

## "Graveyard or Churchyard School of Poetry"

Eighteenth century verse satire came to an end with the death of Alexander Pope. Three poets namely Samuel Garth, Matthew Prior, and John Gay stand between the School of Dryden, Pope and James Thomson whose

'The Seasons' gave hints to the coming of an era with nature on a high pedestal. In between the precursors of the 'Romantic Revival' and Thomson there arose a group of poets who were pre-occupied with death. Their poems belong to the 'Graveyard School of Poetry' which climaxed in Gray's 'Elegy'. Graveyard Poets is a term applied to eighteenth century poets who wrote meditative poems usually set in a graveyard. They composed poems on human mortality, and in moods ranging from elegiac pensiveness to profound gloom.

The first poet of the group is



Thomas Parnell. He was patronised by Swift and Pope and is more lyrical than the others. His best known poem is 'The Hermit'. It is an oriental tale in heroic couplet. His poem 'Night piece on Death' and Robert Blair's 'The Grave' gave rise to the term "graveyard poetry". In these poems we find the seeds of romantic melancholy. In addition to this tone of melancholy there is a still deeper tone in the poetry of graveyard and in the long reflective verses on death and immortality. Parnell suffered disappointments and experienced many vicissitudes. These are found in his verse. His metrical power can also be seen in 'Hymn to Contentment'.

The second poet of the group is Edward Young whose 'Night Thoughts' earned more renown than 'The Seasons'. It was the first great appeal to melancholy. Young derived much pleasure in nocturnal churchyard medi-



tations "visiting the tombs to muse, in a kind of transport, upon the Christian conception of the vanity of earthly things!" He was almost old when he composed 'Night thoughts'. It was during the period of disappointment that he composed the above-named poem. He himself described it as a ~~sequel~~ sequel to Pope's 'Essay on man'. Pope preached optimism and spoke against the pessimists, young harped upon the vanity of the world. According to Legouis "Pope's theme was man, young's the immortal spirit of man." The most striking thing in his long outpouring is "the vision of the poet meditating alone in the stillness of night, his thoughts haunting newly dug graves, yew's and cypresses, with the pale rays of the moon shining down upon him." 'Night thoughts' found its echo in Blair's 'The Grave' and James Harvey's prose 'Meditations Among the



Tombs. These two appeared almost at once. One thing that young created, wider and lasting, was the association between the pleasures of Nature and those of melancholy. We witness this in Thomas Warton's 'The Pleasures of Melancholy'.

The third poet of the group is Robert Blair. In 1743 appeared his 'The Grave' which is a meditation on death in blank verse. According to Rickett he is akin to young in his "portentous gravity". It is really very interesting and surprising that he, a talented man, composed only one poem in blank verse.

Gray's 'Elegy written in a country churchyard' is the culmination of 'graveyard school of poetry' or so to say, the literature of melancholy. This poem is one of the most quoted poems in English literature. It is not only his best poem but probably the best poem

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of the age. We can not say for certain that the death of West was the main cause of the composition of the 'Elegy' but definitely his death was in his mind when he composed the poem. One special point about the poem is that in this poem personal and the general overlap each other. The poem turned out to be a generalisation of what happens in life, the supremacy of death and the uselessness of worldly achievements. The problem of life is that

" Full many a gem of purest  
stony serene  
The dark unfeather'd  
caves of ocean bear!

Full many a flower is  
born to blush unseen,  
And waste its fragrance  
on the desert  
air.

and the solution is that we have to bear with this because this is what happens in life, there



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is no escape.

The end.

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