

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" as a pastoral elegy=

The pastoral elegy is a poem about both death and idyllic rural life. Often, the pastoral elegy features shepherds. The genre is actually a subgroup of pastoral poetry, as the elegy takes the pastoral elements and relates them to expressing the poet's grief at a loss. This form of poetry has several key features, including the invocation of the Muse, expression of the shepherd's, or poet's, grief, praise of the deceased, a tirade against death, a detailing of the effects of this specific death upon nature, and eventually, the poet's simultaneous acceptance of death's inevitability and hope for immortality. Additional features sometimes found within pastoral elegies include a procession of mourners, satirical digressions about different topics stemming from the death, and symbolism through flowers, refrains, and rhetorical questions. The pastoral elegy is typically incredibly moving and in its most classic form, it concerns itself with simple, country figures.

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard is an elegy in name but not in form. The essential characteristics of the elegy, which are invoking the Muse, expressing the shepherd's (or poet's) grief, praising the dead, inveighing against death, telling the affects of death on a personified nature, accepting death and acknowledge a hope of immortality, are missing or modified in Thomas Gray's elegy.

However, the poem does just what an elegy is intended to do. It mourns for the dead and recognizes the loss of life. The poem begins set in a rural landscape and the somber tone begins as the bell rings in the first line. With its mention of the herd, the opening stanza also positions itself in the pastoral tradition—the line of poetry based on songs sung by shepherds. Pastoral poetry often involves nostalgia for a past, but that past doesn't necessarily exist. Instead, pastoral poems often look back longingly on an idealized time where purity and virtue supposedly ruled. The movement of the day, from afternoon to dusk to dark, is just one of the movements the "Elegy" will address. Day and night foreshadow life and death, along with labour and the end of labour, and the building and destroying of personal history. The plowman is progressing on his journey as day turns into evening. And soon, he reaches the churchyard, where beneath "rugged elms" and the "yew-tree's shade," the "rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep." The poet then details the sounds of the countryside—the cock in the morning, the swallow, the echoing horn—which are not heard by the dead. While the opening stanza may have detailed a still silence, the dead and buried know an even stiller silence.

It continues to describe the landscape until the fourth stanza when death is first addressed. As the poem goes on, Gray elaborates the fact that it does not matter how highly ranked a man was or what he accomplished, for everyone will eventually die. He goes on to focus on mourning the loss of the common man, rather than that of a noble or someone well known. He makes the point that nothing can bring you back from the dead, therefore it does not matter the riches one possesses in life. This is seen when he states that even when once in an urn, going back to "its mansion," will not save someone (42). The wealth of someone will not bring a person back to life. These possessions will be of no advantage once one is dead.

As the poem proceeds, the reader is cautioned never to look down upon the poor because wealthy or not, everyone will end up dead. In the ninth stanza Gray says, ". The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r, And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave, Awaits alike th'

inevitable hour. The paths of glory lead but to the grave.” The reader can see that the group Gray is mourning is not famous, wealthy or powerful. His elegy is written to the ordinary people buried in the churchyard. He wonders of what they could have become and praises their simple and virtuous lifestyle. At the end of the poem, Gray begins to ponder upon how he wants to be remembered. He finally concludes that he wants the same as the common, ordinary people he has written about. Thomas Gray, in this elegy, praises the ordinary man and the work he has done.

Gray's elegy is highly innovative as it laments the many who are dead, doesn't have a shepherd speaker and in the end turns out to be an anticipatory lament of his own death.