

Reader's Guide to Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"

Stanzas 1-2: Set the initial calm, serene atmosphere of the poem. Notice how Gray uses /'s, w's, and long o's to establish a slow and gentle pace to the poem. Do you hear the cows lowing? Do you hear their bells tinkling as they head back to the barns? Why, you can even hear the wings of a beetle as it buzzes by. Shhh!

Stanza 3: Do you hear that owl overhead in the church tower? Remember that the owl has traditionally been a symbol of death (it strikes swiftly and silently in the dead of night). Even the curfew bells from stanza 1 remind us of death (see "The Pardoner's Tale", or John Donne's "Meditation 17" (p. 251)). The word "ancient" in line 12 introduces the past into the poem.

Stanza 4: As we look around us in the darkening churchyard, we see. . . graves. Decaying in the graves ('mouldering heaps", l. 14), Gray's ancestors – the "rude forefathers" who preceded him in this small English village of Stoke Poges.

Stanza 5: Suddenly, it's morning. Swallows twitter, and roosters call. But no roosters will wake up the sleepers surrounding Gray.

Stanzas 6, 7: Flashback. We see the simple pleasures enjoyed by these farmers while they lived: coming home to a loving spouse, happy children and a blazing fire; working hard and to a purpose in the fields and woods.

Stanzas 8-9: Gray addresses the reader, telling us not to mock these simple farmers, just because their lives never amounted to much. After all, rich or poor, we all share one inevitable destiny: "*The paths of glory lead but to the grave.*"

(Poets in the 18th century (carrying on a tradition that dates back to at least Chaucer's time) used **personification** to express abstract concepts. This stanza features Ambition and Grandeur. Ahead you will find Memory, Honor, Flattery, Knowledge, Penury, and Contemplation, all addressed as if they were people.)

Stanzas 10-11: So what if you see no elaborate tombstones, or beautiful sepulchers? Did a piece of Italian marble ever make anybody any less dead?

Stanza 12-13: Perhaps there was born in this village a person who had greatness in him (or her), but whose genius was restrained by the limitations of the village. We have all of history and science at our disposal: they – due to their impoverished circumstances – had nothing. (Whatever became of all those great students who couldn't afford the tuition at Yale or Harvard?)

Stanza 14: The most famous lines in the poem. If a tree falls in the woods, and there's nobody there to hear it, does it make a sound? Is a sunset beautiful, or does it only become beautiful when a human consciousness sees it and says "*Wow! That's beautiful*"? What about those cavern at the bottom of the ocean, the delicate flowers that bloom for only a day in the middle of nowhere?

Stanza 15: Bravery is not fearlessness, but the overcoming of fears you already have. Isn't a little boy who fights the schoolyard bully as brave as any war hero? (But you won't read about it in the papers.)

Stanza 16: You can figure this stanza out when you realize that it starts in the next stanza. All the activities described here never happened because "*their lot*" (in life) did not allow for it to happen.

Stanzas 17-18: On the other hand, they never had the opportunity to do a lot of terrible things, either.

Stanza 19: So, all in all, away from the madness of day-to-day life (Thomas Hardy later wrote a novel titled Far from the Madding Crowd) the people of Stoke Poges lived quiet, uneventful lives.

Stanzas 20-21: Nevertheless, you'll find some simple markers in this graveyard. You'll find their names, their dates, and even a verse or two, from which we living may profit. (*As you are now/ So once was I/As I am now/ so you will be/ Prepare yourself/ To follow me.*)

Stanza 22: Did anybody ever die, and not take one last look at life and say, "Aw, gee. . ."

Stanza 23: We all need someone to mourn us, and we will all make some impact on those we leave behind.

Stanza 24: Gray begins to look ahead. What if, when he is long dead, someone comes into this very churchyard and asks, "*What ever happened to Thomas Gray?*"

Stanza 25-29: The response. *Oh, sure, we seen Gray. He would be out walking at sunrise. He liked to take his midday nap under a tree. We'd see him moping around, muttering verses. Then, one day... There's his tombstone over there. Maybe you can read it. (We can't).*

Stanzas 30-32: Gray's Epitaph. Ironically, this poem gave him the Fame he thought he'd never have. His final plea is that we not dig too deeply into his all-too-human frailties. It's advice we'd all do well to heed. Rest in peace, Thomas Gray.