

Gray and Wordsworth: developments in romantic thought essay

[Life](#), [Friendship](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Gray and Wordsworth: Developments in Romantic Thought Though Thomas Gray (1716 -71) passed away, when William Wordsworth (1770 -1850) was still a child, the two poets share certain similarities in their poetic ethos. Gray along with William Blake is considered to be a precursor of Romanticism, a movement in poetry of which Wordsworth is the high-priest. As a consequence, a parallel study of these two great poets' works often turns out to be quite fruitful. This paper intends to attempt a comparative study of Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' and Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', especially focusing on the two poets' appreciation of Nature and their contemplation of the idea of death. For both Gray and Wordsworth Nature is a living force.

Both the poets are led into introspection while contemplating a natural scene. Nature is alive to them provoking and guiding their thoughts and reflections on great issues. Accordingly their descriptions of nature are anthropomorphic, that is these poets, following the Romantic poetic ethos of their age, invest nature with human qualities.

For instance, the thoughts of death in Gray's Elegy are preceded by various symbols of closure in Nature: 'the curfew tolls the knell of parting day', the herds of sheep and cattle return homewards as does the ploughman, 'the glimmering landscape' fades slowly giving way to darkness, and all the air holds 'a solemn stillness' as if to honor the final moments. However, this characteristic is much more prominent in Wordsworth than in Gray. Gray was an early Romantic, and though in his poem nature becomes a potent symbol, echoing and evoking the thoughts and feelings of the poet, it is not clearly

conceived as an independent spirit. In Wordsworth's poem on the other, the poet perceives Nature as a potent living force capable of instructing humankind with thoughts and feelings of the deepest philosophical import. For Wordsworth, Nature is a teacher from whom mankind learns the secrets of life, and those blessed with this special knowledge live in harmony and peace.

Nature does not merely provoke or reflect thought in Wordsworth, but guides it towards truth and knowledge. The poet recalls his younger days when the 'lofty cliffs' had impressed on him 'thoughts of a more deep seclusion'; he recollects how 'mid the din of towns and cities' these scenes of nature had aroused in him 'sensations sweet./ Felt in the blood and felt along the heart'. But Wordsworth claims that he owes to these scenes of Nature a gift much more sublime, of much greater import:...that blessed mood, In which the burthen of the mystery, In which the heavy and the weary weight Of all this unintelligible world, Is lightened: — that serene and blessed mood, In which the affections gently lead us on, -Until, the breath of this corporeal frame And even the motion of our human blood Almost suspended, we are laid asleep In body, and become a living soul: Both Wordsworth and Gray ponder upon thoughts of death in their poems and find similar consolation. Though the elegiac note, the note of melancholy is far more prominent in Gray's elegy, the poet finds comfort in the thought that the dead still lives on in the memory of their friends and fellowmen: On some fond breast the parting soul relies, Some pious drops the closing eye requires; E'en from the tomb the voice of Nature cries, E'en in our ashes live their wonted fires.

Similarly Wordsworth finds comfort in the thought that even when he is no longer there to worship the bounties of nature, his dear beloved sister will remember him and his words with fondness and love. The only consolation of the dead is that they live on in the memories of the living. The poet believes that his thoughts and words will have life after his death because his dearest sister, his ardent follower in the paths of Nature worship will remember them in every step of her life. Moreover, ...Nor, perchance – If I should be where I no more can hear Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams Of past existence — wilt thou then forget That on the banks of this delightful stream We stood together; As has been mentioned before Gray's 'Elegy' strikes a much deeper note of melancholy, almost bordering on despair, than Wordsworth's poem. Wordsworth is more in peace with the thought of death and the secret of the sublime joy that pervades 'Tintern Abbey' lies in the harmony of Wordsworth's philosophical vision. The life-long worshipper of Nature has learnt the deepest secrets of life from his Great Teacher, and having gained this knowledge is now at peace with himself and with all the world.

Unlike in the case of Gray, even the thought of death cannot move him to despair any more. Nature has taught him about the temporal nature of the physical world and given him the key to the eternal world of spirits that lie behind these physical manifestations. He now can, "with an eye made quiet by the power/ Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,/ ... see into the life of things". He now finds, "In nature and the language of the sense,/ The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,/ The guide, the guardian of my heart, and

soul/ Of all my moral being.” Gray on the other hand can only seek solace in the physical world of nature. The contemplation of death thus does not lead him towards revelations about the transcendental spirit of Nature and man’s oneness with it.

It leads him towards despair from which the only escape, though partial, is in the thought of loving friends and grieving hearts. Thus, Gray’s *Elegy* predates Wordsworth’s ‘*Tintern Abbey*’ not only chronologically but also in the development of thought. The depth and extent of Wordsworth’s understanding of the profound relationship between Nature and humanity surpasses by far Gray’s ideas. However, there is little doubt that, as far as the development of the Romantic ideology is concerned – that achieved complete fruition only in the works of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats – Gray is the predecessor of Wordsworth. The ideas put forth in ‘*Tintern Abbey*’, is not a contradiction of those that Gray ponders upon in his *Elegy*. It is rather a development upon them. Thus after reaching the maturity of vision that Wordsworth shows in ‘*Tintern Abbey*’, it would rather be a step backward to return to the Romanticism of Gray.

In Gray, Romanticism is still in its early days, with Wordsworth it finds completeness. Works Cited Gray, Thomas. ‘*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*’. A Blupete Poetry Pick. [http://www. blupete. com/Literature/Poetry/Elegy.](http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Poetry/Elegy)

htm Access date 11th May, 2009. Wordsworth, William. ‘*Tintern Abbey*’. A Blupete Poetry Pick.

<https://assignbuster.com/gray-and-wordsworth-developments-in-romantic-thought-essay/>

<http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Poetry/WordsworthTinternAbbey.htm>

Access Date 11th May, 2009.

<https://assignbuster.com/gray-and-wordsworth-developments-in-romantic-thought-essay/>