

Elegy written in a country churchyard.

Melancholy.

Thomas Gray.

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An Elegy of Gray astonished the literary world of ^{his} his time. It had something quite different from the general vagueness of writings. More than a historical interest, it continues to be a source of unending delight. Many of the phrases coined by Gray have become a part of common speech. Gray's Elegy is different from the pastoral elegies because in them the mouth-piece happens to be a shepherd who laments the loss of another shepherd. The melancholy tone, darkening dusk and even the flow of tender feelings make an agreeable impression on the reader's mind. There is a dusky peace in the poem, which agrees with the temperament of the poet. His melancholy was not of the violent type. It was passive and under control. It was not that of Coleridge which was "acute and rebellious". Even as an elegist Gray has notable predecessors (Milton) and successors (Shelley & Keats).

William Hazlitt considers 'The Elegy' as one of the most classical productions that has ever been penned 'by a refined and thoughtful mind moralising on human life'.

The Elegy of Gray has this notable point about it that it has "anonymity" as its main appeal. The sorrow has not been directed to an individual but to the whole universe. It is for those ~~as~~ class of neglected ones, who remain in obscurity and are often misjudged by the people. It raises the question of human dignity.

~~may~~ The Elegy seems to be melancholy from beginning till end. Every situation in the poem reveals the poet's melancholic idea. The poem has a subjective tone, from the early despondency till the last phase. The choice of the dusky evening shows the very fact of the permanent melancholy in the poem. The glimmering landscape is only for short duration, ~~and~~ all rests in darkness. Where the Romantic poets talk of nightingales

like Keats and Wordsworth talk of nightingale and Cuckoo, Gray ~~shows~~ ^{there} Gray made the choice of 'owl'. It ~~shows~~ ^{shows} the poet's serene and solemn mood.

"The making owl does to the moon complain"

The 'Elegy' has a deep sympathy on human mortality. Gray talks of life to be a melancholy fact indeed. He talks of the dead lying in the narrow walls, the graves are maddening. Now they cannot enjoy the fragrance of the early morning and its exquisite charm. No sound can awake them up from the eternal slumber. For them the blazing hearth, the care of the house wife or love cease to exist, a dead person is snatched away from all the sweet lakes of life.

Grave is the ^{destiny} melancholy part of life. It is the 'inevitable' goal of human existence. The poet has made a contrast between the funeral glory paid to the rich or great men and the poor folk who die with no proper memorials or any honour. The poet points out, the how the ambitious people of the world mock at the lowly of the humble villagers. They are the men of homely joys. He further says that ~~poetry~~ ^{the right} of ~~living~~ ^{life} should be the right of all ~~and~~ ^{one} sundry. But their

Poverty freezes their talents and genius, it is indeed a lamentable fate. Their genius ~~is~~ are wasted unexperienced. by the outside world. They too possess the qualities of great statesman and politicians parliamentarians, they have the genius of military. But they get no opportunity to display their talent. They are men of clear conscience and have not to suppress the voice of truth. The lowly people of the village had a quite sequestered life with little ambition to rise in the world. Their mode of living which is not high and hectic, but a quiet living in a country side. "Along the cool sequestered vale of life, they kept the noiseless tear of their way!"

The culmination of melancholy is seen in Gray's pathetic imagination of self-death. There is the powerful feeling of grief. When he is not seen in the deserted places and his favourite tree, it is sadly contrasted that he is dead. The subjectivity done can be seen in following phrases and words like.

" - - - one parlour, or crayed with care or cross'd in hopeless love.

The objectified subjectivity is revealed in part taking himself to be a dead person, he thinks of aftermath of death, without being able to cast a nostalgic glance at the beautiful world. The deceased longed he died in the arms of someone love him and the tears falling on him. It is the sad romantic turn of mind of the poet.

For Evans.

Gray belonged to the age which was required and gave birth to sad emotions and sentimental. Melancholy in Gray's poetry is partly due to his nature and partly that of his time. Different critics have placed different view for the melancholy of Gray. Some believe it due to his being weak constitutionally or unfortunate circumstances. Melancholy also may be that he was never loved by a woman. Gray was believed to have an introvert personality poverty had damped him, like an asphyxia. It was the unfavourable situation which turned Gray a Melancholic Riches.

Though the atmosphere of Elegy is gloom, yet the beauty of landscape and domesticity has not been lost to sight. It is the happy blending of classical and romantic trends. The time of evening and the fading twilight reveals the romantic feature of the poem. The romanticism is fused with humanism. The morning breeze gives a romantic beauty to the atmosphere of the poem. Elegy has a thoughtful charm in it. The Poem is poignant enough in its imaginative appeal. It touches delicate feelings and at the words moves to section cater.



It is a non-criminal darkness of death which pervades the atmosphere of the Elegy. Less of Pity and more of sympathy fills the tone of the poem. It has universality, as it should appear to one and all. The Elegy goes on inspiring the people of rural hutments in the villages. The sense of tears is in human life is the key note of his melancholy. And so Mr. Lynd considers him "the poet of shattered life".

Gray's Elegy (as an elegy)

A critical note

Familiarly breeds indifference, if not contempt, both in life and art. But the famous 'Elegy' of Thomas Gray is an exception of this generalisation. The appeal of the 'Elegy' has survived the vagaries of time and taste. Even in our time the 'Elegy' evokes more than a historical interest. It continues to be a source of unflinching delight. Many of the phrases coined by Gray have become a part of common parlance: they have acquired an existence quite independent of their context in the poem. Bernard Groom writes, "An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard is one of those poems which have entered so deeply into the fabric of the English mind that it is impossible to view them with detachment. One scarcely remembers Gray or his 'Elegy' while reciting the oft-quoted lines like 'The short and simple annals of the poor' 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave' and 'Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife'. The melancholy tone, darkening dusk and even flow of tender feelings make an agreeable impression on the reader's mind. But it is difficult to trace the cause of the abiding appeal of the 'Elegy' to any single factor. Even as an elegist Gray has notable predecessors (Milton) and successors (Shelley, Arnold). Perhaps the Elegy acquires a special significance when viewed in its proper historical context.

Gray belongs to the period of transition to the twilight hour marking the end of the neo-classical period and the beginning of the Romantic period. In its studied elegance, conscious moralising and calculated melodious effect it belongs to the age of Dryden and Pope. In structure and rhyme scheme the 'Elegy' is a flawless piece of writing. Even the grave, impersonal tone is typical of the neo-classical period. The 'Elegy' does not mourn the death of a

man; it is a reflection on human mortality. One may describe the 'Elegy' as an 'Essay on Man' after the style of the neo-classical poets, like Alexander Pope. But that is not all. There had been a calculated exercise in weaving melodiously (and monotonously) a tapestry of quotable lines that would have lost its appeal like similar composition of the period.

Gray introduces something in the very first stanza of the poem that was alien to the spirit of the mid-eighteenth century. This interest in nature, in animals and the weary plowman foreshadows the poetry of Wordsworth. Nature in neo-classical poetry is a consciously contrived back drop; it is lifeless like a wall decoration. But in Gray's poem, it seems to breathe with a life of its own. It mingles in and intensifies the prevailing melancholy mood of the poem. The fading landscape, the droning ~~of~~ beetle and the tinkling bells of the cattle, the owl and the moon contribute to the meditative tone of the poem. The stage is set for the reflections on "the rude forefathers of the hamlet" lying in the cemetery. Nature in Gray and Collins has greater affinity with the poetry of the Lake School, than with that of Age of Reason. While it provides setting on backdrop to the melancholy thoughts crowding in the poet's mind. It also makes its presence felt as never before since the age of Elizabeth. Gray builds his pictures with fidelity to the minutest details of scenes and sounds.

"Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree's shadow
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap"

The breezy call of incense breathing morn
The shallow twittering from the straw built shed"

Gray's meditation on human morality overflows with deep sympathy for "the mute unglorious millions." This interest in common man is closer in spirit to democratic fervour of the Romantic poets of the nineteenth century. The plowman the busy housewife, the little children and the ordinary folk dying with their promises unfulfilled have no place in the 18th century poetry. They give the foretaste of the deep concern for the common man in a populist age — the Romantic age. The poet is not concerned with the tragic death of a noble and sublime soul but with the collective tragedy of a whole lot of people — with "rude forefathers of the hamlet." A certain element of self-love, self pity, or narcissism generally associated with Romantic poetry is clearly discernible in this poem. The concluding stanzas of the 'Elegy' and the epitaph conjure up the picture of a ~~lonely~~ lonely man, a melancholy wanderer in the woods and hills, "a youth to fortune and to fame unknown sinking into oblivion at the close of his uneventful life. The pale wanderer of Gray appears again and again in the poetry of Shelley and Keats.

The 'Elegy' is classical in style and structure. Even its moralising tone is classical. But in spirit in its evocation of nature's beauty and concern for the common man it is deeply romantic. Gray's art has been rightly described as studied, as near perfection impurity of diction and rhythm, and for the same reason as inflexible, devoid of spontaneity and melodiously monotonous. These are the marks of the classical artist whose resources were not as great as those of Dryden and Pope.

But Gray is also a precursor of the Romantic movement. To quote George Sampson, "like Macaulay he was a mighty reader, yet though almost every page of the elegy has a classical parallel, it is both original and unique. Gray was always himself in his love for the old and adventures into the new, he anticipates an age that was to develop both his romantic instincts and his classical restraint."

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