

Subject- English

Hons. Core Course

Semester-IV

Paper-ENGH-H-CC-T-8

About the poet: Thomas Gray

Thomas Gray is born in London in 1716. His father is a cruel and violent man. He is educated at Eton and Cambridge. At Eton, he and Horace Walpole become friends. He tours Italy and France with his friend Walpole. He earns a degree in law later but never practices that profession. He is that rare kind of person who cares little for fame and adulation. He is offered the Laureateship, but he refuses that honour in 1757. As he wanders at twilight in a country churchyard, he meditates upon the humble fates of those people who are sleeping there and who are perhaps equal in virtue and natural endowments to the heroes whose fame has filled the world: this is the theme of the poem ,“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”. The subject of “The Bard” is the massacre of Welsh poets by Edward I.

“The Progress of Poesy ” and “The Bard” both of these Pindaric odes are remarkably ambitious and intense, and marking a clear shift from neo-classical lucidity towards the obscure and the sublime; both of them are published by Walpole in 1757. He tries in every way to break through the bounds of the prevailing patterns of poetry. He is one of the transitional poets who are paving the path of Romantic poetry. This Age of Transition approximately covers last forty years

of the eighteenth century. This period is also known as the Pre-romantic period.

His “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is first published in 1751. Gray’s poem is emblematic of this Graveyard School of poetry. This poem is a culmination of this trend of poetry. This poem earns him a respected place in the arena of literature. He belongs to this Graveyard School of Poets who are writing reflective, melancholic poems which are often set in the background of graveyard. This term refers to a minor but significant tradition of eighteenth-century poetry on the theme of human mortality. These meditative poems are often set in graveyards to address the sombre themes of death and mortality with sensitivity and concern. This group includes poets like Edward Young, Robert Blair, Thomas Parnell and Thomas Gray and others.

Overview of the poem:

The poem is a typical elegy but not very much so because most elegies focus on the death of a person. An elegy by nature is sombre in tone. It is typically lyrical rather than narrative. It generally expresses feelings of loss and sorrow while also praising the dead and commenting on the meaning of the dead person’s life on earth. However, unlike a typical elegy, Gray’s this poem does not focus on the death of a single person. He does not talk about the death of

someone rich or famous instead this poem reflects on the lives of ordinary and humble people who are buried in the graveyard of the church. It is assumed that Gray has started writing this poem in 1742, shortly after the death of his close friend, Richard West. Gray does not produce a great deal of poems, some of them he refuses to publish and some of them he refuses to complete. He refuses to publish this poem too but he publishes it as others are publishing the hacked versions of this poem. The narrator of this poem sees a country churchyard at sunset, which impels him to meditate on the nature of human mortality. He admires the simple quiet lives of those who are often overlooked. This poem elevates and idealises the common people. This meditative poem is written in quatrains. The churchyard in this poem is perhaps that of St. Giles parish church in Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire, which Gray visits often and where he now lies buried. The poem reflects on the obscure destinies of the villagers who lie buried and suggests that those villagers may have been full of rich promise that is untimely stunted by poverty and ignorance. In the poem, the narrator says that the villagers may have had great potential but in the absence of opportunities, their noble qualities can not flower and they die unknown. Their lives are lived out in certain obscurity. Nobody really knows about them. He also describes that those humble and simple people should not be scorned. He later in this poem explores the daily lives of those people who are buried in the churchyard. He gives the images of the home and the work of the village folk and these are contrasted with the personification of traits

usually associated with the upper classes that are found in the poem like ‘Ambition’, ‘Grandeur’. This elegy is also about the inevitability and finality of death that it comes to everybody. A certain undercurrent of melancholy is found in this poem as the poem is set in a graveyard. This poem is written in late Augustan period and this period also happens to be the beginning of the Romantic period. This poem has characteristics associated with both these literary periods. It has the ordered, balanced phrasing and the rational sentiments which are typical features of Neo-classical period. It has also the emotionalism and individualism of the Romantic poetry.