

**LONGMANS' ENGLISH CLASSIC.
THOMAS GRAY'S ELEGY WRITTEN IN A
COUNTRY CHURCHYARD, AND
OTHER POEMS, OLIVER GOLDSMITH'S
THE DESERTED VILLAGE, THE TRAVELLER,
AND OTHER POEMS**

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Longmans' English Classic. Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, and Other Poems, Oliver Goldsmith's *the Deserted Village*, *the Traveller*, and Other Poems by Thomas Gray & Oliver Goldsmith & James F. Hosis

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LONGMANS' ENGLISH CLASSICS

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INTRODUCTION

GRAY and Goldsmith were contemporaries. Born in the so-called Age of Pope, both lived well on into the period of English letters dominated by Samuel Johnson. The works of both give indications of the dawning romanticism which was to result in the period of Wordsworth and Scott. Both were writers of fluent and admirable prose as well as poets. And there are some personal resemblances. Both found the prescribed work of college, especially mathematics, distasteful, and preferred to read at will; both travelled extensively on the continent; neither married. But the likenesses between the two are few and mainly superficial. In temperament, in experience, in kind and quantity of work, our authors were very different. Gray was a sober, retiring scholar, who lived by choice within college walls near the great libraries, shrinking from notoriety and cherishing a few friends with intellectual sympathies like his own. He was a painstaking student, devoted to knowledge for its own sake, keenly critical, and loth to publish his literary efforts to the world. Goldsmith, on the other hand, was convivial to a degree. He loved the society of his fellows, even the humblest and the rudest, and was warmly loved by them in return. His parents were poor. He himself was the victim of chronic improvidence and of a soft heart, which refused no demand

upon his charity; so that he was unable, like Gray, to live the life of a gentleman reading for pleasure. After many fruitless adventures he settled in the heart of London and slaved for the booksellers to earn his daily bread. Hack work, however, could not wholly stifle his genius. He became a member of the Literary Club and an intimate of Johnson, Garrick, Burke, and Reynolds. He wrote the *Traveller*, the *Deserted Village*, the *Vicar of Wakefield*, *She Stoops to Conquer*; and before his death he had gained much of the recognition and popularity he sought.

We must read the poems of these two writers, then, from somewhat different points of view. The interest in Gray must inevitably be largely in his method. He was a conscious literary experimenter and very sensitive to all the intellectual currents and counter-currents of his times. His odes, for example, are clever attempts to carry Greek and Italian models over into English verse. As a whole, his work represents three distinct periods of development, in each of which a particular interest predominates. He began as a classicist, an avowed admirer of Dryden and Pope; with the *Elegy* he joined the followers of Milton; and finally he became a student of early Norse and Welsh literature and wrote poems based upon these sources. All his work shows the greatest familiarity with classic writers, especially the poets, both of England and of Italy and Greece. He has the scholar's fondness for remote allusion, and he echoes, often consciously, many memorable phrases from the authors he knew so well. With the exception of the *Elegy*, the human interest is not strong in Gray, and even in that poem the experience is broadly typical. It holds us rather by its exquisite poetic tone and perfect expression than by the appeal of the emotion. We shall do well, therefore, to read Gray's poems with an

eye to his excellence in the art of verse, his spoils of many a literary conquest, and the reflection of influences that he helped to pass on. This is the sort of material which repays careful study.

As has been indicated above, we approach Goldsmith with other expectations. True, he has a delightfully easy and graceful style, but this everyone will readily feel who will take the trouble to read his poems aloud. There is little of the scholar's erudition or the critic's nicety. His plan is simple and simply carried out. There is nothing either subtle or profound. But always there is sympathy with life and always the charm and pathos which the character of Goldsmith so remarkably combined. We read the *Traveller* and the *Deserted Village*, not for the truth of their pictures of social conditions nor their more than doubtful political economy, but for the amiable spirit which animates them, for the kindly personality they reflect. As Irving says: "We read his character in every page and grow into familiar intimacy with him as we read. The artless benevolence that beams throughout his works; the whimsical yet amiable views of human life and human nature; the unforced humour, blending so happily with good-feeling and good-sense, and singularly dashed at times with a pleasing melancholy; even the very nature of his mellow and flowing and softly-tinted style—all seem to bespeak his moral as well as his intellectual qualities, and make us love the man at the same time that we admire the author."