

<p>College of Education</p> <p>Department of English</p> <p>Third Stage (Morning)</p> <p>Lecture 3</p>		<p>Instructor: Dr.Mugdad</p>
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Thomas Gray’s “*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*” belongs to the genre of elegy. An elegy is a poem written to mourn a person’s death. Gray wrote this elegy in the year 1742. However, he published it only in the year 1751. He wrote this poem after the death of his friend Richard West.

The poem is an elegy of the common man. It is Gray’s masterpiece. The poem is philosophical and emotional at the same time. The beauty of the poem lies in its simplicity. Nonetheless, the poet brings out the ultimate truth about life and death in free-flowing poetic lines.

Setting : The setting of a piece of literature is **the time and place in which the story takes place**. The definition of setting can also include social statuses, weather, historical period, and details about immediate surroundings.

As far as the setting and mood go, the time is evening and every living being on earth is retiring for the night. As the poem opens, the speaker is seen at the churchyard; he hears the usual evening sounds. The church bell is ringing. The shepherds and their cattle are returning home after the day’s work. The location is rural. The atmosphere is subdued and melancholic. Darkness and silence fill the place except for the hooting of the owl, the buzz of the beetle, and the ringing of

the bells. Regardless of all this gloom, the speaker stands in the middle of tombstones in the graveyard. And while there, he imagines the lives of the dead people who silently sleep there.

Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard

Stanza 1

Lines 1-4

*The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.*

Analysis

- So, right off the bat we have some vocab to sort out in this poem. The "curfew" is a bell that rings at the end of the day, but a "knell" is a bell that rings when someone dies. So it's like the "parting day" is actually dying. Sounds like a **metaphor!**
- The mooing herd of cows makes its winding way over the meadow ("lea" = "meadows")
- And the tired farmer clomps on home.
- Now that the cows and the farmer are out of the picture, the speaker gets everything in the world to himself (he has to share it with the growing darkness, but that's not so bad).
- Notice that the speaker refers to himself in the first person right away in that first stanza: the parting farmer and cows leave "the world [...] to *me*."

- This would be a good time to note that the poet often removes vowels and replaces them with an apostrophe, like "o'er" instead of "over" in the second line.
- If you ever notice an odd-looking word with an apostrophe in it, try replacing the apostrophe with a letter to make a familiar word. Gray makes these contractions to make the number of syllables fit the **iambic pentameter**. While we're talking about form, we'll also point out the **rhyme scheme** here—it's ABAB. For more on the poem's meter and rhyme scheme, check out the "**Form and Meter**" section.

Stanza 2

Lines 5-8

*Now fades the glimm'ring landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;*

- So what's happening, exactly? The "glimm'ring landscape" is fading from the poet's sight. Must be sunset, but we knew that from the first stanza.
- The air is quiet, too, except for the buzz of the occasional beetle and the tinkling bells hanging around the necks of livestock in their "folds" (a.k.a. barns).
- Sounds peaceful and sleepy, like everything is winding down.

- There are some interesting literary devices in these lines, too: "solemn stillness" is a great example of **alliteration**, and the speaker **personifies** the "tinkling" of the bells when he says that they're "drowsy." Go to the "**Symbols**" section for more on these literary tools!

Stanza 3

Lines 9-12

*Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.*

- Here are some more exceptions to the overall peace and quiet: the bent-out-of-shape owl is hooting.
- More figurative language here! The speaker uses **metaphor** to describe the tower where the owl lives as "ivy-mantled." (A "mantle" is a kind of cloak or coat, so the speaker is saying that the tower is dressed up in ivy. Cool!)
- Because the title of the poem says that it was "written in a country churchyard," we can guess that the "tower" mentioned here is probably the church tower.
- But the speaker doesn't just say that there's an owl hooting—he uses some more figurative language. He **personifies** the owl when he says that it's

"moping" and "complaining," since those are things a person would do, not an owl.

- And what's the mopey owl complaining about? Apparently, he's complaining that there's an outsider nearby—someone who is wandering near her private digs (a "bower" is a lady's private room) and bothering her solitude.
- Who is that outsider? Sounds like the owl is probably complaining about the presence of the speaker himself! (And we're just assuming the speaker is a "he.")

Stanza 4

Lines 13-16

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

Analysis

- This stanza is all one long sentence, and the sentence structure is a bit wacky, so let's try to sort it out.
- The subject and the verb of the sentence are way down there in the last line of the stanza: "The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep."

- Hold up—the speaker isn't saying that the ancestors of the town (a "hamlet" is a tiny town, not an omelet with ham in it!) are impolite. "Rude" is used to describe someone who was from the country. Someone who wasn't sophisticated, and who was maybe a bit of a bumpkin. So the forefathers being described here are probably just simple country folks, not discourteous, impolite jerks.
- So what are these country forefathers of the hamlet doing? They're sleeping. Sounds peaceful, right?
- Except, look at the third line of the stanza—they're not sleeping at home in their beds. They're sleeping in narrow cells, and they're laid in there forever.
- Sounds like they're sleeping in only a **metaphorical** sense. These guys are dead and lying in their graves in the churchyard!
- The first two lines of the poem set the scene. These graves are under elm and yew trees, and there are piles of turf on each one.
- So ,we're not just hanging out outside of a church as the sun goes down. We're actually hanging out in the graveyard.