

RESEARCH ARTICLE



THOMAS GRAY: THE FIRST GENUINE HUMANIST IN ENGLISH POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Gray is a poet of lesser significance as compared to romantics like Wordsworth, or Keats etc. But, with regards to his contribution to giving poetry a new dimension- from Neo-classicism to Romantic Revival, is perhaps greater than that of Wordsworth himself. Despite his rich family background, Gray's passion reached out to the poor, suppressed and helpless class of the society on account of his Humanistic approach to life. He was a staunch believer of the fact that all the human beings must be accorded an equal treatment in the society despite their different social status, economic, political or otherwise, in view of the fact that all are an outcome of the same Power or Almighty. Therefore, if, in society people are known as poor or rich or for that matter powerful and so on, it is not the working of God but a mechanism developed by the so-called prosperous people of this very society. In this light, his poems like "Elegy" assume a kind of immortality by transforming the 'poor and vulnerable rustics' into 'powerful and strong' individuals. As a result, the so-called rich people of the society all of a sudden look 'poor and pitiable' as against the rustics in view of the basic human values like honesty, simplicity and hard work exercised by them. These are the qualities as exercised by the rustics that turn them into the real heroes of the society in the perception of the poet.

Key-words: Humanism, Simplicity, Honesty, Rural Happiness, Spontaneity of emotions

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Thomas Gray was a poet not only with a sense of deep sympathy but with a deeper sense of pathos. It was because of his sensitive approach to life. According to him, poetry had a particular purpose to serve. It was to dispel darkness and miseries of life, that are an inseparable part of it. Which is why, he believed that "To compensate the real and imaginary ills of life, the Muse was given to the mankind by the same providence that sends the Day by its cheerful presence to dispel the gloom and terrors of the night."¹ As a matter of fact, Gray was always aware of "the bitter salutary drop of

misery and mortality that we always carry about us."² In a way, he was always aware of killer grasp of life even as he was thinking about youth.

It is out of this attitude that an immortal poem like "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" springs. But the poet talks so spontaneously and vividly about mortality—mortality of the rustics. Gray was deeply aware of the paradoxical way of life. A genuinely simple and honest person that he was, he was disappointed "when he saw the house built by Lord Holland at Kingsgate, he was excited to intense feeling by the contrast between his own

views of a statesman as patriotic, unselfish, constructive, and Holland's conscienceless pillaging of the state and his symbolic construction of artificial ruins in a bleak natural setting."³

Gray was very much aware of his function as a poet. In "The Progress of Poesy" "he earnestly wants to influence society by describing about the basic human values and about the necessity of upholding and practicing them in life as well. But the paradoxical and hypocritical attitude of the people around him makes the figure or the man of his poems "as an isolated one, a man at odds with his own fellows, separated from them by grief or by his contemplative, melancholic temperament."⁴

Likewise, in "The Bard" the poet is "hunted by the barbarous society, to whom he is spiritually superior, but with whom he cannot co-exist."⁵ As a result, happiness is something that was enjoyed in the past or by other men. No doubt, the poet may have his moments of hope for the future, but his present is pathetic or tragic, given the contradictory nature of society. In fact, "the feeling that he is at a great disadvantage in his society, incapable of following its activities himself or of approving its values and attitudes, is present in almost every poem Gray wrote."⁵

Even when he wrote about himself in verse, it was in terms of the disapproval of those people of society who were 'active and successful.'⁶ It is for this reason that the rustics in the "Elegy" are cut off from the rich and the powerful members of the society.

Therefore, as far as Gray's character and temperament are concerned, he was a man with a shy nature. But he thought that he was made for a particular cause—to spread the message that all human beings on earth, irrespective of their caste, creed or religion, or social status (rich or poor), deserved equal treatment in society, as all were creatures of the same Almighty. Arthur Johnson throws light on the same aspect of Gray's character. He says, "From his (Gray's) letters and biography there emerges a picture of a man educated for public life, in the company of the son of the prime minister, but discovering his inability for it in the course of the prolonged Grand Tour. Gray realized that he was at odds with his society;

he was shy, withdrawn, melancholic aesthetic scholar."⁷

From the above estimate, it is quite clear that despite his rich and socially powerful background Gray never felt comfortable with his surroundings. His heart always moved out for those who were made helpless, poor and pathetic by the strata of society to which he belonged. Emile Legouis, the writer of *A Short History of English Literature*, has also something similar to say about the transitional poet in the lines as follows, "He (Gray) had the fastidiousness of the solitary man of letters and though with his brief and ill-sustained inspiration it cost him an exhausting effort to produce the slightest of verses, he gave England some of poems which are among the most popular in the language. Ailing and melancholy, he was led to contrast the carefree games of the schoolboys of Eton with the varied ills which would befall their ripe years. As he wandered at the twilight in the country churchyard, he meditated upon the humble fate of those who were sleeping there and who were perhaps equal in virtue and natural endowments to the heroes whose fame had filled the world."⁸

In fact, the very beginning stanza of "Elegy" brings to light the tragic mode of life, when the poet so vividly describes about the passing away of day (life) giving way to night (death). Darkness is a governing factor over light. Light and darkness are a kind of an extension of the day-night metaphor. The poet very aptly describes the befalling darkness:

The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing heard wind slowly over the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,

And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

It is as if to say that what ultimately rules in life is darkness, i.e. death. Seen the world against this reality, therefore, all the practice of showing off oneself as wealthy, famous or popular is unreal and as a result, superfluous. The reality lies elsewhere. It lies with virtuous men and their practice of these virtues in life. In other words, it lies with simplicity, goodness and with the realization that life is short and fleeting, whereas the virtues are enduring and everlasting.

The green fields and the greenery around the village are a testimony and result of the virtues of rustics of the "Elegy", despite their stark poverty.

The poet exclaims:

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
Their furrows the stubborn glebe has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team afield!

How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

The word 'jocund' in the above lines is significant in order to lead a life with purpose. The rustics despite their poverty could feel 'jocund' (joy), but on the other hand, the so-called 'rich' people could not feel the same despite their richness. This situation is, thus, richly put to contrast in the lines. In other words, happiness eludes them who go after it, and the ones who bother least about it are the ones who possess it. Therefore, as a contrast, the rustics not only deserve happiness but they remain happy even in adverse situations that surround them. The life takes its own course. When the end comes, it comes without discrimination between rich or poor, or high or low in terms of heraldry:

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.

Consequently, it would be a futile practice for one to regard oneself important or powerful on account of social status. Death, when it comes, does not recognize one on these accounts, or pardons or punishes one according to one's position, i.e. richness or poverty or the like. Therefore, everybody on this earth must be respected on equal terms irrespective of one's position, or of caste, creed or religion.

Unfortunately, the rustics of the 'Elegy' are not fortunate enough to be treated on the lines described above. Not only this. They have not been given the human status. Or, they are not recognized even as human beings. Rather than honouring them for their virtues like honesty, hard work, simplicity, generosity etc, their very existence has been denied by the so-called rich and socially powerful people of

the society. This inhuman gesture gives the poet an intolerable pain and anguish, and he cries loud:

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor.

Ambition and glory, symbols of power and social status, instantly come for severe attack by the poet in view of the simple and unambitious way of rustics' lives. Life is not necessarily the one that is led by the ambitious people. They cannot become the standards of the way the life should be led. As a matter of fact, the best and the right way of leading life, the poet thinks, is the one lived by the rustics rather than by the urban people. They are like gems whose shining is not easily noticed because like gems their nature is not to show the qualities but to exercise them. It is not the fault of the gem if its shining remains unnoticed, The fault lies with viewer who does not have the power to notice the shining of the gem, The same logic also goes with the fragrance of a flower:

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.

The poet wastes no time in criticizing the practice by the some people to raise a memorial-stone and lines of praise in the honour of the dead ones, just because all the show cannot be seen and enjoyed by those for whom it was meant. The whole exercise, as a result, becomes futile and useless. At the most, it gives such people an opportunity to serve their petty motives to extract the best advantage out of the situation. In reality, they are least concerned or emotionally attached with the dead ones to whom all these shows are conducted. After all, the poet asks with wonder, can all these post-death activities in any way help these dead ones to come back to life? The straight and simple answer is no. Hitting strongly on this attitude of some flattering people, the poet raises a question passionately:

Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting
breathe?
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent
dust,

Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of
Death?

The poet's strong supports and deep sympathy for the rustics are not merely an imaginary or mere sentimental matters, but are grounded on the plain of reality. Rustics' lives were governed by the principles of simplicity and honesty. Both the qualities are fundamental and central to life with regards to its purpose and goal. In the context of the way the life must be led, the rustics' lives were exemplary, the poet thought. It is more important and useful to be simple and honest rather than being ambitious or rich:

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.

So to say, maintaining 'the noiseless tenor of life' is very significant and difficult as against the 'noisy and showy way'. This is what the rustics succeeded in doing. They could well and easily have adopted the traditional way of progress and popularity as is done by the bulk of the society. But, they deliberately resisted themselves against this practice, and chose the more difficult and challenging one- the way of honesty and self-respect against all odds.

To conclude the discussion, then, it can decisively be said that Gray was a humanist not only in thinking but in practice as well. Although, almost all of Gray's poems carry the humanistic element, but there could have been no better and more abiding example of humanistic attitude as displayed in the "Elegy", where the poet succeeded in convincing the readers that despite their poverty the rustics were the real heroes, not the so-called rich people who may have succeeded in dictating terms to the society on account of their powerful position. But, they cannot be called heroes in the context of upholding the basic values of truthfulness, honesty, hard-work and simplicity. These were the values and qualities that made the basis for the living of the rustics. Hence, they were the real heroes, not the 'ambitious' or 'successful' people influencing the society on account of their

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2. Ibid
3. Ibid
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8. Emile Legouis, *A Short History of English Literature*.Oxford:Clarendon Press(1980) p.231

Note:All the Textual references are taken from the book:*Selected Poems of Thomas Gray and Collins*.