

Thomas Gray was the most important poetic figure in English literature in the latter half of the 18th century between Pope and Wordsworth. His was an age of transition, an age of unrest of advance and retreat. Two movements are clearly discernible in the writings of some of the writers of this period. The allegiance to the old order of classicism as in Dr. Johnson and the search after the new order of Romanticism as in Thomson. So, Gray shared the classical taste of his age but his poetry contains the seeds of Romanticism too.

In fact, Gray began as a classical and ended as a Romantic poet. That is he began in the tradition of Dryden and Pope and involved in the style and manner of Wordsworth. In 18th century English poets believed, on the side of style, that the best poetry was the most polished one and on the side of matter, it was again the most artificial. Real feelings and sentiments found no place in their poetry. Passion, intensity, imagination, Nature, even beauty were conspicuous by their absence. A certain sharpness of wit and clearness of thought and proverbial tone were, however, present in most of the works of that period. The merits of the poets were found in

their intellectual force and activity of deep imagination and tendency to deal with manners and superficialities, rather than the elemental things and larger-issues of life. The leading writers avoided extravagance and emotionalism. Since the proper sustenance of poetry is emotional, great poetry ceased to be written.

A close study of Gray's poetry reveals that though, he started as a devotee to these ideals, he ended by striking a different note - the note of returning to emotion, passion, nature-worship. Thus, in the poetry of Gray, we find those defects common to the artificial poets of his days and some merits which were peculiar only to him that allied him to the new generation of the Romantic poets.

Gray's early poems are classical in nature. They are characterised by all those qualities which are associated with the poetry of the Augustan age. Personification, allegory, moralizing, artificial diction and other traits of classicism are abundantly present. The treatment of Nature is artificial, seen through the spectacle of books; nothing of the freshness and enthusiasm that characterised the Nature poetry of the Romantics.

In fact, the Elegy written in the Country Churchyard marked a turning point in the poetic career of Gray. It shows many conventional touches but at the same time has something of the Romantic mood. The poem begins with a Romantic invocation of Nature to create an atmosphere for the poet to set down his contemplation. He seems to have experienced the fascination of the stillness of the churchyard with heaps of stonemans' tombs around him. The curfew tolls, the sun begins to sink and soon all the business of the day is over. Darkness covers the entire land. Silence reigns supreme, only occasionally broken by the droning of beetles. The tinkling of the sheep bells and the hoofs of the lovely owls seem to intensify the silence. The poet is left alone in the dark:-

"The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day  
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea  
The Ploughman homeward plods his weary way  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me".

Such an introduction is reminiscent of Romantic portrayal of Nature. Another Romantic trait of the Elegy is its sympathy with the lot of common people who lived far away from

the meandering crowd in obscurity. The Elegy depicts very sympathetically the life of the simple village folk, free from the vices of jealousy, hatred and ambition:-

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

In the Elegy, there is also a note of melancholy and pessimism which was better developed by the Romantics, specially Keats and Shelley. The Elegy's melancholic mood is but a reflection of the poet's own melancholic personality:-

"The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
Awaits alike the inevitable hour:

The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

yet the Elegy is not a Romantic poem fully. It stands at the cross road of Classicism and Romanticism. Its moralizing is conventional and pleased the 18th Century readers for that reason. They were attracted by its absolute perfection of language and its beauty and great felicity of expression.

With the publication of 'The Progress Poesy' and the Bard, Gray established herself as a Romanticist.

"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."