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9.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall

- Discuss the form of Elegy
- Features of Elegy
- Critical appreciation of the form

On completing the unit, you should be able to

- Write about the form of elegy
- Critically analyse the work of art by Thomas gray: 'Elegy written in the country churchyard'

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Poetry is writing in the view of the transaction of words and musicality. It regularly utilises rhyme and meter (an arrangement of principles representing the number and game plan of syllables in each line). In poetry, words are hung together to frame sounds, pictures, and thoughts that may be excessively perplexing or unique, making it impossible to portray straightforwardly.

9.2 DEFINITION: ELEGY

Elegy is a form of literature that can be defined as a funeral poem, thoughtful verse sonnet bemoaning the demise of an open personage or a companion or adored one; by augmentation, any intelligent verse on the more extensive topic of human mortality. In established writing a requiem was essentially any ballad written in the elegiac meter (rotating lines of dactylic hexameter and pentameter) and was not limited as to subject. In spite of the fact that some traditional funeral poems were mourns, numerous others were love lyrics. Elegies are of two kinds: Personal Elegy and Impersonal Elegy. In a personal elegy, the poet laments the death of some close friend or relative, and in impersonal elegy in which the poet grieves over human destiny or some aspect of contemporary life and literature. In this way we get his philosophy of life and death.

It usually talks about a funeral procession, a description of sympathetic mourning throughout nature, and musings on the unkindness of death. It ends with acceptance, often a very positive justification, of nature's law. The outstanding example of the English pastoral elegy is John Milton's "Lycidas" (1638), written on the death of a college friend, Edward King. Other notable pastoral elegies are P. B. Shelley's "Adonais" written in 1821 on the death of the poet John Keats and Matthew Arnold's "Thyrsis" written in 1867, on the death of the poet Arthur Hugh Clough.

Other elegies watch no set examples or traditions. Elegies have become a traditional poem which is meant for the morning and to bring consolation in the end. Elegy is a poem which talks about the life and death, the two opposites. In the eighteenth century the English "burial ground school" of writers composed reflections on death and eternal life, merge sombre now and then gruesome symbolism of human fleetingness with philosophical theory. Representative works are Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742–45) and Robert Blair's *Grave* (1743), but the best known of these poems is Thomas Gray's more tastefully subdued creation "An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard" (1751), which pays tribute to the generations of humble and unknown villagers buried in a church cemetery. In the United States, a counterpart to the graveyard mode is found in William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis" (1817). A wholly new treatment of the conventional pathetic fallacy of attributing grief to nature

is achieved in Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865–66).

In modern poetry, the epitaph remains an incessant and critical graceful proclamation. Its range and variation can be seen in such poems as A.E. Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young," W.H. Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," E.E. Cummings's "my father moved through dooms of love," John Peale Bishop's "Hours" (on F. Scott Fitzgerald), and Robert Lowell's "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket."

9.3 FEATURES OF ELEGY

1. Imagination plays a very important role in writing an elegy. The writer mainly uses the first-person narrative.
2. There is often a comparison between the life of deceased and the poet.
3. This helps the writer to go beyond the main subject to the level where it reaches the metaphorical level.
4. The poet always raises the question about destiny, justice and fate.
5. Towards the end of the poem, the poet provides the reader with ease, happiness and consolation. Christian elegies usually proceed from sorrow and misery to hope and happiness because they say that death is just a hindrance in the way of passing from the mortal state into the eternal state.
6. An elegy is not always based on the plot.

Narrative, Lyric, and Drama are the three general literary forms into which writing, especially poetry, has traditionally been grouped. A narrative tells a story or a tale; drama is presented on a stage, where actors embody characters; lyric has been loosely defined as any short poem other than narrative and drama, where poets express their state of mind.

9.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

❖ MCQ

1. The poet was grief-stricken by the deaths of his eleven siblings, his friend Richard West, his aunt Mary and dismayed after an attack by highwaymen on his childhood friend Horace Walpole, all of which led him to meditate deeply on death. What was the poem's original title?
 - a. A Summer Evening Churchyard
 - b. Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey
 - c. **Stanzas Wrote in a Country Churchyard**

d. The Old Vicarage Grantchester

2. Other writers have taken phrases and lines from this poem and used them as book titles; children over the centuries have memorised it. Almost every line is a quotable quote, but what is the first line of the poem?

- a. I wandered lonely as a cloud
- b. Full many a gem of the purest ray serene
- c. **The curfew tolls the knell of parting day**
- d. Say I'm weary, say I'm sad,

3. Literary detectives have tried to identify the original churchyard that provided the inspiration for the poem. Incidentally, the poet himself is buried here. Which one could it be?

- a. The churchyard at Grantchester
- b. **Stoke Poges churchyard**
- c. Winchester Cathedral churchyard
- d. Westminster Abbey

4. Several 18th Century poets were known for their depressing meditations on dying. Images of funerals, last rites, urns and ashes filled their poems. Which one of these is not one of the "Graveyard Poets"?

- a. Thomas Warton
- b. **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**
- c. Oliver Goldsmith
- d. Christopher Smart

5. The poet began writing the "Elegy..." in 1741, finished it in 1750. It went through several revised versions after it was published. Which magazine was it first published in on 16 February 1751?

- a. **The Gentleman's Magazine**
- b. Blackwood's Magazine
- c. Magazine of Magazines
- d. The Quarterly Review

6. "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is a poem that was at one time a popular inclusion in textbooks and anthologies around the world. Many English poets have been influenced by the themes, language and setting of Elegy. Who was the English poet who translated part of it into Latin?

- a. Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- b. **Walt Whitman**

- c. William Butler Yeats
- d. Percy Bysshe Shelley

7. There are several rhyming schemes in poetry. The poet followed a classical scheme for this poem with its weighty theme. Which one of these is the rhyming scheme for "Elegy"?

- a. **ABAB**
- b. AABB
- c. 5-7-5
- d. ABBA

8. The selection of words and phrases in the poem is superb. Writers and artists down the years have been inspired by them. One of the lines was used as the title of a book by Thomas Hardy. Which one was it?

- a. Celestial Fire
- b. The Power and The Glory
- c. **Far from the Madding Crowd**
- d. Kindred Spirit

9. The poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" refers to power and glory that fade, and to illustrate these, three famous figures are named in the poem. Who are they?

- a. **Hampden, Cromwell, Milton**
- b. Wordsworth, Southey, Shelley
- c. Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth, Sir Walter Raleigh
- d. Dickens, Thackeray, Emily Bronte

10. Let's finish with the last line of the poem. It formed part of the Epitaph section. Which one was it?

- a. Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires
- b. **The bosom of his Father and his God**
- c. The paths of glory lead but to the grave
- d. Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

11. When was Thomas Gray born?

- a) 3 June 1688
- b) 1 January 1701
- c) 21 July 1714
- d) **26 December 1716**

12. Where was Thomas Gray born?

- a) Bristol
- b) Cardiff

c) Liverpool

d) **London**

13. When was *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* published?

a) **1751**

b) 1702

c) 1738

d) 1712

14. What was the name of Thomas Gray's most famous poem?

a. *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

b. *The Progress of Poesy*

c. *The Bard*

d. *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*

15. The verse form of Gray's "*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*" is

a. blank verse

b. alexandrines

c. rhymed couplets

quatrains

16. The reference to the "hoary-headed swain" in "*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*" suggests Gray's desire for recognition from

a. poets

b. **the humble**

c. politicians

d. the proud

17. The opening lines of the "*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*" are set at

a. **twilight**

b. daybreak

c. midnight

d. noon

18. In the "*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*," Gray's speaker stresses the

a. laziness of the rural poor

b. shallowness of family life

c. **equalizing nature of death**

d. generosity of land owners

19. In "*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*," which technique is used in the following lines?

"Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,

And all the air a solemn stillness holds”

- a. paradox
- b. dissonance
- c. **inversion**
- d. internal rhyme

20. Gray frequently uses a poetic device whereby letters or sounds within certain words are omitted (e.g. "glimm'ring"). What is this device called?

- a. Simile
- b. Symploce
- c. **Syncope**
- d. Synecdoche

Question/Answers

1. Find out the themes in ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’.
2. Comment on the rural ethos in ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’.
3. Comment on the structure and diction of the poem ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’.
4. How did Thomas Gray reveal death and decay in the poem?

❖ Short Notes

1. Explain in detail features of Elegy.
2. Sounds and sound patterns appeared in the poem ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’

9.5 LET’S SUM UP

• Critical appreciation of the work: -

This poem is written by Thomas gray which comprises of 32 stanzas. Every stanza comprises of four poetic pattern lines for which they are called heroic quatrains. The elegy is written in quatrains. Like other elegies dedicated to “particular person”. Gray’s elegy is about men or various men who lived and obscure life who died and were laid at rest in the country churchyard. The poem begins musically. It describes the setting of the poem that is, evening or probably night time. In the first part of the poem, the writer has chosen time of the day to mourn the death of his previous one. The poet chose night as the season of grieving. Night not only is a part of day but it symbolises loneliness and grieving. Night not always means the end of the day to the poet but also the end of life.

The night additionally proposes the approaching haziness and night in nature, and anguish and despairing in human psyche.

The poet then intensifies the atmosphere by describing the scene 'plowman homeward plods his weary way'. The glimmering twilight is fading, and a 'solemn stillness' fills all the air. The only sound that the poet can hear is that of the beetles and the moping owls. The atmosphere expresses grief-stricken silence. Then the poet moves on to describe the church, the elm tree and the graves that were already weary laying there forever. The poet creates such a sad atmosphere by describing the story of rude forefathers whose tombs still lay there, each in his narrow cell. The reader is grief-stricken when the poet says by pointing out the graves that these people 'No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed', 'no more the blazing hearth shall burn, nor their wife will wait for them to return from their work waiting to entertain them. They will no longer be able to see the breezy morning or hear the shrill of the cock. No children run to lisp their sire's return or climb his knees the envied kiss to share. He perceives the basic existence of the individuals who lived close to the dirt identifying over their destiny with philanthropic energy.

The poet changes his tone to advising rich people by saying not to mock at these men who have died, suddenly he becomes philosophical and start talking about the grandeur of these men and comes to the harsh truth of life: -

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.

No matter how many songs you write about the dead or how many monuments you build in their name, they are not going to rise from the ashes like phoenix. The men were poor and humble, but some had celestial fire in their hearts. Some would even make great rulers; some even were incredible authorities of lyre which filled them with rapture. But the chill penury spoiled their noble rage and froze their genial current of the soul, they did not have means to seek knowledge, and so their potentiality could not flourish, and they remain hidden in the darkness. If given a chance, some would have become Milton and Cromwell because they were normal people like us who avoided all the glory and did not take the path that leads to power. They were sober people who loved to live in peace, and they used to avoid fuss. When these men are buried in the churchyard their friend erected shapeless tom stones with epitaphs with uncouth rhymes to protect them from public shame. So, those who pass by these graves can pay their humble tribute to the innocent men.

The poor men have died, but they are still remembered by their loved who are left behind. The tone of poet becomes grimmer filled with pathos when he describes how these men died one after another. To an inquiry, an ancient headed swain would state that here was the man who might quickly stroll at the peep of daybreak through the dewy grass to meet the sun upon the upland garden. That man would occasionally extend his body at the foot of a gesturing beech tree to cool his worn-out nerves at twelve, and with ponder watch the rivulet that jabbered by. Now and again, he would be seen by the wood with a contemptuous grin all over, mumbling wayward likes. Whenever old, he was a hanging frame, a man beset with cares or crossed in hopeless love, a woeful wan, now abandoned by all. One morning he would miss from his most loved frequents – the heath, the tree, the slope, the yard or the wood. Rather, he would be seen being borne through the churchyard route way with grievers singing laments. His body is presently in the grave under the stone covered with thorns.

An epitaph written on the stone describes a man who is now in the grave. He was a young man, all through his life he was unaware of fame and fortune, he has spent a difficult life, and he also lacked the benefits of ‘fair science’. But he was man who was good at heart, polite and a sincere soul whom God, gave him a friend that he wanted. According to the poet there is no meaning in talking about this man now as he is already dead and soon would be taken into the bosom of his father and his God.

The lyric in its endeavour to work in this manner in all-inclusive terms and in its unrivalled virtue, legitimacy and agreement of lingual authority is an extraordinary acknowledgement of the standards of its day: in its peaceful despairing and rural setting, it is maybe marginally sentimental. Despite the fact that in its treatment of the normal man it is gallant and even lofty, it has not the tone of Wordsworth. The lyric is minimal of what Tennyson called “divine truisms”, and these are all around, assuming properly, influencing. Among poem exemplifying the honourable perfect of what was often thought by everyone but never expressed so well.

9.6 KEY WORDS

Elegy	(in modern literature) a poem of serious reflection, typically a lament for the dead.
Perplexing	completely baffling; very puzzling.

- Sonnet** A poem made up of fourteen lines using any of a number of formal rhyme schemes, in English typically having ten syllables per line.
- Mourning** the expression of sorrow for someone's death
- Epitaph** A phrase or form of words written in memory of a person who has died, especially as an inscription on a tombstone.

9.7 SUGGESTED READING

- “English Literature” by R J Rees. Published by Macmillan.
- The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms by Mark Strand and Evan Boland. Published by Norton & Co.
- The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy edited by Karen Weisman. Published by Oxford University Press
- Elegy written in country churchyard by Thomas Gray.
- A Study Guide for Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" By Cengage learning Gale.
- "Introduction", in Harold Bloom, *Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Bloom Harold (1987).
- A Criticism on the Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard by Young John (1783).

❖ Answers

1.	c	11.	d
2.	c	12.	d
3.	b	13.	a
4.	b	14.	b
5.	a	15.	c
6.	b	16.	b
7.	a	17.	a
8.	c	18.	c
9.	a	19.	c
10.	b	20.	c