



## Thomas Gray, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

Thomas Gray was born in London in 1716. He studied at Eton College and then at Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he was active as a scholar for most of his life. During his studies, he met Horace Walpole, the youngest son of the Prime Minister. He died in Cambridge in 1768. The *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Gray's masterpiece and most famous work, is the sign of a new spirit in poetry because of its new sympathy for the 'short and simple annals of the poor'.

The poem is about the poet's thoughts while he wanders at twilight in a country churchyard and meditates upon the humble fate of those sleeping there and who have, perhaps, the same virtue and natural talent as those who have become famous.

Gray mixes a suffused and deep, personal melancholy and anguish with a dramatic and emotional form that reflects the rising interest in Gothic themes and atmosphere.

It contains many exceptional phrases which have entered the common English lexicon such as 'Far from the madding crowd', 'The paths of glory', 'Celestial fire', 'The unlettered muse' and 'Kindred spirit'.

The following are some of the most relevant passages from the *Elegy*, where the poet argues that there is nobility in all people, even if sometimes life circumstances prevent some talents from being manifested.



### [...] *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

Beneath those rugged elms,<sup>1</sup> that yew-tree's shade,  
Where heaves<sup>2</sup> the turf in many a mouldering<sup>3</sup> heap,  
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,  
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet<sup>4</sup> sleep.

[...]

For them no more the blazing hearth<sup>5</sup> shall burn,  
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:  
No children run to lisp<sup>6</sup> their sire's<sup>7</sup> return,  
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

[...]

Let not Ambition mock<sup>8</sup> their useful toil,  
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;  
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful<sup>9</sup> smile,  
The short and simple annals of the poor.  
The boast<sup>10</sup> of heraldry,<sup>11</sup> the pomp<sup>12</sup> of power,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour:  
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.  
[...]

### GLOSSARY

1 big and sturdy trees - 2 is lifted - 3 decaying - 4 village - 5 fireplace - 6 pronounce imperfectly - 7 father's - 8 ridicule - 9 scornful - 10 excessive proud - 11 genealogy - 12 splendour

### ACTIVITIES

1 Answer the following questions.

- 1 What is the elegy about?
- 2 What kind of emotions are shown through the poem?
- 3 What does Gray describe in the first stanza?
- 4 Why do you think the forefathers are described as 'rude'?
- 5 What is the second stanza about?
- 6 In the fourth stanza the poet introduces another social class. Which one?

