

The Transitional Nature of "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"

First published in 1751, Thomas Gray's popular poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," was written at a time of great restructuring within the literary world. Caught between the ideas of the neoclassical age surrounding formal and rational thought and the emotion and free-flowing verse characterized by the Romantic period, Gray is often regarded as a transitional artist because his pieces include influences from both literary movements. In analyzing form, literary devices, subject matter, and themes within "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," readers find identifiers woven throughout the text which mark the transition from the neoclassicism of the 18th century to the early Romantics.

The structured format of Thomas Gray's poem is one of the main links between his poetry and neoclassical thought. Gray's poem follows the popular 18th century notion of strict adherence to literary rules regarding formatting. Gray utilizes iambic pentameter within his piece which makes use of precise phrasing to stress certain syllables and lines in a calculated manner. For example, one of his stanzas says, "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" (14). Every other line in his stanzas are compatible, allowing the rhythm of the poem to feel steady. In this example, "serene" matches with "unseen" and "ocean bear" and "desert air" work together to fulfill Gray's pattern. In a repetition of corresponding syllables and lines, each of the poem's 32 stanzas contains a similar style in a perfectly balanced 128 lines, adhering to the neoclassical tradition of iambic pentameter.

Additionally, Gray utilizes personification throughout his work, which was a common trait among neoclassical poems. Because ancient classical poets and authors spoke of grand notions such as love or pride as though they were living entities, many neoclassical artists adopted this practice. In the eighteenth stanza, he says, "The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide, To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame, or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride..." In capitalizing inhuman notions such as Luxury and Pride and speaking about them as though they were living, Gray personifies his ideas as a typical neoclassical artist.

Finally, Gray expresses neoclassical ideas in his presentation of a moral rule within the text. Neoclassical writers enjoyed commenting on ideas of morality within their work, and Gray subscribed to neoclassical ideals by presenting his ideas on right and wrong within his lines. He says, "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" (stanza 9). Here, Gray argues that power, wealth, and beauty do not have any effect on the outcome men's lives. No matter how powerful, attractive, or rich a person is, Gray reminds his readers that every person must die no matter their circumstances on Earth. In thinking about the morality of man and speaking about the inevitability of death, Gray presents the idea that no man could live forever and that wealthier people should not look down on less educated or rural people, as they all end up in the ground eventually. Because Gray writes out a lesson regarding morality within his text, his piece adheres to a traditional neoclassical writing style in this way.

While Gray utilizes many neoclassical techniques, his work marked a transition between two great literary movements because his language and subject matter often mirrored Romantic era ideals as well. One of the most marked indicators of Gray's status as a transition to the Romantic style is his celebration of the common people. While more formal neoclassicist poetry of the 18th century tended to honor heroes, aristocrats or citizens with vast fortunes or fame, Romantic poets often wrote about everyday subjects and themes. Gray comments on the lives of rural workers when he says, "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's the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!" (7). Gray does not comment on the elements of life known to wealthy aristocrats, but of the labor required in a difficult life on a farm. Gray says, "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..."(6). Again, Gray speaks of some of the trivialities of everyday life for common people as opposed to scenarios encountered by the wealthy or powerful. He discusses simple acts of rural family life and thus demonstrates his position as a transitional poet between the neoclassical and Romantic Eras.

The elements of nature discussed throughout "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" coupled with the rural setting place the piece in the Romantic era. As Romantic era poets often discussed the relationship between man and nature and Gray's piece expresses a bond between the natural world and human beings, the poem falls into a Romantic category. The first three stanzas, for example, utilize strong natural imagery to describe the mood and setting. In these stanzas, Gray discusses the sunset, the animals dwelling within the graveyard, and the sounds of nature heard while in this churchyard at dusk. He allows readers to wander with him through the outdoors and get a strong sense of his natural surroundings. Gray eloquently describes the setting of the poem in detail for readers, which is commonplace among Romantic Era poets. Gray rekindles the thought of nature as a valid subject matter in poetry unlike many neoclassical artists who ignores the natural world altogether. By including vast natural imagery, Gray strayed away from the classical poetry of his day into themes influenced by nature, which mark his transition from neoclassical poetry into Romantic style verses.

Thomas Gray wrote "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" in a style combining elements of two great literary movements. His balanced form, use of personification, and presentation of a moral rule cluster him among the neoclassicists. However, his celebration of common people and everyday happenings and strong natural imagery place him among the realm of Romantic poets. Gray's poem has withstood the test of time because of its unique style utilizing ideas from both periods, marking a transition between the more formal sentiments of neoclassical poetry and the emotions set free by the Romantics who followed.