UNIT 10  THOMAS GRAY: ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD

Structure

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10.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to analyze and explicate Thomas Gray’s Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard in the biographical, historical and literary perspective. The unit will also discover how far Gray’s Elegy reflects the first rumblings of Romanticism through the choices the poet makes regarding the selection and treatment of his theme in this poem.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will begin with providing some brief biographical information about Thomas Gray, paying special attention to the important poems he wrote during his literary career. And then the unit will come straight to examine Gray’s Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard and bring out the special literary merits of the poem. The discussion of the poem will be based entirely on selected extracts from the poem, and an attempt will be made to see how far the Elegy reveals Romantic features which are later built on by William Wordsworth and other Romantic poets.

10.2 THOMAS GRAY (1716-71)

Thomas Gray, the sole survivor of twelve children, a man of poor physique himself, was born in Cornhill, London in 1716. His father, a scrivener, was mentally unbalanced, and Gray was brought up by his mother who sent him to Eton where he made friends with Horace Walpole. Gray went on to Peterhouse, Cambridge, and gained a high reputation for his Latin poetry, though he failed to take a degree.

In 1739, he embarked on a tour of the continent with Walpole, but in 1741 they quarreled, and Gray returned alone. He turned to the study of law and began writing a tragedy Agrippine which remained unfinished. The death of Richard West, a close friend from his Eton days in 1742 precipitated a period of poetic
activity, and Gray’s first publication was the *Ode On a Distant Prospect of Eton College* written in 1742 but published anonymously by Dodsley in 1747.

From 1742, Gray lived in Peterhouse and later Pembroke College, Cambridge, except for a period (1759-61) in London where he pursued his studies in the British Museum. Relations with Walpole were soon restored, and it was the death of Walpole’s cat which inspired Gray to write the delightful mock-heroic poem *Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat* (1748)

In 1742, Gray also started writing *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* while staying with his mother and aunt at their retirement home in Stoke Pages. The poem was carefully revised over a long period and was eventually published by Dodsley in 1751, achieving instant recognition as a masterpiece. It quickly went through fifteen editions and was often pirated.

With this poem, a great change appears, and many features make it historically very important. There is first the use of Nature which, though employed only as a background, is still handled with fidelity and sympathy. There is next the churchyard scene, the twilight atmosphere, and the brooding melancholy of the poem, which at once connects it with one side of the romantic movement – the development of the distinctive romantic mood. The contrast between the country and town – the peasant’s “simple life” and the “madding crowds’ ignoble strife” – is a third particular which should be noted. Finally, in the tender feeling shown for the “rude forefathers of the hamlet” and the sense of human values of the little things that are written in the short and simple annals of the poor we see poetry, under the influence of the spreading democratic spirit, reaching out to include humble aspects of life hitherto ignored. Thus despite the poet’s continued use of the Augustan trick of personification and capital letters, the Elegy marks a stage in the evolution of Gray’s poetic genius.

In 1761, Gray wrote a number of poems reflecting a mixture of bookish scholarship and romantic primitivism very characteristic of the period: *The Fatal Sisters, The Descent of Odin* (An Ode from the Norse tongue), *The Triumphs of Owen* (A Fragment from the Welsh) were all published in 1768 in Dodsley’s collected edition of his works: *Poems by Mr. Gray*. These poems were filled with a new conception of the poet as an inspired singer rather than an accomplished artist – in the terms of the eighteenth century antithesis, an “enthusiast” rather than a “wit”.

In 1768 Gray was appointed Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, though he never delivered a lecture.

In 1769 he travelled to the Lake District and his *Journal* published posthumously in 1775 relates his reactions to the sublime scenery. His *Letters* reveal a profoundly learned but witty and entertaining personality.

Thus Thomas Gray can be rightly considered as a scholar who produced little but precious little English poetry. What he wrote was not only exquisite in quality and finish but also curiously interesting as a kind of epitome of the changes which were coming over English literature of his time. He began with versified pamphlets in Pope’s manner, passed on through conventional lyrics to the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* and ended with experiments which were fundamentally romantic in character.
It will be apt to conclude this part of the unit with Gray’s brief prose epitaph for his mother’s tomb in Stoke Pages Churchyard in which he noted that she was “the tender careful mother of many children: one of whom had the misfortune to survive her”. It is a typically self-pitying comment, one accentuated by the fact that when Thomas Gray died in 1771 and was himself buried in the same tomb no further reference was made to him on the stone. In sharp contrast, the monument later erected to his memory in Westminster Abbey, immediately under that to Milton, bore a more assertive quatrain by his friend William Mason (1725-97):

“No more the Grecian Muse unrivall’d reigns,  
To Britain let the Nations homage pay;  
She felt a Homer’s fire in Milton’s strains,  
A Pindar’s rapture from the Lyre of Gray”

**Self-check Exercise I**

a) Give the title of the first publication of Thomas Gray.

b) Name the mock-heroic poem written by Thomas Gray inspired by the death of Walpole’s cat.

c) Explain briefly how far you regard Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* as making a great change in English poetry.
Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* has been considered as the most enduringly famous, fluent and diversified of all ‘graveyard’ poems. And the term *Elegy*, as you already know, has been defined as any poetic meditation on the death of an individual or upon death itself. Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* broadly meditates on the obscure destinies of the unknown and undistinguished villagers buried in the country churchyard and culminates in the celebrated comment on unfulfilled greatness; “village Hampdens, “mute inglorious Miltons and “guileless Cromwells”, who have in the village had both their talents and their potentials confined by a lack of opportunity.

But Gray is not making a political protest on behalf of the meek or the downtrodden. He is merely siding with the passive placidity of rural rhythm and rustic verse. The poetry of sophistication complements the unsophisticated rhymes on the grave-stones. The *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* intermixes the poetry of country retirement with a self-reflective nocturnal musing on the egalitarian nature of mortality.

The unnamed “hoary headed swain” at the end of the poem becomes a memorializer of an inconspicuous bard. He speaks not in “uncouth rhymes”, but in the smooth closing quatrains which form an epitaph, and renders the melancholy poet one with the dead villagers. So the Elegy finally focuses on a solitary poet, a man of “humble birth” and a stranger to “national glory, to fortune, and to fame,”

Now let us look more closely at the poem itself. *The Elegy* begins with a quatrain that sums up the very mood and thematic content of the whole poem:

“The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o’er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me”

The curfew mournfully tolling the end of a day, the lowing herd winding slowly over the lea, the tired ploughman plodding his way home – all go to build up a dark and dismal mood that artistically prepares one for the dark thoughts about to come in the *Elegy*. And when the world is left over to darkness, the poet mentions himself in identification with this natural scene of a dusk being overtaken by the darkness of the night. The poet has introduced himself right in the very opening quatrain as a part of the natural landscape. Such an identification between the poet and the natural landscape is later to emerge in the Romanticism of William Wordsworth.

The *Elegy Written in a country Churchyard* next goes on to the Churchyard itself:

“Beneath those rugged elms, that few tree’s shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep”.

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**10.3 ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD (1751)**
The hamlet’s churchyard is described as one with objects of Nature significantly pointed out. “The rugged elms”, and the “yew tree” provide the necessary shade, and the churchyard has near it the mouldering “heap of turf”. The rude ancestors of the village have been buried in this simple churchyard hemmed in with various objects of Nature. The forefathers are described respectfully as sleeping in their narrow cells.

But the *Elegy* soon switches over to the active Past of these “sleeping Forefathers” when it asserts:

“Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,  
Their furrows oft the stubborn glebe has broke  
How jocund did they drive their team afield!  
How bow’d the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!”

The poet makes the readers aware of the pleasant lives of these peasants whose Past had been made up of energetic activities. Their sickles had yielded so many harvests, their furrows had often broken the stubborn earth, the woods had surrendered so easily to their powerful strokes and how happy they had been moving over with their teams in the fields.

In the next quatrain, the poet champions the cause of these once active peasants by observing:

“Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
Their homely joys, and destinies obscure  
Nor Grandeur bear with a disdainful smile  
The short and simple annals of the Poor”

The poet wants that ambitious people should not mock at the useful actions the farmers had performed as well as at their homely pleasures and obscure destinies. Grandeur must not disdainfully smile at the short and simple stories of these poor people. So the *Elegy* now begins to talk about the unknown and unsung heroes of the village:

“Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid  
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire  
Hands that the rod of empire might have sway’d  
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre  
But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page  
Rich with the spoils of time, did ne’er unroll  
Child Penury repress’d their noble rage  
And froze the genial current of the soul”

Here the poet brings out these “rude Forefathers” as people who could have achieved a lot had they been given the opportunity. Poverty stifled the flowering of these geniuses, and so the poet laments that perhaps in this very neglected spot is buried a person who could have achieved greatness had he been given the chance to get knowledge.

So in the country churchyard are buried simple villagers who could have become great had they been given the chance. These sleeping “rude Forefathers” might have been great only if they had been given the opportunity.
And the poem ends with the poet identifying once again with the village scene, as he had done much earlier in the opening quatrain. Now the poem observes:

“Haply some hoary-headed swain may say
Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
Breathing with hasty steps the dews away
To meet the sun upon the upland lawn
One morn I miss’d him on the custom’d hill
Along the heath, and near his favourite tree”

The curfew tolling the end of the parting day of the opening quatrain of the *Elegy* has now been replaced by the “peep of dawn”, and the “hoary headed swain” mentions the poet being seen at the “peep of dawn”, “breathing with hasty steps” to “meet the sun upon the upland lawn”. The earlier dusk has been replaced by dawn now, but the reference to the mourning continues when the hoary headed swain laments:

“The next with dirge, due in sad array
Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay
Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn”.

The poet now imagines himself as having become a part and parcel of the same churchyard when he projects the swain reporting on “the poet” as dying and being carried with a funeral song through the same country churchyard. The *Elegy* ends with an Epitaph that artistically sums up the entire mood and thematic pattern of the whole poem:

“Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A Youth, to Fortune and to Fame unknown
Fair Science frown’d not on his humble birth
And Melancholy mark’d him for his own.”

This Epitaph sums up the *Elegy* and shows the poet himself imagining as having come near the “rude Forefathers” he had been referring to in the earlier part of the poem. This “poet” in the Epitaph is unknown to Fortune and Fame, is of humble birth and is marked for Melancholy. The poet here imagines himself as having becomes one with the other humble people sleeping in the narrow cells of the country churchyard.

So, Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* does prove to be a literary masterpiece.

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**Self-check Exercise II**

a) Comment critically on the dramatic significance of the following lines

“The ploughman homeward plods his weary way
And leaves the world to darkness, and to me”.

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b) Explain briefly the following lines:
“Oft did their harvest to the sickle yield,
Their furrows oft the stubborn glebe has broke”
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c) Comment critically on these lines:
“Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure.”
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d) Explain briefly what the poet suggests here:
“But knowledge to their eyes her ample page
Rich with the spoils of time, did ne’er unroll”.
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e) Explain briefly the importance of the following lines:
“Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A Youth, to Fortune and to Fame unknown”
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10.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have observed closely Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* in the biographical and sociological context of the poet. We have also seen that although Gray wrote very few poems, his poetry carries significant seeds of the changes that were taking place in the literary scene. Our study has also revealed that Gray’s *Elegy* comes out with distinctive Romantic features that were later developed still further by the other Romantic poets like William Wordsworth.

10.5 SUGGESTED READING


10.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I

a) Thomas Gray’s first publication was *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*.

b) The mock-heroic poem written by Thomas Gray inspired by the death of Walpole’s cat was *Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat*.

c) Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* marked a great change in English poetry because Nature here is handled with fidelity and sympathy, and the churchyard scene connects it with one side of the romantic movement creating a distinctly romantic mood.

Self-check Exercise II

a) These lines are dramatically significant because they set the basic thematic tone of the poem. The dark mood comes when the exhausted peasants are described as plodding their way homeward, leaving the natural scene of dusk to darkness and to the poet. The poet projects himself as identifying himself with the entire natural scene.

b) These lines bring out the past hectic attributes of the village poor who have been earlier described in the poem as sleeping and buried in the churchyard. In their Past days those peasants had often made their sickles yield innumerable harvests and had struck deeply into the stubborn earth to pave their own way towards success.
c) In these lines, the poet challengingly tells ambitious people not to mock at the useful labour of these village poor. The domestic moments of happiness and the unknown lives of the rural poor should not be laughed at but sympathized with. These lines bring out the poet as championing the cause of the poor.

d) These lines suggest that the village poor did not get the opportunity to be properly educated, and so wealth never came their way. These people did not get the chance, although they did possess the talent.

e) These lines are very important because here the poet imagines himself as having become one with the village people buried in the churchyard. Like the other “rude Forefathers” of the hamlet sleeping in the cells, the poet projects himself as a youth unknown to Fame and Fortune. The poet imagines himself as having finally identified himself with the natural scene of the country churchyard.