young man's "drooping, woeful wan" muttering as he looked out over the cemetery. The attitudes and sensibilities which take their effect on readers throughout the 29 initial stanzas have already affected the "youth to fortune" who is buried there, and so his way of dealing with social inequity can be taken as the poem's result.

The answer this poem offers for the fact that good people who lack social prominence are left forgotten after death is for a prominent person to climb down into the grave with them, to be buried beside them and to raise up at least one large monument with a lofty epitaph within that forsaken cemetery. It is a much more temperate solution than calling for a revolution to disrupt the social structure (like the revolutions that were to come later in that century). It is at least more active than simply walking away from the problem and concluding that the downtrodden must somehow deserve the fate dealt them. Lacking a burning indignity about the way things are but unable to sit comfortably with it, Gray's young man, steeped in sadness, opts for a show of solidarity to mock the rules that say he is from a different "set" than the farm people.

Is it effective? There is no way to tell from the way the poem leaves things. Generally, rejection of one's class privileges and identifying with the downtrodden only produces the minimal effect of making one's relatives and former friends sigh and wink, unless the class advantage is used to pry some good out of the situation. A child of wealth from a gated suburban community who goes to live in the inner city in order to upset conventional assumptions is likely to just make people think he or she has an inflated sense of importance, while a physician who goes to an impoverished area to work is both an inspiration and a practical asset. The "Elegy" has an inconsistency in praising the inherent worth of the simple country people while pretending that their lives are somehow less for having not received the benediction of a poet before. This is reflected in the egoism in believing that having the body of a beloved young man from a good home among them is somehow an enriching experience for the rural dead. Gray's heart was in the right place, far ahead of its time in terms of his thoughts on social equity, and with no models for him to draw from we shouldn't be surprised that his attempt to bridge the chasm of social class would reflect the very prejudices he was trying to overcome.

Source: David Kelly, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Aviya Kushner

Aviya Kushner is the Contributing Editor in Poetry at BarnesandNoble.com and the Poetry Editor of NewWorld Magazine. She is a graduate of the acclaimed creative writing program in poetry at Boston University, where she received the Fitzgerald Award in Translation. Her writing on poetry has appeared in Harvard Review and The Boston Phoenix, and she has served as Poetry Coordinator for AGNI Magazine. She has given readings of her own work throughout the United States, and she teaches at Massachusetts Communications College in Boston. In the following essay, Kushner describes the pastoral qualities of the "Elegy," which contribute "to the sense that it tells a universal story which spans both nations and centuries."

One of the most famous poems in the history of the English language might never have been published if its author had had his way. Thomas Gray never tried to publish "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," and was quite dismayed to find that a journal he didn't like much chose to print it.

Once it was published—through a friend of Gray's who sent a copy in to the journal—the "Elegy" was a hit. The poem's grip on the readers of its time was no temporary fluke. Today, the "Elegy" still resonates with readers around the world. Much of that resonance is due to the great classic literary texts the "Elegy" borrows from, and the major human stories it manages to contain. The Book of Ecclesiastes, Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, and the pastoral visions of Virgil all lie quietly beneath the poem, contributing to the sense that it tells a universal story which spans both nations and centuries.

Fittingly, the elegy of timeless topics begins in slow motion:

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.

The words "toll," "lowing," and "slowly" physically decrease the speed of the poem. The numerous "I"s in the first stanza produce a lull, and the reader literally "plods his weary way" along with the poet.

As Henry Weinfield observes in his book *The Poet Without a Name: Gray's Elegy and the Problem of History*, there are numerous opportunities for sound here. The plowman and the herd both make noise, and yet, the overwhelming impression



*The poet then details
the sounds of the
countryside—the cock in
the morning, the swallow,
the echoing horn—which
are not heard by the dead.
While the opening stanza
may have detailed a still
silence, the dead and buried
know an even stiller
silence.”*

of the first stanza is silence. It is this deep and carefully controlled silence, presented in exact rhyme and pristine pentameter, that gives the opening a timeless feel.

With its mention of the herd, the opening stanza also positions itself in the pastoral tradition—the line of poetry based on songs sung by shepherds. Pastoral poetry often involves nostalgia for a past, but that past doesn't necessarily exist. Instead, pastoral poems often look back longingly on an idealized time where purity and virtue supposedly ruled.

Musically, the second stanza maintains the silence of the first. Late afternoon is turning to evening:

Now fades the glimmering 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;

The movement of the day, from afternoon to dusk to dark, is just one of the movements the “Elegy” will address. Day and night foreshadow life and death, along with labor and the end of labor, and the building and destroying of personal history.

The plowman is progressing on his journey as day turns into evening. And soon, he reaches the churchyard, where beneath “rugged elms” and the “yew-tree's shade,” the “rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.”

The poet then details the sounds of the countryside—the cock in the morning, the swallow, the

echoing horn—which are not heard by the dead. While the opening stanza may have detailed a still silence, the dead and buried know an even stiller silence.

These buried forefathers not only don't hear anymore, they also don't see and feel. They don't see their children or their wives, and they don't gaze upon the fireplace. This inactivity doesn't mean they weren't active in their lives. In fact, they worked very hard:

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!

At one time, these buried men had power over their animals and over the woods. Although they were only country laborers, the poet takes pains to make sure these achievements are not belittled:

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.

This addressing of powers like “Ambition” and “Grandeur” seems a bit reminiscent of the Platonic forms of the Good, the Beautiful, and the like. Plato tried to nail down a definition of the Good, and here the poet seems to question what Ambition and Grandeur are, anyway. After all, one thing is clear in a graveyard—it is the final resting-place for all social classes.

Power, beauty, and wealth, according to the poet, all “awaits alike th'inevitable hour.” At the end, the wildly successful match the poor in one respect: “The paths of glory lead but to the grave.”

In this country churchyard, the poet speculates about the talents of those buried here:

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 the ecstasy the living lyre.

Some of those buried here may have been outstanding ministers, rulers, or musicians. But destiny is often controlled by money, or what the poet calls “Chill Penury.” This churchyard might have contained a Milton or a Cromwell, if only economics didn't play a part.

But despite the poverty and relative obscurity of those buried here, they still require the dignity of a proper place to rest:

Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
With uncouth rhimes and shapeless sculpture
deck'd,

Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

The churchyard, according to the poet, protects the dead from insult. But it also performs an essential function—it “teaches” the living how to die.

The poem ends with a description of the death of one individual man, who wasn’t seen on his usual hill, heath, and tree. He was also not “beside the rill” or “up the lawn.” He had died, and was being carried to the churchyard.

The dead man is carried slowly through the church-way path, the motion mimicking the slow-motion opening of the poem. Although those in attendance can’t read, an epitaph has been prepared for the dead man.

The epitaph acknowledges that this dead man was not lucky in Fame or Fortune. But in death, he is equal to all others, ready to relocate to “the bosom of his Father and his God.”

Source: Aviya Kushner, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2000.

R. J. Ellis

In this essay, Ellis investigates the central mystery in one of the best-known poems in the English language.

Gray’s ‘Elegy’ is one of the better known poems in the English language. It is also one of those poems about which there is centred an enduring controversy. This can be referred to in shorthand as the ‘stonecutter debate’ and centres on a moment in the poem when, after an apparently serene enough progress into the pastoral mode, with an elegiac ‘graveyard poets’ edge to it, the poem suddenly introduces a startling complication. The ‘Elegy’ up until this moment seems to have a clear enough, and clearly centred, narrative voice, established emphatically in its very first stanza:

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.

The first stanza thus ends on the word ‘me’—announcing thereby a tone of personal, musing reflection. The ‘me’ is in fact quite heavily emphasised: the final word of the stanza, it is also underscored by the rhyme scheme. The poem thus seems to settle into a tone of first-person intimacy between the ‘Poet,’ that is to say the persona of the poem, and the audience. However, this apparent stability is ineradicably complicated by a sudden change of centre in lines 93–98:



*On the other hand
‘thee’ is also a conventional
multi-faceted portrait—
stranding together West,
Gray, the sensitive reader,
the stonecutter/woodcarver,
each one in slightly
different ways safely
locatable in all those
pastoral traditions these
identities reference, within
which ‘The Ignote’ might
be safely constrained....”*

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,
Haply some hoary-headed Swain may say,
‘Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn ...’

These lines, in rapid succession, introduce a new cast of characters: a ‘thee’, a ‘kindred spirit’ and a ‘hoary-headed Swain.’ The last two exist in some imagined future, imagined apparently by the poem’s ‘me’ as ‘haply’ meeting to discuss the ‘fate’ of ‘thee.’ And it is precisely this ‘thee’ which poses the problem: who exactly is ‘thee’? This question is important because the voice of the ‘Hoary headed swain,’ speaking in this imagined future to the ‘kindred spirit,’ dominates the remainder of the poem, and speaks wholly of this ‘thee,’ who he regularly saw ‘Mutt’ring ... wayward fancies’ until he died. Indeed, crucially, ‘The EPITAPH’ at the end is apparently engraved on the headstone of the now deceased ‘thee’ in the imagined future created within the poem. The poem thus ends not by focusing on the reflections of the poem’s narrator, ‘me,’ but on ‘thee,’ whoever this person is, on the fate of ‘thee,’ and on ‘thee’s’ epitaph.

The question ‘who is “thee”?’ has been variously answered, and it is not my purpose fully to rehearse the resulting debate here. This has already often been done, for example in Herbert W. Starr’s

Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gray's 'Elegy' 63. The dominant explanation is that 'thee' is in fact 'me,' either seen to be Gray, or the poem's persona (depending on how you view the relationship of 'me' to the poet in this poem). Briefly, this proposal depends on us understanding that Gray/the poem's persona has reached a point where his reflections are mature enough for him to distance himself from his own death, which he now imagines peacefully, having come to terms with his own mortality—even to the extent of imagining his own epitaph. A problem with this reading is the disconcerting smugness which now accrues to 'The EPITAPH':

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere...

Alternative proposals are fairly thick on the ground, however. Another popular suggestion is that the 'thee' is Gray's close friend Richard West, who had died not long before. The composition date of the 'Elegy' is not quite clear: one, largely discarded, suggestion is that it was commenced as early as 1742, which means it may have been begun just after West's death. Indeed the epitaph, for some critics, was one that Gray originally intended for West, an aspiring poet and Eton College schoolmate, whose career was abbreviated by his premature death. The 'Elegy,' however, hardly supports this suggestion (not least because West's background was not 'humble,' as line 119 seems to indicate), and anyway its composition date is now usually accepted to be rather later.

A third suggestion is that this 'thee' represents an imagined poet, or even an imagined personification, 'The Poet.' Most usually this 'poet' is seen as a *poeta ignotus*—an unknown poet of humble origins fated never to reach a wide audience—composing his poems, his 'wayward fancies,' in rural obscurity before dying, unrecognised and largely unread. But this idea, like the others, has to be imposed on the poem, since it is not overtly the case that this, or any of the other readings so far examined, is correct, though each can lay claim to some degree of plausibility. These readings each, in turn, offer the promise of coherence, but it is only a promise, for the text offers no implicit or explicit support for any of them.

This lack of plain support fuels the next, undeniably dramatic, development. This seeks to define an actual figure in the poem, to whom the pronoun 'thee' refers—the figure of the 'stonecutter.' This argument is difficult to summarise. Briefly, it depends on noting that an unknown poet—a *poeta ignotus*—of sorts has earlier been (at the very least

implicitly) introduced into the poem, namely in lines 79–81, which speak of 'uncouth rimes' decking the 'frail memorials' in the churchyard, with 'names and years' 'spelt by th' unletter'd muse.' This *poeta ignotus* is usually labelled the 'stonecutter poet,' who, according to this reading, is reverted to in line 93, becoming 'thee ... mindful of th' unhonour'd dead'—'mindful' in that he composes verses for the gravemarkers of these dead. But, again, there are problems with this reading: is this 'stonecutter' explicitly mentioned, by being described as the 'unletter'd muse,' or is the 'muse' here to be better understood as the personification of an abstract muse (as 'the muse of poetry' or, in my opinion more pertinently, as the 'muse of literacy'), rather than any individual. And, anyway, even if we accept that 'muse' refers to a person, we are only sure this 'muse' writes 'names [and] ... years,' the bare data that all gravestones carry. Whether he also writes the 'uncouth rhimes' is less certain. Furthermore, the grammatical connection between lines 79–81 and lines 93 ff. is at best remote. Farcically enough, even this attempt to render the 'Elegy' back into good order has led on to a subcontroversy; this occasioned by noting that the 'memorials' are 'frail' and thus more likely to be made of 'wood,' the usual material used for the gravestones of the poor: the 'stonecutter' must now become a 'wood carver'.

What we have ended up with is a plethora of proposed spokespersons, who all in their own way can be sensibly proposed as signifieds for the pronominal signifier, 'thee.'

- (a) Gray himself (thee = me) (real)
- (b) the persona of the poem (thee = me) (imagined)
- (c) someone else (e.g., West) (real)
- (d) a fictional (imaginary) poet ('*poeta ignotus*') (imagined)
- (e) a personification: The Poet (imagined)
- (f) an actual unknown poet (the stone cutter/wood carver) (real)

Now, I of course cannot resist adding one further plausible signified. It seems to me a further plausible reading could be that 'thee' denominates

- (g) the reader of the poem (thee = thee, the reader) (real)

—an idea depending on a scenario where the reader is reciting the 'Elegy,' to him or herself or actually aloud, and in this sense relating the tale told in the 'Elegy,' the tale of 'th' unhonour'd dead,' of which the reader is, *sui generis*, being 'mindful' whilst reading the poem. Here the sense

of ‘relate’ being deployed is related to the (now obsolete) one, ‘4b: to adduce, cite (an authority (*OED*)). This might seem to render up Gray’s idea of his readership in an interesting way: a readership which is sensitive, but not especially exalted. A problem here could be the objection that, since Walpole was one of Gray’s readers, these cannot really be seen as generically ‘humble’ in origins—but this problem can be dismissed to some extent by refusing to accept that ‘me’ and Gray can be equated and instead preferring to regard ‘me’ in the poem as a persona.

However, it is not my purpose to press this particular case. My point in proposing a seventh possible identity for ‘thee,’ which seems, perhaps, to stand up just as well as any other suggestion, is to dramatise the sudden decentering of the poem’s narrational harmony. The centre of the poem is suddenly called in doubt by this question: ‘who is “thee”?’ and its refusal to be resolved. It will be my contention that this irresolution is thematically integral. To explain why I believe this will take me down two lines of analysis, which I will then need to relate together before returning to the question of ‘thee’ and his identity. Both these lines of analysis demand some reference out to history and part of my point is that the ‘Elegy’ has still to be fully located within its history. The critics Richard C. Sha and John Lucas have provided recent impetus to this process, which, perhaps, finds its most significant start in William Empson’s *Some Versions of the Pastoral*. My analysis owes debts to all of these critics: hopefully what I am about to offer will represent a useful extension to their arguments.

The two lines of historical contextualisation I wish to address are, respectively, the chronological position of the ‘Elegy’ in the process of rural change generated by the development of enclosure and engrossment occurring during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the chronological position of the ‘Elegy’ in the process of transition from a society which was predominantly illiterate to one which was predominantly literate. These lines of contextualisation are worth careful examination because, I will contend, in the period during which Gray was working on the ‘Elegy’—most generally reckoned to be 1746–1750—these two important historical processes had reached points of pivotal significance, which actively impinge upon the poem’s thematic structure: their impact on the poem, I contend, is discursively constitutive. What follows are some outlines as to where considering these contextual aspects would lead, rather than a completed project, but I believe these out-

lines are broadly reliable and point out some interesting directions.

In the middle decade of the eighteenth century, 1746 to 1755, precisely when for much of the time Gray was at work on the ‘Elegy,’ the process of enclosure had reached a transition point. It has become increasingly recognised that the enclosure movement had a very long foreground: it had been occurring in a piecemeal, unlegislated and unsystematic way, for many decades in the seventeenth century; the early eighteenth century saw a general, but not consistently maintained, acceleration in this process. The 1750s saw the beginnings of a new dimension to this process, as landowners increasingly turned to private parliamentary bills to facilitate the process of enclosure. This change-over, to the use of private bills, only became fully functional as the 1760s commenced: thereafter the process was very rapid. In the period 1750 to 1810 Paul Langford estimates that nearly four thousand enclosure acts were passed, whilst C.P. Hill states that the period 1760 to 1793 saw 1,335 bills passed. What occurred was the ending of the open-field system and the large-scale absorption of common land into private ownership, as the enclosure movement entered its final, parliamentary phase. In this sense, the ‘Elegy’ appeared in print at this pivotal point: just as parliament began to become the main conduit for the processes of enclosure. Just as significantly, though, Buckinghamshire and Cambridgeshire were situated geographically in that part of the country still largely unenclosed, and thus poised for large-scale take-over by this new mode of parliamentary-authorized enclosure, which re-invigorated the whole trend. The process of enclosure and engrossment in East Anglia had been largely completed by the end of the seventeenth century, Cambridgeshire and north Buckinghamshire were brought fully under the processes of enclosure during ‘the first generation of parliamentary enclosures,’ which would be, precisely, 1750–1770. Thus Gray’s country churchyard, whether one chooses to locate it conventionally in Stoke Poges, or, more freely, somewhere in the area between Stoke Poges and Cambridge is, from the point of view of the historical geographer, at the centre of the changing and accelerating enclosure and engrossment process, moving out of a piecemeal and unlegislated phase into one dominated by Parliamentary acts. These developments were the subject of extensive contemporary debate. Thematically, I contend, all this impresses itself on the poem, once one gives proper emphasis to the primary human impact of this rural change.

Historians now seem to be moving towards some sort of consensus concerning the human impact of engrossment and enclosure in one arena of their debate about this process. There is still the predictable disagreement about to what extent the rural population *as a whole* suffered from these changes: some economic historians insistently point to what they discern as rises in both productivity and levels of employment. However, there is widespread agreement that ‘many individuals’ losses may have been serious. Equally, it would seem to be generally agreed that there developed a clear ‘tendency to replace farm servants with wage-paid labour hired for the purpose’ because ‘The new farms wanted wage labourers.’ Quite simply, the loss of common land forced the rural population to turn to day labour, and day labour ‘offered no equivalent security ... [to] freehold, copyhold or ... long lease.’ This represented, then, a significant alteration in social relations. It has been called ‘a crisis of paternalism,’ and seems to have been the subject of substantial contemporary debate. Radical historians, such as Christopher Hill, reference contemporary mid-century documents exposing a discourse nakedly representing this shift towards day-labour as an ideological contrivance. Hill quotes ‘official Board of Agriculture reports’ which praise the enclosure of the commons ‘because it forced labourers to “work every day in the year” ... depriving the lower orders of any chance of economic independence ... [so that] “the subordination of the lower ranks of society ... would be thereby considerably secured.”’ Similarly Hill references ‘a pamphlet of 1739’ which asserted that ‘The only way to make the lower orders temperate and industrious ... was to lay them under the necessity of labouring all the time they can spare from rest and sleep in order to procure the necessities of life.’

I wish to propose that this ‘crisis of [rural] paternalism,’ gaining momentum in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, can be laid alongside a crisis in the poetic discourse of pastoralism. We are, after all, only two decades away from the publication of Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* (1770). George Crabbe’s *The Village* lies only just over one decade further off (1783). Goldsmith’s and Crabbe’s poems speak of the full impact of enclosure and engrossment in their different ways, and represent the tight squeeze within which the pastoral was constrained. Gray comes significantly earlier in this process, and his ‘Elegy’ feels around the edges of this gathering process. What else are we to make of the strangely unsta-

ble oscillation in the pattern of this poem’s representation of country life?:

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.

Representing ‘lowing herd[s] wind[ing] slowly o’er the lea’ is idyllic enough—falling well within conservative expectations of the genre, but ‘The plowman ... plodd[ing] ... wear[il]y’ is far less reassuring, and much more in line with the sentiments of Hill’s 1739 pamphleteer. In fact this disconcerting switching of mood is recurrent. I offer a partial list:

1.3: plods his weary
1.5: glimmering landscape
1.6: stillness
1.8: drowsy tinklings lull
1.14: mould’ring heap
1.15: narrow cell
1.16: rude Forefathers
1.16: hamlet sleep
1.17: incense-breathing Morn
1.20: lowly
1.21: blazing hearth
1.25: harvest
1.27: jocund
1.30: homely joys
1.30: destiny obscure
1.32: simple annals 1.32: short ... poor
1.45: neglected spot
1.51: chill Penury
1.52: genial currents 1.52: froze
1.56: waste
1.65: forbad
1.74: sober
1.75: cool
1.76: noiseless tenor
1.79: uncouth ... shapeless
1.81: unlettered

It should be observed that antithesis is one central rhetorical trope of this poem, and this has led to the suggestion that what Gray is aiming for here is a ‘balance’ which, correctly understood, is a guarantee of the poem’s apoliticism. I find myself unable to go along with this representation of the poem. After all, the ‘Elegy’ purports, despite its eventual, disconcerting narrative decentering, to describe a real village graveyard around which real activity occurs: the ‘plowman ... plods’ in the present tense to lend, exactly, a sense of immediacy. The disconcerting shuttle between negative and positive representations of this rural experience has thus, unsurprisingly, led this poem to be seen ‘both as rightist and leftist propaganda.’ Certainly, there is, virtually, an alternation: rural life being represented as fulfilling, then debilitating, rewarding,

then chilling—which perhaps functions as a discursive analogue of the confusing social crisis borne within the processes of enclosure. In this respect it is crucial to note that the narrative is led in by a ‘plowman,’ and a ‘weary’ plowman at that: a representative, precisely, of the growing numbers of agricultural labourers coming to dominate the rural scene. In fact, the labours described are all potentially those of farm workers:

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!

It is consistent with my argument here to note that two of these activities (the clearing of woods and the ploughing up of ‘the stubborn glebe,’ which the *OED* links to common land by quoting a source of 1598: ‘Houses ... he raseth, to make the common glebe his private land’ [T. Bastard, *Chrestoleros*]) could both quite well refer to the enclosure of common land: this is, perhaps, how Clare understood these lines, as witness this echo in his ‘Helpstone’ (even allowing for the deployment of stock pastoral imagery the parallelism is worth comment), in which Clare is plainly describing the process of enclosure: ‘Accursed wealth .../Thou art the cause that levels every tree/And woods bow down to clear a way for thee.’

It is equally consistent to observe, however, that in the equivalent stanza of the ‘Elegy,’ though the second of these four activities strongly suggests hard labour, this is plainly set, once again disconcertingly, beside a more idyllic portrait of easy pastoral fulfilment, of ‘yield[ing]’ and ‘bow[ing],’ without Clare’s sense of irony (his ‘woods’ bow to ‘wealth’). Nevertheless, the impression recurrently is of labour and labourers rather than farming and farmers. This sense of a rural working class is perhaps reinforced by constant reminders in Gray’s poem of their illiteracy. And this observation ushers in my second theme.

In exploring the relation of the ‘Elegy’ to actual processes in historical geography, what I am arguing is that the conventional pastoral discourse, as a mode of representing the rural English experience, is losing in this poem any monolithic integrity, and being riven by real contradictory inputs—the observable rural changes here suffuse the ‘Elegy’s’ dramatic representations. In Foucauldian terms, the discourse is falling available, potentially, to seizure—or recuperation. Something similar, I believe, underlies the poem’s apparent uncertainties about literacy. At one point late in the poem,

in line 115, ‘thee’ (here it definitely refers to ‘some kindred Spirit’ who by ‘chance’ may ‘enquire thy fate’) is invited by the ‘hoary-headed Swain’ to ‘approach and read (for thou can’st read).’ The clear implication is that the elderly rural inhabitant cannot read (else the clause is almost wholly redundant). This near-certainty about reading abilities (‘hoary headed Swain’ = non-reader, ‘kindred Spirit’ = reader) comes almost as a relief after a cluster of doubtful suggestions about levels of literacy. Previously, you will recall, we have had the disconcerting image of an ‘unletter’d Muse’ spelling ‘names [and] ... years.’ The only way to grasp this image, before it disintegrates into unresolvable contradictions (how can someone who is ‘unletter’d’ spell?) is to understand that here the ‘letters’ in question must refer to the Classical education that would not have been available to any rural memorialist: the latter is ‘unletter’d’ in this sense: without the Classics. But, even as the issue of literacy recedes by understanding ‘unletter’d’ in this way, and thus apparently resolving the contradiction, it is replaced by the issue of education. The problematic status of this issue is well-captured by the near-oxymoronic juxtaposition of ‘unletter’d’ with ‘Muse,’ which must thereby be divested of its Classical associations and left simply as ‘inspiration’ (the ‘Muse of inspiration’, and not a Classical Muse), in a process of transference only just coming into the language (the *OED*’s first recorded example, 1d, dates from 1721). The terrain here is riddled with ironies, which Gray promptly compounds by offering us what can reasonably be described as a meta-textual irony, since we are reminded that we are reading an elegy at the very moment that we are being reminded that others cannot, else they would not need to rely on an ‘unletter’d muse’:

Their names, their years, spelt by th’ unletter’d
 muse,
 The place of fame and elegy supply.

It will be my contention that, here again, these issues, and their problematic representation in the text, derive from the particular historical context investing Gray’s ‘Elegy.’

It is increasingly often argued by historians that the middle decades of the eighteenth century mark a transition point in the cultural valuation and significance of literacy:

In the mid-eighteenth century about a third of men and two thirds of women were unable to sign their name, though the local incidence of illiteracy varied widely. But the acquisition of basic reading skills by those on the margin of middle- and lower-class life,

for whom they were coming to be an essential working asset, was a notable feature of urban society.

The sting lies in the tail of this analysis: that literacy was becoming of increasing cultural importance was particularly true for those living in towns and cities—but the dislocations occasioned by the processes of enclosure and engrossing had displaced segments of the rural population. Some of these were inevitably drawn into these urban areas (in a process of increasingly fluid interchange between country and city), as the position of the rural worker, now an agricultural labourer, was rendered far more precarious. Education, particularly education to provide literacy, was becoming increasingly necessary. This, too has been quite widely agreed on by historians: one basic sign of this was patterns of reading:

There were many pointers to wide and growing readership in the mid-eighteenth century, including the production of both metropolitan and provincial newspapers, and the multiplication of new tract and book titles generally.

But these positive signs are counterbalanced by the way in which there was no decisive increase in the numbers signing parish marriage registers in the period 1754 to 1800. Indeed it is a significant sign of the growing importance of literacy that it was the year 1753 that had witnessed the introduction of Lord Hardwicke's act requiring the signing of parochial wedding registers (thus enabling us to know the percentage signing marriage registers). Literacy was plainly becoming increasingly important for the individual in his or her negotiations with society. Literacy, I am suggesting, and beside it, education, were two key issues of the middle decades of the eighteenth century, issues of decisive socio-cultural significance. Reading and writing were key terrains of cultural hegemony. To obtain these prizes was of real social significance throughout the eighteenth century:

In the 1720s Mandeville had ... [contended] that to secure the contentment of the poor with their lot, it is requisite that great numbers of them should be ignorant as well as poor.

John Clare, born in 1793, in his autobiographical writings, notes:

As my parents had the good fate to have but a small family, I being the eldest of 4, two of whom dyed in their Infancy, my mothers hopfull ambition ran high of being able to make me a good scholar as she said she expienced enough in her own case to avoid bringing up her children in ignorance, but god help her, her hopful and tender kindness was often crossd with difficultys ... I believe I was not older than 10 when my father took me to seek the scanty rewards

of industry ... as to my schooling, I think never a year passd me till I was 11 or 12 but 3 months or more at the worst of times was luckily spared for my improvement ...

Even allowing for the conventionality of Clare's sentiments, this determination maps onto the lack of opportunity to obtain schooling, on the one hand, and the increasingly high valuation being placed upon literacy in the market place as well as in polite society on the other. Indeed it is possible to contend that education became increasingly hierarchized, thus Gillian Sutherland claims that 'In the course of the eighteenth century, "plebeians," those whose fathers were not gentlemen, disappeared altogether' from Oxford and Cambridge.

These considerations bear sharply upon the constantly problematic introduction of the theme of reading and writing into Gray's 'Elegy':

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.

Annals are '1. A narrative of events written year by year, or 2. Historical records generally' (*OED*)—but in both cases, written records that the poor cannot keep. This is an issue of social status, as Gray's later reference, in stanza eleven, to a 'storied urn' in turn implies: the urn, is of course here a classical one, with a frieze on it narrating a story visually, for the viewer to 'read'—but this 'reading' is itself fundamentally dependent on knowledge of the classics, which 'th' unletter'd Muse' surely does not possess—and so we return to the oxymoron which served as the foundation of my argument. The fact is that these agricultural labourers possessed 'rude Forefathers'—uneducated forefathers, and their gravemarkers will bear 'uncouth rhimes.' But (and here the pendulum swings again) these gravemarkers also carry 'holy text,' and it was precisely the Church, and particularly the Non-conformist Church, with its insistence on reading the Bible, which operated as the main stimulus towards and conduit for what education was obtainable, and then only to a very limited number. Thus Clare, in his 'Shepherd's Calendar,' will write, in 1827, of the shepherd boy still struggling with his letters:

He hears the wild geese gabble oer his head
And pleasd wi fancys in his musings bred
He marks the figured forms in which they flye
And pausing follows wi a wondering eye
Likening their curious march in curves or rows
To every letter which his memory knows

Issues of literacy and education are here, as with Gray, interlinked with the issuings of the creative imagination, but far more explicitly, and from quite another perspective.

Gray's background may not be irrelevant here: he was the son of a scrivener and exchange broker (albeit one able to send his son to Eton), and in this sense slightly on the edge of the social circles in which he moved. Walpole confessed that 'insensible to the feelings of one I thought below me ... I treated [Gray] insolently.' For Gray, therefore, issues of social rank, social order and the advantages of being lettered must have had a particular piquancy. It is tempting then, to identify him in the poem not with the suddenly introduced 'thee' in the poem, nor even with the 'me' that opens up the poem's reflections, but with the 'mopeing owl' in stanza three, located in 'yonder ivy-mantled tow'r,' high above the country churchyard, safe from the questions of literacy and class which in the graveyard down below press upon the consciousness.

All this comes to a climax in 'The EPITAPH' at the end of the poem, which contains one of the most difficult lines in the poem—'Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth'—difficult, because whilst it plainly serves as a key pointer to the identity of the individual being remembered in this epitaph, the 'thee' introduced in stanza twenty-four, this line also, ironically, enormously limits the range of identities assignable to this individual. This constraint results from conjoining the 'birth' of 'thee' with the words 'humble' and 'science.' Such a conjunction renders problematic the identity of 'thee,' since 'science'—in the sense of knowledge acquired by learning—rarely conjoined with humbleness at people's births in mid-eighteenth century England. And this observation precisely maps out for us the links between the 'Elegy's' uneasy treatment of rural labouring experience, its recurrent concern with levels of literacy and the problem of arriving at a satisfactory identification of 'thee.' Each possible identity for 'thee' stumbles up against the problem of who could plausibly conjoin 'humbleness' and 'science' in their origins. Hence, I believe, the resort to identifying 'thee' as a *poeta ignotus*—an unknown poet: it is, quite simply, a way out of this dilemma. This is in fact a pressing issue for Gray: he was much attracted by the idea that true Englishness resided in those marginalised by the Norman invasion and subsequent repressions: hence his interest in the fragments of 'Ossian,' his poems such as 'The Bard' (1757) and translations such as 'The

Triumphs of Owen' (1768). However, these beliefs and interests directed him away from the 'letter'd Muse' into a cultural terrain manifestly neglected and marginalised, full, indeed of unknown poets—such as Stephen Duck, 'a common thresher,' whose *Poems on Several Subjects* had appeared in 1730. It was indeed this period, the middle decades of the eighteenth century, that saw the irruption of vernacular poets into polite society—writers contesting, at least in part, how to understand the presence of 'fair science' at their births: the sense of 'science' would now need to shift to 'knowledge (more or less extensive) as a personal attribute' (*OED*).

This may be conjoined, I believe, to the crisis of pastoralism that I am proposing, twinned as it is with the crisis of paternalism: what is developing is a loss of confidence in the pastoral's discursive representation of a whole nation, and a recognition of cultural and social fragmentation and social division. This manifests itself in a recognition of what I shall describe as an 'Other,' a manifestation of cultural otherness—in this poem, 'thee'—to be desired (as Edenic), feared (as penury), and, indeed, killed off, after being described in terms of melancholic exclusion. In this sense, Gray opens the way towards the Romantics, as many critics have observed, but, I would claim, his accompanying recognition of cultural division, along lines of class and education, points out the way for the concerted development of other written cultural traditions, separate from that laid out by 'th' ... letter'd Muse.' And this is one main element of the link between Gray and Clare. Clare's lines:

No, not a friend on earth had I
But my own kin and poesy

links clearly, in my mind, to the 'thee' as Other depicted by 'the hoary-headed Swain':

'His listless length at noontide wou'd he stretch
'And pore upon the brook that babbles by.
'Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
'Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he wou'd rove,
'Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
'Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.

One needs to be careful here: one needs to recognise the conventionalities investing these images, and I am not proposing that Gray's 'thee' is in some way equitable with Clare. There is a clear enough separation here, which may be related to John Lucas's depiction of Gray as 'muddled' in his handling of the politics involved in depicting 'Englishness.' What I certainly want to note here is that the portrait of 'thee' cannot be read off simply as 'a poet entirely unknown to fame, an Ignotus,' as suggested by Odell Shepard, but rather as a com-

plex doppelgänger: tradition and its fracturing is contained within him.

On the one hand ‘thee’ is not a *poeta ignotus* so much as quite literally ‘The Ignote’, the unknown—the Other, yet to be delivered by the cultural fragmentation sweeping across an enclosing, engrossing, urbanising and industrialising land, where literacy and class would become primary. On the other hand ‘thee’ is also a conventional multi-faceted portrait—stranding together West, Gray, the sensitive reader, the stonemason/wood-carver, each one in slightly different ways safely locatable in all those pastoral traditions these identities reference, within which ‘The Ignote’ might be safely constrained: as the simple rural friend, as the poet (re-)discovering himself in bucolic reverie, as the urban(e) audience longing for rural retreat—as the pastoral rural bard is progressively superseded by the more complex and problematic figure of the peasant poet. Just as Clare came to regret his constraint within one of these categories, the ‘peasant poet’—a category misrepresenting Clare, so ‘The Ignote’ in the ‘Elegy’ cannot adequately be contained within any of these categories, but plays disturbingly across them all, unsettling the pastoral’s attempt to invest the countryside with order. Thus the answer to the question ‘who can Gray have had in mind when he introduced ‘thee’ into his poem?’ is quite literally that ‘no answer fits *anymore*.’ After all, we end up in a projected future set in tension with a counterpoint of intertextual allusions, borrowings and debts from the pastoral’s past—Raymond Williams’ backward moving escalator which seems to offer us the promise of establishing some identity, but always fails. However the ‘Elegy’ also disconcertingly moves from unsettled backward-looking pastoral generalisation towards the anxious future of an imagined, particular ‘thee.’ But this is only ever a seeming particularity, upon which each attempt to place an existing identity fails, and further reveals ‘The(e) Ignote’ as a void still to be filled. External to the poem, one good answer to the question ‘who is “thee”?’ thus *is* John Clare (whose close friend and fellow autodidact John Turnill wrote at least one epitaph, and who seriously considered a career as a monumental mason), but he is not yet born. In the poem’s own terms, there perhaps is and can be no answer, so instead of seeking one, I think it is better to rephrase the question: the ‘Elegy,’ in generating the problem of who ‘thee’ is, is also raising the question, what on earth is descending upon the inhabitant of the changing English countryside—what identity has s/he got?—a question, I

would argue, of very real penetration, and one bound up with shifting social relations and their definition in language, discourse and education—the very themes I see as central to the poem.

Source: R. J. Ellis, “Plodding Plowmen: Issues of Labour and Literacy in Gray’s ‘Elegy,’” in *The Independent Spirit: John Clare and the Self-Taught Tradition*, edited by John Goodridge, John Clare Society and Margaret Grainger Memorial Trust, 1994, pp. 27–43.

Andrew Dillon

In this essay, Dillon explores the reasons behind Gray’s rewriting of the poem’s ending.

The “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” can be read as a journey of recognition, conceived in dusk and worked out—not in a miasma of depression—but in the light of a symbolic self-destruction. The poem contains a drama of identification with the buried farmers of the village of Stoke Poges; however, this identification yields the poet a brief delivery from his rather narrow life. Moreover, the development of the poem has a quasi-heroic quality, for it grows out of a shorter early version that is a more emotionally distanced study of man’s final destiny. When Thomas Gray returned to the Eton manuscript of the “Elegy,” he filled the new ending with far more intimate feelings.

The poem opens with the speaker’s evocation of the world immediately around the graveyard; it then focuses on a plowman, who “homeward plods his weary way.” As if at home in the oncoming darkness, Gray clearly includes himself in the poem in stanzas that are full of a mournful music; suddenly, the verbs take on an almost independent energy: the turf “heaves” as the poet observes the graves as “many a mould’ring heap.” As will be later developed, this heaving of the earth suggests a kind of life within.

A series of vital images follows as if the quiet, celibate scholar perceived the farmers’ lives in moments of dreamy wistfulness. In spite of the need to point out that the cheerful aspects of the laborers’ mornings exist for them no more, the speaker describes elements of dawn: “breezy,” “twitt’ring,” “the cock’s shrill clarion.” There follows a series of pictures of a very different end of day than Thomas Gray could know: the “blazing hearth,” the “busy housewife,” children, and their climbing of the farmer’s knees. Finally, stanza seven depicts the farmer’s daily life:

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!

These verbs evidence virile strength; they portray a celebration of physical power in that stroke that bows the woods. This may have been merely an idealization of everyday life, but it does touch on what could have been a psychological problem for Gray; it evokes the pride that rises from earning one's own way.

Gray's fellowship at Cambridge gave him a life-long tenure for a somewhat elegant—if narrow—scholarly existence. He was never required to teach and never delivered a lecture. Clarence Tracy asserts that Gray “lived for years on public patronage” and goes on to say that “his friend, Mason, made it a virtue in him that he never dirtied his mind with any intention of earning his living.” Tracy also quotes Mason as saying his “life was spent in that kind of learned leisure, which has only self-improvement and self-gratification for its object.”

Gray's biographer, Ketton-Cremer, suggests, “the man of reading and reflection often feels an envious admiration for the man of physical skill.” However, Gray modulates any such response into an identification—as well as a defense of the farmers against the putative disdain of the upper classes. When he honors the simple graves of the poor, he points out that the “storied urn” and “animated bust” of the aristocrat cannot bring back the dead, as if in an urgent exhortation of the prosperous—or that side of Thomas Gray that has enjoyed a life of leisure.

Gray goes on to suggest the possibility that here may lie “some heart once pregnant with celestial fire,” but “chill Penury repress'd their noble range” because they lacked the good fortune of having an education. The farmers, then, were left in pastoral innocence like the famous flower “born to blush unseen.” The poem is now near its first ending, which is preserved only in the Eton manuscript of Gray's “Elegy.” Here, perhaps somewhat self-consciously, Gray implies that learning, worldly power, and leisure could do little but corrupt:

The thoughtless World to Majesty may bow
Exalt the brave, & idolize Success
But more to Innocence their Safety owe
Than Power & Genius e'er conspired to bless
And thou, who mindful of the unhonour'd Dead
Dost in these Notes their artless Tale relate
By Night & lonely Contemplation led
To linger in the gloomy Walks of Fate
Hark how the sacred Calm, that broods around
Bids ev'ry fierce tumultuous Passion cease



*As the swain
describes it, Gray's
Romantic crisis becomes a
self-immolation, a brief
escape from his life, for he
has moved on to a fearful
insight: it is as if Gray and
the deceased farmers share
a complex species of
mortality where the vital
dead are more alive than
the living speaker feels he
is.”*

In still small Accents whisp'ring from the Ground
A grateful Earnest of eternal Peace
No more with Reason & thyself at Strife;
Give anxious Cares & endless Wishes room
But thro' the cool sequester'd Vale of Life
Pursue the silent Tenour of thy Doom.

A close look at Starr and Hendrickson's rendition of the sixth line of the Eton manuscript excerpt shows an alteration to the word “their” from the original “thy.” Of course, this “thy” might have been meant only to refer to the narrator of the poem as he possessed the poem—but it may very well have indicated a deeper involvement as if Gray were briefly identifying with the dead in a melancholic assessment of what his life had become.

The moment of ambiguity between whether “thy” referred only to the tale or to the life of the narrator is resolved when Gray struck out “thy” and rewrote “their,” for the line now seems to concern no one except the dead farmers. However, the brief scratchings remain to suggest that the “Elegy” was for his own existence and that he had briefly included himself among the dead.

When he was much younger, Gray had written a four-line Latin fragment, “O lachrymarum Fons—O fountain of tears.” Starr and Hendrickson's translation is: “O fountain of tears which have their sacred sources in the sensitive soul! Four times blessed he who has felt thee, holy Nymph,

bubbling up from depths of his heart.” This is a moving evocation of the ability to feel as if reaching out to the self’s own source of tears; moreover, it suggests an earlier psychological breakthrough in response to depression. While Ian Jack asserts that Gray dropped the original four-stanza ending of his “Elegy” because “it preached a Stoic attitude to life that he could not accept,” it is as likely a conjecture that the new ending was yet another breakthrough in understanding for Gray, since it formed an escape from the depressing aspects of merely pursuing what he called “the silent Tenour of thy Doom” (Eton ms. 88).

R. W. Ketton-Cremer has demonstrated Gray’s depression; it seems likely to infer an etiology of that condition in “his father’s brutality to his mother” and in Gray’s subsequent dependence on his mother. David Cecil points out “by the easy-going University regulations of those days he could go on residing in the college free, for as long as he wanted.” Cecil also quotes one early letter to a friend saying, “When you have seen one of my days, you have seen a whole year of my life. They go round and round like a blind horse in the mill, only he has the satisfaction of fancying he makes progress, and gets some ground: my eyes are open enough to see the same dull prospect, and having made four and twenty steps more, I shall now be just where I was.”

When Gray took up the Eton manuscript to write the ending with which readers are familiar, the farmers are the ones who keep to the “sequester’d vale of life”—and keep “the noiseless tenor of their way.” This last word, “way,” is, of course, a significant change from Gray’s term for himself in the earlier version: “of thy doom” (Eton ms. 88). Moreover, his new understanding is accompanied by a second major surge of energy:

Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learn’d to stray;
Along the cool sequester’d vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Later, Gray united himself with the farmers and all mankind in tremendously original lines:

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e’er resign’d,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing ling’ring look behind?
On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
Ev’n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
Ev’n in our Ashes live their wonted Fires.

Dr. Johnson said of the two stanzas that contain the ashes line, “I have never seen the notions

in any other place; yet he that reads them here, persuades himself that he has always felt them” (Ketton-Cremer). The poet means to suggest that life is still speaking from the buried ashes—yet whose ashes are these? They are those of the safe dead, yet they also form a melancholic, personal estimation of the poet—alive but in the ashes of an entombed self.

When Gray asserts, “Ev’n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,” he must feel the strength of a tremendous moment of human projection; his living soul is speaking for the abstraction, Nature. Then, the idea is reinforced with, “Ev’n in our Ashes live their wonted Fires.” In the “our” of this line, Gray achieves a kind of emotional closure and becomes more nearly one with the ironically vital dead.

Perhaps it is at this exact moment of desperate recognition that he becomes “the central figure of the poem and occupies that place until the end” (Ketton-Cremer). At any rate, in the next line, Gray speaks of “thee,” who relates these lines. Of course, the “me” of the beginning of the poem and the “thee” here are the same being, for Gray suddenly distances his spirit from his everyday self. Moreover, this objectification of the soul is Gray’s chance to take the whole journey of imagination—and the poem becomes his elegy, “his storied urn” as Cleanth Brooks suggests.

Gray then invokes a “hoary-headed Swain” who would by chance (“haply”) describe the poem’s speaker, now depicted as a rather romantic youth, who is seen as pale and wandering, possibly “craz’d with care, or cross’d in hopeless love.” Frank Brady suggests that “the swain’s description of the narrator” shows that the narrator’s “life is apparently unproductive and unfulfilled.” Then, the Swain is to tell the reader, who is suddenly referred to as a “kindred Spirit,” that the narrator is dead! He then invites the reader to read the narrator’s epitaph, where an offering of the soul to God is recorded. We must understand that Gray—as narrator—has imaginatively entered the local society and has been long known to the swain, who is the second living farmer in the poem. In fact, he is the older parallel of the earlier rustic who “homeward plods his weary way.” That previous figure may have given Gray the first intimation of the farmer’s warm reception at home as this imaginary swain yields Gray his escape from mere static contemplation.

The poet has now managed to stage a symbolic death so that his epitaph can be read in the church-

yard. It is an unusual conception that allows Gray to break through the natural terror of dying in order to forge a relationship between a fear of death and an acceptance of that death. As the swain describes it, Gray's Romantic crisis becomes a self-immolation, a brief escape from his life, for he has moved on to a fearful insight: it is as if Gray and the deceased farmers share a complex species of mortality where the vital dead are more alive than the living speaker feels he is. Their very ashes contain a fire of life that the speaker senses he is missing, and, thus, they are the object of his sympathetic projection.

Perhaps Gray's personal sense of a buried life can be best approached from the end of the epitaph in which we are earlier told that "Melancholy mark'd him for her own":

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.

His frailties are undefined, but they are seen as existing along with his merits in a trembling condition lodged in "the bosom of his Father and his God." It is a strange view of eternal love that reposes the deceased one's attributes only in trembling hope—forever. Indeed, it is depressing, for it pictures God as a stern, judgmental father who holds this split youth (merits and frailties) in eternal abeyance like a bird in winter.

Gray's "Elegy," then, is as much about depression as it is about other species of entombments. Moreover, three years before his death in 1771, in the "Ode for Music," Gray once again referred to melancholy:

Oft at the blush of dawn
I trod your level lawn,
Oft woo'd the gleam of *Cynthia* silver-bright
In cloisters dim, far from the haunts of Folly,
With Freedom by my Side, and soft-ey'd
Melancholy.

Ketton-Cremer suggests that the lines reflect Gray's life at Cambridge "remotely but unmistakably."

However, the "Elegy" works because of the exquisite beauty of its language and the psychic complicity of the minds of readers with that of Thomas Gray. Our guide has disappeared; however, that is not an idiosyncratic moment of desertion but a great release of the imagination. Nevertheless, the vitality we project to the farmers and the buried speaker, is, of course, our own. Moreover, the poem serves as Gray's self-wrought myth,

where life's verve is celebrated, a descent into the earth is recorded, yet a resurrection is shown. In fact, the "Elegy" presents the reader with the "moment of awareness, the essential substance of myth" (Aldus). Therefore, readers return to the poem to take a journey underground while still in "this pleasing anxious being." However, the "Elegy"'s exchange for our energy is a delight which turns us back to the world as we depart the poem's mimetic twilight with our own "wonted fires."

Source: Andrew Dillon, "Depression and Release: The Journey of the Spirit in Thomas Gray's 'Elegy,'" in *North Dakota Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 4, Fall, 1992, pp. 128–34.

Richard C. Sha

In the following essay, Sha encourages the reader to look beneath the surface for meaning in Gray's poem.

Thomas Gray ends his *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* with an injunction to his readers not to look beyond the confines of the poem. As part of the poet's own epitaph, the enjoinder takes on the force of lapidary inscription and we are made to hear, as it were, the voice of the dead or one who speaks for the dead.

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.

But Gray also cleverly projects his future audience in the role of a sympathetic reader of the elegy; we readers, who are now "mindful of the unhonoured dead" and are the poet's "kindred spirits," inquire about the poem and about the swain's and Gray's fates, but only insofar as we avoid topical issues and confine ourselves to thinking about the poem in terms of universal truths. The poet, moreover, practically commands his readers to "relate" to this "artless tale." As Peter Sacks has argued, Gray employs a kind of "posthumous ventriloquism" by putting "words into the mouths of his survivors." It is therefore not altogether surprising that the interpretative history of the poem largely testifies to the fact that readers have heeded the poet's ghostly admonitions. However, we need now to exorcize this ghost fully by looking at the material history imbedded within and surrounding the poem: historical particularities demand that we look beyond the poem's universalizing rhetoric. Moreover, that history bids us to ask: why is the mid-eighteenth-century an appropriate moment for an elegy about the poor? Why exactly does Gray praise the poor? On what issues concerning the peasants



A politicized reading of Gray's elegy, then, indicates that although the poet is sympathetic to the poor, Gray's compassion is contingent upon the silent and cheerful penury of the lower classes."

is the poem conspicuously silent and what are the specific causes of this silence? What ideological pressures does Gray confront in his treatment of the poor? My aim here is to formulate possible answers to these questions.

Although no poem escapes history, Gray's *Elegy* is most often talked about as if it has—a fact that attests to the power of Gray's rhetorical strategy. Samuel Johnson spoke for generations of critics when he praised the poem's universal appeal and claimed that the elegy “abounds ... with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo.” In perhaps the most famous essay on the poem, Cleanth Brooks sees the “the total context of the whole poem” as the ironies and paradoxes of “Gray's storied urn”; that is, the elaborate personifications are contrasted ironically with the simple churchyard. Death, therefore, becomes the great leveller, and brings “the proud and the humble together in common humanity.” Much more recently, Wallace Jackson aptly characterizes the tendency of Gray criticism as, on one hand, governed by the belief that Gray was unhappily separated from his age, and, on the other, centered on the problem of voice in the elegy. The few critics who have delved into the poem's material history include William Empson, F. W. Bateson, Frank Ellis, and John Barrell. Insofar as Empson argues that Gray compares “the social arrangement” of the poor and the elite “to nature” in order to make this hierarchy seem natural, he anticipates some of my remarks. And Barrell's study of the representation of the rural poor throughout the eighteenth century is important to my project. A sustained archeology of the material history of the poem, however, needs to be done.

Let us first acknowledge that Gray's attitude towards the poor is somewhat sympathetic. As the son of a scrivener, Gray's upper-class affiliations were tenuous; this made the poet more sympathetic to the plight of the beleaguered, but it also perhaps made him anxious to bury his class identification with them. Indeed, in much the same way that a farm laborer worked for his lord, Gray depended upon the upper class for patronage. Closer scrutiny of Gray's treatment of the poor reveals this ambiguity. As I will argue below, the poet's compassion is strongly predicated both on the cheerful industry of the poor, and on their acceptance of their place. The poet's upper-class affiliations must have exerted ideological pressures on his attitudes to the poor; not only was Horace Walpole, Gray's friend and patron, the elegy's initial private audience, but Walpole circulated the poem among his coterie. Gray could thus remain sympathetic to the poor as long as he depicted them as somewhat abstract and distanced. If the poor got too close, the elite typically grew uneasy. In a letter to Montagu, Walpole, a member of the House of Commons, demonstrated just such discomfort. Referring to a mob of electors—a group of even a higher economic and social class than Gray's rustics—Walpole wrote with disdain,

Think of me, the subject of a mob, who was scarce before in a mob, addressing them in the town hall, riding at the head of two thousand people, dining with above two hundred of them, amid bumpers, huzzas, songs, and tobacco,... I have borne it all cheerfully.

Walpole's attitude towards the common people seems exemplary of a leisured class which preferred not to get too close to the lower sorts.

We can witness this patronizing attitude towards the poor in many of the contemporary debates concerning them; these debates in turn inform Gray's poem itself. The upper classes grew anxious about the rapid proliferation of the poor and vigorously argued about possible solutions to this problem. When Gray refers to “the poor,” and their “short and simple annals” he elliptically suggests such controversy. In the eighteenth century, the very term, “the poor,” was charged with political significance to which we today are less sensitized; Samuel Johnson records in his 1755 *Dictionary* that the “poor” refers to “Those who are in the lowest rank of community; those who cannot subsist but by the charity of others....” Johnson's definition, of course, accounts for both the idle and laboring poor. As I shall argue later, the absence of any overt reference to charity in Gray's poem is telling. “The poor,” moreover, were the subject of much legis-

lation; during the years 1732–50 alone the House of Commons heard 17 bills or petitions for bills concerning them. Members of Parliament argued about how to remedy the defects of antiquated poor laws of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, how to regulate the choice of church wardens and overseers of the destitute, and how to raise funds for workhouses to keep these people from being idle.

Many of these bills were motivated less by a sense of compassion for the poor and more by a desire to protect propertied interests from possible harm. As early as 1733, for example, representatives from Middlesex sought to “Ease” the “Tranquility of the Inhabitants” by erecting a workhouse for the “Employment and Maintenance of the Poor.” Apparently the “clamorous Proceedings and irregular Behaviour” of the “great Multitude” who attended the Vestry not only discouraged the town’s “principal Inhabitants from attending,” but also so alarmed these inhabitants that they sought to keep the poor better employed. The “clamouring” multitude were not confined to Middlesex, however. Two years later, representatives from Westminster demanded more “Night Watchmen” to protect the “Security of Lives and Properties.” Petitioners from Colchester, Essex, also lamented the “extremely numerous poor,” and spoke of “the Failure of Part of the Administration of Justice to the unspeakable Detriment and Danger of the petitioners” themselves. Others argued in 1736 before the House for the “better Relief and Employment of the Poor” and for “more effective punishment of Rogues and Vagabonds.” Brought again in 1743, that bill was emended to include the punishment of “other idle and disorderly Persons.”

One year later, Parliament issued an act which deemed all who begged or received alms idle and disorderly; moreover, these legislators declared that those who refused to work could be sent to a house of correction where they would be put to hard labor. Because the poor were held responsible for their own condition, legislation became increasingly punitive. Such a hardened attitude is epitomized by a bill of February 1747, in which representatives complained that “the Poor of Suffolk do daily multiply.” “Idleness and Debauchery amongst the meaner Sort do greatly increase,” petitioners warned, “for want of Workhouses to keep them employed.” When Gray alludes to “the poor,” then, he addresses one of the more vexing political issues of his time.

Insofar as Gray speaks to this issue, what might he mean by referring to the poor’s “short and sim-

ple annals?” As Cleanth Brooks has pointed out, the poor do not, properly speaking, have “annals.” “Annals” record the history of the gentry or monarchy; Gray would later use the term more appropriately when he asked Horace Walpole about the “annals of Strawberry Hill.” That Gray calls the poor’s annals “short and simple” might be an ironic reference to the brevity of peasants’ lives and thus the rustic grave markers themselves. Perhaps this description is even an unconsciously euphemised version of Hobbes’s “nasty, brutish, and short.” If we construe the term literally, moreover, the extant “annals” of the eighteenth-century poor are largely the aforementioned bills, poor house and workhouse rolls, and parish registers which recorded the relief administered to the peasants: records not of the poor’s acts but of acts against them. In fact, in “The Parish Register” of 1805, George Crabbe explicitly calls such registers “annals” of the poor. Given that the site of the “Elegy” is at the center of the parish (Churchyard), that the clergy would have been responsible for dispensing poor relief, and that payments for burial and grave-digging expenses were especially common forms of such relief, we find the material history upon which the poem is based effectively “buried” beneath the poem’s rhetoric. If the elegy can be viewed as Gray’s “annals” of the poor, then we must ask why Gray seeks to superscribe his “annals” upon the actual ones, thereby, almost effacing them.

To arrive at possible answers to this question, we might examine the poem’s relative silence on certain issues. As David Simpson has argued, a genuinely historical method should include an inquiry into the “allusions that they [texts] do not make, but would arguably have been expected to make.” I would suggest that although there are no direct references either to the legislation concerning the poor or to charity within the poem, the elegy’s epitaph takes on important resonances when considered in terms of the politics of such benevolence. The historian W. A. Speck would perhaps agree that such silence is telling: he writes that “charity was at the very interface between the propertied classes and the dispossessed in early modern England.” Likewise, John Barrell argues that the eighteenth-century poor “took on the status of an undifferentiated class”—one distinguished only by its need for charity. Yet in seeking both to align his persona—a “youth to fame and fortune unknown”—with the buried peasants and also to isolate that persona, Gray suggests that the poor are more interested in the upper class’s sympathy than their economic aid.

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 wished) a
 friend.

Here, an aura of Christian *caritas* threatens to obfuscate an economic register of earnings and losses. The subject of the epitaph earns heavenly “recompense” through his sincere bestowal of “bounty”; indeed, recompense is not only contingent upon the rustic’s giving of his bounty, but is also directly proportional to (i.e., “as large” as) that bounty. He also “gains” a friend for a tear. In as much as these lines evenly alternate between sums and losses—the first and third stress the latter, the second and fourth foreground the former—the very structure of the stanza helps to reinforce a sense of economic balance and equal distribution. Gray presumes to speak for the poor, moreover, by suggesting that friendship from above is all the youth wishes in return for his spiritual “bounty.” Gray even circumscribes his desire within a parenthesis: a typographical maneuver that prefigures the peasants’ ultimate confinement to “rude and narrow cells.” Since Gray’s lines acquire the force of epitaphic inscription, this parenthesis could be a kind of grammatical (not to mention economic) coffin. If we accept the logic of this stanza, the poor are well off and perhaps even better off than those who have money. Tears are a more valuable form of currency than the finest gold, for a single one can be exchanged for friendship. I might add that the poor would have had no shortage of tears to shed. Because God has already given “recompense” to the poor, and because the poor do not desire economic aid, readers of the poem need no longer be so concerned with almsgiving or charity. What could the affluent do that God had not already done? In displacing material economics by a spiritual one, Gray makes poverty a theological rather than political or economic issue. Gray’s aestheticized “annals” thus potentially render the parish registers and poorhouse rolls obsolete.

The word “bounty” deserves further comment. Johnson defines “bounty” as “generosity, liberality, and munificence.” Moreover, while elaborating the meaning of the term, Johnson takes great pains to distinguish between “bounty” and alms; the former is “used when persons, not absolutely necessitous, receive gifts . . . and the latter refers specifically to charity.” Not only are the poor idealized as generous (one might ask what they might have to be generous with), but also the choice of “bounty” for “alms” is suggestive. Certainly, the

latter is more appropriate. “Bounty,” however, neither calls to mind the systems which support the poor, nor reminds the wealthy who read the poem of the reasons why the poor need charity. It is, after all, the peasantry’s “useful toil” that the middle-to-upper classes exploit. The fact that the poor do not receive material bounty, but *give* it is also curious. Rather than moving the reader of the elegy to social action, the poem allows the elite to remain complacent because the poor do not need much charity. “Mis’ry” has already conditioned the poor to be spiritually generous; thus, the obtrusion of economic assistance would serve only to make them greedy and self-indulgent.

The elegy is also quietly suggestive about the contemporary controversy concerning the education of the poor. We are told that “Knowledge” neither unrolls her scrolls nor teaches the peasants how to read her inscriptions. Moreover, before the epitaph is placed before our eyes, we are asked to approach and “read (for thou can’st read)” it. And yet the poem effaces the material cause of the poor’s illiteracy: the machinations of the elite, who thought that the educated poor might no longer accept their penury. In *The English Common Reader*, Richard Altick traces the politics of literacy in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. After the Interregnum,

...the opportunity for the children of the poor to read was sharply curtailed.... Since the power of the press had been so dramatically revealed during the Puritan regime, one vital way of insuring the nation’s stability was to keep masses ignorant of their letters.

In his “Free Inquiry into the Origin and Nature of Evil” (1757), Soame Jenyns spoke for propertied interests when he pronounced that “ignorance is the appointed lot of all born to poverty and the drudgeries of life....the only opiate capable of infusing that sensibility, which can enable them to endure the miseries of [life] ... It is the cordial administered by the generous hand of Providence....” Indeed, it is possible that Gray, who was reading Jenyns’s poetry as early as January of 1748, might have also read this essay. Yet while men like Jenyns sought to keep the poor as ignorant as possible, others such as members of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge as well as Methodists insisted that “reading Christians will be knowing Christians.” Through charity schools and the dissemination of cheap literature, these Christians sought to inculcate the masses with piety and a sense of duty. Such indoctrination would ensure that the poor would learn their place. Both sides were united by their common perception of the poor

as a class to be feared and by their desire to preserve the social hierarchy.

In the context of this debate, the line “Their sober wishes never *learned* to stray” (emphasis mine), takes on distinctly repressive overtones. The poor accept their “chill penury” and remain “jocund” in their domestic bowers only because they do not know any better. Furthermore, although these laborers cannot be taught how to read, they can be taught how to die; in lines 83–84, Gray points to the “holy texts” of the graveyard “That teach the rustic moralist to die.” The main speaker of the elegy subtly aligns himself with those who would keep the poor ignorant in order to preserve the social hegemony. And insofar as the act of reading becomes literally associated with burial, the elegy itself seems, at least rhetorically, to require the demise of the poor. Even more disturbing, however, is the poem’s naturalizing of the political reasons for the poor’s illiteracy and the reifying of the boundaries between those who can and cannot read. The elegy insists upon the division between “thee” (the reading audience) and “their”: “their lot forbade,” their unlettered muse “strews” holy texts, and “their crimes” are circumscribed. Gray appropriates the abstracted and personified concepts of “Knowledge” and “lot” to account for the inability of the poor to read. Men like Jenyns, as it is made to seem, have no role in this. Illiteracy, therefore, becomes a natural and unquestioned condition of the poor.

Perhaps Gray’s awareness of the important role literacy and pamphleteering played in the English Civil War compels him to speak of a “mute inglorious Milton”; a silent and unknown Milton would neither have written a defense of the regicide of King Charles nor have published praise of Cromwell. Insofar as Gray links Milton with other English radicals who brought much turmoil to England—namely, Hampden, and Cromwell—he provides his readers with a lesson in exemplary history. The poet’s conviction that the masses must remain illiterate leads him to reflect upon what might have happened in terms of the English Revolution had the poor had greater access to knowledge. And if we recall that the putative topography of the poem is Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire, this history becomes even geographically immediate to Gray, who is putting the finishing touches on his Elegy at Stoke. For even without the widespread literacy of the poor, the Buckinghamshire Levellers had managed to publish and disperse a 1648 pamphlet entitled “More Light Shining in Buckinghamshire,” which called for the levelling of all social distinctions and for the equal distribution of all property. The Levellers demanded not

only “the removall of the kingly power” in order “to free all alike out of slavery,” but also denounced the self-interest of “Richmen [who] cry for a King ... and of the Lord’s Barons” who “cry for a King, else their tyrannical House of Peers falls down.” Not only were the Levellers active during the revolution, but Buckinghamshire was also the site of a Digger community—a group which also published pamphlets denouncing private property. Because the causes of their discontent were still active in the eighteenth century, might it not be these specific “crimes” that Gray alludes to when he refers to the poor’s “circumscribed crimes,” and could not the allusions to Hampden, Milton, and Cromwell potentially recall the rebels that the poor almost became and still, as I will argue later, could (and did) become? Only ignorance prevents the poor from “wad [ing] through slaughter to a throne” and “shut[ting] the gates of mercy on mankind.” If the poor cannot read, then they cannot “learn to stray”; that is, they cannot yearn for equality and position. The poem thus actively buries or silences their desires.

Leisured classes not only sought to infuse the poor with the opiate of ignorance by prohibiting reading as a form of recreation, but also they tried to suppress rural sports. Throughout the eighteenth century men of property thought that popular recreation encouraged the poor to become idle; even worse, the carnivalesque atmosphere of these festivities had the potential to undermine the social order. Robert Malcolmson summarizes this strategy: “The more popular diversion could be controlled and restrained, the more would the national economy be strengthened and expanded; habits of leisure had to be brought into line with the requirements of efficient and orderly production.” If we consider that the churchyard was a favorite playground for the lower classes in the eighteenth century, the complete absence of popular recreation within the elegy is perhaps important. In fact, the churchyard of the poem seems to have been taken over by leisured upper-class sentimentalists who have presumably earned the right to such leisure. By contrast, even within the speaker’s imaginative projections of the lives of the poor, leisure is conspicuously absent. In much the same way that John Barrell argues that paintings in the mid-eighteenth century sought to represent the poor as working blithely, Gray seeks to convert the poor to an industrious poor. Thus Gray exclaims:

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!

Not only do these peasants labor diligently, they are perfectly content in doing so. Because they labor cheerfully, Gray seems to say, they deserve our respect and sympathy. Indeed, the poet himself left ten pounds to be distributed to “honest and industrious poor Persons” in the Parish of Stoke Poges.

To the ends of making the poor industrious and of suppressing recreation, propertied interests sought to discourage all forms of public assembly for the poor and attempted “to confine their recreation, when necessary, to domestic pleasures.... The home was a refuge from the world; here amusement could be rational, regulated, uplifting, and subservient to the laws of religion.” We note accordingly that Gray’s portraits of rural life do not suggest any form of public life on the part of the poor; rather, his peasants are “far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife.” The emphasis here, I suggest, is on “far.” Similarly, the poet perhaps displaces representations of recreation with moments of domestic tranquility:

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.

Without question, Gray here devalues the public realm for the poor and seeks to confirm familial values of privacy and domestic autonomy. Furthermore, the poet’s choice of “sire,” that is, “a lord, master, or sovereign” (*OED*), harkens back to an age of feudalism when a “sire’s” rule was entirely capable of instilling order. Perhaps the initial solitary figure of Gray’s poetic landscape, the ploughman who “homeward plods his weary way,” returns to such a domestic bower to uphold this order. Indeed, this rustic farmer becomes a universal type of a domesticated and industrious laborer. The poet denies this figure of all potential radical action. Might Gray have stripped this farmer of topicality because local farm laborers had a history of revolt? We might recall here that the Buckinghamshire community of Diggers were a radical group so named because they subsisted by digging and cultivating common land.

The suppression of popular recreation did not, however, end with the reinduction of familial values and the discouragement of all forms of public assembly. Nothing but the doctrine of necessity would ensure that the poor remained industrious. If the poor had to work continually to provide for their basic necessities, then productivity would be maximized. In 1757 William Temple, a strong advocate of this doctrine, wrote:

The only way to make them [the poor] temperate and industrious is to lay them under a necessity of labouring all the time they can spare for meals and sleep, in order to procure the common necessities of life.

While scarcity facilitated industry, abundance would lead to idleness and crime. If we briefly look again at the stanza of the epitaph which details what the “youth to fortune and to fame unknown” must give in order to receive God’s recompense, we find, not surprisingly, that he must give “all he had” before he can receive, and that those lines add up to a zero-sum gain. Furthermore, Gray’s virtual redefinition of charity within the poem would ensure that the poor never rise above necessity. Too much aid given to the peasants might leave them with a surplus; that in turn would lead to idleness and debauchery. The poet is thus understandably relieved that the poor do not have the power “to scatter plenty o’er a smiling land.” In as much as “plenty” suggests abundance and, according to Johnson’s *Dictionary*, “more than is necessary,” might this line be an oblique reference to charity? Indeed, the choice of “scattering” implies a completely indiscriminate manner of distribution. The line “Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,” then, potentially recalls the doctrine of necessity. Not only have the actual causes of poverty been mythologized through abstract personification, but it is also that very penury that enables the poem to maintain its elegiac tenor; that is, their poverty makes the poor worthy of an elegy. Had the poor not been completely destitute, Gray suggests, their “noble rage” might have become “ignoble strife.” The poor might have diverted their energies from labor to popular revolt.

Both the poet and men of propertied interests had good reason to believe that the poor would rise up against them; although Gray desperately seeks to marginalize the crowd by placing it “far” away in his elegy, the “madding crowd” was closer to the poet’s Buckinghamshire home and to the country churchyard of Stoke Poges than anyone there would have liked. As I have already noted, Buckinghamshire had had a history of popular uprisings. And although E. P. Thompson argues that eighteenth-century crowds were ruled by the “remarkable restraint” of a “moral economy,” “crowd” was a terrifying word for the established order: “crowd” implied either “a multitude confusedly pressed together” or a “promiscuous medley, without order or distinction” (Johnson’s *Dictionary*). Moreover, as Eveline Cruickshanks has argued, “Large crowd demonstrations and violent riots could not be ignored by an elite devoid of an effective professional

police force or a large standing army.” As if the use of the word “crowd” were not adequately alarming, Gray also calls attention to their “ignoble strife” and to the fact that they are “madding” or furious. The issuance of a Riot Act in 1715 by Parliament, specifically to put an end to “tumults and riotous assemblies, and for the more speedy and effectual punishing of rioters,” suggests that eighteenth-century crowds were an extremely disruptive force; indeed, under the Act’s provisions, crowds of twelve or more which unlawfully assembled for an hour after the reading of a proclamation were guilty of a felony, and were subject to capital punishment. Despite the act, however, rioting was not contained. The prime minister, Sir Robert Walpole (father of Gray’s friend and patron), himself witnessed just how unruly a crowd could be; in response to his attempt to postpone the unpopular 1733 Excise Bill, the crowd outside the House mobbed Walpole and his friends, and even though the Riot Act was read, blows and abuse were exchanged.

That the crowd was threatening to the established order is confirmed by their disruptiveness and virtual ubiquity. I will list only a few examples germane to the elegy. In Charnwood Forest, Leicestershire, in 1748, crowds demanded rights to the common and destroyed warrens in the presence of troops, constables, and gameskeepers. Apparently this crowd was taken seriously; their demands were met. At Bristol, between July and August 1749, farmers and laborers who feared the extra charges on produce brought into the area destroyed toll-gates on roads leading to that city. By August 3rd, almost all turnpikes and turnpike houses there were razed. These highway disturbances were not uncommon and were noted in 1727, 1731, 1734, and in 1735–36 in Bristol, Gloucester, Ledbury, and Herefordshire. And according to a 1750 eyewitness account, “a crowd of people assembled” in Walsall and proceeded to shout treasonable expressions and to fire shots at an effigy of King George II. In 1751, the year that Gray’s *Elegy* first appeared in print, moreover, rioters at Cannock Chase slaughtered 10,000 of the Earl of Uxbridge’s rabbits. The most common form of protest, however, were food riots with nationwide waves in 1709–10, 1727–29, 1739–40, and in 1756–57. All of this strongly suggests that crowds would have been very much on the minds of those who read the poem.

If we accept the idea that Gray may have had specific crowd disturbances in mind, then the lines, “The cock’s shrill clarion or the echoing horn / No

more shall rouse them from their lowly bed,” may allude as well to the mob’s rebellions. Although as Roger Lonsdale has noted, “echoing horn” perhaps recalls Milton’s “Hounds and Horn” which “Chearly rouse the slumbring morn” (“L’Allegro”), and thus refer to the hunting horns of the gentry, E. P. Thompson informs us that crowds in the mid-eighteenth century were often mobilized by horns and drums. Agreeing with Thompson, John Stevenson writes: “Mobs were frequently headed by someone blowing a horn.” The fact that this horn is “echoing” suggests that rural rebellion was not an isolated phenomenon. Indeed, when Gray writes that the Poor have “kept the noiseless tenor of their way,” might he not be actively silencing the peasants? In the four rejected stanzas of the Eton Manuscript which originally appeared immediately before the lines referring to their “noiseless tenor,” Gray extolls the “sacred calm” of the graveyard which now fortunately “Bids every tumultuous Passion cease.” The “cock’s shrill clarion” may recall another sound which the gentry would have shuddered to hear. According to Johnson’s *Dictionary*, “cock” could suggest a “conquerer or leader of men,” and “clarion” was the sound of a trumpet—“a wind instrument of war.” The poet’s choice of the verb “rouse,” then is fitting; although the overt meaning of the term is clearly “wake,” the word, taken as an imperative, would suggest incitement to action. One need only think here of the commanding and manifesto-like call with which Blake would later begin his epic, *Milton*: “Rouze up O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings!” As long as Gray’s poem keeps the poor buried, the peasants can thankfully no longer be “roused” to such revolution.

But the reference to the crowd’s “ignoble strife” may be even more historically specific. Food riots were extremely common in 1740: just a few years before Gray would begin writing his elegy. To cite only a few instances, crowds rose in Newcastle-upon-Tyne protesting the high price of corn, and plundered granaries. When a rioter was killed, the crowd “ransacked” the town hall and carried away 1,800 pounds of the town’s money. In the process, the crowd “wounded most of the gentlemen.” And in Norwich, the rabble fixed notes upon bakery doors in the city demanding that the price of wheat be lowered. When the mayor committed the leaders to prison, the crowd became so incensed that they stormed the prison and released their companions. Elsewhere, villagers pulled down mills, protested rises in prices, and began stopping the transport of any grain to be for exportation. As the

historian R. B. Rose aptly put it, “Where simple hunger riots are concerned, no part of England seems to have been immune.”

What precipitated the riots of 1739–40 was severe frost—one of the coldest winter seasons on record—and the ensuing miserable harvests. According to William Ellis, a farmer in Buckinghamshire,

The Hard Frost that began about Christmas of 1739, and ended the 23rd of February following, was deemed the sharpest in the Memory of Man; for it occasioned the Death of many poor people who wanted Heat and Victuals....

Another account reads:

An unheard of frost seized with extraordinary severity on the world and the elements, so that it is scarcely possible to number or relate the many strange occurrences that took place through its violence.... This extraordinary weather was followed by an equally uncommon spring. In May no sign of verdure was yet to be seen; it was still cold in July, and the vegetation was still then further hindered by drought....

Although Gray’s grand tour to France and Italy with Walpole lasted from March 1739 to September 1741, Gray knew about the severe weather; in a letter to his wife dated March 1740, the poet writes, “I hope at present ... that all your frosts, and snows, ... are, by this time, utterly vanished.” Indeed, the bitter cold would remain a major topic of conversation in England; scattered throughout the January, March, and July issues of *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1740), for example, are numerous letters, articles, and even poems about the weather. Not surprisingly, the frost triggered enormous increases in wheat and coal prices. For example, at Oxford in the first few months of 1740, wheat prices rose from twenty to fifty nine shillings per bushel. Coal prices in London also trebled from January to March. Because the poor relied upon bread as their main source of nourishment and coal for a cheap form of fuel, many died. In response to the growing hardships of the peasants, those who could afford to do so began thinking about how to help them. *The Craftsman* of January 26, 1740, contained the following editorial note:

We have many dismal Accounts from all Parts of the great Damages done by the severity of the Weather, and of the Hardships the Poor undergo from the extravagant Price of Firing and Coal, and We receive likewise many satisfactory Advices of the charitable Benevolence of well-disposed Christians to assist them in this calamitous Season.

There are reportedly so many letters that the editors cannot print them all. Perhaps it can be safely said that the frost did focus more public at-

ention on the poor than there otherwise would have been.

Given this context, it is quite possible that Gray’s lines about the “Chill Penury” which “repressed their noble rage” and which “froze the genial current” of the peasant’s souls either are direct references to the frost of 1739–40 or would have been taken in that sense. And there was another unusual frost from the first of February to the middle of March in 1746 which may have helped to remind readers of the earlier “chill.” Quite literally then, the poor lie in a “mouldering heap” because their “genial currents” have been frozen. If the peasants, moreover, were as potentially militant as I suggest, their currents are hardly “genial” but were more accurately termed “violent.” For the established order, the deaths of the peasants were perhaps the best that could be hoped for. Insofar as their confinement to “narrow cells” was no longer temporary—that is, there would be no more need for prison cells to contain these potential rioters—but now permanent, the elite might rest more comfortably. As if to lend authority to the poem, Gray concludes the elegy proper with “the voice of nature” which demands that the peasants be so confined.

A politicized reading of Gray’s elegy, then, indicates that although the poet is sympathetic to the poor, Gray’s compassion is contingent upon the silent and cheerful penury of the lower classes. Much more than critics of the poem have recognized, Gray’s attitudes towards these peasants were conditioned by the contemporary debates concerning them. Because the very hegemony of the propertied classes was at stake, Gray sought to place the poor “far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife” even if that meant inflicting upon them intellectual, economic, social, and finally, physical death. Because the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* actively suppresses the rebellious history of the poor, the poem both memorializes and anticipates the burial of English peasants whose “trembling hopes” must be contained within the safe walls of Gray’s parenthetical coffins.

Source: Richard C. Sha, “Gray’s Political *Elegy*: Poetry as the Burial of History,” in *Philological Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 3, Summer, 1990, pp. 337–57.

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Glazier interprets this as a poem of equality, favoring no class over another. He reminds readers that it is not merely about the virtues of the poor, but a declaration that all persons, rich and poor, are mortal.

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