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❁ THOMAS GRAY ❁

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

PRE-GRAMMAR | Preparation

Prepare to think about the poem and its Central One Idea by drawing upon your prior knowledge, experience, or interests.

1. Thomas Gray's friend, Richard West, died in 1742. He may have written this poem with his friend in mind. Take a minute to imagine walking through an old churchyard cemetery. Old and weathered, the headstones have been there for decades. What do you see? What do hear? What comes to mind regarding the subject of death?

GRAMMAR | Presentation

Discover essential facts, elements, and features of the poem through the Reading Notes, Words to Be Defined, and Comprehension Questions.

READING NOTES

1. **elegy** – a sustained, formal poem that mourns the loss of someone or something; a lament or a sadly meditative poem on a solemn theme
2. **glebe** (l. 26) – fields; lands
3. **annals** (l. 32) – historical records
4. **(Oliver) Cromwell** (l. 60) – Oliver Cromwell was an English political leader who led the anti-Royalists during the English Civil War. He then ruled as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth from 1649-1660.

WORDS TO BE DEFINED

1. the sound of a slowly rung bell, usually for a death or funeral
2. decaying; decomposing
3. disrespectful; scornful
4. to assign; to ascribe
5. extreme poverty
6. dishonorable; shameful
7. hidden; isolated
8. areas; boundaries
9. usual; customary
10. songs of grief or lamentation; funeral songs

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Iambic pentameter; the rhyme scheme is ABAB.
2. All things are settling down for the evening. The lowing herd are winding over the meadow, and the ploughman is plodding his weary way home. Left with himself and the darkness, the speaker reveals his thoughtful, reflective mood.
3. Answers will vary. The glimmering landscape; the solemn still of the air; "the beetle wheels his droning flight"; "drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds"; the "moping owl" complains to the moon.
4. Dead persons are buried there, "each in his narrow cell for ever laid." (l. 15)
5. Any listed in stanza 6 (lines 21-24). The blazing hearth will not burn, no children run to lip their sire's return, etc.
6. poor, simple countryfolk
7. He personifies Ambition and Grandeur, warning readers not to let their ambition "mock" the rustic, hardworking poor, or let their grandeur (i.e., ego/arrogance) "hear with a disdainful smile,/The short and simple annals of the poor." (ll. 31-32)
8. He reminds the proud not to belittle ("impute to these the fault") the poor for not having fancy tombs or monuments over their dead bodies.
9. Many of these rustic people could have been famous or recognized in life, but they died unknown because "their lot forbade it"—that is, because of their poverty. Their poverty prevented them from achieving all kinds of lofty things, and it also prevented them from committing base deeds, such as crimes (because they're working too hard).
10. Answers will vary. They have "uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture"; just "their name, their years," and some Bible verses.
11. The speaker refers to himself as "thee," and says he is "mindful of the unhonoured dead," and "in these lines their artless tale relate." He establishes that his purpose is to use his poetry to remember and honor the poor country folk buried there.

WORDS TO BE DEFINED

Definitions Bank

areas; boundaries	hidden; isolated
to assign; to ascribe	songs of grief or lamentation; funeral songs
decaying; decomposing	the sound of a slowly rung bell, usually for a death or funeral
dishonorable; shameful	usual; customary
disrespectful; scornful	
extreme poverty	

1. The curfew tolls the **knell** of parting day, *n.* (l. 1)
2. Where heaves the turf in many a **mouldering** heap, *adj.* (l. 14)
3. Nor Grandeur hear with a **disdainful** smile, *adj.* (l. 31)
4. Nor you, ye Proud, **impute** to these the fault, *v.* (l. 37)
5. Chill **Penury** repressed their noble rage, *n.* (l. 51)
6. Far from the madding crowd's **ignoble** strife, *adj.* (l. 73)
7. Along the cool **sequestered** vale of life, *adj.* (l. 75)
8. Left the warm **precincts** of the cheerful day, *n.* (l. 87)
9. Ev'n in our ashes live their **wonted** fires. *adj.* (l. 92)
10. The next with **dirges** due in sad array, *n.* (l. 113)



Read "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," marking the poem in key places.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Conduct a **scansion** of the first stanza. What is its **meter** and **rhyme scheme**?
2. Describe the **setting** and the **mood** in stanza 1. What does the speaker reveal about his state of mind?
3. List a couple details of **imagery** from stanzas 2-3.
4. What significant **image** does the speaker present in stanza 4? Include a quote in your answer.
5. List a couple of earthly pleasures that the dead will no longer be able to enjoy.

6. What sort of people are buried in the country churchyard?
7. Briefly **summarize** stanza 8, and explain the use of **personification**.
8. What does he caution "the proud" against in stanza 10?
9. What is the broad idea for stanzas 13-19?
10. What kinds of monuments do the simple, poor folk have over their graves? List a couple details from stanzas 20-21.
11. According to stanzas 24-25, what is the **purpose** of the poem? Include a phrase or line in your answer.
12. In stanzas 24-29, how does the speaker introduce the topic of death as it relates to himself? What story does he imagine?
13. At the end of the speaker's imagined story (st. 29), what does the country swain finally ask the kindred spirit to do?
14. What does the speaker imagine will be written on his gravestone? List a few of his conjectures.

LOGIC | Dialectic

Reason with the facts, elements, and features of the poem; sort, arrange, compare, and connect ideas – and begin to uncover and determine the Central One Idea.

SOCRATIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

May be verbally discussed or answered in written form in your Literature Notebook.

1. What **metaphor** does the speaker use in stanza 1 which points toward the **theme** of the poem?
2. What important **message** is conveyed in stanza 9? Do you agree with the speaker?
3. To what effect are **rhetorical questions** and **imagery** used in lines 41-44? What point is the speaker making?
4. Through various **metaphors**, what is the speaker saying in stanzas 14-15?
5. **Summarize** the last stanza. What is the closing thought of the speaker's epitaph?



12. In stanzas 24-29, the speaker imagines a country swain telling another swain (the "kindred spirit") about himself, the speaker/poet, who frequented the churchyard. The swain tells the kindred spirit about the speaker and his behaviors around the churchyard: "now smiling ... Muttering his wayward fancies," etc. Then the swain reports that one day he did not see the speaker, nor the next day, nor the next. On the following day, the swain explains that he saw the speaker being born with dirges in sad array through the church-way path to the churchyard.
13. To approach and read the gravestone of the speaker: "Approach and read ... the lay,/Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn" (ll. 115-116).
14. Answers will vary. He did not receive fame or fortune, but despite his humble birth, he acquired knowledge ("Science") in his life. But along with this, he had some melancholy or depression. But still, his bounty (generosity) was large and his soul was sincere, and heaven blessed him for this, and in addition, blessed him with a close friend. (He may very well have had his close friend who died, Richard West, in mind here.)

SOCRATIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day." The curfew bell rings because it is the end of the day, only it rings the (death) knell. Thus, the parting day represents the parting life, which gives way to night (death).
2. The speaker says that even people who have the boast of heraldry and the pomp of power, beauty, wealth, and glory still arrive at the same place: the grave. "Awaits alike the inevitable hour." (l. 35) Answers will vary. Yes, I fully concur with the speaker here!

3. The speaker extends his point from the previous stanza, using rhetorical questions and powerful imagery: No life can reanimate death; nothing can change the permanence of death; no "Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death."
4. The speaker mentions a few metaphors, the first is that of dark, unfathomed caves of the ocean that bear many gems of pure beauty. In other words, many great lives and talents of the poor remain unknown to the world due to the hardships and limitations of their poverty.
5. Do not try to disclose any of the speaker's merits or deficiencies, for they are both reposing with him, trembling in hope of eternal life with God.

RHETORICAL EXPRESSION

1. The speaker wanders into a country churchyard and reflects deeply and poetically on the simple, rustic folk buried there. He honors them and memorializes them with his poem. He also contemplates death in general, and this leads him to think about his own death. He concludes the poem with his own epitaph.
2. Answers will vary.
 - ◆ **Central Quote:** Answers will vary. Here is an example:
"Can storied urn or animated bust/Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?/Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,/Or Flattery soothe the cold ear of Death?" (ll. 41-44)
 - ① Everybody will die: the rich and the powerful, and the humble and simple. All paths lead to the grave. We should live generously and sincerely, hoping for salvation in God.

THOMAS GRAY • *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

RHETORIC | Expression

Express in your own words the Central One Idea with supporting points.

RHETORICAL EXPRESSION

To be answered in your Literature Notebook in preparation for your essay.

1. In 2-3 sentences, **summarize** the poem.
 2. Write the **Central One Idea** of the poem in a precise, eloquent sentence.
 - ◆ **Central Quote:** Choose a line or two from anywhere in the poem that you think best embodies the Central One Idea. With good penmanship, write it in your Literature Notebook.
- ① **Write the Central One Idea as expressed by the teacher.**

WRITING OPTION:

Take some time to visit a cemetery. Take a writing journal with you. Spend some time walking around and reflecting on your surroundings. What do you see and feel? Read some gravestones. Think about each grave as containing a person who was once alive, but who is now dead. Reflect on death in general. And finally, reflect on your own death. Write a reflective piece or a poem capturing the thoughts and feelings of your experience in the cemetery.