Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

POEM TEXT

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.

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;

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.

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.

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

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.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team afield!
How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

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.

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.

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If Mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
Where thro' the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

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

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

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

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

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 blood.

Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes,

Their lot forbade: nor circumscrib'd alone
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;
Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,
Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

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

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

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing, ling'ring look behind?

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.

For thee, who mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,

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.

"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.

"Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he would rove,

Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.

"One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,
Along the heath and near his fav'rite tree;
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

"The next with dirges due in sad array
Slow thro' the church-way path we saw him borne.
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,
Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn."

THE EPITAPH

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heav'n did a recompense as largely send:
He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,
He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend.

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.

SUMMARY

The church's evening bell signals that the day is ending. The mooing cows travel slowly across the grass and a tired farmer trudges home, leaving the world and I are together in the darkness.

Now the land around me is glowing in the sunset but also fading away as I look at it. There's a seriousness stillness hanging in the air, apart from the buzz of a flying beetle and the tinkling of the sheep's bells, which is like their bedtime music.

The air is still apart from that tower over there, covered with ivy, where a sad owl is complaining to the moon about anything that, wandering around her secret nest in the tower, disturbs her longstanding, lonely rule over the area.

Underneath those burly elm trees and the shade of that yew tree, there are mounds of moldy dirt: each laying in a narrow room forever, the uneducated founders of this tiny village sleep.

The sound of the scented breezes of morning, the swallow singing in a shed made of straw, the rooster's sharp cry, or the echoes of a hunter's horn—these sounds will no longer wake the dead from their humble resting places.

The fireplace will no longer burn brightly for these dead people, nor will with their busy wives work in the evening to take care of them. Their children no longer will run over to celebrate when their father has come home from work for the evening, or climb on his lap to get to be the first to get a kiss.

When they were alive, these people often harvested crops with their farm implements. They often plowed up difficult ground. How cheerfully they drove their farm animals over the field as their plowed! How confidently they chopped down trees, which seems to bow as they fell beneath the strokes of the ax!

Don't let ideas about ambition push you to make fun of the useful work these country folk did. Don't make fun of their plain and simple joys, their unknown lives. Don't let feelings of superiority make you smile scornfully at the short and simple biographies of poor people.

The bragging implied by a rich family's coat of arms; the frills and traditions of the powerful; all the things that beauty and wealth can give someone—death waits for all these things. Even the most glorious lives still end in death.

And you, you proud people, don't blame the poor if no memorials are erected on their graves as ornaments that outline their achievements in life; or if they don't have a tomb with a long hallway and a vaulted ceiling illustrated with all their accomplishments, echoing with the sounds of mourners singing the praises of the dead.

Can an urn decorated with events from the dead person's life, or a life-like sculpture of their head, call the dead person's breath back into their body? Can honor bring their decaying body back to life? Can flattery convince death not to come for someone?

Maybe in this unkempt patch of ground is buried someone who was once passionately filled with heavenly fire. Maybe someone is buried here who could have ruled an empire or brought music and poetry to new heights.

But they couldn't read or get an education, meaning they were never able to learn about history. Cold poverty held back their inspiration and froze the creative parts of their minds.

Many gems that give off the most beautiful light are buried in dark, unexplored caves in the ocean. Many flowers bloom unseen by anyone, wasting their beauty and scent on a deserted place.

Some villager here could have been like the politician John Hampden (who fought for the people's rights against an authoritarian king)—except on a much smaller scale, fearlessly standing up to the landlord who owned the fields he worked. Someone here might have been a silent, fame-less John Milton (the renowned Renaissance poet who wrote *Paradise Lost*) because he never learned to write. Someone could have been like the English dictator Oliver Cromwell, but because he was poor and powerless he never had the chance to ruthlessly kill all the English people that Cromwell did.

The ability to have the senate applaud you; the ability to scoff at the dangers of suffering and defeat; the chance to spread wealth throughout a happy country; the chance to live a life so influential that one's biography is reflected in an entire nation...

All these things were prevented by these people's poverty. Not only did poverty prevent them from developing their talents, but it also prevented them from committing any atrocities. It prevented them from killing countless people in order to gain power, and in the process giving up on any sense of human rights.

Poverty means that these people never had to hide their guilt after committing such acts, repressing their own shame. They never had to honor the rich and proud as if honoring gods with poetry.

Far away from the crazed, immoral conflicts of the rich and powerful, these poor people only had simple, serious desires. In this calm and isolated valley of life, they stuck to their own quiet ways.

Yet, to protect even these poor people's bones from total disrespect, a meager memorial has been built nearby. It has poorly written rhymes and a poorly made sculpture, but it still makes passing visitors sigh.

These people's names, the years they were alive—all carved by someone who was illiterate—stand in place of fame and a lengthy commemoration. Many quotes from the Bible are scattered around the graveyard, quotes that teach unrefined yet good-hearted people how to die.

After all, what kind of person, knowing full well they'd be forgotten after death, ever gave up this pleasant and troublesome life—ever left the warm areas of a happy day—without looking back and wanting to stay a little longer?

A dying person relies on the heart of some close friend, leaning against their chest—they need that person to shed some reverent tears as they die. Even from the tomb nature cries out, even in our dead bodies the habitual passions of the poor still burn.

You, who have been thinking about those who died anonymously, have been telling their unpretentious story in this poem. If by chance, and because of lonely thoughts, someone similar to you asks about what happened to you—

—maybe luckily enough some old country person will answer them: "We saw him at sunrise a lot, his quick footsteps sweeping the dew off the grass as he went to see the sun from the town's higher fields.

"Over there, at the base of that swaying beech tree with old,

gnarled roots and high, tangled branches, he would lay down and noon and stretch out his tired body, gazing into the nearby brook.

"Close to that forest over there, smiling as if with disapproval, talking to himself about his own stubborn fantasies, he would explore—sometimes moping, sad and pale, like a miserable person; other times gone crazy with worry, disturbed by unrequited love.

"One morning I didn't see him on his usual hill, near the rough fields and his favorite tree. Another morning came, and I didn't see him by the stream or field or forest.

"The third morning, with funeral songs and a sad procession, we saw him carried slowly along the path to church. Go up and read (since you can read) the poem carved on the gravestone under that old, gnarled tree."

THE SPEAKER'S EPITAPH:
Here, resting his head in the dirt, lies a young man that had neither wealth nor fame. He had no education because he was born to common people. His life was defined by sadness.

Even so, he had great gifts and an earnest mind. Heaven repaid him in plenty for these gifts and his suffering. He gave all he had to his misery, which was a single tear. In return, Heaven gave him the only thing he'd ever wanted: a friend.

Don't try anymore to talk about his strengths and gifts, or to bring his weakness back from the dead. Both his strengths and weakness lie in the grave in a state of quivering hope. He is now with his Father, God.

THEMES

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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-116
- Between Lines 116-117
- Lines 117-128

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 live 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 commemorating the dead: remembering and honoring those who are gone, and facing up to the fact of death itself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 13-116
- Between Lines 116-117
- Lines 117-128

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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 13-116
- Between Lines 116-117
- Lines 117-128

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

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.

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" begins by setting the scene and mood. A "Country Churchyard" is a graveyard—that is, a burial area connected to a church—in a rural area. The

speaker is standing in this rural graveyard as the day ends. He describes in simple, clear details the various sights and sounds that mark the end of the day in a rural English village in the mid-1700s: the church bell rings, cows are herded back to the farm, farmers trudge home from the fields, and darkness envelops the land.

This is an atmospheric beginning to a poem that announces itself, from its title, as an "Elegy"—a poem that mourns someone's death. Death is on the reader's and speaker's minds, then, throughout these opening lines. As "the curfew tolls the knell of parting day," it's easy to imagine a funereal sound to these bells. After all, "parting" is often a euphemism for death. The sorrowful-sounding "lowing" of cattle, like the cries of mourners, mixes with the ringing of the bells. And finally "darkness," a classic symbol of death, descends over the world. Everyone has gone home and the speaker is left in isolation, perceiving death everywhere.

By beginning with accurate, evocative descriptions of the natural world, Gray immediately places his poem within a new kind of nature poetry, one that evolved throughout the 1700s. In comparison, much poetry of the time tended to focus on allegory, in which *abstract* qualities were personified in imaginary scenes. Although Gray will turn to this type of writing in this poem as well, he deliberately begins the poem by describing *concrete* images in the real world. It's easy to imagine the speaker as a flesh-and-blood person observing an actual scene in this rural village.

At the same time, the poem follows a pretty conventional form: rhymed quatrains, or four-line stanzas, written in iambic pentameter. This means that each line has five poetic feet that follow a da-DUM rhythm. Here's line 1 as an example:

The cur- | few tolls | the knell | of par- | ting day,

The lines rhyme in an alternating ABAB pattern (the rhyme pairs being "day"/"way" and "lea"/me"). The result is that the poem is both very readable and very quotable. (And, in fact, many phrases from this poem have found their way into popular culture, and into other works of art.)

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;

The speaker weaves his descriptions of the landscape with hints of death. First, he describes how the surrounding fields seem to "glimm[er]" and "fade[]" in the sunset. This combination of glimmering and fading captures how sunsets can make everything more beautiful, the slanting light sparkling off any reflective surface, even as the light *disappears* and everything gets harder to see. Again, there's a premonition of death here, as the fading of light symbolizes the fading of life. To the speaker, the whole scene seems invested with a "solemn stillness," like the atmosphere at a funeral.

But this stillness is slightly broken by the buzzing flight of a beetle. Oh! So there is a bit of life still left in the landscape! Except that beetles also often represent death in literature. So much for the beetle, then.

Then the speaker hears the "tinklings" of the bells hung round the necks of sheep, goats, and cows as they lay down to rest. This "drowsy" sound marks the onset of sleep—yet another symbol of death.

The delicately beautiful imagery in this stanza, the "tinklings" and "glimm'ring," captures both death and life, sadness and beauty. In fact, as with the symbol of the beetle, there's even a little tension in these images. The beetle represents death to humans, but the beetle *itself* is very much alive. While a dark premonition of death hangs in the air, there's also a sense that death is not a total annihilation. Even as some lives are extinguished, others continue. The world is alive with signs of death.

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.

The third stanza begins with the same word as line 7: "Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r." This anaphora will show up repeatedly; it's one of the devices that makes the poem so easy and pleasurable to read. Here, it links the third stanza to the second and shows that the speaker is continuing the same thought, naming the things that disturb the "solemn stillness" of the early evening. This time a "moping owl" calls out as if complaining to the moon. This owl lives in a tower covered in ivy, which the speaker calls a "bow'r," a shady spot in a wooded area. Anytime someone or something comes near her, the owl calls out in complaint.

Three stanzas in, this is a good moment to take stock of the poem's form. As noted before, the poem is written in four-line stanzas called quatrains that rhyme in an ABAB pattern. Here, those rhymes are "tow'r" and "bow'r" (i.e., *tower* and *bower*) and "complain" and "reign." These are all perfect rhymes, and they ring out clearly.

The words "tow'r" and "bow'r" are written like this because the speaker wants them to be pronounced as one syllable, rather than two. This is done to fit the poem's iambic pentameter (five feet in a da-DUM rhythm). For instance, here's the meter of lines 11-12:

Of such, | as wan- | d'ring near | her se- | cret bow'r,
Molest | her an- | cient so- | litar- | y reign.

In these two lines of crisp iambic pentameter, pronouncing "bow'r" as one syllable creates a nice clean stress at the end of the line. Tiny adjustments like this (common for poetry of this time period) actually make the poem more musical.

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.

The fourth stanza marks the end of the introduction and the beginning of the speaker's main meditation. He finishes setting the scene when something captures his attention—something that has been lurking in the back of his mind the whole time: death. Specifically, the speaker begins to think about the people who are buried in this graveyard, the "forefathers" (that is, ancestors) of the village.

The speaker describes these graves with vivid imagery. Underneath the shade of some trees, these ancient graves "heave[] the turf in many a mould'ring heap." In other words, mounds of decaying dirt mark the spots where these long-dead people are buried. Seeing these mounds, the speaker makes an imaginative leap:

> Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
> The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The speaker pictures the ancestors of the villagers as sleeping in narrow rooms, or "cell[s]," in the ground. By imaginatively transporting the reader into the ground, where he imagines the forefathers to be asleep, not dead, the speaker opens up a whole new dimension to this graveyard. Suddenly the past comes alive. The dead are both dead and not dead; long gone and right there with the speaker.

Here, "rude" means *uneducated*. In other words, the speaker notes that the people in this village are unlearned and illiterate. Though this seems like a small point, it will eventually come to dominate the speaker's thought. For now, though, it simply signals a slight level of the separation between the speaker and the villagers. After all, this poem itself is a work of art, written by an accomplished poet (Thomas Gray) who himself was a university professor. So, as the speaker imaginatively journeys into graves of these forefathers, he not only journeys across time and the boundary between life and death, he also travels between classes, from the life of an intellectual and writer to that of common folk in rural England.

LINES 17-20

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

The speaker imagines the lives of the village's "rude forefathers" even more deeply. Specifically, he emphasizes how the dead can no longer lead the lives they once lived: they can't appreciate the beauty of nature, share intimate moments with their family, or enjoy the robust pleasures of work. They are dead; life is over.

The descriptions in these next few lines are all about conjuring what must have been the dead villager's joys and satisfactions. The speaker pays particular attention to the senses, like sight, sound, and smell. For instance, the speaker describes "The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn." Incense is a fragrant material that releases a calming scent when burnt. The speaker lushly describes the morning breeze as full of wonderful scents and lovely noises, like the "swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed."

Next, the speaker describes the sharper sounds of a rooster's crow or the blast of a hunting horn. Here, the speaker uses meter to help him capture the feeling of waking up. For example, the speaker describes:

> The cock's | shrill cla- | rion, or | the ech- | oing horn,

Here, the three stresses in a row of "cock's shrill clarion" has a sharpness to it, mirroring the shrillness of the crow. Meanwhile, "clarion, or the echoing horn," squeezes some extra syllables in, as if the line itself is filled with the echoes of the hunter's horn.

All these things would have greeted these villagers in the morning. Their senses roused by the bracing sounds and smells of a morning in the English countryside, these forefathers would have leapt out of bed, full of life. But now, each forefather is as dead as can be, and no amount of noise will wake him from his grave, which the speaker metaphorically calls a "lowly bed."

LINES 21-24

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.

Next, the speaker imagines the domestic lives of these long-dead "rude forefathers," again describing the joys they can no longer partake in:

> For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
> Or busy housewife ply her evening care:

This "no more," repeated from the previous stanza, treats death as a total absence. Death is a state in which everything is "no more"; all the experiences of life are over.

The speaker tries to wrap his mind around this absolute absence by listing all the things the dead can no longer experience. Imaginatively inhabiting these forefathers' rural

lives, the speaker thinks that one of the biggest absences in death is familial love. For these dead men, there's no more coming home to a warm fire made by their loving wives, busy at their evening tasks. The joys of having children is also gone. The speaker imagines children running over to climb on their father's lap, vying for a kiss. This is another precious moment the dead can never experience again.

Repetition plays a pretty central role in these stanzas. In addition to the repeated "no more," which is also echoed in "No children" in lines 23, the speaker begins lines 22 and 24 with "Or." As a result, there's a parallel structure between lines 21-22 and 23-24. That is, these two sets of lines mirror each other. *No more of this, / Or of this* is basically how the structure goes. The repeated rhythm creates a dirge-like, elegiac feeling: that is, the poem feels like a song of mourning. And that's exactly how it should feel. After all, this is an "Elegy."

LINES 25-28

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team afield!
How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

In this third and final stanza of imagining the lives of the "rude forefathers" of this village, the speaker describes what the forefathers' experiences of labor must have been like.

Earlier the speaker described how "The plowman homeward plods his weary way," emphasizing how tired the farmer was after a long day's work. Here, though, the speaker focuses on the satisfactions of farm work. First, he describes how skilled these men must have been at what they did:

> Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
> Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;

The speaker describes how every season the men would cut down the crops in their fields and plow the land ("glebe" means soil). In this description, the speaker pointedly mentions how the harvest would "yield" to each man's "sickle," and how the soil always "broke" under their plow. These men, skilled at their labor, could always get their hard work done.

In the next two lines, the speaker imagines that the men must have felt pleasure in this fact:

> How jocund did they drive their team afield!
> How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

With their farm animals (such as oxen) harnessed to plows, the farmers cheerfully ("jocund") guided the animals over their fields. Nearby, trees in the woods fell as the men cut them down for timber. They chopped with a "sturdy stroke," again emphasizing the men's prowess at these rugged tasks.

And, again, repetition—the anaphora of "How"—conveys the speaker's admiration for the forefathers' lives. For the last three stanzas, the speaker has been basking in the imagined details of what their lives must have been like. In fact, he's pretty much idealized their lives, highlighting only the best experiences. Thomas Gray, a university professor who grew up in a middle-class family, certainly didn't live the kind of life he extols here. Rather, his speaker seems to be longing for the kind of life he never had, one free from the anxieties of elite academic society.

LINES 29-32

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.

For the next four stanzas, the speaker thinks about how the rich and powerful look on the lives of the poor. In particular, the speaker is interested in how the rich have elaborate tombs and funerals, while common people die in relative anonymity.

In this particular stanza, the speaker urges the rich not look down upon the lives of the poor. He makes this plea using personification, a device that will feature throughout this section and the rest of the poem: "Let not Ambition mock their useful toil." Here, "Ambition"—the desire to gain wealth, fame, or power—is personified as someone who usually has disdain for the work that poor people do. It's easy for famous intellectuals or powerful statesmen to look down on the labors of common people—but they shouldn't, argues the speaker. This work is "useful." It's farmers who put food on everyone's tables.

Nor should "Ambition" disdain the "homely joys, and destiny obscure" of common people. In contrast with the expensive and elegant pleasures of the rich, the poor only have "homely joys," which probably seem barren, even ugly, to upper class people. Furthermore, these poor are destined to live without recognition and die in obscurity. That's what "destiny obscure" means: no one will ever know the lives of the poor.

The speaker makes a parallel plea in the next two lines:

> Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
> The short and simple annals of the poor.

Now it's "Grandeur," or pomp and elegance, that is personified, again assuming that the rich only have a "disdainful smile" when hearing about the lives of poor people. The poor may have "short and simple annals"—that is, there may not be much written about their lives and history—but that doesn't mean people should look down upon them.

LINES 33-36

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.

In this quatrain, the speaker focuses on the futility of wealth and power in the face of death. Whatever earthly greatness someone achieves, it has no effect on their mortality. Everybody, rich and poor, dies.

The themes of this stanza can be broken into two chunks. The first evokes all the "pomp" of wealth, fame, and power, while the second asserts that all these trappings are ultimately vanquished by death.

In the first two lines of the stanza, the speaker conjures:

> The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,
> And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,

"[H]eraldry" refers to aristocratic families' coats of arms, which represent their lineage. All the things described here, then, are signs used to remind other people of one person or family's status and wealth. Yet despite all these signs of wealth, rich people still die. Each of these things—those coats of arms, "all that beauty":

> Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.
> The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

The "inevitable hour" is the moment of one's death. In other words, glitzy and glamorous possessions and achievements can't stave off mortality. In fact, a family coat of arms has such appeal precisely *because* people die. It persists even though individual family members perish.

As a small aside, the reader might notice that the word order in this stanza feels a little funky! Gray's syntax here is inspired by Latin, the language of the educated classes in the 18th century; it was normal for poets to fit English words into Latin patterns of grammar. One of the things that makes "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" an exceptional poem is that it doesn't overuse Latin shapes: for the most part, it weaves together Latinate and conventional English to form a readable whole.

The final phrase in this stanza, "The paths of glory lead but to the grave," is one of the poem's famous lines. It succinctly captures an overriding concern in the poem—that death is inevitable no matter what one achieves in life. More broadly, it has the feeling of a grim mantra lurking in the back of mind, a constant awareness of mortality. The snappy rhyme between "gave" and "grave," the way the first word is so easily transformed into the second, captures how easily life gives way to death.

LINES 37-40

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If Mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
Where thro' the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Having asserted that money can't stop death, the speaker again urges the "proud" not to look down on those who can't afford the trappings of wealth. Here, the speaker focuses on the pomp that surrounds the burial of the rich and famous.

The speaker urges, "Nor you, ye proud impute to these the fault / If Mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise." In other words, don't fault the poor if they don't have any impressive ornaments on their tombs detailing their accomplishments. After all, as the speaker's been arguing, the poor don't necessarily lead the kinds of lives whose events are traditionally celebrated. And even if they did, they couldn't afford to pay for the kinds of memorials that would depict such events!

Again, the speaker uses personification, this time depicting "Mem'ry" (i.e., Memory) as a figure that erects memorials for the dead. Interestingly, the speaker doesn't just view Memory as a neutral figure that exists outside social class. Rather, memory *depends* on memorials in the physical world, memorials that take money and resources to erect. In other words, the speaker says that people are remembered because of "trophies."

As the speaker has noted earlier, the poor only have simple graves—just "mould'ring heap[s]" of dirt. Meanwhile, the rich have "long-drawn aisle[s] and fretted vault[s]"—that is, tombs with long hallways and high vaulted ceilings, all decorated with events from the deceased's life. The rich even have mourners who sing an "anthem [...] of praise" at their funeral!

Since the rich, powerful, and famous have all these things, their lives are more likely to be remembered. This concern over how the dead are memorialized will come to occupy the speaker a great deal.

LINES 41-44

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

In this stanza, the speaker asks rhetorical questions to make his point about the futility of "pomp" in the face of death. The basic gist of these questions could be summed up as: *Can wealth save you from death?* The speaker's answer: of course not.

Continuing his thoughts on memorialization, the speaker asks:

> Can storied urn or animated bust
> Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?

A "storied urn" is a burial urn decorated with important events from the speaker's life. A "bust" is a sculpture of someone's

head, and an "animated bust" is a particularly lifelike version of a such a sculpture. Yet however lifelike such a sculpture may be, or however evocative the events depicted on the urn, these things cannot bring someone back to life.

Here, the speaker refers to death metaphorically. He compares the body of a dead person to a "mansion." Breath has fled from this mansion, leaving the person dead. While modern people typically check someone's pulse to tell whether they are alive, for a long time it was more common to check someone's breath. Breath was the basic symbol of life, as "fleeting" and effervescent as the soul—the soul that, according to Christianity, departs the dead body and joins God in heaven. A decorated urn or a well-carved statue has no effect on this process, of course. This metaphorical description thus provides a vivid and concrete image for the impossibility of reversing death.

Next, the speaker uses anaphora, repeating "Can" at the beginning of line 43, to convey that he is continuing along the same train of thought: "Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust [...]?" As with the previous lines, the speaker vividly evokes the impossibility of reviving the dead. Here, "silent dust" refers to a body's decayed remains. And again, the speaker employs personification, referring to "Honour's voice." Honor refers to any sort of accolades or respect that a person garnered during their lifetime. The speaker is asking, can such respect reanimate a decaying corpse? The implied answer is the same as before: *of course not*.

Similarly, "Flatt'ry" (flattery) cannot "soothe the cold ear of Death." Flattery is praise of another person in hopes of getting something from them, a form of insincerity that the speaker implies is a trademark of the rich and powerful. Though flattery may help some people wheedle their ways into positions of power, it doesn't work on death. There's no flattering personified Death, whose "dull cold ear" is immune to the words of mortals.

LINES 45-48

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

Having finished up criticizing the rich for their vanity and pride, the speaker spends the next seven stanzas considering the thwarted potential of the poor. He thinks about how some of the people buried in the graveyard may have had the potential to do great things had they been born into better circumstances. The speaker seems sad over this wasted opportunity. However, as his thoughts develop in later stanzas, he comes to believe such loss of opportunity is actually a good thing: it saves people from a life of anxiety and evildoing.

For now, though, the speaker laments that the poor have just as much potential as the rich, but with fewer chances to discover or use their talents:

> Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
> Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;

"[C]elestial" means *heavenly* or *in the sky*. In other words, maybe someone is buried here who was filled with great spiritual passion.

Next, the speaker speculates that someone here could have had "Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd." The "rod of empire" is an emperor's scepter, the symbol of his absolute power. And "sway'd" means controlled. In other words, someone here, if they had been born into a royal family instead of a poor one, could have been emperor someday. Or, perhaps their hands could have "wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre." The lyre is an ancient Greek instrument that has often been used as a symbol of poetry itself. In other words, perhaps someone here could have been a great poet, if only they weren't illiterate.

This quatrain captures the sense that anybody can have the capacity for great things, if only they are given the chance. However, so many people aren't given such a chance. As a result, they aren't buried in a grand grave, but a "neglected spot."

LINES 49-52

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

Continuing to mull over the lost opportunities of the poor, the speaker addresses poverty and the lack of education.

First, he personifies "Knowledge," which would have been achieved through education and literacy. The rural poor of early 18th-century England didn't have these things, so they were never exposed to the kind of knowledge the speaker refers to in these lines:

> But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
> Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;

This isn't the know-how of tending fields or raising cattle, but book-learning: knowledge of historical events, scientific theories, literary masterpieces, and so on. The speaker makes clear that such knowledge is connected to literacy by referring to knowledge's "ample page." Here, knowledge reveals information to people through text on a page.

That text is "Rich with the spoils of time." The word "spoils" refers to goods stolen from a particular place, often by a victorious army after capturing new territory. Both the words "Rich" and "spoils" slyly link knowledge with wealth.

For one thing, only rich people had the means to access knowledge (although this was rapidly changing in the 18th century, as literacy rates and new institutions like lending libraries were on the rise—though mostly in cities).

For another, knowledge itself a kind of wealth, and like all wealth, it's not necessarily achieved innocently. If "spoils" are gotten by ransacking a town, the knowledge might be gotten by ransacking the world. There's a sneaking sense here that it might be okay not to have all the knowledge that the rich do: perhaps knowledge can be a crime.

Next, the speaker refers to "Chill Penury"—that is, cold poverty. Poverty has "repressed" the poor's "noble rage." Here, "rage" means inspiration. In other words, struggling to scrape by has prevented the poor from finding the kind of inspiration in themselves that the rich are able to find.

In fact, poverty is so "Chill" that it freezes "the genial current of the soul." "[G]enial" is related to the word *genius*, here meaning *creativity*. According to the speaker, poverty prevents people from becoming artists because it denies them the time, energy, education, resources, or cultivation to pursue their creative inclinations.

One interesting historical side note here, as briefly mentioned above, is that Gray actually wrote these lines during a century in which literacy rates were on the rise in England (though more so in cities than the country). More and more people were reading—and even some writers started to come from the poorer classes. In fact, roughly 40 years after this poem was written, the poet John Clare was born to a peasant family, later receiving enough of an education to write poems that made him famous among the Romantic poets. The speaker's observations about the relationship between class and art-making thus capture a specific moment in a rapidly changing society, a moment when England was becoming aware of the potential of working class people.

LINES 53-56

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

The speaker continues to the address the thwarted potential of the poor in this stanza. First, he conjures the image of beautiful gems hidden in dark caves deep in the ocean. These caves "bear," or hold, the gems in secret:

> Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
> The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:

The phrase "purest ray serene" captures how such imagined gems are filled with a clear and calming light. Except there is no light in these "dark unfathom'd" (i.e., unexplored) underwater caves! Like the uneducated poor, these crystals have the potential for beauty, but are never given the chance to shine.

The next image reiterates the same idea, but in different scenery. This similarity is captured by the parallel structure of these lines as well as the anaphora of "Full many a." The speaker describes how:

> Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,
> And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

A lot of flowers "blush," or bloom, in "desert[ed]" places that no one visits, and go unappreciated. Someone whose talents might have been valued among cultured city people also blooms "unseen" in the countryside.

Both these images jump away from the poem's setting. They conjure exotic locations that contrast with the humble English landscape, emphasizing how isolated and provincial little rural towns seem to the speaker.

These images also show how deeply the speaker is absorbed in his imagination. For the last few stanzas, he has drifted further and further away from concrete descriptions of the landscape, instead imagining various personified and allegorical scenes, in which objects and human-like figures stand in for abstract concepts. Now, the speaker has fully transported himself in his imagination, down to ocean depths or deep into the wilderness.

These lines provide a clear and succinct statement of the speaker's argument about the lives of the poor thus far. Line 55, "Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen," is among the most quoted lines of the poem. This stanza's metaphors are visual and simple, making for a nice poetic moment that the reader can linger on.

LINES 57-60

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 blood.

Now the speaker's imagination returns to England, alluding to three important English historical figures from the previous century: John Hampden, John Milton, and Oliver Cromwell.

- John Hampden was a politician who, before the English Civil War (1642-1651), fought for parliamentary representation for the people, standing up to the autocratic rule of Charles I.
- John Milton, before he wrote *Paradise Lost* (one of the most famous poems in English) was also involved in the political life of England before and during its Civil War. Milton wrote in favor of republican (that is, liberal) values like the freedom of the press. He even justified the right of Parliament to execute King Charles I!
- Oliver Cromwell was a controversial figure who

ruled England after the Civil War. Although Cromwell fought on the side of those who wanted England to be a republic, he eventually become the sole ruler of England—essentially a dictator. For the next century, he was regarded as an opportunist and a hypocrite.

These three men represent a miniature history of the English Civil War as well as a spectrum of the personalities involved, from the heroic Hampden, to the brilliant and multifaceted Milton, to the authoritarian Cromwell.

The speaker begins by suggesting that someone buried in the graveyard might have been like Hampden, but on a much smaller scale—only a "village-Hampden." The person, instead of standing up to the king of England, might have stood up to the stingy landlord who owned the fields this person farmed—a small act of "dauntless[ness]" (i.e., bravery) that the history books will never record.

Then, the speaker imagines that one of the people buried here might have had the same potential as Milton, a gift for language and political argument. Except, this person didn't receive the same education as Milton, who was highly literate—fluent in both Latin and Greek as well as modern European languages. As a result, this person was only a "mute inglorious Milton," silent and without glory because they left no writing behind.

On the other hand, someone here might have become another Oliver Cromwell, who was responsible for the deaths of so many English people during the Civil War and after. Instead of going down in history as a "brave bad man"—as his contemporary the Earl of Clarendon called Cromwell—this person was "guiltless of his country's blood."

The speaker thus reaches a turning point here. Now, there seems to be a *positive* side to the thwarted potential of common rural folk. Perhaps, according to the final line of this stanza, anonymity saves the poor from becoming the kind of terrible people that the rich and powerful can become.

LINES 61-66

Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes,
Their lot forbade: nor circumscrib'd alone
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;

In the next quatrain, the speaker further imagines the kinds of power the people in this graveyard might have wielded had they been given the chance. The speaker imagines how they might have received the "applause of list'ning senates" as important statesman. Growing in power, they might even have scoffed at the danger involved in their political intrigue, at any "threats of pain and ruin." For context, note that political life in the 17th and 18th centuries was a perilous affair. During and after the English Civil War, for instance, falling afoul of the country's ruler could mean not only the end of one's career, but imprisonment or execution.

However, for those who did succeed in their power grabs, there was the chance "To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land." A benevolent ruler could improve the lives of many people, in other words, including those who live in the village the speaker has been describing. Such a ruler could affect the lives of every person in the country. As a result, the biography (or "hist'ry") of a powerful ruler can be "read [...] in a nation's eyes." The ruler's biography is the history of the country during their reign; their life is everyone's life.

Yet, as the speaker has labored to make clear, the common folk don't get to achieve the kind of power that makes their biographies synonymous with national history. Their "lot," or economic reality, "forbade" them.

The speaker says that their lives were "circumscrib'd." This is a key word in the poem. Circumscribed means limited, just as a circle is limited by the circumference the surrounds it. Similarly, common rural people often didn't leave their own village or surrounding region, and they often didn't expand their minds beyond local traditions and ways of thinking. This meant that both their "virtues" and their "crimes" were limited. Someone can't become a diplomat or a dictator if they never leave their village.

LINES 67-72

Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,
The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,
Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

The speaker elaborates the "crimes" that the people buried in the graveyard might have committed, had they not been "confin'd" to lives of poverty. Following his train of thought from the previous lines, the speaker first imagines these crimes as connected to the pursuit of political power.

Here, the speaker uses the vivid image of "wad[ing] through slaughter to a throne." The speaker conjures a merciless villain trudging through the blood of his slain foes on his way to his throne. Once there, such a villain would "shut the gates of mercy on mankind." In other words, there would be no mercy from this villain once they became ruler: they would ruthlessly repress dissenting voices. (As noted earlier in this guide, the speaker isn't speaking theoretically here: he's inspired by bloody episodes in England's past.)

The speaker begins the next quatrain by imagining the psychological effects of committing such gruesome crimes. After brutally killing the people in their way, the ascendant ruler would have to deal with guilt for all that killing. Yet rather

than dealing with the "pangs of conscious truth" (i.e., their conscience), they would try to "quench" their shame.

In the next two lines of the stanza, the speaker imagines a different kind of deceitful person, someone who writes only to flatter the rich and powerful, to:

> [...] heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
> With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

Once again the speaker uses personification, treating "Luxury and Pride" as gods that have a shrine. Just as people burn incense in church, the speaker imagines deceitful and self-interested people burning incense at this shrine in order to gain luxury and pride for themselves. This incense is lit by "the Muse's flame." The Muse is the Greek goddess of poetry, and in European writing she generally symbolizes poetic inspiration.

The speaker is saying that some people use poetry to pray for luxurious goods and egotistical satisfaction. In effect, this means writing poetry that pleases those people who already have luxury and pride, in the hopes that they'll pass some of it along. Clearly, the speaker disapproves of such writers, effectively equating them with bloodthirsty dictators. (And perhaps there is some justification in this criticism, as history is full of writers who used their gifts and influence to gain favor with unsavory rulers.)

LINES 73-76

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

The next three stanzas transition away from hypotheticals and back to an attempt to understand the lives of the people buried in the graveyard. The speaker describes how these people were never poisoned by the desires of elite society. Instead, they kept to their simple ways and clear minds.

The speaker begins this description with another line that has become famous, partly because it was the title of Thomas Hardy's important novel, *Far From the Madding Crowd*. "[M]adding" means *crazed*. The phrase "Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife" means that country folk live away from all the wild conflicts and power struggles of the rich.

Instead, the poor have "sober wishes." They don't hatch cunning plots to conquer territory or dethrone a ruler; they just focus on daily living and basic needs, like getting food on the table. As a result, they live in "the cool sequester'd vale [i.e., valley] of life." Metaphorically, the calmness of their rural valley represents the calmness of their lives, which are insulated from the craziness of high society. Their lives could even be called "noiseless." These people don't make a lot of fuss or cause harm to others, they just go about their business.

This sentiment marks the end of what could roughly be called the first half of the poem. This half was devoted to discussing life in this rural town, addressing both what it is and what it is not. In particular, the speaker devoted a lot of attention to the anonymity of the rural poor. In the second half of the poem, the speaker will focus on how the poor are buried, and how they're remembered.

LINES 77-80

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

The speaker begins this stanza with the word "Yet," signaling a change in his train of thought. Having discussed how common people aren't buried with all the pomp and grandeur of the rich, the speaker now acknowledges that they do still have "Some frail memorial":

> Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect,
> Some frail memorial still erected nigh,

That is, there's a meager memorial nearby ("nigh") that's supposed to "protect" these dead from "insult," or disrespect.

This memorial is a stone sculpture so unskillfully made that the speaker calls it "shapeless." In addition to its rough shape, the sculpture also has some "uncouth," or poorly written, "rhymes." This verse "Implores the passing tribute of a sigh," begging a little moment of sorrow from passers-by.

Speaking of verse, this stanza stands out a bit from the preceding ones. It's one of the first in a while not to employ parallelism. For some time now, the speaker has been making his points in twos, often with the stanza's latter two lines echoing its first two. Here, though, the speaker stops that pattern. Instead, each line has its own unique syntax and adds on another important detail.

This change in structure helps signal that the speaker is moving into a different train of thought and description. It gives the impression that the speaker is again observing something in the world, listing its important details as they appear to him.

And by mentioning "uncouth rhymes," the speaker draws attention to his own rhymes and to the poem itself. In comparison to the rhymes on the memorial, probably written by someone with little knowledge of literary history, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" was written by a very learned poet. And a look at the rhyming phrases in this stanza shows that they are anything but uncouth: "from insult to protect," "erected nigh," "shapeless sculpture deck'd," and "tribute of a sigh."

There's an implicit contrast between how the poem describes these people and how they would describe themselves—and a

tension between who Thomas Gray was and how the speaker ultimately portrays himself. The speaker knows that he is from a different class than these people, and the language of the poem makes this clear. Yet, at the end of the poem, the speaker will try to erase this difference.

LINES 81-84

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

Again hearkening back to his earlier descriptions of the tombs of the rich, the speaker now describes the graves of the poor. While the rich have "fame and elegy," lengthy depictions of their accomplishments, the poor only get "Their name, their years" carved on their graves. Sometimes, their graves also have "a holy text," a quote from the Bible. These texts are supposed to "Teach the rustic moralist to die." Simply put, these are quotes that help rural people accept death.

In this stanza, the speaker introduces the idea of the "unletter'd muse." As noted before, the "muse" symbolizes poetic inspiration. However, "unletter'd" means illiterate. This illiterate muse represents the people with very limited education who were presumably in charge of the inscriptions for these gravestones. In contrast with the "incense kindled at the Muse's flame" (note the capital "M") three stanzas ago, which referred to prestigious poetry, this "unlett'rd muse" (here the "m" is lowercase) has no prestige, and is rather clumsy. More generally, this "muse" represents the ability of rural people to express their simple wisdom—awkwardly, but in verse all the same.

For the speaker, the cultured "Muse" of earlier stanzas pandered to "Luxury and Pride" and came to represent one thing that was bad about fame—its insincerity. By contrast, then, the rural muse of the common folk feels sincere and authentic. Common people may not be sophisticated or elegant, the speaker observes, but they're still driven to express their truths. Rather than flattering people, or pretending that fame and honor will save them from death, such folk try to find a way to talk about death honestly, to "teach" themselves "to die."

Note here that the B rhymes of this stanza (in terms of the ABAB rhyme scheme) continue the B rhymes from the previous stanza: "nigh," "sigh," "supply," and "die." This links these two stanzas and establishes them as key statements of the speaker's attitude towards the poor.

LINES 85-88

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing, ling'ring look behind?

The first two lines of this quatrain contain some of the poem's most confusing syntax. The word order is unintuitive, but basically the speaker is simply asking: *Who would die without taking one last look at the life they're leaving behind? Who, knowing how quickly they'll be forgotten upon dying, wouldn't want just a little more life?*

Here's a closer breakdown of what's happening in lines 85-86:

> For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
> This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,

In this first line, the speaker again uses personification. "Forgetfulness" is just that, a state of forgetting everything; "dumb" means silent; and "prey" here means victim or someone susceptible to something. This line can be rearranged to say, "*For who is such a victim to silent Forgetfulness that [...]?* "The speaker is referring to people who are doomed to be forgotten—namely, the poor, humble people he's been talking about throughout the poem.

The next line continues this question. Here, "being" refers to life itself, which is both "pleasing" and "anxious." That is, life is full of both happiness and worry. And "resigned" means *gave up*. Putting the first two lines together, the speaker is asking:

> *What kind of person, who knows they'll be forgotten, ever simply gave up their life, with its happiness and worry...*

The next two lines are a little clearer. "[P]recincts" means areas, and this third line metaphorically compares dying to leaving a pleasant spot on a sunny day. And in the fourth line, the speaker finally completes the question: "Nor cast one longing, ling'ring look behind?" All together, then, the stanza is saying:

> *What kind of person, who knows they'll be forgotten, ever simply gave up their life, with its happiness and worry, or left a beautiful sunny spot, without looking back?*

In other words:

> Who has died without looking back on their life, perhaps wanting to stay?

A confused modern reader might ask what the point of syntax like this is (besides shuffling "prey" and "resign'd" to the ends of their lines so they can rhyme with "day" and "behind"). Well, such inverted word order was pretty common in 18th-century poetry! Although spoken English no longer had the complex grammar that made such word order possible, poets were inspired by the Latin of the ancient Roman poets they admired. Latin *does* have a complex grammar, which gives it a lot of

flexibility in its syntax. In retrospect, however, some critics have thought that English poets during this period went overboard with their Latinate grammar.

That said, critics have generally felt that Gray achieves a good balance in this poem. For instance, although these first two lines are definitely ornate, the second two lines slip into a more intuitive English. In addition to displaying a masterful control of style, then, the difference between lines 85-86 and 87-88 captures one of the fundamental conflicts at the heart of the poem: the differences in lives of the rich and the poor, the cultured and uneducated, and how death ultimately ignores that conflict, welcoming all humans into its bleak indifference.

LINES 89-92

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.

In the last stanza, the speaker emphasized how death makes people look back on their lives with "longing," wishing they could cling on. In the next stanza, the speaker describes the comforts that people need in order to die peacefully, before suggesting that even then people don't die easily. This stanza marks the end of the speaker's analysis of these anonymous lives.

In lies 89-90, the speaker once again uses parallelism, repeating "some" in both lines (an example of anaphora), and ending each line on similar sounding verbs (note the assonance and alliteration of "relies" and "requires") in order to emphasize that parallelism:

> On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
> Some pious drops the closing eye requires;

Here, "breast" means *chest*, or more specifically *heart*, and "fond" means loving or beloved. Dying people require the comforting presence of someone they love, the speaker says. The "parting soul," as it leaves the body and ascends to heaven, needs a loved one to ease that passage.

Following the same structure, the next line says something slightly different. "[P]ious" means earnestly religious. The speaker is saying that dying people also need someone to cry for them as they die. Not only do they need comfort, then, but they also need to be mourned—and to *know* they're being mourned.

The next two lines again employ parallelism and anaphora:

> Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
> Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

"Ev'n" is a single-syllable abbreviation of *Even*. In these two lines, the speaker makes a somewhat bold and surprising assertion: that even when people die, something remains behind. In line 91, that something is "Nature." But what exactly is "Nature" in this context? That's left unclear in the poem itself. For people in the 18th century, "Nature" often referred to human nature, though it could also mean the natural world. At any rate, when the speaker looks at people's tombs, he feels as if something is crying out to him.

The next line is equally mysterious and bold. The phrase "wonted fires" could roughly be translated as "accustomed passions"—in other words, the things these people cared about when they were alive. These "wonted fires" live in "our ashes." Who is this "our"? It is, at least, the speaker and the reader—as well as, presumably, anyone else who is alive and can read this. "[A]shes" refers to the decayed remains of the body, as in the phrase "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" from the Book of Common Prayer. What the speaker seems to be saying here is that the passions of the dead continue in the living, who will someday die as well.

There is a feeling, in these two lines, that while death is universal and inevitable, something persists after death and continues to engage with life. As living people look at the graves of the dead, they feel some sort of presence. And as the living look within themselves, the feel they have inherited some of the passions and concerns of those long gone.

LINES 93-94

For thee, who mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;

Now comes an even stranger and bolder turn in the poem. The speaker address someone as "thee," which means *you*. For a split second, it seems as if that speaker is talking directly to the reader. However, in the second line of the quatrain, the speaker makes it clear that it's "thee, who [...] Dost in these lines [the dead's] artless tale relate." This "thee" is the person writing the poem—the speaker is addressing himself! For a moment, though, speaker and reader get tangled, even seem to switch places.

Let's take a closer look at these lines:

> For thee, who mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead
> Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;

Here, "mindful" means *aware*, or *paying attention to*. The speaker is saying that he has been trying to pay close attention to dead people who have received no attention. In this poem ("these lines"), the speaker has tried to "relate," or tell, "their artless tale."

The word "artless" means sincere or earnest, though it can also mean without skill. And, of course, here it also a suggests the elegant tombs these people lack. The speaker means all these things. These dead common folk, according to him, lived

earnestly but without the means to achieve anything great. As a result, there is no artwork about them. And yet, of course, there is artwork about these people *now*, now that the speaker has written this poem! Thus, in this poem the speaker artfully gives voice to this "artless" tale.

Furthermore, in the coming lines the speaker himself will become one of the "unhonour'd Dead." He will craft an alternate persona for himself, imagining himself to be an uneducated young man who lived in this village.

LINES 95-100

If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,
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.

The speaker continues talking about himself in the second person in the next two lines, imagining that someone has come to this rural village to find out what happened to him:

> If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
> Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate

The speaker imagines someone happening to come to this village and being guided "by lonely contemplation." That is, the person shall be someone who gets lost in their own, isolated thoughts. As such this person will be a "kindred spirit," someone who feels a connection with the speaker—someone as contemplative as he is. This person will ask about the speaker's "fate." *Whatever happened to so-and-so?*

Perhaps, says the speaker, some gray-haired ("hoary-headed") villager might know. This old-timer will tell the visitor what happened to the speaker. Now shifting to the quoted speech from the "hoary-headed swain," the poem also shifts from the second to third person. Now he is referred to as "him." For the rest of this stanza, and the next four, this swain will describe the speaker in the third person.

The speaker now seems to be one of the villagers as well. The old man says:

> "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.

The old man used to see the speaker day after day at dawn. The speaker would climb up the hill to see the sunrise, knocking the dew off the grass on his way up.

In additional to its surprising shift in perspective, this stanza is remarkable for its vivid imagery. The poem zooms in on the speaker's feet, using the delicate verb "Brushing" and conjuring the tiny, individual "dews" that have built up on the grass. In fact, not since the first 30 lines of the poem has the speaker observed the natural world with such attention. Here, the poem balances its snappy and allegorical description (the personification that dominates the middle of the poem) with realistic imagery of nature—two types of writing that were prevalent in the 1700s, though rarely wedded together like this.

LINES 101-104

"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.

The "hoary-headed swain" continues to describe the speaker. After climbing up the dew-covered hill, he remembers, the speaker would lie under a beech tree and gaze into a nearby brook.

Again, this stanza is notable for its physical imagery. The speaker describes the beech tree as "nodding," swaying in the wind. In the next line, the speaker brilliantly describes how the tree "wreathes its old fantastic roots so high." Here, the tree's old, gnarled roots are seen as extending up, through the tree's trunk, and into the air as a wreath of "fantastic" branches.

The speaker lies down under the tree and stretches out. The old man describes the speaker's body as a "listless length." "[L]istless" means *lacking energy or enthusiasm*. This could suggest that the speaker appears lazy, but more deeply it suggests "*Melancholy*" (a word supplied later in "The Epitaph"). That is, the speaker is preoccupied, moody, blue. All he can bear to do is "pore upon the brook that babbles by." The /b/ alliteration captures the bubbling, "babbl[ing]" flow of the water, which seems to hypnotize the watching speaker.

In these lines, the speaker begins to invent a persona for himself. His imagined self gets up in the morning, rushes up a hill, and lies there till afternoon, staring moodily into a brook. What is he thinking? What is he feeling as he looks at the water? In inventing this thoughtful wanderer, the speaker also begins to invent a new persona for poets in general. Nowadays, people are used to thinking of a poet as just the kind of person the speaker describes here: someone dreamily lying under a tree, starting into a stream, moody and sad and mysterious. But when Gray wrote this poem, that idea of a poet hadn't been fully invented yet. During Gray's time, poets more often presented themselves as urbane know-it-alls, witty, educated, and even-keeled. But as the next stanza shows, Gray's speaker is anything but that.

LINES 105-108

"Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he would rove,
Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,

Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.

The imagined speaker, in the old man's description, seems almost insane. He is erratic and emotional, wandering along the edge of the forest and muttering to himself. What is he saying? As far as the swain can tell, it is "wayward fancies." That is, the speaker is talking to himself about his own wild imaginings. He seems to smile at nothing in particular with "scorn"—smirking at the world. Other times, he is "woeful wan," sad and pale so that he seems to "droop[]." Sometimes he's "hopeless" with unrequited "love." And other times he is "craz'd with care," frenzied with worry.

This behavior, at the very least, suggests that he's an odd and lonely individual. He's definitely not the kind of person who could advance very far in polite society.

On the one hand, this is a pretty bleak portrait of the speaker. There's no evidence that he is happy. Perhaps the speaker is composing poems as he paces near the forest, but no one recognizes them as poems. To the old man, these poems only seem like "wayward fancies." Though he may have great poetic potential, the speaker will never be recognized for it. It seems he may end up keeping his poems to himself, taking them to the grave. He will become another "mute inglorious Milton."

On the other hand, the speaker lives amid beautiful nature, the "fantastic roots" of the tree, "the brook that babbles by," and the "wood." And whatever is going on in the speaker's head, it's hard to imagine things would have been better for him in the city, or among the rich and powerful. The quiet, idyllic, and anonymous setting of this rural village give him the space to live out his life in peace. Perhaps he will never be happy, but at least he can be his authentic self.

LINES 109-114

"One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,
Along the heath and near his fav'rite tree;
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;
"The next with dirges due in sad array
Slow thro' the church-way path we saw him borne.

Having described the speaker's *life*, the old man now describes his *death*: "One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill." One morning, the speaker didn't show up on the usual hill. Another morning goes by, and still nothing. The speaker isn't at any of his usual places. On the third day, the swain sees the speaker's funeral, and realizes he is dead:

> "The next with dirges due in sad array
> Slow thro' the church-way path we saw him borne.

"[D]irges" are funeral songs. The swain sees the speaker's body carried along the path to the church and into the churchyard, where he will be buried. It turns out that the speaker has been buried in the very churchyard that the poem is written in!

Remember that in line 96 the speaker used the word "shall," setting all of these events in a hypothetical future—imagining how his death might have played out if he were an anonymous rural poet. Throughout the poem, he imagined the lives of the people buried in the graveyard, and now he pictures how his *own* life might end in this same graveyard. This poem then, is not just an elegy for the "rude forefathers of the hamlet," it's also an elegy for the speaker himself. In emphasizing the universality of death, the fact that death comes for everyone, the poem has even killed off its own speaker!

LINES 115-116

Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,
Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn."

To end the poem, the swain invites the "kindred spirit"—who has come to the village to find the speaker—to read the speaker's epitaph. In effect, the swain asks the reader to read the speaker's gravestone. A strange ending to a poem!

The grave is "beneath yon aged thorn." Here, "thorn" means an old, gnarled tree, perhaps one of the "rugged elms" the speaker mentioned way back in line 13. The old man describes the epitaph as a "lay," a song or poem. The epitaph, then, is like one of the "uncouth rhymes" described in line 79, a humble poem written by a local person. Before diving into the epitaph, note the old swain's parenthetical "(for thou canst read)." In other words, the old man is saying, *Read this poem, since you can read.*

Including this detail emphasizes two things:

1. First, that not everyone in this village can read, as the speaker has noted extensively earlier. The visitor/kindred-spirit/*reader* is special in this regard, an outsider of sorts.
2. And second, of course the reader can read! By explicitly pointing this out, the swain draws attention to the fact one's whole experience of this poem depends on the ability to read.

The gravestone's epitaph forms the final three stanzas, and it's written in the exact same form as the rest of the poem—hinting that the whole poem is a kind of epitaph. Perhaps *all writings* are epitaphs.

BETWEEN LINES 116-117, LINES 117-120

THE EPITAPH
Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth

A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,

And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.

Now for that epitaph, the inscription to be carved on the

speaker's gravestone. It begins by evoking the speaker's anonymity:

> *Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth*
> *A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.*

The speaker dies without wealth or fame, according to his epitaph. Notice that not only is the speaker again referred to in the third person, but now he is also called "*A youth*"—that is, a young person. This means that the speaker envisions dying as a young man.

Furthermore, as the speaker imagines himself, he is uneducated: "*Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth.*" "*Fair Science*" means education, and it is not seen as a good thing. Instead, personified education "frown[s]" on people's lives; it makes things worse. Luckily the speaker was born in "humble" circumstances and didn't receive an education. So far, so good. Unluckily, however, "*Melancholy mark'd him for her own.*" That is, personified melancholy, or sadness, chose him for herself, dooming him to a life of sorrow.

There's a shift in tone here, a new earnestness and specificity. Before the speaker was describing people in general, making up hypotheses about what their lives were like or could have been like, without zeroing in on any one individual. Here, however, the speaker picks a single person's death to mourn in detail. This increases the pathos of these lines until they're almost sentimental. What's more, this is supposed to be the speaker's own epitaph! No longer considering other people's lives from a detached point of view, the speaker now tries to elicit sympathy for *his own life*, with heightened and dramatic emotion.

LINES 121-124

> *Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,*
>
> *Heav'n did a recompense as largely send:*
> *He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,*
>
> *He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend.*

The second stanza of the epitaph begins: "*Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere.*" A "bounty" is something good, in generous amounts. What exactly is the speaker's bounty? Well, clearly not wealth or education. In fact, the speaker seems to imply that he is rich in a totally different way: spiritually and emotionally rich. "*His soul*," according to the epitaph, "*is sincere.*" As the old swain's descriptions earlier attest, the speaker was certainly earnest and full of strong, varied emotions. So this first line checks out.

At first blush, however, the second line is a bit strange: "*Heav'n did a recompense as largely send.*" "Recompense" is compensation for harm. The harm here is probably the speaker's "*Melancholy.*" However, heaven's recompense would seem to be death, suggesting that to make up for all the speaker's suffering, God killed him.

The next two lines show why this is considered recompense:

> *He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,*
> *He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend.*

Once again, the speaker uses personification, this time with regard to Misery, or "*Mis'ry.*" This misery demands that the speaker give it everything he has. Less metaphorically, this line captures how suffering can take over people's lives, consuming everything they do. According to the speaker, the only thing he personally has to give misery is a single tear. Again, this captures the speaker's lack of wealth and accomplishment. All he has are his emotions: but those emotions are pure. Note how the tear echoes the "pious drops" of line 90. This echo suggests that the speaker views tears as sacred, if humble, things.

In compensation for this life of suffering, the speaker gets "*a friend*" from Heaven. This friend is Heaven itself. That is, seeing how sad and lonely the speaker is, Heaven takes him back. All the speaker had ever wanted was companionship, and now he is with God and has all the love and companionship he needs.

LINES 125-128

> *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.*

The final stanza of the epitaph ends on probably the most religious note of the poem. Before that, though, the epitaph has a few admonishments for its reader:

> *No farther seek his merits to disclose,*
> *Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,*

The word "*disclose*" means reveal. Don't ask anything more about the speaker, the epitaph warns.

The second line is notable for how it metaphorically compares talking about the speaker's "*frailties*," or weakness, to "*draw*[*ing them*] *from their dread abode.*" The "*dread abode*" is death or the grave, and "*draw*" means to lure or to pull out. In other words, talking about the speaker's weaknesses would be like dragging them back from death and out of the grave.

There's an echo here with line 91: "Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries." In both these lines, there's a sense that even though someone dies, they're not totally gone. In fact, that's what this whole poem has been about! From the meager information provided by humble gravestones, the speaker has tried to reconstruct the lives of the forgotten poor, reclaiming

them from the grave. Now, however, the speaker says that enough is enough. Leave these forgotten people alone.

For the speaker, death is a state of "trembling hope." Although the speaker "repose[s]," or rests, in "*The bosom of his Father and his God*," there's also a sense that this isn't quite a state of rest. There's energy and excitement in this last description. As with the cry of Nature from the tomb, or the "wonted fires" of line 92, death is not a total nothingness, as some would have it. But it's also not a feeling of tranquility and peace, as others would have it. If anything, death seems to be a summation of humanity's purest and clearest passions, a feeling of "trembling hope."

SYMBOLS

DARKNESS AND NIGHT

Darkness and night in the poem symbolize death and isolation. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker describes watching evening begin in a rural village. Slowly, he is left alone in an increasingly dark graveyard as night falls. This coming darkness represents the inevitability of death. Just as every day must end in night, so must every life end with dying. Additionally, the onset of evening implies that throughout the poem, it is getting darker and darker. As the speaker progresses through his meditation, he also gets closer and closer to death.

To that end, note how the speaker points out graves in the "yew-tree's shade," again linking death (in the form of those graves) to darkness (shade). Not coincidentally, the yew tree is a traditional symbol of death itself—one regularly found in British churchyards.

The darkness throughout the poem also represents the speaker's isolation from other people. It suggests a sense of isolation that the speaker tries to overcome throughout the coming lines by imagining the lives of the dead people who are buried in this graveyard.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** " And leaves the world to darkness and to me. "
- **Line 5:** "Now fades the glimm'ring landscape on the sight, "
- **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. "

LIGHT AND FIRE

Given that darkness and night in the poem represent death, it makes sense that light and fire represent life. The loss of light throughout the poem is tied to the coming of death—with the speaker sitting in the graveyard as evening comes and the "glimm'ring lanscape" fades, meaning the light of life itself begins to wane. Note also how the speaker repeatedly points out how the dead no longer have access to light and fire; they can't feel the "burn" of "the blazing hearth," for example ("hearth" means *fireplace*), and are buried in the "shade" of a yew tree.

Light and fire also represent two things closely associated with life and vivacity: passion and inspiration. To that end, the speaker says there might be someone in the graveyard whose "heart [was] one pregnant with celestial fire"—or passion, glory, vivacity—but that lively fire has been extinguished by death. When the speaker refers to "incense kindled at the Muse's flame" in line 72, he's again linking fire with inspiration (the Muse refers to a goddess of the arts, and in more general usage simply refers to a person or personified source of creative inspiration).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Now fades the glimm'ring landscape on the sight, "
- **Line 21:** "For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn, "
- **Lines 45-46:** "Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid / Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire; "
- **Lines 71-72:** "Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride / With incense kindled at the Muse's flame. "

THE BEETLE

Beetles, particularly the type of beetle called *Deathwatch beetles*, are a classic symbol of death. According to superstition, the sound of this beetle is supposed to signal that someone is going to die, in fact! By introducing a beetle in this stanza, the speaker thus emphasizes how he sees death everywhere around him.

At the same time, the beetle *itself* is a living thing going about its usual beetle tasks. As a result, there's some tension between the beetle as *symbol* in the poem and beetle as actual, living animal. This might hint that the line between life and death can sometimes be a little blurry. For instance, as the poem shows, the memories of people can live on even though those people have died.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight, / And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds; "

THE ROD OF EMPIRE

The "rod of empire" is an emperor's scepter, a symbol

of absolute political power. Here, the speaker uses it to contrast the height of human power, an emperor, with the most humble people, those buried in this cemetery. The speaker believes that one of these humble people could have wielded the power of an emperor, if only they had been born into different circumstances. Additionally, by using the rod as a symbol, the poem provides an easy-to-visualize image for the speaker's otherwise abstract argument. It helps the reader digest what the speaker's saying immediately, registering this sentiment on a physical level.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 47:** "Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd, "

THE LYRE

The lyre is a stringed-instrument that the ancient Greeks used to accompany their poetry, and it has come to symbolize poetry itself. As with the use of the "rod," or scepter, as symbol, the lyre provides an easy-to-grasp physical dimension to the speaker's otherwise abstract argument. In lines 45-48 the speaker says, "Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid" someone who might have "wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre."

He's saying that perhaps someone in this graveyard could have written beautiful poetry. To heighten the "ecstasy" of this idea, he chooses to represent it through an image that is more exciting than someone writing on a poem on a piece of paper. Instead, he depicts the "living lyre," a vibrant stringed instrument creating beautiful sounds (note how the alliteration of "living lyre" here also adds more beauty to the phrase itself).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 48:** "Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre. "

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

The language of "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is musical and melodious—thanks in large part to the poem's assonance, some striking examples of which we've highlighted in this guide. The poem's carefully doled out assonance simply makes it pleasurable and easy to read, and it also helps makes the poem's imagery more vivid.

For instance, the speaker repeats the long /o/ sound in the first two lines:

> The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
> The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,

The assonance here evokes the poem's somber setting. Those round, open /o/ sounds suggest the slow "toll[ing]" bells or the deep "lowing" noises made by a nearby herd of animals.

The speaker often sustains the same assonant sound across many lines as well, making the poem feel cohesive and lyrical. Take lines 13-17, for example, in which the relentless /ee/ sound makes the poem feel carefully crafted:

> 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.
> The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,

This repeated sound also links each image at hand—the trees, the heaps of dirt, the corpses, the morning—into one coherent environment. As a result, there's an almost cinematic quality to the these descriptions, as if a camera is slowly moving through a graveyard, before jumping to a flashback (the "incense-breathing Morn") in the same landscape.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "tolls"
- **Line 2:** "lowing," "slowly"
- **Line 3:** "homeward," "weary"
- **Line 4:** "leaves," "me"
- **Line 5:** "fades," "landscape"
- **Line 6:** "all," "solemn"
- **Line 7:** "beetle," "wheels"
- **Line 9:** "yonder," "tow'r"
- **Line 11:** "near," "secret"
- **Line 12:** "ancient," "reign"
- **Line 13:** "Beneath," "tree's"
- **Line 14:** "heaves," "heap"
- **Line 15:** "Each"
- **Line 16:** "sleep"
- **Line 17:** "breezy," "breathing"
- **Line 18:** "swallow," "twitt'ring," "straw," "built"
- **Line 19:** "shrill," "or," "horn"
- **Line 20:** "more"

CONSONANCE

As with assonance, consonance adds to the poem's melodiousness, all those carefully arranged sounds making for a smooth, pleasant reading experience. Together, these sonic devices lend the poem a sense of fluidity that has contributed to its enduring popularity. We've again highlighted some examples of the device in this guide.

One way that the poem creates this smooth, melodious quality is by using liquid consonants, like /l/ and /w/:

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.

These consonants are called *liquid* because they don't require the mouth to close, creating a fluid, uninterrupted stream of sound. It's not so much that the language speeds up here, but that it's able to progress in a smooth and musical fashion. By beginning the poem with this musical flow, the poem invites the reader in, assuring them that though this is a long poem, it's also going to be a beautiful and absorbing one—there's no need to be daunted!

Sometimes, the speaker changes up this smooth rhythm for emphasis, as in lines 18-19. Here, note that sharp /t/ and hard /c/ sounds:

The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,

Here, the phrases "straw-built shed" and "cock's shrill clarion" also have bunched stresses that, combined with the sharp consonance, create a kind of jittery, spiky energy. They capture the feeling of being woken up by the sounds of different birds. Yet note that, even here, the poem's smooth rhythm isn't disrupted too much. These jittery moments are ultimately small hiccups that blend into the smooth pace of the poem.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "tolls," "knell"
- **Line 2:** "lowing," "wind," "slowly," "lea"
- **Line 3:** "plowman," "homeward," "weary," "way"
- **Line 4:** "leaves," "world"
- **Line 5:** "glimm'ring," "landscape"
- **Line 6:** "all," "solemn," "stillness," "holds"
- **Line 7:** "where," "beetle," "wheels," "flight"
- **Line 8:** "drowsy," "tinklings," "lull," "distant," "folds"
- **Line 9:** "from," "yonder," "mantled," "tow'r"
- **Line 10:** "moping," "moon," "complain"
- **Line 11:** "such," "wand'ring," "secret," "bow'r"
- **Line 12:** "Molest," "solitary," "reign"
- **Line 13:** "rugged," "tree's"
- **Line 14:** "Where," "turf," "many," "mould'ring"
- **Line 15:** "narrow," "ever"
- **Line 16:** "rude," "forefathers"
- **Line 17:** "breezy," "incense," "breathing," "Morn"
- **Line 18:** "twitt'ring," "straw," "built"
- **Line 19:** "cock's," "shrill," "clarion," "echoing"
- **Line 20:** "more," "rouse," "from," "their"

ALLITERATION

Along with assonance and consonance, alliteration is used frequently throughout the poem. Again, it contributes to the smooth and musical quality of the lines. In fact, it's probably the sonic device most noticeably responsible for making the poem sound so good!

The second stanza is a good early example of the poem's use of alliteration:

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;

As with so many stanzas in the poem, there is alliteration in every line here. Beyond simply making things sound musical, this helps evoke the imagery at hand—those quiet /s/, /w/, and /f/ sounds in particularly reflecting the "solemn stillness" of the atmosphere. The thudding /d/ sounds of "drowsy" and "distant" add a sense of heaviness to the line as well, lulling the reader into a dreamy, contemplative mood.

Alliteration can also help highlight parallelism in the poem. For instance, this is the beginning of stanza 5:

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,

In each of these lines, the speaker lists another aspect of life that the dead no longer get to experience. The /b/ sounds mirror the /s/ sounds and the /c/ sounds, highlighting how each line in this list parallels the others. This parallel patterning of sound also draws attention to how the items in this list build up, emphasizing just how many things the dead miss out on.

In all the above examples, and throughout the poem, alliteration is never something that trips the reader up or draws too much attention to itself. In fact, Gray weaves in a lot of alliteration below the radar, skillfully and subtly blending it in with the overall melodiousness of the poem.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "lowing," "wind," "lea"
- **Line 3:** "weary," "way"
- **Line 4:** "world"
- **Line 5:** "fades," "sight"
- **Line 6:** "solemn," "stillness"
- **Line 7:** "Save," "where," "wheels," "droning," "flight"
- **Line 8:** "drowsy," "distant," "folds"
- **Line 9:** "mantled"
- **Line 10:** "moping," "moon"
- **Line 11:** "secret"
- **Line 12:** "solitary"
- **Line 14:** "heaves," "many," "mould'ring," "heap"

- **Line 17:** “breezy,” “breathing”
- **Line 18:** “swallow,” “straw”
- **Line 19:** “cock's,” “clarion”
- **Line 21:** “hearth,” “burn”
- **Line 22:** “busy,” “housewife”
- **Line 24:** “climb,” “kiss”
- **Line 104:** “brook,” “babbles,” “by”

IMAGERY

Imagery plays a crucial role in the poem, which is filled with the speaker's descriptive observations of the world around him—all his detailed, evocative descriptions of the quiet, solemn churchyard at the end of the day.

The first seven stanzas are devoted to descriptions of the speaker's environment that vividly establish the poem's setting. With precise, clear, and simple observations, the speaker brings his scenery to life for the reader. The second stanza is a good example of this:

> 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;

This imagery engages the reader's senses. The first line describes the sight of a rural landscape glittering in the sunset as the light fades. In the second line, the air that "holds" a feeling of "solemn stillness" evokes the strange motionlessness of the evening air, the way it feels on the skin, even the way it smells, in addition to its silence. Having evoked this silence, the speaker then breaks it in the next two lines by describing the sound of the beetle's "droning flight" and the "drowsy tinklings" of sheep's bells as they lie down to sleep.

This kind of description comes back in full force towards the end of the poem, as the "hoary-headed swain" describes the speaker's behavior before his death. Here, there are precise observations of the natural world, such as "yonder nodding beech / That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high," or the speaker's feet "Brushing with hasty steps the dews away." Both these descriptions help create a level of specificity that suggests all these things really happened: these are real, concrete images observed by real people.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 17-20
- Lines 21-24
- Lines 25-28
- Line 31
- Line 36
- Lines 38-40
- Lines 41-44
- Lines 45-48
- Lines 49-50
- Lines 53-56
- Line 61
- Lines 63-64
- Lines 67-68
- Lines 70-72
- Line 75
- Lines 77-80
- Line 83
- Lines 87-88
- Lines 89-92
- Lines 97-100
- Lines 101-104
- Lines 105-108
- Lines 109-112
- Lines 113-116
- Lines 117-117
- Line 119
- Line 123
- Lines 126-128

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem features many more end-stopped lines than enjambed lines, and this generally suits its contemplative tone. Those many end-stops create a steady, stately pace that makes sense for a poem about death. The speaker isn't rushing things here, or thinking of ideas off the cuff; the language is carefully crafted and controlled. The speaker never gets very emotional in his consideration of death, and the end-stops add to that effect of being calm and collected.

We've highlighted some examples of end-stop to illustrate its effect in the poem here. Just look at the first stanza—which is completely end-stopped:

> 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.**

In each of these lines, the speaker introduces a new, complete perception. First the bell tolls, then the cows go over the grass, then the farmers walk home, and then it is dark. By starting out in this simple, clear way, the speaker eases the reader into the poem. These lines also feature anaphora (of "The"), creating a repetitive, meditative feel. Additionally, this end-stopped structure emphasizes the poem's rhymes, making its rhyme

scheme readily apparent as well enhancing the poem's readability early on.

All that said, at first blush, the poem's use of end-stopped lines might seem a little more extensive than it actually is. This is because most of the lines here end in commas, creating slight pauses even though *technically* speaking some of these lines run over into each other when it comes to their *meaning*. Long story short: the poem isn't always super clear whether a line is end-stopped or enjambed, but in general the many pauses at the end of lines throughout create a calm, measured feel throughout the poem.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "day, "
- **Line 2:** "lea, "
- **Line 3:** "way, "
- **Line 4:** "me. "
- **Line 5:** "sight, "
- **Line 6:** "holds, "
- **Line 7:** "flight, "
- **Line 8:** "folds; "

ALLUSION

The main allusions in "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" occur in lines 57-60. Here, the speaker alludes to three historical figures involved in the English Civil War: the statesman John Hampden, the poet John Milton, and the authoritarian ruler Oliver Cromwell.

All together, these men represent a spectrum of the personalities and approaches to the Civil War, highlighting both the heroism and villainy that people are capable of when given the chance. Of course, the speaker's whole point here is that common folk aren't given this chance, and so they never become Hampdens or Miltons or Cromwells.

First, the speaker refers to "Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast / The little tyrant of his fields withstood." John Hampden was a member of Parliament who stood up to King Charles I. Hampden resisted Charles's taxation of the people, fighting for the representative government of Parliament against the autocratic policies of monarchy. He died during the war and was seen as a hero by future generations. Here, the speaker suggests that someone in this village might have been like Hampden, but on a much smaller scale. Instead of standing up to the king of England, this person might have stood up to the person he was working for on the farm. A much smaller conflict! And the kind that goes unrecorded in history books.

Next, the speaker suggests that "Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest." Among many works, Milton wrote the poem *Paradise Lost*, the great epic poem of the English Renaissance. Additionally, he was a public intellectual who fervently supported representative democracy and also sided with the Parliamentarians during the Civil War. He even wrote an essay justifying regicide, or killing the king. Like Shakespeare, his talents have been widely acknowledged ever since his death. To be a "mute inglorious Milton" would thus be to have the *opposite* fate of the real Milton—to never write anything and to never receive any fame as a result.

In contrast to these two figures, the speaker now alludes to "Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood." Oliver Cromwell was a controversial figure who came to power in England after the Civil War. Although like Hampden he fought on the side of the republicans, those who believed England should be a republic, eventually Cromwell dissolved Parliament and become the sole ruler of England. In the 1700s, he was a regarded as a hypocrite and opportunist, guilty "of his country's blood"—that is, responsible for the deaths of many Englishmen. The speaker implies that someone in this village may have had the same potential as Cromwell, yet because he was only a poor commoner, he never had the chance to commit the same crimes that Cromwell did.

The speaker also refers to the "muse" in lines 72 and 81. The Muse was the ancient Greek goddess of poetic inspiration, and she has symbolized this throughout the history of European poetry.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 57:** "Hampden"
- **Line 59:** "Milton"
- **Line 60:** "Cromwell"
- **Line 72:** "Muse's"
- **Line 81:** "muse"

METAPHOR

The poem's use of metaphor comes in waves. Sometimes the speaker sticks to literal descriptions of his environment without using any comparisons. Similarly, the speaker sometimes personifies abstract qualities without delving into outright metaphor, as in line 38 ("If Mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise"), which, apart from the personification, is a pretty literal line. At the same time, the speaker often *does* use metaphor with his personifications to create rich allegorical imagery. And sometimes he also uses it to enhance his observations of the churchyard and surrounding rural village.

One great example of the speaker's use of metaphor paired with personification is line 49 to 50:

> But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
> Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;

If knowledge is the possession of information, then this personified "Knowledge" has a vast trove of information that is metaphorically compared to a scroll. On this scroll are "the

spoils of time," a phrase that compares facts to "spoils"—riches stolen from an enemy during war. One way to roughly paraphrase this is that facts are like treasure stolen from the world in the course of history. There's a certain unsavoriness to this description, foreshadowing the speaker's later suggestion that maybe people are better off without an education.

Sometimes, the speaker conjures an image that functions as an imaginative metaphor for some abstract concept, without necessarily being allegorical. For instance, he mentions in lines 55-56 how:

> Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,
> And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Here, the speaker isn't actually observing this image (and his whole point is that no one sees it!). Rather, he's comparing the untapped potential of the rural poor to such a flower. Similarly, when the speaker says, "The paths of glory lead but to the grave," he's conjuring a visual image that makes his point clear. The lives of the famous people are seen as roads that lead to the same place that the lives of the poor lead to: a grave.

The speaker also uses metaphor when describing things in the physical world. For instance, he references "The cock's shrill clarion," which the speaker compares a rooster's crow to the loud sound of a horn. Or he describes a tree "That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high," comparing the structure of the tree's branches to a wreath, or loop of twigs woven together by a human.

Often, the speaker uses metaphors to refer to death, such as the classic, euphemistic comparison of death to sleep in lines 15-16:

> Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
> The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

Ditto for the comparison of graves to beds: "No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed" the speaker says in line 20. All these comparisons increase the vividness of the speaker's descriptions of the physical world.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** " The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep. "
- **Line 17:** "The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn, "
- **Line 19:** "The cock's shrill clarion,"
- **Line 20:** " No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed. "
- **Line 36:** " The paths of glory lead but to the grave. "
- **Line 42:** "its mansion"
- **Line 43:** "the silent dust"
- **Line 46:** " Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire; "
- **Line 48:** " Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre. "
- **Lines 49-50:** "But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page / Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll; "
- **Line 52:** " And froze the genial current of the soul. "
- **Lines 53-56:** "Full many a gem of purest ray serene, / The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear: / Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air. "
- **Lines 63-64:** "To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land, / And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes, "
- **Lines 67-68:** "Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne, / And shut the gates of mercy on mankind, "
- **Lines 71-72:** "Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride / With incense kindled at the Muse's flame. "
- **Lines 75-76:** "Along the cool sequester'd vale of life / They kept the noiseless tenor of their way. "
- **Lines 91-92:** "Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries, / Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires. "
- **Line 102:** " That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high, "
- **Lines 117-117:** "Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth / "
- **Line 123:** "He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear, "
- **Lines 126-126:** " / Or draw his frailties from their dread abode, "

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is a major part of "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." The speaker uses it in a manner that can generally be called allegorical, so that abstractions (things like "Memory" or "Knowledge") are represented by human figures. These personifications (always signaled by a capital letter in the poem) usually engage in actions or are situated in scenes that are heavily symbolic or metaphorical.

For instance, the speaker personifies honor, flattery, and death in the following lines:

> Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
> Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

The speaker imagines each of these figures in terms of their "voice." First, the speaker addresses "Honour"—that is, accolades and respect. Here, "silent dust" metaphorically refers to a corpse. The speaker asks if personified honor can speak to a dead body and revive it. In other words, can the awards and attention someone gained during their life bring them back from the dead? (Obviously not.)

Next, the speaker asks if "Flatt'ry," or flattery, can convince death to let someone come back to life. Flattery is when someone gives another person insincere compliments in order to get that person to like them. The speaker implies that many rich and powerful people get where they are through this

insincerity. Can death itself be flattered? Well, the speaker describes death as having a "dull cold ear." In other words, it can't even hear the words of flattery to begin with. Once someone's dead, they're dead for good.

Other instances of personification are more straightforward, even literal. For instance, the speaker says in lines 31-32:

> Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
> The short and simple annals of the poor.

Here, the phrase *grand people* (that is, those who have the means to live a lavish lifestyle) could be subbed in for "Grandeur," and these lines would be a straightforward admonishment of such people's behavior. As it stands, however, the speaker pictures grandeur itself as a human figure, perhaps adorned in elaborate jewels and expensive clothes, sneering at the lives of the poor.

Similarly, when the speaker says, "If Mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise," the only thing out of place in this otherwise literal description is "Mem'ry." Otherwise, this would again be a literal description of building a rich person's tomb. With the addition of personification, however, it becomes more magical. Now, memory itself—picture, for instance, an old, solemn figure carrying history books and chained to a clock—is the one who puts the "trophies" on people's tombs. These "trophies" are sculptures and ornaments that represent the achievements of the deceased. This allegorical representation suggests that if people want to be remembered, they need to erect such means of being remembered.

These examples give an idea of the range of personification employed by the poem. To modern readers, these moments might not be the most attention-grabbing, but for people in the 1700s this was where poets got to be the most imaginative. Personification allowed poets to craft fanciful and pithy images that seemed to capture something essential about life and human nature. With this in mind, it's clear that Gray achieves such things in this poem, another reason the poem has been so rewarding to readers ever since.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "Morn"
- **Line 29:** "Ambition"
- **Line 31:** "Grandeur"
- **Line 38:** "Mem'ry"
- **Line 43:** "Honour's"
- **Line 44:** "Flatt'ry," "Death"
- **Line 49:** "Knowledge"
- **Line 51:** "Penury"
- **Line 71:** "Luxury," "Pride"
- **Line 72:** "Muse's"
- **Line 85:** "Forgetfulness"
- **Line 91:** "Nature"
- **Line 118:** "Fortune," "Fame"
- **Line 119:** "Science"
- **Line 120:** "Melancholy"
- **Line 123:** "Mis'ry"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism is so common in "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" it sometimes seems omnipresent! It is one of main devices that structures the language of the poem, and it also does a lot for the poem's musicality and readability—in effect, it helps make the poem feel *poetic*. The poem is repetitive on the whole, and parallelism is a big part of that too; the speaker repeats himself, or slightly restates ideas, again and again, hammering home and also refining his point as he goes.

The first stanza provides an excellent example of one of the simplest types of parallelism used in the poem:

> The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
> The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
> The plowman homeward plods his weary way,

First off, each line begins with the anaphora of "The," signaling that the lines will follow a parallel structure. Second, each line is basically set up the same way, saying, *The X does Y*, each time. This creates a sense of routine, which makes sense given that the speaker is describing what happens seemingly at the end of each day near the churchyard. Many stanzas have similar lists, which rely on a mixture of anaphora, parallelism, and asyndeton to create a steady, thoughtful pace in the poem.

The second stanza exemplifies another type of parallelism common in the poem:

> *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;

Again, anaphora is a big part of the parallel structure here. This time, however, it is two parallel couplets. The first line of each couplet, italicized here, provides some description of the landscape. The second line, beginning with the bolded anaphora, adds some related observation to that description. Many instances follow a similar pattern, which create an interlocking feeling throughout the poem—the sense of all the lines weaving together into a rich tapestry of language.

These two examples provide solid blueprints for a lot of the parallelism that occurs throughout the poem. Note that though these examples involve anaphora, sometimes it is absent. Anaphora doesn't make or break parallelism—it's just a helpful device for drawing attention to it.

Much of the poem depends on doubling and restatement. That is, oftentimes the speaker says something, and then seems to say almost the same thing again. For instance, the speaker describes, in lines 53-56:

> Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
> The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
> Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,
> And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Again, this stanza employs parallel couplets. Thematically, these couplets say similar things: poor people are aren't given the chance to flourish. Both present images of undiscovered beauty. But upon unpacking these images a bit more, it's clear they represent slightly different things. The gem hidden in a dark ocean cave never has the chance to shine. As a metaphor for people, this represents those who never even discover their own talents. In the second image, meanwhile, the flower *does* get to bloom, but no one's around to see it. This image refers to people who put their talents use, but go unknown to the outside world.

All of these examples, in fact, have some form of conceptual repetition where the speaker seems to be saying the same thing over again, but not quite. This not-quite-repetition adds to the musical quality of the poem, as if these are melodies repeated with slight variations in their notes.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day, / The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea, / The plowman homeward plods his weary way,"
- **Line 6:** " And all the air a solemn stillness holds,"
- **Line 8:** " And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;"
- **Lines 17-19:** "The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn, / The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed, / The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,"
- **Line 21:** "no more the blazing hearth shall burn,"
- **Lines 22-24:** " 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."
- **Lines 27-28:** "How jocund did they drive their team afield! / How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!"
- **Lines 29-32:** "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."
- **Lines 33-34:** "The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r, / And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,"
- **Lines 41-44:** "Can storied urn or animated bust / Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath? / Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust, / Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?"
- **Lines 45-48:** "Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid / Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire; / Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd, / Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre."
- **Lines 49-52:** "But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page / Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll; / Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage, / And froze the genial current of the soul."
- **Lines 53-56:** "Full many a gem of purest ray serene, / The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear: / Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air."
- **Lines 57-60:** "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 blood."
- **Lines 61-62:** "Th' applause of list'ning senates to command, / The threats of pain and ruin to despise,"
- **Lines 63-64:** "To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land, / And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes,"
- **Lines 67-68:** "Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne, / And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,"
- **Lines 73-76:** "Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife, / Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray; / Along the cool sequester'd vale of life / They kept the noiseless tenor of their way."
- **Lines 89-92:** "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."
- **Lines 105-108:** "now smiling as in scorn, / Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he would rove, / Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn, / Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love."
- **Lines 111-112:** "nor yet beside the rill, / Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;"
- **Lines 119-120:** "Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth, / / And Melancholy mark'd him for her own."
- **Lines 123-124:** "He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear, / / He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend."

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is an important device in the poem. The poem itself is quite repetitive—thanks in large part to this anaphora and the related device parallelism—and this helps emphasize the speaker's points while creating a steady, meditative tone.

The first three stanzas give an idea not only of the different kinds of anaphora the poem uses, but also how it sometimes weaves those types together to create both predictability and surprise. For example, the poem begins with three lines of anaphora:

> The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
> The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
> The plowman homeward plods his weary way,

Anaphora gives the poem a steady structure right up top, and anaphoric lists like this will appear throughout the poem. These lists are valuable because the speaker is trying to fit so much of the world and human life (and death) into this poem. The lists allow the speaker to capture one facet of existence after another without expending any extra words linking them together. As in the example above, readers are able to infer how all these perceptions the speaker has are linked. It's always pretty clear; here, each line is a different image of day ending in a rural village.

Anaphora can also add emphasis to certain ideas and images. Take the repeated "the" and "all that" in lines 33-34:

> The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,
> And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,

The anaphora here draws readers' attention to "all" the things that do not matter in the face of death; it creates the sense that the speaker could go on and on in this list (a sense reinforced by the asydenton here, which coincides with a lot of the anaphora in the poem and bolsters its effect).

For another example, note the repetition of "Full many a" in lines 53-55:

> Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
> The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
> Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,

Here, the repeated phrase stands out on purpose, emphasizing just how many people go unnoticed due to their circumstances.

By contrast, the poem also often uses anaphora with words like "and" or "the" (as in the first example above). This kind of anaphora sometimes fades into the background. This is intentional, a quiet musical effect that work almost subconsciously to structure the poem and readers' expectations; they come to expect a certain rhythm here.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The"
- **Line 2:** "The"
- **Line 3:** "The"
- **Line 4:** "And"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 7:** "Save"
- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "Save"
- **Line 17:** "The"
- **Line 18:** "The"
- **Line 19:** "The"
- **Line 22:** "Or"
- **Line 24:** "Or"
- **Line 27:** "How"
- **Line 28:** "How"
- **Line 33:** "The," "the"
- **Line 34:** "all," "all"
- **Line 36:** "The"
- **Line 41:** "Can"
- **Line 43:** "Can"
- **Line 44:** "Or"
- **Line 48:** "Or"
- **Line 53:** "Full many a"
- **Line 55:** "Full many a"
- **Line 57:** "Some"
- **Line 59:** "Some"
- **Line 60:** "Some"
- **Line 61:** "Th'"
- **Line 62:** "The"
- **Line 64:** "And"
- **Line 65:** "Their"
- **Line 66:** "Their"
- **Line 68:** "And"
- **Line 81:** "Their," "their"
- **Line 89:** "some"
- **Line 90:** "Some"
- **Line 91:** "Ev'n"
- **Line 92:** "Ev'n"
- **Line 105:** "now"
- **Line 107:** "Now"
- **Line 108:** "Or," "or"
- **Line 111:** "nor"
- **Line 112:** "Nor," "nor"
- **Line 123:** "He"
- **Line 124:** "He"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem's lines are mostly end-stopped, which creates a measured pace. That said, there are a number of enjambments throughout. On one level, these simply prevent the poem from becoming too stiff or stodgy; 128 lines of pure end-stop would likely get a little boring after a while! Enjambment creates some variety, speeding up lines or adding moments of anticipation into an otherwise tightly-controlled poem.

Enjambment can also evoke a line's content. Take lines 41-42:

> Can storied urn or animated bust
> Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?

The enjambment here speeds up the lines, suggesting that "animated bust" bringing the dead back to life. The enjambment

between lines 49-50 is similarly evocative:

> But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
> Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;

The lack of pause here allows line 49 to "unroll" into line 50. The "ample page" of "Knowledge" is so "ample"—so overflowing—that it can't fit on one line.

The line between enjambment and end-stop is sometimes blurry in this poem, which has a feeling of unfurling smoothly down the page despite the many end-of-line pauses. The frequent punctuation at the end of lines adds a sense of control, while the fact that the actual ideas and *meanings* of the poem get stretched out across many lines makes the poem feel expansive and contemplative.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "tow'r / The"
- **Lines 10-11:** "complain / Of"
- **Lines 31-32:** "smile / The"
- **Lines 34-35:** "gave, / Awaits"
- **Lines 39-40:** "vault / The"
- **Lines 41-42:** "bust / Back"
- **Lines 45-46:** "laid / Some"
- **Lines 49-50:** "page / Rich"
- **Lines 57-58:** "breast / The"
- **Lines 65-66:** "alone / Their"
- **Lines 75-76:** "life / They"
- **Lines 93-94:** "Dead / Dost"
- **Lines 98-99:** "dawn / Brushing"
- **Lines 99-100:** "away / To"
- **Lines 113-114:** "array / Slow"
- **Lines 117-118:** "Earth / / / A"

VOCABULARY

Country Churchyard () - A rural graveyard—that is, a burial ground attached to a church.

Curfew (Line 1) - A bell marking the beginning of evening.

Tolls (Line 1) - Rings.

Knell (Line 1) - Solemn ringing.

Parting Day (Line 1) - The end of the day.

Lowing (Line 2) - The sound a cow makes; i.e., mooing.

Wind (Line 2) - In other words, the cows are walking in a slow, curving path.

O'er (Line 2) - A contraction of *over* to one syllable: /or/.

Lea (Line 2) - An open area of grass; a lawn or meadow.

Plowman (Line 3) - A farmer working a plow.

Plods (Line 3) - Walks slowly and heavily.

Glimm'ring (Line 5) - A contraction of *glimmering* (sparkling, shining) to two syllables: /glim/+/ring/

Solemn (Line 6) - Serious, even mournful.

Wheels (Line 7) - Flies in a circular or curving path.

Tinklings (Line 8) - Delicate ringing sounds.

Lull (Line 8) - Relax, coax into restfulness.

Folds (Line 8) - Herds of sheep.

Yonder (Line 9) - "Yonder" means *that one over there*, referring to something in the distance.

Ivy-Mantled (Line 9) - Covered in leafy vines of ivy.

Bower (Line 11) - A shady spot.

Molest (Line 12) - Bother, disturb.

Yew Tree (Line 13) - A type of evergreen tree that can live for centuries, and is often found in graveyards.

Heaves (Line 14) - Thrusts up.

Turf (Line 14) - Ground; grass and dirt.

Mould'ring (Line 14) - A contraction of *mouldering*, or decaying, into two syllables: /mol/+/dring/.

Narrow Cell (Line 15) - The speaker is comparing a grave to a small "cell," or room.

Rude (Line 16) - Uneducated.

Forefathers (Line 16) - Ancestors.

Hamlet (Line 16) - A small village (totally unrelated to the Shakespeare play).

Incense-Breathing Morn (Line 17) - Incense is a scented material burnt during religious services that has a meditative fragrance to it, and "Morn" means morning. In other words, it smells good in the morning.

Twitt'ring (Line 18) - That is, *twittering*, or chirping, contracted to two syllables: /twi/+/tring/.

Cock (Line 19) - A rooster.

Clarion (Line 19) - A loud horn, to which the speaker compares the rooster's cry.

Horn (Line 19) - A hunter's horn, used to communicate during the hunt.

Rouse (Line 20) - Wake.

Lowly (Line 20) - Meager, humble, poor.

Hearth (Line 21) - Fireplace.

Ply (Line 22) - Work at.

Care (Line 22) - Tasks.

Lisp (Line 23) - Here, the children are running to greet their father in sweet, babyish voices (think about little kids' speech impediments as they learn to talk!).

Sire (Line 23) - Father.

Oft (Line 25, Line 26, Line 98) - Often.

Sickle (Line 25) - A blade used to cut down crops.

Yield (Line 25) - Fall; give way.

Furrow (Line 26) - A small, narrow trench plowed in the soil for planting.

Glebe (Line 26) - Soil.

Jocund (Line 27) - Cheerful.

Team (Line 27) - Set of farm animals harnessed to a plow.

Afield (Line 27) - Into the field.

Bow'd (Line 28) - Bent, fell.

Stroke (Line 28) - The chop of an axe.

Ambition (Line 29) - The desire to succeed or get ahead, which is here personified.

Obscure (Line 30) - Unknown.

Grandeur (Line 31) - Splendor, lavishness. It is personified here.

Annals (Line 32) - Historical records.

Heraldry (Line 33) - A family's coat of arms.

Pomp (Line 33) - Lavish displays and events meant to celebrate something.

E'er (Line 34, Line 86) - A contraction of *ever*, pronounced like /air/.

Ye (Line 37) - A old-fashioned plural form of *you*.

Impute (Line 37) - Assign to. In other words, don't *blame* the poor if they can't afford fancy tombs.

Trophies (Line 38) - Ornaments on the tomb depicting the dead person's accomplishments.

Long-Drawn Aisle (Line 39) - The decorated hallway leading into a tomb.

Fretted Vault (Line 39) - An arched ceiling decorated with carved lines.

Pealing Anthem (Line 40) - Loud singing.

Storied Urn (Line 41) - An urn—a vase used for storing the ashes of the dead—decorating with events from deceased's life.

Animated Bust (Line 41) - A bust is a statue of someone from their chest up. An "animated bust" is a particularly lifelike version of such a sculpture.

Mansion (Line 42) - A large house. The speaker is comparing a corpse to an empty house.

Fleeting (Line 42) - Temporary; not lasting a long time.

Provoke (Line 43) - Stimulate; or, in this case, bring back to life.

Flatt'ry (Line 44) - A two syllable contraction of *flattery* as /fla/+/tree/, meaning insincere compliments. Here flattery is personified.

Celestial Fire (Line 46) - "[C]elestial" refers to heaven or the sky. Here, "celestial fire" is a metaphor for passion or inspiration.

Rod of Empire (Line 47) - A scepter, the symbol of an emperor's absolute authority.

Sway'd (Line 47) - Controlled.

Ecstasy (Line 48) - Exquisite beauty and delight.

Lyre (Line 48) - A stringed instrument that the ancient Greeks used to accompany their poetry. Here it symbolizes poetry itself.

Ample (Line 49) - Full, brimming, plentiful.

Spoils (Line 50) - Stolen goods.

Chill Penury (Line 51) - In other words, "cold poverty," here personified.

Rage (Line 51) - Inspiration.

Genial Current (Line 52) - Here, "genial" is related to the word "genius." A "genial current" would be someone's creative spirit.

Serene (Line 53) - Tranquil, beautiful.

Unfathomed (Line 54) - Unexplored.

Bear (Line 54) - Hold. In other words, the ocean caves hold these gems in secret.

Blush (Line 55) - Bloom—with a metaphorical suggestion of bashfulness, and of the warm red color of someone's cheek.

Hampden (Line 57) - An allusion to John Hampden, a statesman who stood up to the autocratic King Charles I.

Dauntless Breast (Line 57) - "[D]auntless" means brave and determined, and "breast" means heart. So "dauntless breast" refers to someone who bravely persists against their foes.

Little Tyrant (Line 58) - A "tyrant" is a cruel and authoritarian leader. Here, "little tyrant" refers to a landlord or farmer who is mean to the people working his land.

Mute Inglorious Milton (Line 59) - This alludes to John Milton, a Renaissance poet and intellectual most famous for his epic poem Paradise Lost. He actively supported the Parliamentarians and representative democracy during the English Civil War. He even advocated for *regicide*, the killing of King Charles I. A "mute inglorious Milton" is thus someone who had the same talent as Milton but never got to put it to use, dying without having written a word or garnered any fame.

Cromwell (Line 60) - An allusion to Oliver Cromwell, who came to power after the English Civil War. Despite fighting on the side of the republicans—those who believed in representative democracy over a monarchy—Cromwell eventually became the sole ruler of England. As a result, he is a controversial figure. The speaker of the poem clearly regards him as guilty of killing a lot of English people, at the very least.

Lot (Line 65) - Circumstances; i.e., their poverty and rural

isolation.

Forbade (Line 65, Line 67) - Prevented.

Circumscrib'd (Line 65) - Limited.

Virtues (Line 66) - Strengths or talents.

Slaughter (Line 67) - A lot of killing—the kind that people tend to do when they seize power.

Pangs (Line 69) - Sharp pains. Here, it refers to feelings of guilt.

Ingenuous Shame (Line 70) - "Ingenuous" means sincere or earnest. This phrase suggests that shame cuts through whatever lies someone has told themselves or others: even deceitful people can feel shame.

Luxury and Pride (Line 71) - Lavishness and vanity, which are personified here. They have a shrine, or altar, as if they are gods that people worship.

Muse (Line 72, Line 81) - The Greek goddess of poetic inspiration, and a traditional symbol of such inspiration in European literature.

Madding Crowd (Line 73) - "Madding" means crazed. A "madding crowd" is thus a group of people who act crazily.

Ignoble Strife (Line 73) - "Ignoble" means not noble: low-down, deceitful, etc. The "madding crowd's ignoble strife" refers to all the unsavory treachery that elite society engages in.

Sober (Line 74) - Sane, clear-minded.

Sequestered Vale (Line 75) - A hidden or isolated valley.

Tenor (Line 76) - Direction, meaning, character, tone. The "noiseless tenor of their way" means the quiet habits of the rural poor's lives.

Nigh (Line 78) - Near.

Uncouth (Line 79) - Awkward, unskilled.

Deck'd (Line 79) - Adorned.

Implores (Line 80) - Begs.

Unletter'd (Line 81) - Illiterate.

Elegy (Line 82) - An elegy is a poem about death. In this poem, the speaker meditates on the deaths of people he didn't even know, those buried in a rural graveyard, before describing his own death.

Rustic Moralist (Line 84) - "[R]ustic" means rural and a "moralist" is someone who studies the difference between right and wrong. A "rustic moralist" is thus someone who lives in the country and is interested in living according to principles.

Dumb Forgetfulness (Line 85) - "[D]umb" means silent and "Forgetfulness" is personified. Someone who is "prey" to "dumb Forgetfulness" would tend to completely forget things.

Resign'd (Line 86) - Gave up, left.

Precincts (Line 87) - Areas.

Fond Breast (Line 89) - The chest of the dying person's loved one. Here, "breast" also suggests that person's heart and soul.

Pious Drops (Line 90) - "[P]ious" means devoutly religious, and "drops" here are tears. Dying people require people to cry for them and pray for their souls.

Wonted Fires (Line 92) - "[W]onted" means accustomed or habitual, and "fires," as with line 46, means passion. The speaker means that the passions of one generation live on in the next.

Thee (Line 93) - An archaic word for *you*.

Dost (Line 94) - An archaic word for *do*.

Artless (Line 94) - Earnest; unskillful. In this context, the word also suggests a lack of works of art—nobody has made art about the lives of the poor (at least, not until Mr. Gray came along to write this very poem...)

Chance (Line 95) - A shortening of *perchance*, which means *by some chance*.

Kindred Spirit (Line 96) - A likeminded individual; someone who feels a connection with the speaker.

Thy (Line 96) - An archaic word for *your*.

Haply (Line 97) - Perhaps; by chance.

Hoary-Headed Swain (Line 97) - "[H]oary-headed" means white- or gray-haired, and a "swain" is a rural person.

Peep (Line 98) - First light.

Dews (Line 99) - Drops of dew, or water that forms on the ground overnight.

Upland Lawn (Line 100) - A hill or raised area of grass.

Nodding Beech (Line 101) - A "beech" is a type of tree. Here, it is "nodding" or swaying in the wind.

Wreathes (Line 102) - Twists and turns. The speaker is also comparing the tree's branches to a wreath, a woven loop of twigs, stems, or flowers—often used as a memorial on a grave.

Listless Length (Line 103) - "[L]istless" means lacking energy, and "length" refers to the speaker's body as he lies down. This might suggest he's lazy—but, more likely, he's sad.

Noontide (Line 103) - Noon.

Pore (Line 104) - Look deeply into; get absorbed in.

Yon (Line 105) - Like "yonder," "yon" means *that*, referring to something at a distance.

Wood (Line 105, Line 112) - Forest.

Wayward Fancies (Line 106) - "[F]ancies" are things that people imagine, and "wayward" means unusual or idiosyncratic. Here, the speaker refers to his own strange fantasies.

Woeful Wan (Line 107) - "[W]oeful" means sad or sorrowful, and "wan" means pale. The speaker is so sorrowful his face turns pale.

Forlorn (Line 107) - Dejected, despondent, very sad.

Care (Line 108) - Here, "care" means worry.

Custom'd (Line 109) - As in *accustomed*, habitual. This is the hill the speaker usually visits.

Heath (Line 110) - An uncultivated area of wild grass.

Rill (Line 111) - A stream.

Dirge (Line 113) - Funeral songs.

Array (Line 113) - Arrangement, procession.

Lay (Line 115) - Poem; song.

Thorn (Line 116) - An old gnarled tree.

Youth (Line 118) - A young man.

Fortune (Line 118) - Good luck; wealth.

Fair Science (Line 119) - Education.

Melancholy (Line 120) - A deep and meditative sadness.

Bounty (Line 121) - The good things one possesses or receives (e.g., the "bounty of nature" means all the food and resources the people can get from the natural world). The speaker's bounty is his rich interior life and the fact that he hasn't been poisoned by wealth, power, or fame.

Recompense (Line 122) - Compensation or payment for something, usually for some harm or damage done.

Disclose (Line 125) - Reveal.

Abode (Line 126) - Home, dwelling.

Bosom (Line 128) - Chest.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is written in rhymed quatrains, or four-line stanzas. These stanzas are self-contained: every fourth line is end-stopped, almost always with a period, and the stanzas often feature other end-stopped lines as well. As a result, the poem proceeds in a very clear, simple, and readable manner. Line by line, the speaker puts together a well-ordered depiction of his observations and thoughts. Each line can stand on its own as a poetic observation or image, and each stanza is a cohesive whole—held together with parallelism, anaphora, and rhyme.

Quatrains are also the traditional stanza form for songs. Although the poem never fully veers into actual singing—it's not a funeral dirge—it does have a very musical feel to it, in its use of the devices mentioned above as well as its assonance, alliteration, and consonance. Whatever strangeness readers may find in the poem, there's no arguing that formally it is balanced, tasteful, and musical.

The poem is also, of course, an elegy—a mournful lamentation for someone who has died. The speaker is actually elegizing the entire graveyard, and, perhaps more broadly, humanity itself, given his insistence that death comes for everyone eventually.

METER

The poem employs a steady, fluid iambic pentameter, meaning each line has five feet in a da-DUM rhythm. The first line is a classic example of this meter:

The cur- | few tolls | the knell | of par- | ting day,

There aren't any hiccups or tongue-twisters here—the line flows. All four lines of the first stanza are in the same meter, and have that same smooth rhythm.

This is the case for most of the poem. Even though the poem clocks in at some 128 lines, its iambic pentameter goes down as easy as a glass of juice. Over two centuries of readers have found this poem pleasurable and readable.

That said, the poem is never smooth to the point of monotony. For instance, sometimes the speaker swaps the first two syllables, as in line 9:

Save that | from yon- | der i- | vy man- | tled tow'r

This is a classic little trick. The trochee (DUM-da) changes up the rhythm just enough without disrupting the poem's overall flow. Here, the speaker almost seems to interrupt himself as the sound of an owl catches his attention, creating a slight bump in the poem's rhythm.

An even more varied line comes in line 19 of stanza 5:

The cock's | shrill clar- | ion, or | the ech- | oing horn,

The speaker replaces the second foot with a spondee (DUM-DUM), creating three stresses in a row. The result is a sharp series of sounds that mimics the rooster's early-morning cry. Next, the speaker inserts an extra unstressed syllable in the third and fifth feet. As a result, these two feet have an elongated, "echoing" sound to them, like the blast of the horn. Gray probably meant for these unstressed syllables to be elided (so that "clarion" is pronounced /clar/+/yon/ and "echoing" is /ek/+/wing/), but even so, there's definitely a feeling of a new metrical texture here, one that captures what the line describes.

In fact, this whole stanza slows things down, as thick, textured consonant sounds and big stresses make the reader linger over each line, just as the speaker lingers in these happy visions of rural life. That said, the poem never veers too far off course. Even during its most vibrant changes in meter, the poem never loses track of that smooth, fluid rhythm that makes it so musical and readable.

RHYME SCHEME

Each stanza in "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" follows this rhyme scheme:

ABAB

This is a simple, intuitive rhyme scheme, and it rings out clearly and reliably throughout the poem. Because many of the lines end with punctuation, and many are end-stopped, these rhymes are further highlighted: rather than breezing past them, the poem usually has a slight pause or breath after each rhyme. For such a long poem, it's impressive how many of these rhymes are perfect; in fact, there are arguably only a handful of slant rhymes, and even these might have been less slanted in the 1700s when the poem was written (for example, "withstood"/"blood" in lines 58 and 60). This reflects the speaker's control over the poem's language, which is rather comforting in its predictability even as the speaker contemplates death.

SPEAKER

The question of the speaker in "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is an interesting one. This is because at the end the speaker turns the poem around on himself, addressing himself in the second person, then having a character talk about him the third person, and finally ending with his own epitaph!

Let's tackle the beginning of the poem first, before these mysterious twists occur. For the first 90 lines of the poem, the speaker meditates on the world around him rather than describing his own life. However, he does begin the poem by situating himself within this world, describing a rural village at dusk before hinting at his own place in it:

> The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
> And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

As the title suggests, the speaker is standing in a rural graveyard, watching evening begin. At the end of the first stanza, everyone has gone home for the night, meaning the speaker is left alone in this graveyard. The sense of isolation in the fourth line suggests that the speaker isn't really one of these villagers; he's an outsider.

As the speaker describes the lives of the rural poor, particularly their lack of education and illiteracy, it becomes even clearer that he's not one of them. When the speaker references "uncouth rhymes" or "th' unletter'd muse," he clearly does so as someone who has his own developed literary taste and ability. In contrast to the awkward, "uncouth" writing on the memorials of the poor, the speaker uses sophisticated syntax (language structure) inspired by Latin grammar, as well as other elegant poetic devices. Although the speaker idealizes the poor's lack of education, it's clear that he himself is well-educated.

However, from line 93 to the end of the poem, the speaker suddenly transforms into an uneducated "*youth*" that lives and dies in the village. This transformation begins by the speaker suddenly addressing *himself* as "thee," or you, who "Dost in these lines [the Dead's] artless tale relate." That is, the speaker speaks to himself as the person who has been writing this poem! Next, the speaker says that if any like-minded person should come to the village and ask about the speaker, they might be lucky enough to meet some old-timer who would tell them about the speaker.

Now, the poem shifts into the third person as this old "swain," or rural person, describes the speaker's life and death. Here the swain calls the speaker "him." At this point, the speaker becomes a character in his own poem. In effect, he stops speaking and transforms from a highly educated writer to an illiterate young man. In this new role, the speaker has a pure soul and strong emotions, but he also seems unable to express himself. He is lonely and unknown, and one day he dies. Finally, the poem ends with the speaker's own epitaph.

These final sections are an ingenious way of emphasizing death's inevitability: even the speaker of this poem dies! By shifting from the first to third person, the poem ends outside any one person's mind. This shift captures the sense that life goes on after someone dies, but any individual person's perspective eventually disappears.

SETTING

The title gives it away: this poem is set in a "Country Churchyard," a graveyard beside a church in a rural village. The poem begins as day ends, and the speaker sets the scene by the describing the different activities that occur in the church's village at evening: the cows are mooing, the "plowman" is heading home, and the sunlight is fading.

After this initial sketch, the speaker focuses his attention on the graveyard itself. Most of the poem involves the speaker looking around this graveyard, with its simple graves and "mould'ring heap[s]" of dirt, and pondering what he sees. Something he sees something that sends him into his own thoughts for a while, as when he sees a "neglected spot"—an unkempt grave—and starts to imagine all the people who could have been buried there.

As a result, the setting of the poem is equal parts rural graveyard and the speaker's own imagination, where abstract ideas are personified like gods (i.e., "Knowledge," "Grandeur," etc.). These two settings fuse at the end of the poem, when the speaker imagines himself as someone who lives in this village and gets buried in this graveyard.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Inspired in part by the death of a fellow poet, Thomas Gray wrote "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" in the 1740s, and first published it in the 1750s. The poem has enjoyed enormous popularity ever since, and remains one of the most famous poems in the English language to this day.

Gray weaves together two forms of writing in this poem. One is a type that had been familiar to contemporary readers for the last century: *Neoclassical* or *Augustan* poetry. This genre was a form of writing in which poets talked about morality, society, and how people should live their lives. Rather than describing actual events, Augustan poets used imaginative, revealing images of personified abstractions (like "Knowledge") engaged in allegorical scenes. Poets using this form, from John Dryden to Alexander Pope, were even-tempered, witty, and sharply intelligent.

The other type is new a kind of writing that some poets began to develop in the 1700s, and to which Gray's poem is a contribution. This is poetry as nature writing. Poets like John Dyer and James Thomson described real sights in the English countryside. They evoked the beauty of the natural world through realistic descriptions. Their poems were earnest, rural, and lush, rather than satirical and suave. Some critics consider such works to be a kind of precursor to 19th-century Romanticism.

Partly because of how it weaves these strands together, and partly because the poem really is a marvel of control and tone—it just sounds so good—Gray's poem immediately sparked a lot of imitations. The English read it incessantly for a century, and all poets writing after it had to contend with it in some way.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Socially, Gray's poem is a product of a society that was paying increasing attention to the lives of its poor. Literacy rates were increasing, meaning that reading for pleasure was no longer just a pastime of the rich. More and more writing was directed to common people, and people's everyday lives became subjects of public discussion. This also meant that some of the poor even became writers or political figures, demonstrating to English society that greatness could be found in any class. These ideas are very obviously present in Gray's poem.

Philosophically, this was the age of empiricism. Philosophers liked David Hume and John Locke analyzed how people's moment-to-moment experiences were the basis of all their ideas. These philosophers were very interested in perception, in how people observed the real world and then made conclusions from those observations. This trend can also be seen in Gray's poem, as he begins by emphasizing the poem's setting, then shows how that setting leads his speaker to new thoughts.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to a reading of Gray's full poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbYcPW2MwAI)
- Gray's Biography — Read a detailed biography of Thomas Gray from the Poetry Foundation, featuring analyses of many of his poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-gray)
- The Thomas Gray Archive — Visit an online archive featuring a trove of information about Gray's writings. (https://www.thomasgray.org/)
- The Village that Inspired the Poem — Read a short article on Stoke Poges, the village that Gray in lived in when he wrote the poem, and see a photo of the church that probably inspired him. (https://www.britannica.com/place/Stoke-Poges)
- Gray's Monument and Gray's Field — Find information on a monument to Gray in Stoke Poges, as well as an overview of Gray's life and the countryside he lived in. (https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/grays-monument-and-grays-field-stoke-poges-buckinghamshire)

HOW TO CITE

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