

## Inconsistency in “Elegy...”

By Christie S

There are many interpretations of Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. Some critics question the pronouns “thee” and “me” in the poem; several scrutinize the stanzas and find deep meaning in the words; some speculate for whom the epitaph was written; others take notice of the imagery and sounds described. It is obvious that the poem is very much concerned with the people buried in the yard. However, Gray is inconsistent in the purpose of the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. He praises the country folk and laments their condition, but offers no solution for their plight.

There is no argument that Thomas Gray does an outstanding job of lauding the poor individuals buried in [written at eastern alamance hs in 05] the cemetery. After describing the churchyard, he launches into a description of the lives of this little-known group, mourning their unnoticed deaths. “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. Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield...How jocund did they drive their team afield!” (Lines 21-25, 27). Gray wrote descriptive lines of these men and women, praising their virtue and humility. This was not undeserved praise. “These were not easy people to ignore, by Gray’s standard: their virtues should have made them stand out as society’s finest, and he writes with bitterness that they were left to rot in obscurity in tiny churchyards while men and women not nearly as useful or loved rested under marble monuments” (Kelly 84). Generally, he is concerned with the lack of attention the lives of the deceased in their graves received.

Gray seems to think that laying under the soil were people that could have done great things had their lives not been cut short by death. He speculates about their lost futures, lavishes praises on them, and shows considerable remorse for the ignored value of the lives of these honorable citizens.

Remorse, though, is the most Gray can offer to the dead and their descendants. In the poem, he fails to offer help in correcting this negligence. Gray presents a problem (less deserving people receive much more recognition after death) and does not present a solution to it.

The problem is that, having imagined the greatness of the 'rude forefathers' so well and rendered them so convincingly, Gray did not have any idea about what he should do about their descendants that labored on. He was hardly the revolutionary... The best that Gray could come up with to compensate for the opportunities that had been denied these simple country people was the complaint that they should have memorials on their graves as nice as those that mark the remains of social luminaries, in acknowledgment of the fact that they could have been important too, given the chance (Kelly 84).

Social purpose was a dominant theme in this period of literature. Poetry was concise and written towards a particular goal (Restoration 481). It has been said that Thomas Gray was more of [written at eastern alamance hs in 05] a Romantic era poet than the typical author of the eighteenth century. He was presumed to show revolutionary ideas and new viewpoints, and he achieves this to some extent. But instead of suggesting new reforms to help these destitute farmers or offering other solutions to lift them from their common

state, Gray can do nothing more than compose an elegy to society's loss of their presence.

The poem is beautiful and descriptive, but it is also inconsistent. The author shows this when he praises the admirable countrymen and mourns their circumstances, but then he does not give aid for [written at eastern alamance hs in 05] their predicament and the continuing problems of their descendants. Now that Gray has called our attention to this regrettable situation, what can we do to help? Gray's poem can leave a reader asking, "What can *I* do to change the problem of the people in the churchyard? The answer is, we can do nothing."

## Works Cited

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