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CHAPTER

From "An Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard"

Thomas Gray (1716-1771)

➔ About the Poet

Thomas Gray was born in London on 26th December, 1716. His father's name was Philip Gray. His mother was Dorothy Antrobus. He was educated at Eton and at Peterhouse, Cambridge. He started writing poetry around 1742. He composed some remarkable poems in his early life. His masterpiece work, 'An Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard' was finished in 1750. In 1757, he was given the poet-laureateship which he did not accept. He was appointed as professor of Modern History and languages at Cambridge in 1768. He remained bachelor throughout his life and died in 1771. He was buried in the little churchyard of stoke pages in Bucks. His other famous writings are 'Pindaric Odes', 'The Progress of Poesy and The Bard'. There is a melancholy note in his poems. We find his clear impact on Shelley and Keats. In the words of Johnson, "Gray was a romantic serpent grazing in classical grasses". It is also said that he was the most learned of English poets after Milton.



➔ About the Poem

The poet mourns over the simple graves of those millions who were unknown and unrecognised. We should not mock at their life of humble birth, hard toil and homely joys. He commemorates their memory. He concludes that in this world nothing is everlasting because wealth, exalted birth, power and beauty, all lead to the one and the only one end—death. So it is useless to run after fame, money and power. The poem discloses the universal truth that death levels all distinctions.



*The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.*

X X X X X X

*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.*

X X X X X X

*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*

—Thomas Gray

➡ Appreciation of the Poem

The poem, 'An Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard' is composed by Thomas Gray, a poet of the eighteenth century. It is an elegy. An elegy is a lyric poem of lament and mourning over the death of some one dear to the poet. But here the poet does not mourn over some one dear to him or any great man. He mourns the passing away of those millions who remain unknown and unrecognised. On account of this, it abounds in sentiments which have a universal appeal. An appeal, which finds an echo in every bosom, has made this poem one of the most famous elegies in English Literature and has made the poet immortal.

The poem is written in iambic pentametre. It is classical in precision but romantic in spirit. It is also rich in the use of the figures of speech, specially that of personification.

||Glossary||

curfew	:	ringing of a bell at 8 p.m. as a signal for lights to be put out and fires covered (here) it means an evening bell in the church (शाम को बजने वाली गिरजाघर की घण्टी)
tolls	:	cause to ring with slow (मन्द गति से बजना)
knell	:	sound of a bell, sign of the end or death (घण्टी की ध्वनि, अन्त या मृत्यु का चिह्न)

parting	: departing (समाप्त होता हुआ, अन्त होता हुआ)
herd	: group of cattle (पशुओं का समूह)
lea	: grassland (घासयुक्त भूमि)
ploughman	: farmer (किसान)
plods	: continue walking slowly (पैरों को घसीटकर चलना) (थकावट के कारण)
beneath	: under (नीचे, छाया तले)
rugged	: rough (भद्दा)
elms	: a kind of forest tree (एक प्रकार का जंगली वृक्ष)
yew	: an evergreen tree (एक सदाबहार वृक्ष)
heaves	: rises (उठती हुई)
turf	: soil covered with roots of grass (घास की जड़ों से ढकी हुई भूमि)
mouldering	: loose earth (स्वतन्त्र भूमि)
fore-fathers	: ancestors (पूर्वज)
Hamlet	: Name of a small village (एक छोटे गाँव का नाम)
narrow cell	: small grave (छोटी समाधि या कब्र)
breezy	: pleasant wind (मनोहारी पवन)
incense breathing	: fresh and sweet (ताजा और मीठा)
morn	: morning (सुबह)
swallow	: a kind of bird (एक प्रकार की चिड़िया)
twittering	: chirping (चहचहाना)
straw built shed	: thatched house (फूस से निर्मित घर)
shrill clarion	: loud shrill call made to rouse (कर्कश आवाज से चौकन्ना करना)
echoing	: resounding (प्रतिध्वनि)
lowly bed	: small graves (छोटी कब्र)
ambition	: ardent desire, aspiration (here) ambitious people (लक्ष्य)
mock	: laugh at (हँसी उड़ाना)
toil	: hard labour (कठोर श्रम)
homely	: domestic (घरेलू)
obscure	: unknown to fame (छिपा हुआ, अनजाना)
grandeur	: greatness (here) grand and mighty persons (शान, भव्यता)
disdainful	: full of hatred (घृणापूर्ण)
annals	: brief life history (अभिलेख, जीवनवृत्त)

boast	:	pride (घमण्ड)
heraldry	:	noble birth (श्रेष्ठ कुल में जन्म)
pomp	:	display (प्रदर्शन)
inevitable	:	that which cannot be avoided (अपरिहार्य)

||Exercise||

➡ Answer the following questions :

1. Write the central idea of the poem 'From "An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"'.
 - (i) Let not Ambition mock their useful toil.
 - (ii) Nor grandeur hear with a disdainful smile.

➡ Explain the following lines with reference to the context :

1. Beneath those sleep.
2. Let not of the poor.
3. The boast of the grave.
4. The curfew tolls darkness and to me.

