* **“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” 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***](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/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.*

* **“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” 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.

**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.

**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**](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/metaphor) 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.

* **Line-by-Line Explanation & Analysis of “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”**
  + **Lines 1-4**

"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**](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/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**](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/symbolism) 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**](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/allegory), in which *abstract* qualities were [**personified**](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/personification) 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**](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/formal-verse): [**rhymed**](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/rhyme) [**quatrains**](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/quatrain), or four-line stanzas, written in [**iambic**](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/iamb) 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.)

**Note-** <https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/poetry/elegy-country-churchyard> (visit this link for more notes on Elegy…