



Thomas Gray

(1716-1771)

Life and works

Thomas Gray (1716-1771) was born in Cornhill, London. His father was a scrivener and his mother kept a milliner's shop. He was educated at Eton where he met Horace Walpole, son of the great Prime Minister Robert Walpole (→ 3.3). Together they toured France and Italy for about three years. When Gray returned to England, he settled down in Cambridge, where he lived for the rest of his life except for occasional trips to the Lake District and Scotland in search of 'the Sublime' and 'the Beautiful'. In 1751 his friend Walpole helped him to publish *An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard*, which soon became very popular. Gray published other poems in *Odes* in 1757. *The Bard* and *The Progress of Poesy* reflect Gray's interest in Celtic and Icelandic mythology and English literary history. In the same year he was offered the Poet

Laureateship but turned it down. In 1768 he became Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, where he died in 1771.

A transitional poet

During his time Gray was considered one of the greatest scholars in Europe. His interest in simple, primitive culture, as well as in country life and humble people, and his use of the first person singular to express emotions, foreshadowed some of the trends of the Romantic movement. Generally speaking, Gray is regarded as a transitional poet because, even though in choice of subject-matter he rejected the neoclassical tradition, he was still linked to it in style as testified by his use of poetic diction and his conviction that everyday language cannot be the language of poetry.

An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard

(1751)

GRAY'S ELEGY AND THE CLASSICAL ELEGY

In 1742 one of Gray's best friends, Richard West, died. The poet was deeply affected by this event and in the same year he started to write the *Elegy*. The traditional form of the elegy usually laments someone's death but in Gray's *Elegy* West is not named. Gray's poem also lacks many of the genre's conventional motifs. There is no procession of mourners, no catalogue of flowers, and no refrain of grief. Finally, it ends with the imagined death of the poet. Gray uses the elegy as a vehicle for meditation on universal themes such as man's destiny, equality, worldly ambition and humility.

MEDITATIVE MOOD

The poem opens with the contemplation of a country churchyard at twilight, when the setting sun gives way to darkness. The scene, described through the poet's eyes, is vividly conveyed thanks to the interplay of assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia and carefully chosen images; the feeling of melancholy created by the atmosphere leads the poet to a meditation on the 'rude forefathers', the village dead. This thought gives him the chance to describe the life of rural people and, at the same time, to reflect on the circumstances that prevented these people from becoming

famous but also from doing great evil or falling prey to ambition. Finally, the poet meditates on the value of the tomb as a link, the expression of affection and friendship between the living and the dead. In the final stanzas the poet's thought turns to his own death; in the epitaph he decides to leave for people to read after his death, he says that he had a melancholy nature and a sincere soul and that he is now resting with God.

A NEW SENSIBILITY

The poem is written in heroic quatrains of ten-syllable lines; almost each stanza is complete in itself; it is a whole statement standing on its own and at the same time it is part of the general development of the poem.

The *Elegy* remains one of the most important poems in English literature. On the one hand it marks the beginning of a new sensibility and introduces a new figure of the poet, who is the speaking voice in the poem, no longer the spokesman of fashionable city tastes like Pope (→ Text Bank 20) but someone turning to country life and solitude for inspiration. The poem became very popular throughout Europe; in Italy it was translated by Melchiorre Cesarotti (1730-1808), and the poet Ugo Foscolo (1778-1827) may have drawn inspiration from it when writing *I Sepolcri* (1807).

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 ANSWER the following questions about Gray's work.

- Why is Gray regarded as a transitional poet?
- How does Gray's *Elegy* differ from the classical elegy?
- What scene is described at the beginning of the poem?
- What atmosphere is created?
- What does Gray think about the function of the tomb?
- How was the poem written?



An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard

Thomas Gray
(1751)

Written between 1742 and 1750, Gray's Elegy belongs to the tradition of graveyard poetry and is perhaps the most interesting example of early Romantic verse, for its blend of neoclassical elements and Romantic features.

- The curfew tolls the knell of parting day¹,
The lowing² **herd** wind slowly o'er the lea³,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way⁴,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.
- 5 Now fades⁵ the **glimmering** landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn **stillness** holds,
Save where the beetle wheels⁶ his droning⁷ flight,
And drowsy tinklings⁸ lull the distant folds⁹;
- Save that from yonder ivy-mantled¹⁰ tower
10 The moping owl¹¹ does to the moon complain
Of such, as wandering near her secret bower¹²,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.
- Beneath those rugged elms¹³, that yew-tree's shade¹⁴,
Where heaves¹⁵ the turf¹⁶ in many a mouldering **heap**,
15 Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
the rude¹⁷ forefathers of the hamlet¹⁸ sleep.
- The breezy call of incense-breathing morn¹⁹,
The swallow²⁰ twittering from the straw-built shed²¹,
The cock's shrill²² clarion or the echoing horn²³,
20 No more shall rouse them from their lowly²⁴ bed.
- For them no more the blazing **hearth** shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply²⁵ her evening care:
No children run to lisp their sire's return²⁶,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.
- 25 Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield²⁷,
Their furrow²⁸ oft the stubborn glebe²⁹ has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team afield!
How **bowed** the woods beneath their **sturdy** stroke!
- Let not Ambition mock their useful toil³⁰,
30 Their homely joys and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear, with a **disdainful** smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor.
- The boast of heraldry³¹, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
35 Awaits alike the inevitable hour.
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 trophies³² raise,

- 1 **The curfew ... day.** La campana della sera annuncia con tristi rintocchi il giorno che si congeda.
2 **lowing.** Che muggisce.
3 **lea.** Prato, pascolo.
4 **The ploughman ... way.** Il contadino cammina con passi stanchi verso casa.
5 **fades.** Svanisce.
6 **wheels.** Rotea (in volo).
7 **droning.** Ronzante.
8 **drowsy tinklings.** Sonnolenti tintinnii.
9 **folds.** Ovili.
10 **ivy-mantled.** Coperta di edera.
11 **moping owl.** La civetta triste.
12 **bower.** Rifugio, dimora.
13 **rugged elms.** Olmi robusti.
14 **that yew-tree's shade.** L'ombra di quel tasso.
15 **heaves.** Si solleva.
16 **the turf.** La zolla erbosa.
17 **rude.** Rustici.
18 **hamlet.** Piccolo villaggio.
19 **morn.** Mattino.
20 **swallow.** Rondine.
21 **straw-built shed.** Rifugio fatto di paglia; *qui*: il nido.
22 **shrill.** Acuto.
23 **horn.** Corno.
24 **lowly.** Umile.
25 **ply.** Svolgerà.
26 **to lisp ... return.** Ad annunciare balbettando il ritorno del loro signore, cioè del padre.
27 **to their sickle yield.** Cedere sotto la loro falce.
28 **furrow.** Solco.
29 **glebe.** Terra.
30 **toil.** Fatica.
31 **boast of heraldry.** Il vanto di una casata illustre.
32 **trophies.** *Lett.*: trofei; *qui*: sculture mortuarie.



- Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault³³
 40 The pealing anthem³⁴ swells the note of praise.
- Can storied³⁵ urn or animated bust
 Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
 Can Honour's voice provoke³⁶ the silent dust,
 Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death?
- 45 Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
 Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
 Hands that the rod of empire³⁷ might have swayed³⁸,
 Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.
- But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
 50 Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;
 Chill Penury repressed their noble rage³⁹,
 And froze the genial current⁴⁰ of the soul.
- Full many a gem of purest ray serene
 The dark unfathomed⁴¹ caves of ocean bear:
 55 Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
 And waste its sweetness on the desert air.
- Some village-Hampden⁴², that with dauntless⁴³ breast
 The little tyrant of his fields withstood⁴⁴;
 Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
 60 Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.
- The applause of listening senates to command,
 The threats of pain and ruin to despise⁴⁵,
 To scatter⁴⁶ plenty o'er a smiling land,
 And read their history in a nation's eyes,
- 65 Their lot forbade⁴⁷: nor circumscribed alone
 Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;
 Forbade to wade through slaughter⁴⁸ to a throne,
 And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,
- The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
 70 To quench⁴⁹ the blushes of ingenuous shame,
 Or heap the shrine⁵⁰ of Luxury and Pride
 With incense kindled⁵¹ at the Muse's flame.
- Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife⁵²
 Their sober wishes never learned to stray⁵³;
 75 Along the cool sequestered⁵⁴ vale of life
 They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.
- Yet even these bones from insult to protect
 Some frail memorial still erected nigh⁵⁵,
 With uncouth⁵⁶ rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked⁵⁷,
 80 Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

33 long-drawn ... vault. La lunga navata e la volta adorna di fregi.

34 pealing anthem. L'inno echeggiante.

35 storied. Istorata.

36 provoke. *Qui*: richiamare in vita.

37 rod of empire. Scettro dell'impero.

38 might ... swayed. Avrebbero potuto reggere.

39 rage. *Qui*: slancio.

40 genial current. Inclinazione naturale.

41 unfathomed. Sconfinata, inesplorata.

42 Hampden. Difensore dei diritti della borghesia, si oppose al governo di Carlo I. Morì in battaglia nel 1643.

43 dauntless. Impavido.

44 withstood. Si oppose a.

45 despise. Disprezzare.

46 scatter. Spargere, disseminare.

47 Their lot forbade. Il destino negò loro.

48 wade through slaughter. Farsi strada attraverso il delitto.

49 quench. Reprimere, smorzare.

50 heap the shrine. Colmare il tempio.

51 kindled. Acceso.

52 strife. Lotta, contesa.

53 stray. Dispersersi.

54 sequestered. Appartata.

55 nigh. Vicino.

56 uncouth. Rozze.

57 decked. Adorno.



Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered muse,
The place of fame and elegy supply:
And many a holy text around she strews⁵⁸,
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

- 85 For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey⁵⁹,
This pleasing anxious being⁶⁰ e'er resigned⁶¹,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?

- On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
90 Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
Ev'n from the tomb the voice of nature cries,
Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted⁶² fires.

- For thee who, mindful of the unhonoured dead,
Dost in these lines their artless⁶³ tale relate;
95 If chance, by lonely Contemplation led,
Some kindred⁶⁴ spirit shall inquire thy fate,

- Haply some hoary-headed swain⁶⁵ may say,
'Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn⁶⁶
'Brushing with hasty steps the dew away
100 'To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.

'There at the foot of yonder nodding beech⁶⁷
'That wreathes⁶⁸ its old fantastic roots so high,
'His listless⁶⁹ length at noontide would he stretch,
'And pore upon⁷⁰ the brook that babbles⁷¹ by.

- 105 'Hard by yon wood⁷², now smiling as in scorn,
'Muttering his wayward⁷³ fancies he would rove,
'Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn⁷⁴,
'Or crazed with care⁷⁵, or crossed⁷⁶ in hopeless love.

- 'One morn I missed him on the custom'd hill,
110 'Along the heath and near his favourite tree;
'Another came; nor yet beside the rill⁷⁷,
'Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

- 'The next⁷⁸ with dirges⁷⁹ due in sad array
'Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne⁸⁰.
115 'Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the lay,
Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn⁸¹'.

The Epitaph

- Here rests his head upon the lap⁸² of earth
A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.
120 Fair Science frowned not on⁸³ his humble birth,
And Melancholy marked him for her own.*

*Large was his bounty and his soul sincere,
Heaven did a recompense as largely⁸⁴ send:*

58 strews. Sparge.

59 to dumb ... prey. Preda del muto oblio.

60 being. Esistenza.

61 resigned. Lasciò, rinunciò.

62 wonted. Abituati, soliti.

63 artless. Semplice.

64 kindred. Affine.

65 Haply ... swain. Forse qualche contadino dai capelli bianchi.

66 peep of dawn. Alba.

67 beech. Faggio.

68 wreathes. Intreccia.

69 listless. Indifferente.

70 pore upon. Meditare su.

71 babbles. Gorgoglio.

72 Hard ... wood. Proprio accanto a quel bosco.

73 wayward. Capricciose.

74 Now ... forlorn. Ora chinandosi, mesto e pallido, come un desolato.

75 crazed with care. Condotta alla follia dalle preoccupazioni.

76 crossed. Contrariato.

77 rill. Ruscello.

78 The next. Il mattino seguente (*morning* è sottinteso).

79 dirges. Canti funebri.

80 borne. Portato.

81 thorn. Rovo.

82 lap. Grembo.

83 frowned not on. Non disprezzò.

84 largely. Generosamente.



125 *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,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode⁸⁵,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose)
The bosom of his Father and his God.*

85 abode. Dimora.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the first eight stanzas of the poem and match the highlighted words and phrases with their meaning.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 pile | 5 floor of the fireplace |
| 2 quiet, peace | 6 shining with a faint light |
| 3 bent | 7 scornful |
| 4 a number of animals moving together | 8 strong |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 SAY what the poet sees and hears in the first four stanzas. What people are mentioned?

3 FOCUS on stanzas 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9. The poet introduces two contrasting social classes. What are they? What is the poet's attitude towards them? What general reflection does he introduce here?

4 READ line 36. What does the word 'but' mean?

5 READ lines 45 to 64. Consider the verbs. Which of the following is the best summary?

- A Lots of famous people are buried here.
- B The people buried here might have been famous if they had had the opportunity.

6 STUDY lines 65-66 and complete this sentence.

These poor people buried here could not be rich and famous, but nor could they be

7 LOOK carefully at lines 89-92. Note the juxtaposition of 'ashes' and 'fire'. The poet considers the cold tombs and the way the dead remember the living. What do you think he means by the fire?

8 READ 'The Epitaph.' What picture of the Romantic young poet does Gray draw at the end of the poem? Describe him.

9 WHICH of the following do you think the poet wants people to remember about him?

- A That he was unremarkable.
- B That he is at one with nature and god.
- C That he was melancholy.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

10 FOCUS on the first stanzas and work out

- 1 the stress pattern;
- 2 the rhyme scheme.



11 SAY how the poem is organised. Are all the stanzas and the lines the same length? How does the poem end?

12 STUDY lines 53 to 56.

1 Think about the sounds of the words as well as their meaning. The repetition of both consonants and vowels have an effect. Describe the alliteration and assonance, then decide how they contribute to the context.

2 Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ They make the scene more vivid in sight and sound.
- ☐ They add to the sense of reality conveyed by the description of the setting.
- ☐ They create an enchanting and musical effect.
- ☐ They bring out more forcefully the semantic area the words belong to.

13 PROVIDE a few examples of inversion from the text. What do you think Gray's aim was in using such a device? Choose among the alternatives given below.

- ☐ To fit a line into a particular rhyme scheme.
- ☐ To make the language more solemn.
- ☐ To emphasise a particular idea.
- ☐ To suit the meditative and contemplative mood of the poem.

14 CHOOSE from the following to show the qualities the poet is given. Tick as appropriate and explain your choice.

- ☐ Heroic.
- ☐ Emotional.
- ☐ Ordinary.
- ☐ Isolated.
- ☐ Unhappy.
- ☐ Worldly.

15 LOOK at the vocabulary of the poem and find some examples of words which mark the contrast between the rustic poor and the pompous rich.

16 FIND the vocabulary which opposes the quiet, slow, still and solitary evening setting at the beginning (lines 1-16) and the liveliness of the rustic home life (lines 17-28).

17 EXPLAIN what insights and ideas these quotations from stanzas 19, 20 and 21 suggest.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| 1 'Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife'; | 4 'noiseless tenor of their way'; |
| 2 'sober wishes'; | 5 'uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture'; |
| 3 'cool sequestered vale of life'; | 6 'a holy text'. |

➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE AGE**

18 POINT out the originality of the *Elegy* in the context of 18th-century poetry. How is the figure of the poet evolving at the turn of the century?

19 EXPLAIN why the setting described by Gray can be considered 'Gothic'.

➤ **COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

20 DISCUSS. In the 20th and 21st century, death, funerals, and graves are not part of our everyday experience as they were in the 18th and 19th century. Despite the fact that everyone still dies, we are unfamiliar, or like to think we are unfamiliar with death. Death is unusual and takes place in hospitals, not at home; we associate it with the elderly and not with anyone at any time. Does that mean that the feelings of Gray's *Elegy* are strange to us or can we still relate to them?

21 DISCUSS. Have you ever visited a cemetery? Why do you think people build 'storied urns' for the dead? How does this affect the relationship between the dead and the living?