

An analysis on "elegy written in a country churchyard"

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An analysis on "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard" "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard" is composed by Thomas Gray. The main idea of this poem is the contemplation of mortality. Thomas Gray's life was surrounded by loss and death. In 1750, the death of his close friend stimulated him to brood on the philosophy of death. An elegy is a poem which laments the dead. In this poem, the poet concentrated on the death of common people instead of great and famous one. The biggest achievement of the poem is the idea of democracy. Gray depicted the suffer of the poor masses and voiced his dissatisfaction with the society. Gray was not a prolific writer and did not produce many works. However, "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard" has brought him great reputation and a timeless respected place in literary history. The poem enjoys incredible popularity among world wide literature critics and common readers who praise the language, theme and other aspects of this elegy. The poem is also regarded as the most renowned graveyard poet in the world, which no other poems of the same type can surpass. This poem was written exactly at the end of the Augustan Age and at the beginning of the Romantic Period. The stamp of the age was reflected evidently in the poem. Gray combined a classic form typical of the Augustan era with contents and attitudes portrayed from the Romantic Period. This special combination makes his poem unique and different from others'. The poem employs diversified rhetorical devices to manifest the theme. Firstly, the writer used personification many times. That endowing human traits to non-living objects make the abstract things more lively and vivid. For example, "Let not Ambition mock their useful toil, Their homely joys, and destiny obscure; Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile, The short and

simple annals of the poor". Here, ambition and grandeur take on human characteristics. Secondly, the use of onomatopoeia also highlights the poem. For instance, the " tinkling" in " Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight, And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds" gives readers a series of flowing sounds and presents the beauty of the nature. Gray wrote this poem in four-line stanzas and each line is in iambic pentameter. This kind of style makes the form pleasant and the sound palatable. Take the first stanza for example, the " day" in the first line rhymes with the " way" in the third line and the " lea" in the second line rhymes with the " me" in the fourth line. The description of the churchyard and the images such as the moon, birds and trees in the poem make readers feel no horror. On the contrary, the vivid description of the idyllic scenery reveals Gray's love and longing for the nature, in which people can find solace and comfort when they are lonely. Readers can feel the strong loneliness of the poet from sentences like " The ploughman homeward plods his weary way, And leaves the world to darkness and to me". Living in a world dominated by the bigwigs and losing of his friend, the poet could not find a single one to pour out his loneliness and had to share his feelings with the dead. Hence, we can see that the poet was apart from the whole world. Standing in a country churchyard at sunset, where the impoverished and inferior people were buried, Gray naturally portrayed the huge difference existing in the lives of the poor and the rich. From the point of the dead, Gray expressed his sympathy for the miserable people and his satire for the wealthy who lived lives of extravagance. Human beings are measured and judged by money or social status when they are alive. While, in the face of death, there is no difference

among the human kind. " 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 grave." The poet elaborated on a simple but deeply moving theme, that is, the universal fate of the human kind. For all people, the end of lives will be the graves. Everyone is mortal and has to face " the inevitable hour". In addition, the poet compared the poor and the rich from another angle." 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". These sentences show that though the toiling masses had to work hard day after day to support themselves and their families, their lives were full of happiness and peace, which the rich cannot experience. The death eliminates the difference of human and the unfairness in society. It is really ironical that the death seems to be the heaven for the wretch. " Elegy written in a Country Churchyard" shows readers the British cemetery culture. The grief, sorrow, wisdom, romance and humor symbolized by the cemetery culture has made death become a wordless art. Wandering in the cemetery impels people to contemplate death and life. The gravestones and the epigraphs inscribed on them tell stories of the dead, expressing sentimental love for life and mournful sigh for fate. Gray's elegy illustrated the evolution of the 18th century English poetry from Classicism to early Romanticism and became one of those most quoted poems in the English language. It is acknowledged as a masterpiece and holds a very important role in English literature history.