

By Prof. J. Biswas 4th SEMESTER : ENGLISH HONOURS

STUDY MATERIAL : cc: 8

② Thomas Gray: Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Topics:

- ① Thomas GRAY: His life and works.
- ② Characteristics of his poetry.
- ③ Thomas GRAY : A poet of Transition
- ④ Gray and His Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard
- ⑤ Immortality in Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.

"immortality" is almost entirely disconnected to those things which we would commonly associate fame or remembrance-wealth, power, accomplishment, circumstance. Instead, immortality is achieved in the recollections of those one has spent his or her life with: loved ones, co-workers, acquaintances, and bystanders. Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" does in fact suggest a theme of immortality for those passed, but in a somewhat unconventional manner that can only be detected after completely reading through the work. While, at first, the speaker is more interested in the transient earthly life, and for most of the laments the lack of distinction of those lying dead and buried around him, by the end of the work it is apparent that he does believe at least in a figurative immortality for the dead. Of course, he suggests, a figurative life-after-death is all we on earth can substantiate. The beginning and

Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is a melancholic poem that considers the possibility of immortality for the people buried in the churchyard the speaker visits. Although previous sections of the poem explore different ideas, such as the speaker's remorse for those who passed their earthly lives ignobly and seemingly without consequence, "Elegy" closes with five strong quatrains and the epitaph, which emphasize Gray's belief in the (at least figurative) immortality of the dead. The poem's other seemingly unconnected themes appear connected to the main theme of life after death. Finally, the poem considers the nature of the speaker's own immortality as a possibility in either a physical or figurative sense. Ultimately, "Elegy" argues that the

(33-36) The following section of the work, consisting of eight quatrains, concerns the unsung accomplishments of those buried in the churchyard, as well as the potential greatness that died with them. The grim reality of death again here seems to be the focus—the speaker is, once more, preoccupied with the transient physical world, and gives little thought to any kind of “immortality,” other than, perhaps, to mourn its impossibility: “Th’ applause of list’ning senates to command, The threats of pain and ruin to despise, To scatter plenty o’er a smiling land, And read their history in a nation’s eyes, Their lot forbad:..(61-65) The poem’s continued emphasis on the melancholy aspects of temporary earthly life is again anything but indicative of the final theme of “Elegy.” Gray continues to underscore the lack of any sort of fame or “immortality” possessed by the deceased individuals buried around the churchyard due to their lack of noted accomplishments. For the

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nameless dead mentioned earlier in the poem. The man is not even being recalled for any sort of heroic or particularly noteworthy feat, but rather for his everyday activities. In the end it was not some noble action that drew the attention of onlookers, but rather the enactment of a regular life that made an impression. The fact that this onlooker is able to expound upon the common activities of the deceased for several quatrains is a testament to the validity of an unspectacular existence. Even the epitaph acknowledges the deceased as "A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" (118), and yet in this case it is mistaken. It is only here at the end of the work does the type of immortality the speaker is detailing becomes apparent: it makes absolutely no difference what you accomplish or succeed in during your lifetime, because the impressions left on those surrounding you are going to be your only legacy. From what can be gathered from the work as a whole, the poem suggests,

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should be given equal opportunities for the full realisation of their personality.

The rustics in the *Elegy* are the simple poor folk who are not even aware of the movements in the urban circles. They are just the sons of the soil toiling to eke out a mean living. Their domestic life does not admit of any kind of luxury enjoyed by the rich in the cities. The atmosphere which he paints has a realistic homely touch about it. The unsophisticated tillers of the land remain supremely unaware of the forces of the current politics of the literary movements. They simply exist, and just don't live. Gray wants and desires that their status should be elevated and they be placed on the recognised pedestal of society. The idea is, however, debatable whether they shall be able to maintain their unrecognised superiority over the urban folk in matters of simple outlook on life or they should be able to maintain their external glamour of life they are handicapped, and if we take their living generously we shall, however, be content to note that their existence is just free from the urban artificiality.

The nihilism of the *Elegy* points out the meaninglessness of life, a kind of philosophy which takes refuge in the idea that there is nothing of permanent value. Even greatness meets the tragic fate ultimately. "Path of glory leads but to the grave." If it were so why then on earth should be lamentation for the poor. Nothing like contentment, and if it is not so why should they be persuaded to accept the so-called higher life. We find a kind of contradiction in the argument of Gray. There seems to be, however, defeatism, a tendency of wishful thinking for the objects we desire and do not get. Gray seems to lose ground on the point. Why should not an urban dignitary envy the rustic for all his contentment. It is a debatable point, and the question is left for us to decide.

There is an aroma of slow and all-pervading melancholy. It touches our heart. We are taken into confidence to plead the cause of the poor rustics. We are made to think on the wastage of the possible genius. Gray's heart at once goes out to them. The shade of melancholy becomes all the more dark when reference is made not to the living but to the dead. The tone of sympathy for this reason becomes all the more intense and pathetic. There is no twitching of a muscle for satire or laughter. The tone goes on steadily leaving a powerful trail of pathos behind, and there is hardly any slackening tendency except at the places he asserts himself in a classical manner.

nature which characterises such genuine romantic poetry as Shelley's *Ode to West Wind* or Coleridge's *Dejection*. The feeling of self-torture is not to be found in it. There is the element of sympathy which is felt for the poor. Gray can be termed for this reason a pseudo-romantic. "Man as Gray views him from Stoke Pogis and from Windsor, is still the abstraction of Pope's quasi-philosophical poem, and it is the pathos of the race, not of the individual, which tinges his contemplations with melancholy". The intensity of feeling with regard to the rustics has been depicted with a personal concern. The *Elegy* is different from other elegies in its width and pathetic concentration. "But in the *Elegy* he gives no hint of personal sorrow, in the *Elton Ode* only the most carefully visited one."

The *Elegy* of Gray represents both the romantic and classical qualities in it. The pathos though not the expression of an individual constitutes the romantic ingredients in the poem. But the classical element in it can be seen in the use of his personifications and didacticism. It does not show, however, any vigorous tendency of separation from the classical mode. Gray has portrayed the surroundings replete with the details of nature. It is different from the classical portrayal, and tends to be romantic, but it lacks depth. It has the freshness of the country-side, but has not been viewed from within. Further, it is not the main constituent of the poem, it forms only the background. Any way it has been treated well as a romantic description. Mr. James Mackintosh writes: "He was the first discoverer of the beauties of nature in England.....He anticipated Romantic Revival, 'Go back to nature'. The romantic side of the poem, which shall be dealt in greater detail elsewhere, lies in his sympathy for the poor, his portrayal of the scenes of nature, in the choice of locale far from the madding crowd and in its pathos of race'.

As regards the appeal of the *Elegy* is concerned we can say that it is universal. The pathos is applicable to all mankind of the rustic type. He pleads the cause of the down-trodden humanity wallowing in poverty. Thus the choice of the locale has no regional bias. Gray crosses the geographical boundaries in his expression for the cause of the poor. One may even be tempted to suggest that, consciously or unconsciously, the poet, wants to advocate the democratic view in the sense that the poor people

places its quality is baulked by the influx of the classical expressions. It lends it a magnificence of language, no doubt, but then it tends to diminish or obstruct the pathetic spontaneity of its easy flow. I wonder why a critic calls it 'autobiography'; it not doubt belongs to the familiar village of Stoke Pogis, but on the emotional side it is least personal. This romantic quality cannot be attributed to Gray, it only belongs to the romantic poets like Shelley and Keats. The critic says, "It is autobiography and the creation of a world for the hearts of a man..." The latter part of the comment is more true than the former. The objectivity of the poem diminishes the strength of its autobiographical approach. It is just associated with the knowledge of the poet. It is not of the poet but of the lowly rustics who otherwise would have been great statesmen or poetic geniues. It is true Gray escapes out of the Eighteenth Century into immortality' and it is something more than *The Bard* something more than the 'master piece of imaginative rhetoric'.

The striking feature of the *Elegy* is its peaceful atmosphere, it is only the imagination of the poet which works with defensive fury. His contemplative dynamics lends a charm to it. The beginning of the poem is highly suggestive of the evening glow of nature, but then predicament of man comes to lodge in the poet's imagination and he discharges the full battery of his poetic power to lament the woeful condition of the handicapped rustics. "Here the genius of the parting day and all that it means to the imagination, its quiet movement, and its music, its pensiveness and its regrets, but have been given a form more lasting than bronze."

The images that jostle in the *Elegy* are of the darkest hue, but they have a music of human heart. The *Elegy* has been described as "a fountain of dusky images playing melodiously as the peaceful evening darkens." The critics trace the pensive quality of it from the time of the publication of *II Penseroso*. As a trend they do not consider it as a novel experiment but only the supreme accomplishment in that sphere 'already well established'. It in fact 'indicates hardly a revolt from, but at least a weakness of the subject-matter in which our typical Augustans had delighted.'

There is a total absence of the 'monologue of the soul' in *Elegy* or in the *Eton Ode*. The critic says about the *Elegy* in the following manner; "There is an almost total absence of that intimate self-revelation, that monologue of the soul, confronted with

Gray And His Elegy Written in A Country Church-Yard

The famous Elegy of Gray has been colourfully described as a water colour landscape which is "something more than natural in tint". In it we find the 'pathos of the race'. It has a kind of anonymity about it, and the expressions have not been set in motion for any particular person. Gray achieves a kind of universality which is almost a rare quality "Gray was the poet of the shattered life", who in "*Elegy* liberated the English imagination after a century of prose and rhetoric.

He restored poetry to its true function as the confession of an individual soul: It is an interesting co-incidence that Gray and Collins should have brought about a poetical revival by the rediscovery of the beauty of the evening just as Mr. Yeats and Mr. A. E. brought about a poetical revival in our own day by the rediscovery of the beauty of twilight. No poem other than the *Elegy* that he wrote was a miracle".

This masterly comment comes from Mr. Lynd. The matter only hinged about the 'confession of an individual soul'. I wonder why it should not only be an expression. The word 'confession' connotes a different meaning, and I personally think that it cannot fit in so well as the word 'expression' for the feelings which are guiltless. It is a great work of art. This *Elegy* is "the fabric so closely woven and patterned and is made for the wear, like a tapestry or carpet that has cost the maker months of eye-sight." Besides expression there is an intense scenic quality about the atmosphere of the *Elegy*.

The peculiar quality about the elegy is that it appeals to human imagination, there is hardly a person who does not feel so much. The readers who appreciated Blair's *Grave* like Gray's *Elegy*. The pathos contained in the poem is highly touching though at

thesis is beyond him." There is consequently a mark of laboured effort, as pointed by Dr. Johnson, in his Odes. Gray is dissatisfied with the traditions of his age, though he feels at the same time that classical discipline and order in poetry are necessary. These two show a conflict for supremacy in his work. His poetry has on the one hand the measure and balance of classicism and on the other some kind of freedom and spontaneity of romanticism. He makes a departure from the town poetry of the Augustans and sings of nature and the country churchyard. He transgresses from the actualities of the present and goes to the wide spaces of the past and from the limitations of the heroic couplet he goes to the varieties of metrical experiment. What he failed at is that he cannot combine these conflicting trends, as Keats has done later on. He is truly speaking a poet of transition, because his poetry is a combination not a fusion, of the impulses of classicism and romanticism.

*Enchanting shall the sullen cares
And frantic Passions hear thy soft control,
The Progress of Poesy,
In gallant trim the gilded vessel goes,
Youth on the prow, the Pleasure at the helm,
The Bard.*

There are other artificial devices such as rhetorical exclamation, avoidance of the common-place and use of circumlocution, which show that his poetry is product of his age. Some of the examples of these devices are as follows :

*"The scourge of heaven what terrors round him wait !
Hyperion's march they spy,
Ruby drops that warm my heart
The orb of day,*

Sententious Moralising

Sententious moralising commonly practised by Gray in his poetry, is similar to that of the classic poets, "Again and again the commonplace and meaningless diction of the period spoils," states Stopford Brooke, "the grace of his verse. Its sentiment is sometimes faded; its sententious phrasing too usual; its expression too carefully, too academically wrought." Gray in all this undoubtedly belongs to his :

Connection with the Coming Age

But he has links with the coming age too. He has passion, not deep but subdued, sentimental, personal, melancholy, interest in man as man interest in the past and love of nature which show that he is very much in advance of his time and looks forward to the coming period of romanticism. He has broken off from the classical tradition in the choice of metre also. The classical writers used only the heroic couplet, but Gray discards the heroic couplet altogether. He uses the stanza from and other kinds of metres which definitely is an evidence of his connection with the romantic movement.

Trace of Classicism and Romanticism are distinct in Gray

We have in the poetry of Gray distinct and clear traces of classicism and romanticism, but they are seen separately from one another. "He does not possess", says Cazamian, "the necessary creative force to fuse together the contrary impulses of romantic spontaneity and classical lucidity; the psychological effort of such a syn-

Thomas Gray : A Poet of Transition
OR
Thomas Gray : In Relation To His Age

Gray stands between two age, the Classical and the Romantic classical and the romantic. He stands between two ages—the both these ages. Gray is a representative poet of his age; he breathes in its atmosphere and grows up under its influence. He has imbibed the tendencies of his times consequently. He is deeply a man of his time, yet he rebels against it too. He is interested in things which mark the romantic poetry, but he can not be called a conscious herald of the coming romanticism. He is a man of liberal sensibilities, which lead him to get interested in the lives and destinies of the poor people. He is an artist and has a susceptible ear to music. As such he gets tired of the mechanical heroic couplet and experiments in other metres. But it cannot be said that he consciously stands against the classicism of his age.

Influence of the age in his Poetry :

It is clearly evident from his poetry that he has upon him the impact of his age. He makes constant use of lifeless personification with a capital letter which Wordsworth condemns severely in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, which shows that he is influenced by his age. His pure style is spoiled even in his more elaborate poems, such as *The Elegy*, *The Progress of Poesy* and *The Bard* by the sickening use of personification.

*Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys and destiny obscure,
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor,
The Elegy*

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Thomas Gray : Characteristics of His Poetry

In 'poetizing of the meditative melancholic subjects,' says a critic, he draws from the minor poems of Milton. His genius is suited best for the melancholy expressions in poetry. It is not exuberance which marks his Muse but the tendency to display the splendid plumes of knowledge. His language, no doubt happen to be forced but it is enough high-flown at certain places. For sheer 'exquisite workmanship' Gray stands alone. Further he is all for form wherein the 'logical sequence' plays an important role. Chaos does not colour his poetry but form which puts it in a regular shape. Inside it the philosophic pathos shimmers with all its tenderness and touching glory.

choly could not be eschewed because it was in the man himself. His contemporaries were not creative in the sense that they depended much upon the artificial manipulations, whereas Gray created and recreated the forces in poetry which in fact set the ball of romanticism rolling.

As a romantic poet he had scarcely those qualities which crept in the 19th Century romantic poetry. No self-analysis like that of a typical romantic can be found in him. The expression of self-pathos is missing in him. He simply projects those emotions which he feels for the suffering humanity. An individual in none of his concern, the race—the entire run of the class-interests him in this respect.

The poems neither weave the magic web like that of Coleridge, nor does he probe deep into the inner nuances of nature. He is a romantic poet of his own type—one on whom still clings the vestiges of classicism. "There is no elusive or mysterious quality in his poetry". He stands for the concrete in the sphere of humanity and nature. But he shows indifference to the great ethical and religious movements of his time. He is least interested in the political ferments of the age. The legendary trouble like that of the massacre of Welsh bards moves him a great deal. His Muse 'is essentially academic'. He lacks the creative fecundity. The intellect rather than the emotion is much more predominant in him. It is one reason that his poetry comes to show the lack of 'supreme lyrical exaltation'. The spontaneity is curbed, and he gets tangled into an ornate style.

The sublime, particularly that of the style of Milton, comes to enrich his verse. It is an uplifted style in which he works up his poems. Partly the *Elegy* is free from it, the part of which stands simple and polished. But he is different from his contemporaries in the sense of abstaining himself from introducing the didactic element. His descriptive resources however, stand vastly enlarged, and the essence smacking of his personality lingers about his verses. He however, is a creator of a new kind of music which is rarely seen in that age in which Gray lived. The element of revivalism is in him. Like Keats he looks at the past. The general trend of caricature, laughter and satire, has obviously been eschewed by him.

deal of tinsel and splendid patch work' in the poems of Gray. But in architectural superiority he surpasses, evidently, Collins. He lacks, on the other hand, the 'enthusiasm' of his close contemporary. There are 'glittering array of ideas and phrases'. 'Gray has the long, resounding melody and statuesque structure of latin poems'.

His Conception of Nature in Poetry :

Nature as an exclusive element is not found in the poems of Gray, but they are found in a nicely draped style; the descriptions of nature serve him as an excellent background. It is said that 'the scenes of nature in the *Elegy* are of the water-colour schools'. The love of picturesque scenery was becoming fashionable in the middle of the century, says a critic, and Gray as a man of taste was the first to feel the impulse : He labours in a little garden but he certainly knows where to plant what. The discovery of the beauty of evening in the *Elegy* is almost analogous to that of the rediscovery of the twilight in our own age by certain poets.

The streak of tranquility runs through the descriptions of nature, but he is not anxious to plumb into the interior of nature. He does not bother to find meaning. They must hang like well-woven tapestries in the background. The descriptions of nature are not seen from within. Music, pensiveness and regrets pervade the entire fabric of his poetry.

Some broad features of the poetry of Gray :

Gray has got an immense power to give freshness to the commonplace. There is a pathetic tenderness in his poems. The text is wrought with feelings. However, his store of knowledge stands in the way of his passionate expressions and his poems are loaded with an 'excessive fastidiousness'. The age was littered with prose and rhetoric and Gray snapped the shackles and set free the poetic imagination which had started growing restive in constraint. The soft and magnificent beauty of nature seeped in. The 'image of reality' came to stamp the poetry of Gray. The artificiality started crumbling under the extraordinary impact of his verse.

He got closer to life. Instead of paying attention to the town-gardens he looked directly at the twilight. The strain of Melan-

sidered elsewhere. His romanticism, however, does not fulfil those conditions which pertain to the Nineteenth Century romantic poets, particularly in the sense that monologue of soul, for which the romantic poets are noted, is missing from his poems.

His Poetic Diction :

Occasionally his thoughts get smothered under the heavy figures of speech. There is a classical grandeur even in his simplicity. He has written in such a 'grandiose diction' which is now considered to be obsolete. His two poems, *The Progress of Poesy* and *The Bard*, have been written in a classical style and they look so ornate and embellished. His *Elegy*, however, as compared to them, is not so embellished. But he takes enough care not to 'lapse into the vernacular'. The choice of words used by him is of a nature which lends enchantment to his poems, but they do not ring as they do in Tennyson. Gray is not without the infections of the age in which he lived. He wears 'stately ropes in his poetry'. The main contribution of Gray is that he liberates the English imagination in the age of prose and rhetoric.

The total effect is exquisite in his poetry; and it is due to his style. We wish if he could have refrained from using the plethora of allusions so as to allow the thoughts to peep through that jungle. It is not that his 'passion for the acquisition and coordination of knowledge' desired but the effect which must announce itself immediately. It is for this reason that his Muse has been described as 'essentially academic'. But there is Miltonic sublimity in some of his poems. At places, where the thought is more sincere, we find simple and polished expression. The varied effects however, can be traced in his poems. He often uses Popian diction for depicting nature, and being a man of the century, he cannot be much blamed for that. He used rhymes which Pinder did not use. W.P. Ker holds that his so-called Pindaric Odes are not after Pinder but after the Italian Canzone. In his opinion the real Pindaric Ode [cannot be met with anywhere outside the Greek literature.

Gray has rejected the use of the heroic couplet. There is a forced use of the poetical language. The language which he uses is generally high flown. According to Hazlitt there is a 'great

elements. He stands for the destiny of men and pleads for their cause in a pathetic tone. In the *Elegy* his voice quivers with all the pathetic tones. His feeling for the poor is genuine. But the voice heard in *The Bard* is that of anger. His wrath knows no bounds. Not man alone has been wronged but the segment of the race of the poets. It is a sacrilege which calls for all the curses which must wipe away Edward I along with his progeny. As regards men is concerned he deals both with men in general and men in particular. He has sympathy for the common man, and for the poets his love knows no bounds. Unlike the professional prosaic theorists of his time, he is largely liberal and humanistic. And for this reason he has been described as a 'poet of shattered life'.

In the *Elegy* he has seen man in the grip of unkind destiny. This he has described in his most sincere moods of lamentation. It may well be surmised that Gray initiated the democratic sentiment in that age when the poets were busy describing the artificial appendages of life.

He gets deeply interested in the pathetic side of life, but refrains from uttering a word about himself. The handicapped humanity touches him to the quick, and the impulses of humanism stir his sensitive self. Thus his poetry came to be imbued with the forces which spring from his honest feeling and pity. Humanism in Gray has been cast in gloomy moulds.

Gray as A 'Recluse' in the Realm of Poetry :

He has been described as a 'scholarly and scientifically minded recluse'. Cutting himself away from the main currents of poetry he designs a unique cottage for his Muse. He stands with the trends of his age, but at the same time he removes himself from there. He often gets 'obscure' in his poetry because like a romantic poet he has to operate the back cluth. For this reason his poetry has been described as 'an oasis in the desert. I here is not merely experimentalism in his poetry but a mature shape which he gives to some of his poems. The critic has discovered 'wide horizons of poetry' in the lines on Milton and Dryden. The historical lyric in *The progress of poesy* and *The bard* just lift him from the poets of the century and place him in the vicinity of the romantic poets. His position as [a romantic poet has been con-

Thomas Gray : Characteristics of His Poetry

His poetry is a blend of Classical and Romantic poetry :

Gray's poetry is a strange blend of classical and romantic elements. His style also varies according to the subject-matter of his poetry. In the classical treatment of the subject he was with his contemporaries, but in the choice of the subject-matter he veered from them. It is said about him that he avoided social and satirical poetry, the social poetry in that specific sense in which the writers of the time were dealing with it. His romantic qualities were often looked with suspicion. Dr. Johnson called his aesthetic treatment of nature as 'a perverse quest of mistaken beauties'. The later criticism of Gray's poetry is much more discerning than that of his time.

Universal Quality of his Poetry :

His *Elegy* has a large universal quality because it touches a theme of unquitting importance. Whatever be the clime men are found in the similar condition which we find in this poem. His poem voices their silent aspirations. Gray at once becomes their advocate. He is not only moved by their predicament, but feels honestly that their lot should be improved and an equal opportunity given to them so as to bring out the latent qualities which go to the grave unexpressed. This predicament of man is universal. The lowly in life suffer, particularly those who live in the rural areas. He dwells on theme which is of a universal nature. In *The Progress of Poesy* and *The Bard* he does not appeal to the universal quality but in *Elegy* he does.

Humanism in Poetry :

The humanism in the poetry of Gray is one of the important