



Exploring elegiac and eulogistic tones in Thomas Gray's poem elegy written in a country churchyard

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Abstract

The prime objective of this research article is to explore elegiac and eulogistic tones in Gray's Poem entitled "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" that was first published in 1751. This poem deals with the situations and deeds of the dead as well as living marginalized people in rustic surroundings. The writer has employed some poetic lines as data which retain the elegiac and eulogistic tones. This article is based on a qualitative descriptive method which involves the presentation of poetic lines and their analyses. This article concludes with a striking elegiac remark that all the people rich and poor, proud and humble, heard and unheard, noble and ignoble and noted and mediocre must merge their existence with soil at the end of life. The prime themes of the poem are death, vanity of human glory, inevitability of death, life in death etc. This article is assumed to be significant to those who are involved in teaching learning English poetry.

Keywords: elegy, poetry, Thomas gray, tone

1. Introduction

Poetry is an artistic expression of human contents tinted with imagination for creating a certain emotion, feeling or in-depth perception in readers. Elegy is a form of poetry. It is a serious subjective poem with mournfulness or melancholy as a dominant element. "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is one of the most popular poems composed by Thomas Gray (December 26, 1716 – July 30, 1771). He was an English poet, classical scholar and professor at Cambridge University. Structurally, this poem is not an elegy since it is not written in elegiac couplets which require the structure of a hexametric line followed by a pentametric line, but thematically, it is an elegy because it is set in a graveyard and it expresses mourning for loss and death. It may have been written on the death of Gray's friend Richard West who died in 1742. Moreover, it is itself a more general lament concerning human mortality.

The poetic persona tends to express his/ her attitude towards something or somebody. Tone or attitude may be positive, negative, satiric, ironic, elegiac, eulogistic, neutral etc. Sometimes it is difficult for an average reader to explore a dominating tone of the poem.

The article writer has attempted to explore two sorts of tone in this elegy: elegiac tone and eulogistic tone. He has highlighted the major poetic lines that hint at these tones and interpreted them as a method of researching the tone. This article will be fruitful to those who wish to discern tone for a thematic analysis of a poem.

2. Literature Review

Literature review includes definition of elegy, parts of elegy, features of elegy, different types of tone, and different persons' views on this elegy.

2.1 Elegy

The word "elegy" comes from the Greek word "elegos" which means "mournful poem". The elegy which belongs to the category of serious meditative poetry is a formal poem composed on the loss of something loved, destruction of

something great and valuable, separation from someone near and dear and the death of an individual or upon death itself. The elegy is distinguished from other forms of poetry by its special meter called "elegiac meter" consisting of a dactylic hexameter followed by a dactylic pentameter in poetic lines. But a modern elegy just focuses on its subject matter that must be mournful and melancholic. There are several elegies in English literature. 'The scholar Gypsy' by Arnold, "Break Break Break" by Tennyson, "Elegy written in a country churchyard" by Gray, "Lycidas" by Milton etc. are popular elegies in English literature. Cuddon (1999) [7] mentions that elegy has come to mean "a poem of mourning for an individual, or a lament for some tragic event" (p.253). Harmon (2009) [9] considers elegy as "a sustained and formal poem setting forth meditations on death or another solemn theme" (p.182). Abrams (1993) [1] asserts that "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" deals with "the mortality of human beings and the passing of things they value" (p.50).

2.1.1 Basic Parts of Elegy

A traditional elegy has three basic parts that come in order in the poem

1. Grief: An expression of sadness.
2. Admiration: Praise for the deceased.
3. Acceptance: Coming to terms with loss.

Although grief is a dominant element in the early part of the elegy, the note often changes towards the close to the resignation. The poet reconciles himself to the inevitable reality or expresses his faith in immortality and future reunion.

2.1.2 Features of elegy

Some common features of elegy are as follows

1. The most striking feature of an elegy is its mournfulness. Whatever may be the subject matter – be it the death of an individual, or the fall of a great city or the lost love or anything else, It must be sad and in the

nature of a lamentation.

2. The second feature or quality of an elegy is its absolute sincerity of emotion and expression.
3. It retains philosophic and speculative elements.
4. Subjectivity
5. The note of hope and resignation which is sounded towards the close of the elegy.
6. Mystical and spiritual feelings for the departed soul.
7. Hope of existence of the soul in nature and heaven.

2.2 Tone in General

Tone is the author's implicit attitude toward the reader, subject, and/or the people, places, and events in a work as revealed by the elements of the author's style. Tone may be characterized as serious or ironic, sad or happy, private or public, angry or affectionate, bitter or nostalgic, or any other attitudes and feelings that human beings experience. Harmon (2009) ^[9] defines tone as "the attitude toward the subject and toward the audience implied in a literary work" (p.523). Cuddon (1999) ^[7] views the tone as "the reflection of a writer's attitude (especially towards his readers), manner, mood and moral outlook in his work" (p.920).

Writers and poets may exploit numerous tones in their writings: positive tones such as amiable, consoling, friendly, playful, amused, content, happy, pleasant, appreciative, dreamy, hopeful, proud, authoritative ecstatic, impassioned, relaxed, benevolent, elated, jovial, reverent, rave, elevated, joyful, romantic, calm, encouraging jubilant, soothing, cheerful, energetic, lighthearted surprised cheery, enthusiastic, loving, sweet, compassionate, excited, eulogistic, optimistic, sympathetic, complimentary, exuberant, passionate, vibrant, confident, fanciful, peaceful, whimsical etc; negative tones such as accusing, choleric, furious, quarrelsome, aggravated, coarse, harsh, shameful, agitated, cold, haughty, angry, condemnatory, hateful, snooty, apathetic, condescending, hurtful, superficial, arrogant, contradictory, indignant, surly, artificial, audacious, desperate, insulting, threatening, belligerent, disappointed, irritated, tired, bitter, disgruntled, manipulative, uninterested, boring, disgusted, obnoxious, wrathful, brash, disinterested, outraged, childish, facetious, passive etc., and humorous and ironic tones such as amused, droll, mock-heroic, sardonic, bantering, facetious, mocking, satiric, bitter, flippant mock-serious, scornful, caustic, giddy, patronizing, sharp comical, humorous, pompous, silly, condescending, insolent, quizzical, taunting, contemptuous, ironic, teasing, critical, irreverent, ridiculing, whimsical, cynical, joking, sad, wry, disdainful, malicious, sarcastic, grotesque etc.

They may also use neutral tones in their writing such as admonitory, dramatic, intimate, questioning, allusive, earnest, judgmental, reflective, apathetic, expectant, learned, reminiscent, authoritative, factual, loud, resigned, baffled, fervent, lyrical, restrained, callous, formal. matter-of-fact, seductive, candid, forthright, meditative, sentimental, ceremonial, frivolous, nostalgic, objective, consoling, histrionic, obsequious, sincere, contemplative, humble, patriotic, unemotional, conventional, incredulous, persuasive, urgent, detached, informative pleading, didactic, inquisitive etc.

2.3 Tones in elegy written in a country churchyard

The article writer has attempted to explore primarily two types of tone in this poem. They are elegiac tone and

eulogistic tone. The elegiac tone is a sorrowful or melancholic tone that pervades the poem because of the demise of someone near and dear, separation from the loved one, destruction of lives and properties, loss of something significant etc. According to Collins Dictionary (2014) ^[6], elegiac tone involves "expressing sorrow". The eulogistic tone involves a speech, presentation, or writing that pays tribute to someone's lifetime achievements. Webster's New World College Dictionary (2010) ^[23] defines eulogy as "a formally expressing praise". Eulogistic tone refers to the appreciative tone of the poet towards somebody for his / her goodness, innocence, hard work, honesty, positive achievement, noble causes etc.

3. Method of the Study

The researcher adopted a qualitative descriptive method in which he took verse lines / stanzas that hint at the elegiac or eulogistic tone. The verse lines / stanzas functioned as data that were identified, described and analyzed.

3.1 Data of the Study

The researcher employed qualitative / nominal data that were taken from the poem. The data in the study are verse lines and stanzas of the poem.

3.2 Sampling

The data being qualitative in nature, the researcher used a purposive sampling technique with a small sample size by taking one poem under study. The researcher culled only certain verse lines or stanzas that contain the elegiac and eulogistic tones.

3.3 Validity

Colleagues and lecturers of poetry were consulted to ensure the validity of data under study.

4. Analysis of Data

The researcher followed thematic analysis of data through the process of identification, description and analysis to come o the conclusion. He focused on the iterative process to discover the elegiac and eulogistic tones in the poem.

4.1 Exploring elegiac and eulogistic tones in the poem

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is a powerful evocative poem composed in heroic quatrain: a stanza of four lines of iambic pentameter having the rhyme scheme *abab*. It ends with an epitaph that is a poetic inscription intended to be on a gravestone. This poem moves from a meditation in a particular place upon the graves of the poor to a reflection on the mortality of all humankind and on some of the benefits of being constrained by poverty.

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. (Lies: 1-4)

This poetic line associates the end of day with the end of human life. The first line of the poem holds a conspicuously somber tone. The curfew bell does not simply ring, but it "knells". The term "knell" is usually applied to the sound of a bell rung slowly after a death or at a funeral. From the start, Gray reminds us of human mortality. The line retains

an elegiac tone regarding human mortality.

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. (Line: 17-20)

The speaker reminds us that the forefather buried beneath the earth will never again rise from their "beds" to feel the breeze of sweet smelling morning and to listen to the twittering sound of the swallow. They will never rise from their eternal death beds to hark at the rooster's cock-a-doodle-doo and the echoing sound of the horn. They can't enjoy pleasing sounds of country life that the living do. The term "lowly beds" describes not only the unpretentious graves in which the forefathers are buried, but the humble conditions that they endured when they were alive. They were humble when they were alive; they will remain humble in the graves. This stanza retains an elegiac tone regarding the loss of earthly sensuous pleasures.

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. (Lines: 21-24)

Those who are dead demand nothing. They need no welcome. No one will burn the hearth fire for them anymore. No housewife tries to take care of him after he gets home from work in the evenings. No little kids get excited by saying, "Daddy's home!" when he gets back from work. No little kids climb up onto his lap for kisses that would make their siblings envy them. The dead will no longer enjoy the happiness of home, wife, and children. This is an elegiac tone created because of the loss of the bliss of happy home, watchful wife and cheerful children.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
Their furrow of the stubborn glebe has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team afield!
How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke! (Lines: 25-28)

The dead were born in the rustic surroundings, worked hard there during their lives and died innocently there. They often harvested their crops with their sickles. Farmers would cut the furrow into the glebe (land) using a plough for cultivation. They called the ground "stubborn" if the ground was really hard to break into. The farmers were cheerful as they drove their teams of oxen or mules into the field to plough. The woods bowed to the stroke of their axes as they cleared forests to make their farms. They were hard-working, helpful and happy. This stanza retains a eulogistic tone towards the dead for their nature of hard-working, helpfulness and happiness.

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. (Lines: 29-32)

The speaker tells the readers / people that they shouldn't mock at the hard work or the plain pleasures and the vague

destiny or fortune of the poor farmers in the graveyard. The speaker says that we shouldn't allow the people of high social status "Grandeur," to smile mockingly or scornfully at the day-to-day rough hard deeds "annals" of the poor people. Their joys were not founded on the sorrows of others. Their deeds were not tinted with the selfishness and pomposity. This stanza reflects a eulogistic tone for the dead whose joys were homely and whose deeds were tough.

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. (Lines: 33-36)

The speaker states that the people with arrogance of rank, their show of power and position, beauty, sound collection of money and properties are all heading to the grave. The people who are enjoying their great success are also moving to the grave. All of the people and their belongings are waiting for the inevitable time. The speaker reminds the readers about the bitter truth all must eventually die regardless of social position, beauty or wealth. This stanza hints at an elegiac tone regarding the loss of the earthly greatness.

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. (Lines: 37-40)
The speaker addresses proud, rich, haughty and showy people not to blame those poor dead people if they don't have alluring monuments or remarkable medals over their graves, but the church bell and chorus coming from the decorated vault admire those dead people. It is the expression of a eulogistic tone intended for the dead people who died working hard without getting any rewards or medals.

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? (Lines: 41-44)

The speaker enunciates that nothing can bring the dead back to life, and that all the advantages that the wealthy had in life are useless in the face of death. Neither elaborate funeral monuments nor impressive honors can restore life. Nor can flattery in some way be used to change the mind of death. Death is so powerful that no one can avoid its dominion. It holds an elegiac tone regarding the loss of life.

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. (Lines: 45-48)

The speaker, in his eulogistic tone, states that the dead could not get chance on their land. If they had been given opportunity, they might have accomplished great deeds. Such poor farmers might have been great emperors; or might have been great poets or musicians. 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. (Lines: 49-52)
The speaker portrays poverty as a cruel factor. Penury is the thing that repressed and froze the dead people's potential. Poverty paralyzed their ability to draw upon their innermost passions, the very passions that could have inspired them to become great poets or politicians. This stanza explicitly projects an elegiac tone concerning the loss of fortune, but implicitly expresses a eulogistic tone that the dead had ability to be great and noble.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air. (Lines: 53-56)

The speaker in his eulogistic tone remarks that the talents of the poor are like a "gem" hidden in the ocean or a "flower" blooming in the desert. The people of the world are superficial and showy. They can see neither depth nor height or distant beauties.

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. (Lines: 57-60)

The speaker compares these poor, uneducated people with three of the most famous and powerful people of the previous century: John Hampden, a parliamentary leader who defended the people against the abuses of Charles I; John Milton, the great poet who wrote great epics *Paradise Lost / Paradise Regained* and who also opposed Charles I; and Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England from 1653 to 1658. The speaker in the eulogistic tone indicates that the buried in this churchyard might be like Hampden, Milton, or Cromwell. They retained the innate ability to oppose tyranny, but never had the opportunity to exercise that ability.

Their lot forbade: nor circumscribed alone
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;
Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind, (Lines: 65-68)

The speaker comes to realize that if poverty prevented the country laborers from acquiring the "virtues" of great and powerful people, it also prevented them from committing the "crimes" often associated with those people—and

especially with those people who hold political power. In particular, it prevented them from engaging in the bloody activity associated with the War. It is great bliss to die without committing any crimes for power, position and popularity. The speaker expresses his eulogistic tone on the peaceful death of the country folks.

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. (Lines: 69-72)

The farm laborers were not in positions of power. They never had to ignore their own conscience. Nor did they sacrifice their artistic talents (the gift of the "Muse") to "Luxury" or "Pride." Although they were humble persons, their hearts were not touched by Luxury and Pride. The speaker reveals his eulogistic tone for their modesty and simplicity.

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
Along the cool sequestered vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way. (Lines: 73-76)

The speaker affirms his eulogistic tone for the simple and modest life of common people. They are "far from the madding crowd" of city and political life. They had calm wishes that did not torment others. They never "strayed" into the immoral acts of the powerful. Instead, they kept steadily to their simple but meaningful lives. "Madding Crowd" is such a crowd of people, where fair judgement, serenity, sensibility and conscience cannot be expected. But people are mad for power, position, pomposity and popularity. People do ignoble strife for fulfilling their selfishness.

Their name, their years, spelt by th' unlettered muse,
The place of fame and elegy supply:
And many a holy text around she strews,
That teach the rustic moralist to die. (Lines: 81-84)

The speaker states that the people buried here have modest tombstones, which display only their names and the dates of their birth and death. These common people were not famous, and no one has written elaborate elegies or funeral verses for them. Still, the very modesty of their tomb-stones testifies to the nobility and "holy" nature of their simple lives. The speaker emphasizes his eulogistic tone for their morality and nobility.



Fig 1: Graveyard in the Country

5. Conclusion

“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” deals with a meditation on the graves of humble, unheard, unnoticed and unknown villagers. This poem is considered a superior example of Graveyard Poetry in the field of English literature. It does not retain only an elegiac tone for mortality, misfortune, loss of chance and poverty of the modest villagers, but also holds a eulogistic tone for their innocence, morality, nobility, humility, hard work and hidden heroism. The poem edifies us that goodness is greater than greatness. Modesty is more attractive than pomposity. Nobility is more powerful than prosperity.

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