

"An Elegy Wrote in a Country Church Yard"

By Thomas Gray

*Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and markup by The Text
Creation Partnership and Students and Staff of The University of Virginia*

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- [TP] -

AN
ELEGY,^{Elegy}
WROTE IN A
Country Church Yard.

LONDON
Printed by R. DODSLEY in *Pall-mall*;
And sold by M. COOPER in *Pater-noster-row* . 1751.
[Price Six-pence.]

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Advertisement.

THE following POEM came into my Hands by Accident, if the general Approbation with which this little Piece has been spread, may be call'd by so slight a Term as Accident. It is this Approbation which makes it unnecessary for me to make any Apology but to the Author: As he cannot but feel some Satisfaction in having pleas'd so many Readers already, I flatter myself he will forgive my communicating that Pleasure to many more.

The EDITOR.,^{EDITOR}

AN ELEGY, &

1 THE *Curfeu* , ^{Curfeu} tolls the Knell of parting Day,
2 The lowing Herd winds slowly o'er the Lea,
3 The Plow-man homeward plods his weary Way,
4 And leaves the World to Darkness, and to me.

5 Now fades the glimmering Landscape on the Sight,
6 And all the Air a solemn Stillness holds;
7 Save where the Beetle wheels his droning Flight,
8 And drowsy Tinklings lull the distant Folds.

9 Save that from yonder Ivy-mantled Tow'r
10 The moeping Owl does to the Moon complain
11 Of such, as wand'ring near her sacred Bow'r,
12 Molest her ancient solitary Reign.

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13 Beneath those rugged Elms, that Yew-Tree's Shade,
14 Where heaves the Turf in many a mould'ring Heap,
15 Each in his narrow Cell for ever laid,
16 The rude Forefathers of the Hamlet sleep.

17 The breezy Call of Incense-breathing Morn,
18 The Swallow twitt'ring from the Straw-built Shed,
19 The Cock's shrill Clarion, or the ecchoing Horn,
20 No more shall wake them from their lowly Bed.

21 For them no more the blazing Hearth shall burn,
22 Or busy Houswife ply her Evening Care:
23 No Children run to lisp their Sire's Return,
24 Or climb his Knees the envied Kiss to share.

25 Oft did the Harvest to their Sickle yield,
26 Their Furrow oft the stubborn Glebe has broke;
27 How jocund did they they drive their Team afield!
28 How bow'd the Woods beneath their sturdy Stroke!

29 Let not Ambition mock their useful Toil,
30 Their homely Joys and Destiny obscure;
31 Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful Smile,
32 The short and simple Annals of the Poor.

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33 The Boast of Heraldry, the Pomp of Pow'r,
34 And all that Beauty, all that Wealth e'er gave,
35 Awaits alike th' inevitable Hour.
36 The Paths of Glory lead but to the Grave.

37 Forgive, ye Proud, th' involuntary Fault,
38 If Memory to these no Trophies raise,
39 Where thro' the long-drawn Isle and fretted Vault
40 The pealing Anthem swells the Note of Praise.

41 Can storied Urn or animated Bust
42 Back to its Mansion call the fleeting Breath?
43 Can Honour's Voice provoke the silent Dust,
44 Or Flatt'ry sooth the dull cold Ear of Death!

45 Perhaps in this neglected Spot is laid
46 Some Heart once pregnant with celestial Fire,
47 Hands that the Reins of Empire might have sway'd,
48 Or wak'd to Extacy the living Lyre.

49 But Knowledge to their Eyes her ample Page
50 Rich with the Spoils of Time did ne'er unroll;
51 Chill Penury repress'd their noble Rage,
52 And froze the genial Current of the Soul.

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53 Full many a Gem of purest Ray serene,
54 The dark unfathom'd Caves of Ocean bear:
55 Full many a Flower is born to blush unseen,
56 And waste its Sweetness on the desert Air.

57 Some Village *-Hampden* , *Hampden* that with dauntless Breast
58 The little Tyrant of his Fields withstood;
59 Some mute inglorious *Milton* , *Milton* here may rest,
60 Some guiltless of his Country's Blood.

61 Th' Applause of list'ning Senates to command,
62 The Threats of Pain and Ruin to despise,
63 To scatter Plenty o'er a smiling Land,
64 And read their Hist'ry in a Nation's Eyes

65 Their Lot forbad: nor circumscrib'd alone
66 Their growing Virtues, but their Crimes confin'd;
67 Forbad to wade through Slaughter to a Throne,
68 And shut the Gates of Mercy on Mankind,

69 The struggling Pangs of conscious Truth to hide,

70 To quench the Blushes of ingenuous Shame,
71 Or heap the Shrine of Luxury and Pride
72 With Incense, kindled at the Muse's Flame.

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73 Far from the madding Crowd's ignoble Strife,
74 Their sober Wishes never learn'd to stray;
75 Along the cool sequester'd Vale of Life
76 They kept the noiseless Tenor of their Way.

77 Yet ev'n these Bones from Insult to protect
78 Some frail Memorial still erected nigh,
79 With uncouth Rhimes and shapeless Sculpture deck'd,
80 Implores the passing Tribute of a Sigh.

81 Their Name, their Years, spelt by th' unletter'd Muse,
82 The Place of Fame and Elegy supply:
83 And many a holy Text around she strews,
84 That teach the rustic Moralist to dye.

85 For who to dumb Forgetfulness a Prey,
86 This pleasing anxious Being e'er resign'd,
87 Left the warm Precincts of the chearful Day,
88 Nor cast one longing ling'ring Look behind!

89 On some fond Breast the parting Soul relies,
90 Some pious Drops the closing Eye requires;
91 Ev'n from the Tomb the Voice of Nature cries
92 Awake, and faithful to her wonted Fires.

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93 For thee, who mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead
94 Dost in these Lines their artless Tale relate;
95 If chance, by lonely Contemplation led,
96 Some hidden Spirit shall inquire thy Fate,

97 Haply some hoary-headed Swain may say,
98 'Oft have we seen him at the Peep of Dawn
99 'Brushing with hasty Steps the Dews away
100 'To meet the Sun upon the upland Lawn.

101 'There at the Foot of yonder nodding Beech
102 'That wreathes its old fantastic Roots so high,
103 'His listless Length at Noontide wou'd he stretch,
104 'And pore upon the Brook that babbles by.

105 'Hard by yon Wood, now frowning as in Scorn,

106 'Mutt'ring his wayward Fancies he wou'd rove,
107 'Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
108 'Or craz'd with Care, or cross'd in hopeless Love.

109 'One Morn I miss'd him on the custom'd Hill,
110 'Along the Heath, and near his fav'rite Tree;
111 'Another came; nor yet beside the Rill,
112 'Nor up the Lawn, nor at the Wood was he.

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113 'The next with Dirges due in sad Array
114 'Slow thro' the Church-way Path we saw him born.
115 'Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the Lay,
116 'Grav'd on the Stone beneath yon aged Thorn.

The EPITAPH.

117 HERE rests his Head upon the Lap of Earth
118 A Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown:
119 Fair Science frown'd not on his humble Birth,
120 And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.

121 Large was his Bounty, and his Soul sincere,
122 Heav'n did a Recompence as largely send:
123 He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a Tear:
124 He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a Friend.

125 No farther seek his Merits to disclose,
126 Or draw his Frailties from their dread Abode,
127 (There they alike in trembling Hope repose)
128 The Bosom of his Father and his God.

FINIS.

Footnotes

Elegy "An Elegy Wrote in a Country Church Yard" is probably the most well-known and beloved poem in English from the eighteenth century. It was immediately popular with readers when it was first printed in 1751, and has been reprinted (usually often the later, slightly revised title "An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"), anthologized, recited, translated, memorized, studied, parodied, and quoted ever since. The poem's publication kicked off an entire movement of what has been known as "graveyard poetry," poems centered around a figure--usually a man--walking quietly through a graveyard, musing on his place in the cosmos and on his own mortality. The poem's author, Thomas Gray (1716-1771), did not write a great deal of poetry compared to many other canonical poets, and he published only a handful of poems in his own lifetime. He led a fairly quiet life as an academic in Cambridge. But the "Elegy" has been enough to ensure Gray a lasting place in English literary history.

What made Gray's "Elegy" stand out then and makes it significant now? Perhaps the most important clue is in the word "elegy" itself. An elegy is a poem of praise for the a dead person, and poets of this period very frequently wrote elegies to commemorate a death. Sometimes these were elegies for a famous person; other elegies were written to mark the passing of a family member or friend. Gray does something different. Rather than writing about an individual person and describing their virtues in the manner of most elegies, Gray offers praise for the long-gone, ordinary people whose lives are now largely forgotten, commemorated only by the names on the headstones in an undistinguished cemetery next to a typical small church in an unnamed English village. The poem praises ordinary, not extraordinary people, people whom the poet walking through the graveyard never knew. In its final stanzas, the poem then turns in another direction, as it offers an epitaph (that is, a poem that would be inscribed on a gravestone) that seems to be the future epitaph for the poet himself.

- [JOB]

EDITOR Although he is not identified here, the "editor" is surely [Horace Walpole](#), Gray's friend for many years. When Gray learned that the poem was going to be published against his wishes in a periodical, the *Magazine of Magazines*, he wrote from his home in Cambridge to Walpole asking him to supervise getting a separate edition printed by a more respectable London printer. (There's a good chance, too, that it was Walpole's handwritten copy of the the poem that somehow made its way to William Owen, the publisher of the magazine, so it was his responsibility to make things right.) Walpole turned to Robert Dodsley, one of the most prestigious publishers in London at the time, and expedited the process. The magazine version and this stand-alone version came out at roughly the same time in February 1751.

Curfew A bell rung at the end of the working day, signaling the "curfew," the time when people should return home. Curfew bells continued to be rung in some villages well into the nineteenth century.

Hampden John Hampden (1594-1643) was a prominent member of Parliament who led the opposition against Charles I, helping to prompt the start of the English Civil War in the 1640s. Hampden was killed in a battle between Parliamentary forces and those of the King.

Milton The poet John Milton (1608-1674), author of *Paradise Lost*, and also a prominent supporter of the Parliament's side in the English Civil War.