

Block

4

**THOMAS GRAY: *ELEGY WRITTEN IN A
COUNTRY CHURCHYARD***

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Thomas Gray: *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

This block is an SLM (Self Learning Material) to **Thomas Gray's** poem, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. This block contains **4 Units** that will help you gain a comprehensive understanding of this poem that has been very well-anthologised and has retained its popularity since the time of its publication.

In **Unit 1** we will give you an introduction to Gray, the man, his literary career, and the socio-political and cultural background necessary for a better appreciation of this very complex poem, along with the history of its publication and reception in its time. There is also a rough chronology provided that will help you understand some literary markers of the age better.

Unit 2 offers annotations and notes to the text of Gray's *Elegy*; a ready reference that contains extensive discussions of each of its stanzas, in alternating summary and critical analysis. Formal poetic matters like the classicism of Gray's writing pertaining to choice of genre, rhyme and metre, figures of speech like metaphor, allusion, ambiguity, irony, etc. are also dealt with in these analyses. You must remember that more than one close reading of the poem is needed to fully appreciate the somewhat contradictory ideas that underpin its seemingly sympathetic and melancholy surface.

In **Unit 3** we address the various themes that may be identified as Gray's overt reasons as well as his hidden compulsions for the writing of this complex poem. Some of these themes relate to broad questions of representations of the city and the countryside; the idea of lost joys and communities; the nature, forms, and limitations of memorials; disparities of power and privilege and their losses and collateral gains; besides a few other themes addressed later. In probing deeper into these overarching socio-cultural concerns, we sense the poet's own contradictory self-positioning as a scholarly urban writer celebrating the melancholy lot of 'unlettered' rural communities. We are certain that as students of literature, you will also bring your own critical and intellectual ideas to draw a fuller picture of the poem and the age in which it was written.

Unit 4 carries summaries of useful critical essays on Thomas Gray and the *Elegy* to aid your further study. You may add to this critical research by selecting books and articles from among the suggested reading lists provided, and browsing library shelves or surfing the net to explore it further.

We have placed simple exercises within or at the end of each Unit by doing which you could check your progress. There are also suggested links given to aid you in re-reading parts of these units to enable you to answer the questions given in the exercises. Please complete each of the exercises before you move on to the next section. Now let us turn to the first Unit on 'Thomas Gray: Introduction to the Life, Times, and Works'.

UNIT 1 THOMAS GRAY: INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE, TIMES, AND WORKS

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Thomas Gray: The socio-cultural background
- 1.3 Gray: Life and Literary Works
- 1.4 The Poet and Society
- 1.5 The Literary and Historical Context of Gray's *Elegy*
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 1.8 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Unit, you should be able to:

- describe the cultural milieu of mid-eighteenth century England
- discuss the changed nature of poetry in the mid-18th century
- distinguish between the value and use of the various names for this period
- relate Gray's personal and social context to the writing of his poetry
- describe the nature of Gray's poetic choices and his broad concerns for poets and poetry in his time
- give an account of the history of the *Elegy*'s publication and reception in its time

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we introduce you to the life of **Thomas Gray** and familiarise you with the span of his poetic career. We also wish to make you acquainted with the culture of mid-eighteenth century society in England that forms the context relevant to the understanding of the position of poets and poetry in this transitional period. This historical context will allow you to place Gray within his social milieu as also make clear the complex ways in which the poet attempts to reach out in the *Elegy* to an ever receding, and reduced, audience for poetry. Further, you will get information on the range of Gray's writings, the nature of the poet's classicism as reflected in his formal choices against the literary practices of his day, and the socio-economic reasons behind the thematic debate within the text of the very compelling poem that you are studying. Let us look at Gray's socio-cultural context next.

1.2 THOMAS GRAY: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND

The period within which we can contextually place the poetry of Thomas Gray is identified in English literary history often by titles like 'Age of Sensibility', 'Mid-Eighteenth Century Poetry', or 'Pre-Romantic Poetry'. We will later take some account of the context behind these markers of the age, in explaining

why this period is considered as tending towards 'sensibility'. We will seek to understand why the mid-century writers are thought about as anticipating the style and sensibility of the Romantic era. The very plural quality of such markers suggests that critics have been uncertain about the accuracy and logic of these classifications, while at the same time feeling the need to use them for some clarity on this literary period.

A primary reason for the critical need to separate the earlier more public poetry of the Augustan writers, (self-termed thus, for their presumed linkage with the refined literary times of Augustan Rome, from 27BCE to 14CE) John Dryden, Alexander Pope, John Gay or Jonathan Swift from the poetic styles of Samuel Johnson, Thomas Gray, **William Collins**, **William Cowper**, **George Crabbe**, **Edward Young**, **Mark Akenside**, or **Oliver Goldsmith** is that the writings of these latter mid-eighteenth century poets reflect a distinct culture, socio-politically speaking.

To some extent the changed character of these writings may be attributed to alterations in the public sphere that negatively affected the kind of political patronage that had often supported many earlier writers. By the term 'political patronage' we understand the propagandist use that politicians of the time made of contemporary writers and how they supported them both socially and economically. Thus, writers in early to mid-18th century looked upon the political events and culture as a means of economic subsistence, hence very often writing commissioned pieces.

The death of the leading Whig minister, Robert Walpole in 1742 led to a decline in poetry serving party political purposes. This event became a turning point for poetry that overtly reflected and commented on government and public matters. Less and less inclined to seek political patronage for the publication of their writings, poets of this later period drew away from topical subjects, from both poems of praise of public figures as well as from satirical attacks on politicians and government policies. They turned instead to broader social, moral and even personal issues while using a deeper, more reflective tone in their poetry. Thus, clearly there is a need to understand the character of what is sometimes also called the Age of Johnson by examining both its continuities with, as well as its discontinuities from the earlier, more politically orientated, Age of Dryden and Pope.

The 'long eighteenth century' of English literature beginning with the Restoration era writings of Dryden (post 1660) and culminating with the radically changed expectations from poetry initiated by Wordsworth and Coleridge in their *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) is informed by certain common cultural values that remain respected throughout this time. It is a commonplace of literary history that the classics, or the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans, profoundly influenced Restoration and 18th century poets. Literary ideas of 'taste' and 'wit' throughout this period look back to the grace and beauty of classical writings. In this ethical and aesthetic desire they show their debt to the past culture, in open acknowledgement of reverence for the 'Ancients', as they are labelled. This period of the 18th century is hence, also termed the 'Neo-classical' age.

But an interest in the texts of the past was not a new one. A classical revival had already been under way since the European Renaissance in the 15th century, and a classical humanist education in English grammar schools and in universities had further strengthened cultural and literary links with the ancient texts. Knowledge of Latin and some Greek was also considered fundamental to a good education

for a gentleman. In the late 17th and early to mid-18th century England these Ancients were to become the subject of much heated debate and controversy among writers and critics. The neoclassic ‘rules’ developed out of the older texts by Italian and French critics had been followed faithfully by many English writers of the Augustan period while others refused to accept these unquestioningly as doctrines for their own literary expressions. A relatively aristocratic reading and writing class felt and showed great interest in classical learning thereby aspiring to ideas of taste and wit, order and reason, decorum and moral instruction drawn from the philosophical and literary treasury of the classics. The dominant drama, poetry, prose and satire of the long eighteenth century shows the impact of this past tradition as well as the marks of a rising social and political restlessness generated by events in the contemporary public arena.

The early 18th century Augustans, so considered self-reflexively by political analogy with the powerful and stable reign of **Augustus Caesar** in classical Rome (27 BCE-14 CE), favoured the urbane style of the classical poetic models, Virgil (70-19 BCE), Horace (65-8 BCE), Ovid (43 BCE-17 CE), and even satirised the inadequacies of their contemporaries in the styles set down by Horace, his disciple Persius, and the later satirist Juvenal.

The Age of Dryden (to 1700), the Age of Pope (to 1744) and the Age of Johnson (to 1784) saw the establishment of classical principles, whereby the regularity of the heroic couplet set it as the predominant metre for poetry, as being most dignified in its aesthetic balance and effect. The century also experienced the gradual disintegration of these poetic principles and practices in the latter era of the poetry of sensibility and melancholy self-reflection.

By mid-century, which is the specific context of Gray’s *Elegy*, of his other works, and of the poetry of Johnson, Goldsmith, **Thomas Warton**, **Shenstone**, **Christopher Smart**, Collins, Cowper, and Crabbe, we witness a poetic shift from reverence towards a classicist tradition to emotional linkages with earlier English writers in a bid to create a national identity.

Literature now also moved away from the metropolitan culture and political issues and searched for alternative space settings – the countryside, as well as the periphery of England – Scotland, Wales, and Ireland – where a more authentic, original culture might be found. Such an interest in older native forms of poetry led to the ballad collections of **Thomas Percy** and **Robert Burns**, along with a revival of the primitive past of a bardic tradition by Gray, **James Macpherson**, and **Thomas Chatterton**.

This interest has been linked to a Gothic revival whereby the English medieval period rather than the Graeco-Roman classical era now became the favoured past for poets to revere. A change of voice and sentiment followed, resulting in rougher, more emotional tones and a romantic wildness being favoured, distinctly different from the elegance privileged by the Augustan poets.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What could be the reason for the many names by which the period of the mid-18th century poetry is known?

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2) Write a short note on the aims and styles of poetry in the period before the death of Robert Walpole.

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3) Discuss the term ‘Neo-Classical Age’.

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4) With which writers did the ‘Augustans’ of the early 18th century link themselves and why?

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5) Detail some of the broad features of literature in the ‘long 18th century’.

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6) What was the changed nature of poetry in the mid-18th century? Discuss why this age seems to be a ‘transitional period’?

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1.3 GRAY: LIFE AND LITERARY WORKS

Born in 1716 to economically struggling middle-class parents, Gray was supported by his uncles who were assistant masters at Eton, to get the education befitting a gentleman-scholar. At Eton, Gray became friends with the well-connected and well-to-do set of people such as, **Richard West**, **Thomas Ashton**, and Horace Walpole, the son of Robert Walpole, the then Prime Minister. This ‘Quadruple Alliance’ as it was called, was a friendship that carried over into Cambridge. Gray spent most of his life as a scholar in Cambridge despite his dissatisfaction with the course of the sciences, as well as law that he later planned to study, both activities being abandoned by him. He preferred to travel with his friend Walpole on a ‘Grand Tour’ in 1738, enjoying natural landscapes and art in Rome, Naples and Florence, though the friendship underwent a rift that was not patched up till 1745.

While belonging to a family with small time commercial links, besides owning small properties that drew in rents, via Eton and Cambridge, Gray had been able to acquire a higher social standing and an easy membership to an aristocratic culture. However, with the economic and cultural rise of a bourgeoisie (the middle classes) happening within the public sphere at this time, Gray's aspirations toward aristocratic culture seem to have a problematic and ideologically contradictory status. Some of these ideological complexities are manifest in Gray's poetic self-positioning and in his argument in the Elegy that we will be discussing later.

Financial security came to Gray after the death of his father whereupon he returned to Cambridge where he spent the rest of his life leading a quiet scholarly existence as a don, reading classical and contemporary literature much like a gentleman of leisure, without publishing or lecturing.

Gray began seriously writing poetry in 1741-2, mainly after the death of his close friend, Richard West. These most prolific years of his creative activity resulted in the *Ode to Spring*, *Ode to Adversity*, *Ode on a distant Prospect of Eton College*, and the famous *Sonnet on the Death of Richard West*, none of which were published till much later. These poems are marked by a tone of loss, grief, affliction, and nostalgia for the passing of a time of companionship with like-minded persons.

In the summer of 1742, he is supposed to have begun writing the Elegy. Having been reconciled with Walpole, Gray wrote his *Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes* in 1747, perhaps on Walpole's request or to condole with him. Written in the mock-heroic style, with elements of the animal fable, the satire within this otherwise playful-seeming poem is directed at effeminate luxury under the guise of the cat, Selima's vanity and fatal folly. Gray's stance here suggests a complex relationship of the poet toward the contemporary commercial culture and the economics of a rising capitalism. As with most male writers of this period, the blame for the consumerist logic of imperial trading ventures was given to women, who were often projected as the consumers of exotic foreign goods.

In 1750, after his completed *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* received the acclaim of Walpole and other friends' approval in private circulation within this coterie of sympathetic readers, on their insistence Gray reluctantly offered the poem to the publisher, Robert Dodsley. The period of the 1750s is also credited with the production of the famous Pindaric odes, *The Bard* and *The Progress of Poesy*, as part of Gray's study of and interest in Old Norse and Welsh poetry. The imagery of these poems is largely reflective of his early romantic love of wild and rugged landscape. Both these poems use the classical Pindaric form and thus bring together the power of the epic and lyric traditions into celebrating England's native past. This turn of Gray's direction towards a public and historical theme represents his desire to imbue the figure of the poet with renewed vigour within and against the changing times.

In 1757 he was offered a Poet Laureateship but declined the honour as a man shunning publicity and moreover, aware of the reduced dignity of the post. This by the way was not the only active and public position that the reclusive poet rejected. Gray also did not wish to practice civil law that he had graduated in. Further yet, he graciously declined a dutiful secretary-ship to the British ambassador to Spain. In fact, the only position that he accepted in 1768 was a sinecure, a Regius Professorship of Modern History at Cambridge, where he was never asked to deliver a single lecture.

Gray spent his later years alternately travelling and writing about the travels, and corresponding with his friends in supremely celebrated letters that include a wide survey of European history and culture. While in residence in Cambridge he was deeply immersed in the study of a vast range of languages and traditions: the Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Celtic, Welsh, Scandinavian, and Icelandic, among others. These scholarly tastes for literature and history were in this remarkable writer accompanied by an abiding interest in music, painting, gardening and architecture. Gray died in his rooms at Pembroke College, Cambridge in 1771, much admired as a poet, and most influential to his times as a writer of great sensibility. We shall look at the society that he lived in, in the next section.

1.4 THE POET AND SOCIETY

Apart from the rather shy, reclusive and melancholic nature of the celibate poet's social persona making him stand apart from the popular public sphere, Gray's poetic output too seems to have been rather small. Critics impute the reasons for this fact to the low ambitions of the poet. On the urging of his friend Horace Walpole (a writer, born 1717, died 1797) to write more, he had responded by saying: 'If I do not write much, it is because I cannot.' The articulation of this inability is not suggestive of a true failure to write, but most likely a refusal to write a lot. In part, the reason behind the limited number of works produced by Gray relates to his scholarly bent of mind which made him prone to deep study and research, to labouring strictly and hard toward perfection, which would constantly come up against a rigorous self-criticism.

Further, an unwillingness to submit himself to the judgement of a considerably less erudite and even perhaps an ill-educated audience can be assessed from the constant hesitations of the writer toward the matter of publication. Thus, instead of placing his poetry in the hands of an indiscriminating reader, the choice of producing less for the few (often a small coterie of like-minded friends) may have been the arguably elitist reason behind these writerly anxieties. As a gentleman-scholar of some means, living a hermit-like existence within the protected portals of an academic world at Cambridge, culturally and socially Gray seems alienated from his implied readers. These readers, whom he is forced to address, largely belonging to a widening middle-class unversed in the classics, may not have the intellectual means to understand his poetry.

Thus, a more materialist assessment of his small output as a poet would lead us to the changed nature of the times within which the poet grew to maturity. The altered conditions of commercial publishing in the period and the changing readership patterns with regard to poetry might be connected to Gray's disinclination toward a market-directed mass productivity. Gray feared the destructive effects that the book trade and its mass audiences might have on literary culture. What repelled this sensitive writer was the book trade's transformation of literature into a commodity.

As the century progressed, the changing tastes of the largest reading groups are represented in the rise of a journalistic model in the form of the periodical essay, and in the growth of a public sphere reflecting on its everyday social and moral concerns in such a collaborative exercise with authors like Joseph Addison (1672-1719), Richard Steele (1672-1729), and later Samuel Johnson (1709-1784). The other dominant trend-setter in the mid-century was the genre of the popular novel that obtained for itself a mixed audience, from the point of view of both class and gender. So, with the growth of lending and circulating libraries and cheaper means of publication available to the largely middle-class writers, the reading

tastes of working class groups and of women were sought to be satisfied through this easier narrative form of the novel, as compared to the more challenging demands of a poetry based on classical models.

In such an environment, an author like Gray may have been fearful of not being understood. This dilemma of the writer may be linked to the pathology of an anxiety of a loss of authority, as may be read within his poetry and also in his concern for the passing of an old, poetic time. The figure of the 'bard' belonging to a lost, grand time, with power to move hearts is a romanticised self-reflexive trope that recurs in Gray's poetry. Some of the repercussions of these ideological tensions and anxieties are also to be read within the argument of the *Elegy*, as we shall discuss later.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Who were the close friends of Thomas Gray at school and university? Discuss how Gray was able to rise above the class position he was born in.

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- 2) Write a short note on Gray's poetry written before the famous *Elegy*.

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- 3) What were the personal circumstances of Gray's life while writing his poetry? How did he spend his later years?

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- 4) Discuss Gray's attitude towards the publication of poetry.

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- 5) What were the changing trends of literary writing during Gray's time?

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- 6) In what way were the contemporary forms of writing contrary to Gray's own image of the poet in society?

1.5 THE LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF GRAY'S *ELEGY*

Perhaps one of the salient features of Thomas Gray as a poet of the mid-eighteenth century is the fact that his writings are a reflection of the transitional processes which literature, in substance as well as in form, underwent in its swing from the formalised standards of a classical tradition to the freedoms which characterized the writings of the later Romanticists. The Augustan age (roughly charted in time as the writings done during the reign of Queen Anne, from 1702 to 1714) had set up rules of right reasoning, principles of correct form, and standards of restraint which in themselves have a high value as following the long approved literary examples set by classical writers of Augustan times.

The newer age, later termed Romantic, began however to look to nature and to the common person for inspiration. The essentials of this new school of literary thought and practice were a belief in the value of the individual as opposed to group acceptance, of content over form, of the subjective over the objective, of emotion and imagination over intellect and judgment. As critical readers of the sum of writings during the mid-18th century, however, we find that this newer trend is gradual in its move toward these ideas in their full bloom. We encounter herein a transitional period which was factually neither classical nor romantic, but a variable of the two schools. It is with this rather indeterminate middle period that the name of Gray has become synonymous, sometimes therefore called the time of the pre-Romantics. The problem with the latter term is that it is reductive of the inherent individuality of the writers of the mid-century, and in making their rather complex and nuanced contributions to poetry seem important only in their relationship with the Romantic poets, some of whom had not yet even been born.

Another styling of the age connects with the abstract quality of 'sensibility' that becomes identified as responsible for the changed literary taste in the arts, also significantly connected with the predominantly sentimental literature that nourished the rising form of the novel.

In order to fully understand the literary context of the writing of Gray's *Elegy*, we need to examine the phrase 'Age of Sensibility' with which we had linked the times in which this poet's works have often been classified by critics. The term 'sensibility' actually came into general use during the early 18th century, indicating the tendency to be easily and strongly affected by emotions. At this time, writers and thinkers, such as **Anthony Ashley Cooper**, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1631-1713), reacting against the practical materialist philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), began to promote an idealistic, spiritual alternative, based on the appreciation of order and harmony through right emotions, correct judgments of morality, beauty, and religion.

Joseph Addison, the essayist, in 1711 defined modesty as 'an exquisite Sensibility', a 'kind of quick and delicate feeling in the Soul'. Laurence Sterne, in *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768) sets a high value on this emotion, thus writing of it as, 'Dear Sensibility! Source unexhausted of all that's precious in our joys or costly in our sorrows!' This term and the ideas

underlying it, therefore, remained in fashion in this sense till the early 19th century, and occurs in the title of Jane Austen's first published novel *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), although this novelist is clearly underwhelmed by the excessive effects of this feeling, and who through the thematic thrust of the narrative, questions the 'sense' of giving in to too much 'sensibility'.

The poets of the mid-18th century, however, Thomas Gray, William Collins, William Cowper, Joseph and Thomas Warton, and Mark Akenside, among others, share a distinctive emphasis on feeling as an end in itself, rather than as part of some larger philosophical project or scheme. Considerably less concerned than the poets of the previous few decades to write poetry on topical themes, and less certain of the impact of their political convictions, the mid-century poets explore the power of poetry in self-reflexive and meditative exercises that delve into the processes of the poetic imagination.

The new intensification of feeling associated with sensibility expressed itself in restlessness against the urgent tenor of city culture. This left the poets turning toward delicate descriptions of nature and toward a seemingly glorious past in recovering medieval forms. The poetry also ended up seeking remote regions for subjects, and for their settings, landscapes uncorrupted by commerce and industry. During this period, representations of the countryside become touched with nostalgia for untainted cultures and landscapes. These representations had the broader effect of reflecting a kind of English ideal that is found in rural communities and indicates all that the cities were rapidly losing. This idea and ideal of the countryside, however, did not have a lot of connection with the specific spaces that were the real material on which the sentiment was expended. The very idea of the countryside as a place available to the intellectual observer (mainly the poet himself/herself) for the pleasure to be derived from gazing on it, or for the nostalgic melancholia to brood in sadness over the loss as more and more land became citified, is a passive sentiment. It is a poetic sentiment and sensibility which has little relationship with the realities of the labour of real farmers, of their harsh experiences under the threat of poverty, or of their daily struggle with the land.

This celebration of the countryside as an ethical and aesthetic ideal takes the literary form of a poetry of retreat and retirement, as in **James Thomson's** *The Seasons* and Collins's *Ode to Evening*, and pastoral poetry of the style of Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*. The latter poem, however, did carry a political edge, and relevance to the enclosure movement that had converted common lands into cultivable ones, whereby large holdings by richer owners ended up depriving a rural peasantry of means of labour as well as of their small lands and living spaces. Rural depopulation and emigration are shown as resulting in the 'deserted' nature of the village in that poem. Such poems as Goldsmith's ended up rejecting the prosperous gains of scientific modernisation in favour of a nostalgic vision of a lost, simple life of the countryside. It is within this melancholy tradition of poetry reflecting loss and nostalgia and the imagined values of the countryside as an idyll, that we can contextualise the impulse of a poem like Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. This poem shares with Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* a poetic and imaginative recreation of an idyllic village life, and the picture of a busy and contented peasantry.

The paradox of Gray's poem, however, lies in the fact that the inhabitants of this blissful rural space are also represented as dead, currently resting in their graves within the solitary churchyard which is the poem's setting. These latter motifs of graves, a graveyard location, and melancholy thoughts of loss, death

and bereavement, connect Gray and his *Elegy* to what has been conveniently termed ‘The Graveyard School of Poetry’, also sometimes, ‘The Churchyard School’. Many poems of the period of the early 1740s have been classified as sharing an interest in this contemporary vogue for meditating, in poetry or prose, on melancholy subjects. The themes of such writings range from religious and moral instruction, death and life, life after death, to even invoking a morbid and sensational horror of death’s physical manifestations as in images of ‘skulls and coffins, epitaphs and worms’ (Robert Blair, ‘The Grave’; line 23).

Although Gray’s *Elegy* is the best known poem of the ‘graveyard’ poems of the period it perhaps followed the trend set by some of the other contemporary poems within this genre of writing, which are: **Edward Young’s** *Night Thoughts* (1742-45) and **Robert Blair’s** *The Grave* (1743). Other poems in this style are **Thomas Parnell’s** *A Night-Piece on Death* (1722), **Mark Akenside’s** *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1744), **James Hervey’s** *Meditations among the Tombs* (1746), **Thomas Warton’s** *The Pleasures of Melancholy* (1747), apart from the odes of William Collins and Joseph Warton. Critics have pointed out that consciously or unconsciously, Gray seems to have remembered phrases and longer passages from some of these poems of the 1740s, and therefore his poem carries, apart from older classical allusions, several echoes of the contemporary poems on these themes (Roger Lonsdale, ed., *The Poems of Thomas Gray*, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith, London and Harlow: Longmans, 1969, p.109).

In keeping with such an interest, the title page of *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* was illustrated with skulls and crossbones, picks and shovels, and hourglasses. In his *Life of Gray* Samuel Johnson says: ‘The Church-yard abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo.’ This individual quality of Gray’s poem referred to here, that of a universal appeal seems to have been borne out by the popularity enjoyed by it, in its own time as also later. Thus, for instance, one of its often quoted lines also lent itself to the title of one of **Thomas Hardy’s** novels, *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874). Let us discuss the elegy briefly, as we have already talked about it in BEGC 107, Block I earlier.

Elegies are lyrical poems expressing feelings of loss and sorrow while also praising the deceased with accompanying meditations on deeper questions of life on earth and death. Yet, conventionally, an elegy belonging to the classical genre popularised by Theocritus, is supposed to mourn an individual. Other famous elegies of this particularised kind are **John Milton’s** *Lycidas* (1637) on the death of his friend Edward King, and **Alfred Tennyson’s** *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850) mourning his friend, Arthur Henry Hallam’s untimely demise. The use of ‘elegy’ that Gray’s poem makes relies, rather on the concept of *lacrimaerum* (Latin phrase that translates as ‘tears for things’) that represents a disturbance or disquiet regarding the human condition. As such, the rather pensive mood of the poem, its reflections on secluded life, and its contemplation of death qualify it as an ‘elegy’.

The history of the poem’s publication relates to the nature of Gray’s personal history discussed earlier, in his close friendship with Richard West, whose death in 1742 might have been the impetus for its writing. Gray’s *Elegy* was, however, not completed till about 1746, and even then the poet did not rush into print, and kept it circulating among a coterie of like-minded friends, reminding us of the idea of the ‘kindred spirit’ of line 96 of the poem, with whom he prefers to communicate his thoughts rather than with a vast, anonymous reading public. As such, the *Elegy* was circulated in manuscript by Horace Walpole among friends and acquaintances, and was much admired. The editors of the none-too reputable

Magazine of Magazines got hold of the popular poem, and would have printed it, the copyright laws of the time not requiring the consent of Gray. Walpole intervened on Gray's behalf, and **Robert Dodsley**, a well-known and respectable figure published the Elegy in 1751. Having been published with such haste, it went into eight editions by 1753, and was also translated into several languages due to its phenomenal popularity.

The success of the Elegy was remarkable. A critic writing in *The Monthly Review* iv 309, for Feb. 1751 commented that, 'This excellent little piece is so much read, and so much admired by everybody, that to say more of it would be superfluous'. Another reviewer praised it enthusiastically, asserting that it 'comes nearer the manner of Milton than anything that has been published since the time of that poet', which was high acclaim indeed (Roger Lonsdale, ed. *The Poems of Thomas Gray*, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith, p. 112).

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) What do you understand by the term 'Augustan Age'?
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- 2) In what way was the term 'Pre-Romantic poets' suited to classify the poetry of mid-18th century?
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- 3) Why is the term 'Pre-Romantic poets' for poets like Gray also not entirely satisfactory?
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- 4) What meaning does the term 'Age of Sensibility' convey to you?
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- 5) What were the salient features of the Age of Sensibility in relation to depictions of the countryside?
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- 6) Write a short note on ‘The Graveyard School of Poetry’.
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- 7) How does Gray’s *Elegy* qualify as a poem fitting the contemporary taste for melancholy poetry?
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- 8) Write a brief note on the history of the publication of the *Elegy*.
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1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have discussed the various literary, social, and biographical aspects of Thomas Gray’s times and life to contextualise the *Elegy*, and also attempted to understand the other broad literary periods that relate to this poem. A rough chronology of literary eras connected to Gray’s poetry is listed below to provide ready reference pointers. You must consider the years indicated to be treated as approximations and not definitive or specific markers.

1700–1799: The English Augustan Age (the name is borrowed from a brilliant period of literary creativity in ancient Rome) flourishes throughout much of the 18th century, also termed the ‘long 18th century’, the latter term also includes the Restoration period.

1740–1775: The Age of Sensibility or Pre-Romanticism, (despite its questionable classification in connection with a period yet to come) a transitional literary movement between Neoclassicism and Romanticism, that takes place in the middle part of the 18th century.

1740–1750: The Graveyard (or the Churchyard) School of Poetry, referring to poetry that focuses on death and grieving, emerges as a significant genre in the middle of the 18th century.

1775–1850: Romanticism as a literary movement arises in the latter part of the 18th century and continues until the middle of the 19th century.

1.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Note: We provide you below with suggested passages where you might find some relevant answers from reading the above Unit. However, we remind you that you need to write your answers in your own words as far as possible.

Check Your Progress 1

1. After a thorough reading of 1.1 and 1.2, you will be able to answer this question from the discussion.
2. Discuss the nature of public poetry as mentioned in 1.2 and detail the propagandist aims of poetry. You may refer to the early poets and how they wrote poems of praise and satire related to known figures and specific public events.
3. Summarise the ideas of 1.2, paras 5, 6, 7, 8 and write a relevant answer.
4. 1.2, paras 7 and 8 mention the writers of the classical age of Emperor Augustus who were influences on the 18th century Augustans.
5. Paras 4 to 8 of 1.2 refer to the 'long eighteenth century' whose features are discussed at length. You could use some of those ideas to give an overview of the period.
6. The idea that it is a 'transitional period' has been dealt with throughout this unit. Para 2 contains the names of the writers of the later age; para 4 and the last two paras of 1.2 discuss the changed nature of poetry in the mid-18th century.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Refer to 1.3, paras 1 and 2.
2. Refer to 1.3, paras 4 and 5.
3. Refer to paras 2 and 3, and the last two paras of 1.3.
4. 1.3 contains the idea of Gray writing poetry as part of an exercise of shared intellectual companionship with like-minded persons. The 5th para points in the direction of a changed social environment that may have been responsible for Gray's unwillingness to publish his poetry. Refer further to the detailed discussion of the same ideas in paras 1st to the 3rd of 1.4.
5. Refer to the last two paras of 1.4.
6. Refer to the last para of 1.4.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Refer to the second para of 1.2 and first para of 1.5.
2. Para 8 of 1.3 refers to the 'latter era of the poetry of sensibility and melancholy self-reflection'. The early moment connected with a Romantic sensibility is also remarked upon in the poetic choices discussed in the last three paras of 1.2. Read 1.5 closely for more discussion on the growth of a Romantic sensibility in this period, and then answer this question.
3. The problem with calling the mid-18th century poetry the 'pre-Romantic' age is argued in the second para of 1.5.
4. Now read paras 3 to 7 of 1.5 and then answer in your own words.
5. Refer to paras 7 to 9 of 1.5.
6. Refer to paras 10, 11, 12 of 1.5.
7. Refer to the last two paras of 1.5.
8. Refer to para 6 of 1.3 and the last para of 1.5.

1.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Among the other poems of Thomas Gray that you might usefully read as primary material, and also incidentally enjoy, is the delightful ‘Ode on the death of a Favourite Cat’ that has been referred to and briefly discussed in section 1.2 above. In order to relate the *Elegy* to socio-historical concerns similar to its own in the writings of a contemporary poet, portions of Oliver Goldsmith’s ‘The Deserted Village’ show certain links with idealised representations of the countryside.

For secondary reading, which provides the basis for a more nuanced and richer understanding of the poem, we would encourage you to read selectively some of the following general studies on the age:

F W Hilles and Harold Bloom. *From Sensibility to Romanticism*. (London, 1974)

Raymond Williams. *The Country and the City*. (London, 1973)

Roger Lonsdale. *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith*. (London and New York, 1969)



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UNIT 2 A SUMMARY AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THOMAS GRAY'S *ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Form & Structure of the Elegy
 - 2.2.1 Form
 - 2.2.2 Structure
- 2.3 Summary and Critical Analysis of the Elegy: Lines 1-16 (stanzas 1-4)
- 2.4 Lines 17-36 (stanzas 5-9)
- 2.5 Lines 37-44 (stanzas 10-11)
- 2.6 Lines 45-52 (stanzas 12-13)
- 2.7 Lines 53-76 (stanzas 14-19)
- 2.8 Lines 77-92 (stanzas 20-23)
- 2.9 Lines 93-116 (stanzas 24-29)
- 2.10 Lines 117-128 (stanzas 30-32 --THE EPITAPH)
- 2.11 Hints to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Unit, you should be able to:

- do a close reading/analysis of the poem independently
- relate Gray's reputation as a neo-classicist to his use of classical allusions
- discuss the literal images used in the graveyard setting
- understand the metaphors and personifications used in the Elegy
- follow the complexities of how Gray contrasts the values of the countryside with city values

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we provide you with a summary of groups of stanzas and accompanying critical analysis of the text of Gray's *Elegy*. These annotations and notes will aid you in reading the poem with a full comprehension of its cultural and literary significance. Formal poetic matters like the classicism of Gray's writing will be discussed in the various classical allusions pointed out to you. Other literary-aesthetic matters relating to Gray's choice of genre, rhyme and metre, figures of speech like metaphor, allusion, ambiguity, irony, etc. will also be noted. Detailed discussions on the matter of genre will be discussed later in Unit 3 while analysing the themes of the Elegy. Remember to go over the lines of the poem more than once in order to fully appreciate the somewhat contradictory ideas that underpin its seemingly simple sympathies and its melancholy surface. Let us begin by examining the form and structure of the Elegy next.

2.2 FORM & STRUCTURE OF THE *ELEGY*

You should be reading your text of Gray's *Elegy* alongside the following part of this unit. Given below are the line numbers and phrase-prompts for the grouped stanzas, accompanied by a summary and critical analysis, in each case.

2.2.1 Form

As its title indicates, Gray's poem is an 'elegy'. The classical genre of 'elegy' has already been discussed in Unit 1, section 1.4. It would be useful for you to refer to that portion of Unit 1 to get more details on the genre of an 'elegy'. However, despite being called an 'elegy', Gray's poem was not written to commemorate an individual's death. The cause of the lamentation here is not the death of a friend or even a single person, but the death and the limited opportunities of all the villagers of this hamlet. Needless to say that since there are several indicators that this poem links with Gray's own personal concerns regarding his poetry and its reception within a changing society, the sadness and melancholy of such anxieties take on an elegiac tone in the poem.

2.2.2 Structure

Gray's *Elegy* consists of 32 alternating rhymed four-lined stanzas, or heroic quatrains with an ABAB rhyme scheme. Its metrical unit is the typically English iambic pentameter (five iambs per line in rising rhythm). The balanced structure of the poem as a whole derives strength from Gray's skill of maintaining a classical or 'Augustan' restraint, which is never allowed to indulge in an over-emotional excess of feelings or melodramatic effects, which were usual with some of the 'graveyard school' poets like **Young**, **Blair**, and **Hervey**. The next section will deal with the summary and analysis of the *Elegy*.

2.3 SUMMARY AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE *ELEGY: LINES 1- 16 (STANZAS 1-4)*

We shall begin with the summary of the first four stanzas of the poem.

Lines 1-16 (stanzas 1-4)

- 1 The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
- 2 The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
- 3 The ploughman 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 tower
- 10 The moping owl does to the moon complain
- 11 Of such, as wandering near her secret bower,
- 12 Molest her ancient solitary reign.

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

Summary:

The tolling or ringing of the village church bell in the evening marks the end of the day. The cattle wind their way slowly over the meadow making deep sounds characteristic of cows. The farmer too returns homeward wearily after his long day's labour that has been the ploughing of his fields. While these activities go on around me, darkness falls.

The surrounding landscape seems dim to the sight in the darkening twilight-time, and the atmosphere of the place is still and sombre, except for the humming of the beetle as it circles about, and the sleepy tinkling of the bells round the necks of sheep in sheds faraway in the village.

No sounds are heard except those of the drowsy owl from the ivy-covered tower of the churchyard. The owl seems to grumble to the moon about the intruders who disturb what had been its unchallenged ruling ground at night.

Under the shade of the elm and the yew trees growing in the churchyard, the grass-covered earth rises in little mounds, under which lie the bodies of the simple villagers.

Critical Analysis:

The reference to the curfew suggests that the poem is set in evening time, since in its older sense 'curfew', (from the Old French *couvre-feu*) denotes a regulation requiring people to cover or extinguish their fires at a fixed time in the evening. A ringing of the village church bell tolling the hour indicates the end of the day's work, and time to retire to bed. 'Toll' and 'knell' work like images that both connect with the announcement of a death by solemn church bells ringing slowly in the village, in this case connected by the poet with the 'parting' or (as originally written by Gray) dying day. The concluding line of the first stanza makes the only use of the first person singular pronoun 'me', implying the meditative stance of the poet and the poem. It is clear that he is sitting in isolation in the churchyard surrounded by anonymous graves of the people of this hamlet. It is this setting that seems to turn his thoughts to contemplation, and to a certain extent lament, the lives and deaths of the inhabitants of the hamlet.

"Far-off curfew-sound" occurs in **Milton's** *Il Penseroso*, 76; the classical writer, Horace's poem, '*Beatus Ille*', *Epode ii*, 11-12 has a similar expression in 'wandering herds of lowing cattle'; Pope's translation of **Homer's** *Odyssey* X, 485-7 has 'the lowing herds return'. Gray makes powerful and lyrical use of alliteration in 'ploughman...plods', 'lowing...lea', 'weary way', as well as assonance in the dragged out, vowel sounds in 'lowing...slowly' and 'ploughman homeward plods'. All of these sound effects (emphasised in bold font in the previous sentence) contribute to the mournful quality of the poem. "Weary way" is an example of a transferred epithet in which the weariness of the ploughman is transferred to qualify the noun 'way', thus making the 'way' to be tired rather than the human. Here, Gray may be using the classical poet, **Virgil** or the following line from **Spenser's** *Faerie Queene* 6.7.39,1, 'And now she was upon the weary way'. All these classical allusions and the ambivalent syntax that often follows the forms of Latin, clearly identify Gray as a classicist despite the new tone of romantic sensibility of his poetry.

In the 2nd line of the 2nd stanza Gray makes a formal inversion of the syntax quite common in the poetry of this period. Here he leaves ambivalent whether the 'stillness' of the landscape holds an 'air' of solemnity or that the 'air' or atmosphere of the churchyard retains a kind of gloomy 'stillness' with night

descending. In this compressed line, ‘air’ and ‘stillness’ are each both subject and object. Thus, there is a tight economy that is used in the production of multiple meanings. The two lines that follow this reference describe the very minimal sounds that are heard.

In the 3rd stanza the poet uses literal images present within this landscape that recreate the typical melancholia of the graveyard style, with the owl, the moon, the old tower darkened by the ivy clinging to it, and a reference to the secret, hidden quality of this solitary space. ‘Secret bower’ is an echo from Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, 4.5.5, 4.

The reference to ‘yonder’ tower in the 3rd stanza and ‘those’ elms in the 4th one, locates the actual presence of the poet within the churchyard, a pastoral space of stillness but one marked by death and isolation. The narrowness of the graves of those buried, further reinforces this sense of solitariness and isolation, while ‘heaves’ also recalls the physical effects of sobbing in sorrow. ‘Mouldering heap’ with reference to the rough, crumbling quality of the burial forms of these villagers begins the theme of memorialising of the dead, to be developed in lines 37 onwards.

Check Your Progress 1

1) What type of work is *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*? Discuss the purpose of such a poem.

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2) What metre and rhyme scheme are used in this poem?

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3) What is the setting of Gray’s poem?

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4) Write a brief note on the imagery in the opening stanzas of the *Elegy*. Cite at least one example of alliteration, assonance, and transferred epithet used here.

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5) From whose perspective is the poem written? Is the speaking voice identifiable or referred to?

- 6) Detail the features of the opening four stanzas that contribute to the expression of sorrow?

2.4 LINES 17-36 (STANZAS 5-9)

- 17 The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
18 The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,
19 The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
20 No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.
- 21 For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
22 Or busy housewife 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 drive their team afield!
28 How bowed 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.
- 33 The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
34 And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
35 Awaits alike the inevitable hour.
36 The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Summary:

The early morning sounds of the horns of the hunters, the crowing of the rooster, the chirping of the swallow from its nest, and the fragrant breezes of this fresh, healthful time are images of vital life that will no longer wake these villagers who are dead and therefore, sleeping in their graves.

Their contented fireside family joys too cannot be experienced by each farmer any longer: of the wife busy in the household routine, or of his children flocking around him with their childish greeting, each one wishing to be the first to climb on his lap and be kissed.

Many were the times these farmers laboured hard at ploughing and harvesting their fields, happily following their oxen and plough, or strenuously working with an axe to bring in the firewood.

The grand and ambitious people of the city should not look down in contempt on the gainful employment of these rural folk, or mock the limited life-experiences

of these simple, poor inhabitants of the village.

They must remember that despite their proud and noble ancestry, and all their privileges of wealth and beauty, they share the common human lot of mortality, which is death.

Critical Analysis:

‘Swallows twitter on the chimney tops’, **Dryden’s** translation of **Virgil’s** *Georgics*, iv, 434; and ‘straw-built citadel’ from *Milton’s* epic, *Paradise Lost*, I, 773, along with echoes from Milton’s *L’Allegro*, describing a lively hunting scene set in the morning, show Gray’s classicism and his debt to these poets. The sights and sounds treated in this stanza represent all that these villagers will no longer see or hear, clearly a ‘catalogue of loss’ (Suvir Kaul, *Thomas Gray and Literary Authority: Ideology and Poetry in Eighteenth-Century England*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 129)

The picture described here of domestic bliss enjoyed by the villagers, despite their arduous duties and responsibilities, echoes Horace’s ‘Beatus Ille’, (translated as ‘happy life’) Epode ii, 44, as also the other image of hard labour done on the ‘unwilling soil...stubborn land’ (Dryden, *Georgics*, i.143-4) and the ‘stubborn plain (Pope, *Imitations of Horace*, Satire II, i.131), adapting the same classical theme of the ‘happy man’ viewed as contented within a limited life.

Note the alliteration of the hard sounds in ‘sturdy stroke’ imitating the toughness of the axe falling on the hard wood. Note also the personifications based on the abstract nouns ‘ambition’ and ‘grandeur’ since both are represented as human figures, while the one ‘mocks’ and the other has a ‘smile’.

These stanzas open for the first time in the poem the oppositions between the country and the city that will serve the poet with the moral function through which he intends to celebrate the village dead. The poet seems to advocate the cause of the rural poor in this warning directed at the city-folk about death as a leveller. However, the stress that Gray lays on ‘the short and simple annals of the poor’ shows his interest less in the idea of death visiting all and rather more on the question of the form memorials take. The choice of the term ‘annals’ to refer to the life-stories of the poor is ironical, ‘as only kingdoms have annals, and so do kings, but the peasantry does not.’ (**Cleanth Brooks**, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, London: Dobson Books, 1947, p.102) In doing so, Gray seems to be elevating the status and the merit of the indigent though industrious villagers. Thereby, as a poet willing to provide deserving memorials to the poor, Gray seeks for himself a new role and authority.

However, the adjectives ‘useful’, ‘homely’, ‘obscure’, and ‘simple’, that praise the villagers, are also rendered ambivalent since this sentiment is voiced by one who himself speaks from the space of the city. This irony and contradiction of social perspective is one of many to be perceived in the poem by an alert reader. Also to be noted is the classicist tendency of the poet transferring his contemplation from the particular object to the general in the course of the poem.

2.5 LINES 37- 44 (STANZAS 10 -11)

37 Nor you, ye Proud, impute to these the fault,
38 If Memory o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
39 Where through the long-drawn aisle 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 Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

Summary:

The proud should not blame them if these poor villagers have earned no ornamental tombs like those commemorating rich people whose funerary ceremonies are performed in grand, decorated cathedrals or abbeys accompanied by organ music and hymns of praise.

Is it possible to bring the breath back into their bodies by publicly celebrating the dead through ostentatious, memorial urns or elaborate life-like statues? Is it possible to awaken them to life by singing eulogies and songs of praise in their honour, or engraving flattering epitaphs on their tombstones?

Critical Analysis:

The melancholic and gloomy mood with which the poem had begun has turned in this part to moral indignation directed at the privileged classes on behalf of the neglected lowly dead. These stanzas also expound the theme of loss and the need for memorials. The poet seems to advocate the cause of the poor in the countryside, who are likely to be scorned by the proud city people as being unimportant and therefore, undeserving of being remembered. The absence of any records celebrating the deeds of the rural poor need not be the cause of sending them into oblivion. The fact that their deeds do not have any grand, public dimensions that limits the nature of mourning for them is lamented by the poet in this elegy.

Once again Gray resorts to using abstract nouns 'Proud', 'Memory', 'Honour', and 'Flattery' as personifications in the creation of a kind of moral allegory. The paradox lies in that the actions that are usually performed by memory, honour, and flattery in the case of the rich to call public attention to the dead of their families, are absent for the villagers. These personifications therefore, are being used ironically to show the absence of these personified entities from the funeral forms of the villagers. 'The long-drawn aisle', the 'fretted vault' and the 'pealing anthem' re - imagine in full regalia the funerary forms of the rich taking place within precincts much grander than the ordinary village church.

The moral purpose of this ironic recovery is to point out that the extravagance of these celebrations exceeds what is proper for memorialising. However, embedded within this moral chastisement of the 'Proud' is Gray's nostalgia and regret for the absence of any public memorials for this dead peasantry. Throughout the poem such regret about the absence of a public recognition of the worth of these villagers may be linked to Gray's implicit concern with the uncelebrated status of the poet himself. In their loss is reflected his own social and poetic alienation.

2.6 LINES 45-52 (STANZAS 12-13)

- 45 Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
46 Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
47 Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,
48 Or waked to ecstasy 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 repressed their noble rage,
52 And froze the genial current of the soul.

Summary:

These neglected graves might contain some who had hearts passionate with grand ambitions, some others whose hands might have held the sceptre of power as rulers and emperors, or those whose hands could have produced and written rapturous poetry.

Yet the privilege of obtaining a good education the way it seems a natural right of the rich was denied them by their limited circumstances. All that these villagers experienced were the difficulties of poverty which utterly smothered their souls.

Critical Analysis:

The meditations of the poet make him imagine the buried possibilities of the kind of greatness that the villagers may have achieved, if only the ‘ample page’ of ‘Knowledge’ could have been opened for them; in other words, if their social opportunities could have included literacy and education.

‘Knowledge’, a personification here, is represented as a classical figure holding a scroll, of knowledge and learning symbolised by the written word; a scroll that remains rolled, unrevealed and undecipherable for these ‘unlettered’ peasants. In Gray’s time a Graeco-Roman classical education was the standard fare at the various elite schools and the two universities Oxford and Cambridge, affordable only by the upper classes. In view of its jealously guarded page, although ample, ‘Knowledge’ is a rather negative figure, much like Ambition and Grandeur. Her ‘ample page’ or the collective learning of the past is also problematically referred to as ‘spoils’, the booty seized from a defeated enemy. The word ‘spoils’ thus carries overtones of hostility and combat, thus pointing inadvertently to the unequal class relations in society that carry connotations almost of a class war.

The rustics are championed as likely to have the ‘noble rage’, the genius that makes for greatness, if only poverty and their class position had not deprived them of their chances in life.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What are the positive images used by the poet in describing the lives of the villagers in stanzas 5 to 7? What kind of life did they lead?

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- 2) What reminder or warning is given to the proud and the rich of the cities concerning the poor villagers?

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- 3) Discuss Gray’s treatment of the theme of memorials in these stanzas.

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4) What might the dead rustics have become if they had got proper opportunities?
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5) What are the distinctive personifications that Gray uses in this part of the
Elegy? What purpose is served by these?
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2.7 LINES 53-76 (STANZAS 14-19)

53 Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
54 The dark unfathomed 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, that with dauntless breast
58 The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
59 Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
60 Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.
61 The applause of listening 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 history in a nation's eyes,
65 Their lot forbade: nor circumscribed alone
66 Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;
67 Forbade 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.
73 Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
74 Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
75 Along the cool sequestered vale of life
76 They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Summary:

Rarest gems often lie submerged and hidden in the deepest caves of the ocean as also the sweetest flowers bloom and die unseen in deserts, without there being any admirers of their beauty.

In the same way perhaps this village might have had its own rebellious Hampden-like figure who might have defied some despotic local landlord. Among these graves might lie buried, some unrecognised poetic talent like that of Milton, or

a Cromwell-like leader of the people but who, (because of his restricted actions and chances) did not have the guilt of bloodshed (caused during the political turmoil of the Civil War) on his conscience.

Their limited fortunes prevented the obscure villagers from attaining high positions while overcoming barriers in their way. Thus, they did not earn applause in Parliament, nor did they perform historic deeds to bring prosperity to their nation. However, their limited chances also prevented them from committing the kind of crimes that public life often entails. Their obscure destiny prevented them from becoming dishonest and shameless in the pursuit of power. Nor as poets or writers did they have to work their way upwards on the ladder of success by worshipping their patrons with false flattery.

These rustics therefore lived, distanced from the life of dishonourable competition that causes city folk to strive madly after lofty goals. In contrast to the embattled state of the world of public affairs, the villagers' calm-paced and retired existence always continued on its even and straightforward path.

Critical Analysis:

Stanza 14 invests the objects, gem and flower, and their natural habitat with metaphorical force thereby imaginatively recreating this village in the images of the unplumbed ocean or an un-traversable desert. The implication is that the obscure village is equally remote, as are the ocean beds and deserts from the world of action and public rewards and honours.

Gray alludes to Pope's lines of verse where Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock* (IV.153-54; 157-58) wishes she had 'un-admir'd remain'd' /In some lone Isle' and 'There kept my Charms conceal'd from mortal Eye/Like Roses that in Desarts bloom and die'. There is also an allusion to Milton's *Comus* (732-33) in 'The unsought diamonds/Would so emblaze the foreheads of the deep'. 'Purest ray serene' is a typical Miltonic placement of adjectives, one before and the other after the noun.

In stanza 15, historical human figures, 'village-Hampden', 'mute inglorious Milton', 'Cromwell guiltless' are similarly metaphors representing those talented rustics who simply never had the same chances as those celebrated public creators of history. **John Hampden** (1594-1643), English patriot, cousin of Oliver Cromwell, had resisted Charles I by refusing to pay a tax imposed without Parliament's approval; John Milton (1608-74), poet and author of *Paradise Lost*, republican and like Hampden, had been a champion of liberty; Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), served as Lord Protector of England in the years 1653-58, following his Puritan revolt that led to the execution of Charles I.

All the phrases of stanza 16, that describe public actions that might have been performed by the rustics had they not been obscured, depend on the main clause 'Their lot forbade' in line 65, stanza 17. They also could not read their personal actions as commemorated and reflected in the public history; could not 'read their history in a nation's eyes'. Thus, they did not figure in the cultural memory of the nation. This idea connects with Gray's concern with the need for adequate memorials for the dead.

The following part of the poet's argument offers him a consoling thought that their hidden rural existence, 'far from the madding crowd's...strife' also prevented 'ignoble' actions, and contained their potential for evil as much as of virtuous and glorious deeds.

2.8 LINES 77-92 (STANZAS 20-23)

77 Yet even these bones from insult to protect
78 Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
79 With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,
80 Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

81 Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered 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 die.

85 For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
86 This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,
87 Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
88 Nor cast one longing lingering 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 Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

Summary:

The graves of these villagers too carry some slight memorials so that they are not insulted by being entirely ignored. These epitaphs and memorials take the form of simple, uneducated words and roughly crafted sculptures, but nevertheless urge the onlooker to gaze upon them, in poignant memory of the departed dead. These gravestones carry basic information of the names and life-span of the dead, and perhaps some biblical moral that teaches the pious villagers about the need for calm in the face of death.

For who can ever readily resign the warmth of life, and pass into the oblivion of death without regret? Each departing soul deserves the shedding of some affectionate tears, and the wish to be remembered stays with us even at death.

Critical Analysis:

These stanzas carry one of the many contrasts presented by the poem. Here, by implication, Gray distinguishes those elaborate memorials referred to earlier in stanza 10 with what may suitably be encountered on these 'mouldering' graves of the 'rude forefathers of the hamlet'. The city pomp stands contrasted with the country simplicity.

The other concern here is with the close-knit, organic nature of the village community. The 'pious drops' that are shed and the awkward verses of the 'unlettered Muse' signify deep, affective ties binding the rural departed to the living villagers, that in feeling and sensibility far surpass the elaborate forms and grand ceremonies of the rich city folk. This evocation of 'pious drops' is suggestive of a warm human memorial that is seemingly far more authentic than any cold marble sculptures, in offering the departed soul a true tribute.

Yet another contrast brought out in this part of Gray's argument relates perhaps to his own melancholic awareness of the value of life vitalising warmth of 'cheerful day' against the 'dumb forgetfulness', the solitariness and oblivion of death.

Check Your Progress 3

1) With which two objects in nature are the villagers compared? What is the complex effect of these metaphors?

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2) Which figures from history are used to point to the lost opportunities of the villagers?

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3) What is the positive side of the lack of opportunities suffered by the rustics?

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4) What basic human need is recognised by the poet in speaking of the dead rustics?

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5) In what way do the memorials of the departed poor of the village differ from those of rich city folk?

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2.9 LINES 93-116 (STANZAS 24-29)

93 For thee, who mindful of the unhonoured dead
94 Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
95 If chance, by lonely Contemplation led,
96 Some kindred 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 would he stretch,
104 'And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

105 'Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
106 'Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove,
107 'Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
108 'Or crazed with care, or crossed in hopeless love.

109 'One morn I missed him on the custom'd hill,
110 'Along the heath and near his favourite tree;
111 'Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
112 'Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

113 'The next with dirges due in sad array
114 'Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne.
115 'Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the lay,
116 'Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.'

Summary:

Perhaps ('haply') some like-minded visitor to this spot might enquire about you, you who write your humble verses to commemorate these neglected villagers. Perhaps some grey-headed shepherd would narrate the tale of your isolated, poetic wanderings around the village, thus:

'We have seen him often at the break of day seeking out distant, open spaces, or stretched out in lonely thought in the shade of a beech tree, gazing into a passing stream. At times in happy self-absorbed mood he would walk about seeming to converse with his thoughts or brood as if care-worn, or troubled in love. One day he was not to be seen at his usual haunts, the tree, the stream or the grassy stretch; another day passed without any sight of him, till his body was seen carried on a bier toward the churchyard. Go closer to that thorn-tree under which he lies, and read the verses on his gravestone, for you know how to read.'

Critical Analysis:

In the lines that begin stanza 24, Gray's mood turns more particularly self-reflexive. This means that he almost seems to think of himself from an outsider's perspective. Thus, quite interestingly he addresses himself as 'thee', treating himself as a second-person entity; someone with whom he has a conversation or a dialogue. The 'me' of line 4 becomes a 'thee'; an externalised self who is 'mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead', thus fulfilling the role of the poet sympathetic to a neglected community and therefore writing about their lives. It is for this group that he writes: 'Dost in these lines their artless tale relate', (lines 93-94).

At this point, we as readers of the Elegy can connect with the complexity of the multiple addressees of his poem. We get an impression that all along in this poem, Gray's concerns have been of forging a self-identification with the innocent villagers who are the subject of the poem. Although he is surrounded by only the graves of the dead rustics, this group are in some sense his audience, the receivers of his views. He clearly imagines himself as linked with them in his own withdrawal from society and choice of living in a pastoral retreat. Although his tale is most certainly not 'artless', it is he who alone is 'mindful' of the deserving of these rustics and therefore treats of their hidden lives, and also incidentally offers them this Elegy as an appropriate memorial.

We also sense that the elegy is addressed to his readers in the learned world mainly because of the erudite style and language in which his whole argument is couched. Most of all we become aware of Gray's strong personal desire to question his own relationship with his poetry. Here he seems to dramatise his social role as a poet in such a way that he stands outside himself in an attempt to understand how the world will see him.

At this point Gray's stance is complicated in relation to his overt self-representation, since on the one hand he authorises himself as being the rustics' champion and yet, on the other hand, his evident socio-cultural positioning and poetic aspirations make him unsuitable for his adopted habitat.

The solitary and hermit-like figure of the nameless poet whom the 'hoary-headed swain' describes is definitely an oddity and a stranger to the villagers. Ironically, it is the person visiting these precincts, the outsider who is imagined by the poet as being a 'kindred spirit', perhaps like those boon companions left behind in Cambridge. Actually, those are the true 'kindred soul[s]' who can read and comprehend his 'artless tale', and appreciate the classical elegiac form and its nuanced poetic sensibility. We note, however, that the swain's speech uses the carefully crafted stylistic forms like alliteration and assonance that Gray's own poetry employs, and is not given the realistic speech of peasants. As discussed in Unit 3 later, the pastoral has always remained an artificial literary convention of classical poetry, and the pastoral poet despite his self-imagined immersion in idyllic environs, fails to live out the realities of the rustics' way of life. Much the same conflicted self-identification with his pastoral subjects is suffered by the over-literate poet figure whose search for a like-minded community and audience among these unlettered country poor results only in a self-defeating pathos.

An interesting embedded allusion in the description of the poet-figure listlessly stretched out under the 'nodding beech' is his similarity with Jacques from Shakespeare's comedy, *As You Like It*, who is the prototype of a melancholy man. Such a figure, with his extreme sensibility and his tendency toward moral generalising on death, while he broods from a pastoral retreat on the passing scene of life around him, would have appealed to the contemporary fashion of sensibility.

There is an even more consciously applied self-directed pathos that accompanies Gray's imagined narrative of his own reclusive existence. Thus, the tale of his days spent within this community shows him as unknown, unappreciated by them as a poet due to their 'unlettered' state, followed by his quiet passing away without the 'fond breast' of any kin that he may rely on for the 'pious drops' that the 'closing eye requires'.

However, the self-representation of the poet living an isolated, pastoral existence where he seems disconnected from the community of villagers but assimilated within the environment, turns him almost into a thing of nature, as if he has become an aspect of the landscape of the wood, the hill and heath, the rill and the beech tree. This kind of choice of living a life of retreat works like a positive, moral position to shun the competitive culture of the city, which has been satirised earlier on in the poem.

2.10 LINES 117-128 (STANZAS 30-32 THE EPITAPH)

117 Here rests his head upon the lap of earth

118 A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.

119 Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,
120 And Melancholy marked him for her own.
121 Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
122 Heaven did a recompense as largely send:
123 He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,
124 He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) 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.

Summary:

Here lies a youth of humble birth who had no fame or fortune, yet who had acquired much knowledge and learning. He was also melancholy and contemplative in nature. He was generous and benevolent, and sensitive to the needs of others. He was amply rewarded for his goodness by God's blessings and the gift of sincere friendships. Do not seek to examine his good deeds or his faults, but let him rest in hope to receive grace from his Maker.

Critical Analysis:

The last three stanzas that constitute the Epitaph, perhaps appended later by Gray to the main Elegy, have been the subject of much debate by critics as has been the identity of the poet-figure of whom the swain speaks. Some critics hold that this figure might be Gray's friend, Richard West who had died just prior to the writing of the Elegy, and that the epitaph might have been written in his memory.

Another, rather literal minded critical assumption made in the early part of the twentieth century, had given rise to what has been called the 'stone-cutter poet' controversy. According to this idea Gray's Epitaph could not be very well for himself and must be about an impersonal figure, perhaps the local village poet who had been engraving the 'uncouth rhymes' mentioned in line 79, hence the critical reference to him as the 'stone-cutter poet'.

Over time, however, critics have favoured the other idea of the Epitaph being written by Gray for the figure within the poem that may be seen as a composite one, usefully bringing together several impulses, both personal and general ones that serve Gray's purpose.

There is irony in the fact that although in the poem Gray has represented the need for humans to be acknowledged and remembered for who they are even after their death, the Epitaph's 3rd stanza hopes for his actions on earth to pass into oblivion. He rather wishes for himself only the heavenly bosom as the place where he seeks to be fully judged with God's kindness and treated with mercy. Interestingly, Gray echoes *Petrarch's* phrase 'paventospeme' (fearful hope) used by that poet in hopes of 'grace' or favours of love from his lady (Sonnet 115).

Although a few early critics tended to see the Epitaph as an unnecessary addition to the otherwise fine Elegy, in so far as the poem is a personal elegy there is a positive, hopeful note on which an otherwise melancholy mood of the rest of the poem culminates. Besides, the Epitaph offers Gray's morally upright response to those ceremonious commemorative monuments like the 'animated bust' and the 'storied urn', which had been rejected by him as being too ostentatious. Suitably, the cultural authority of the poet validates the right form of memorializing in this more minimally worded epitaph to himself.

Another positive resonance that is struck is the fact that this Epitaph engraved on his imagined tombstone that the ‘hoary-headed swain’ points to, at least provides that memorial much on the mind of the poet, that which he had lamented as the lack of the neglected dead of the village. The morbid taste and fashion of the contemporary times seems to be played out in the poet imagining his own death, and moreover, writing his own epitaph. The kind of pious resolution of the poet’s anxieties that the Epitaph seems to offer has been considered by some critics as being the gaining of a moral knowledge that leads to a quiet of mind, a kind of unselfish acceptance of God’s will (**Howard D Weinbrot**, ‘*Gray’s Elegy: A Poem of Moral Choice and Resolution*’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 18, No. 3, *Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (1978), pp.548-549).

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Who do you think is the intended audience of this poem? What complexities arise through this ambivalence about the audience?

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- 2) What are the complex ways in which Gray represents the poet-figure in the pastoral landscape of the village?

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- 3) How is the poet described in the epitaph?

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- 4) Discuss some critical assumptions about the epitaph of the Elegy.

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- 5) What is the positive significance carried by the epitaph?

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2.11 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Note: We provide you below with suggested passages where you might find some relevant answers from reading the above Unit. However, we remind you that you need to write your answers in your own words as far as possible.

Check Your Progress 1

1. Refer to 2.2.1: Form
2. Refer to 2.2.2: Structure
3. Refer to 2.3 Summary: paras 1 and 2
4. Refer to 2.3 Critical Analysis: paras 1, 2, 4 and 5
5. Refer to 2.3 Critical Analysis: para 1 where the reference to 'me' is pointed out
6. Refer to 2.3 Critical Analysis: paras 2, 4 and 5 where the sounds and the melancholy quality of the scene is discussed. These are all contributory to the mood of sadness that the poet wishes to create in his Elegy

Check Your Progress 2

1. Refer to 2.3 Summary: paras 1, 2, and 3, and Critical Analysis: para 2
2. Refer to 2.3 Summary: last 2 paras, and Critical Analysis: para 4, and Summary of 2.4
3. Read the discussion in both 2.5 and 2.6 to understand what the poet says there about what might the villagers had become if only they had received the benefit of a good education. Now answer the question in your own words.
4. Carefully read 2.5 Summary and Critical Analysis and then answer the question in your own words.
5. Refer to 2.5 Critical Analysis: para 2, and 2.5 Critical Analysis: para 2

Check Your Progress 3

1. Refer to 2.7: Summary para 1, and Critical Analysis: paras 1 and 2
2. Refer to 2.7: Summary para 2, and Critical Analysis: para 3 and 4
3. Refer to 2.7: Summary paras 3 and 4, and Critical Analysis: para 5
4. Refer to 2.8: Summary
5. Refer to 2.8: Critical Analysis: last 2 paras

Check Your Progress 4

1. Refer to 2.9: Critical Analysis, paras 2 and 3
2. Read paras 1 to 5 of the Critical Analysis in 2.9 and from that discussion draw your ideas regarding the answer to this question. Then answer it in your own words.
3. Refer to 2.10: Summary, Critical Analysis: para 4
4. Refer to 2.10: Critical Analysis: paras 1, 2, 3, and 5
5. Refer to 2.10: Critical Analysis: last 2 paras

UNIT 3 THOMAS GRAY'S *ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD*: THEMES

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Image of the poet in society and in Gray's *Elegy*
- 3.3 Gray's Classicism: 'Pastoral' representations of the city versus the country
- 3.4 Disparities of power and privilege and their losses and collateral gains
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 3.7 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Unit, you should be able to:

- give an account of the changed function of poetry and of the position of the poet in mid-18th century society
- define the nature of Gray's classicism as manifest in the *Elegy*
- discuss Gray's complex use of pastoral images to represent the countryside as a contrast to city life
- comment on Gray's shifting argument on the nature of memorials
- identify the ambivalent attitude of Gray in relation to his social positioning

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Published in 1751, Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* became immediately popular, and has remained so till today, although he had not expected to or even wished to acquire any fame by writing it. The changed nature of poetic production and the rather limited reception of formal poetry in the middle of the 18th century in England have already been discussed in Units 1.3 and 1.4. So, although the poets of this period like Gray, Collins, Warton, Akenside, and a few others seemed to be setting up the image of a poet in their writings as a significant and powerful influence in society, the irony remains that in the real, historical world around them, such was not the case. The 'bard' figures that these poets created in their imagined worlds had no relationship with the practical, material world of aristocratic or political patrons, journal subscribers, publishers, and a growing market for the commercial production and circulation of texts that would be saleable, and often for their sensational quality, as for instance, the popular novels, periodical essays, scandalous society memoirs, and the true as also fake travel writings of the period. Due to the rapidly expanding book trade in mid-century England, poets who would not cater to the broadly democratised reading tastes and like Gray did not wish to be treated like saleable commodities, ended up with a sense of powerlessness. They experienced a feeling of their reduced poetic authority within a culture of commercialism where excessive circulation of reading material was considered as cheapening the value of the material sold.

In the next section we shall continue our discussion of the age and examine the image of the poet in the society of the times in the Gray's *Elegy*.

3.2 THE IMAGE OF THE POET IN SOCIETY AND IN GRAY'S *ELEGY*

In the early 18th century, poets and critics like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift had enforced the dominant authority of classical cultural norms and values through satire directed at the prolific 'hack writers' and 'Grub Street scribblers' for their degradation of literary standards and the prostitution of the arts. However, by mid-century most writers had struck a compromise with market forces and took some pride in their professionalism. 'For many of Gray's contemporaries, the social esteem given to male writers depended upon their proper circulation of texts in the literary marketplace.'

In such a context, Gray's own hesitancy to publish the *Elegy* as also the rest of his poetry, as discussed in Unit 1, was implicitly censured by professional writers like Samuel Johnson, who scorned Gray's 'aristocratic desire to be viewed "as a private independent gentleman, who read for his amusement"'. Gray's rejection of the popular market thus, related both to his personal reclusiveness as well as to the social context. The contemporary dilemma of a poet within an expanding mercantile culture would lead him to explore ways of how to speak with poetic authority to such a heterogeneous audience. These altered social circumstances would result in the poet figure becoming more and more withdrawn, with a tendency to speak from that position of retreat and retirement to a small group and class of individuals, those 'kindred' spirits possessing the cultural advantages of comprehending the classicist poet's articulations.

It is possible to identify within Gray's *Elegy* some of these pressing broader contemporary concerns as well as a particular stance of personal anxiety on the part of the poet-persona which pertains to poetic authority and the poet's vocation as being the voice of the community. Critics point out that most of Gray's poems are concerned with the theme of finding an ideal audience, and being uneasy with the one he actually has. In the sonnet he wrote on the death of his close friend, Richard West, West represents a 'kindred Spirit', the ideal listener Gray desires. But since he is dead, Gray cannot communicate his feelings to anyone else. In other poems, like in this *Elegy*, Gray is cut off by social class divisions from potential listeners. In this poem he does not envisage an audience among the 'Great', for whom he saves most of his moral indignation in the form of the negative allegorical representations, like Ambition and Grandeur. He will not cultivate the figure of Flattery to 'soothe the dull cold ear of Death' among the aristocracy in the city. This group being morally repugnant to him is not the audience he desires. He has much more sympathy for the villagers in the country whose destiny is obscure and whose talents are not allowed to flourish. The tragic irony of Gray's social positioning and literary choices as a learned poet is that the rustics will never be the readers of his verses. As an audience they would be incapable of understanding Gray, as the 'hoary-headed swain' fails to understand the melancholy behaviour of the poet-figure in the poem. Gray's poetic authorship is wasted on an illiterate group who cannot read, as indicated by the words of the swain who directs the 'kindred spirit' to decipher the verses of the dead poet's epitaph. As a cultural community the country-folk are outside the force of his literary authority. His classicist bent of mind and his erudite language will fail to form a bridge between cultures.

The symbolic representation of this thematic thread works even in the opening passages of the *Elegy*, through the imagery as well as choice of words expressing Gray's stance. It is significant in a poem that presents an account of death and loss, that the sights and sounds of the surrounding phenomena in the opening lines are also represented as 'a catalogue of loss' and a deprivation of authority and sovereignty for the brooding poet. We are made to notice the gradual diminishing of the visibility of the sights within the graveyard due to the fading light, as also of the ambient sounds, as the living entities recede or withdraw into sleepy rest. These are characterised by their 'leaving' him in the churchyard, which is the first verbal sign of the poet losing his authority. His later concerns with the contemporary poet's lost audience tie in with the isolation and deprived identity of this poet-figure.

As one of many contrasts used by Gray in the *Elegy*, the twilight/night time scene of the present moment is antithetical to the imaginative recovery of the daytime movements of the peasants busy in their ploughing and harvesting activities. Also represented against the alienation of the solitary poet is the imagined image of the warm and cheerful family, grouped around the 'blazing hearth', nourished by each other's love and care.

The solitude and the idle, meditative stance of the poet in the opening passages of the poem also interestingly stand contrasted with the active, labouring routine of the occupants of the village community, both animal and human, though described in the present moment as tired and seeking their well-earned rest. In the depictions of their daily struggle and activity, the passages render ironic the contemplative idleness and passivity of the poet. Thus, complexly enough, although an important thematic concern of Gray in the *Elegy* is the reinstatement of the poet-figure within a society that has reduced his cultural status; the image of the poet's passive brooding against the active, hard-working rustics' labour is a problematic one.

The gap between the poet and the objects of his poetic and thematic interest, the rural folk, is cultural as well as socio-economic, as these inhabitants of the hamlet cannot act as his audience since they are unable to read his very erudite verses. This contrast is borne out by the words of the 'hoary-headed swain' who, it is implied, cannot read the few verses of the crucial epitaph.

Significantly, at the current moment of the poet's presence within the churchyard it is ironic that the 'audience' that surrounds him 'beneath those rugged elms' is interred in the soil, 'each in his narrow cell for ever laid' in their eternal sleep. Their buried existence seems to have a reciprocal resonance with the poet's own submerged and subdued identity in society. Gray's lack of an adequate readership for his classicist poetry could not have been more poignantly represented than in the solitary poet's dead rural companions.

Yet, despite the obvious gap between the learned poet and the 'unlettered' rustics, Gray imagines himself as linked with them in the fact of his own withdrawal from society and choice of living in a pastoral retreat. Their hidden quality is represented through the images of gems embedded within the unfathomable depths of oceans, and flowers that bloom unseen in deserts. At this point Gray's stance is complicated in relation to his overt self-representation, since on the one hand he authorises himself as being the rustics' champion and yet, on the other hand, his evident socio-cultural positioning and poetic aspirations make him unsuitable for his adopted habitat. Despite this disconnect, however, the attempt to commemorate these unsung, unheroic folk results in the *Elegy* thematically

bringing together the marginalised poet and the marginalised villagers. This play of identity and difference is even more marked by the end of the poem in the sentimental tones of the self-directed epitaph of the marginalised poet.

As discussed in Unit 1, Section 1.3, some of the pressures on mid-century poets were due to certain emergent factors in society. For most of the previous century, writers had been forced to depend for patronage upon the aristocracy or on politicians for the publication of their works. By mid-century, changed social configurations emerged as effects of a dominant mercantile economy, with a gradual withdrawal of the public poet-figure as a result of untenable affiliations of aristocratic and political patronage. This shift was manifest as well in the widening of the readership of an altered and advanced print culture due to increase in literacy at all levels. Identifying closely with aristocratic values and interests, Gray perhaps desired a renewal of ruling-class authority over cultural production, an authority that the market in texts had eroded. Gray feared the destructive effects that the book trade and its mass audiences might have on literary culture, and especially on the survival of poetry, which he considered to be an art that required a liberal education and an informed understanding of literature. Although a new kind of independence was enjoyed by writers of the new emerging genre of the novel, poetry that depended for its proper effects on readership by an intellectually and socially cohesive community began to lose cultural ground.

In such an environment of commodified texts and an expanding readership, an author like Gray, fearful of not being understood may be linked to the pathology of an anxiety of a loss of authority, as may be read within his poetry and in his concern for the passing of an old, poetic time. The figure of the 'bard' belonging to a lost, grand time, with power to move hearts is a romanticised self-reflexive trope that recurs in Gray's poetry.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Discuss the changed nature of literary production and reception in mid-18th century England. What were the effects of this alteration on writers like Gray?

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- 2) How had poets of the early 18th century dealt with commercial trends?

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- 3) Discuss briefly how Gray's anxieties concerning poetic authorship and authority are inscribed in the *Elegy*.

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- 4) What complexities and contradictions are evident in Gray’s stance of poetic authority in relation to the villagers about whom he writes?

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3.3 GRAY’S CLASSICISM: ‘PASTORAL’ REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CITY VERSUS THE COUNTRY

The most significant element of Gray’s *Elegy* is its classicism. This quality is recognisable most obviously in the allusiveness of the poem, which means that it contains verbal echoes of other poets’ works in almost every line. In the 1768 text Gray acknowledged some of his borrowings. Thus, apart from phrases adapted and translated from classical poems by Virgil, **Lucretius**, Horace, and others, there are echoes of many 18th century Augustan and neo-classicist poets’ verses as, for instance, those of Dryden, Pope, Collins, **Parnell**, Akenside, Thomson, Young, etc. These add to the texture of feeling and meaning in the poem. Gray was also a conscious reader of the older English writers like Spenser, **Shakespeare** and Milton, and was aware that his poems re-echoed this rich tradition of the past. In his use of language too, he consistently strove to use archaisms, or old word forms, and Latinate syntax, or the often inverted structuring of the sentence order as in the classical language. This is done in order to elevate his poetry to the remote regions of the poetic imagination, by evoking a shared voice with these older literary figures. This is one of the reasons for the paradox that although Gray’s *Elegy* is perhaps one of the most popular poems in English literature, it was at the same time available only to the learned reader and therefore a contemporary elite audience. Thus, the classicist style of the *Elegy* is evident in that it is often Latinate in diction and syntax, its choice of words and word order being in the manner of Virgil or Horace. Despite this exclusive quality, it hit the fancy of the contemporary reading public.

The form of the verse used in the *Elegy* is alternately rhymed four-lined stanzas, or quatrains with an ABAB rhyme scheme. Its metrical unit is the typically English iambic pentameter (five iambs per line in rising rhythm, with the first syllable unstressed and the second one stressed in each of the five metrical feet). In using this form for poetry, Gray moves away from the more widespread heroic couplet stanza of the 18th century that was common with neo-classicist Augustan poets. This stanza form of Gray’s *Elegy* later became established because of its elegiac potential.

The genre of the ‘*elegy*,’ and the contemporary literary vogue of writing melancholy ‘graveyard’ or ‘churchyard’ poems, has already been discussed in Unit 1, Section 1.4. The setting of the poem in a country churchyard at day end evokes a meditative response in the poet on the nature of human mortality. The poem thus invokes the classical idea of *memento mori* (a Latin phrase which warns all mankind, ‘Remember you must die’). This classical theme is considered as having a universal appeal as related to the idea of *vanitas*, or the reminder of the vanity of life in the face of human mortality. As Samuel Johnson commented on this idea of Gray’s popular poem, ‘The Church-yard abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo’.

An important theme therefore of Gray's *Elegy* is the attempt to derive salutary moral lessons from thoughts of death. In this context, the classical trope that valorises a state of retirement from the hectic activity of life might be identified as constitutive of the representation of the countryside as an idyllic yet comforting domain. The 'graveyard' poems and the sublime odes of the mid-18th century poets created largely imagined worlds, or visions, or meditations set in an idealised landscape, or were reflective of the poet's retirement from active life. This literature of retirement or shared solitude has a relationship of influence to the classical pastoral tradition that dates back to the ancient Greek poetry of Theocritus, to the ancient Latin *Eclogues* of Virgil and to the other Roman poet Horace's second Epode. Closer to Gray's time in the 17th century in England, John Dryden had translated Virgil's *Eclogues*, and John Milton had revived the genre of such a meditative poetry in his two companion pieces, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*.

Praise of country life, images of rural bliss and descriptions of an idyllic Arcadian life, (also represented in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* in the 16th century) all belonged to a literary convention in which Nature was the subject of an idealised existence that was mostly part of a dream world of a 'civilised', 'un-ruralised' poet. The actual conditions of the rustic dwellers in the real countryside had never been the concern of poets of the early part of the 18th century, writing as they were in imitation of the classical writers. Their poems might be thought of as 'neo-classicised' versions of the pastoral tradition.

Another strain of early eighteenth-century poetry that represents the landscape of the countryside had been the tendency of what was called 'prospect poetry' to show and praise the plenty and prosperity being produced that was contributing directly to the wealth and progress of the nation. This kind of celebration of cultivated Nature in the countryside with poetry like Pope's *Windsor Forest* (1713), James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726-40), and John Dyer's *The Fleece* (1757) had both an aesthetic aspect as well as the material, socio-economic one; on the one hand the pleasing prospect (hence the term 'prospect poem') of a picturesque landscape was viewed as spread out for the eye of the poetic gaze, while, on the other hand, such poems represented the rural industry that led to the burgeoning of trade and commerce of an increasingly imperial Britain. This kind of poetry that celebrated wealth-generating agriculture derived from the genre of the georgic, based on the Latin poem written by Virgil that idealised rural labour, traces of which are evident in Gray's *Elegy* in the image of the weary ploughman in the opening stanzas. With Gray's rather solemn image of a practically depopulated landscape, moreover one that is inhabited by the graves of the farmers, the mood of the poem is quite distinctly antithetical to the positive celebratory 'prospect' poems. Many of these prospects were viewed by the poet from a literal eminence, a hilltop perhaps, so as to provide the gazing eye with dominance over the landscape. This positioning of the poet seemed to be symbolically endorsing ownership of agricultural capital and the landowner's pride in the prosperous landscape. Pastorals and picturesque prospects had also been treated for presenting the virtues of retirement and contemplation, as in John Dyer's early poem, *Grongar Hill* (1723), where the poet sitting on his hilltop retreat contemplates 'the vanity of human ambitions. . . . Picturesque prospects here are a source of melancholy moral reflection. Property and politics become trivial in the wider scheme of things' that the poet sees from a vantage point literally above his fellow men, inhabiting a high moral ground.

Thus, in the eighteenth century, representations of the countryside had become

symbolic or emblematic of a generalised yet exemplary space; ethical and aesthetic resonances became attached to this ideal in which a certain nostalgia for a place that was fast disappearing played a significant role. 'A desire to find an essential Englishness in the landscape uncorrupted by commerce and industry only increased as such a landscape became more and more unattainable.... Throughout the century, observers were fascinated by the countryside as a place of retreat, peace and authenticity. Yet they were, perhaps, enthralled by it to the extent that the place that they imagined was disappearing forever.'

In Gray's poem, this nostalgic sense of the countryside becomes further touched with the contemporary mood of melancholia, because of the churchyard setting and the style characteristic of the graveyard poetry. It is significant in view of the contemplative prospect poetry discussed above, that in Gray's poem the poet does not sit above or dominate the landscape, but on a level with the graves that are a reminder of his as well as general human powerlessness. The poetry of the graveyard school chose despair, death, mortality, and the brevity of life as subjects suited to general meditations, with deep undertones of sadness and melancholy. Often, as here, the poems are focussed self-reflexively on the writer. Thus, the subjective tone, the fondness of solitude, and a mood of gloomy meditation marked the poetry of the mid-18th century as distinct from the writing of the Augustans who preceded them. The emotional quality and sensibility of poems like Gray's *Elegy* led to links with the poetry of the Romantics who wrote in the latter part of the century. Gray's poem became extremely fashionable and led to many imitations of the churchyard style.

So, the poem's setting within a 'churchyard', or graveyard adds complexity to the *Elegy's* use of the pastoral convention of the countryside as an idealised space of retirement and leisure. Thus, while this setting is in keeping with the sententious moralising in vogue, which led the fashionable to choose contrived ruins as architectural elements, and urns, and hourglasses as garden ornaments on their estates, the macabre and gloomy mood evoked by this neighbourhood of the dead seems hardly an ideal situation for the poet. Gray himself had been melancholic all his life, although he had always looked upon this mood as a source of inspiration and wisdom, referring to it as his 'white melancholy'. The heightened sensibility that he clearly connected with this personal trait shows him sharing with the poet-figure in the poem such a seeking out of solitary spaces and an audience among the dead. The irony of this solitary stance and his pastoral withdrawal is that as a poet hoping to fulfil a public role and address an ideal audience, he will fail to form a bridge between cultures. He will forever remain an isolated figure, as the poet-figure in the poem, talking only to himself, 'Muttering his wayward fancies.'

Disaffected both with his own, mercantile bourgeois class, and the glittering sophisticated circles of his aristocratic friend, Horace Walpole (with whom he had earlier quarrelled), the poet looks to the third class of society for solace, represented by the villager, but ironically who will fail to comprehend him. In doing so, he creates what has been called a 'version of pastoral', one which reflects his particular anxieties about poetry and identity. We are rightly warned by literary critics that pastoral is a fantasy, and not an authentic version of rural life. But the anxieties Gray expresses, and the issues he raises in the *Elegy* are real enough.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Write a short note on Gray's classicism with reference to the allusiveness of the *Elegy*.

'artless tale' to compensate them for their hidden existence. But the poet is conscious of greater deprivations suffered by the inhabitants of the countryside in the repression of their 'celestial fire', their ambitions, the 'genial current of the soul', and most of all in the 'ample page' of Knowledge being unjustly withdrawn from them. Here, Gray explores questions of what might have been, as well as how not simply in their deaths the rural folk lack adequate memorials but that while living too they lacked an admiring public and a suitable audience of their talents. Stanzas 15 to 18 elaborate on the losses to these people caused by their unrealised greatness.

All of the public historical figures chosen by Gray, to contrast with the villagers' marginalised existence, are connected to the larger national and very public event of the previous century's Civil War and its ideas. It must be noted that the oblique reference to the guilt of the historical Cromwell towards his country is offset against the implied positive value of the glorious Milton's contribution to his country. Thus, if the rustics' lack of education denied them the creative powers of a Milton, then they also did not fulfil the destructive destiny of a Cromwell. It seems to be a quietist consolation offered for the deprived state of the peasantry, that this obscure destiny of theirs also their 'crimes confined'.

The felt pathos of their unlettered and uncultured status is once again countered by the compensatory and comforting idea of the collateral gains that their socio-political marginalisation led to. The restrictions of the rural poor also have advantages. Thus, the imagined villager would be 'guiltless of his country's blood', would not 'wade through slaughter to a throne', and his obscure destiny meant also the confining or limiting of crimes that are presumed as natural to public life and ambitions.

There are strains of complexity and ambivalence to be noticed, where the poet as a city gentleman seems to both desire the life of the rustics for the values to be found in their simple existence, and yet remaining aware of how those people he speaks about might regret their lost chances of improving their material lot in life. Some of these ideological contradictions and anxieties of the urban poet caught in this awkward social positioning, form the central thematic elements of the Elegy. There is also another accompanying yet embedded contradiction related to the poet's larger ambitions for poetic immortality that are implied in his desire to write the 'annals' of these obscure people, thus while earning poetic fame for himself, also attempting to give the buried villagers a certain degree of continuity in time. Yet contradicting his bid to commemorate them is also a desire to naturalise the obscurity of their lives in giving them metaphorical similarity and identity with submerged gems and flowers in deserts.

The celebrated stanza beginning with the line, 'Full many a gem', dealing with the theme of unrealised greatness has received inordinate and extended critical attention over the centuries due to the complicated nature of Gray's imagery and argument. Note that the 'purest ray' of the gem is hypothetical in that the deep ocean caves being dark would not reflect its shine. It is only in Gray's imagination that the gem's 'ray' would shine as also the villagers' talents, which the rest of the world has refused to acknowledge.

However, critics have called attention to the problematical nature of Gray's analogy, since, as William Empson points out, 'a gem does not mind being in a cave, and a flower prefers not to be picked', or have onlookers admiring its beauty. By comparing the simple villagers to natural objects, Gray makes their obscurity seem 'natural', like that of the gem and the flower. Through this manipulation

of mood and pathos, Gray may be accused of an aestheticisation of the socially created deprivations of the rustics. The beauty of their obscurity is privileged over the ugly realities of economic disparities caused by social inequalities. Significantly, the flower wears a human face: it 'is born to blush unseen.'

Check Your Progress 3

1) What, according to Gray, are the deprivations suffered by the villagers in their lives?

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2) What are the collateral gains to the rustics linked to their obscure lives that in Gray's opinion are compensations to them?

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3) What are some of the ideological contradictions connected to Gray's defence of the rustics' obscurity?

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4) How does Gray deal with the theme of memorials in the Elegy?

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5) Discuss the complex self-positioning of the poet within the poem.

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6) What is the spiritual consolation that the epitaph at the end brings to the poet?

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

In representing the physical and cultural loss of a whole community in terms of the denial of opportunities and chances to shine in the public memory, the *Elegy* reveals Gray's own imaginative self-identification with people lacking social recognition and importance. The poet-figure in contemporary society, confronted with the threat of diminished cultural authority leading to marginalisation, is more and more anxious about how his readership is likely to enshrine him in literary history. This connects directly to the persistent thematic concern with the nature, proper forms, and limitations of memorials.

It is inevitable that an elegy that laments the death of an individual or, as in this case, an entire community, should evoke the sentiment of memory. Memory is considered as playing a central role in refiguring the loss of the living and their displacement to the life hereafter, or to the regretted 'dumb Forgetfulness' of line 85 of the poem. No one, so argues the sympathetic poet, likes to be entirely forgotten. The educated elite of the city, the 'Proud' have their tombs and trophies; the grandeur of their funerary rites might, or not, deserve the pomp of an abbey or a cathedral with its 'fretted vault' echoing 'the pealing anthem'.

These elite ceremonies, however, involve grandiose and pretentious memorials in the form of a 'storied urn' or even an 'animated bust', which latter ironically underscores their current 'unanimated' state despite their memorialisers attempting to provide the world with a life-like sculpture marking their physical features. Thus, despite the aesthetic and decorative nature, from a public point of view of these grand memorials, considerable irony is piled up through these images in the poem. The implication here is that such public performances of memory involve a falsification of the real figures being lamented. The moral and allegorical force behind words like 'Ambition', 'Grandeur', 'boast', 'pomp', 'Flattery' render hollow these formal memorials, these symbolic 'epitaphs' to the 'Proud'. Significantly, although Gray belongs to this city culture, in describing the elaborate memorials and epitaphs of the rich, he positions himself in critical and ironic contradiction to the fact of his urban identity.

Contrasted with these are the burial forms that the villagers receive in 'place of fame and elegy', that although decked with 'uncouth rhymes' and 'shapeless sculpture', resonate with the simple pieties of 'many a holy text' teaching every one of the inevitability of death. However, despite the natural and logical assumption that we as readers might make about the equalising force of death as coming to all, the poet seems dissatisfied with inadequate forms of mourning. This contradiction is voiced in the pleas for due mourning forms evoked after he speaks of the rustics' sequestered existence, 'far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife'. Such a pressing need for due memorials is seemingly being fulfilled by the sensitive poet in his *Elegy*, that offers the world this 'artless tale' in memory of the 'rude forefathers' of this hamlet. This kind of self-conscious double-ness of perspective, of being both an outsider and yet sensitive to the need to preserve their memory comes of the larger self-reflexive maturation of the poet's own cultural alienation and authorial anxieties.

Adding complexity to his self-positioning vis-à-vis the peasants is the extremely self-reflexive imaging of himself as a poet by Gray in the Epitaph and in the highly personal six stanzas that precede it. Offering a kind of biographical sketch of himself in the improbably literary and sophisticated words of the 'hoary-headed swain', he comes across as a contemplative but obscure genius, besides being a man of feeling in being sympathetic to the sad plight of the villagers:

'He gave to Misery all he had, a tear'. Besides this acknowledged sympathy for the rustics he implicitly declares a singular tendency to wish to live like them, 'far from the madding crowd'. His audience in the poem, apart from the silent, unlettered, and moreover, dead villagers is the sole 'kindred spirit' - an outsider like himself who listens to the swain's narrative of his life and reads his Epitaph when urged to do so.

Thus, the poet rhetorically sets out his imaginative self-identification with these labouring poor who have been alienated, like him 'to fame unknown' due to their poverty, and side-lined by History. In offering himself this exemplary bio-narrative and sentimental Epitaph, Gray seems to reinforce the theme of proper memorials, reminding us of his earlier rejection of those hollow and flattering decorative forms that belonged to a culture given to empty display. There is most certainly an emphasis on the necessity of memorials; the human need to be remembered after death is shared by the poet in such a way as for him to provide a suitable memorial to himself in the form of his own epitaph. But the words of the epitaph are ironically indicative of a piety and a resolution in God, such as to suggest that all epitaphs are superfluous. God is the only true 'kindred spirit', who alone will be the 'friend' who can best comprehend and judge his merits against his frailties. The sentimental self-imagining and the godly pieties to which the poet turns at the end mystifies his alienation from that society in creating for him an alternative identity than one celebrated by public fame; one therefore more suited to the retreated poetic temperament. This self-imagining also 'implies an especially significant role for the poet as the creator of proper cultural narratives, as necessary guardian of the "place of fame and elegy"'.

3.6 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Refer to 3.2: paras 1 and 3
2. Refer to 3.2: para 2
3. Refer to 3.2: paras 4 and 5
4. Refer to 3.2: para 6 onwards

Check Your Progress 2

1. Refer to 3.3: para 1
2. Refer to 3.3: paras 3 and 4
3. Refer to 3.3: paras 3 and 4
4. Read 3.3 carefully to understand the classical idea of the pastoral and the complex changes it undergoes in the poem. Then answer the question in your own words.
5. Read 3.3: paras 4 onwards and then answer the question based on your understanding of this theme.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Refer to 3.4: paras 1 and 2
2. Refer to 3.4: paras 3 and 4
3. Refer to 3.4: paras 5, 6 and 7
4. Read 3.5 to understand Gray's argument related to the use and abuse of memorials and the answer the question in your own words.

5. Refer to the last two paras of 3.5
6. Read the last two paras of 3.5 and write down your own opinions on this question.

3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 4 THOMAS GRAY: CRITICAL ESSAYS ON THE *ELEGY*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Contemporary Critical Views: The *Elegy's* Early Reception
- 4.3 Critical Views on Gray's *Elegy* in the 20th Century and later
- 4.4 Poetic Effects: Gray's Classicism
- 4.5 The Self-Divided Poet
 - 4.5.1 The Poet-Figure in the *Elegy*
 - 4.5.2 'Lyric of Moral Choice'
 - 4.5.3 Analysing Poetic Practice and Cultural Politics
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 4.8 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Unit, you should be able to:

- begin to understand the original moment of the *Elegy's* writing, based on its reception in its own time
- appreciate the changed critical perspective on the poem in the twentieth century and later
- address the matter of the poet-persona in the poem: 'the stone-cutter poet' or Gray himself?
- discuss the critiques on the self-divided poet
- comment on the complexities of class identities as created by Gray's references to city and country discourses
- bring out the philosophical and moral meanings implied by the poet and interpreted by critics
- analyse the socio-economic and political meanings of the poem

4.1 INTRODUCTION

You have already come to an understanding of Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* based on a stanza by stanza close reading and analysis. You have also examined in detail many of the thematic elements of the poem. We have also taken account of the literary contexts and the actual history of the writing of this poem.

We will now turn to the critical history surrounding the *Elegy*, with a view to introducing you to the many ways in which the poem has been read and received. This development of ideas related to it, you must realise, also connects with the changing patterns of reading poetry all the way from mid-18th century to our present times.

Summarised, paraphrased, and excerpted below are some of the many critical studies that this very popular poem has generated. This will allow you to appreciate

more fully the ideological assumptions of the different periods of the poem's reception. This will also provide a richer substance to any questions that you will later address. We hope you will make your own choices of critical elements to substantiate your argument about the *Elegy*. In this regard, the many exercises done as part of your reading of the previous units will provide you with a better perspective on how to tackle longer questions on the poem.

4.2 CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL VIEWS: THE *ELEGY'S* EARLY RECEPTION

The history of the publication of the *Elegy* has already been dealt with in Unit 1, Section 1.4 in which the intervention of Gray's friends like Horace Walpole as part of the poet's elite coterie reminds us of the social context in which the poem was written.

Gray had a peculiarly difficult relation to his culture, both high and low, a difficulty rooted in his own experience of the class system. He distrusted the middle-class mobility that enabled him to prosper. There is in fact a sense of anxiety in Gray about the work world he had evaded. Samuel Johnson called Gray the son of a 'scrivener of London' and describes Gray as: 'though without birth, or fortune, or station, his desire was to be looked upon as a private independent gentleman, who read for his amusement.'

You must take into account that the views of Johnson as a literary critic and commentator of magisterial stature make him an important voice from among Gray's contemporaries, who had an opinion on his writings. As a neo-classicist Johnson greatly valued smoothness and regularity of versification which he found often lacking in Gray's poetry, the Odes more particularly. Gray's interest in what Johnson dismissed as 'obsolete mythology' was also such that led to the disdain of the critic. But it is toward the *Elegy* that in his bio-historical study, *Life of Gray*, Johnson offers some warm praise.

Johnson considered that Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* 'abounds with images which find a mirror and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo.....Had Gray written often thus, it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him.' **Roger Lonsdale**, writing in the twentieth century, argues that it 'produces fewer or more complicated echoes in the bosoms of modern readers than in those of earlier generations'. Lonsdale's reference to the complex resonances of the *Elegy* on its readers in our later age reminds us of the different notions regarding how texts must be read and understood that had evolved all the way from the mid-18th century.

Several other contemporary critiques of the *Elegy* relate to the dating of its writing, since there was a considerable lapse of time between when Gray had begun writing it, and its publication in 1751. In fact, he had written a letter about it in June 1750, mentioning it as 'a thing' whose beginning his friend had seen long ago. He concludes the letter by asking Walpole's opinion on it. Among contemporary critics, one argument for dating the beginning of the *Elegy* in 1742 is based on it having been known as a prolific creative period for the writer, yet an alternative theory rests on the fact of the friendship of Gray and Walpole having been re-established in 1746, when he began showing his new poems to his friend.

Gray's borrowings or the echoes of the 'graveyard school' of poetry further connects the beginning of the writing of the *Elegy* with the later date, since a number of poems were written in the early 1740s as part of that vogue of 'graveyard' poetry and prose. This aspect of the poem has already been discussed

in Unit 1, Section 1.4. Most other contemporary critiques of the poem follow the lead of Johnson in remarking on its excessive popularity.

Discussions of the *Elegy* in the 19th century tended to be preoccupied with such textual matters as Gray's sources, the location of the churchyard, and Gray's link with neoclassicism. On textual matters, there was considerable interest in the fact of there being two versions of it; one of them in manuscript form having four stanzas which were later rejected by the poet.

4.3 CRITICAL VIEWS ON GRAY'S *ELEGY* IN THE 20TH CENTURY AND LATER

Closer to our times, critical assessments of the *Elegy* has turned away from mere textual as well as biographical matters. There is a kind of consensus about its complexity, the ambivalence within Gray's poetry, and of the divided consciousness of the poet that lends depth to the meanings that may be derived from the verse. Here we will take account only of some of the more important of the landmark critiques.

4.4 POETIC EFFECTS: GRAY'S CLASSICISM

In the early twentieth century, among the important Anglo-American critics to write in detail about the *Elegy* within the close-reading approach favoured by critics of the New Criticism, is **Cleanth Brooks**, treating of the poem in *The Well-wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. In the chapter on the *Elegy* within this study, titled, 'Gray's Storied Urn' Brooks links the poem to Milton and other poets upon whose previous poetry and Gray's conscious use of the past tradition, are dependent the poetic effects of the poem. He notes:

The *Elegy* is...-like *The Waste Land* - a tissue of allusions and half-allusions. If the materials of which it is composed are 'poetic', they have been made poetic by other poets.(Brooks, 98)

Brooks points out the value of this tradition not so much merely to our own later consciousness of all the references, which we do need for a fuller understanding of its poetic effects. As he insists:

'But the audience for which Gray wrote...and which gave its admiration to the poem was aware of many of them.'(Brooks, 98)

Here, very clearly is the critical assessment of Gray's classicism which is deeply inscribed in this poem. Brooks also writes of how the very conventional materials are used dramatically so as to move the poem beyond the bookish and trite, beyond the 'clutter of lifeless eighteenth-century ornament.' He points out the dramatic and ironic contrasts rendered by even the very conventional uses of the abstract personifications. To quote Cleanth Brooks more fully here would bring out the argument well:

The rural graveyard in its simplicity calls up for the speaker memories of another kind of burial-place, one in which heraldry visibly makes its boast, and one filled with 'storied urn' and 'animated bust.' 'Honour,' at least, it must be granted, is treated as one of the personifications on an allegorical monument:

*Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust...*

But whether we treat the personifications as sculptures, or as terms used in the grandiloquent epitaphs, or merely as the poet's own projections of the pomp implied by the ornate burial place—in any case, they are used ironically. That is to say, they are contrasted with the humble graves of the country churchyard, and they are meant, in contrast, to seem empty, and lifeless. For 'Honour' to possess more vitality as a metaphor would run counter to the intention of the poem. We can put the matter in this way: the more richly and dramatically realised Honour becomes, the more plausible it would be to feel that 'Honour' could 'provoke the silent dust.' Conversely, the more fully dead, the more flatly abstract Flattery is, the more absurdly ironical becomes its attempt to 'soothe the dull cold ear of Death.' (There is, of course, here a further level of irony: Flattery attempts what it cannot perform; but further, it is witless in its attempt to do what has already been done: the ear has been fully 'soothed' already.) Once we see that the purpose of the poem demands that the personifications be used ironically, one is allowed to see some of the supporting ironical devices. They are rich, and some of them are intricate, (Brooks, 101). Thus, such a close reading critical approach treats of the many rhetorical devices used by the self-conscious poet in creating several ironic effects, some of which might seem to turn the irony against himself, a result of what the later critiques consider to be the self-divided quality of Gray's sensibility.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Critically analyse the gains of close reading approaches in relation to the poetic effects studied in the *Elegy*.

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4.5 THE SELF-DIVIDED POET

Critics like **F Doherty**, in *The Two Voices of Gray*, and **David Cecil** in *The Poetry of Thomas Gray*, introduced into the mainstream of Gray criticism the notion of two voices, public and private, separating these entities as the real Gray, and perhaps another counterfeit one.

When **Patricia Meyer Spacks** takes up the subject of Gray's poetry and the by-now-accepted view of ambivalence within the poems, she adds her own twist to the idea. She discovers that even in the early work, usually taken as poems of the private voice, 'the poet has exploited structural patterns of alternation, passages of direct statement paired with those of highly artificial and indirect suggestion. The combination of a diction which deliberately conceals with a more personal mode of expression is largely responsible for the impact of these poems.' (Spacks, 1965, 520)

Two voices are heard, then, in the early verse and also in the *Elegy*, but she says further that both voices are deliberately present as an intentional stylistic device to ensure maximum emotional affect. Division is thus considered to be a function of Gray's artifice, a matter of deliberate choice.

In the essay titled, *Thomas Gray: Drowning in Human Voices*, **Wallace Jackson** discusses the more recent opinions current within Gray criticism of the notion of two voices, public and private, the 'historical' and the 'personal', and the accompanying assumption that the public voice is a counterfeit of sorts, whereas

the personal is the real Gray. He invokes the critique of Spacks in agreeing with her that ‘both voices are deliberately present as an intentional stylistic device to ensure maximum emotional affect. Division (here alternation) is thus, tacitly redefined as a function of Gray's artifice’. (Jackson, 363) In other words, Gray employs both a public voice as well as introduces a discourse that involves engaging with his very private sensibility, almost as a dialectic taking place within himself. Jackson goes on to say:

If division is present in the poetry, it is so as a symptom of his relation to an uncongenial age, or the result of his own unfulfilled sexuality, and is manifested in a language dominated by two antithetical voices which may be resolved into some sort of unity through various critical strategies. (Jackson, 363-4)

Jackson suggests that, ‘from the beginning, in Gray’s canon, there is a special alertness to what is voiced.’ In other words the poet remains conscious of his audience, anxious about, for instance, what ‘some hoary-headed swain may say.’ He is acutely aware of his commitment to speaking in a public, poetic voice. To invoke voice is also to invoke the memory of its absence (‘Mute’). There is the fear, therefore, of the suppression of the voice, through death. ‘Or there is the most famous occasion where voicelessness is justified as another example of the law, Nature’s edict, the result of which is the diminished and paradoxical thing, “Some mute inglorious Milton”.’

Walter Jackson notes that ‘Every common reader intuits the churchyard as the centre of Gray’s imagination, the place where he pauses in the midst of passage to insist that the vast negative absolute of death renders voice impotent.’ In summing up his argument, Jackson says:

Understood in this way, the *Elegy* is an extended meditation on what voice can or cannot accomplish. The legacy passed from generation to generation, from poet to ‘kindred spirit,’ is the commemorative word itself, and the self is contextualized (“Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered muse”) within other texts (“And many a holy text around she strews,/That teach the rustic moralist to die”). The *Elegy* is surely Gray’s most subversive poem, restricting and limiting the power of voice while universalizing the need to speak. All the dead are predecessor voices. (Jackson, 367)

4.5.1 The Poet-Figure in the *Elegy*

In mid-20th century a significant thesis about the poetic persona within the *Elegy* led to the ‘stone cutter controversy’, an oddly compelling dispute over whether the ‘rustic moralist’ who appears in the central section of the poem is also the subject of its ending. According to this theory, the poet-spokesman figure, Gray himself, imagines the local ‘Stone-cutter’ poet and speaks on his behalf in the poem’s concluding moments. However, as **John Sutherland**, in his essay titled, ‘The Stone Cutter in Gray’s *Elegy*’ arguing against such an assumption points out:

‘...the epitaph does not fit this shadowy stone cutter at all well. For example, what would partisans of the stone cutter do with line 119: “Fair Science frown’d not on his humble birth”? This would seem to refer to someone a little better educated than an artisan inspired by “th’ unletter’d muse”.... It is difficult to imagine that he could have meant the epitaph to refer to a person inspired by “th’ unletter’ dmuse,” since he would surely have felt that “Fair Science” had frowned on such a person’s birth.’ (Sutherland, 12)

Sutherland represents the flaw in the theory thus, and further as supporting his dismissal of the 'stone-cutter' notion cites Brooks:

Cleanth Brooks seems to accept the case for a fictional narrator and explains the shift as dramatic in nature. 'If read in this way, the shift reveals that the speaker is viewing himself objectively, that he has started to think of himself with the same sort of feeling that he has previously expressed about the inhabitants of the graveyard. Thus the shift may be construed as an appropriate introduction to the speech of the 'hoary-headed swain' and to the epitaph itself. (Sutherland, 13)

Hence, clearly dismissing the 'stone cutter' theory of the poet figure at the end of the poem suggesting some local rustic poet, John Sutherland says:

All that can be said is that the narrator and the subject of the epitaph are the same person and that that person is described as an educated young gentleman, not as an unlettered village stone-cutter. (Sutherland, 13)

4.5.2 'Lyric of Moral Choice'

Ronald Crane in his study of poetry titled *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* observes of Gray's *Elegy* that:

[T]he Elegy is an imitative lyric of moral choice rather than of action or of mood, representing a situation in which a virtuous, sensitive, and ambitious young man of undistinguished birth confronts the possibility of his death while still to 'Fortune and to fame unknown,' and eventually, after much disturbance of mind (hinted at in the Swain's description of him), reconciles himself to his probable fate by reflecting that none of the rewards of successful ambition can 'soothe the dull cold ear of Death,' which comes as inevitably to the great as to the obscure; that a life passed 'far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,' though circumscribing the exercise of virtue and talent, may yet be a means of preserving innocence; and that he can at any rate look forward to-what all men desire as a minimum-living on in the memory of at least one friend, while his merits and frailties alike repose 'in trembling hope' on the bosom of his Father and his God. (Crane, 176)

Myrddin Jones in his essay titled '*Gray, Jaques, and the Man of Feeling*', discusses Gray's self-presentation in terms of the man of sensibility by comparing him with the figure of Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. He notes the progression of ideas and their culmination in the moral solace and contentment of the Epitaph:

After having placed his reader in the picturesque setting of the opening stanzas of the poem, and followed this pastoral landscape with reflections on the lives and deaths of the villagers, the poet turns to represent himself, his life and death, in the image of a solitary moralist. He recognizes his fundamental sympathy with the villagers and his similar apparent lack of success in the world. But far from considering this a defeat, he sees it as a life of fulfilment, enriched by understanding (melancholy), knowledge (Fair Science), and voluntary retirement from the fashionable world. '...

'...he wants also to represent to others the image of the poet as a man of wisdom and sensibility. He is thus at one with the villagers being outside the pale of the fashionable, 'successful', insensitive world; but more vulnerable than they in his appreciation of the cost of this exclusion. It is not difficult to see how both Gray and later Romantic artists found in the solitary Jaques an image of this sensibility. (Jones, 48)

This matter of moral choices debated in the *Elegy* is discussed by Roger Lonsdale in his edition of the poem, also referred to from the perspective of the melancholic man. Lonsdale connects the idea to the Epitaph speaking of the poetic self as ‘melancholy’. Here he provides a detailed explanation of the term which connects not only with a contemporary fashion of cultivating a particular melancholy stance and disposition, but also as related to benevolence and other social virtues. Thus, he notes:

The meaning of this word is crucial to the ‘Epitaph’. Gray does not mean simply that the poet has been made melancholy (=gloomy) because his education made him aware of abilities which he has been unable to fulfil; if that had been the case the ‘And’ of this line would have logically been ‘But’. The favourable sense of ‘melancholy’, implying a valuable kind of sensibility, though not found in Johnson’s Dictionary, was becoming fashionable at this time. The heightened sensibility of the melancholy man ideally expresses itself in benevolence and other social virtues, rather than merely in solitary wandering, though that usually precedes it. (Lonsdale, 1969, 139)

Wallace Jackson also refers to Roger Lonsdale’s *Chatterton Lecture* of 1973 which is subtitled, ‘*Versions of the Self*.’ He details Lonsdale’s views:

[Lonsdale] finds in the Elegy, ‘two selves’ (‘as if’ there were): ‘a judicious, normative self, resting confidently on traditional wisdom and values, and a deeper unofficial self of confused and subversive passions which can only be acknowledged as the debate is closed in the concluding lines.’But if the poetry is sponsored by a private self, it is one that cannot be adequately translated into a public presence. Division is re-enacted here as a flight from knowledge, a sort of proto-romantic embowering of the self, and ... Lonsdale’s thesis fuses the biographical with Arnold’s cultural criticism: ‘The perpetual but inhibited preoccupation with the self in Gray’s poetry may be explicable simply in terms of the theoretical pressure on a poet of his generation to avoid morbid self-centredness and to express the truths of common human experience.’ (Jackson, 364)

Howard D Weinbrot, in the essay titled ‘*Gray’s Elegy: A Poem of Moral Choice and Resolution*’, analyses the poem in terms of, according to him, its seven principal parts:

its initial tone and setting (lines 1-28); the speaker’s defence of the poor and insistence upon the futility of riches in keeping one from death (lines 29-44); the difficulty of being successful if one is poor (lines 45-64); the danger of being successful if one is rich or fortunate (lines 65-76); the universal longing for some human memorial, as seen among the poor (lines 77-92); the Swain’s report, which indicates the speaker’s acceptance of his lot (lines 93-116); and, finally, the Epitaph, in which the speaker’s earned resolution is projected in the future, as an emblem of his newly won control (lines 117-128). (Weinbrot, 538-539)

Weinbrot sums up Gray’s stance of moral resignation in the following analysis:

Gray’s poet learns to tell the tale of the dead around him and to preserve their memory; a “kindred Spirit,” perhaps the friend whom heaven has sent, inquires after him and preserves his memory. In any case, the poem finally looks through the grave to eternity, and does so because the speaker has abjured his desire for personal fulfilment -really self-aggrandizement and power-which is as likely to produce merciless as merciful acts. Though he never is a joyful member of the village’s life, he uses his active mind and

learns to resign himself to ordinary human affection; he associates himself with his neighbouring, humble people and landscape and, in the process, leaves the definition of his hidden, true character to God. Ironically, through this surrender he also improves his character, cools his moral fever, and changes his focus from choice of life to choice of eternity. The poem which begins as an elegy for the speaker's unfulfilled promise ends as an elegy, now appropriately written in a country churchyard, for a man who learns to accept and praise his limited world and its people, and thus hopes to be accepted and praised in the limitless world of God and His people. The paths of moral choice lead beyond the grave. (Weinbrot, 551)

4.5.3 Analysing Poetic Practice and Cultural Politics

Among some of the most satisfying critiques for readers of Gray's *Elegy* in our time, are those that analyse it by dealing with pressing social, political and cultural questions. These address the matter of the changed nature of poetic production, distribution and consumption of literary texts, and how these questions are formative of the ideological complexities of the *Elegy*. In Unit 1, Sections 1.3, 1.4 and Unit 3, Section 3.1, we have already discussed some of these issues that determined Gray's hesitations regarding the publication of his poetry, and his anxieties related to the mid-18th century poet's reduced cultural authority.

In a historical period that was infiltrated by a money economy, the literary text became part of a process of commercialisation; a commodity to be bought and sold with little regard to its intrinsic cultural value. In this context, Gray's own troubled bourgeois class position with high-cultural aspirations that led him to seek out an elite, coterie audience of like-minded but aristocratic friends begins to have a necessary and logical relationship with his choice of poetic subject. Within this chosen subject of his *Elegy*, he is not only lamenting the obscure destinies of those who are neglected by history, but one in which these country-folk allegorically become linked to the moral and poetic authority of one who endows them with attention and memorialisation. Thus, through the rustic subjects the poet's personal positioning becomes connected with a broader social and political allegory in a transformed commercial culture.

As was pointed out in Unit 3, Section 3.1, the gap between the poet and the objects of his poetic and thematic interest, the rural folk, is cultural as well as socio-economic, and so these inhabitants of the hamlet cannot act as his audience, since they are unable to read his very erudite verses. Yet, despite the obvious gap between the learned poet and the 'unlettered' rustics, Gray imagines himself as linked with them in the fact of his own withdrawal from society and choice of living in a pastoral retreat. This overt valuation of the countryside as an idyllic space while all the time being aware of the necessary cultural and material deprivations of the rustics creates an ambivalent poetic stance that is pointed out by some of the following critiques, each in their own way.

Some of these discussions will be provided to you through excerpts of a few 20th century critiques that have concentrated and commented on many complex socio-historical and ideological emphases within the poem.

The earliest reference to the troubling and contradictory signals given by the *Elegy* is by **William Empson** who wrote in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) that the poem is 'an odd case of poetry with latent political ideas'. He pointed out one stanza in particular, (lines 53-56) that begins: 'Full many a gem....' Of the implications of this imagery, Empson comments:

What this means, as the context makes clear, is that eighteenth-century England had no scholarship system...This is stated as pathetic, but the reader is put into a mood in which one would not try to alter it...By comparing the social arrangement to Nature [Gray] makes it seem inevitable, which it was not, and gives it a dignity which was undeserved. (Empson, 4)

Empson further analyses the poetic images in such a way as to point out the bad faith or the quiescent containment of the material inequalities evident between the city and the country existence; as a part of a poetic and rhetorical performance involving mood and melancholy acceptance. Empson is irritated 'by the complacency in the massive calm of the poem.'

To his earlier interrogation of the images in the above-mentioned stanza, he adds:

Furthermore, a gem does not mind being in a cave and a flower prefers not to be picked; we feel like the man is like the flower, as short-lived, natural, and valuable, and this tricks us into feeling that he is better off without opportunities. The sexual suggestion of blush brings in the Christian idea that virginity is good in itself, and so that any renunciation is good; this may trick us into feeling that it is lucky for the poor man that society keeps him unspotted from the World. The tone of melancholy claims that the poet understands the considerations opposed to aristocracy, though he judges against them; the truism of the reflections in the churchyard, the universality and impersonality it gives to the style, claim as if by comparison that we ought to accept the injustice of society as we do the inevitability of death. (Empson, 5)

Thus, for Empson the waste these images represent is 'stated as pathetic, but the reader is put into a mood in which one would not try to alter it'.

John Lucas, in his broader critical study, *England and Englishness: Ideas of Nationhood in English Poetry 1688-1900* in writing of Gray, agrees with Willam Empson's sense of Gray's reactionary class politics, where the poet while fully aware of the suppression of country ambitions, does not wish for any substantial change for these under-privileged groups. The *Elegy*, he says, 'underwrites an almost entirely complacent account of a "settled" society' and 'refuses to censure tyranny and oppression.'

Yet another important critic, **Raymond Williams**, in his magisterial study titled, *The Country and the City* touches briefly on the situation within the poem:

Gray's *Elegy*, with its churchyard setting draws of course on a traditional commonplace ---

The paths of glory lead but to the grave

--- but there is also a sustained and ambiguous celebration of 'the short and simple annals of the poor.' It is ambiguous because it at once ratifies this remote simplicity ---

*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 tenour of their way*

--- and admits, with an edge of protest, the social as opposed to the abstracted rural condition:

*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.*

It cannot really be had both ways: the luck of the 'cool sequestered vale' and the acknowledged repression of 'chill Penury'. But in this structure of feeling, temporarily, the ambiguities of the appeal to simplicity were held and mediated. (Williams, 74)

Hence, the matter of who Gray is truly sympathetic to in the *Elegy*, and whether those apparent sympathies get translated into an authentic affiliation or remain only a melancholy mood, unconnected with political commitments, has always remained an important question in recent critical interpretations of the poem.

In '*Bridging the Gulf Between: The Poet and the Audience in the Work of Gray*', Linda Zionkowski discusses Gray's relationship with his implied audiences, by considering the unusual popularity of the poem:

Part of the poem's appeal no doubt arose from Gray's apparent self-portrait in the closing lines. Given the 'popular preoccupation with the artistic sensibility' that took root in mid-century, readers of the Elegy would most likely behold Gray in the Epitaph that the poet-speaker creates for himself:

*Here rests his head upon the lap of earth
A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.
Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy marked him for her own. (117-20)*

An obscure genius and man of feeling ('He gave to Misery all he had, a tear, / He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend' [123-24]), the speaker is distinguished by his sympathy for the dead rustics. Yet in the *Elegy*, the qualities that define the poet's character include not only imaginative identification with people lacking social importance (the speaker eulogises the ploughmen and housewives living 'far from the madding crowd' [73]), but also separation from all human community, including that of the villagers. Alienated by poverty from the 'Proud' whose remains are interred in cathedrals, and by knowledge from the labourers buried in the mouldering graves, the speaker exists apart from the society he describes. His audience in the poem, who reads his Epitaph and listens to the 'hoary-headed swain's' narrative of his life, consists of a sole 'kindred spirit'-an outsider like himself led by 'Contemplation' to the churchyard (95-96).

Gray's portrayal of the isolated speaker seems to voice, and indeed validate, his own feeling of detachment from an understanding public; the *Elegy* mystifies this alienation, transforming it from an aspect of commodified print to a feature of the sensitive poet's temperament. In light of this, the public's enthusiastic response to the *Elegy* understandably embarrassed and annoyed Gray. He believed that readers liked the poem only because its theme fit the current vogue for graveyard verse: it 'owed its popularity entirely to the subject . . . [for] the public would have received it as well if it had been written in prose.' Although the *Elegy* seems to have provided him with an attentive audience, Gray found the applause of readers at large to be more humiliating than gratifying; the poem's unexpected success ranked him among the vulgar, crowd-pleasing writers whom he despised.

Charlotte Sussman in her study titled Eighteenth-Century English Literature: 1660-1789 investigates how social, political and economic developments shape a literary period. Commenting on Gray's poem, she 'reminds us that

eighteenth-century writers used the 'sequestered vales' of the poor to work through the problems of poverty and illiteracy that surely plagued urban spaces as well. The geographical differences between country and town often stand in for the socioeconomic differences of a still entrenched class system, even as the countryside becomes a space for personal contemplation.' (Sussman, 108)

One of the most comprehensive and scholarly critiques on the poem, is included in **Suvir Kaul's** book-length study of the writer, *Thomas Gray and Literary Authority: Ideology and Poetics in Eighteenth-Century England*. Here Kaul takes account of Gray's discomfort with the radically different nature of the new literary marketplace that threatened to marginalize high-cultural and ideological 'aristocrats' like Gray. While studying the interrelations of formal methods and cultural politics, Kaul says that the *Elegy* 'as an attempt to contest the hegemony of bourgeois social and cultural values, and as a record of the textually and historically inevitable failure of such an attempt.' (Kaul, 3)

Pointing to the vocational crisis faced by the poet at this historical juncture, Kaul suggests that the gem and flower images earlier referred to, whereby the rustics' 'sequestered' and neglected status seems to be naturalised, or that they are treated as 'natural' objects that cannot have any market or cultural value, are symbolic of the poet's own loss of poetic authority and value in a world that treats texts as commodity. Hence:

The poem sets itself up as a structure of antitheses: the country versus the city, nature versus culture, the organic versus the reified, those left outside History versus those who would appear to make it, appropriate forms of cultural memory versus inappropriate memorials. It is also about the place of the poet, whose attempt to mediate between these oppositions is at once an attempt to articulate a role for himself as a culturally-vital mediator of such social oppositions. (Kaul, 127)

Kaul also identifies the function of a characteristic 'eighteenth-century Sentimentalism' in the poem, 'the ideology of unpurposive pity', through which the poem 'offers itself both as political, and as the resolution of the political, or, more accurately ...[into] the morally correct emotion.' (Kaul, 141)

He asserts:

The *Elegy* is complicated further by the fact that even though it is the swain who speaks lines 98-116, he is as a ventriloquist's dummy mouthing a part in the solipsistic, tragic psychic drama of the poet-figure. The contradiction between this 'crazed' (self-) representation of the poet-figure, and the far more collected and composed figure of the contemplative poet who meditates on the country churchyard...is obvious, and can easily be mapped onto the divide between the pathetic-sentimental and contemplative-humanist modes.

Finally, says Kaul, we get to the signifier of absolute loss in the poem: the epitaph on the gravestone. And the *Elegy* does not end with a gesture of self-assertion on the part of the poet; in fact,

'the Poet can no longer speak, and can only be spoken of.... [The poem] closes with a rather despairing attempt to claim a heavenly solution/reconciliation for the irreconcilable earthly problems of poetic, cultural, social marginalisation.' (Kaul, 154)

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What were the theories regarding the poet-persona in the poem? Comment on critical assumptions about the divided nature of Gray’s self-positioning in the *Elegy*.

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- 2) Comment on the complexities of class identities as created by Gray’s references to city and country discourses.

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- 3) Discuss how certain critical perspectives choose to derive philosophical and moral meanings implied by Gray in his *Elegy*.

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- 4) Analyse the contradictions within the poem pointed out by critics who explore socio-economic and political meanings of the poem.

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- 5) Keeping in view the reception of Gray’s *Elegy* in its own time, discuss in what way did his contemporaries approach the poem.

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4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have looked at the time of the writing and the publication of the *Elegy*, we have looked at various critical perspectives on the poem through the ages and tried to understand the original moment of the *Elegy’s* writing, based on its reception in its own time, appreciate the changed critical perspective on the poem in the twentieth century and later and address the matter of the poet-persona in the poem: ‘the stone-cutter poet’ or Gray himself?. Also discussed the critiques on the self-divided poet, comment on the complexities of class identities as created by Gray’s references to city and country discourses, bring

out the philosophical and moral meanings implied by the poet and interpreted by critics, analyse the socio-economic and political meanings of the poem.

4.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Please note that since all the above questions require more detailed consideration and are Long Answer Questions, you will understand better how to answer them if you read all the previous units once more.

Check Your Progress 1

1. Refer to 4.4

Check Your Progress 2

1. Refer to 4.5 and 4.5. 1 and then answer the question in your own words.
2. Refer to 4.5.1 and 4.5.3 for a detailed understanding of how to address this question.
3. Refer to 4.5.2. Read also the last 2 paras of Critical Analysis in Unit 2 section 2.10 for a fuller answer.
4. Refer to 4.5.3
5. Refer to Unit 1 Section 1.5 for the history of the poem's reception and then read 4.2 to seek a suitable answer to this question.

4.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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