

## **Thomas Gray**

BORN: 1716, London, England

DIED: 1771, Cambridge, England

NATIONALITY: *British*

GENRE: *Poetry, nonfiction*

### MAJOR WORKS:

“Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” (1747)

“Ode on the Spring” (1748)

“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751)

*Essays and Criticism* (1911)

## **Overview**

[Thomas Gray](#) is generally regarded as a transitional figure in eighteenth-century poetry, providing a bridge between

the poetic sensibility of his own generation and the Romantic revolution of the future. He combines in a unique way a classic perfection of form typical of the Augustan era with subject matter and attitudes that are clearly Romantic and that anticipate still later developments. Gray's special gift for precise and memorable language was the result of rigid discipline in long years of studying Greek and Roman literature. Steeped as he was in the past, in his ideas and emotions Gray looked to the future.

## **Author Biography**

Born in the Cornhill district of London in 1716, Gray was the son of Dorothy Antrobus Gray, a milliner, and Philip Gray, a scrivener. Gray's father was a mentally disturbed and violent man who at times abused his wife. Gray attended Eton School from 1725 until 1734, when he entered [Cambridge University](#). He left Cambridge in 1738 without taking a degree, intending to study law in London. However, he and childhood friend Horace Walpole embarked on an extended tour of Europe. The two separated in Italy in 1741 after a quarrel, and Gray continued the journey on his own. He returned to London later in the year, shortly before his father died. Gray then moved with his mother to Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire, and began his most productive period of poetic composition. In 1742 Gray wrote his first major poem, “Ode on the Spring,” which he sent to his close friend Richard West—unknowingly on the very day of West's death from tuberculosis. In the next three months Gray wrote “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” “Hymn to Adversity,” and “Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West.” It is believed that he also worked on “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” during this time, though this poem was not published until 1751. Gray returned to Cambridge at the end of 1742 and received a Bachelor of Civil Law degree the next year. Gray lived at the university for most of the rest of his life, but he never took part in tutoring, lecturing, or other academic duties; instead he pursued his studies and writing, taking advantage of the intellectual stimulation of the setting. In 1757 Gray was offered the position

of Poet Laureate, but he declined it. He moved to London in 1759 to study at the [British Museum](#) and remained there for two years. He read widely and earned a reputation as one of the most learned men in Europe. Except for regular trips back to London and elsewhere in England, Gray stayed in Cambridge from 1761 until the end of his life. In 1768 Gray was named Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, an office he held until his death in 1771.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

***A “Proper” Education to Escape the Horrors of Home Life*** Thomas Gray was born on December 26, 1716, in London, England. Although his family was fairly prosperous, Gray's father was a morose and violent man who at times abused his wife unmercifully. There is uncertainty as to whether Gray's parents separated, but it is well documented that it was arranged for Gray to attend Eton College when he was eight years old so that he could be properly educated. A studious and solitary boy, Gray formed intimate friendships with only three other students: Thomas Ashton, Horace Walpole, and Richard West. They proclaimed themselves the “[Quadruple Alliance](#)” and were given to precocious conversation on life and literature. West and Walpole figured significantly in Gray's literary development and later in his poetic career, which blossomed during Gray's four years at [Cambridge University](#). While at Cambridge, Gray attracted attention as an accomplished writer of Latin verse, though he left in 1738 without taking a degree. Shortly thereafter, Gray joined Walpole on an extended tour of Europe, but in 1741 they quarreled violently, the cause of their differences still a matter of speculation, and the two parted company until their reconciliation in 1745. In November 1741, Gray's father died; Gray's extant letters contain no mention of this event.

***The Loss of a Dear Friend*** Except for his mother, Richard West was the person most dear to Gray, and his death from tuberculosis (a common, deadly disease in Europe throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) on June 1, 1742, was a grievous loss to the young poet. West died in the year of Gray's greatest productivity, though not all of the work of that year was inspired either by West's death or by Gray's anticipation of it.

Gray's “Ode on the Spring” was written while West was still alive and is to some extent a response to the ode he had sent Gray on May 5, 1742. Gray's “Ode on the Spring” was sent to West at just about the time of his death and was returned unopened. The ode takes the implicit form of elegy, displacing spring from the context of renewal to that of death, and is consistent with a May

27, 1742, letter to West in which Gray explains that he is the frequent victim of “a white Melancholy”

***From Bard to Professor*** Gray's mother died on March 11, 1753, shortly after Gray had begun his famous *Pindaric Odes*, which were published by his friend Horace Walpole in a slim volume in 1757 and were received by a less than appreciative public. When the [poet laureate](#), Colley Cibber, died, also in 1757, Gray was offered the position, but he declined it on the basis that it had become a meaningless post. From this point on, Gray wrote little more poetry, and, in July 1759, he moved to London to study at the [British Museum](#), which had been opened to the public in January. In December 1761, he returned to Cambridge; except

for frequent trips to London, other parts of England, Scotland, and Wales, he remained in Cambridge for the rest of his life. This was the period of the [Seven Years War](#) (1756–1763) between France, England, and nearly all the other major colonial powers of the time. Although he did not respond directly to these world events in his poetry, Gray's "The Bard" may perhaps be understood as an obliquely patriotic commentary, focusing as it does on the final English conquest of Wales.

In July 1768, Gray was made professor of modern history at Cambridge, though he never actually lectured or published on the subject, focusing his scholarly efforts rather on antiquity and natural history. Meanwhile, modern history was taking place in the colonies, as the [British East India Company](#) conquered more and more of India in the name of the Crown, and the settlers in America grew increasingly restless under British rule. The most significant event of Gray's last years, however, was personal: it was his brief, intense friendship with a young Swiss student, Karl Victor von Bonstetten. The friendship was apparently complicated by physical desire on Gray's part, though many scholars concur that the two had no actual sexual relations. In July 1771, Gray became ill while dining at Pembroke College in Cambridge; a week later, on July 30, he died.

## Works in Literary Context

Gray remains an important poet in the context of a less than striking era for poetry during the latter half of the eighteenth century. In this sense he is one of a group, including [William Collins](#), [James Macpherson](#), [Thomas Chatterton](#), [William Cowper](#), Christopher Smart, and Joseph and [Thomas Warton](#), who largely failed to provide English poetry with a distinctive period identity, and whose achievements were shortly to be overshadowed by the emergence in the 1780s and 1790s of [William Wordsworth](#), [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#), and the quickly succeeding second generation of Romantic writers.

***Sexual Desire and Castration*** Gray's poetry is frequently concerned with the rejection of sexual desire. The figure of the poet in his poems is often a lonely, alienated, and marginal one, and various muses or surrogate-mother figures are invoked—in a manner somewhat anticipatory of [John Keats](#)'s employment of similar figures—for aid or guidance.

One of Gray's typical "plots" has to do with engaging some figure of desire in order to reject it, as in the "Ode on the Spring," or, as in the "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College," to lament lost innocence. Sometimes, as in the "Hymn to Adversity," a harsh and repressive figure is conjured to reject excessive desire and to aid in the formation of a modest friendship, the socially acceptable substitute of sexual desire. In the "Hymn to Ignorance," a goddess is used to rebuke the "I" who longs for her maternal and demonic presence.

Such figures indicate a radical sexual distress. Though one might argue that the reduction of humanity to insect life in the "Ode on the Spring" is a significant form of sexual loss, in the "Hymn to Adversity," Gray has arrived at the first clear symbolism of castration. The threat of castration is transposed into an acceptance of it. That is, the threatening figure of Adversity is pacified but requires a surrender of sexual identity.

## Poem Text



beds” describes not only the unpretentious graves in which the forefathers are buried, but the humble conditions that they endured when they were alive.

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.

The speaker then moves on to consider some of the other pleasures the dead will no longer enjoy: the happiness of home, wife, and children.

25

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,  
 Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe [plot] has broke;  
 How jocund [jolly] did they drive their team afield!  
 How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy  
 stroke!

The dead will also no longer be able to enjoy the pleasures of work, of plowing the fields each day. This stanza points to the way in which the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” contains elements of both Augustan and Romantic poetry. Poetry that describes agriculture—as this one does—is called georgic. Georgic verse was extremely popular in the eighteenth century. Note, however, that Gray closely identifies the farmers with the land that they work. This association of man and nature is suggestive of a romantic attitude. The georgic elements of the stanza almost demand that we characterize it as typical of the eighteenth century, but its tone looks forward to the Romantic period.

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
 Their homely joys, and destiny obscure; 30  
 Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile  
 The short and simple annals of the poor.

The next four stanzas caution those who are wealthy and powerful not to look down on the poor. These lines warn the reader not to slight the “obscure” “destiny” of the poor—the fact that they will never be famous or have long histories, or “annals,” written about them.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,  
 And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave,  
 Awaits alike the inevitable hour. 35  
 The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

This stanza invokes the idea of *memento mori* (literally, a reminder of mortality). The speaker reminds the reader that regardless of social position, beauty, or wealth, all must eventually die.

Nor you, ye Proud, impute to These the fault,  
 If Memory o’er their Tomb no Trophies raise,  
 Where through the long-drawn aisle [ long narrow passage] and fretted  
 vault  
 The pealing anthem swells the note of praise. 40

The speaker also challenges the reader not to look down on the poor for having modest, simple graves. He suggests, moreover, that the elaborate memorials that adorn the graves of the “Proud” are somehow excessive. In this context, the word “fretted” in line 39 has a double meaning: on the one hand, it can refer to the design on a cathedral ceiling; on the other hand, it can suggest that there is something “fretful,” or troublesome, about the extravagant memorials of the wealthy.

Can storied urn or animated bust  
 Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?  
 Can Honor's voice provoke the silent dust,  
 Or Flattery sooth the dull cold ear of Death?

The speaker observes that nothing can bring the dead back to life, and that all the advantages that the wealthy had in life are useless in the face of death. Neither elaborate funeral monuments nor impressive honors can restore life. Nor can flattery in some way be used to change the mind of death. Note here Gray's use of personification in characterizing both "flattery" and "death"—as though death has a will or mind of its own.

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid 45  
 Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;  
 Hands, that the rod of empire might have swayed,  
 Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

The speaker then reconsiders the poor people buried in the churchyard. He wonders what great deeds they might have accomplished had they been given the opportunity: one of these poor farmers, the speaker reasons, might have been a great emperor; another might have "waked ... the living lyre," or been a great poet or musician.

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page  
 Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll; 50  
 Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,  
 And froze the genial current of the soul.

The poor were never able to fulfil their political and artistic potential, however, because they were uneducated—they never received the "Knowledge" that would enable them to rule and to create. Instead, "Penury," or poverty, "froze the genial current of their soul." That is, poverty paralyzed their ability to draw upon their innermost passions—the very passions that could have inspired them to become great poets or politicians.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,  
 The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:  
 Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, 55  
 And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

In a series of analogies, Gray observes that the talents of the poor are like a "gem" hidden in the ocean or a "flower" blooming in the desert. Just as an unseen flower in the desert is a "waste," Gray suggests, the uneducated talents of the poor are also a "waste," because they remain unused and undeveloped.

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast  
 The little Tyrant of his fields withstood;  
 Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,  
 Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's 60  
 blood.

The speaker then compares these poor, uneducated people to three of the most famous and powerful people of the previous century: John Hampden, a parliamentary leader who defended the people against the abuses of Charles I; John Milton, the great poet who wrote *Paradise Lost* and who also opposed Charles I; and Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England from 1653 to 1658. The speaker suggests that buried in this churchyard might be someone who—like Hampden, Milton, or



source of madness or insanity) or it can mean “mad” (that is, the crowd is itself hatefully insane). In either case, the common country people were removed from this insane world; as a result, they never “strayed” into the immoral acts of the powerful. Instead, they kept steadily to their simple but meaningful lives.

Yet even these bones from insult to protect,  
 Some frail memorial still erected nigh,  
 With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture  
     decked,  
 Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

80

The speaker then reminds us that these common people are, in fact, long dead. He notes that even if they were not powerful or great, and even if they do not have an elaborate memorial of the sort mentioned in line 38, they still deserve homage or tribute. At the very least, he suggests, an onlooker should “sigh” on seeing their graves. Note here the multiple meanings we can attach to the word “passing.” It can refer to the onlooker, who is simply walking or “passing by” these graves. It can mean “in passing”—that someone seeing these graves should take just a moment out of their busy lives to remember the dead. And “passing” itself is a euphemism for death. In a way, then, Gray is suggesting that there is no difference between the person “passing” by the grave and the person who has “passed” away—another reminder that all will eventually die.

Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered  
     muse,  
 The place of fame and elegy supply:  
 And many a holy text around she strews,  
 That teach the rustic moralist to die.

Instead of “fame and elegy,” the people buried here have modest tombstones, which display only their names and the dates of their birth and death. These common people were not famous, and no one has written elaborate elegies or funeral verses for them. Still, the very modesty of their tombstones testifies to the nobility and “holy” nature of their simple lives. As such, they provide an example not so much of how life should be lived, but how its end, death, should be approached. The term “rustic moralist” here is open to interpretation. It may refer to anyone who is in the countryside thinking about the meaning of death. But more likely, it refers to the speaker, who is himself moralizing—preaching or contemplating—about the nature of both life and death.

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,

85

This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,  
 Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,  
 Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?

The speaker reasons that most people, faced with the prospect of dying and ultimately being forgotten, cling to life. Note Gray’s use of paradox in line 86: “this pleasing anxious being.” On the one hand, “being” or living can be “anxious,” filled with worries. On the other hand, just being alive—when faced with death—is itself “pleasing” or pleasant. The speaker is suggesting that even the troubles and worries of life are enjoyable in comparison to death.

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,  
 Some pious drops the closing eye requires;  
 Ev’n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,  
 Ev’n in our Ashes live their wonted Fires.

90



The dead rely on the living to remember them and to mourn for them. The speaker suggests that this need is so fundamental that even from the grave the buried dead seem to ask for remembrance. In fact, as line 92 suggests, the dead actually live on in our memories.

For thee, who mindful of the unhonoured Dead  
 Dost in these lines their artless tale relate,  
 If chance, by lonely contemplation led, 95  
 Some kindred Spirit shall inquire thy fate,

In this stanza, the speaker addresses himself. He reasons that since he himself has been mindful of the dead, and has remembered and praised them in this poem, perhaps when he is dead someone will remember him. This person, he reasons, will necessarily be a “kindred Spirit,” someone who is also a lonely wanderer in the country, meditating on the nature of death. The speaker then goes on to imagine his own death: he envisions this “kindred Spirit” seeing his (the speaker’s) grave and wondering about his life and death.

Haply some hoary-headed Swain may say,  
 “Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn  
 Brushing with hasty steps the dews away  
 To meet the sun upon the upland lawn. 100

In the next five stanzas, the speaker imagines how an old farm laborer might remember him after his death. If, the speaker speculates, the “kindred Spirit” sees the speaker’s grave and wonders about it, perhaps an old man might offer to describe the speaker. The old man would say that the speaker was often seen wandering about the countryside at dawn. Presumably, he was frequently out all night—as, no doubt, he has been in this very poem.

“There at the foot of yonder nodding beech  
 That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,  
 His listless length at noontide would he stretch,  
 And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

At noon, the old man continues, the speaker would frequently stretch out under an old tree at noon, and stare at a nearby brook.

“Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn, 105  
 Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove,  
 Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,  
 Or crazed with care, or crossed in hopeless  
 love.

The old man would have observed that the speaker’s moods were changeable: sometimes the speaker would wander about in the nearby woods, “smiling scornfully” and talking to himself; other times, he would appear depressed; then again, sometimes he would look as though he were in anguish. Perhaps, the old man speculates, the speaker had been “crossed in hopeless love.”

“One morn I missed him on the customed hill,  
 Along the heath and near his favorite tree; 110  
 Another came; nor yet beside the rill,  
 Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

The speaker continues to imagine this old man remembering him after his death. The old man would have noticed one morning that the speaker was absent: he was not in any of his favorite spots. Likewise, the old man would remember, the speaker did not appear the following day.

"The next with dirges due in sad array  
 Slow through the church-way path we saw him  
 borne.  
 Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the lay,                   115  
 Graved on the stone beneath yon agéd thorn."

The third day, however, the old man and his friends would have seen the speaker's body being carried to the churchyard for burial. (The speaker, then, is imagining himself buried in the very graveyard he once used to wander by.) The old man invites this curious passerby, or "kindred Spirit," to read the speaker's epitaph. Note the reminder that the old man is uneducated: he cannot read, although the passerby can do so.

### Epitaph

*Here rests his head upon the lap of earth  
 A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.  
 Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,  
 And Melancholy marked him for her own.                   120*

The last three stanzas are, in fact, the speaker's epitaph; the way in which the speaker imagines his epitaph will read. Through the epitaph, the speaker asks the passerby (and the reader) not to remember him as wealthy, famous, or brilliantly educated, but as one who was "melancholic" or deeply thoughtful and sad.

*Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,  
 Heaven did a recompense as largely send:  
 He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,  
 He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend.   125*

The speaker asks that we remember him for being generous and sincere. His generosity was, in fact, his willingness to mourn for the dead. Because he was so generous, the speaker reasons, heaven gave him a "friend"—someone who would, in turn, mourn for him after his death. This friend is unnamed, but we can deduce that it is any "kindred Spirit"—including the reader—who reads the speaker's epitaph and remembers him.

*No farther seek his merits to disclose,  
 Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,  
 There they alike in trembling hope repose)  
 The bosom of his Father and his God.                   128*

The speaker concludes by cautioning the reader not to praise him any further. He also asks that his "frailties," his flaws or personal weaknesses, not be considered; rather, they should be left to the care of God, with whom the speaker now resides. The poem, then, is an elegy not only for the common man, but for the speaker himself. Indeed, by the end of the poem it is evident that the speaker himself wishes to be identified not with the great and famous, but with the common people whom he has praised and with whom he will, presumably, be buried.

## Themes

### Death

Gray's "Elegy" is one of the best-known poems about death in all of European literature. The poem presents the reflections of an observer who, passing by a churchyard that is out in the country, stops for a moment to think about the significance of the strangers buried there. Scholars of medieval times sometimes kept human skulls on their desktops, to keep themselves conscious of the fact that someday they, like the skulls' former occupants, would die: from this practice we get the phrase *memento mori*, which we say to this day to describe any token one uses to keep one's mortality in mind. In this poem, the graveyard acts as a *memento mori*, reminding the narrator to not place too much value on this life because someday he too will be dead and buried. The speaker of the poem is surrounded by the idea of death, and throughout the first seven stanzas there are numerous images pointing out the contrast between death and life. After mentioning the churchyard in the title, which establishes the theme of mortality, the poem itself begins with images of gloom and finality. The darkness at the end of the day, the forlorn moan of lowing cattle, the stillness of the air (highlighted by the beetle's stilted motion) and the owl's nocturnal hooting all serve to set a background for this serious meditation. However, it is not until the fourth stanza that the poem actually begins to deal with the cemetery, mentioned as the place where the village forefathers "sleep." In the following stanzas, the speaker tries to imagine what the lives of these simple men might have been like, touching upon their relations with their wives, children, and the soil that they worked. They are not defined by their possessions, because they had few, and instead are defined by their actions, which serves to contrast their lives with their quiet existence in the graveyard. This "Elegy" presents the dead in the best light: their families adored them and they were cheerful in their work, as they "hummed the woods beneath their steady stroke." The speaker openly admits that they are spoken of so well precisely because they are dead, because death is such a terrible thing that its victims deserve the respect of the living. In line 90, the poet explains, "Some pious drops the closing eye requires," explaining that the living should show their respect for death with their sorrow.

### Search for Self

The speaker of this poem goes through a process of recognizing what is important to him and choosing how to live his life (which leads to the epitaph with which he would like to be remembered). In stanza 8, the poem begins naming the attributes that are normally considered desirable but are now considered pointless when compared with the lives of the rustic dead in the country graveyard. Ambition and Grandeur, according to the speaker, should not think less of these people because of their simple accomplishments. He goes on to assert that Pride and Memory have no right to ignore them, and that Honor and Flattery will be as useless to the rich as to the poor when they are dead. The speaker, an educated person, gives much consideration to the subject of Knowledge, and whether the lack of it made the lives of these country people less significant. Their poverty blocked the way to knowledge, he decides, and the lack of knowledge separated them from vices as well as virtues, so that in the end he does not consider his education a factor in making him better or worse than them either. In the end, having eliminated all of the supposed benefits of the wealthy, educated world that he comes from, the speaker identifies himself with the graveyard inhabitants to such a degree that he winds up in this humble graveyard after his death. In contrast to the simple graves that he pondered over throughout his life, though, the speaker's grave is marked with a warm-hearted

memorial, the “Epitaph” at the end of the poem. Assuming that such a thoughtful person would not have been so immodest as to write this epitaph for himself, there must have been some other literate person to remember him. He is also remembered by an illiterate member of the farm community, the “hoary-headed swain” who has to ask someone to read the epitaph. Before the death of the poem’s narrator, this Swain established a nonverbal relationship with him, observing him from afar.

### **The Inevitability of Death**

The main idea of “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is a simple one: everybody dies. Sitting in a graveyard as the sun begins to set, the speaker mulls over the fact that death is universal. He thinks about the many kinds of lives that death cuts short, emphasizing the fact no amount of wealth, power, or fame can save people from death. At the heart of the poem, then, is the blunt fact that death comes for everyone: the rich, the poor, and the speaker himself.

Since an “elegy” is a poem written to lament someone’s death, the poem's title signals its themes right away. This elegy, it becomes clear soon enough, is for everyone who is buried in the “Country Churchyard,” the graveyard attached to a rural church. It’s also for everyone who will be buried there—which includes the speaker himself! In fact, the poem might as well be for all mortals, for whom the poem reminds readers death is inevitable.

This is a bleak sentiment to be sure, and the darkness that descends over the churchyard captures this sense of looming, inescapable mortality. Church bells signal the “parting day,” leaving the speaker alone as night falls. Standing in the graveyard as the light fades, the speaker sees death everywhere, as if it suddenly envelops the world itself.

Contemplating the humble graves all around him, the speaker is further struck by the fact that people die whether they’re rich or poor. The graves in this churchyard might look like moldy mounds of dirt, but, the speaker insists, it's not like a rich person’s more beautiful grave would somehow call them back from the dead!

The speaker reflects on the elaborate burials of the rich and powerful in order to hammer home the fact that death is universal. Some people may have “trophies” on their tombs, “urn[s]” and “bust[s]” that represent all their accomplishments, yet these things cannot “call the fleeting breath” back into the dead person’s body. The “dull cold ear of Death” doesn’t listen to “praise” for the dead person; even fame and “glory” can’t defeat death, and when someone dies, the speaker implies, they’re dead for good.

The speaker even describes his own death, imaging how he will be buried “beneath yon aged thorn,” under an old tree. The poem in fact ends with the speaker’s imagined epitaph! From the gloomy omens at the beginning to the speaker’s demise at its end, then, the poem is saturated with death—universal, inescapable, and final.

### **The Value of Commemorating the Dead**

The speaker insists that death is universal and final—that it comes for everyone and can't be undone. At the same time, however, the poem speaks to the value of honoring, remembering, or even just imagining the lives of the dead. Doing so, the poem suggests, is a meaningful act of memorial for those whom the rest of the world, and history itself, has forgotten. What's

more, the poem implies that such acts of commemoration may be a way to help people confront their own mortality. Memorializing the dead thus also helps the living.

The people buried in the churchyard don't have elaborate memorials. The speaker describes their graves as "moldering heap[s]," mounds of dirt without the ostentatious decorations of rich people's marble tombs. At most, their graves have their names and the years they were alive.

Still, their simple graves have a profound effect on the speaker, who starts imagining what kinds of lives these people might have led. He imagines them woken by the call of a rooster. He pictures them "[driving] their team" of oxen over the land, cheerful as they plow the soil. He speculates that one of them may have stood up to "the little tyrant of his fields" (i.e., a greedy landlord). In contemplating the lives of these people, he honors them. He sees their lives as full of meaning and authentic emotion. And this, in turn, illustrates the profound effect that even the simplest traces of the dead can have on the living.

These simple gravestones also lead people to contemplate their own deaths. The speaker describes how simple rural people often have poetry or Bible verses ("many a holy text") carved on their graves in order to "teach the rustic moralist to die." In other words, people like to carve sayings that provide some wisdom about death and dying. Visiting someone's grave isn't just about remembering someone's life, but about confronting death itself, and perhaps finding some way to accept it. The poem ultimately suggests there are two reasons to commemorate the dead: remembering and honoring those who are gone, and facing up to the fact of death itself.

### **Anonymity vs. Fame**

As the speaker contemplates death, he focuses on all the common people who have died without fame, power, or wealth. In particular, he realizes that many people could have been great and famous if only they had grown up under the right circumstances. Rather than lamenting this fact, however, the speaker suggests that these people led less troubled lives than those in elite society. The speaker rejects wealth, fame, and power, and instead celebrates regular people living ordinary lives. Anonymity, the poem suggests, is better for the soul. The speaker imagines all the kinds of fame and power common people might have achieved if they'd been born in a higher class. First, the speaker represents this idea in metaphorical terms: "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen." In other words, many flowers bloom with nobody to look at them. The same goes for common people, whose skills and powers may well go unrecognized.

Next, the speaker imagines this potential in terms of past famous people. For instance, he imagines "Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest": that is, someone buried in this graveyard might have been as great a genius as the poet John Milton. However, because the dead here were illiterate and confined to a rural trade, they never had the chance to write any glorious poems—rendering them metaphorically "mute," or unable to speak.

All this wasted potential sounds pretty sad, until the speaker starts thinking about all the horrible people who have gained power throughout history. For instance, he mentions Oliver Cromwell, a dictator who ruled England in the middle of the 17th century. Someone buried in this churchyard might have had the same potential for injustice, yet because of his anonymity he never had the chance and is "guiltless of his country's blood." In this sense, the lives of

common people prevent them from becoming monsters. Their “lot,” or place in their world, “confined” their “crimes.” Someone can’t “wade through slaughter to a throne” if they’re just a simple, unknown farmer living from one harvest to the next.

All things considered, the speaker doesn’t think wealth, power, or fame are worth it, preferring common people’s “sober wishes.” Regular folks want simple, understandable things like food on the table and a roof over their heads, the speaker says, and thus are never driven to “the madding crowd’s ignoble strife”—to the grotesque conflicts of the powerful. Commoners, according to the speaker, live in “the cool sequestered vale of life.” They keep their heads clear and find a measure of happiness.

Finally, the speaker reveals that he identifies with this anonymity. In the epitaph at the end of the poem, the speaker imagines himself as a young man who never received an education and died without fame or wealth. Although he dies full of “Melancholy,” or sadness, he also found a measure of peace in his anonymity. “[H]is soul was sincere,” and he dies without being polluted by wealth or fame.

Life might not be happy, the poem implies, but at least anonymity grants people the chance to live and die in peace—without empty striving or cruel ambition.

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