



**READING 3** Evaluate the changes in sound and form in poetry across literary time periods. **RC-12(B)** Make complex inferences about text and use textual evidence to support understanding.

# Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Poem by Thomas Gray

## Meet the Author

### Thomas Gray 1716–1771

In the boisterous Age of Johnson, Thomas Gray was something of an anomaly. He shunned lively public debate and the glare of intellectual celebrity for the gentler pursuit of private study and the company of an intimate circle of friends. The hustle and bustle of London held no attraction for him; he preferred the quiet confines of Cambridge University and solitary walks in the countryside. His medium was lyric poetry rather than satire. He was a shy, introverted, even secretive man who famously lacked ambition. After gaining national acclaim with the publication of “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751), he adamantly refused the offered post of poet laureate and the publicity that came with it. His published body of work numbered less than 1,000 lines. And yet, his lyrical “Elegy” made him the dominant poet of his time and a precursor of the Romantic Age to come.

**Surviving Childhood** Gray was born in London, the only one of 12 brothers and sisters to survive to adulthood. His father, a “money-scrivener” (lender), was violent and abusive, while his long-suffering mother ran a small hat shop to help support the family. A frail but studious child, the

young Gray escaped his frightening home life at age eight when his mother paid for him to attend boarding school at Eton College. Gray thrived at Eton and there developed the reclusive academic habits that remained with him for life.

**“Far from the Madding Crowd”** While at Eton, Gray met Horace Walpole, the son of the prime minister and a lifelong friend who would later encourage Gray to publish his poems. The young men traveled together on a grand tour of Europe, but their personal differences—Gray’s love of museums and romantic scenery clashing with Walpole’s social interests—led to a bitter falling out that lasted four years. By the time Gray settled in Cambridge in 1742, he had begun writing poetry. But that year his closest friend, Richard West, died at the tender age of 25, plunging Gray into a sadness that pervaded his next poems, especially his popular “Elegy.” His later poems were not as well received by readers, who found them difficult to understand, and so Gray withdrew from his already minimal public life and even stopped writing poetry. A large inheritance ultimately allowed him to live out his remaining years doing what he liked best—reading in private, writing letters, exploring the English countryside, and spending tranquil hours with friends.

## DID YOU KNOW?

Thomas Gray ...

- hated math.
- may have had pyrophobia, or fear of fire.
- was buried in the cemetery described in his famous “Elegy.”

(background) Eton College



Author Online



Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com). KEYWORD: HML12-690

● POETIC FORM: ELEGY

Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is one of the most famous English elegies. An **elegy** is an extended meditative poem in which the speaker reflects on death—often in tribute to a person who has died recently—or on an equally serious subject. Most elegies are written in formal, dignified language and are serious in mood and tone. Consider these lines from Gray's poem, which describe a cemetery:

*Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree's shade,  
Where heaves the turf in many a moldering heap,  
Each in his narrow cell forever laid,  
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.*

As you read this elegy, think about who the dead are, how the speaker pays tribute to them, and what observations are made about death.

● READING SKILL: MAKE INFERENCES

To understand this poem you must **make inferences**, or logical guesses, about the dead who are described and about the speaker who describes them. Use details from the poem to infer ideas not stated outright. For example, what would you guess about the lives of the people portrayed in this stanza?

*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 bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!*

From the words *harvest*, *sickle*, and *furrow*, you can infer that they were farmers. *Oft* ("often") suggests that they were hardworking; *jocund* ("merry") suggests that they were happy in their labor.

What would you guess are the speaker's feelings toward these people? Positive images of strength—a harvest yielding to the sickle, the woods bowing beneath an axe stroke—suggest that he admires them. As you read, record your inferences about the dead and the speaker, and clues that led to your inferences. Use a chart like the one shown.

Inferences About the Dead	Inferences About the Speaker	Clues

## What are life's LIMITATIONS?

In our world of modern conveniences and endless possibilities, it's hard to think about limits. But for most people in the 18th century, life's limitations were readily apparent. From scarce resources and opportunities to dangerous health threats and premature death, ordinary people faced innumerable obstacles in their lives. Gray's "Elegy" addresses the limitations imposed upon ordinary people of his time.

**SURVEY** Ask your classmates: What is the biggest limitation faced by young people you know? Tally the different responses given and their frequency, and present your findings to the class. How do today's limitations compare with the limitations of the past?

### Biggest Limitation

lack of money THH IIII

incomplete education IIII



Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

# Elegy Written in A Country Churchyard

Thomas Gray

**BACKGROUND** Gray's "Elegy" is one of the most quoted poems in English literature. Gray worked eight years on it and never meant for it to be read by the public; he first published it reluctantly and anonymously. But the intense personal feelings the poem expresses gave it an immediate and universal appeal. The speaker is widely assumed to be the poet himself. He contemplates the deaths of those buried in the churchyard, then the deaths of all people, and then his own death.

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.

5 Now fades the glimmering 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 tower  
10 The moping owl does to the moon complain  
Of such, as wandering near her secret bower,  
Molest her ancient solitary reign. **A**

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree's shade,  
Where heaves the turf in many a moldering heap,  
15 Each in his narrow cell forever laid,  
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

**2** lea (lē): meadow.

## Analyze Visuals ►

What ideas come to mind as you study this photo of an old country churchyard in England?

## **A** ELEGY

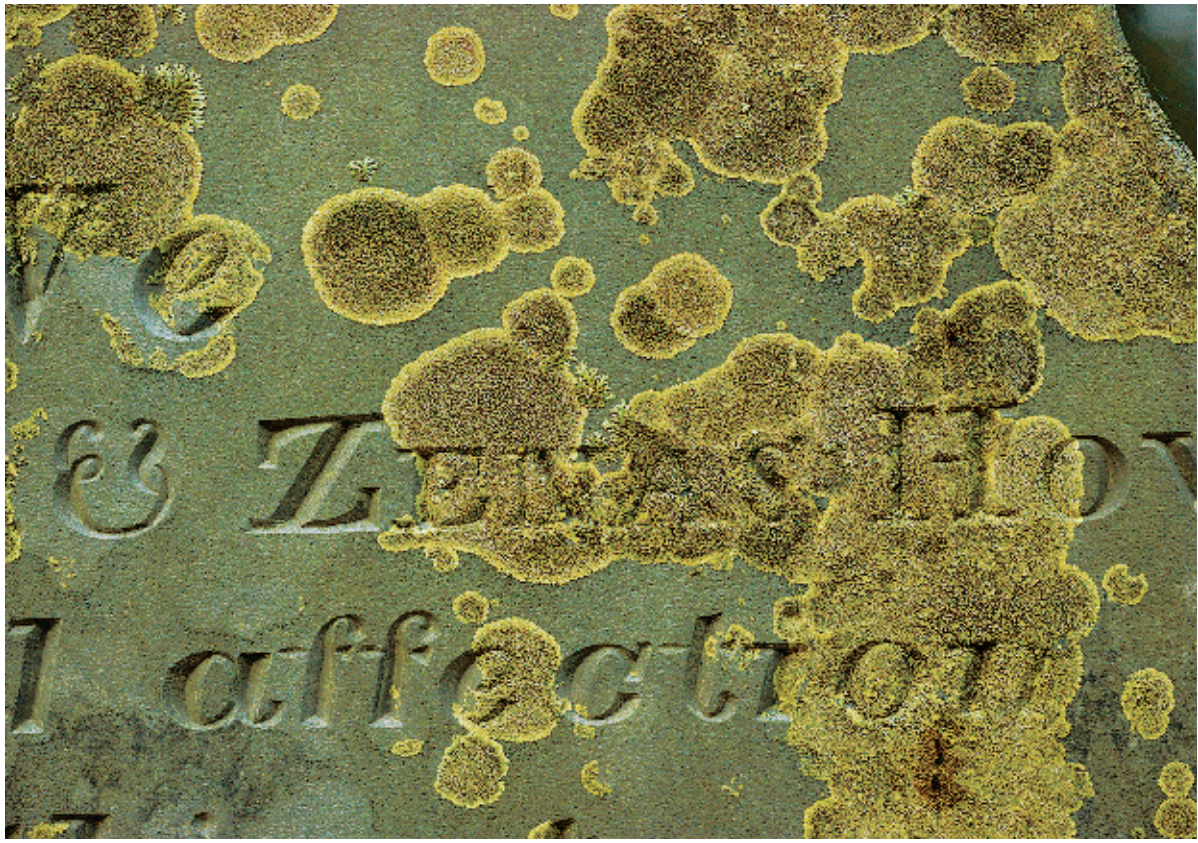
What **mood** is created by the images in the first three stanzas?

**16** rude: unsophisticated; rustic.









The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,  
 The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,  
 The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,  
 20 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. **B**

25 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 bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

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

**B MAKE INFERENCES**

Reread lines 17–24. What do you infer about the lives and the values of those buried?

26 **glebe**: soil; earth.

27 **jocund** (jŏk'ənd): merry.

32 **annals**: descriptive records; history.

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

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

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

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

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

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,  
 The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:  
 55 Full many a flower 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,  
 60 Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

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

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

33 **heraldry**: noble birth.

## **C ELEGY**

What observation about death is made in lines 33–36?

37 **impute . . . fault**: assign the blame to them.

38 **trophies**: sculptures depicting the achievements of the deceased.

39 **fretted vault**: space enclosed under a decorated arched ceiling.

41 **storied . . . bust**: an urn for the ashes of the deceased, decorated with scenes from the person's life, or a lifelike portrait sculpture.

43 **provoke**: call forth.

48 **lyre**: a small harplike musical instrument used in ancient Greece to accompany the singing of poetry, and therefore frequently used as a symbol of the poetic art.

51 **penury** (pĕn'yə-rē): extreme poverty.

52 **genial current**: warm, life-giving power.

57 **Hampden**: John Hampden, a 17th-century English politician who opposed the "tyrant" Charles I over unjust taxation.

60 **Cromwell**: Oliver Cromwell, leader of the Parliamentary forces in the English Civil War and head of the English government from 1653 to 1658.

65 **circumscribed**: limited; confined.

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,  
 70 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 learned to stray;  
 75 Along the cool sequestered vale of life  
 They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

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

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

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

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,  
 90 Some pious drops the closing eye requires;  
 Even from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,  
 Even in our ashes live their wonted fires.

For thee, who mindful of the unhonored dead  
 Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;  
 95 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  
 100 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.

**69 conscious truth:** conscience.

**72 incense . . . flame:** poetic praise.

**73 madding:** wildly excited;  
disorderly.

**75 sequestered:** isolated; secluded.

**76 tenor:** unwavering course.

## Language Coach

**Multiple Meanings** In Gray's day, *uncouth* could mean "awkward" (as it does today) or "unfamiliar." Which is meant in line 79?

**81 unlettered Muse:** the "inspiration" of the uneducated stonemasons who carved the inscriptions on the tombstones.

**85–88 For who . . . behind?:** For who has ever accepted that he will be forgotten, leaving the warmth of earthly life without any regret?

**90 drops:** tears.

**92 wonted** (wŏn'tĭd): accustomed.

**93 thee:** that is, Gray himself.

**97 hoary-headed swain:** white-haired peasant.

**104 pore:** to gaze intently.

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

“One morn I missed him on the customed hill,  
110 Along the heath and near his favorite 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 through the churchway path we saw him borne.  
115 Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,  
Graved 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 frowned not on his humble birth,  
120 And Melancholy marked him for her own.*

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

125 *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. **E***

#### **D MAKE INFERENCES**

What can you infer about the speaker's life and values from the way he imagines himself described in lines 98–108?

111 **rill**: brook.

113 **dirges**: funeral hymns.

115 **lay**: poem.

116 **thorn**: hawthorn.

119 **science**: learning.

#### **E ELEGY**

In lines 117–128, the speaker imagines his own **epitaph**, an inscription on his tomb. How does he want to be viewed upon his death?



## Comprehension

1. **Recall** At what time of day does the poem take place?
2. **Paraphrase** Relate the lives of the dead to lines 55–56: “Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air.” Restate the meaning of these lines.
3. **Summarize** What do all the dead desire, according to the speaker?



**READING 3** Evaluate the changes in sound and form in poetry across literary time periods. **RC-12(B)** Make complex inferences about text and use textual evidence to support understanding.

## Literary Analysis

4. **Interpret Elegy** Explain the purpose of this elegy. Whom is the speaker praising, and why? What **themes** about death does he express? Cite lines to support your interpretation.
5. **Make Inferences About Characters** Review the chart of inferences you made about the dead villagers. Explain what you inferred about the following:
  - their values
  - the challenges they faced
  - the benefits of their lot
6. **Make Inferences About the Speaker** The speaker reveals almost as much about himself and his values as he does about the villagers. Infer his opinion on the following topics from the statements he makes:
  - the upper classes (lines 29–36)
  - city life vs. country life (lines 73–76)
  - famous people (lines 67–72)
  - himself (lines 105–108; 117–128)
7. **Compare and Contrast** How does the speaker’s imagined gravesite with its moving epitaph fit in with the other graves in the churchyard? How does it stand out? Discuss what the comparison suggests about the speaker’s relationship to the villagers.
8. **Analyze Influence of Author’s Background** What in Thomas Gray’s personality and experience might have led him to write a formal elegy about a rural cemetery? Review the biography on page 690 and the background on page 692, as well as details in the poem, for clues to his motivations.

## Literary Criticism

9. **Different Perspectives** In lines 65–76, Gray makes the point that the poor farmers were prevented from corruption as well as from achievement. Is it widely believed today that a rural existence is less corrupting than an urban one? Support your answer.

### *What are life’s* **LIMITATIONS?**

How might having limitations possibly increase, rather than limit, your sense of freedom?

## A Man of Letters

James Boswell portrayed Samuel Johnson as a man larger than life—a man of great courage, greater appetites, strong principles, and an engaging personality. Johnson’s own body of work suggests that Boswell was not far wrong; Johnson’s extensive writings reveal a rigorous, insatiable mind and great wit. Rising to fame after the publication of his dictionary, Johnson was eventually rewarded by the king for his contribution to English letters and came to be seen as a great talent and a man of his age.

### Writing to Analyze

Based on the Johnson selection you read, as well as the excerpts from his biography, what do you think are the qualities that made Johnson so widely revered? Additionally, what does his popularity tell you about the age in which he lived? Write an essay in which you present and explain your response, citing evidence from the selections.

#### Consider

- the way he organized his ideas
- his use of language
- his qualities as described by Boswell

*Dr. Johnson in the Ante-Room of Lord Chesterfield Waiting for an Audience, 1748 (1845), Edward Matthew Ward. Tate Gallery, London. © Tate Gallery, London/Art Resource, New York.*

### Extension

**LISTENING & SPEAKING** With several classmates, stage a performance of the dialogue recorded by Boswell in the excerpts from *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. In preparation, review each section of dialogue. Discuss the traits of the people speaking as well as the ideas communicated by the dialogue, considering how to best convey both. After your performance, hold a wider discussion of the ideas that were presented. Do you agree with any of the speakers? Disagree? Why?



**WRITING 15A** Write an analytical essay.  
**LISTENING AND SPEAKING 26** Work productively with others in teams.

