

Critical appreciation of Gray's *Elegy Written in the Country Churchyard*

Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is one of the most famous elegies written in any language. It is not on the death of any particular person, friend or relative. One evening while Gray was standing at Stoke Poges Churchyard watching the graves of the poor, unknown peasants, an idea came to his mind, he wrote his elegy on the death of the neglected fellow citizens – A note of deep melancholy, and broad humanity runs throughout Gray's elegy. It is a retrospective of humble rustics with universal notes and sentiments.

After building an atmosphere of befitting evening landscape the transitional poet Gray in his poem proceeds further to elaborate the rude ancestors who lie buried in the churchyard and beyond recall at present. In fact, the Elegy runs thereafter with its true sense in perfectly elegiac mood with the reflection of these poor rustics. These are the rustics resting eternally and no morning hues, sounds or any such echoing songs sung by the poet could have the power to make them awake. The children will no more greet them while returning home after day labors. The elegiac note permeates the entire atmosphere with the reference of these rustics, simple joys, sorrows and obviously referring to the irrevocable nature of death. Since the villagers are dead and buried in their graves, no worldly activities, which use to happen during their lifetime, will happen. With their death, this chapter of the family life is closed forever.

The simple rustics had their homely occupations. They used to reap their crop smoothly with their sickles and ploughed the hard land with their horses. They joyfully took their cattle to their fields. Mighty trees fell under the heavy strokes of their axes. They were familiar with these homely occupations of the village. In an ironic tone poet Gray proceeds by saying that even though proud and ambitious men mock at the toil of these labours, the inevitability of their death is eternally true. Further what he declares becomes a glorious line –

“The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow’r,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave,
Awaits alike th’ inevitable hour
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.”

Elaborating another moral note Gray says that all the death memorials, urns, tombstone are futile to express the dead one's exuberance back. All words of flattery, eloquence is useless to the deaf ears of these dead rustics.

The rustics who are buried here were greatly skilled. The vast, rich and accumulated knowledge of centuries remained locked to their eyes. Extreme poverty with its chilling effect extinguished their holy or religious enthusiasm as well as the warm and generous impulses of their hearts. Here might have been resting dauntless, courageous Hampden, poetic Milton or a leading quality like Cromwell. Owing to acute poverty and poor living conditions, they remain unheard and obscure.

However, it is unlucky and sorrowful of their sad lot it is a matter of consolation too. These men lived far from the scenes of feverish struggle and restless activity in crowded

cities dominated by sin. They had simple, humble desires and they kept away from evil courses. At the peaceful hamlet they lived with joy and pastoral elegance-

“Far From the Madding Crowd’s ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learned to stray,
Along the cool sequester’d vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenour of their way.”

The sentiments drawn in this poem are easily understood and widely familiar owing to its universal sentiments. The sentiments regarding the dead ones in the churchyard are so common and genuine. Again, if the trophies and memorials are missing Gray finds rightly that they are useless recalling the dead ones into the living world. Further Gray is quite justified while saying that gems, pearls, unseen are lying unknown in the vast domain of earth. The simple rustics are thus hidden from us:

“Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear”

Usually a poet writes an elegy on the death of his dear friend. Traditionally it is imagined that the dead person was a shepherd and his fellow shepherd, often the poet, sings sorrowfully in his praise. An elegy gradually passes from a sad state of mind to a state of hope as the poem ends. But this elegy is not written on the death of a single person. It has a universal appeal and the feeling of loss has been exquisitely expressed in a manner which is indeed unprecedented in the history of English literature.