

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THOMAS GRAY'S ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD

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Abstract:

This article analyses Thomas Gray's poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", which is generally considered to be the harbinger of Romantic Movement. The poet in this poem expresses his concern over the plight and predicament of the villagers and he has composed this poem in remembrance and honor of the late villagers. It is a dirge. The bard visualizes what the late farmers might have done during their lifetime. How they remained as the backward sections of the society for want of opportunity, the poet presents in this poem. The poet's sympathy, concern and interest in the villages are manifested in this poem.

Key words: *Curfew, herd, tea, solitary reign, forefathers, hamlet, the inevitable hour, furrow, stubborn globe.*

Thomas Gray, born in 1710, was the only one of twelve children who survived infancy. His sorrowful childhood, the brutality of his father and his absence from his mother made his character melancholic. It is obvious in all his poems. Both at Eton College and Cambridge, he followed his own selection of reading rather than the curriculum. Displeased with idleness and dullness of university life, he acquainted himself with Horace Walpole with whom he undertook a European tour that left deep a impression on his mind.

Regarding his career, his literary output can be studied in three phases. The first phase saw him publishing poems like "Hymn to Adversity", "The Odes to Spring" and "On a Distant Prospect of Eton College". These early poems reveal the poet's melancholy bent of mind. In this second phase he came out with poems like "The Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", "The Progress of Poesy and the Bard". The poet in his third phase composed poems like "The Fatal Sisters" and "The Descent of Odin". Gray was the first poet to release himself from the classical rules and norms on poetic creation. His predecessors, the classicists wrote poems on Lords and Ladies, kings and Queens especially people from higher echelons of society besides shedding light on logic and reason. Neo Classical poets prioritized practical reality over fantasy, contemporary themes over mediaeval subjects. That was the poetic tradition followed by poets then.

Gray's poem is a departure from classical school of poetry dominated by the writings of Dryden and Pope. His contemporaries such as William Blake, Thompson, Burns, Cowper are generally know as precursors to romantic poetry which later found its zenith in the poetic creations of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats. The seeds of Romantic Movement were sown by the precursors who spoke about nature, mythological subjects and the people of ordinary class.

In the poem selected for this analysis the poet, speaking in sympathetic tone for the late forefathers of the hamlet, remembers their lives, their deeds, their boldness and denial of opportunity for them. He starts his poem by highlighting the evening atmosphere of the village. The dusk has just come and the cows which are grazing on the meadow are being driven home along the winding track by the river. The ambience is so splendid that the villagers seem to do their work with absolute plainness of mind. The inference from the first stanza is that the villagers are immaculate and unblemished by nature. Their lives

are the reflection of their simplicity and humbleness. Then the poet draws the reader's attention to the cows and calves as they return homeward. Having toiled hard in their agricultural farm, the farmers with weariness and exhaustion return to their habitation. The bard standing in the churchyard watches all these scenes. He looks at them with warmth and concern.

The poet is left to stand in the churchyard and glances at the villager's movement. The poet illustrates that the light has withdrawn and the entire village has been enveloped by darkness with absolute quietness and calmness reigning supreme everywhere. The only sound heard there is the ringing of the bell worn around the neck of sheep kept in their huts. It serves as a lullaby to the sleeping sheep. From the ivy-covered tower, a little away from there, the poet shows an owl making its complaint to the moon that its territory is violated by some creatures like beetle and honey bees. The owl is depicted as saying nobody so far dares to get near its habitation. The presence of owl which is generally considered to be an ill omen bird adds to the melancholic atmosphere prevailing there. The employment of birds like owl and its complaint to the moon is one of the devices followed by romantics.

Then the poet depicts old elm trees and the yew trees under which the rude forefathers have been buried. He further adds that each is kept in his narrow cell. On seeing these trees and the burial grounds under them, the lives of the late forefathers flash in the mind of the poet. At this point the poet further explains the nature of the ambience there. The healthy morning breeze blows, spreading the fragrance of dawn everywhere, with the swallow twittering from the shed built of straw, the cock crowing shrilly or the hunter's horn echoing from hill to hill. All these occurrences, the poet says, will not awaken the village forefathers from their eternal sleep. These splendid natural scenes cannot provide any happiness for the villagers. During their lifetime, they all led a complete life with some fulfillment and passed away. The bard visualizes in his mind what kind of life they all might have led in the village and sympathies with them. His heart becomes so heavy and painful that he keeps verbalizing his passions and sentiments towards them. At this juncture, he says to himself that the splendid environment of the day means nothing to the late rustics whose lives are characterized by innocence and plainness.

The successive stanzas express the powerful description of the poet of the hearths, busy housewives' activities and children's mischief. The poet explains that the hearths of home will not burn and prepare food for the late villagers anymore. Similarly, the housewives who very actively do their works like spinning and weaving ordinary clothes would mean nothing to the villagers. The way the poet has depicted the quiet and serene evening and the eternal absence of the late rustics lend ornamentation to the poem.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn
Or busy housewife ply her evening care;
No children run to lisp their sire's return
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share (24)

Then the poet reveals his soft corner and good will for the villagers, who throughout their lives remain unnoticed, unhonoured, unrecognized and uncared for, goes on to refer to their gutsy and dynamic nature of capturing the harvest with their sickles. He seems to have been thrilled by well built physique of peasants and their skill in executing the harvest work. The poet pictures the tilling scene wherein the land is often broken into furrows when they ploughed. Gray brings before the eyes of the readers the harvest scene of the village. They have driven their team of plough-horses to the fields in cheerful mood. How the trees have fallen under the sturdy strokes of their axes. Then the poet turns his attention to the ambitious and appeals to them not to underestimate the farmers, their homely joys and humble destinies. The poet also asks the people of pride and vanity not to listen with contemptuous smiles to the short and simple records of the lives of these humble people.

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. [32]

Then the bard holds that the great people boasting of their family heritage and emblems, the pomp in their lives, wealth will never have anything to come for their rescue when death strikes them. Then the poet makes the powerful statement that all the paths of glory lead only to the grave in the end.

The paths glory lead but to the grave. [36]

Neither power nor influence nor glory nor family heritage will safeguard one from death which is a leveler that equalizes and evens the gap between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless. He further builds his poem saying that if proud records are not inscribed on the tombs of the villagers, it is not their fault. If poems are not sung in the beautifully built cathedrals at the time of their death it is also not their fault. He puts a question whether the records on the tombs or the life like marble bust or the urns with ashes of the dead can bring back life to the dead. He asks whether this luxury can revive the dead and give them life. Luxury cannot be of any value or relevance to death.

Then the poet draws consolation from his statement on the possible presence of some Milton here among these tombs. His heart would have been filled with creative energy and fire. The poet says that some hands which were capable of wielding the scepter might have lived here. Or some musician might have lived and died here. They all remained obscure only for want of opportunity. The poet's contention is that if opportunities had been afforded to them, they also would have had a splendid life. He states with regret the goddess of knowledge and wisdom was not benign towards them. She did not open the book of knowledge to them. Their noble ambitions were crushed by their poverty. The mottoes they bore in their heart, they could not attain on account of their want and penury. He then draws an analogy between precious diamonds in the mid sea and the villagers. Like mid sea diamonds unrecognized by anyone, the rustics also live and die in obscurity. Their uniqueness and skill remain unknown to the outside world which looks down upon them as illiterates and uneducated. The poet's equation of desert flowers with the tillers of the village also finds expression in the next part.

Then he moves on to shed light on the bravery of the villagers. He says some Hempton who initiated British Civil war may have been buried here. He also adds that Some Milton may have lived and disappeared from here. He opines that had they all been afforded an opportunity, they would have proved their mettle. There might have been people here who matched the stature of Oliver Cromwell, a key figure of English Civil War. In course of his expression of feelings towards the rustics, here at this point highlights the fact that it was not necessary for the villagers to deliver long speeches in Parliament and to make the people read the Nation's history along with theirs. At this juncture, the poet is seen heaving a sigh of relief thinking that though these people did not make any great achievements to their credit, they never indulged in any criminal activities. It was not necessary for them to lavishly praise anybody for position and money.

The poet is surprised at the simple lives of the farmers and remarks that the villagers also want to inscribe certain words on their tombs after their demise so that their kith and kin would remember them. But it may not be ornamental and contains details such as year of birth and death. Some others have recorded some holy texts on the tombs. The dying person wants to leave some affectionate heart to fondly remember them. Then the bard draws readers' heed to himself in the concluding stanzas of the poem. He states that he has illustrated the simple, innocent and unblemished lives of the villagers in the above stanzas. The reality that he also some day or other has to leave this world dawns on him and he says that after his disappearance, if passersby make enquiries about him, some grey haired villagers might answer that they used to see him hurrying up on the snowy grass to greet the rising sun and by noon near the beech trees indulging in day dream.

Regarding the epitaph that is written on his tomb after he ceased to live, he says it should be written as follows. Here lies the body of a man who inspite of humble birth learnt science . He was melancholic mostly but generous towards others. His values and morals would enable him to have the blessings of Almighty God. Having said like this, he appeals to people not to probe his life deep and learn more about him. He with sober mind utters his strengths and weaknesses may lie with him. Post demise, he piously and reverentially states that he will be in the lap of God.

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