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PAPER-201 ENGH (C-3)

POEM:

London: A Poem

In Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal

———*Quis ineptæ*
Tam patiens Urbis, tam ferreus ut teneat se?
JUV.

Tho' Grief and Fondness in my Breast rebel,
When injur'd THALES bids the Town farewell,
Yet still my calmer Thoughts his Choice commend,
I praise the Hermit, but regret the Friend,
Resolved at length, from Vice and LONDON far,
To breathe in distant Fields a purer Air,
And, fix'd on CAMBRIA's solitary shore,
Give to St. DAVID one *true Briton* more.

For who would leave, unbrib'd, *Hibernia's* Land,
Or change the Rocks of *Scotland* for the *Strand*?
There none are swept by sudden Fate away,
But all whom Hunger spares, with Age decay:
Here Malice, Rapine, Accident, conspire,
And now a Rabble Rages, now a Fire;
Their Ambush here relentless Ruffians lay,
And here the fell Attorney prowls for Prey;
Here falling Houses thunder on your Head,
And here a female Atheist talks you dead.

While THALES waits the Wherry that contains
Of dissipated Wealth the small Remains,
On *Thames's* Banks, in silent Thought we stood,
Where GREENWICH smiles upon the silver Flood:
Struck with the Seat that gave ELIZA Birth,
We kneel, and kiss the consecrated Earth;
In pleasing Dreams the blissful Age renew,

And call BRITANNIA 's Glories back to view;
Behold her Cross triumphant on the Main,
The Guard of Commerce, and the Dread of *Spain*,
Ere Masquerades debauch'd, Excise oppress'd,
Or *English* Honour grew a standing Jest.

A transient Calm the happy Scenes bestow,
And for a Moment lull the Sense of Woe.
At length awaking, with contemptuous Frown,
Indignant THALES eyes the neighb'ring Town.

Since Worth, he cries, in these degen'rate Days,
Wants ev'n the cheap Reward of empty Praise;
In those curst Walls, devote to Vice and Gain,
Since unrewarded Science toils in vain;
Since Hope but soothes to double my Distress,
And ev'ry Moment leaves my Little less;
While yet my steady Steps no Staff sustains,
And Life still vig'rous revels in my Veins;
Grant me, kind Heaven, to find some happier Place,
Where Honesty and Sense are no Disgrace;
Some pleasing Bank where verdant Osiers play,
Some peaceful Vale with Nature's Paintings gay;
Where once the harass'd BRITON found Repose,
And safe in Poverty defy'd his Foes;
Some secret Cell, ye Pow'rs, indulgent give.
Let —— live here, for —— has learn'd to live.
Here let those reign, whom Pensions can incite
To vote a Patriot black, a Courtier white;
Explain their Country's dear-bought Rights away,
And plead for Pirates in the Face of Day;
With slavish Tenets taint our poison'd Youth,
And lend a Lye the confidence of Truth.

Let such raise Palaces, and Manors buy,
Collect a Tax, or farm a Lottery,
With warbling Eunuchs fill a licens'd Stage,
And lull to Servitude a thoughtless Age.

Heroes, proceed! What Bounds your Pride shall hold?
What Check restrain your Thirst of Pow'r and Gold?
Behold rebellious Virtue quite o'erthrown,
Behold our Fame, our Wealth, our Lives your own.

To such, a groaning Nation's Spoils are giv'n,
When publick Crimes inflame the Wrath of Heav'n:
But what, my Friend, what Hope remains for me,
Who start at Theft, and blush at Perjury?
Who scarce forbear, tho' BRITAIN's Court he sing,
To pluck a titled Poet's borrow'd Wing;
A Statesman's Logic, unconvinc'd can hear,
And dare to slumber o'er the *Gazetteer*;
Despise a Fool in half his Pension drest,
And strive in vain to laugh at *H—y's* jest.

Others with softer Smiles, and subtler Art,
Can sap the Principles, or taint the Heart;
With more Address a Lover's Note convey,
Or bribe a Virgin's Innocence away.
Well may they rise, while I, whose Rustic Tongue
Ne'er knew to puzzle Right, or varnish Wrong,
Spurn'd as a Beggar, dreaded as a Spy,
Live unregarded, unlamented die.

For what but social Guilt the Friend endears?
Who shares *Orgilio's* Crimes, his Fortune shares.
But thou, should tempting Villainy present
All *Marlb'rough* hoarded, or all *Villiers* spent;
Turn from the glitt'ring Bribe thy scornful Eye,
Nor sell for Gold, what Gold could never buy,
The peaceful Slumber, self-approving Day,
Unsullied Fame, and Conscience ever gay.

The cheated Nation's happy Fav'rites, see!
Mark whom the Great caress, who frown on me!
LONDON! the needy Villain's gen'ral Home,
The Common Shore of *Paris* and of *Rome*;
With eager Thirst, by Folly or by Fate,
Sucks in the Dregs of each corrupted State.
Forgive my Transports on a Theme like this,
I cannot bear a *French* metropolis.

Illustrious EDWARD! from the Realms of Day,
The Land of Heroes and of Saints survey;
Nor hope the *British* Lineaments to trace,
The rustic Grandeur, or the surly Grace;
But lost in thoughtless Ease, and empty Show,

Behold the Warriour dwindled to a Beau;
Sense, Freedom, Piety, refin'd away,
Of FRANCE the Mimic, and of SPAIN the Prey.

All that at home no more can beg or steal,
Or like a Gibbet better than a Wheel;
Hiss'd from the Stage, or hooted from the Court,
Their Air, their Dress, their Politicks import;
Obsequious, artful, voluble and gay,
On *Britain's* fond Credulity they prey.
No gainful Trade their Industry can 'scape,
They sing, they dance, clean Shoes, or cure a Clap;
All Sciences a fasting Monsieur knows,
And bid him go to Hell, to Hell he goes.

Ah! what avails it, that, from Slav'ry far,
I drew the Breath of Life in *English* Air;
Was early taught a *Briton's* Right to prize,
And lisp the Tale of HENRY's Victories;
If the gull'd Conqueror receives the Chain,
And what their Armies lost, their Cringes gain?

Studious to please, and ready to submit,
The supple *Gaul* was born a Parasite:
Still to his Int'rest true, where'er he goes,
Wit, Brav'ry, Worth, his lavish Tongue bestows;
In ev'ry Face a Thousand Graces shine,
From ev'ry Tongue flows Harmony divine.
These Arts in vain our rugged Natives try,
Strain out with fault'ring Diffidence a Lye,
And get a Kick for awkward Flattery.

Besides, with Justice, this discerning Age
Admires their wond'rous Taients for the Stage:
Well may they venture on the Mimic's art,
Who play from Morn to Night a borrow'd Part;
Practis'd their Master's Notions to embrace,
Repeat his Maxims, and reflect his Face;
With ev'ry wild Absurdity comply,
And view each Object with another's Eye;
To shake with Laughter ere the Jest they hear,
To pour at Will the counterfeited Tear;

And as their Patron hints the Cold or Heat,
To shake in Dog-days, in *December* sweat.

How, when Competitors like these contend,
Can surly Virtue hope to fix a Friend?
Slaves that with serious Impudence beguile,
And lye without a Blush, without a Smile;
Exalt each Trifle, ev'ry Vice adore,
Your Taste in Snuff, your Judgment in a Whore;
Can *Balbo*'s Eloquence applaud, and swear
He gropes his Breeches with a Monarch's Air.

For Arts like these preferr'd, admir'd, carest,
They first invade your Table, then your Breast;
Explore your Secrets with insidious Art,
Watch the weak Hour, and ransack all the Heart;
Then soon your ill-plac'd Confidence repay,
Commence your Lords, and govern or betray.
By Numbers here from Shame or Censure free,
All Crimes are safe, but hated Poverty.
This, only this, the rigid Law persues,
This, only this, provokes the snarling Muse;
The sober Trader at a tatter'd Cloak,
Wakes from his Dream, and labours for a Joke;
With brisker Air the silken Courtiers gaze,
And turn the varied Taunt a thousand Ways.
Of all the Grievs that harrass the Distrest,
Sure the most bitter is a scornful Jest;
Fate never wounds more deep the gen'rous Heart,
Than when a Blockhead's Insult points the Dart.

Has Heaven reserv'd, in Pity to the Poor,
No pathless Waste, or undiscover'd Shore?
No secret Island in the boundless Main?
No peaceful Desart yet unclaim'd by SPAIN?
Quick let us rise, the happy Seats explore,
And bear Oppression's Insolence no more.
This mournful Truth is ev'ry where confest,
SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPREST:
But here more slow, where all are Slaves to Gold,
Where Looks are Merchandise, and Smiles are sold,
Where won by Bribes, by Flatteries implor'd,
The Groom retails the Favours of his Lord.

But hark! th' affrighted Crowd's tumultuous Cries
Roll thro' the Streets, and thunder to the Skies;
Rais'd from some pleasing Dream of Wealth and Pow'r,
Some pompous Palace, or some blissful Bow'r,
Aghast you start, and scarce with aking Sight,
Sustain th' approaching Fire's tremendous Light;
Swift from pursuing Horrors take your Way,
And Leave your little ALL to Flames a Prey;
Then thro' the World a wretched Vagrant roam,
For where can starving Merit find a Home?
In vain your mournful Narrative disclose,
While all neglect, and most insult your Woes.

Should Heaven's just Bolts *Orgilio's* Wealth confound,
And spread his flaming Palace on the Ground,
Swift o'er the Land the dismal Rumour flies,
And publick Mourning pacify the Skies;
The Laureat Tribe in servile Verse relate,
How Virtue wars with persecuting Fate;
With well-feign'd Gratitude the pension's Band
Refund the Plunder of the begger'd Land.
See! while he builds, the gaudy Vassals come,
And crowd with sudden Wealth the rising Dome;
The Price of Boroughs and of Souls restore,
And raise his Treasures higher than before.
Now bless'd with all the Baubles of the Great,
The polish'd Marble, and the shining Plate,
Orgilio sees the golden Pile aspire,
And hopes from angry Heav'n another Fire.

Could'st thou resign the Park and Play content,
For the fair Banks of *Severn* or of *Trent*;
There might'st thou find some elegant Retreat,
Some hireling Senator's deserted Seat;
And stretch thy Prospects o'er the smiling Land,
For less than rent the Dungeons of the *Strand*;
There prune thy Walks, support thy drooping Flow'rs,
Direct thy Rivulets, and twine thy Bow'rs;
And, while thy Beds a cheap Repast afford,
Despise the Dainties of a venal Lord:
There ev'ry Bush with Nature's Music rings,
There ev'ry Breeze bears Health upon its Wings;

On all thy Hours Security shall smile,
And bless thine Evening Walk and Morning Toil.

Prepare for Death, if here at Night you roam,
And sign your Will before you sup from Home.
Some fiery Fop, with new Commission vain,
Who sleeps on Brambles till he kills his Man;
Some frolick Drunkard, reeling from a Feast,
Provokes a Broil, and stabs you for a Jest.
Yet ev'n these Heroes, mischievously gay,
Lords of the Street, and Terrors of the Way;
Flush'd as they are with Folly, Youth and Wine,
Their prudent Insults to the Poor confine;
Afar they mark the Flambeau's bright Approach,
And shun the shining Train, and golden Coach.

In vain, these Dangers past, your Doors you close,
And hope the balmy Blessings of Repose:
Cruel with Guilt, and daring with Despair,
The midnight Murd'rer bursts the faithless Bar;
Invades the sacred Hour of silent Rest,
And plants, unseen, a Dagger in your Breast.

Scarce can our Fields, such Crowds at *Tyburn* die,
With Hemp the Gallows and the Fleet supply.
Propose your Schemes, ye Senatorian Band,
Whose *Ways and Means* support the sinking Land;
Lest Ropes be wanting in the tempting Spring,
To rig another Convoy for the K—g.

A single Jail, in ALFRED's golden Reign,
Could half the Nation's Criminals contain;
Fair Justice then, without Constraint ador'd,
Sustain'd the Ballance, but resign'd the Sword;
No Spies were paid, no *Special Juries* known,
Blest Age! But ah! how diff'rent from our own!

Much could I add, —— but see the Boat at hand,
The Tide retiring, calls me from the Land:
Farewel! —— When Youth, and Health, and Fortune spent,
Thou fly'st for Refuge to the Wilds of *Kent*;
And tir'd like me with Follies and with Crimes,
In angry Numbers warn'st succeeding Times;

Then shall thy Friend, nor thou refuse his Aid,
Still Foe to Vice forsake his *Cambrian* Shade;
In Virtue's Cause once more exert his Rage,
Thy Satire point, and animate thy Page.

1. SAMUEL JOHNSONS "LONDON"

London is a poem by Samuel Johnson, produced shortly after he moved to London. Written in 1738, it was his first major published work. The poem in 263 lines imitates Juvenal's Third Satire, expressed by the character of Thales as he decides to leave London for Wales. Johnson imitated Juvenal because of his fondness for the Roman poet and he was following a popular 18th-century trend of Augustan poets headed by Alexander Pope that favoured imitations of classical poets, especially for young poets in their first ventures into published verse.

London was published anonymously and in multiple editions during 1738. It quickly received critical praise, notably from Pope. This would be the second time that Pope praised one of Johnson's poems; the first being for *Messiah*, Johnson's Latin translation of Pope's poem. Part of that praise comes from the political basis of the poem. From a modern view, the poem is outshined by Johnson's later poem, *The Vanity of Human Wishes* as well as works like his *A Dictionary of the English Language*, his *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, and his periodical essays for *The Rambler*, *The Idler* and *The Adventurer*.

BACKGROUND

During March 1737, Johnson lived in London with his former pupil the actor David Garrick. Garrick had connections in London, and the two stayed with his distant relative, Richard Norris, who lived in Exeter Street. Johnson did not stay there long, and set out to Greenwich near the Golden Hart Tavern to finish his play, *Irene*. Later, in October 1737, Johnson brought his wife to London; they first lived at Woodstock Street and then moved to 6 Castle Street. Soon, Johnson found employment with Edward Cave, and wrote for his *The Gentleman's Magazine*.

According to Walter Jackson Bate, his work for the magazine and other publishers "is almost unparalleled in range and variety", and "so numerous, so varied and scattered" that "Johnson himself could not make a complete list". During this time, Johnson was exposed to the "imitations" of Horace composed by Pope and saw how they were used to attack contemporary political corruption. Both the form and subject were popular, and Johnson decided to follow Pope's lead by creating his own imitation.

In May 1738, *London* was published anonymously, and it went into a second edition that year. This was his first major work to be published to a wide audience and one of his longest "non-dramatic public poems".¹ It was not written to be a general satire; instead, it was written to demonstrate Johnson's skill as a writer and to become popular to further his literary career.

London is part of the eighteenth-century genre of imitation, or **Neoclassicism**. The work was based on [Juvenal's Third Satire](#) which describes Umbricius leaving Rome to live in [Cumae](#) in order to escape from the vices and dangers of the capital city. In Johnson's version, it is [Thales](#) who travels to Cambria ([Wales](#)) to escape from the problems of London. Johnson chose Juvenal as a model based on his own appreciation for Juvenal's works. The epigraph from Juvenal, "Quis ineptae [iniquae] / Tam patiens urbis, tam ferreus ut teneat se?" (Juv. 1.30-1) can be translated as "Who is so patient of the foolish [wicked] city, so iron-willed, as to contain himself?".

The poem describes the various problems of London, including an emphasis on crime, corruption, and the squalor of the poor. To emphasise his message, these various abstract problems are personified as beings that seek to destroy London. Thus, the characters of Malice, Rapine, and Accident "conspire" (line 13) to attack those who live in London.

The poem begins:

Though grief and fondness in my breast rebel,
When injur'd THALES bids the town farewell,
Yet still my calmer thoughts his choice commend,
(I praise the hermit, but regret the friend)
Resolv'd at length, from vice and London far,
To breathe in distant fields a purer air,
And, fix'd on Cambria solitary shore,
Give to St. David-one true Briton more.

— *lines 1–8*

Who Thales represents is unknown, but it is possible that he represents [Richard Savage](#), Johnson's friend who left London to travel to Wales.

The main emphasis of the poem comes to light on line 177: "Slow rises worth, by poverty depressed".

The poem is forced to cut short, and the narrator concludes:

Much could I add, but see the boat at hand,
The tide retiring calls me from the land:
Farewell!—When youth, and health, and fortune spent
Thou fly'st for refuge to the Wilds of Kent;
And tir'd like me with follies and with crimes,
In angry numbers warn'st succeeding times;
Then shall thy friend, nor thou refuse his aid,
Still foe to vice, forsake his Cambrian shade;
In virtue's cause once more exert his rage,
Thy satire point, and animate thy page.

— *lines 254–263*

Politics

The British government under the [Whig Sir Robert Walpole](#) opposed to the content expressed in "London."¹The poem does not hide its political agenda, and the lines directed against [George II](#) follow a Jacobite political sentiment. Although it does not mention George in line 50 ("Let ____ live here, for ____ has learned to live"), the poem is referring to the king. Not until the end of the poem does the narrator directly address the government when he says:

Propose your schemes, ye senatorian band,
Whose ways and means support the sinking land:
Lest ropes be wanting in the tempting spring,
To rig another convoy for the king

— *lines 244–247*

It is through the "Ways and Means", or the [Committee of Ways and Means of the House of Commons](#), that the king is able to tax the people, and this function is part of many that Johnson satirises.

The city of London was seen as a means to attack the [Whig](#) political party run by [Robert Walpole](#). In particular, Johnson compares the actions of George II and Walpole to those of the Roman emperors during the decline of the Roman Empire. Part of the attack included, as Brean Hammond puts it, "a nostalgic glorification of English history that went hand-in-hand with the representation of the present as in the grip of forms of corruption never previously encountered". This "nostalgic glorification" includes multiple references to [Queen Elizabeth](#) and her defeat of the Spanish invaders while simultaneously claiming that Walpole is seeking to allow Spain to conquer England's trade investments.

With England's rivalry with Spain, Johnson included the lines "Has heaven reserved, in pity to the poor,/No pathless waste or undiscovered shore,/No secret island in the boundless main,/No peaceful desert yet unclaimed by Spain?" Modern Latin American historians have used the lines to illustrate Europeans' wonder at the sheer size of the [Spanish Empire](#).

CRITICAL RESPONSE

Johnson judged his own poem harshly; he revised it in 1748-and came to depreciate the genre of poetic imitations of which *London* was an example. Another aspect of the poem that Johnson disliked in his later years was the pastoral bias of the poem, to prefer the countryside to the city. However, his contemporaries did not agree with his later assessment, and [Alexander Pope](#) from the first claimed that the author "will soon be déterré¹ although it did not immediately happen This would be the second time that Pope directly praised a work of Johnson Not everyone praised the work, as its political themes did cause controversy within the Hanoverian government and with the supporters of Walpole's administration. Johnson was not to receive recognition as a major literary figure until a few years later when he began to work on his [A Dictionary of the English Language](#).

The printer and bookseller [Robert Dodsley](#) bought the copyright from Johnson for £10. Later, *London* would be rated as his second greatest poem, as *The Vanity of Human Wishes* would replace it in the eyes of [Walter Scott](#) and [T. S. Eliot](#). The later critic Howard Weinbrot agreed with Scott's and Eliot's assessment, and says "*London* is well worth reading, but *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is one of the great poems in the English language." Likewise, Robert Folkenflik says: "It is not Johnson's greatest poem, only because *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is better". Some critics, like Brean Hammond, only see the poem as "no better than a somewhat mechanical updating of Juvenal's third *Satire*" Others, like Walter Jackson Bate, consider the poem as "masterly in its versification"

LONDON

PLOT SUMMARY

The speaker waits with his friend Thales by the River Thames. He feels sorrowful, because his friend has decided to leave London for the country, but he respects and supports Thales's decision. The two men look over London, and for a moment, things seem calm. Then Thales frowns and begins to explain why he has chosen to leave the city.

Thales feels that London—and all of England, for that matter—has declined under the current government and its policies. The nation used to be nobler and more just. There were courageous kings such as Edward and Henry, who both won great military victories against England’s enemies. There were also kings such as Alfred the Great, who was righteous and inspiring. Such monarchs created a climate that curtailed criminality. Thales believes that during Alfred the Great’s reign, a single jail could have held half of England’s criminals. He invokes these old rulers to illustrate the heights of greatness from which London and England have fallen.

London is now full of criminals; those who aren’t breaking the law fall prey to those who are. People everywhere are going hungry. They are taken advantage of by the government, which supports “pirates” who prey on Englishmen. Meanwhile, the nation’s leaders are allowed to grow rich by running lotteries and collecting taxes from the poor. These leaders are now driven by the love of money rather than the pursuit of noble aims, leaving Londoners at the mercy of such plutocrats. The working classes are subject to the whims of those with less character but more money. Thales feels that the entire city is falling into ruin as “falling houses thunder on your head.” He attributes these maladies to the misguided culture but lays most of the blame on the greedy and indifferent government, lamenting how each official constantly tries to “raise his treasures higher than before.”

Thales asks to be given a place where honor, kindness, and wisdom aren’t looked down upon. He wants a better life than the one he has in London. At the end of the poem, he tells the speaker that he still has much to add—but they’ve run out of time, since his boat has arrived. He foresees a time when his friend will also flee London—when his “youth, and health, and fortune” are gone—and then feel enraged enough to pen a satire against the city, presumably in the form of the poem “London” itself.

SUMMARY

London: A Poem in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal, a poem in twenty-seven stanzas of varying lengths, is written in pointed heroic couplets. An imitation of Juvenal’s third satire, it revives Juvenal’s complaints against flattery, fraud, perjury, theft, and rejection of old Roman virtues and applies them to the British metropolis. Like Juvenal, Johnson is rhetorical and dramatic. He, too, presents readers with a

scene: A man, injured by the viciousness and folly of the city, leaving for the peace and solitude of the country, is bidding farewell to his friend.

Johnson's poem opens with a man named Thales waiting on the banks of the Thames for the boat to take him to Wales. Thales reviews his reasons for leaving town: selfishness, greed, the absence of public and private virtue, and the...

ABOUT Samuel Johnson

1709–1784

Samuel Johnson was born on September 18, 1709, in Lichfield, Staffordshire, England. He was educated at Pembroke College, Oxford, but had to leave before obtaining a degree due to a lack of funds. After a brief career in teaching, he left for London where he worked as a journalist, publishing poems, essays, biographies, and speeches. In 1755, he published his most influential work: *A Dictionary of the English Language*. The book made him one of England's leading literary figures and earned him a masters of arts degree from Oxford University and, later, an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Trinity College in Dublin. He died on December 13, 1784, in London. He is buried in Westminster Abbey.

2. POEM

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Poem by Thomas Gray

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

Now fades the glimm'ring 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 tow'r
The moping owl does to the moon complain

Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring 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 twitt'ring 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 pow'r,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If Mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
Where thro' 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 Flatt'ry 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 wak'd 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 flow'r 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 hist'ry in a nation's eyes,

Their lot forbade: nor circumscrib'd alone
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;
Forbade 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 tenor of their way.

Yet ev'n 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'er resign'd,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing, ling'ring look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
Ev'n 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,
Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he would rove,
Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
Or craz'd 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 fav'rite 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 thro' the church-way path we saw him borne.
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,
Grav'd 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 frown'd not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.*

*Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heav'n did a recompense as largely send:
He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,
He gain'd from Heav'n ('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.*

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard is a poem by [Thomas Gray](#), completed in 1750 and first published in 1751. The poem's origins are unknown, but it was partly inspired by Gray's thoughts following the death of the poet Richard West in 1742. Originally titled *Stanzas Wrote in a Country Church-Yard*, the poem was completed when Gray was living near St Giles' [parish church](#) at [Stoke Poges](#). It was sent to his friend [Horace Walpole](#), who popularised the poem among London literary circles. Gray was eventually forced to publish the work on 15 February 1751 in order to preempt a magazine publisher from printing an unlicensed copy of the poem.

The poem is an [elegy](#) in name but not in [form](#); it employs a style similar to that of contemporary odes, but it embodies a [meditation](#) on [death](#), and remembrance after death. The poem argues that the remembrance can be good and bad, and the narrator finds comfort in pondering the lives of the obscure rustics buried in the churchyard. The two versions of the poem, *Stanzas* and *Elegy*, approach death differently; the first contains a [stoic](#) response to death, but the final version contains an [epitaph](#) which serves to repress the narrator's fear of dying. With its discussion of, and focus on, the obscure and the known, the poem has possible political ramifications, but it does not make any definite claims on politics to be more universal in its approach to life and death.

Claimed as "probably still today the best-known and best-loved poem in English", the *Elegy* quickly became popular. It was printed many times and in a variety of formats, translated into many languages, and praised by critics even after Gray's other poetry had fallen out of favour. Later critics tended to comment on its language and universal aspects, but some felt the ending was unconvincing—failing to resolve the questions the poem raised—or that the poem did not do enough to present a political statement that would serve to help the obscure rustic poor who form its central image.

BACKGROUND

Gray's life was surrounded by loss and death, and many people whom he knew died painfully and alone. In 1749, several events occurred that caused Gray stress. On 7 November, Mary Antrobus, Gray's aunt, died; her death devastated his family. The loss was compounded a few days later by news that his friend since childhood [Horace Walpole](#) had been almost killed by two highwaymen.^[4] Although Walpole survived and later joked about the event, the incident disrupted Gray's ability to pursue his scholarship. The events dampened the mood that Christmas, and Antrobus's death was ever fresh in the minds of the Gray family. As a side effect, the events caused Gray to spend much of his time contemplating his own mortality. As he 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, should he die, if there would be anyone to remember him. Gray's meditations during spring 1750 turned to how individuals' reputations would survive. Eventually, Gray remembered some lines of poetry that he composed in 1742 following the death of West, a poet he knew. Using that previous material, he began to compose a poem that would serve as an answer to the various questions he was pondering.

On 3 June 1750, Gray moved to [Stoke Poges](#), and on 12 June he completed *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. Immediately, he included the poem in a letter he sent to Walpole, that said:

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.

The letter reveals that Gray felt that the poem was unimportant, and that he did not expect it to become as popular or influential as it did. Gray dismisses its positives as merely being that he was able to complete the poem, which was probably influenced by his experience of the churchyard at Stoke Poges, where he attended the Sunday service and was able to visit the grave of Antrobus.

The version that was later published and reprinted was a 32-stanza version with the "Epitaph" conclusion. Before the final version 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; the copyright laws of the time did not require Gray's approval for publication. With Walpole's help, he was able to convince [Robert Dodsley](#) to print the poem on 15 February as a [quarto](#) pamphlet.

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."^[10]

The pamphlet contained [woodblock illustrations](#) and was printed without attribution to Gray, at 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. It was so popular that it was reprinted twelve times and reproduced in many different periodicals until 1765, including in Gray's *Six Poems* (1753), in his *Odes* (1757), and in Volume IV of Dodsley's 1755 compilation of poetry. The revised version of 1768 was that later printed

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard Summary

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is a poem by Thomas Gray. Its speaker strides the countryside at dusk and evokes the cycles of the

natural world to meditate on the inevitability of death for all—including himself.

- The speaker observes the landscape and watches the plowman and his cattle heading home.
- Upon seeing grave sites in the shade of a yew tree, the speaker considers the deaths of poor and rich men alike.
- The speaker praises the modesty of the graves in the churchyard and realizes that death consigns all men—poor and rich, obscure and renowned—to a fate of oblivion.

SUMMARY

[Thomas Gray](#) probably began “[Elegy](#) Written in a Country Churchyard” about 1746. It was originally a somewhat shorter poem than the version he published in 1751, and some have speculated that the poem may have been occasioned by an actual death, perhaps that of Gray’s friend Richard West in 1742. When Gray designated his work as an elegy, he placed it in a long tradition of meditative poems that focus on human mortality and sometimes reflect specifically on the death of a single person. By setting his meditation in a typical English churchyard with mounds, gravestones, and yew trees, Gray was also following a tradition. Some of the most popular poems in the middle of Gray’s century were set in graveyards and meditated on death.

“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is cast in four-line stanzas, or quatrains, in which the first line rhymes with the third, the second with the fourth. This *abab* pattern, at this time associated with elegiac poetry, gives the poem an appropriately stately pace. The last three stanzas are printed in italic type and given the title “The Epitaph.”

In the first three stanzas (lines 1 to 12), Gray sets the scene for his private and quiet meditations. He is far from the city and looking out from a country churchyard at a rural scene, but the sights and sounds of this rural world of men and beasts fade away. Although the scene is beautiful, life is not joyous, and Gray reflects that this day dies just like the one before it, as the plowman plods wearily home. The poet is alone, but he is not tired. The text gives a sense of the vitality of his solitude and of the stillness of the scene by describing the few things that remain to disturb it: the tinkling of the cattle who have returned home, the drone of the beetle, and the sound of an owl from the church tower. This owl—a “moping,” secret, solitary ruler over the churchyard since ancient times—strikes an ominous note and protests that the poet is challenging

its reign. With these descriptions, Gray creates the backdrop for his melancholy reflections about eternal truths.

In the next four stanzas (lines 13 to 28), Gray uses the churchyard scene to invoke important images: the strength of the elms, death as symbolized by the graves, and the comfort provided by the yews shading bodies that sleep. The poet begins by reflecting that death for the humble and lower class means a cessation of life's simple pleasures: waking up to the songs of birds, sharing life with a wife and children, and enjoying hard and productive work. Gray reflects not on the untimely death of young people but on the death that comes after a normal life span.

In the next four stanzas (lines 29 to 44), the poet addresses the upper classes—those with ambition, grandeur, power, nobility, and pride—and exhorts them not to mock the poor for their simplicity or for not having elaborate statues on their graveyard memorials. He tells the living upper classes (perhaps the people Gray envisions as his readers) that ultimately it does not matter what glory they achieve or how elaborate a tombstone they will have. They will die just like the poor.

The eight stanzas (lines 45 to 76) that follow provide the central message of the poem: The poor are born with the same natural abilities as members of the upper classes. Who can say what humble people might...

CRITICAL APPRECIATION

The immediate response to the final draft version of the poem was positive and Walpole was very pleased with the work. During the summer of 1750, Gray received so much positive support regarding the poem that he was in dismay, but did not mention it in his letters until an 18 December 1750 letter to Wharton. In the letter, Gray said,

The Stanza's, which I now enclose to you have had the Misfortune by Mr W:s Fault to be made ... publick, for which they certainly were never meant, but it is too late to complain. They have been so applauded, it is quite a Shame to repeat it. I mean not to be modest; but I mean, it is a shame for those who have said such superlative Things about them, that I can't repeat them. I should have been glad, that you & two or three more People had liked them, which would have satisfied my ambition on this head amply.

The poem was praised for its universal aspects, and Gray became one of the most famous English poets of his era. Despite this, after his death only his elegy remained popular until 20th-century critics began to re-evaluate his poetry. The 18th-century writer [James Beattie](#) was said by [Sir William Forbes, 6th Baronet](#) to have written a letter to him claiming, "Of all the English poets of this age, Mr. Gray is most admired, and I think with justice; yet there are comparatively speaking but a few who know of anything of his, but his 'Church-yard Elegy,' which is by no means the best of his works."

There is a story that the British General [James Wolfe](#) read the poem before his troops arrived at the Plains of Abraham in September 1759 as part of the [Seven Years' War](#). After reading the poem, he is reported to have said: "Gentlemen, I would rather have written those lines than take Quebec tomorrow." [Adam Smith](#), in his 21st lecture on rhetoric in 1763, argued that poetry should deal with "A temper of mind that differs very little from the common tranquillity of mind is what we can best enter into, by the perusal of a small piece of a small length ... an Ode or Elegy in which there is no odds but in the measure which differ little from the common state of mind are what most please us. Such is that on the Church yard, or Eton College by Mr Grey. The Best of Horaces (tho inferior to Mr Greys) are all of this sort. Even [Samuel Johnson](#), who knew Gray but did not like his poetry, later praised the poem when he wrote in his *Life of Gray* (1779) that it "abounds with images which find a mirror in every breast; and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo. The four stanzas beginning *Yet even these bones*, are to me original: I have never seen the notions in any other place; yet he that reads them here, persuades himself that he has always felt them."

Johnson's general criticism prompted many others to join in the debate. Some reviewers of his *Lives of the Poets*, and many of Gray's editors, thought that he was too harsh. An article in the *Annual Register* for 1782 recognised, with relation to the Elegy, "That the doctor was not over zealous to allow [Gray] the degree of praise that the public voice had universally assigned him, is, we think, sufficiently apparent"; but it went on to qualify this with the opinion that "partiality to [Gray's] beautiful elegy had perhaps allotted him a rank above his general merits." Debate over Gray's work continued into the 19th century, and Victorian critics remained unconvinced by the rest of it. At the end of the century, [Matthew Arnold](#), in his 1881 collection of critical writings, summed up the general response: "The *Elegy* pleased; it could not but please: but Gray's poetry, on the whole, astonished his contemporaries at first more than it pleased them; it was so unfamiliar, so unlike the sort of poetry in vogue."

In 1882, [Edmund Gosse](#) analyzed the reception of Gray's poem: "It is curious to reflect upon the modest and careless mode in which that poem was first circulated which was destined to enjoy and to retain a higher reputation in literature than any other English poem perhaps than any other poem of the world written between Milton and Wordsworth." He continued by stressing the poem's wide acceptance: "The fame of the Elegy has spread to all countries and has exercised an influence on all the poetry of Europe, from Denmark to Italy, from France to Russia. With the exception of certain works of Byron and Shakespeare, no English poem has been so widely admired and imitated abroad and after more than a century of existence we find it as fresh as ever, when its copies, even the most popular of all those of Lamartine, are faded and tarnished." He concluded with a reinforcing claim on the poem's place in English poetry: "It possesses the charm of incomparable felicity, of a melody that is not too subtle to charm every ear, of a moral persuasiveness that appeals to every generation, and of metrical skill that in each line proclaims the master. The Elegy may almost be looked upon as the typical piece of English verse, our poem of poems; not that it is the most brilliant or original or profound lyric in our language, but because it combines in more balanced perfection than any other all the qualities that go to the production of a fine poetical effect."

A Critical Appreciation of "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" Written by Thomas Gray

This "Elegy" consists of 32 stanzas. Each stanza consists of four iambic pentameter lines for which they are called heroic quatrains. In the first three quatrains the poet has created a suitable atmosphere required for mourning the death of near and dear ones. Gray selects evening for the time of mourning. This gives him the advantage of suggesting both the ends of a day and the end of life. The evening also suggests the oncoming darkness and night in nature, and grief and melancholy in human mind.

The melancholic atmosphere of the evening has been intensified by a reference to the grief-stricken silence. It is further enhanced by the sound of the curfew bell, the droning of the beetle, the occasional hooting of the owl and the dying sound coming from the tinkling of the bells fastened round the necks of the sheep in the distant folds. Gray very carefully creates the setting of the poem in order to set the mood of

mourning the first three stanzas. It is needless to say that the evening, the approaching night and its darkness, prevailing stillness and the fading sounds contribute to his melancholic mood.

In the next four stanzas, the poet passes from particular to general and refers to universal laws of nature. Pride in ancestral history, worldly power, physical beauty and wealth cannot save one from death. Death is the leveler of the poor and the rich, the beautiful and the ugly, the powerless and the powerful. So, there is nothing to be proud of worldly privileges. In these lines, there is a criticism of those who generally think that they are successful in this world. The generalization also has a moral tone.

The analysis of the structure shows that the "Elegy" has wide variety of moods and tones. Though a mood of melancholy runs throughout the poem, it is not always the same. In the beginning, a gloomy mood has been created and it has been associated with a subjective melancholic tone by a reference to "me" in the fourth line. But the tone soon becomes objective and pitiful as the cause of lamentation is revealed. Again the tone changes when the tone refers to the universal laws of life and death.

The poem is a famous elegy. Usually a poet writes an elegy on the death of his dear friend. Traditionally it is imagined that the dead person was a shepherd and his fellow shepherd, often the poet, sings sorrowfully in his praise. An elegy gradually passes from a sad state of mind to a state of hope as the poem ends. But this elegy is not written on the death of a single person. It is written to mourn the death of all the death villagers.
