

Thomas Gray (1716-1771)

" The curfew tolls the  
knell of parting day;  
The lowing herd wind  
slowly o'er the sea;  
The plowman homeward  
plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to  
darkness and to me.  
Now fades the glimm-  
ering landscape on the  
sight,  
And all the air a sole-  
mn stillness holds,  
Save where the beetle  
wheels his droning flight,  
And drowsy tinklings  
lull the distant folds."

So begins "the best known  
poem in the English language",  
a poem full of the gentle  
melancholy which marks all  
early romantic poetry. It  
should be read entire, as  
a perfect model of its kind.  
Life of Gray - The author  
of the famous "Elegy" is the  
most scholarly and well-

Balanced of all the early romantic poets. In his youth he was a weakling, the only one of twelve children who survived infancy, and his unhappy childhood, the tyranny of his father and the separation from his loved mother, gave to his whole life the stamp of melancholy which is noticeable in all his poems. At the famous Eton School and again at Cambridge, he seems to have followed his own scholarly tastes rather than the curriculum and was shocked, like Gibbon, at the general idleness and aimlessness of university life. One happy result of his school life was his friendship for Horace Walpole, who took him abroad for a three years' tour of the Continent. No better index of the essential difference between the classical and the new romantic school can be imagined.

than that which is revealed in the letters of Gray and Addison, as they record their impressions of foreign travel. Thus, when Addison crossed the Alps, some twenty-five years before, in good weather, he wrote: "A very troublesome journey.... you can not imagine how I am pleased with the sight of a plain." Gray crossed the Alps in the beginning of winter, "wrapped in mufflers, hoods and masks of beaver, fur boots, and bearskins," but wrote ecstatically, "Not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff but is pregnant with religion and poetry!" On his return to England, Gray lived for a short time at Stoke Poges, where he wrote his "Ode on Eton" and probably sketched his "Elegy" which however, was not finished till 1750, eight years later. During the

latter years of his shy and scholarly life he was Professor of modern History and Languages at Cambridge, without any troublesome work of lecturing to students. Here he gave himself up to study and to poetry, varying his work by "prowlings" among the manuscripts of the new British Museum, and by his "Lilliputian" travels in England and Scotland. He died in his rooms at Pembroke College in 1771 and was buried in the little churchyard of Stoke Poges.

The end. //

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