

Thomas Gray

Isabella Cheung, Simon Fraser University

Thomas Gray was born in Cornhill, London, on 26 December 1716. He was the only child born alive to Dorothy and Philip Gray. He attended Eton College from 1725 to 1734, where he befriended Horace Walpole (1717-97) and Richard West (1716-42).

In October 1734, Gray attended Peterhouse at Cambridge alongside Walpole. Here, he studied Virgil and began writing Latin verse, occasionally communicating with West via poems in French and Latin. He took interest in a variety of languages, as well as studies in medieval history and botany. After leaving Peterhouse in 1738, Gray and Walpole embarked on a tour of Europe. One of their stops was in Paris, where Gray began to take interest in French classical dramatists such as Racine. He tried to imitate Racine's works in his tragic verse drama fragment "Agrippina." The journey ended in spring 1741, when a quarrel between Gray and Walpole forced the two friends down separate paths.

Gray stayed in London for almost a year after, until his father died on 6 November 1741. When he returned home, he found West suffering from a decline in his health. Gray spent the next few summers at Stoke Poges with his mother and Aunt Mary. The spring and summer of 1742 were the most prolific periods of his creative productivity, though much of the poetry he wrote during this time remained incomplete, such as "Agrippina," the "De Principiis Cogitandi," and the "Hymn to Ignorance." The tragedy of his friend Richard West's death at twenty-five prompted Gray to write "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College," "Ode to Adversity," and "Sonnet on the Death of Richard West," as well as some lines in "De Principiis Cogitandi." He returned to Peterhouse in October of 1742, where he met his eventual literary executor William Mason (1724-97) and John Clerke, a Fellow at Peterhouse. His most well-known work, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," may have been started in 1742 or 1745 and taken up again in the winter of 1749 after his Aunt Mary's death. It was published on 15 February 1751 and became the most celebrated and reprinted poem of the century.

Despite the success of this poem, Gray led a quiet life reading, studying, and traveling, though his health began to decline in 1755. He started two Pindaric Odes in 1752 called "The Progress of Poesy" and "The Bard," though the criticism he received for both prompted him to move away from public critical debate. In 1762, he applied to Lord Bute for the Professorship of History and Modern Languages at Cambridge. Initially the spot was taken by Lawrence Brockett, but following the passing of Brockett in 1768, Gray was appointed as his successor. He met Charles Victor de Bonstetten (1745-1832) in 1769, developing a deep affection for him after directing his studies for several weeks. Gray's health deteriorated in 1770, with his last visit to London being in May of 1771. He died in

July of 1771, and was laid to rest in the same vault as his mother in the churchyard of St Giles at Stoke Poges.

Gray wrote many poems that explore the theme of death, such as his “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” His melancholy has been hypothesized to have emerged out of a “distinctive and deeply embedded facet in his view of himself” (Snyder 129). The early death of his friend Richard West contributed to this fascination with tragic poetry. Perhaps the culture at the time that “failed to provide [Gray] with an acceptable framework for [the] self-actualization” of his sexual identity (Snyder 136).

“Epitaph on Mrs. Clerke” was written by Gray for his friend John Clerke, following the death of his wife in 1757. Not much is known about Jane Clerke, the poem’s subject, other than the fact that she is “a friend, a wife, [and] a mother” (l. 2). The poem belongs to the epitaph genre and is written in iambic tetrameter couplets. Although the first line describes the “silent marble,” this poem may not have actually been engraved on Mrs. Clerke’s tombstone. The poem explores the price that comes with living — the toll of watching loved pass away.

Further Reading

Huber, Alexander. *Thomas Gray Archive: Home*, www.thomasgray.org/. Accessed 4 Feb. 2024.
Rounce, Adam. “Thomas Gray.” *Oxford Bibliographies*, 2012, www.oxfordbibliographies.com.

References

Snyder, Robert Lance. “The Epistolary Melancholy of Thomas Gray.” *Biography*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1979, pp. 125–40.

Epitaph on Mrs. Clerke²⁴⁵

LO!²⁴⁶ Where this silent marble weeps,²⁴⁷
 A friend, a wife, a mother sleeps:²⁴⁸
 A heart, within whose sacred cell²⁴⁹
 The peaceful virtues²⁵⁰ loved to dwell.
 Affection warm, and faith sincere, 5
 And soft humanity were there.
 In agony, in death, resigned,
 She felt the wound she left behind.
 Her infant image, here below,
 Sits smiling on a father's woe:²⁵¹ 10
 Whom what awaits, while yet he strays²⁵²
 Along the lonely vale²⁵³ of days?
 A pang,²⁵⁴ to secret sorrow dear;
 A sigh; an unavailing²⁵⁵ tear;
 Till time shall every grief remove, 15
 With life, with memory, and with love.



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²⁴⁵ First published in 1758. Copytext from *Thomas Gray Archive*, 1758.

²⁴⁶ *Lo*: “an interjection of vague meaning, corresponding approximately to the modern O! or Oh!” (*OED*).

²⁴⁷ *Silent marble weeps*: a gravestone, presumably with condensation on it.

²⁴⁸ *Mother*: Mrs. Jane Clerke, the wife of Gray’s friend.

²⁴⁹ *Cell*: the speaker imagines the heart as a hermitage or monastic retreat

²⁵⁰ *Virtues*: “moral qualities regarded (especially in religious contexts) as good or desirable in a person, such as patience, kindness, etc.; a particular form of moral excellence” (*OED*).

²⁵¹ *Woe*: grief or regret.

²⁵² *Strays*: “to escape from confinement or control, to wander away from a place, one’s companions, etc.” (*OED*).

²⁵³ *Vale*: a valley, often with a stream; may also be a reference to Ps 23 “though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death.”

²⁵⁴ *Pang*: a sudden feeling of deep emotional pain.

²⁵⁵ *Unavailing*: “to be of no avail (to); to fail” (*OED*).