

ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCH-YARD

BY THOMAS GRAY

FAITHFULLY REPRODUCED FROM A "HARPER'S" OF 1853

*The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the sea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to Darkness & to me.*

*No farther seek his Merits to disclose,
Or e'en his Fraillities from their dread Abode;
(There they alike in trembling Hope repose)
The Bosom of his Father, & his God.*

Your humble Serv^t F. Gray



Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield:
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team a-field!
How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!



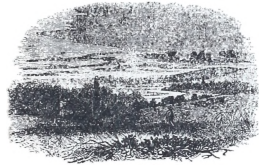
THE Curfew tolls the knell of parting day:
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the sea;
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.



Beneath those-rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.



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.



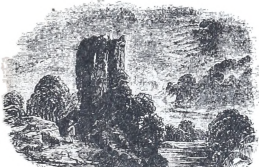
Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds:



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.



The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth, e'er gave,
Await alike, th' inevitable hour:—
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.



Save that, from yonder ivy-mantled tower,
The moping Owl does to the Moon complain
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.



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.



Nor you, ye proud! impute to these the fault,
If Memory o'er their tomb no trophies raise:
Where, through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault,
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.



Can storied urn, or animated bust.

Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?

Can Honor's voice provoke the silent dust?

Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death?



Some village Hampden, that, with dauntless breast,

The little tyrant of his fields withstood;

Some mute, inglorious Milton,—here may rest;

Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country's blood.

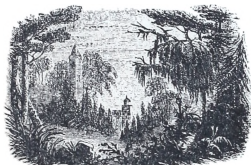


Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,

Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;

Along the cool, sequester'd vale of life,

They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.



Perhaps, in this neglected spot, is laid

Some heart, once pregnant with celestial fire;

Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,

Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre.



Th' applause of listening 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,



Yet e'en these bones from insult to protect,

Some frail memorial still, erected nigh,

With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,

Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.



But Knowledge, to their eyes, her ample page,

Rich with the spoils of time, did ne'er unroll;

Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,

And froze the genial current of the soul.



Their lot forbad; nor circumscrib'd alone

Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;

Forbad to wade through slaughter to a throne,

And shut the gates of mercy on mankind.



Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd Muse,

The place of fame and elegy supply;

And many a holy text around the strews,

That teach the rustic moralist to die.



Full many a gem of purest ray serene

The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:

Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,

And waste its sweetness on the desert air.



The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide;

To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame;

Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride,

With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.



For who, to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,

This pleasing, anxious being e'er resign'd;

Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,

Nor cast one longing, lingering look behind?



On some fond breast the parting soul relies;
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
E'en from the tomb the voice of Nature cries:
E'en in our ashes live their wonted fires.



Haply, some hoary-headed swain may say:
"Oft have we seen him, at the peep of dawn,
Brushing, with hasty steps, the dew away,
To meet the Sun upon the upland lawn.



"Hard by yon wood, now smiling, as in scorn,
Muttering his wayward fancies, he would rove:
Now drooping, woeful, wan, like one forlorn,
Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.



For thee, who, mindful of th' unonor'd dead,
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely Contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate:



"There, at the foot of yonder nodding beech,
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high
His listless length, at noontide, would he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.



"One morn, I miss'd him on the 'custom'd hill,
Along the heath, and near his favorite trees;
Another came,—nor yet beside the rill,
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood, was he:

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"The next, with dirges due, in sad array,
Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne.
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,
Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn."



Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere:
Heaven did a recompense as largely send:
He gave to Misery all he had—a tear:
He gain'd from Heaven ('twas all he wish'd) a friend.



STOKE-POGES CHURCH—SCENE OF THE ELEGY

Thomas Gray, the son of a squire in London, was born there in 1716. He was educated at Eton and Cambridge. When his college education was completed, Horace Walpole induced him to accompany him in a tour through France and Italy; but a misunderstanding taking place, Gray returned to England in 1741. His father being dead, he went to Cambridge to take his degree in civil law, though he was possessed of sufficient means to enable him to dispense with the labor of his profession. He settled himself at Cambridge for the remainder of his days, only leaving home when he made tours to Wales, Scotland, and the lakes of Westmoreland, and when he passed three years in London for access to the library of the British Museum. His life thenceforth was that of a scholar. His "Ode to Eton College," published in 1747, attracted little notice; but the "Elegy in a Country Church-yard," which appeared in 1751, became at once, as it will always continue to be, one of the most popular of all poems. Most of his odes were written in the course of three years following 1753; and the publication of the collection in 1757 fully established his reputation. His poems, flowing from an intense, though not fertile imagination, inspired by the most delicate poetic feeling, and elaborated into exquisite terseness of diction, are among the most splendid ornaments of English literature. His "Letters," published after his death, are admirable specimens of English style, full of quiet humor, astute, though fastidious criticism, and containing some of the most picturesque pieces of descriptive composition in the language. He became professor of modern history at Cambridge in 1768. He died by a severe attack of the gout in 1771.



Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth,
A youth, to fortune and to fame unknown;
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.



No further seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode;
(There they alike in trembling hope repose),
The bosom of his Father and his God.

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