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# UNIT-1 THOMAS GRAY: ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD

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## 1.1 OBJECTIVES

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The aim of this unit is to analyze and explicate Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard in the biographical, historical and literary perspective. The unit will also discover how far Gray's Elegy reflects the first rumblings of Romanticism through the choices the poet makes regarding the selection and treatment of his theme in this poem.

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## 1.2 INTRODUCTION

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This unit will begin with providing some brief biographical information about Thomas Gray, paying special attention to the important poems he wrote during his literary career. And then the unit will come straight to examine Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard and bring out the special literary merits of the poem. The discussion of the poem will be based entirely on selected extracts from the poem, and an attempt will be made to see how far the Elegy reveals Romantic features which are later built on by William Wordsworth and other Romantic poets.

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## 1.3 THOMAS GRAY (1716-71)

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Thomas Gray, the sole survivor of twelve children, a man of poor physique himself, was born in Cornhill, London in 1716. His father, a scrivener, was mentally unbalanced, and Gray was brought up by his mother who sent him to Eton where he

made friends with Horace Walpole. Gray went on to Peterhouse, Cambridge, and gained a high reputation for his Latin poetry, though he failed to take a degree.

In 1739, he embarked on a tour of the continent with Walpole, but in 1741 they quarrelled, and Gray returned alone. He turned to the study of law and began writing a tragedy *A gripping* which remained unfinished. The death of Richard West, a close friend from his Eton days in 1742 precipitated a period of poetic activity, and Gray's first publication was the *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* written in 1742 but published anonymously by Dodsley in 1747.

From 1742, Gray lived in Peterhouse and later Pembroke College, Cambridge, except for a period (1759-61) in London where he pursued his studies in the British Museum. Relations with Walpole were soon restored, and it was the death of Walpole's cat which inspired Gray to write the delightful mock-heroic poem *Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat* (1748)

In 1742, Gray also started writing *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* while staying with his mother and aunt at their retirement home in Stoke Pages. The poem was carefully revised over a long period and was eventually published by Dodsley in 1751, achieving instant recognition as a masterpiece. It quickly went through fifteen editions and was often pirated.

With this poem, a great change appears, and many features make it historically very important. There is first the use of Nature which, though employed only as a background, is still handled with fidelity and sympathy. There is next the churchyard scene, the twilight atmosphere, and the brooding melancholy of the poem, which at once connects it with one side of the Romantic Movement – the development of the distinctive romantic mood. The contrast between the country and town – the peasant's "simple life" and the "madding crowds' ignoble strife" – is a third particular which should be noted. Finally, in the tender feeling shown for the "rude forefathers of the hamlet" and the sense of human values of the little things that are written in the short and simple annals of the poor we see poetry, under the influence of the spreading democratic spirit, reaching out to include humble aspects of life hitherto ignored. Thus despite the poet's continued use of the Augustan trick of personification and capital letters, the *Elegy* marks a stage in the evolution of Gray's poetic genius.

In 1761, Gray wrote a number of poems reflecting a mixture of bookish scholarship and romantic primitivism very characteristic of the period: *The Fatal Sisters*, *The Descent of Odin* (An Ode from the Norse tongue), *The Triumphs of Owen* (A Fragment from the Welsh) were all published in 1768 in Dodsley's collected edition of his works: *Poems by Mr. Gray*. These poems were filled with a new conception of

the poet as an inspired singer rather than an accomplished artist – in the terms of the eighteenth century antithesis, an “enthusiast” rather than a ‘wit’.

In 1768 Gray was appointed Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, though he never delivered a lecture. In 1769 he travelled to the Lake District and his *Journal* published posthumously in 1775 relates his reactions to the sublime scenery. His *Letters* reveal a profoundly learned but witty and entertaining personality. Thus Thomas Gray can be rightly considered as a scholar who produced little but precious little English poetry. What he wrote was not only exquisite in quality and finish but also curiously interesting as a kind of epitome of the changes which were coming over English literature of his time. He began with versified pamphlets in Pope’s manner, passed on through conventional lyrics to the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* and ended with experiments which were fundamentally romantic in character.

It will be apt to conclude this part of the unit with Gray’s brief prose epitaph for his mother’s tomb in Stoke Pages Churchyard in which he noted that she was “the tender careful mother of many children: one of whom had the misfortune to survive her”. It is a typically self-pitying comment, one accentuated by the fact that when Thomas Gray died in 1771 and was himself buried in the same tomb no further reference was made to him on the stone. In sharp contrast, the monument later erected to his memory in Westminster Abbey, immediately under that to Milton, bore a more assertive quatrain by his friend William Mason (1725-97):

“No more the Grecian Muse unrivall’d reigns,  
To Britain let the Nations homage pay;  
She felt a Homer’s fire in Milton’s strains,  
A Pindar’s rapture from the Lyre of Gray”

### **1.3.1 The early years (1716-1741)**

Thomas Gray was born on 26 December 1716 at 41 Cornhill, London, near St Michael’s Church, in what was then a small milliner’s shop kept by his mother. He was the fifth and only surviving child of twelve children born to Dorothy (1685-1753) and Philip Gray (1676-1741). His father Philip, a “money-scrivener” in the City of London by profession, had married his mother Dorothy, whose maiden name was Antrobus, in 1709. Gray’s mother, originally from a Buckinghamshire family, kept the small shop with her elder sister Mary (1683-1749), but the premises belonged to her husband Philip and the two women had to support themselves and the children by its profits. The marriage was an unhappy one and it was at Dorothy’s expense that Thomas was removed from this unhealthy home environment to Eton College in 1725, where his maternal uncle Robert (1679-1729) who was at Peterhouse, Cambridge, and then assistant master at Eton, took care of the boy and his education. Dorothy’s other

brother William (1688-1742) was at King's College, Cambridge, and also an assistant master at Eton.

From 1725 to 1734 Gray attended Eton College, located opposite Windsor Castle on the other side of the Thames. Thomas was a studious and literary boy and he flourished at Eton. His closest, like-minded school friends were Horace Walpole (1717-97), the son of prime minister Sir Robert Walpole, Richard West (1716-42), whose father was a Lord Chancellor of Ireland, and Thomas Ashton (1715-1775). Together they formed the "quadruple alliance" (Walpole), a lasting friendship based on their shared academic and non-academic interests. They gave themselves nicknames taken from poetry and mythology, Gray was "Orozmades", Walpole was "Celadon", West was "Favonius" or "Zephyrus", and Ashton was "Almanzor". His time at Eton and this friendship had a profound influence on Gray's entire life. At Eton Gray also met Jacob Bryant and Richard Stonhewer (1728-1809) who became life-long friends. Gray's antiquarian interests; which are central in many of his works, and which he always was to follow passionately, were first roused at Eton.

In October 1734 Gray matriculated at Peterhouse, Cambridge. Ashton had entered King's College in August 1734, Walpole would join him there in March 1735, while West was sent to Christ Church, Oxford in May of the same year. Gray's habits at Cambridge, as at Eton, were studious and reflective, he studied Virgil and began to write Latin verse. Walpole and Gray kept up a correspondence with West, communicating poems, and occasionally writing in French and Latin. All three contributed to a volume of *hymeneals* on the marriage of Frederick, Prince of Wales, published as *Gratulatio* in 1736. Gray also wrote at college the Tripos verses "Luna Habitabilis", published in the *MusaeEtonenses*. Gray made at this time the most constant friendship of his life with Thomas Wharton (1717-94), then pensioner of Pembroke College, Cambridge, who would in time become a doctor. Apart from a few humorous lines and translations, Gray had not yet composed any serious English poetry. Gray did not graduate at the normal time, but he immersed himself in Greek, Latin, French, and Italian, studied medieval history, architecture, natural history, and was interested in such subjects as entomology and botany. His poems are full of reminiscences of other languages and other literatures, living and dead. Gray studied mainly for himself, and scarcely anything remains, apart from a vast accumulation of notes, to attest to his profound and varied scholarship. Gray left Peterhouse in 1738 without having taken a degree, and passed some months at his father's house in Cornhill, probably intending to study law at the Inner Temple.

In 1738 Walpole, who had already been appointed to some sinecure office, invited Gray to accompany him on the Grand Tour. Of course Gray who had a confessed passion for French, Italian, and classical culture accepted. On 29 March, 1739, they set out on a prolonged continental tour. They spent the remainder of the year in

France, and crossed the Alps in November. Gray studied *De Bello Gallico* as he travelled through France, and Livy and Silius Italicus as he crossed the Alps. In Paris Gray cultivated a taste for the French classical dramatists, especially Racine, whom he afterwards tried to imitate in the fragmentary tragedy in blank verse *Agrippina*. They also visited Versailles and the small town of Reims, before they travelled south towards Lyon and Geneva. The whole of 1740 was passed in Italy. Gray had already learned Italian and made translations from Dante, Guarini, and Tasso. Gray stayed principally at Florence, but Rome, Naples, and Herculaneum are also described in his letters. The spring months were spent with Horace Mann, the British minister at Florence, afterwards Walpole's well-known correspondent. In Florence Gray began a long work called *De principiis cogitandi*, which he never finished. Gray and Walpole returned to Florence from a visit to Rome in August, and remained there until April 1741 when they set out northwards for Venice. At Reggio, however, a quarrel took place, the precise circumstances of which are unknown.

Obviously, both Walpole and Gray developed in rather different directions both in their personalities and respective interests. They parted in anger and were not reconciled until 1745. Gray spent a few weeks in Venice, and from there returned home alone, visiting, for the second time, the monastery of the Grand Chartreuse in its sublime scenery. He left in the album of the brotherhood his *Alcaic Ode, O Tu, severireligio loci*. Throughout his years abroad Gray had been a careful sightseer, made notes in picture-galleries, visited churches, and brushed up his classical learning. He observed, and afterwards advised (see his letter dated "Stoke, Sept. 6, 1758" [letter id 321]), the custom of always recording his impressions on the spot. Gray had continued his studies abroad throughout his journey, and had acquired a detailed knowledge of classical and modern art, but, at the age of 25, he had not yet prepared himself for any sort of career.

On his return to England in 1741, London was Gray's headquarters for almost a year. Shortly after Gray's return, his father Philip, with whom he had corresponded throughout his time abroad, died on 6 November 1741. On his return home, Gray had also found his friend Richard West, troubled by family problems and personal failures, in declining health. West who was then living in London had, in the meantime, studied law. They renewed their personal and scholarly companionship, which was a source of strength to Gray after his quarrel with Walpole.

Gray resumed his work on the unfinished tragedy *Agrippina*, which was inspired by a performance of Racine's *Britannicus* in Paris. As part of their literary correspondence, Gray sent the fragment to West. West's criticism, however, seems to have put an end to it. Over the following couple of years Gray spent his summers at Stoke Poges, near Slough in Buckinghamshire, to which his mother and aunt Mary had retired from their business in December 1742. The two women were joined by their sister Anne (1676-

1758), whose husband Jonathan Rogers had been a retired attorney who had lived in Burnham parish till his death in October 1742. The three sisters took a house together at West End, Stoke Poges.

### 1.3.2 The Middle years (1742-1758)

The spring and summer of 1742 - the interval between his return from abroad and his move to Cambridge - saw Gray's first and most prolific period of creative activity. The year was fruitful in poetic effort, of which much remained incomplete however. The *Agrippina*, the *De principiiscogitandi*, the "Hymn to Ignorance", in which he contemplates his return to the University, remain fragments. The sights and sounds of the Buckinghamshire countryside also inspired Gray to write the masque-like "Ode on the Spring", which he also sent to West. Shortly after, he received news of the death of West, aged only 25, to whom he had drawn closer since his estrangement from Walpole and who was indeed his only close friend. His sorrow and loneliness found expression in the poems which now followed in close succession - the "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College", the "Ode to Adversity", and the "Sonnet on the Death of Richard West" were written before the close of the summer. The emphasis in these poems is on loss, grief, affliction, and nostalgia. He also mourned West in some lines added to the ambitious philosophical epic *De principiiscogitandi*. This passage was the culmination and the close of his Latin writing.

On 15 October 1742, after more than three years, Gray finally returned to his old college of Peterhouse. He took up residence as a fellow commoner in order to read for a degree of bachelor of laws, with a not very serious intention of an eventual career at the bar. He proceeded to a degree of Bachelor of Civil Law in 1743, but he preferred the study of Greek literature to that of law. The next four or five years Gray devoted to reading, his chief study being the literature and history of ancient Greece. Cambridge remained Gray's headquarters for the rest of his life as a don. Among his Cambridge contemporaries was Wharton who was a then resident and fellow of Pembroke till his marriage in 1747. Wharton afterwards became a member of the Royal College of Physicians and in 1758 settled in his paternal house at Old Park, Durham, where he died in 1794. A later friend, William Mason (1724-97), was at St John's College, Cambridge, where he attracted Gray's attention by some early poems, and, partly through Gray's influence, was elected a fellow of Pembroke in 1749. Mason became an admirer and imitator of Gray and eventually his literary executor. In 1754 he took Holy Orders and moved to York. Gray occasionally visited Wharton and Mason at their homes, and maintained a steady correspondence with both. Other acquaintances included John Clerke, a fellow at Peterhouse, and Dr Conyers Middleton, the University Librarian. Gray wrote the "[Epitaph on MrsClerke]" for his friend's wife on her death in 1758. In the summer Gray generally

spent some time with his mother and aunts at Stoke Poges. His aunt, Mary, died there on 5 November 1749. Gray's mother died on 11 March 1753, aged 67. He was tenderly attached to her, and he placed on her tomb an inscription to the "careful tender mother of many children, one of whom alone had the misfortune to survive her."

Gray's friendship with Horace Walpole had been renewed in 1745, at first with more courtesy than cordiality, although they afterwards corresponded on very friendly terms. Gray was often at Walpole's Strawberry Hill estate at Twickenham, and became acquainted with some of Walpole's friends, although he was generally withdrawn in society. Walpole admired Gray's poetry and encouraged him to publish his works. Gray's first publication was the "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College", written in 1742, which through Walpole's initiative was published anonymously by Dodsley in the summer of 1747. In the following year Gray began his unfinished poem on the "Alliance of Education and Government" and in the same year appeared the first three volumes of Dodsley's collection, the second of which contained Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College", the "Ode on the Spring", and the "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes", one of Gray's most light-hearted poems in memory of Walpole's drowned cat, Selima. These poems hold an important place in Gray's exceptionally small output of verse. The "Ode on the Spring" and the "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" in particular revealed his ease and felicity of expression, his wistful melancholy, and the evocative powers he possessed. However, his more abstract and challenging poems, the "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" and the "Ode to Adversity" met with little attention.

Perhaps as early as 1742, but more likely around 1745, Gray embarked on a long meditative elegy in the tradition of the Retirement Poem. The "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" was composed over a long period of time, it was probably taken up again in the winter of 1749, upon the death of his aunt Mary. The poem, though certainly inspired by the deaths both of West and of his aunt, in time turned into a *memento mori* meditation on and lament for the inevitable fate of all human beings. Opinions will continue to differ about the progress and the several stages of the poem's composition, but progress was certainly very slow and it was only concluded at Stoke Poges and sent to Walpole in a letter dated 12 June 1750 (letter id 173). Walpole admired the "Elegy" greatly, and showed it to various friends and acquaintances in manuscript. Nevertheless, Gray would certainly not have published it even when he did, had he not been forced to do so. In February 1751 the publisher of the *Magazine of Magazines*, who had obtained a copy, wrote to Gray that he was about to publish the "Elegy". In order to forestall its piratical printing, Gray instantly wrote to Walpole to have the poem printed by Dodsley. It was published, anonymously, on 15 February 1751 just before the version in the *Magazine*. The poem's success was instantaneous and overwhelming. It became the most celebrated

and reprinted poem of its century. To this day, it is one of the most frequently quoted and best-known English poems. The poem shows the tension and synthesis between Classicist and Romantic tendencies, and remained influential for generations to come. Alfred Lord Tennyson, a century later, spoke of its "divine truisms that make us weep." It went through four editions within two months of publication, and eleven editions in a short time, besides being imitated, satirized, translated into many languages, and pirated. Through its frequent inclusion in poetic miscellanies and collections throughout the eighteenth century, the poem enjoyed an unusually wide and comprehensive audience.

Walpole's admiration of the poem led to the only incident in Gray's biography which has a touch of conventional romance. Walpole had shown the "Elegy" among others to Lady Cobham, widow of Sir Richard Temple, afterwards Viscount Cobham, who was the *grande dame* of Stoke Poges and had come to live in Stoke Manor House with her young niece and protegee Miss Henrietta Jane Speed (1728-1783). Lady Cobham was a great admirer of the poem and she persuaded Miss Speed and a Lady Schaub, who was staying with her, to pay a visit to Gray at his mother's house. Not finding him at home, they left a note, and the visit eventually led to an acquaintance and to Gray's poem "A Long Story", written in August 1750, celebrating their first meeting. The poem is one of the best examples of Gray's humorous verse. A platonic affection developed between Gray and Miss Speed. When Lady Cobham died in April 1760, leaving 20*l.* for a mourning-ring to Gray and 30,000*l.* to Miss Speed, some vague rumours pointed to a match between the poet and the heiress. They were together at Park Place, Henley, in the summer, but Gray clearly did not enjoy the company of "a pack of women". Not long after, in November 1761, Miss Speed married the Baron de la Perriere, son of the Sardinian minister, and went to live on the family estate of Viry in Savoy, on the lake of Geneva. This is the only suggestion of a conventional romance in Gray's life, he never married. In recent years, much scholarly attention has been paid to the importance of male friendship and apparent homoeroticism in Gray's poems and letters.

Another outcome of the summer of the "Elegy" was the publication, in 1753, of the first authorized collected edition of Gray's poems, with the exception of the "Sonnet" on the death of West. At this time Richard Bentley (1708-1782), the son of the master of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, was a close friend of Walpole. Bentley produced remarkable drawings for Gray's poems, which Gray himself admired. Gray's modesty and reluctance to appear as a public poet is still reflected in the title of the published collection *Designs by Mr. R. Bentley for Six Poems by Mr. T. Gray*, which appeared in March 1753 in a folio volume published by Dodsley. The six poems included were the "Ode on the Spring", the "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes", the "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College", the "Elegy", and, for the first time, "A Long Story", and the "Ode to Adversity". A



"portrait" of Gray is introduced in the frontispiece and in the design for "A Long Story" which also depicts Miss Speed and Lady Schaub. Gray withdrew the poem from later editions of his works, considering it too private for the public.

Through these years, Gray had been living a quiet life at Peterhouse, reading, studying, taking short summer tours, cultivating his modest circle of friends and writing letters. He took little part in university or college business, but simply resided in college as a gentleman of leisure and taking advantage of the intellectual amenities of a university. Gray was in possession of the small fortune left by his father, which was sufficient for his wants. Nor did the new-found celebrity make much difference to the habits or the social pattern of his daily life. His health, however, was weakening. After a visit in 1755 to his and Walpole's friend, Chute, in Hampshire, he was taken ill and remained for many weeks laid up at Stoke. In March 1756, he moved from Peterhouse across the street to Pembroke College. According to Gray, he had been repeatedly vexed by riotous fellow commoners at Peterhouse. At Pembroke, he occupied rooms in a corner of a court which came to be known as Ivy Court.

By 1752 Gray had begun work on his Pindaric Odes. In both "The Progress of Poesy" and "The Bard" the imagery is largely inspired by Gray's early romantic love of wild and rugged landscape, mountains and torrents. On 26 December 1754, aged 38, he sent "The Progress of Poesy" to Thomas Wharton. "The Bard" was partly written in the first three months of 1755, and finished in May 1757, when Gray was inspired by a concert given at Cambridge by John Parry, the blind harper. At this time Walpole was setting up his printing-press at Strawberry Hill, and he begged Gray to let him start his press with the two odes. Gray agreed and the two odes were printed in a slim volume at the Strawberry Hill press and published by Dodsley in August 1757. The poems themselves were odes in the strict Pindaric form, and Gray hoped that they rather than the celebrated "Elegy" would form his crowning achievement. In "The Progress of Poesy" he set out to glorify the poet's high calling with every adornment of rhetoric and eloquence. In "The Bard" he chose the genre of the historical poem to depict a traditional episode during the final conquest of Wales. Unlike the rather private "A Long Story" or even the "Elegy", both these poems were very much intended for a public audience.

The odes met with a mixed reception, they were praised and much discussed as well as criticized. Goldsmith reviewed them in the *Monthly Review*, and Warburton and Garrick were enthusiastic. Gray was rather vexed, however, by the general complaints about their obscurity, although he took very good-naturedly the parodies published in 1760 by Colman and Lloyd, called "An Ode to Obscurity" and "An Ode to Oblivion". According to Mason, Gray meant his bard to declare that poets should never be wanting to denounce vice in spite of tyrants. The odes are clear examples of Gray's adherence to a patriotic and Whiggish programme of national freedom and

eminence. Unquestionably they are difficult poems, and were still more difficult without the aid of the footnotes which Gray refused to provide in the original edition. The majority of his contemporaries remained perplexed. The poems are full of metaphor, rhetoric, veiled allusion, and rhapsody. Gray, of course, remarked that "[t]he language of the age is never the language of poetry" (letter to Richard West, 8 April 1742), and his poetry has been the subject of much critical debate on poetic diction. Though the odes did not reach the popularity of the "Elegy", they became an important contribution to the history of English poetry.

Small as the amount of Gray's poetical work had been, he was recognized as one of the greatest living poets. In December 1757, Lord John Cavendish, an admirer of the Odes, persuaded his brother, the Duke of Devonshire who was Lord Chamberlain, to offer the Laureateship, vacated by Cibber's death, to Gray. Gray, however, shunned publicity and wisely declined it, knowing the Laureateship had become a farcical post. Consequently, William Whitehead held the post from 1757-85. In September 1758 Gray's aunt, Mrs. Rogers, with whom his paternal aunt, Mrs. Olliffe, had resided since his mother's death in 1753, died, leaving Gray and Mrs. Olliffe joint executors. Stoke Poges now ceased to be in any sense a home. When at the beginning of 1759 the British Museum first opened, Gray settled in London in Southampton Row, Bloomsbury, to study in the reading-room almost daily. He did not return to Cambridge except for flying visits until the summer of 1761.

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#### 1.4 THE LATER YEARS (1759-1771)

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The reception and criticisms of the two Pindaric odes accelerated Gray's movement away from public critical debate, and thereafter he virtually ceased to write original poetry. He devoted himself even more to private study, especially English antiquities and natural history. He greatly admired the works James Macpherson published as *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (Ossian) in 1760, and made investigations of his own into the Celtic and Scandinavian past. Before he wrote "The Bard" he had begun to study Scandinavian literature, and the two "Norse Odes" "The Descent of Odin" and "The Fatal Sisters", both finished in 1761, were a result of his engagement with these literatures. The *Specimens of Welsh Poetry*, published by Evan Evans in 1764, inspired Gray's later translations, by way of an intermediate Latin version, from Icelandic and Welsh originals. Gray translated four fragments of varying length from the Welsh, of which "The Triumphs of Owen" alone was published during his lifetime.

Gray also stated that he intended these translations and imitations of Welsh and Icelandic originals to be included in his *History of English Poetry*, a work he had contemplated for many years but never completed. Gray tended to limit the circulation of any such pieces to his closest friends. They have their place in the history of the

Romantic revival in England and indeed in Europe, where Gray came to be widely read. His only other works during this period (1758-1768) were occasional satirical verses. Most of these were destroyed by Mason after Gray's death, but two pieces, a political squib entitled "The Candidate" and the biting satire "On L[or]d H[olland]'s Seat near M[argat]e, K[en]t", have survived.

After his return to Cambridge in November 1761, Gray became friends with Norton Nicholls (1742-1809), an undergraduate at Trinity Hall. Nicholls was an accomplished student and attracted Gray's attention by his knowledge of Dante. During Gray's later years, Nicholls was among his best friends, and he left some valuable "Reminiscences of Gray", and an interesting correspondence with him. Nicholls was ordained in 1767 and afterwards became rector of Lound and Bradwell, Suffolk. He died in his house at Blundeston, near Lowestoft, 22 November 1809, aged 68.

In the final years of his life, Gray went on several long summer walking tours in place of the Buckinghamshire countryside he used to visit in earlier years. He visited various picturesque districts of Great Britain, exploring great houses and ruined abbeys, carefully recording his impressions. In 1762 he travelled in Yorkshire and Derbyshire. In the autumn he travelled in the south of England and went to Southampton and its surroundings. In 1765 he went on a tour in Scotland, visiting Killiecrankie and Blair Athol. He stayed for some time at Glamis castle, where the poet and essayist James Beattie (1735-1803), Professor of Moral Philosophy in the Marischal College, Aberdeen, came to pay him homage. Gray declined the degree of doctor of law from Aberdeen, on the ground that he had not taken it at Cambridge. Gray's most notable achievement as a travel writer was his journey through the English lakes in 1769. His journal of the tour was fully published by Mason in 1775, and contains remarkable descriptions of the "sublime" scenery, then beginning to be visited by painters and men of taste, but not yet generally appreciated. Even in 1770, the year before his death, he visited with his friend Norton Nicholls "five of the most beautiful counties of the kingdom". Some of Gray's finest letters date from this period.

In 1762 Gray had applied to Lord Bute for the professorship of history and modern languages at Cambridge, founded by George I in 1724, and then vacant by the death of Hallett Turner in 1762. Lawrence Brockett, however, was appointed to the post in November of that year. When Brockett was killed on 24 July 1768 by a fall from his horse, Gray's appointment was suggested by his old college friend Richard Stonhewer who was at that time secretary to the Duke of Grafton. The Duke of Grafton immediately offered Gray the professorship, his warrant being signed 28 July 1768. Gray treated this office as a sinecure, although he had at first intended to deliver lectures but failed to do so.

When Grafton was elected chancellor of the University in April 1769, Gray felt compelled to show his gratitude by composing the customary "Installation Ode" to be set to music and sung at the elaborate ceremony of Grafton's installation. The ode was set to music by J. Randall, the professor of music at the University, was performed at the Senate House on 1 July 1769, and printed by the University. Since the ode celebrating and commemorating the occasion was to be set to music, it was composed in the irregular form of a cantata, with sections of uneven lengths assigned to various soloists and to the chorus. Gray had no personal acquaintance with Grafton and was much attacked and ridiculed for his praises of this highly unpopular figure. Gray's final poetic accomplishment, often considered as a deliberate counterpoint to and parody of his best-known work, may also be considered as his tribute of homage to Cambridge.

Late in 1769 Gray made the acquaintance of Charles Victor de Bonstetten (1745-1832), a young Swiss nobleman, who had met Norton Nicholls at Bath in December 1769, and was by him introduced to Gray. Gray developed a deep affection for him, probably the most profound emotional experience of his life. Gray was fascinated by de Bonstetten, he directed his studies for several weeks and saw him daily. De Bonstetten left England at the end of March 1770. Gray accompanied him to London, pointed out the "great Bear" Johnson in the street, and saw him into the Dover coach. He promised to pay de Bonstetten a visit in Switzerland. De Bonstetten only remained a few months in England, and Gray's letters after his departure reveal how intensely he felt their separation. Gray valued their friendship as highly as his earliest friendship with West and Walpole.

Gray's health, which was never robust, had been declining for some years, and worsened considerably during the later months of 1770 confining him to his rooms in Cambridge for several months. Gray visited London for the last time in May 1771. He was contemplating a journey to Switzerland to visit his friend de Bonstetten, who seemed to be battling with problems of his own, and Nicholls proposed to go with him, but Gray eventually sent Nicholls off on his own in June. Gray also visited Walpole who was preparing to leave London for Paris at the time. Gray returned to Cambridge in July, but soon after his arrival he suffered an attack of gout in the stomach, and his condition soon became alarming. He was affectionately attended by his cousin Mary Antrobus, his friend and joint executor of his will, the Rev James Brown (1709-84), master of Pembroke, and his friend Stonhewer who came from London to take leave of him. Gray died in his rooms at Pembroke on 30 July 1771, and was laid in the same vault as his mother in the churchyard of St Giles at Stoke Poges on 6 August.

In 1775 Mason published his *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr. Gray*, in which he set out to let Gray "become his own biographer" by constructing the biography

almost entirely from Gray's personal letters, thus concentrating on his subject's "inner life". This innovative use of the private correspondence of a recently deceased author not only lent the *Memoirs* authenticity, but made it a hugely influential model for biographical writing (e.g. Boswell's *Life of Johnson*). On 6 August 1778 a monument, by John Bacon the Elder (1740-1799), to the memory of Gray was opened in Westminster Abbey. It is located in Poets' Corner just under the monument to Milton and next to that of Spenser, two of the poets Gray admired the most. It was erected by Mason and consists of an allegorical figure holding a medallion, and an inscription: "No more the *Graecian* Muse unrival'd reigns, / To *Britain* let the Nations homage pay; / She felt a Homer's fire in Milton's strains, / A Pindar's rapture in the Lyre of *Gray*." In 1799 a monument to Gray's memory was erected adjoining the churchyard at Stoke Poges. Other memorials are at Eton College and Cambridge.

As a poet Gray was admired and influential out of all proportion to his ambitions and modest output of verse. The whole of his anthumously published poetry amounts to fewer than 1,000 lines. He was unquestionably one of the least productive and yet, besides William Collins (1721-1759), the predominant poetic figure of the middle decades of the 18th century. Gray's poetry was strongly marked by the taste for sentiment controlled by classical ideals of restraint and composure that characterized the later Augustans, but prepared the way for the the inward emotional exploration displayed by the Romantics of the 1790-1820 generation. He shows sensitive response to natural environment without the sense of organic union with human nature predominant in the later generation. Yet Gray was neither a half-hearted Augustan, nor a timid Romantic, he may rather be considered as the Classicist variant of the transition into the Romantic era. He combined traditional forms and poetic diction with new topics and modes of expression. He valued polish and symmetry, didactic reflection and personification, yet he also shared the taste for sensibility. Gray was an innovator and distinguished practitioner of poetic form, exemplified by his abandonment of the heroic couplet for the greater rhetorical freedom of his odes, a form nevertheless sanctioned by antiquity. A man of studious instincts, of a retiring and somewhat melancholy temperament ("white melancholy"), he nevertheless set his mark upon his age. And his one poem, the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", sometimes considered *the* representative poem of its age, was to become a lasting contribution to the English heritage. It is no doubt thanks to the "Elegy" that Gray has been able to continuously attract the attention of literary scholarship. It has spared Gray the fate of many 18th-century poets falsely considered as "minor", namely that when reception history is incomplete or ceases and an author drops out of informing the reception and interpretation of an age and other writers, he becomes a relic, a thing of another period altogether, and isolated from literary discourse.

Gray's favorite maxim was "to be employed is to be happy", and "to find oneself business is the great art of life." In pursuing this aim he made himself one of the best

Greek scholars at Cambridge, and cultivated his taste in music, painting, literature, gardening and architecture. He was interested in metaphysics, criticism, morals, and politics, and his correspondence includes a wide survey of European history and culture, with criticisms of a fresh and modern cast. These multifarious studies are illustrated in the frequently densely-lined pages of his *Commonplace books* (3 vols. fol.), preserved at Pembroke College Library, Cambridge. Besides his collections and observations on a great variety of subjects, they contain original copies of many of his poems in very clear and legible hand-writing. Gray was also one of the supreme letter-writers in the best age of letter-writing. His letters are immensely readable and illustrate not only his acute observations on many topics but betray his caring and affectionate nature as well as gleams of the genuine humor which Walpole pronounced to be his most natural and original vein:

"[Sketch of his Own Character]"

Too poor for a bribe and too proud to importune,  
He had not the method of making a fortune:  
Could love and could hate, so was thought somewhat odd;  
No very great wit, he believed in a God.  
A post or a pension he did not desire,  
But left church and state to Charles Townshend and Squire.

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<https://www.thomasgray.org/resources/bio.shtml>

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## 1.5 ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD (TEXT)

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The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
 The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea,  
 The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,  
 And leaves the world to darkness and to me.  
 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  
The moping owl does to the moon complain  
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,  
Molest her ancient solitary reign.  
Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,  
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,  
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,  
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.  
The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,  
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,  
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,  
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,  
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'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!  
Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;  
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile  
The short and simple annals of the Poor.  
The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour:—  
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.  
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  
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.  
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 dull cold ear of Death?  
Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid  
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;  
Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,  
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre:  
But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page,  
Rich with the spoils of time, did ne'er unroll;



Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,  
And froze the genial current of the soul.  
Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:  
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,  
Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country's blood.  
Th' applause of list'ning 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,  
Their lot forbad: nor circumscribed alone  
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;  
Forbad to wade through slaughter to a throne,  
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,  
The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,  
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 learn'd to stray;  
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life  
They kept the noiseless tenour of their way.  
Yet e'en these bones from insult to protect  
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,  
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,  
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.  
Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd Muse,  
The place of fame and elegy supply:  
And many a holy text around she strews,  
That teach the rustic moralist to die.  
For who, to dumb forgetfulness a prey,  
This pleasing anxious being e'erresign'd,  
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,  
Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?  
On some fond breast the parting soul relies,  
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;  
E'en from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,  
E'en in our ashes live their wonted fires.

For thee, who, mindful of th' unhonour'd dead,  
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;  
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,  
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.  
'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 cross'd in hopeless love.  
'One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,  
Along the heath, and near his favourite 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 church-way path we saw him borne,—  
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,  
And Melacholy 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 wish'd) a friend.  
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.

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## 1.6 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

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### What is an Elegy?

**ELEGY**, a short poem of lamentation or regret, called forth by the decease of a beloved or revered person, or by a general sense of the pathos of mortality. The Greek word ἔλεγεία is of doubtful signification; it is usually interpreted as meaning a mournful or funeral song. But there seems to be no proof that this idea of regret for death entered into the original meaning of ἔλεγεία. The earliest Greek elegies which have come down to us are not funereal, although it is possible that the primitive ἔλεγεία may have been a set of words liturgically used, with music, at a burial. When the elegy appears in surviving Greek literature, we find it dedicated, not to death, but to war and love. Callinus of Ephesus, who flourished in the 7th century, is the earliest elegist of whom we possess fragments. A little later Tyrtaeus was composing his famous elegies in Sparta. Both of these writers were, so far as we know, exclusively warlike and patriotic. On the other hand, the passion of love inspires Mimnermus, whose elegies are the prototypes not only of the later Greek pieces, and of the Latin poems of the school of Tibullus and Propertius, but of a great deal of the formal erotic poetry of modern Europe. In the 6th century B.C., the elegies of Solon were admired; they are mainly lost. But we possess more of the work of Theognis of Megara than of any other archaic elegist, and in it we can observe the characteristics of Greek elegy best. Here the Dorian spirit of chivalry reaches its highest expression, and war is combined with manly love.

The elegy, in its calm movement, seems to have begun to lose currency when the ecstasy of emotion was more successfully interpreted by the various rhythmic and dithyrambic inventions of the Aeolic lyrists. The elegy, however, rose again to the highest level of merit in Alexandrian times. It was reintroduced by Philetas in the 3rd cent. B.C., and was carried to extreme perfection by Callimachus. Other later Greek elegists of high reputation were Asclepiades and Euphorion. But it is curious to notice that all the elegies of these poets were of an amatory nature, and that antiquity styled the funeral dirges of Theocritus, Bion and Moschus—which are to us the types of elegy—not elegies at all, but idylls. When the poets of Rome began their imitative study of Alexandrian models, it was natural that the elegies of writers such as Callimachus should tempt them to immediate imitation. Gallus, whose works are unhappily lost, is known to have produced a great sensation in Rome by publishing his translation of the poems of Euphorion; and he passed on to the composition of erotic elegies of his own, which were the earliest in the Latin language. If we possessed his once-famous *Cytheris*, we should be able to decide the question of how much Propertius, who is now the leading figure among Roman elegists, owed to the example of Gallus. His brilliantly emotional *Cynthia*, with its rich and unexampled

employment of that alternation of hexameter and pentameter which had now come to be known as the elegiac measure, seems, however, to have settled the type of Latin elegy. Tibullus is always named in conjunction with Propertius, who was his contemporary, although in their style they were violently contrasted. The sweetness of Tibullus was the object of admiration and constant imitation by the Latin poets of the Renaissance, although Propertius has more austere pleased a later taste. Finally, Ovid wrote elegies of great variety in subject, but all in the same form, and his dexterous easy metre closed the tradition of elegiac poetry among the ancients. What remains in the decline of Latin literature is all founded on a study of those masters of the Golden Age.

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## 1.7 SUMMARY

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Although Gray was not a prolific poet, his “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is one of the most well-known and popular poems in the English language. An elegy is a lament for the dead, usually a specific person as in Milton’s elegy *Lycidas* written to mourn his friend Edward King. Gray’s “Elegy” is more a lament for an entire group of people—the common people of a typical village in England who live simple lives away from the public eye.

Gray is considered part of a group of poets from the late 18th century known as the graveyard school, poets who wrote melancholy, meditative poetry about death. As part of the graveyard school, Gray writes a melancholy lament for the ordinary people who lie buried in this tiny, obscure location. Stanzas 8, 9, and 14 are well-known stanzas that convey this theme.

Gray’s “Elegy” also is an example of topographical poetry—poetry inspired by a geographical setting. British churchyards were typically graveyards, Christians at that time believing they should be buried in hallowed ground. The poem begins with a description of the location, the narrator noting specific details that allow the reader to imagine the scene and at the same time establishing the melancholy mood.

Because of these characteristics, Gray’s “Elegy” is important as a precursor of the Romantic Movement which began in the late 18th century. Neoclassical poetry emphasized symmetry, reason, and rational thought—the life of the mind. Gray’s poem marks the beginning of a trend to emphasize organic form, sentiment, and emotion—the life of the heart. The Elegy’s description of nature, its sensitivity to emotion rather than emphasis on reason, and its elevation of common people all intimate important characteristics of 19th century Romanticism.

(<https://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/british-literature-through-history/s05-06-thomas-gray-1716-1771.html>)

Thomas Gray wrote *Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard*. It was finished in 1750. It was published in 1751. The origin of the poem is unknown. It was inspired by the feelings of Gray when Richard West died in 1742. West was also a poet. It was first named "Stanza's Wrote in a Country Church-Yard". Gray continued the poem after his aunt died in 1749. Other sad things happened to him that year. He finished the poem in June 1750. He was near Stoke Poges churchyard that June. It was then sent to his friend Horace Walpole. Walpole sent the poem to his friends in London. They liked the poem. Gray had to publish the poem on 15 February 1751. This was to stop someone else from printing it first.

The poem is an elegy but it is not a true elegy. It describes the English countryside like the type of "picturesque" poems. The poem also relies on the form of poems called "odes". The poem is an elegy because it talks about death. The narrator talks about a country churchyard and how people want to be known after they die. He says that to be known is good and bad. He also feels better when he thinks about the people in the graveyard. There are two versions of the poem. They discuss death in a different way. The first one has less emotion when talking about death. The second one talks about the narrator's fear of death. The poem talks about being unknown and being famous. This could be political. The poem does not make a political claim. The poem has ideas for everyone by talking about death.

The poem was well liked. It was printed many times. It was praised by critics after Gray's death. It was praised when his other poems were no longer liked. Modern critics like the words of the poem. They also like how the poem has meaning for everyone. Some critics do not like the ending of the poem. They thought that the poem should be more political. They thought that the poem did not do enough to help the poor.

Gray's life was surrounded by loss and death, and he knew that many people around him died painfully and alone. In 1749, many events took place that would cause Gray stress. On 7 November, Mary Antrobus, Gray's aunt, died and her death devastated his family. The loss was compounded by news that followed a few days after that Horace Walpole, his close friend yet one he just recently disputed with, was almost killed by two highway men wanting his money. Although Walpole survived and later joked about the event, the incident disrupted Gray's ability to pursue his scholarship. The events dampened the mood during that Christmas and Antrobus's death was ever fresh in the minds of the Gray family. As a side effect, the events also caused Gray to spend much of his time contemplating his mortality.<sup>[1]</sup>

As Gray began to contemplate various aspects of mortality, he combined his desire to determine a view of order and progress present in the Classical world with aspects of his own life. With spring nearing, Gray questioned if his own life would enter into a sort of rebirth cycle or if, he was to die, if there would be anyone to remember him.

Gray's meditations during spring 1750 turned to how the reputation of individuals would survive in the future. Eventually, Gray remembered some lines of poetry that he composed in 1742 following the death of West, a poet he knew. He used the previous material and began to compose a poem that would serve as an answer to the various questions he was meditating on.<sup>[2]</sup>

On 3 June 1750, Gray moved to Stoke Poges and on 12 June he completed *Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard*. Immediately, he included the poem in a letter to Walpole and sent it to him. The letter claims:<sup>[3]</sup>

As I live in a place where even the ordinary tattle of the town arrives not till it is stale, and which produces no events of its own, you will not desire any excuse from me for writing so seldom, especially as of all people living I know you are the least a friend to letters spun out of one's own brains, with all the toil and constraint that accompanies sentimental productions. I have been here at Stoke a few days (where I shall continue good part of the summer); and having put an end to a thing, whose beginnings you have seen long ago. I immediately send it you. You will, I hope, look upon it in light of a *thing with an end to it*; a merit that most of my writing have wanted, and are like to want, but which this epistle I am determined shall not want<sup>[4]</sup>

The letter reveals that Gray felt that the poems was unimportant and that he did not expect it to become as popular or influential as it later became. Gray dismisses its positives as merely being that he was able to complete the poem, which was probably influenced by his exposure to the church-yard at Stoke Poges where he attended the Sunday service and was able to visit the grave of Antrobus.<sup>[5]</sup>

The version that would be later published and reprinted was a 32 stanza version with the "Epitaph" conclusion. Before the final poem was published, it was circulated in London society by Walpole who ensured that it would be a popular topic of discussion throughout 1750. By February 1751, Gray received word that William Owen, the publisher of the *Magazine of Magazines*, would print the poem on 16 February without his approval and the copyright laws at the time would not allow Gray to stop the publication. He sought Walpole's help with the matter and they were able to convince John Dodsley to print the poem on 15 February as a quarto pamphlet.<sup>[6]</sup> Walpole added a preface to the poem reading: "The following POEM came into my hands by Accident, if the general Approbation with which this little Piece has been spread, may be call'd by so slight a Term as Accident. It is the Approbation which makes it unnecessary for me to make any Apology but to the Author: As he cannot but feel some Satisfaction in having pleas'd so many Readers already, I flatter myself he will forgive my communicating that Pleasure to many more."<sup>[7]</sup>

The pamphlet contained woodblock illustrations and was printed without attribution to Gray upon his request. Immediately after, Owen's magazine with Gray's poem was printed but contained multiple errors and other problems. In a 20 February letter to Walpole, Gray thanked him for intervening and helping to get a quality version of the poem published before Owen.<sup>[8]</sup> It was so popular that it was reprinted twelve times and reproduced in many different periodicals until 1765,<sup>[9]</sup> including in Gray's *Six Poems* (1753), in his *Odes* (1757),<sup>[10]</sup> and volume four of Dodsey's 1755 compilation of poetry.<sup>[11]</sup>

([https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Ottava\\_Rima/Elegy\\_Written\\_in\\_a\\_Country\\_Church-yard](https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Ottava_Rima/Elegy_Written_in_a_Country_Church-yard))

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## 1.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- Write a short note on Elegy in not more than 150 words.

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- Write a short note on Thomas Gray and his life.

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- Why the elegy is named “Elegy written in a country churchyard”? Give valid reasons to support your answer.

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## 1.9 LET US SUM UP

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As Gray began to contemplate various aspects of mortality, he combined his desire to determine a view of order and progress present in the Classical world with aspects of his own life. With spring nearing, Gray questioned if his own life would enter into a sort of rebirth cycle or if, he was to die, if there would be anyone to remember him. Gray's meditations during spring 1750 turned to how the reputation of individuals would survive in the future. Eventually, Gray remembered some lines of poetry that he composed in 1742 following the death of West, a poet he knew. He used the previous material and began to compose a poem that would serve as an answer to the various questions that he was meditating.



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## **UNIT-2 WILLIAM BLAKE: “A POISON TREE”**

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### **Structure**

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 About the writer William Blake
- 2.4 Blake’s Songs Of innocence and songs Of Experience
  - 2.4.1 Note on Songs of Innocence
  - 2.4.2 Note on Songs of Experience
- 2.5 Blake's Revolutionary Views
- 2.6 Blake's Interpretation of History
  - 2.6.1 Blake's Triadic Division of Poetry
  - 2.6.2 Approaches To Blake's Poetry
- 2.7 Blake's Contribution
- 2.8 Text
- 2.9 Analysis of the Poem
- 2.10 Check your progress

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### **2.1 OBJECTIVES**

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The prime objective of this unit is to make us aware of the works of Wiliam Blake so that we know his excellence as a writer and his weightage in the 20<sup>th</sup> Literary fraternity. The writers, novelists, poets and essayists of this era had the ease to put forth social issues in an influential yet undertoned manner.

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### **2.2 INTRODUCTION**

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Blake was born in 1757, in Carnaby Market—but Blake's life of Blake would not have begun like that. It would have begun with a great deal about the giant Albion, about the many disagreements between the spirit and the spectre of that gentleman, about the golden pillars that covered the earth at its beginning and the lions that walked in their golden innocence before God. It would have been full of symbolic wild beasts and naked women, of monstrous clouds and colossal temples; and it would all have been highly incomprehensible, but none of it would have been irrelevant. All the biggest events of Blake's life would have happened before he was born. But, on consideration, I think it will be better to tell the tale of Blake's life first and go back to his century afterwards. It is not, indeed, easy to resist temptation here, for there was much to be said about Blake before he existed. But I will resist the temptation and begin with the facts.

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## 2.3 ABOUT THE WRITER, WILLIAM BLAKE

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William Blake's memorial plaque in St. Paul's Cathedral, London, identifies him as an "artist, poet, mystic." Born in London, where he spent most of his life, Blake was educated largely at home. From his childhood he claimed to experience visions of and even conversations with angels and with the Virgin Mary. His visionary experiences appear in many of his poetic works, such as *The Book of Urizen* and *The Book of Los*. Blake attended art school for a short span of time and then was apprenticed to an engraver. He made his living primarily from his artwork. His poetry, such as *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, was written as an integral part of his engravings. WILLIAM BLAKE would have been the first to understand that the biography of anybody ought really to begin with the words, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." If we were telling the story of Mr Jones of Kentish Town, we should need all the centuries to explain it. We cannot comprehend even the name "Jones," until we have realised that its commonness is not the commonness of vulgar but of divine things; for its very commonness is an echo of the adoration of St John the Divine.

The adjective "Kentish" is rather a mystery in that geographical connection; but the word Kentish is not so mysterious as the awful and impenetrable word "town." We shall have rent up the roots of prehistoric mankind and seen the last revolutions of modern society before we really know the meaning of the word "town." So every word we use comes to us coloured from all its adventures in history, every phase of which has made at least a faint alteration. The only right way of telling a story is to begin at the beginning—at the beginning of the world. Therefore all books have to be begun in the wrong way, for the sake of brevity. If Blake wrote the life of Blake it would not begin with any business about his birth or parentage.

Blake was born in 1757, in Carnaby Market—but Blake's life of Blake would not have begun like that. It would have begun with a great deal about the giant Albion, about the many disagreements between the spirit and the spectre of that gentleman, about the golden pillars that covered the earth at its beginning and the lions that walked in their golden innocence before God. It would have been full of symbolic wild beasts and naked women, of monstrous clouds and colossal temples; and it would all have been highly incomprehensible, but none of it would have been irrelevant.

All the biggest events of Blake's life would have happened before he was born. But, on consideration, I think it will be better to tell the tale of Blake's life first and go back to his century afterwards. It is not, indeed, easy to resist temptation here, for there was much to be said about Blake before he existed. But I will resist the temptation and begin with the facts.

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## **2.4 BLAKE'S SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND SONGS OF EXPERIENCE**

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### **2.4.1 Note on Songs of Innocence**

The former are happy songs written to and about children, the latter depict, to use Blake's own words, the "contrary state of the human soul". Songs of Innocence is a statement of the reaffirmation of the New Testament doctrine, "Lest ye become again as a little child ye cannot hope to enter the kingdom of heaven". This is underscored by Blake's use of pastoral Christian symbols (the Christ child, the lamb, the shepherd, etc.) As Russell Noyes observes: "The poet has left out all art, all moralizing, all pretending. The theme of loss and finding runs through the songs and the gaiety and laughter of children fills them."

### **2.4.2 Note on Songs of Experience**

Having experienced the hypocrisy and cruelty of the world personally, Blake was indignant in Songs of Experience. If Innocence is Heaven, Experience is Hell, Love and joy are suppressed by selfishness and by restrictions imposed by the priests (The Garden of Love). The children's laughter is silenced by adults; the children are exploited by an insensitive world (The Chimney-Sweeper), The Church and the State, two pillars of society, are indifferent. Sometimes they even connive, to cause suffering to children. Blake thought that these social evils were shameful. As a poet he could speak out with indignation and compassion. Russell Noyes says: "These songs reverberated the intensity of his feeling in brilliant denunciatory phrases, tight rhythms, and searing imagery. The best of them are rarely to be matched elsewhere in Blake, or (for that matter) in their kind in anyone else"

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## **2.5 BLAKE'S REVOLUTIONARY VIEWS**

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### **2.5.1 Blake as an Anarchist**

Blake was attracted by revolutions. He was eighteen when the Declaration of Independence by the American Colonies inspired idealists all over Europe. He was an eye-witness to the burning of Newgate Prison (1780) as an expression of the hatred of authority. He sympathized with the French Revolution. He was incensed when Tom Paine was attacked in 1798. With such a political background, Blake became a sort of anarchist. He hated all political systems and favored complete personal freedom. He admired Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. Several radicals were his friends: Godwin, Dr. Price (who was the first Englishman to support the French Revolution) and Tom Paine. He despised tyranny of every sort. Although he did not develop a coherent

political theory, he wanted freedom and love for all. He was opposed to private property, any established church, formal government, the prevailing laws, and machinery.

### **2.5.2 Blake's Views on Christianity**

Blake hated traditional Christianity. The Romantics attempted a re-evaluation of Christian values after the French Revolution. Some Romantics said that godless philosophers fomented the Revolution. But Blake believed that all churches are a kind of prison. He attacked the lack of individual freedom in the Church in his poem, *The Garden of Love*:

I went to the Garden of Love,  
And saw what I have never seen;  
A Chapel was built in the midst,  
Where I used to play on the green.

And priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,  
And binding with brains my joys & desires,

Blake's political radicalism combined with his Christian Non-Conformity inspires the politics of the left even now.

### **2.5.3 Blake's Anti-classicism**

Blake hated the classics and in this he foreshadowed a common romantic tendency. The established cultural tradition was shattered in the Romantic period. Newly popular cultural lore was introduced paving way to primitivism and Orientalism. This is in line with the Protestant rejection of the classics as shown in Milton's *Paradise Regained* where Christ rejects the classics and prefers the Psalms. Blake is forthright in his Preface to Milton:

"The Stolen and Perverted writings of Homer & Ovid, of Plato & Cicero, which all men ought to contemn, are set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible . . . We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just and true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live forever in Jesus our Lord". Another reason for Blake's detestation of the classics is that they, in his opinion, are related to the adult world of experience, and represented intellect. He favored an intuitive and imaginative view of the world. Blake's attitude to society was conditioned by his anarchism, non-conformism, anti-rationalism and anti-classicism.

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## **2.6 BLAKE'S INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY**

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Blake's hostile attitude towards traditional Christianity also influenced his interpretation of history. As he did not have any formal education his reading was perhaps uneven. He read the works by quakers and the Gnostics. He also read mystics like Swedenborg (whom he attacked later), Jakob Bohme, and the New Platonists. His view of history was shaped by his reading in religious literature. He identified three stages in history which corresponded to three stages in the life of an individual. The first stage corresponds to that of the Garden of Eden, or of primal innocence. The second stage was the eating of the fruit of the forbidden tree or the Fall. The third stage was that of achieving a higher state of innocence or redemption. Blake also divided history into a number of periods corresponding to the historical divisions in the Bible. For example, the first period was the Druid period, which corresponded to the period of Lucifer and Moloch which he found in the Bible.

### **2.6.1 Blake's Triadic Division of Poetry**

Blake extended his scheme of the triadic division to poetry also. He thought that the function of poetry was to regain a kind of oneness with life which had been lost. The eighteenth century represented the Fall. The Age of Reason which emphasized the intellect, in his view, was equivalent to the eating of the fruit of knowledge of good and evil. The intellectual approach had destroyed man's early modes of perception. Blake believed that the function of poetry is to restore our early ways of seeing and to revive the heart. His comprehensive view of the role of poetry is stated in *Auguries of Innocence*:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And Heaven in a wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.

Blake presents not the actual world of our normal experience, but a world before the Fall. He enables us to see the world in its beauty and horror and gives us the hope that the apocalypse can be attained. His prophetic books such as *Jerusalem* are not merely allegories, but pure visions in which light is shed on something so that the poet and the reader can together see it.

### **2.6.2 Approaches To Blake's Poetry**

Blake's poem is simple and direct; there is no sentimentality which makes poetry distasteful. One may approach Blake as a child or as a scholar. Blake's poems, particularly the short lyrics, can be enjoyed by children. But we need to analyze and

synthesize the meaning for a better understanding. As scholars, we have to consider his views and how they form a consistent system. Blake writes in metaphors or pure images. Concept or ideas are pre-dominant in much popular poetry. We have to figure out Blake's meaning by examining his metaphors or images. Blake's poems can be read in several ways: as direct statements, as indirect statements, or as clusters of images. Our understanding of his poems depends on how we wish to study his poems.

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## **2.7 BLAKE'S CONTRIBUTION**

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We have seen Blake's use of symbols in *The Lamb*, *The Sick Rose*, *The Tyger* and other poems. We have also noted examples of compressed or concise statements in his poems. He developed these and integrated them into an elaborate system of his own. He believed: "I must create a System, or be enslaved by another Man's". His "Prophetic Books" *Jerusalem* is an example - deal with this developing and changing system of Blake. Much of Blake's work in these books is abstruse or obscure, but his main theme is clear. All the prophetic books deal with some aspect of the Biblical Pattern of the Fall of Man, Salvation, the destruction of the fallen world and the rebuilding of New Jerusalem, the City of God. All these are presented as visions, which are modeled on the Book of Revelation in the Bible. Blake believed that the violence predicted in the Book of Revelation was manifested in the American War of Independence and the French Revolution, He thought that such violence precedes the redemption of the world. He expressed these views in his unfinished "Prophetic Books", *The French Revolution and America: a Prophecy*. His later writings such as *The Four Zoas*, *Milton and Jerusalem* deal with Biblical history which is an outer representation of the inner state of the soul. In this version, the fall comes through the disintegration of the soul and salvation is attained again through imagination. Blake held imagination to be the divine spark in man. He had stated: "I copy Imagination; I write when commanded by the spirits".

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## **2.8 THE TEXT**

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I was angry with my friend:  
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.  
I was angry with my foe:  
I told it not, my wrath did grow.  
And I watered it in fears,  
Night and morning with my tears;  
And I sunned it with smiles,  
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,

Till it bore an apple bright;  
And my foe beheld it shine,  
And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole  
When the night had veil'd the pole:  
In the morning glad I see  
My foe outstretch'd beneath the tree

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## 2.9 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

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“A Poison Tree” by William Blake is a relatively short but interesting poem. The poem is the narrator telling the story of two scenarios. The first and also shorter scenario is the narrator being angry with his friend and telling the friend about the anger which has no consequences. The second scenario is the narrator being angry with his enemy. He doesn't tell the anger and it grows stronger. The narrator's foe is eventually poisoned and killed by an apple that the tree bore. This explains the satisfied tone of the poem as it written in the past tense. By the end of the poem his revenge is complete so he is satisfied.

The narrator has already experienced both scenarios and the purpose of the poem is to teach others and for them to not repeat the same mistake. This can be seen clearly through the title of the poem. The use of the word “A” instead of “The” is significant. The tree can only refer to one tree and cannot be any other tree but a tree can be any tree. This is to imply that what happened to the narrator can happen to anybody and is not just his own experience.

The poem has quite a simple structure. The poem is comprised of four quatrains each one with the rhyme scheme of AABB. This means that for each stanza the first two lines rhyme and the last two lines rhyme. This links up the two lines and better expresses the meaning. The story of the narrator is also told mainly in two line blocks such as the first two; “I was angry with my friend; / I told my wrath, my wrath did end.” The second line explains the first and is rhymed. The poem is also written in iambic tetrameter which means that each line has four feet of an unstressed and stressed syllable making eight syllables in total (4 stressed and 4 unstressed). An example would be the second line;

“I **to**ld my **wrath**, my **wrath** did **end**” As shown, every second syllable is stressed which adds a certain flow to it and is easier to read and understand.

The most notable techniques used are metaphors and personification. The poison tree is the central metaphor as it is not actually referring to a tree but the narrator's anger

which can “grow day and night”. This is a personification as although a tree can grow anger cannot. This just refers to the narrator’s anger becoming stronger. This metaphor continues throughout the entire poem and there are many references to it such as the narrator watering the tree in fears. A tree can be “waterd” to help it grow but this refers to the reader helping his fear to grow stronger.

William Blake has effectively used the central metaphor of a tree being his anger for an enemy to convey his past experiences. Through this poem he warns us about keeping a grudge.

(<https://unicornexpressmhs.wordpress.com/2015/06/09/a-poison-tree-by-william-blake-written-analysis/>)

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## 2.10 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- Write a short note on Blake’s ‘Anti-Classicism’.

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- Explain Triadic division of poetry in your own words.

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- Write a short note on Blake’s approach towards poetry.

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## 2.11 LET US SUM UP

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The above unit has made us understand that Blake provides a good example of the romantic revolt against traditional ideas. We have seen that he is opposed to the classics, to the mechanistic view of the universe, and to the tyranny of political systems. He has created a strange, even a private, mythology, and re-interpreted Christianity to suit his opinions. There was a tendency among the romantics to pursue truth in a new way. In their quest for ultimate meanings; the romantics emphasized the importance of the work of art. Blake is an outstanding example of this new approach to find out the ultimate truth. Blake was almost unknown as a poet in his lifetime. Three decades after his death, the Pre-Raphaelites regarded him as a precursor. In the early decades of the twentieth century mythology and symbolism have been revived in the poetry of W.B. Yeats and the fiction of James Joyce. Blake's posthumous recognition was due to the importance given to myth and symbol in the poetry of W.B. Yeats and the fiction of James Joyce.

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## **UNIT-3 WILLIAM BLAKE: CHIMNEY SWEEPER**

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### **Structure**

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 The Text
- 3.4 Analysis of the Poem
- 3.5 Check your Progress
- 3.6 Block End Questions
- 3.7 Let us Sum up

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### **3.1 OBJECTIVES**

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After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the perfection in Blake's poetry.
- Learn about the social tensions that occurred during that time.
- Analyze Blake's interpretation of the society
- Understand the theme, the poem wants to convey

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### **3.2 INTRODUCTION**

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During his sixties, Blake devoted himself entirely to engraving and painting. He produced hundreds of paintings and engravings. These include illustrations for Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, for the Book of Job (see Appendix) and for Dante's Divine Comedy.

Blake provides a good example of the romantic revolt against traditional ideas. We have seen that he is opposed to the classics, to the mechanistic view of the universe, and to the tyranny of political systems. He has created a strange, even a private, mythology, and re-interpreted Christianity to suit his opinions. There was a tendency among the romantics to pursue truth in a new way. In their quest for ultimate meanings; the romantics emphasized the importance of the work of art. Blake is an outstanding example of this new approach to find out the ultimate truth. Blake was almost unknown as a poet in his lifetime. Three decades after his death, the Pre-Raphaelites regarded him as a precursor. In the early decades of the twentieth century mythology and symbolism have been revived in the poetry of W.B. Yeats and the fiction of James Joyce. Blake's posthumous recognition was due to the importance given to myth and symbol in the poetry of W.B. Yeats and the fiction of James Joyce.

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### 3.3 THE TEXT

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When my mother died I was very young,  
And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
Could scarcely cry "'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"  
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.  
There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head  
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved, so I said,  
"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare,  
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."  
And so he was quiet, & that very night,  
As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!  
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,  
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black;  
And by came an Angel who had a bright key,  
And he opened the coffins & set them all free;  
Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,  
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.  
Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,  
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.  
And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,  
He'd have God for his father & never want joy.  
And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark  
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.  
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;  
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

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### 3.4 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

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This poem was inspired by the agitation in Blake's time against the employment of children as chimney sweepers. The agitators demanded the passing of laws against this inhuman practice. The speaker in this poem is a small child who is himself a chimney sweeper. Hence the point of view is that of an innocent child. And the child accepts without protest the appalling conditions into which he is forced. The pathetic condition of a child who was sold to be a chimney sweeper even before he could learn to speak the word 'sweep' ('weep' in line 3 is child's lisp for 'sweep') correctly is truly heart-rending. The pathos is reinforced when the speaker says that he sleeps in the soot. Children are innocent and meek like lambs. The children who worked as chimney sweepers were shaved. The implicit comparison is with the lamb shorn of its wool. The lamb cannot protest; it has to accept what is done to it. So also the child has

to meekly accept. There is biting irony in line 8 when the speaker says that the soot of the chimneys cannot spoil a tonsured head. The spirit of acceptance may be noted in Tom's dream in the third, fourth and fifth stanzas. A chimney sweeper is like a body in a coffin. As the child is innocent, an Angel sets him free so he can wash himself clean and enjoy himself in the green plains in the Sun. In Tom's dream, the Angel tells him that he could enjoy endlessly if he is a good boy. God would be his father, his protector. But this is only a dream. When Tom woke up, it was business as usual; they had to get back to sweeping chimneys. In spite of the cold and discomfort, Tom was happy because he had learnt that doing his duty was its own reward. The conclusion of the poem is rather strange and unexpected, but the poem as a whole is an expose of an evil practice in the poet's day.

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### 3.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- What message does the poet want to convey through the poem?

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- How tragic could this poem possibly be, according to you? Illustrate with examples.

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**3.6 BLOCK END QUESTIONS**

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- Critically appreciate all the three poems in your own words.

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- What according to you is the theme of ‘The Chimney Sweeper’.

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- Write a short note on Blake’s interpretation of History.

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**3.7 LET US SUM UP**

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The aforementioned unit has put light on a very pertinent social practise that has been taking place in the society since long. The poet has knitted his words very carefully and skilfully to make us understand the importance of cutting the slack of such social crimes like child labour. We need to understand the subtle irony that lies within.