

Thomas Gray

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Portrait by John Giles Eccardt, 1747–1748	
Born	26 December 1716 Cornhill, London, England
Died	30 July 1771 (aged 54) Cambridge, England
Occupation	Poet, historian
Alma mater	Cambridge University

Thomas Gray (26 December 1716 – 30 July 1771) was an English poet, letter-writer, classical scholar and professor at Cambridge University. He is widely known for his *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, published in 1751.

Early life and education

Thomas Gray was born in Cornhill, London, the son of an exchange broker and a milliner. He was the fifth of 12 children, and the only child of Philip and Dorothy Gray to survive infancy.^[1] He lived with his mother after she left his abusive father.

He was educated at Eton College where his uncle was one of the masters. He recalled his schooldays as a time of great happiness, as is evident in his *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*. Gray was a delicate and scholarly boy who spent his time reading and avoiding athletics. He lived in his uncle's household rather than at college. He made three close friends at Eton: Horace Walpole, son of the Prime Minister Robert Walpole; Thomas Ashton, and Richard West, later to be appointed as Lord Chancellor of Ireland. The four prided themselves on their sense of style, sense of humour, and appreciation of beauty.

In 1734 Gray went up to Peterhouse, Cambridge.^[2] He found the curriculum dull. He wrote letters to friends listing all the things he disliked: the masters ("mad with Pride") and the Fellows ("sleepy, drunken, dull, illiterate Things.") Intended by his family for the law, he spent most of his time as an undergraduate reading classical and modern literature, and playing Vivaldi and Scarlatti on the harpsichord for relaxation.

In 1738 he accompanied his old school-friend Walpole on his Grand Tour of Europe, possibly at Walpole's expense. The two fell out and parted in Tuscany, because Walpole wanted to attend fashionable parties and Gray wanted to visit all the antiquities. They were reconciled a few years later.

Writing and academia

Gray began seriously writing poems in 1742, mainly after his close friend Richard West died. He moved to Cambridge and began a self-imposed programme of literary study, becoming one of the most learned men of his time, though he claimed to be lazy by inclination. Gray was a brilliant bookworm, a quiet, abstracted, dreaming scholar, often afraid of the shadows of his own fame.^[3] He became a Fellow first of Peterhouse, and later of Pembroke College, Cambridge. It is said that the change of college was the result of a practical joke.

Gray spent most of his life as a scholar in Cambridge, and only later in his life did he begin travelling again. Although he was one of the least productive poets (his collected works published during his lifetime amount to fewer than 1,000 lines), he is regarded as the foremost English-language poet of the mid-18th century. In 1757, he was offered the post of Poet Laureate, which he refused. Gray was so self-critical and fearful of failure that he published only thirteen poems during his lifetime. He once wrote that he feared his collected works would be "mistaken for the works of a flea". Walpole said that "He never wrote anything easily but things of Humour."^[citation needed] Gray came to be known as one of the "Graveyard poets" of the late 18th century, along with Oliver Goldsmith, William Cowper, and Christopher Smart. Gray perhaps knew these men, sharing ideas about death, mortality, and the finality and sublimity of death.

In 1762, the Regius chair of Modern History at Cambridge, a sinecure which carried a salary of £400, fell vacant after the death of Shallet Turner, and Gray's friends lobbied the government unsuccessfully to secure the position for him. In the event, Gray lost out to Lawrence Brockett, but he secured the position in 1768 after Brockett's death.^[4]

"Elegy" masterpiece

It is believed that Gray began writing his masterpiece, the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, in the graveyard of St Giles parish church in Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire, in 1742. After several years of leaving it unfinished, he completed it in 1750^[5] (see Elegy for the form). The poem was a literary sensation when published by Robert Dodsley in February 1751 (see 1751 in poetry). Its reflective, calm and stoic tone was greatly admired, and it was pirated, imitated, quoted and translated into Latin and Greek.^[citation needed] It is still one of the most popular and most frequently quoted poems in the English language.^[citation needed] In 1759 during the Seven Years War, before the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, British General James Wolfe is said to have recited it to his officers, adding: "Gentlemen, I would rather have written that poem than take Quebec tomorrow".^[citation needed]

The *Elegy* was recognised immediately for its beauty and skill.^[citation needed] It contains many phrases which have entered the common English lexicon, either on their own or as quoted in other works.^[citation needed] These include:

- "The Paths of Glory"
- "Celestial fire"
- "Some mute inglorious Milton"
- "Far from the Madding Crowd"
- "The unlettered muse"
- "Kindred spirit"

Gray also wrote light verse, including *Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes*, a mock elegy concerning Horace Walpole's cat. After setting the scene with the couplet "What female heart can gold despise? What cat's averse to fish?", the poem moves to its multiple proverbial conclusion: "a fav'rite has no friend", "[k]now one false step is ne'er retrieved" and "nor all that glisters, gold". (Walpole later displayed the fatal china vase (the tub) on a pedestal at his house in Strawberry Hill.)

Gray's surviving letters also show his sharp observation and playful sense of humour. He is well known for his phrase, "where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." This is from his *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*.



Monument, in Stoke Poges, inscribed with Gray's *Elegy*

This phrase is one of the most misunderstood phrases in English literature. Gray is not promoting ignorance, but reflecting nostalgically on a time when he was allowed to be ignorant, his youth (1742). It has been asserted that this 'Ode' also abounds with images which find "a mirror in every mind".^[6]

Forms

Gray considered his two Pindaric odes, *The Progress of Poesy* and *The Bard*, as his best works. Pindaric odes are to be written with fire and passion, unlike the calmer and more reflective Horatian odes such as *Ode on a distant Prospect of Eton College*. *The Bard* tells of a wild Welsh poet cursing the Norman king Edward I after his conquest of Wales and prophesying in detail the downfall of the House of Plantagenet. It is melodramatic, and ends with the bard hurling himself to his death from the top of a mountain.

When his duties allowed, Gray travelled widely throughout Britain to places such as Yorkshire, Derbyshire, and Scotland in search of picturesque landscapes and ancient monuments. These elements were not generally valued in the early 18th century, when the popular taste ran to classical styles in architecture and literature, and most people liked their scenery tame and well-tended. Some Wikipedia:Avoid weasel words have seen Gray's writings on this topic, and the Gothic details that appear in his *Elegy* and *The Bard* as the first foreshadowing of the Romantic movement that dominated the early 19th century, when William Wordsworth and the other Lake poets taught people to value the picturesque, the sublime, and the Gothic.^[citation needed] Gray combined traditional forms and poetic diction with new topics and modes of expression, and may be considered as a classically focused precursor of the romantic revival.^[citation needed]



The Hours by Maria Cosway, an illustration to Gray's poem *Ode on the Spring*, referring to the lines "Lo! where the rosy-bosomed Hours, Fair Venus' train, appear"

Gray's connection to the Romantic poets is vexed. In the prefaces to the 1800 and 1802 editions of Wordsworth's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth singled out Gray's, "Sonnet on the Death of Richard West," to exemplify what he found most objectionable in poetry, declaring it was

"Gray, who was at the head of those who, by their reasonings, have attempted to widen the space of separation betwixt prose and metrical composition, and was more than any other man curiously elaborate in the structure of his own poetic diction."^[1]

Gray wrote in a letter to West, that "the language of the age is never the language of poetry."^[1]

Death

Gray died on 30 July 1771 in Cambridge, and was buried beside his mother in the churchyard of Stoke Poges, the setting for his famous *Elegy*. His grave can still be seen there.

Honors

- John Penn "of Stoke" had a memorial to Gray installed in the churchyard and engraved with the "Elegy".
- A plaque in Cornhill marks his birthplace.



Tomb of Thomas Gray in Stoke Poges Churchyard

- Gray's biographer William Mason erected a monument to him, designed by John Bacon the Elder, in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey in 1778.^[7]

References

- [1] John D. Baird, 'Gray, Thomas (1716–1771)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004) Accessed 21 Feb 2012 (<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11356>)
- [3] Gilfillan, George , dissertation in *The Poetical Works of Johnson, Parnell, Gray and Smollet* 1855, kindle ebook ASIN B004TQHGGE
- [4] Edmund William Gosse, *Gray* (London: Macmillan, 1902), p. 133 (<http://books.google.com/books?id=bZ2FNDVX9JcC&pg=PT133#v=onepage&q=&f=false>) at books.google.com
- [5] Letter, dated 12 June 1750 (<http://www.thomasgray.org/cgi-bin/display.cgi?text=tgal0173>), in which Gray sent the completed poem to Horace Walpole. Thomas Gray website
- [6] Gilfillan, George , dissertation in *The Poetical Works of Johnson, Parnell, Gray and Smollet* 1855, kindle ebook 1855 ASIN B004TQHGGE
- [7] Monument to Thomas Gray (<http://www.thomasgray.org/cgi-bin/view.cgi?collection=gallery&image=place0031>), Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey.

Further reading

- *The Poems of Thomas Gray*, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith, ed. R. Lonsdale (1969; repr. 1976)
- T. Gray, *The Complete Poems ...*, ed. H. W. Starr, J. R. Hendrickson (1966; repr. 1972)
- T. Gray, *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, ed. P. Toynbee, L. Whibley (3 vols., 1935; rev. H. W. Starr 1971)
- R. L. Mack, *Thomas Gray A Life* (2000)
- A. L. Sells, *Thomas Gray His Life and Works* (1980)
- R. W. Ketton-Cremer, *Thomas Gray* (1955)
- D. Cecil, *Two Quiet Lives* (1948) [on Dorothy Osborne; Thomas Gray]
- D. Capetanakis, 'Thomas Gray and Horace Walpole', in *Demetrios Capetanakis A Greek Poet in England* (1947), p. 117-124.
- P. van Tieghem, *La poesie de la nuit et des tombeaux en Europe au XVIII siecle* (1922)

External links

- *The Thomas Gray Archive* (<http://www.thomasgray.org/>) Alexander Huber, ed., University of Oxford
- *Luminarium: Thomas Gray* (<http://www.luminarium.org/eightlit/gray/>) Life, extensive works, essays, study resources
- Works by Thomas Gray (<http://www.gutenberg.org/author/Thomas+Gray>) at Project Gutenberg
- *Thomas Gray - Britannica Online Encyclopedia* (<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9037806/Thomas-Gray>)
- *Thomas Gray (1716–1771)* (<http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/ENGL201/Gray.htm>) Jo Koster. Literary analysis and biography with illustrations (including six William Blake did for some of Gray's most popular poems)
- *Selected Bibliography: Thomas Gray (1716–1771)* (<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/C18/biblio/gray.html>) Alan T. McKenzie and B. Eugene McCarthy

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