

Elegy

WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD

The curfew¹ tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,²
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

- 5 Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

- Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
10 The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

1. *curfew*: evening bell (knell) usually tolled (rung slowly and solemnly) at 8:00 or 9:00
2. *lea*: meadow

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,³
 Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
 15 Each in his narrow cell forever laid,
 The rude⁴ forefathers of the hamlet sleep. **R**

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,⁵
 The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,
 The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
 20 No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
 Or busy housewife ply her evening care:
 No children run to lisp their sire's return,
 Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

25 Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
 Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe⁶ has broke; **A**
 How jocund did they drive their team afield!
 How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

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

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,
 And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
 35 Awaits alike the inevitable hour.
 The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
 If Mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
 Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted⁷ vault
 40 The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Can storied urn⁸ or animated bust
 Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
 Can Honor's voice provoke the silent dust,
 Or Flatt'ry sooth the dull cold ear of Death? **R**

45 Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
 Some heart once pregnant⁹ with celestial fire;
 Hands, that the rod of empire might have swayed,
 Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
 50 Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;
 Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,¹⁰
 And froze the genial current of the soul.¹¹

Infer Theme: Identify sight and sound imagery in lines 5–16 that helps to convey the setting. **R**

Style: What traits reflecting sentimentalism and foreshadowing romanticism are illustrated in lines 21–26? **A**

disdainful (dīs-dān'fəl) *adj.* Expressive of disdain; scornful and contemptuous.

Infer Theme: Reread lines 29–44. Identify instances of personification and imagery. What happens to both rich and poor alike? **R**

penury (pēn'yā-rē) *n.* Extreme want or poverty; destitution.

3. *yew-tree's shade:* The yew tree, common in graveyards, is associated with death.

4. *rude:* rustic

5. *incense-breathing Morn:* so called because of Anglican daily morning worship

6. *glebe:* soil

7. *fretted:* Ornamented. Aisle and vault are parts of a cathedral where indoor burial was possible for the rich or famous.

8. *storied urn:* inscribed vase for ashes

9. *pregnant:* infused, filled

10. *noble rage:* creative frenzy; inspiration

11. *current . . . soul:* flow of natural genius

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

Some village Hampden,¹² that with dauntless breast
 The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
 Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
 60 Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood. **A**

The applause of listening senates to command,
 The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
 To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
 And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes,

65 Their lot forbade: nor circumscribed¹³ alone
 Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;
 Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
 And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,¹⁴
 70 To quench the blushes of ingenuous¹⁵ shame,
 Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
 With incense kindled at the Muse's¹⁶ flame. **A**

Far from the madding¹⁷ crowd's ignoble strife,
 Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
 75 Along the cool sequestered vale of life
 They kept the noiseless tenor¹⁸ of their way.

Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect
 Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
 With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,
 80 Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered¹⁹ Muse,
 The place of fame and elegy supply:
 And many a holy text around she strews,
 That teach the rustic moralist to die. **R**

85 For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
 This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,²⁰
 Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
 Nor cast one longing ling'ring look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
 90 Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
 Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
 Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

Style: Identify the meter and number of feet per line of lines 57–60. What other neoclassical stylistic trait is illustrated in these lines? **A**

Diction: How do the previous two stanzas illustrate eighteenth-century poetic diction? **A**

sequestered (sī-kwēs'tərd) *adj.* Sheltered, retired, secluded.

Infer Theme: Reread lines 77–84, noting the imagery. What point is Gray making? **R**

wonted (wôn'tid) *adj.* Accustomed; usual.

12. *Hampden*: John Hampden (1594–1643), Oxford graduate and member of Parliament, leader of popular resistance to a tax levied by Charles I, mortally wounded in the Civil Wars

13. *circumscribed*: limited the scope of

14. *The . . . hide*: forbade them to suppress their consciences

15. *ingenuous*: innocent

16. *Muse's*: goddess of poetry's

17. *madding*: frenzied

18. *tenor*: course

19. *unlettered*: uneducated

20. *who . . . resigned*: whoever willingly gave up to Forgetfulness this pleasurable but worrisome earthly existence



For thee, who mindful of the unhonored dead
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;²¹
95 If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,

Haply some hoary-headed swain²² may say,
"Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
Brushing with hasty steps the dews away
100 To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.

"There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

105 "Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he would rove,
Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
Or crazed with care, or crossed in hopeless love.

"One morn I missed him on the customary hill,
110 Along the heath and near his fav'rite tree;
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,²³
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

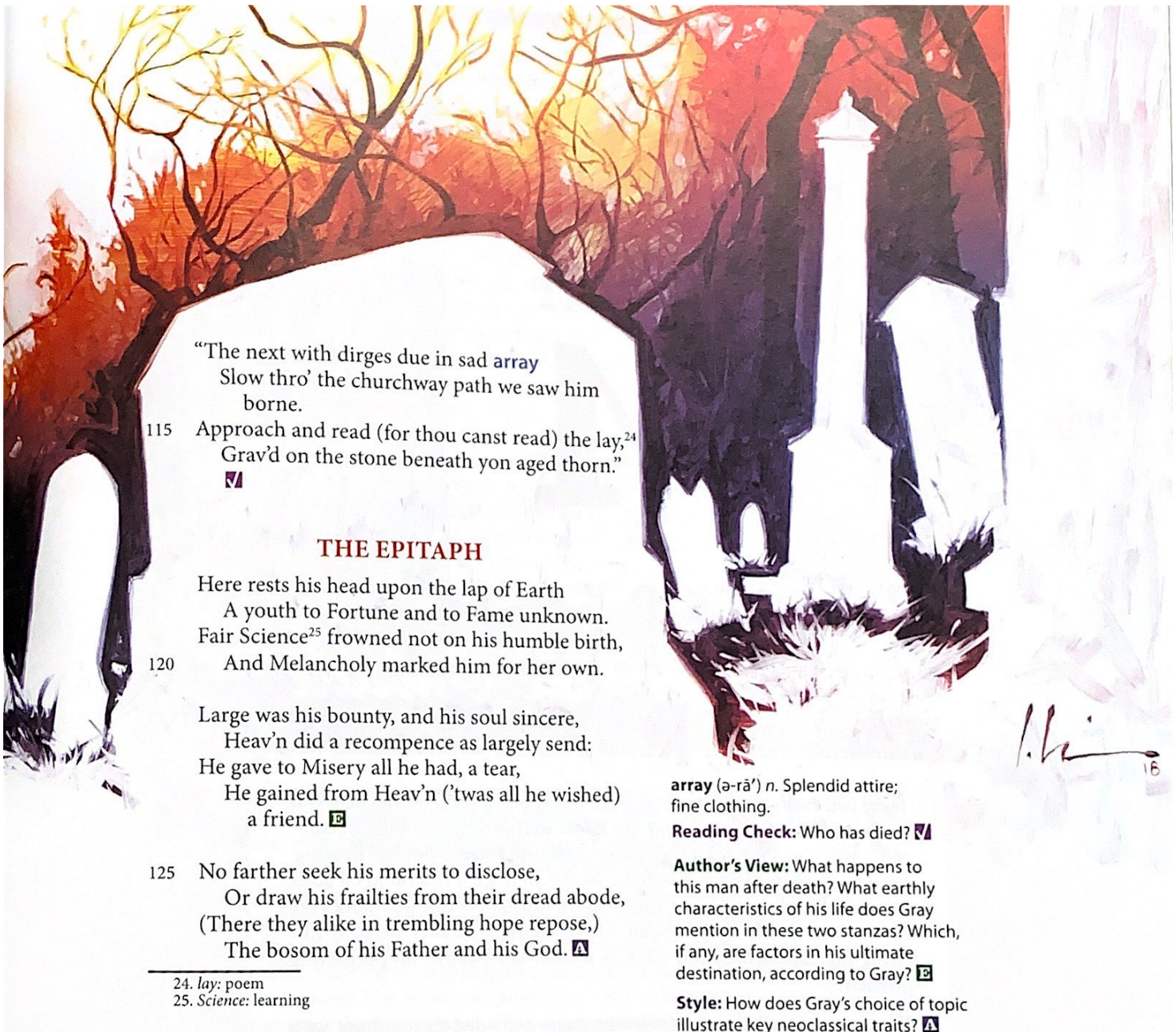
21. *thee . . . relate*: Gray himself

22. *hoary-headed swain*: white-haired shepherd

23. *rill*: brook

VISUAL ANALYSIS

How has the artist chosen to convey the melancholy mood of Gray's poem?



"The next with dirges due in sad array
Slow thro' the churchway path we saw him
borne.

115 Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay;²⁴
Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn."

7A

THE EPITAPH

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.
Fair Science²⁵ frowned not on his humble birth,
120 And Melancholy marked him for her own.

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heav'n did a recompence as largely send:
He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,
He gained from Heav'n ('twas all he wished)
a friend. 7B

125 No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose,
The bosom of his Father and his God. 7A

24. lay: poem

25. Science: learning

array (ə-rā') *n.* Splendid attire;
fine clothing.

Reading Check: Who has died? 7A

Author's View: What happens to
this man after death? What earthly
characteristics of his life does Gray
mention in these two stanzas? Which,
if any, are factors in his ultimate
destination, according to Gray? 7B

Style: How does Gray's choice of topic
illustrate key neoclassical traits? 7A

1. h. i. 18