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POETRY (Detailed Study)

PARADISE LOST BOOK IV (Lines 131-187)

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**John Milton** (9 December 1608 – 8 November 1674) was an English poet and intellectual who served as a civil servant for the Commonwealth of England under its Council of State and later under Oliver Cromwell. He wrote at a time of religious flux and political upheaval, and is best known for his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667), written in blank verse, and widely considered to be one of the greatest works of literature ever written.

*Paradise Lost* is an epic poem in blank verse by the 17th-century English poet John Milton (1608–1674). The first version, published in 1667, consists of ten books with over ten thousand lines of Virgil's *Aeneid*) with minor revisions throughout.<sup>[1][2]</sup> It is considered to be Milton's major work, and it helped solidify his reputation as one of the greatest English poets of his time.<sup>[3]</sup> The poem concerns the biblical story of the Fall of Man: the temptation of Adam and Eve by the fallen angel Satan and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Milton's purpose, as stated in Book I, is to "justify the ways of God to men." of verse. A second edition followed in

1674, arranged into twelve books (in the manner. Here we discussed about the book four (131287)

### Outline of the prescribed lines

Milton begins by again lamenting the Fall of Man, and wishing that Adam and Eve had escaped Satan's "mortal snare." Meanwhile Satan lands on a mountain near Eden and looks upon the glory of Paradise. He is wracked with doubt at the sight of such beauty and innocence. Satan remembers his own former glory, and recognizes how unfairly he has rebelled against God, who never showed him anything but goodness. Satan wishes he had not been made such a powerful

Archangel, as otherwise he might not have aspired to even more power and the overthrow of God

Satan briefly considers what would happen if he repented and subdued himself to God, but he knows that this could only be a false confession. He knows that if he returned to Heaven, he could not bow down or be reconciled after such "wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep."

He reasons that if he knows this, then God must know it too, explaining why God has not offered Satan any mercy. Satan accepts his own misery and realizes that he brings Hell with him wherever he goes now, as he is the incarnation of Hell, and will be unhappy even in Paradise.

Finally embracing his fallen state and doom of eternal misery, Satan decides to pursue the only path he perceives as left to him – he will work his hardest to commit evil deeds, and try to pervert God’s goodness. Satan does not realize that as he is having this internal debate, his dark shifts in mood have shown on his face. This reveals him “counterfeit,” as no Cherub would be subject to such inner turmoil. Uriel sees this from afar and realizes that he has been deceived.

Satan then comes to the border of Paradise, which is surrounded by a high wall of thickets, beyond which are many tall and beautiful fruit trees giving off heavenly odors. Satan leaps easily over the wall like a “prowling wolf” entering a sheep’s pen, or like “lewd hirelings” (paid clergy) climbing into God’s Church. Satan immediately flies to the tallest tree in the center of Eden, the Tree of Life, and he perches atop it in the shape of a cormorant (a sea bird).

Satan looks down on Paradise, the Garden of Eden, and examines its lushness and geography.

Next to the Tree of Life is the Tree of Knowledge, “our death.” Milton describes the beautiful flowers, fruits, and trees of Eden, which is more fair than any of the famous gardens of Greek mythology. After surveying “undelighted all delight,” Satan notices two creatures walking upright and appearing more noble than all the other animals. They shine with “The image of their glorious Maker,” beautiful and innocent, the woman submissive to the man. They are naked but without sin or shame, and they walk past Satan hand in hand.

The humans rest beside a fountain, and they eat fruits and drink from the fountain. Wild animals play innocently around them, and predators like lions and bears are tame and vegetarian. The sun begins to set and Satan is speechless at the beauty and innocence of these creatures, but then he begins an inner monologue, as he is once more filled with great turmoil.

Satan experiences new grief and envy, and he feels he could have loved these humans. He seems to regret the suffering he is about to cause them, but he feels again that he has no choice, and is condemned by damnation to do evil. He then flies down from the tree to the ground and takes on different shapes of animals, gradually approaching the human pair.

## **Analysis**

Satan was supremely confident in Hell, when he was trying to impress his followers and was still convinced that he could make a “Heaven of Hell.” Now that he has reached Paradise, however, he sees that the opposite is also true – he makes a Hell of Heaven. No matter how

perfect his surroundings, Satan carries Hell within himself in the form of his hatred, envy, and separation from God.

Satan preempts the obvious question of why God doesn't show mercy to the devils – they haven't repented. Despair is one of the worst sins, as God offers no forgiveness unless his creature asks for it. Satan gives in to despair here and so condemns himself to eternal Hell, unwilling to repent and still clinging to his pride and doomed fate of suffering.

Satan accepts his role as the “Adversary” (the meaning of “Satan” in Aramaic). As long as he despairs of forgiveness and refuses to submit to God, the only path left to him is suffering and hate. He then decides to make the most of this and bring others into his suffering if he can, or at least lash out in blind spite against God.

Milton throws in a critique of the church of his day – he disapproved of paid clergy as more interested in wealth and earthly vanity than keeping their minds on God. Satan is associated with two predatory animals here, a wolf and a cormorant, as his transformations continue to grow less glorious. The cormorant was seen as a “sinful” animal because of its gluttonous appetite. Milton extends all his powers of language to describe the glory of the Paradise that will soon be lost. Many of Milton's Puritan contemporaries held the human body to be inherently sinful, but Milton asserts the “naked glory” of Adam and Eve, affirming that nakedness was the proper and holy state of humans before they were corrupted by lust and shame. The “protagonists”—Adam and Eve—finally enter.

Milton himself advocated a vegetarian diet, and he expands on this by portraying the pre-Fallen world as entirely vegetarian. Thus Adam and Eve's sin also changed the nature of all animals, so that many became predators. Humans are also shown as the rightful masters of the animals, who act friendly and tame.

Satan grows more distraught and less reasonable as the poem progresses. He is genuinely moved by the beauty and innocence of Paradise and Adam and Eve, but he purposefully overcomes his better nature and continues in his futile crusade of hate.

THOMAS GRAY

Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" was first published in 1751. Gray may, however, have begun writing the poem in 1742, shortly after the death of his close friend Richard West. An elegy is a poem which laments the dead. Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country

Churchyard" is noteworthy in that it mourns the death not of great or famous people, but of common men. The speaker of this poem sees a country churchyard at sunset, which impels him to meditate on the nature of human mortality. The poem invokes the classical idea of *memento mori*, a Latin phrase which states plainly to all mankind, "Remember that you must die." The speaker considers the fact that in death, there is no difference between great and common people. He goes on to wonder if among the lowly people buried in the churchyard there had been any natural poets or politicians whose talent had simply never been discovered or nurtured. This thought leads him to praise the dead for the honest, simple lives that they lived.

Gray did not produce a great deal of poetry; the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," however, has earned him a respected and deserved place in literary history. The poem was written at the end of the Augustan Age and at the beginning of the Romantic period, and the poem has characteristics associated with both literary periods. On the one hand, it has the ordered, balanced phrasing and rational sentiments of Neoclassical poetry. On the other hand, it tends toward the emotionalism and individualism of the Romantic poets; most importantly, it idealizes and elevates the common man.

### **Author Biography**

Born in the Cornhill district of London in 1716, Gray was the son of Dorothy Antrobus Gray, a milliner, and Philip Gray, a scrivener. Gray's father was a mentally disturbed and violent man who at times abused his wife. Gray attended Eton School from 1725 until 1734, when he entered Cambridge University. He left Cambridge in 1738 without taking a degree, intending to study law in London. However, he and childhood friend Horace Walpole embarked on an extended tour of Europe. The two separated in Italy in 1741 after a quarrel, and Gray continued the journey on his own. He returned to London later in the year, shortly before his father died.

Gray then moved with his mother to Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire, and began his most productive period of poetic composition. In 1742 Gray wrote his first major poem, "Ode on the

Spring,” which he sent to his close friend Richard West—unknowingly on the very day of West’s death from tuberculosis. In the next three months Gray wrote “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” “Hymn to Adversity,” and “Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West.” It is believed that he also worked on “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” during this time, though this poem was not published until 1751. Gray returned to Cambridge at the end of 1742 and received a Bachelor of Civil Law degree the next year. Gray lived at the university for most of the rest of his life, but he never took part in tutoring, lecturing, or other academic duties; instead he pursued his studies and writing, taking advantage of the intellectual stimulation of the setting. In 1757 Gray was offered the position of Poet Laureate, but he declined it. He moved to London in 1759 to study at the British Museum and remained there for two years. He read widely and earned a reputation as one of the most learned men in Europe. Except for regular trips back to London and elsewhere in England, Gray stayed in Cambridge from 1761 until the end of his life. In 1768 Gray was named Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, an office he held until his death in 1771.

## Poem Summary

### Lines 1-4

In the first stanza, the speaker observes the signs of a country day drawing to a close: a curfew bell ringing, a herd of cattle moving across the pasture, and a farm laborer returning home. The speaker is then left alone to contemplate the isolated rural scene. The first line of the poem sets a distinctly somber tone: the curfew bell does not simply ring; it “knells”—a term usually applied to bells rung at a death or funeral. From the start, then, Gray reminds us of human mortality.

### Lines 5-8

The second stanza sustains the somber tone of the first: the speaker is not mournful, but pensive, as he describes the peaceful landscape that surrounds him. Even the air is characterized as having a “solemn stillness.”

### Lines 9-12

The sound of an owl hooting intrudes upon the evening quiet. We are told that the owl “complains”; in this context, the word does not mean “to whine” or “grumble,” but “to express sorrow.” The owl’s call, then, is suggestive of grief. Note that at no point in these three opening stanzas do Gray directly refer to death or a funeral; rather, he indirectly creates a funereal atmosphere by describing just a few mournful sounds.

### **Lines 13-16**

It is in the fourth stanza that the speaker directly draws our attention to the graves in the country churchyard. We are presented with two potentially conflicting images of death. Line 14 describes the heaps of earth surrounding the graves; in order to dig a grave, the earth must necessarily be disrupted. Note that the syntax of this line is slightly confusing. We would expect this sentence to read “Where the turf heaves”—not “where heaves the turf”: Gray has inverted the word order. Just as the earth has been disrupted, the syntax imitates the way in which the earth has been disrupted. But by the same token, the “rude Forefathers” buried beneath the earth seem entirely at peace: we are told that they are laid in “cells,” a term which reminds us of the quiet of a monastery, and that they “sleep.”

### **Lines 17-20**

If the “Forefathers” are sleeping, however, the speaker reminds us that they will never again rise from their “beds” to hear the pleasurable sounds of country life that the living do. The term

“lowly beds” describes not only the unpretentious graves in which the forefathers are buried, but the humble conditions that they endured when they were alive.

### **Lines 21-24**

The speaker then moves on to consider some of the other pleasures the dead will no longer enjoy: the happiness of home, wife, and children.

### **Lines 25-28**

The dead will also no longer be able to enjoy the pleasures of work, of plowing the fields each day. This stanza points to the way in which the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” contains elements of both Augustan and Romantic poetry. Poetry that describes agriculture—as this one does—is called georgic. Georgic verse was extremely popular in the eighteenth century. Note, however, that Gray closely identifies the farmers with the land that they work. This association of man and nature is suggestive of a romantic attitude. The georgic elements of the stanza almost demand that we characterize it as typical of the eighteenth century, but its tone looks forward to the Romantic period.

### **Lines 29-32**

The next four stanzas caution those who are wealthy and powerful not to look down on the poor.

These lines warn the reader not to slight the “obscure” “destiny” of the poor—the fact that they will never be famous or have long histories, or “annals,” written about them.

### **Lines 33-36**

This stanza invokes the idea of *memento mori* (literally, a reminder of mortality). The speaker reminds the reader that regardless of social position, beauty, or wealth, all must eventually die.

### **Lines 37-40**

The speaker also challenges the reader not to look down on the poor for having modest, simple graves. He suggests, moreover, that the elaborate memorials that adorn the graves of the “Proud” are somehow excessive. In this context, the word “fretted” in line 39 has a double meaning: on the one hand, it can refer to the design on a cathedral ceiling; on the other hand, it can suggest that there is something “fretful,” or troublesome, about the extravagant memorials of the wealthy.

### **Lines 41-44**

The speaker observes that nothing can bring the dead back to life, and that all the advantages that the wealthy had in life are useless in the face of death. Neither elaborate funeral monuments nor impressive honors can restore life. Nor can flattery in some way be used to change the mind of death. Note here Gray’s use of personification in characterizing both “flattery” and “death”—as though death has a will or mind of its own.

### **Lines 45-48**

The speaker then reconsiders the poor people buried in the churchyard. He wonders what great deeds they might have accomplished had they been given the opportunity: one of these poor farmers, the speaker reasons, might have been a great emperor; another might have “waked ... the living lyre,” or been a great poet or musician.

### **Lines 49-52**

The poor were never able to fulfill their political and artistic potential, however, because they were uneducated—they never received the “Knowledge” that would enable them to rule and to create. Instead, “Penury,” or poverty, “froze the genial current of their soul.” That is, poverty paralyzed their ability to draw upon their innermost passions—the very passions that could have inspired them to become great poets or politicians.

### **Lines 53-56**

In a series of analogies, Gray observes that the talents of the poor are like a “gem” hidden in the ocean or a “flower” blooming in the desert. Just as an unseen flower in the desert is a “waste,”

Gray suggests, the uneducated talents of the poor are also a “waste,” because they remain unused and undeveloped.

### **Lines 57-60**

The speaker then compares these poor, uneducated people to three of the most famous and powerful people of the previous century: John Hampden, a parliamentary leader who defended the people against the abuses of Charles I; John Milton, the great poet who wrote *Paradise Lost* and who also opposed Charles I; and Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England from 1653 to 1658. The speaker suggests that buried in this churchyard might be someone who—like Hampden, Milton, or Cromwell—had the innate ability to oppose tyranny, but never had the opportunity to exercise that ability.

### **Lines 61-64**

This person, the speaker reasons, with the proper education and resources, might have “commanded” the government as well as any great political leader. Note, however, that Gray gives us two ways in which to consider this power. On the one hand, a great ruler can receive applause and can ignore “threats of pain and ruin.” A great leader can “scatter plenty,” can offer prosperity, to a grateful nation. But on the other hand, if one governs, one is, in fact, exposed to dangerous threats. And simply governing to receive “applause” suggests a shallow and self-serving motive. Moreover, “scattering plenty” implies that the wealth of a nation can be squandered by its rulers. Gray may be suggesting that having power is not as desirable as it seems. Note that the final line of this stanza is enjambed; it continues into the following line—and in this case, the next stanza.

### **Lines 65-68**

The first line of this stanza continues the thought of the previous, enjambed line. It abruptly reminds us that the impoverished conditions of the poor “forbade” them from becoming great rulers. Gray underscores the abrupt shock of this idea by abruptly interrupting the flow of the line with a caesura. Building on the idea of the previous stanza, the speaker notes that if poverty prevented the country laborers from acquiring the “virtues” of great and powerful people, it also prevented them from committing the “crimes” often associated with those people—and especially with those people who hold political power. In particular, it prevented them from engaging in the bloody activity associated with the British Civil War.

### **Lines 69-72**

Because these farm laborers were not in positions of power, the speaker reasons, they never had to ignore their own consciences. Nor did they sacrifice their artistic talents (the gift of the “Muse”) to “Luxury” or “Pride.”

### **Lines 73-76**

The speaker continues his praise of the simple life of common people. They are “far from the madding crowd” of city and political life. “Madding” here can mean either “maddening” (that is, the source of madness or insanity) or it can mean “mad” (that is, the crowd is itself hatefully insane). In either case, the common country people were removed from this insane world; as a

result, they never “strayed” into the immoral acts of the powerful. Instead, they kept steadily to their simple but meaningful lives.

### **Lines 77-80**

The speaker then reminds us that these common people are, in fact, long dead. He notes that even if they were not powerful or great, and even if they do not have an elaborate memorial of the sort mentioned in line 38, they still deserve homage or tribute. At the very least, he suggests, an onlooker should “sigh” on seeing their graves. Note here the multiple meanings we can attach to the word “passing.” It can refer to the onlooker, who is simply walking or “passing by” these graves. It can mean “in passing”—that someone seeing these graves should take just a moment out of their busy lives to remember the dead. And “passing” itself is a euphemism for death. In a way, then, Gray is suggesting that there is no difference between the person “passing” by the grave and the person who has “passed” away—another reminder that all will eventually die.

### **Lines 81-84**

Instead of “fame and elegy,” the people buried here have modest tombstones, which display only their names and the dates of their birth and death. These common people were not famous, and no one has written elaborate elegies or funeral verses for them. Still, the very modesty of their tombstones testifies to the nobility and “holy” nature of their simple lives. As such, they provide an example not so much of how life should be lived, but how its end, death, should be approached. The term “rustic moralist” here is open to interpretation. It may refer to anyone who is in the countryside thinking about the meaning of death. But more likely, it refers to the speaker, who is himself moralizing—preaching or contemplating—about the nature of both life and death.

### **Lines 85-88**

The speaker reasons that most people, faced with the prospect of dying and ultimately being forgotten, cling to life. Note Gray's use of paradox in line 86: "this pleasing anxious being." On the one hand, "being" or living can be "anxious," filled with worries. On the other hand, just being alive—when faced with death—is itself "pleasing" or pleasant. The speaker is suggesting that even the troubles and worries of life are enjoyable in comparison to death.

### **Lines 89-92**

The dead rely on the living to remember them and to mourn for them. The speaker suggests that this need is so fundamental that even from the grave the buried dead seem to ask for remembrance. In fact, as line 92 suggests, the dead actually live on in our memories.

### **Lines 93-96**

In this stanza, the speaker addresses himself. He reasons that since he himself has been mindful of the dead, and has remembered and praised them in this poem, perhaps when he is dead someone will remember him. This person, he reasons, will necessarily be a "kindred Spirit," someone who is also a lonely wanderer in the country, meditating on the nature of death. The speaker then goes on to imagine his own death: he envisions this "kindred Spirit" seeing his (the speaker's) grave and wondering about his life and death.

### **Lines 97-100**

In the next five stanzas, the speaker imagines how an old farm laborer might remember him after his death. If, the speaker speculates, the "kindred Spirit" sees the speaker's grave and wonders about it, perhaps an old man might offer to describe the speaker. The old man would say that the speaker was often seen wandering about the countryside at dawn. Presumably, he was frequently out all night—as, no doubt, he has been in this very poem.

### **Lines 101-104**

At noon, the old man continues, the speaker would frequently stretch out under an old tree at noon, and stare at a nearby brook.

### **Lines 105-108**

The old man would have observed that the speaker's moods were changeable: sometimes the speaker would wander about in the nearby woods, "smiling scornfully" and talking to himself; other times, he would appear depressed; then again, sometimes he would look as though he were

in anguish. Perhaps, the old man speculates, the speaker had been “crossed in hopeless love.”  
Lines 109-112

The speaker continues to imagine this old man remembering him after his death. The old man would have noticed one morning that the speaker was absent: he was not in any of his favorite spots. Likewise, the old man would remember, the speaker did not appear the following day.

Lines 113-116

The third day, however, the old man and his friends would have seen the speaker’s body being carried to the churchyard for burial. (The speaker, then, is imagining himself buried in the very graveyard he once used to wander by.) The old man invites this curious passerby, or “kindred

Spirit,” to read the speaker’s epitaph. Note the reminder that the old man is uneducated: he cannot read, although the passerby can do so.

### **Lines 117-120**

The last three stanzas are, in fact, the speaker’s epitaph; the way in which the speaker imagines his epitaph will read. Through the epitaph, the speaker asks the passerby (and the reader) not to remember him as wealthy, famous, or brilliantly educated, but as one who was “melancholic” or deeply thoughtful and sad.

Lines 121-124

The speaker asks that we remember him for being generous and sincere. His generosity was, in fact, his willingness to mourn for the dead. Because he was so generous, the speaker reasons, heaven gave him a “friend”—someone who would, in turn, mourn for him after his death. This friend is unnamed, but we can deduce that it is any “kindred Spirit”—including the reader—who reads the speaker’s epitaph and remembers him.

Lines 125-128

The speaker concludes by cautioning the reader not to praise him any further. He also asks that his “frailties,” his flaws or personal weaknesses, not be considered; rather, they should be left to the care of God, with whom the speaker now resides. The poem, then, is an elegy not only for the common man, but for the speaker himself. Indeed, by the end of the poem it is evident that the speaker himself wishes to be identified not with the great and famous, but with the common people whom he has praised and with whom he will, presumably, be buried.

## Themes

### Death

Gray's "Elegy" is one of the best-known poems about death in all of European literature. The poem presents the reflections of an observer who, passing by a churchyard that is out in the country, stops for a moment to think about the significance of the strangers buried there. Scholars of medieval times sometimes kept human skulls on their desktops, to keep themselves conscious of the fact that someday they, like the skulls' former occupants, would die: from this practice we get the phrase *memento mori*, which we say to this day to describe any token one uses to keep one's mortality in mind. In this poem, the graveyard acts as a *memento mori*, reminding the narrator to not place too much value on this life because someday he too will be dead and buried. The speaker of the poem is surrounded by the idea of death, and throughout the first seven stanzas there are numerous images pointing out the contrast between death and life. After mentioning the churchyard in the title, which establishes the theme of mortality, the poem itself begins with images of gloom and finality. The darkness at the end of the day, the forlorn moan of lowing cattle, the stillness of the air (highlighted by the beetle's stilted motion) and the owl's nocturnal hooting all serve to set a background for this serious meditation. However, it is not until the fourth stanza that the poem actually begins to deal with the cemetery, mentioned as the place where the village forefathers "sleep." In the following stanzas, the speaker tries to imagine what the lives of these simple men might have been like, touching upon their relations with their wives, children, and the soil that they worked. They are not defined by their possessions, because they had few, and instead are defined by their actions, which serve to contrast their lives with their quiet existence in the graveyard. This "Elegy" presents the dead in the best light: their families adored them and they were cheerful in their work, as they "hummed the woods beneath their steady stroke." The speaker openly admits that they are spoken of so well precisely because they are dead, because death is such a terrible thing that its victims deserve the respect of the living. In line 90, the poet explains, "Some pious drops the closing eye requires," explaining that the living should show their respect for death with their sorrow.

### Search for Self

The speaker of this poem goes through a process of recognizing what is important to him and choosing how to live his life (which leads to the epitaph with which he would like to be remembered). In stanza 8, the poem begins naming the attributes that are normally considered desirable but are now considered pointless when compared with the lives of the rustic dead in the country graveyard. Ambition and Grandeur, according to the speaker, should not think less of these people because of their simple accomplishments. He goes on to assert that Pride and Memory have no right to ignore them, and that Honor and Flattery will be as useless to the rich as to the poor when they are dead. The speaker, an educated person, gives much consideration to the subject of Knowledge, and whether the lack of it made the lives of these country people less

significant. Their poverty blocked the way to knowledge, he decides, and the lack of knowledge separated them from vices as well as virtues, so that in the end he does not consider his education a factor in making him better or worse than them either. In the end, having eliminated all of the supposed benefits of the wealthy, educated world that he comes from, the speaker identifies himself with the graveyard inhabitants to such a degree that he winds up in this humble graveyard after his death. In contrast to the simple graves that he pondered over throughout his life, though, the speaker's grave is marked with a warm-hearted memorial, the "Epitaph" at the end of the poem. Assuming that such a thoughtful person would not have been so immodest as to write this epitaph for himself, there must have been some other literate person to remember him.

He is also remembered by an illiterate member of the farm community, the "hoary-headed swain" who has to ask someone to read the epitaph. Before the death of the poem's narrator, this Swain established a nonverbal relationship with him, observing him from afar, wondering.

## Style

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is written in heroic quatrains. A quatrain is a four-line stanza. Heroic quatrains rhyme in an *abab* pattern and are written in iambic pentameter. An iamb is a poetic foot consisting of one unstressed and one stressed syllable, as in the phrase "the world." Pentameter simply means that there are five feet in each line. Consider, for instance, the first line of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard":

The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day.

When we scan the line, or identify its stresses, it appears as follows:

TheCur / few tolls / the knell / of part / ing day.

Try reading the line aloud: its regular, steady rhythm helps to create a calm and quiet mood—one appropriate to the meditative nature of this poem.

## Critical Overview

Over the years, Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" has received extensive critical attention. Critics have long recognized Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" for its restrained and dignified expression of simple truths. In *Lives of the English Poets*, Samuel

Johnson praised the poem for its universal appeal and its originality: "The 'Churchyard' abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every

bosom returns an echo are to me original.... Had Gray written often thus, it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him.” Other writers, such as Samuel Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, also admired the work, although Arnold’s criticism was somewhat cautious. Arnold noted in his *Essays in Criticism* that “the ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ is a beautiful poem ...

But it is true that the ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ owe[s] much of its success to its subject, and that it has received a too unmeasured and unbounded praise.”

In the twentieth century, critics have often observed two competing “voices” or attitudes in Gray’s writings. Joseph Wood Krutch, in his introduction to *The Selected Letters of Thomas Gray*, offers a useful comparison of the classical and Romantic tendencies in the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” Krutch maintains that there are certainly strong romantic qualities in the poem, but that it is more clearly identifiable with the eighteenth century: “there is nothing mystical, at least nothing transcendental, in the ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.’ It is everywhere stubbornly rational, even in its melancholy. The simple life, even the life close to nature, is good because it is healthful and free from great temptation, not because God dwells in a sunset.” In more recent years, critical attention has been focused on Gray’s complex use of language. Some critics have noted a degree of ambiguity in Gray’s syntax. One critic, W. Hutchings, argues in an essay in *Studies in Philology* that this ambiguity tends to “undermine” the apparently secure or simple universe that Gray has depicted. Hutchings notes, “there is an extraordinary degree of instability about [the ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’], one which often expresses itself by making its syntax fluid, even indeterminate. Far from being something to be amended or ignored, this quality is the key to the ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.’” We notice, then, a transformation in the way in which this poem has been viewed: early critics tended to praise the poem for its simple truths; more recent critics, however, have begun to wonder if underneath these apparently simple truths there are more troubling questions.

William Blake

William Blake (28 November 1757 – 12 August 1827) was an English poet, painter, and printmaker. Largely unrecognised during his lifetime, Blake is now considered a seminal figure in the history of the poetry and visual arts of the Romantic Age. What he called his prophetic works were said by 20th-century critic Northrop Frye to form "what is in proportion to its merits the least read body of poetry in the English language"

"The Tyger" is a poem by the English poet William Blake, published in 1794 as part of his *Songs of Experience* collection. It is one of Blake's most reinterpreted and arranged works. Literary critic Alfred Kazin calls it "the most famous of his poems". The tiger itself is a symbol for the fierce forces in the soul that are necessary to break the bonds of experience. The tiger also stands for a divine spirit that will not be subdued by restrictions, but will arise against established rules and conventions.

"The Tyger" is a highly symbolic poem based on Blake's personal philosophy of spiritual and intellectual revolution by individuals. The speaker in the poem is puzzled at the sight of a tiger in the night, and he asks it a series of questions about its fierce appearance and about the creator who made it. But the context and everything in it must be interpreted according to Blake's philosophy of symbolic myths about human life, society and spiritual revolution.

It is also a romantic poem to some extent written by the pre-romantic William Blake. The 'Tyger' is a symbolic tiger which represents the fierce force in the human soul. It is created in the fire of imagination by the god who has a supreme imagination, spirituality and ideals. The anvil, chain, hammer, furnace and fire are parts of the imaginative artist's powerful means of creation. The imaginative artist is synonymous with the creator. The man with a revolutionary spirit can use such powers to fight against the evils of experience.

So, the god creating the tiger can be interpreted as any of these creative agents which inspire common men to free their minds, hearts and souls from the chains of social falsities- the king, the priest, the landlord and their systems that eat up the individual's potentials. The creator has strong shoulders (energy) as well as art (skills) and dread feet and hand. His courage is supreme, too. His creation is fierce, almost daunting himself. So must be man's spirit and imagination, or the poet's. The forest is the symbol of corrupted social conventions and that tries to suppress the good human potentials. In the poem night stands for ignorance, out of which the forest of false social institutions is made.

Similarly, the context of a person asking questions and getting puzzled at the tiger symbolically represents the final beginning of the realization and appreciation of the forces of his

own soul. This individual will then begin his personal spiritual revolution. The poem is taken from the

“Songs of Experience” which means the adult world of corruption, immorality and suffering.

Passing through the first phase of “Innocence” or the pure child’s-like world or mentality in “Songs of Innocence”, and then having experienced the opposite world of experience, the speaker in this poem has begun to recognize the suppressed power of his soul and realize its necessity. He is himself puzzled at its fearful faces, and begins to realize that he had gotten, not only the lamb-like humility, but also the tiger-like energy for fighting back against the domination of the evil society. The qualities of the original and pure man must be freed by using this tiger-like force of the soul. Blake’s imaginative man or creative artist is a rebellious being. It also represents the double potentials in any human being.

Thematically, the poem is intended to make us to witness the persona realizing the potentials of his soul and to realize it ourselves. We have not only the lamb (Christ) like humility but also the tiger like quality for spiritual revolution and freedom from falsities. The unusual spelling in “Tyger” is also a hint of the special meaning and emphasis as the unusual stresses. The use of the first stanza as a refrain repeating it with the difference of one word (dare) at the end is also for special emphasis on its symbolism. Readers who have learnt some of the private symbols of Blake can only understand this poem. But it is not too difficult after we get at the basic symbols. **Outline of the poem**

The poem begins with the speaker asking a fearsome tiger what kind of divine being could have created it: “What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame they fearful symmetry?” Each subsequent stanza contains further questions, all of which refine this first one. From what part of the cosmos could the tiger’s fiery eyes have come, and who would have dared to handle that fire? What sort of physical presence, and what kind of dark craftsmanship, would have been required to “twist the sinews” of the tiger’s heart? The speaker wonders how, once that horrible heart “began to beat,” its creator would have had the courage to continue the job. Comparing the creator to a blacksmith, he ponders about the anvil and the furnace that the project would have required and the smith who could have wielded them. And when the job was done, the speaker wonders, how would the creator have felt? “Did he smile his work to see?” Could this possibly be the same being who made the lamb.

### **Line by line description Lines 1-2**

Tyger Tyger, burning bright  
In the forests of the night,

These first lines set up to whom the poem is addressed: the "Tyger."

It begins with the repetition of the name ("Tyger, tyger"). The repetition creates a chant-like mood to the whole poem, which contributes to the mysteriousness. Reading it, you can't help but get the feeling this poem is about way more than the biggest cat in the world.

What is this about "burning bright, / In the forests of the night"? Tigers don't burn. When you see crazy or unexpected metaphors like this – which always happens with Blake – slow down and chew on them for a minute.

"Burning bright" may describe the appearance of the Tyger (tigers have fiery orange fur), or it may on a deeper level describe a kind of energy or power that this Tyger has.

The Tyger's presence in "the forests of the night" further increases the mystery and power of the creature – it's elusive, while at the same time burning with some sort of inner force.

### **Lines 3-4**

What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

These lines introduce the central question of the poem: what "immortal" being or force is able to contain or produce the Tyger's sublime form? Big stuff, we know.

The "immortal hand or eye," symbols of sight and creation, immediately conjure references to a creative God (in pretty much all cases with Blake, "God" refers to the Christian God). If this is so, then questioning whether God could do anything is a direct attack on the omnipotence of such a God.

To "frame," here, is probably to contain, kind of like putting a picture in a frame. When you frame something, the boundaries are clear, the object isn't going anywhere.

"Fearful symmetry," is a very nuanced quality to have. "Fearful" references the scariness of a tiger, but also alludes to the sublime. The sublime is an old notion of really big, powerful, mysterious stuff that terrifies us because it's big, powerful and mysterious. The first BIG example that should come to mind: God, or the divine (that stuff is big and powerful and mysterious).

Symmetry is a classical quality of the divine, as well as the defining factor of artistic beauty.

So, there are lots of doors open with the first stanza. Just hold on, it'll be OK. If there is one thing Blake does, it's open doors, but it can be hard to keep track of where each one might lead as you read through the poem.

## Stanza II

### Lines 5-6

In what distant deeps or skies  
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?

These lines ask where the Tyger was created, and also add to the growing image the reader has of the Tyger.

The use of "distant deeps or skies" seems to refer to an otherworldly ("distant") place, perhaps a kind of Hell ("deeps") or Heaven ("skies").

The metaphor of "burning" from line 1 returns with the burning "fire" of the Tyger's eyes, adding to the power and fearfulness of the image.

### Lines 7-8

On what wings dare he aspire?  
What the hand dare seize the fire?

These lines are where a lot of people just totally get knocked off the tracks.

Who the heck is "he"? It may be God, it may be the poet, it may be the artist, it's unclear – what "he" is for sure, is the creator of this Tyger. The Tyger – that we know is a big, powerful, mysterious thing – must have a pretty big, powerful, mysterious creator.

The "hand" returns from line 3 as well as "fire," and the image of flying on wings is added, alluding to supernatural power, but not necessarily a divine one.

Also, the notion of daring is introduced, which will be echoed in the last stanza.

## Stanza III and IV

### Lines 9-12

And what shoulder, & what art,  
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
And when thy heart began to beat,  
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

This stanza continues the questioning of who/what the creator of the Tyger is (notice the "And" continues the thought from the previous stanza).

What "shoulder" roughly means what kind of bodily strength could create the Tyger ("twist the sinews of thy heart").

What "art" refers to the skill that could put the Tyger all together.

Lines 11 and 12 are more mysterious, in that they're really vague. From earlier in the poem we know that hands and eyes frame (stanza 1), hands seize (line 8), shoulders twist (lines 9 and 10), but what do these hands and feet do after the heart begins to beat? Whose hands and feet? Again, not sure.

Whatever the answer, the use of "dread" increases the same big, powerful, mysterious quality known as "the sublime."

### **Lines 13-16**

What the hammer? what the chain?  
In what furnace was thy brain? What the anvil?  
what dread grasp Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

These lines further question how the Tyger was created.

Blake uses the metaphor of the blacksmith, who forms metal with a hammer, furnace (fire), and anvil.

The stanza is very rhythmic, adding further to the chant-like quality that we talked about in lines 1-2.

We also get the sense that the pace and volume is picking up, since the questions are now coming faster and Blake uses his first exclamation point.

### **Stanza V and VI Lines 17-20**

When the stars threw down their spears,  
And watered heaven with their tears, Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

These lines are the most clearly Christian ideology of the poem.

Lines 17 and 18 are a bit ambiguous, and may refer to the casting down of the angels after Satan rebelled against God .

The same "he" reappears here as in line 7, but in a much more Christian setting, more closely referencing God than the other stanza.

The "Lamb" is a traditional Christian symbol for Jesus Christ (who was "made" by God, though that is a big can of worms). It also refers back to Blake's poem "The Lamb" in Songs of Innocence (see "In a Nutshell" for more on "The Lamb").

### **Lines 21-24**

Tyger Tyger, burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?  
The final stanza echoes the first, but why?

Along with the rhyming and chant-like rhythm, the repetition may be like a refrain, like song's chorus.

The repetition is also a very clever device to get us to notice the one change that is made to the stanza: "could" is switched to "dare."

Now, instead of questioning the ability of the creator, Blake questions his nerve. Like when you triple-dog dare someone, Blake seems to challenge the courage of whatever/whoever tried or tries to contain the big, powerful, mysteriousness of the Tyger.

### **Form**

The poem is comprised of six quatrains in rhymed couplets. The meter is regular and rhythmic, it's hammering beat suggestive of the smithy that is the poem's central image. The simplicity and neat proportions of the poems form perfectly suit its regular structure, in which a string of questions all contribute to the articulation of a single, central idea.

### **Analysis of the poem**

The opening question enacts what will be the single dramatic gesture of the poem, and each subsequent stanza elaborates on this conception. Blake is building on the conventional idea that nature, like a work of art, must in some way contain a reflection of its creator. The tiger is strikingly beautiful yet also horrific in its capacity for violence. What kind of a God, then, could or would design such a terrifying beast as the tiger? In more general terms, what does the undeniable existence of evil and violence in the world tell us about the nature of God, and what does it mean to live in a world where a being can at once contain both beauty and horror?

The tiger initially appears as a strikingly sensuous image. However, as the poem progresses, it takes on a symbolic character, and comes to embody the spiritual and moral problem the poem explores: perfectly beautiful and yet perfectly destructive, Blake's tiger becomes the symbolic center for an investigation into the presence of evil in the world. Since the tiger's remarkable nature exists both in physical and moral terms, the speaker's questions about its origin must also encompass both physical and moral dimensions. The poem's series of questions repeatedly ask what sort of physical creative capacity the "fearful symmetry" of the tiger bespeaks; assumedly only a very strong and powerful being could be capable of such a creation.

The smithy represents a traditional image of artistic creation; here Blake applies it to the divine creation of the natural world. The "forging" of the tiger suggests a very physical, laborious, and deliberate kind of making; it emphasizes the awesome physical presence of the tiger and precludes the idea that such a creation could have been in any way accidentally or haphazardly produced. It also continues from the first description of the tiger the imagery of fire with its simultaneous connotations of creation, purification, and destruction. The speaker stands in awe of the tiger as a sheer physical and aesthetic achievement, even as he recoils in horror from the moral implications of such a creation; for the poem addresses not only the question of who could make such a creature as the tiger, but who would perform this act. This is a question of creative responsibility and of will, and the poet carefully includes this moral question with the consideration of physical power. Note, in the third stanza, the parallelism of "shoulder" and "art," as well as the fact that it is not just the body but also the "heart" of the tiger that is being forged. The repeated use of word the "dare" to replace the "could" of the first stanza introduces a dimension of aspiration and willfulness into the sheer might of the creative act.

The reference to the lamb in the penultimate stanza reminds the reader that a tiger and a lamb have been created by the same God, and raises questions about the implications of this. It also invites a contrast between the perspectives of "experience" and "innocence" represented here and in the poem "The Lamb." "The Tyger" consists entirely of unanswered questions, and the poet leaves us to awe at the complexity of creation, the sheer magnitude of God's power, and the inscrutability of divine will. The perspective of experience in this poem involves a sophisticated acknowledgment of what is unexplainable in the universe, presenting evil as the prime example of something that cannot be denied, but will not withstand facile explanation, either. The open awe of "The Tyger" contrasts with the easy confidence, in "The Lamb," of a child's innocent faith in a benevolent universe.

## Symbol

### The Tiger

Like the lamb in Blake's poem of the same name, the tiger represents an aspect of God. Whereas the lamb seems to suggest that God is loving and tender, in line with the idea of a fatherly God overseeing his flock, the tiger speaks to another side of God's character.

The poem gently suggests that God created the tiger, but it also allows for the possibility that it was Satan who did so (as one of the fallen angels that line 17 might be describing). Either way, God is ultimately responsible, since (in the Christian tradition) God created heaven, earth, and hell. The tiger is therefore symbolic of God's ability to be violent and frightening, traits which seem to be at odds with the creator who made the small and vulnerable lamb. The tiger, then, also represents the unknowability of God: humankind can love God and be in awe of his creations, but it can never hope to fully comprehend the way that God operates within and conceives of the world.

"The Tyger" is ultimately less about actual tigers (or other specific frightening things) and more about all the large concepts that humanity finds it difficult to comprehend. God created the world, but the world is full of suffering, pain, hatred and violence. The tiger thus symbolizes those parts of God (and the world) that humans struggle to reconcile with their idea of God.

### Fire

The poem picks up on the visual appearance of the tiger—its bright orange striped coat—and associates this with fire. This helps to characterize the tiger as dangerous and destructive, and to generally create a tense atmosphere throughout the poem.

But fire also represents the imagination, both of the ultimate creator—God—and of more humble human artists and craftspeople. The imagined creator in the poem literally draws the tiger from the fire, which is presented as the kind of necessarily harsh and pressurized environment from which something as majestic and fearsome as the tiger could be made. The implication here is that true creation requires bravery—that is, a willingness to put a hand into the fires of the imagination and make something. The symbol of fire shows that the poem holds the creative act in high regard.

Finally, fire may also symbolize a connection to hell ("distant deeps," line 5) or Satan in the poem. The speaker suggests that God created the tiger, while also leaving open the possibility (particularly in line 17) that Satan was the one responsible for the tiger—and perhaps for evil more generally. Notably, however, this fire isn't presented as a wholly bad thing, even if it does come from hell; instead, it's shown to be a necessary part of creating something as darkly

wondrous as the tiger. Through the images of fire as a productive force, the speaker suggests that even if evil forces like hell and Satan do play a part in shaping the world, they're still components of God's larger plan for creation.

### **Industrial Tools**

The fourth stanza is the only one in which the speaker imagines the tiger's creator using tools. The ones described are all industrial tools, which allows the stanza to build the noisy and fiery atmosphere of a metal workshop. These tools symbolize a certain type of creativity, in which skill and vision alone are not enough. Rather, the creator also needs willpower and bravery in order to build meaningful creations.

Additionally, the "hammer," "chain," "furnace," and "anvil" are all distinctly industrial (as opposed to, say, paintbrushes and canvas). This choice of symbols evokes the Industrial Revolution, which was at full pace during Blake's lifetime. If the tiger does represent a kind of evil, then perhaps this moral judgment extends to the practices of industry too. However, the poem resists such conclusive interpretations. Rather, this symbol seems to showcase the way that artistry, ugliness, and danger all exist in close proximity.

### **Analysis of literary devices used in “The Tyger”**

Literary devices are tools that enable the writers to present their ideas, emotions, and feelings with the use of these devices. Blake has also used literary devices in this poem to show the fearsome and yet magnificent image of a tiger. The analysis of some of the literary devices used in this poem has been analyzed below.

**Assonance:** Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in the same line such as the sound of /i/ in “Tyger Tyger, burning bright” and /ae/ sound in “Dare its deadly terrors clasp!”

**Metaphor:** It is a figure of speech used to compare two objects or persons different in nature.

There are two metaphors in the poem. The first is used in the second line, “In the forests of the night” he compares tiger with darkness and repression. The second is used in the sixth line, “Burnt the fire of thine eyes?” he compares its eyes with fire or something evil.

**Rhetorical Question:** Rhetorical question is a question that is not asked to receive an answer; it is just posed to make the point clear. Blake has used a series of questions in this poem to emphasize his point such as given below:

“What the hammer? what the chain, In what furnace was thy brain?

What the anvil? what dread grasp.”

**Personification:** Personification is to attribute human qualities to inanimate things. Blake has used personification in the fifth stanza where he considers stars as humans,

“When the stars threw down their spears  
And water’d heaven with their tears:”

**Alliteration:** Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same line such as the sound of /t/ and /b/ in “Tyger Tyger, burning bright” and the sound of /f/ in “Dare frame thy fearful symmetry”.

**Apostrophe:** An apostrophe is a device used to call somebody from far. The poet has used this device in the first line, “Tyger Tyger, burning bright.”

**Symbolism:** Symbolism is using symbols to signify ideas and qualities, giving them symbolic meanings that are different from the literal meanings. “The Tyger” represents the evil and beauty too, “the forest of the night” represents unknown challenges, “the blacksmith” represents the creator and “the fearful symmetry” symbolizes the existence of both good and evil.

**Imagery:** Imagery is used to make the readers perceive things with their five senses. Blake has used imagery to show the unique creation of God such as, “What immortal hand or eye,” “Burnt the fire of thine eyes?” and “In the forests of the night.”

### **Reference:**

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