

**ELEGY WRITTEN IN A  
COUNTRY CHURCH YARD  
AND OTHER POEMS**

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Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard and Other Poems by Thomas Gray

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BY THOMAS GRAY.



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## CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS.

Among the most finished and classical compositions in English poetry, we must certainly rank the Poems of THOMAS GRAY. Few as they are, the mere triflings of a man of letters, who prided himself less on being a scholar, than on sustaining the easy, desultory character of a gentleman, they have sufficed to place his fame above all danger from either the petulance of criticism, or the caprices of taste. What Dr. Johnson admitted with regard to the *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* may, without any restriction, be applied to his works: the merit of their author is now so generally appreciated, the public suffrages concurring with the competent decision of criticism, that it has become "vain to blame," if not "useless to praise him."

The *Elegy* is, perhaps, the most popular poem in the language. It is the favorite recitation of every school-boy; and he who has once committed it to memory is not willing ever to forget it. Hackneyed as it is, and, what is still worse for the effect of a poem, imitated and parodied as it has been times without number, it still retains its original power to call up those pleasing and pensive associations which the charm of the sentiment, and



the perfect grace of the versification, are adapted to excite. While his other productions slowly gained the public attention, the Elegy, when it first found its way into some of the periodical publications, was read and copied with avidity; and upon its being subsequently printed, speedily ran through eleven editions. It was translated into Latin verse by three different classical scholars, and five have translated it into Greek. Gray himself expressed surprise at the rapidity of the sale, and indignant at the neglect with which, what he deemed superior productions, his Odes, had been received, attributed the popularity of the Elegy entirely to its subject, saying, "that the public would have received it as well had it been written in prose." In this he deceived himself. The Elegy is not the most perfect of his poems, nor does it display the most original genius. It unquestionably owed much of the interest it immediately excited to its being accommodated, in its turn of thought and moral, to the capacity of childhood, and to the universal instinct of human nature. But then, it is in imparting this permanent charm to commonplace sentiments, and in rescuing back to poetry, subjects which have become unaffecting from their mere triteness and familiarity, that the power of real genius is sometimes most unequivocally exhibited. In his Elegy, Gray has, in this respect, achieved what no second writer has been able to succeed in doing; and his merit cannot be shown more strikingly by any circumstance than by the vast distance at which he has been able to place all his imitators.

But in fact, though the Elegy is less elaborated than several of his poems, there are other causes to which it owes its deserved popularity. This, more than any other of his works, was probably written under the influence of strong feeling, and of the vivid impressions of the beautiful in the scenery of nature. The dato

of its composition, although it was not finished till some years after, is the period at which his mind was overspread with melancholy, in consequence of the loss of his amiable and accomplished friend, West. The scenes amid which it was composed were well adapted to soothe and cherish that contemplative sadness which, when the wounds of grief are healing, it is a luxury to indulge. In the secluded and romantic churchyard where his remains are, in fulfilment of his own request, deposited, there still stands a majestic yew-tree, which would seem to claim on the ground of high probability, to be viewed as the very one described by the poet. A monument consisting of a large stone sarcophagus on a lofty base erected to his memory in Stoke Park, contiguous to the spot, bears record that he is buried amid the scenes which inspired his lays. On two of its sides are inscribed stanzas taken from the Elegy; and it is inevitable to believe, that the "rugged elms," the "yew-tree's shade," the "wood now smiling in scorn," there described, are the same as form the picturesque features of the landscape. Besides this, there are expressions in the poem so minutely accurate as descriptive of the objects and sounds of rural nature, that nothing but actual observation could have suggested the nice selection of the precise epithets by which they are characteristically discriminated. These delicate touches will scarcely admit of being formally particularized; but, in "the nodding beech

That wreathes its old, fantastic root so high,"

in "the swallow twittering from the straw-built shed," in the line describing the returning herd, and in the drowsy tinklings of the folded sheep falling upon the ear at intervals, so different from the quick busy tinkling of sheep in the field,—the lover of nature will not fail to recognize the marks of actual observation, as well

as of exquisite taste. No poem is richer in specimens of the picturesque force of language.

Before the Epitaph, Mr. Gray originally inserted a very beautiful stanza, which was printed in some of the first editions, but afterwards omitted, because he thought that it was too long a parenthesis in this place. The lines however are, in themselves, exquisitely fine, and demand preservation :

"There scatter'd oft, the earliest of the year,  
By hands unseen are showers of violets found  
The redbreast loves to build and warble there,  
And little footsteps lightly print the ground."

The following stanza was also written by Gray for this poem, but for some reason subsequently rejected.

"Hark! how the sacred calm that breathes around,  
Bids every fierce tumultuous passion cease;  
In still small accents whispering from the ground,  
A grateful earnest of eternal peace."

The odes of Gray display the same taste and feeling, but they are certainly in a more elevated strain of composition. There is little propriety in the neatly turned compliment which ascribes

"A Pindar's rapture [to] the lyre of Gray."

Gray has written two poems, which he designates Pindaric Odes. These constitute nearly the whole of his resemblance to Pindar. The productions of genius, at periods in the history of society so remote, can seldom admit of being brought into comparison; and Pindar is of all ancient bards, perhaps, the most inaccessible to either rivals or imitators.

The "Long Story" is an exquisite *jou d'esprit*: its elegant