

Immortality in thomas
gray's "elegy written
in a country
churchyard"



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Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is a melancholic poem that considers the possibility of immortality for the people buried in the churchyard the speaker visits. Although previous sections of the poem explore different ideas, such as the speaker's remorse for those who passed their earthly lives ignobly and seemingly without consequence, "Elegy" closes with five strong quatrains and the epitaph, which emphasize Gray's belief in the (at least figurative) immortality of the dead. The poem's other seemingly unconnected themes appear connected to the main theme of life after death. Finally, the poem considers the nature of the speaker's own immortality as a possibility in either a physical or figurative sense.

Ultimately, "Elegy" argues that the dead do seem to live and achieve a kind of immortality. For the first twelve quatrains of the poem, the speaker appears content to bemoan the presence of death which cancels out of all the small pleasures of life. Somber adjectives such as "solemn," "lowly," and "fleeting" permeate his descriptions of dying, and emphasize on the simple pleasurable experiences of everyday life: "For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn, or busy housewife ply her evening care; No children run to lisp their sire's return, Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share" (21-24). The speaker in this section highlights not immortality, but the fragility and fleetingness of human existence. Gray's purpose in doing this seemingly runs counter to the idea of immortality. Rather, the speaker glorifies life and urges the reader to appreciate even its trivialities and savor every moment on earth. Man's inescapable doom is also emphasized, with the speaker especially noting the social equality present in death: "The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power, And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er

gave, Awaits alike the inevitable hour:-The paths of glory lead but to the
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grave" (33-36)The following section of the work, consisting of eight quatrains, concerns the unsung accomplishments of those buried in the churchyard, as well as the potential greatness that died with them. The grim reality of death again here seems to be the focus—the speaker is, once more, preoccupied with the transient physical world, and gives little thought to any kind of “immortality,” other than, perhaps, to mourn its impossibility: “Th’ applause of list’ning senates to command, The threats of pain and ruin to despise, To scatter plenty o’er a smiling land, And read their history in a nation’s eyes, Their lot forbad:..(61-65)The poem’s continued emphasis on the melancholy aspects of temporary earthly life is again anything but indicative of the final theme of “Elegy.” Gray continues to underscore the lack of any sort of fame or “immortality” possessed by the deceased individuals buried around the churchyard due to their lack of noted accomplishments. For the speaker, the fact that none of their actions were ever great enough to garner acclaim is what robbed them of their immortality, or perhaps “killed” them. Only in death are these people noteworthy at all, and then only as noticeable as those ornaments that adorn their graves:“ Yet even these bones from insult to protectSome frail memorial still erected nigh, With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked, Implores the passing tribute of a sigh” (77-80). This section sets up the final significant portion of the poem, which begins at line 97 and runs through the end of the work. The theme of immortality in “Elegy” appears for the first time in the poem’s final section. Lines 97-116 simply recount the memories some “hoary-headed swain” had of someone we assume to be no more than an average local man. However, the mere fact that this man is in fact being recalled already puts him leagues ahead of the many nameless

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dead mentioned earlier in the poem. The man is not even being recalled for any sort of heroic or particularly noteworthy feat, but rather for his everyday activities. In the end it was not some noble action that drew the attention of onlookers, but rather the enactment of a regular life that made an impression. The fact that this onlooker is able to expound upon the common activities of the deceased for several quatrains is a testament to the validity of an unspectacular existence. Even the epitaph acknowledges the deceased as "A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" (118), and yet in this case it is mistaken. It is only here at the end of the work does the type of immortality the speaker is detailing becomes apparent: it makes absolutely no difference what you accomplish or succeed in during your lifetime, because the impressions left on those surrounding you are going to be your only legacy. From what can be gathered from the work as a whole, the poem suggests, "immortality" is almost entirely disconnected to those things which we would commonly associate fame or remembrance-wealth, power, accomplishment, circumstance. Instead, immortality is achieved in the recollections of those one has spent his or her life with: loved ones, co-workers, acquaintances, and by-standers. Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" does in fact suggest a theme of immortality for those passed, but in a somewhat unconventional manner that can only be detected after completely reading through the work. While, at first, the speaker is more interested in the transient earthly life, and for most of the laments the lack of distinction of those lying dead and buried around him, by the end of the work it is apparent that he does believe at least in a figurative immortality for the dead. Of course, he suggests, a figurative life-after-death is all we on earth can substantiate. The beginning and middle of the poem, <https://assignbuster.com/immortality-in-thomas-grays-elegy-written-in-a-country-churchyard/>

which at first appear to reject the concept of life after death, turn out instead to complement the figurative life after death that the poem posits in its final section.