

Elegy written in a country churchyard assignment

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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Thomas Gray wrote “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” in 1742, shortly after the death of his close friend Richard West who died from tuberculosis (“Gray, Thomas”). The death of his dear friend influenced him to write an elegy, which is a poem expressing sorrow or lamentation, especially towards one who has died (“Poetry for Students”). An elegy is usually a pensive or reflective poem that can be nostalgic or melancholy (“Elegy”). Gray uses figurative language and detailed description to get his message across to his reader.

Instead of mourning for the people with wealth and high status, his elegy focuses on the common person. With detailed imagery and diction of the Augustan Era, Thomas Gray expresses the beauty of life and conveys the themes of death and self-search in his pastoral elegy, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” The poem was written at the end of the Augustan Age and at the beginning of the Romantic Period, where both periods are evident in the poem. Gray combined in a unique way a classic form typical of the Augustan Era with contents and attitudes portrayed from the Romantic Period (“Gray, Thomas”). On one hand, it has the ordered, balanced phrasing and rotational sentimental of Neoclassical poetry. On the other hand, it tends toward the emotionalism and individualism of the Romantic poets; most importantly, it idealizes and elevates the common man.” (Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” 73). His poem focuses on common people and really describes their lives and ponders on the things they could have accomplished if they were given the chance to do greater things. He also uses georgic verses, poetry that describes agriculture, which was popular in the eighteenth century.

Gray also associates man and nature, which suggests a romantic attitude (“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” 78). He is able to combine both the Augustan Era and Romantic Period into his poem, making it unique and different from others. This poem was written in heroic quatrains, which consists of four lines per stanza. Heroic quatrains have a rhyme scheme of abab pattern and are written in iambic pentameter. Its regular, steady rhythm helps create a tranquil and quite mood, which is appropriate to the pondering nature of this poem (“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”). Gray sets his lyrics in the comforts of nature and selects mild images ??? a knell, fading, drowsiness, and moping ??? rather than the extremes of gothic horror. ” (Snodgrass, Mary Ellen). The poem begins with an observation of a country day coming to an end and farmers returning home. The first line of the poem sets a solemn tone that makes the mood of the poem gloomy, which can lead to the description of the graveyard and the pondering of the speaker. The speaker considers the pleasures that the dead will no longer enjoy and invoke the idea that everyone dies eventually.

Earthly matters once valuable will no longer matter when a person is dead. He tries to persuade the reader not to look down on the poor because of their simple accomplishment because the speaker says that if the poor got a chance to do great things they could have accomplished a lot. The speaker is wondering if someone will remember him when he is dead. He imagines an old farmer remembering him after his death and describes what the old man would say about him. The speaker wonders if someone will remember his when he is dead and imagines what an old farmer would say about him... and finish it somehow)The last three stanzas of the poem are the speaker’s

epitaph. In his epitaph, he asks anyone that passes his grave to be remembered for being generous and sincere rather than wealthy and famous. The speaker wishes to be recognized not with the great and famous, but with the common people he has praised in his poem (“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”).

Gray’s poem is reflective towards the questions of life and death and shows sympathy for the underclass society. He uses syntax, diction, and organization to express the tone of beauty and equality in humanity. With syntax, which is the grammatical arrangement of words in a sentence, Gray creates multiple meanings in a line and truly expresses the beauty and equality of life and death. One type of syntax that he uses is repetition, in which he places emphasis on the simple joys and beauty of life that the common people enjoy by reusing common ideas throughout the poem.

For example, Gray uses repetition to describe a beautiful morning, “The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn, The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed, The cock’s shrill clarion, or the echoing horn, No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.” (Gray, Thomas 17-20). He illustrates the beauty of life and to get the point across that life is precious because humans are mortal. Gray also uses rhetorical devices such as alliteration, personification, paradox, and allusion to get his message to his readers.

He makes the poem more interesting and draws the reader into the poem. An example of personification would be in line 44, “Or Flattery sooth the dull cold ear of Death?” Here Gray uses the words “flattery” and “death” to personify death having a will or mind of its own. By personifying death, Gray

is trying to explain that death can come and take a person's life away at any moment. In the poem, Gray also uses paradox to suggest that the troubles and worries of life are more enjoyable when he compares them to death. The pleasing anxious being..." in line 86 means that just living can be "anxious", and filled with tons of worries, but being alive is "pleasing" compared to death ("Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" 78). In addition, he alludes three famous and powerful people in order to compare them to those who are buried in the churchyard. "Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless beast/The little Tyrant of his fields withstood/ Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest/ Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood," (Gray, Thomas 57-60).

John Hampden is a parliamentary leader who defended the people against the abuse of Charles I, John Milton is a great poet who wrote *Paradise Lost*, and Oliver Cromwell is the Lord Protector of England from 1653 to 1658. The allusion to the three illustrious men suggests that those who were buried in the churchyard could have been as distinguished as Hampden, Milton, or Cromwell if only they had the opportunity to become someone great ("Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" 78).

Alliteration was also used to emphasize imagery, such as "solemn silence" in line 6 and "sturdy stroke" in line 28. Gray also uses a series of analogies to examine the talents of the poor. For example in lines 53-56, "Full many a gem of purest ray serene/ The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear/ Full many a flower is born to blush unseen/ And waste its sweetness on the desert air." He compares the talents of the poor to hidden "gems" in the

ocean and to “flowers” blooming in the desert. The analogies he uses here express beauty, while still getting his point across to the reader.

Gray is suggesting that the uneducated talents of the poor are a waste because they remain unused and undeveloped, but their talents are still present (“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” 78). Gray is reflective over death, which is the only thing that makes all men equal and reminds the reader about human mortality. In the poem, he ponders over the dead and thinks about how they will no longer be able to enjoy the pleasures of working in the fields each day and seeing their loved ones (“EXPLORING Poetry”).

By comparing these common people to those of high status, he sympathizes with the fact that they did not have the chance to become great, but he still praises the simple lives that they lived. The common people live a steady simple, but meaningful life even if they did not get to accomplish great things (“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” 78). Gray also reminds the reader that these common people are long dead, but suggests that they deserve homage and tribute even if they are not famous and powerful (“Poetry for Students”).

There are two main themes expressed in this poem, one of them being death. “Out of sympathy with the universal terror of death, he elevates humankind with a serene melancholy at common place losses and disappointments from lives cut short.” (Snodgrass, Mary Ellen). Gray uses the poem to compare death with sleep to make death seem less horrifying. Death is presented in a better way in this poem; instead of it seeming like

the worst thing that could happen the speaker talks about the dead people's family loving them and how they were cheerful at work when they were alive.

He establishes a theme of mortality and reminds the reader that everyone dies eventually and nothing can be done to prevent death from occurring. The graveyard acts as a memento mori, which in Latin means "Remember that you must die" ("EXPLORING Poetry"). In death, there is no difference between great and common people. Gray conveys the message that in the end no matter if you are rich, poor, famous, or well known that all men will become equal through death. Another theme that is expressed in this poem is self-search. Gray conveys that attributes normally considered important and desirable in life are now pointless and useless when compared to the lives of the dead. According to the speaker Ambition should not think of the common people in the grave any less because their accomplishments are not as grand as others. He also states that Pride and Memory have no right to ignore them and Honor and Flattery will be useless to the rich when they are dead ("Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" 81). Gray uses personification on these attributes to emphasize his point.