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Literary Perspective on Environment in Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in the Country Churchyard

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ABSTRACT

The most cited Eco critical collections show that Literature and Environmental Studies have evolved significantly over time. Literature and Environmental studies together are known as Ecocriticism or Environmental Criticism. Ecocriticism aims to explore the environmental dimensions of literature and also other media. The significance of environment and natural world in poetry, fiction and non-fiction in literature is not only to connect human race with nature but also for evoking and promoting contact with it and to enhance the imagination and value nature preservation. The central interest in Literature Environment studies have been the concept of place. The place creates the atmosphere for the reader and gives him the opportunity to unite with it. This enchanting acquaintance with nature has been very beautifully captured in the poem Elegy written in the Country Churchyard written by Thomas Gray. Literature by itself an interdisciplinary study always gives an opportunity for Environment to develop and excel in its own creative form. The aim of this paper is to explore the Environmental significance and the impact laid by it creating the atmosphere of gloominess. The environment of the poem beautifully developed by Thomas Gray leaves the reader enchanted and captivated. Thus, the object of this paper is to probe into this environmental factor of the above-mentioned poem by Thomas Gray through literary perspective.


Introduction

Literature reflects the relationship between

living things and their surroundings, a connection explored through ecological

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concepts. Ecocriticism examines this relationship, advocating for human and non-human coexistence by bridging the gap between them, as environmental concerns become increasingly important. As a cultural product, literature utilizes meaning, value, language, and imagination to engage with ecological awareness. Ecocriticism provides a framework for studying the connections between literature and the environment.

Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) offers a deeply reflective literary perspective on the environment, blending Romantic sensibilities with pre-Romantic pastoral themes. The poem contemplates mortality, the passage of time, and the unnoticed lives of common people, all set against the backdrop of a serene rural landscape. The poem's setting, a quiet country churchyard at twilight, establishes a reflective mood. The imagery of nature, such as "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day, / The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea," evokes the cycle of life and death. The environment acts as a silent witness to the transient nature of human existence.

Gray's depiction of the countryside reflects the tradition of pastoral poetry, emphasizing

the simplicity and dignity of rural life. He presents the environment as a space where the unnamed, humble villagers led quiet but meaningful lives, contrasting it with the ambition and corruption of urban society. Nature becomes a place of solace, untouched by the excesses of wealth and power. The poem employs natural imagery to mirror the speaker's meditative mood. The "rugged elms," the "yew tree's shade," and the "solemn stillness" create an atmosphere of melancholy and introspection, reinforcing the poem's themes of loss and remembrance. The natural setting enhances the emotional depth of the elegy.

Although Gray was a poet of the Augustan age, his elegy foreshadows Romanticism by attributing emotional significance to the natural world. His contemplative approach to the environment anticipates the later works of Wordsworth and Coleridge, where nature is seen not only as a backdrop but as an active participant in human experience. Gray's poem contrasts the fleeting nature of human life with the enduring presence of the landscape. While individuals pass away, the "moping owl" and the "beetle's droning flight" continue, underscoring nature's permanence. The environment, in this

sense, serves as both a resting place and a witness to the cycle of life.

In *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Thomas Gray presents the environment not just as a passive setting but as an integral element of the poem's meditation on life, death, and legacy. His use of nature to evoke emotion, reflect human mortality, and contrast different social conditions places the poem at a crossroads between neoclassical restraint and the burgeoning Romantic appreciation of nature.

Modern poetry frequently employs detailed settings and their impact on the speaker to highlight the interconnectedness of human existence and the natural world. Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is a prime example, using vivid natural imagery and metaphors to inspire reflections on the fleeting nature of life. Environmental reading emphasizes the spatial aspects of this tranquil setting, recovering historical perceptions of the environment and encouraging an ecologically informed awareness of space.

It is a widely studied poem that reflects on mortality, rural life, and the passage of time. While much scholarly attention has focused on its themes of death and social class, there has been an increasing interest

in examining the poem through an ecological and environmental lens. This literature review explores critical perspectives that analyze Gray's representation of the natural world and its interaction with human existence.

Several scholars have interpreted *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* as an exemplary pastoral poem that romanticizes rural life. According to Alpers (1996), the poem aligns with traditional pastoral conventions by idealizing the countryside and presenting it as a serene, harmonious environment. However, Williams (1973) argues that Gray's depiction of nature is not merely an aesthetic backdrop but a living presence that interacts with human life and death. The "rugged elms" and "yew-tree's shade" evoke both solace and an eternal cycle of life and decay, positioning nature as a silent witness to human transience.

Recent ecocritical readings of Gray's elegy have emphasized the poem's engagement with the environment beyond its pastoral elements. Morton (2007) explores how Gray presents nature as a participant in the process of remembering the forgotten dead. The "lowing herd" and the "beetle's drowsy hum" illustrate an ecological continuum, suggesting that the natural world persists

despite human mortality. Similarly, Bate (2000) argues that Gray's use of the sublime underscores the insignificance of individual human lives in the vast, enduring landscape. The poem's environmental imagery, therefore, reflects both the beauty and indifference of nature.

Another significant debate in environmental readings of *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* concerns the balance between anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives. According to Kroeber (1994), Gray's depiction of nature serves primarily as a metaphor for human concerns, reinforcing an anthropocentric worldview. In contrast, Garrard (2012) suggests that Gray's elegy contains ecocentric elements, as the poem acknowledges the autonomy of nature in ways that transcend human narratives. The presence of the "moping owl" and the "solemn stillness" implies a world that exists independently of human presence and social structures.

Some scholars have also explored the poem's environmental ethics, particularly in its lament for a disappearing rural world. Buell (1995) examines how Gray's portrayal of rural life anticipates later ecological concerns about industrialization and urbanization. The elegy's tone of

nostalgia for simple, agrarian life can be seen as an early critique of the environmental degradation that accompanies progress. Similarly, McKusick (2001) argues that Gray's poem valorizes a form of environmental humility, where human existence is portrayed as fleeting in contrast to the continuity of nature.

The environmental perspective on *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* reveals the poem's complex engagement with nature as more than a passive setting. Whether viewed through the lens of pastoral tradition, ecocriticism, or environmental ethics, Gray's elegy offers rich opportunities for examining the interrelationship between humanity and the natural world. Future research may further explore its connections to contemporary ecological thought and the role of poetry in environmental discourse.

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard acts as a cultural and environmental link to English history, European literature, and classical writers beyond its aesthetic value. Published in 1751 and initially shorter, the poem was inspired by the death of Gray's friend, Richard West, in 1742. It meditates on the lives of ordinary people buried in a churchyard, prompting readers to

contemplate life and mortality. While poetry often depicts built environments shaped by human hands, Gray's poem defines nature through the lens of grief and melancholy, conveying a powerful environmental message.

In his 'Elegy', Gray skillfully employs both concrete and natural imagery to explore the complex themes of death and mortality, anchoring these concepts in familiar, everyday experiences. His careful use of simple language, capitalization, and personification, especially in the depiction of Death and other emotions, both simplifies and enriches the poem's meaning. The "Elegy" moves beyond a simple lament for the dead, probing the profound fear of being forgotten. Gray thoughtfully acknowledges the lives of common people buried in the graveyard, resisting the urge to dismiss their experiences.

Gray establishes a peaceful setting that evolves into a somber, spectral landscape, reflecting the potential for humanity's foundations to descend into darkness. This transition is evident in the opening lines, "Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight / And all the air a solemn stillness holds." The darkening earth at sunset symbolizes the corruption of humanity's

core values. Furthermore, the poem draws connections between simple images and complex emotions, integrated with environmental elements:

"Full many a gem of purest ray serene, the dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear: Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, And waste its sweetness on the desert air."

Through these accessible comparisons, Gray directs attention to the inherent darkness at the base of the psychological hierarchy. The passage implies that many possess the potential to positively impact humanity, yet their opportunities are stifled by the "unfathomed caves of ocean," preventing them from realizing their potential. Gray effectively personifies emotions through capitalization, a simple technique that vividly brings the concept of darkness to life in the reader's mind. Line 36, "The paths of glory lead but to the grave," serves as a significant structure and warning within the poem. The poem's language allows readers to understand the underlying fear of darkness inherent in everyone, as illustrated in these lines:

"Can storied urn or animated bust Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath? Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust, Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death?"

(Lines 41-44)

Regardless of social status, no amount of honor, pride, or flattery can alter Death's decree. This stanza effectively dismantles all social, monetary, and hierarchical distinctions. The poem's central message cautions that darkness exists within every individual, regardless of status, but its power is limited to what a person allows. Each person has the ability to influence humanity for better or worse, according to their choices. The poem's opening lines are striking, not only for their visual imagery but also for their skillful use of sound. The initial verses are rich in alliteration, where the mournful, vowel-heavy sounds of cattle lowing and the tolling bell are grounded by the heavier sounds of tired footsteps in the mud. As the poem progresses, the intense environment is conveyed through a darkening sky and sounds that become lighter, fainter, yet more intense: the beetle's "droning flight" and the high, faint "tinklings" of sheep bells. The music shifts in tone to match the "moping owl" in the following stanza, suggesting an atmospheric disturbance when the owl is disrupted by human presence, rather than unsettling spirits. The low social standing of the "rude forefathers of the hamlet" is emphasized by

their burial in the churchyard, instead of within the church itself, and by the absence of elaborate memorials.

The poem poignantly portrays the weight of personal loss, casting the poet as both the primary mourner and the chronicler of the villagers' simple lives. While his depiction of them is somewhat idealized, it maintains a realistic quality through specific, evocative details. The verb "ply" effectively illustrates the housewife's relentless work, and the seemingly small adjective "envied" in "envied kiss" powerfully conveys the children's competition for their father's affection.

Gray's characteristic lyricism reaches its apex with a more elevated style, referencing Milton and echoing his syntactic and tonal artistry. His initial selection of Roman figures to represent achievement was subsequently changed to include Hampden, Milton, and Cromwell. This substitution, particularly given their recency to Gray's audience, likely resonated more deeply. The revision sharpens the poem's central argument, underscoring that the villagers were not denied merely a long-past glory, but also political agency within their own historical context.

Gray creates an environment conducive to

his solitary reflection. Though positioned seemingly far from the city, observing a rural churchyard, the sights and sounds of this agrarian world gradually fade into the background. Despite the setting's inherent beauty, the poem lacks joy, with Gray noting the weary plowman's daily, repetitive journey home. The poet's solitude is vibrant, punctuated by subtle sounds: the cowbell's chime, the droning beetle, and the owl's hooting from the church tower. This "moping," secretive, solitary owl, a long-standing resident of the churchyard, casts a somber shadow, seeming to protest the poet's intrusion. These images coalesce to form the atmospheric bedrock for Gray's melancholic reflections on universal truths.

The churchyard itself contributes to the powerful atmosphere, with the imposing elms, the graves symbolizing mortality, and the sheltering yews offering solace to the remains beneath. The poem begins with the poet contemplating how death, for the common person, signifies the end of life's simple pleasures: waking to birdsong, sharing life with loved ones, and finding fulfillment in labor. Gray reflects not on premature death, but on the death that follows a full, natural lifespan.

Gray contrasts the elaborate burial sites of

the wealthy, with their ostentatious displays of ambition and pride, with the unadorned graves of the poor, urging those in power not to disdain the simple memorials of the less fortunate. He reminds the living elite that worldly achievements and elaborate tombs become meaningless in the face of death, which ultimately levels all.

He laments the unrealized potential of the poor, their inherent virtues and beauty obscured by the harsh realities of their rural existence, a potential "wasted on the desert air." These graves may hold the remains of individuals who, given the opportunity, could have become great scholars, leaders, or even poets- "mute inglorious Milton[s]." He also suggests that poverty may have prevented these individuals from committing great evils, leaving them "guiltless" of the violence, cruelty, and excess often associated with the powerful. The villagers, removed from worldly affairs, lived lives of quiet simplicity, suggesting their moral virtue may surpass that of their social superiors.

Returning to the churchyard setting, Gray observes the simple grave markers, complete with misspellings and rudimentary verse, and sees them as poignant reminders of the shared humanity

of the deceased. He believes the voice of universal human experience echoes from these graves, signifying the enduring nature of life's passions and desires, even in death.

The poem then turns inward as Gray contemplates his own mortality:

"For thee, who mindful of the unhonoured dead, Dost in these lines their artless tale relate, If chance, by lonely contemplation led, Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate"

He imagines a rural scene where an old farmer, a "hoary-headed swain," describes Gray's character: a man who doesn't fit neatly into either the upper or lower classes, neither notable for his achievements nor defined by poverty. Instead, he is a wanderer, a solitary figure who greets the dawn with enthusiasm, only to later languish by a stream, lost in thought. This portrayal aligns with the era's conception of the poet: a sensitive, melancholic soul ill-suited for the practical world. The poem concludes by evoking a sense of hope emerging from darkness: the farmer's account of the poet's funeral procession heading towards the church, presumably the churchyard setting of the poem itself. Gray may have intended to emphasize the poem's universal message about mortality by

implying the poet chose to be buried alongside those often denied such recognition.

In the epitaph's three stanzas, Gray envisions his grave as being "upon the lap of Earth," a deliberate choice to be outside the church itself. He modestly praises his own life, defending its meaning and expressing a desire to remain connected to nature. Despite his "humble birth," he acknowledges his education. While his inherent melancholy might be seen as a flaw, he likely viewed it as the very source of his poetic sensibility. Gray portrays himself as generous and sincere, accepting heavenly "recompense" rather than worldly fame. The epitaph ends by urging the reader to refrain from further judgment of his virtues and weaknesses, entrusting him to God's ultimate assessment.

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" evolves from a localized reflection on the graves of the impoverished to a broader meditation on human mortality and the unexpected advantages of a life constrained by poverty. The poem explores the universal desire to avoid death and the diverse ways individuals are remembered. Ultimately, Gray considers his own death and the legacy he hopes to leave behind.

In *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Thomas Gray presents a poignant literary perspective on the environment, blending nature with themes of mortality, legacy, and the passage of time. The poem's vivid pastoral imagery, rolling meadows, ancient trees, and the quietude of a rural graveyard, serves as a reflective space where human life and nature are intertwined. Gray's depiction of the countryside not only honours the simplicity of rural existence but also emphasizes the transient nature of human endeavours.

Through his elegiac tone, Gray suggests that the environment, particularly the unspoiled rural landscape, holds a quiet dignity and serves as a witness to both the lives and deaths of common people. His reverence for nature as a setting for contemplation and remembrance aligns with a broader Romantic sensibility that

emerged later, celebrating nature's role in shaping human emotions and experiences.

Ultimately, Gray's poem presents the environment as more than a mere backdrop; it is an essential element in understanding human life, mortality, and memory. The churchyard, nestled in the countryside, becomes a symbol of permanence in contrast to fleeting human existence, reinforcing the idea that nature is both a sanctuary and a silent chronicler of history.

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