

Topic Page: [Gray, Thomas \(1716 - 1771\)](#)

Summary Article: **Gray, Thomas**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

English poet. His *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), a dignified contemplation of death, was instantly acclaimed and is one of the most quoted poems in the English language. Other poems include *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* (1747), *The Progress of Poesy*, and *The Bard* (both 1757). He is now seen as a forerunner of Romanticism.

Gray was born in London and educated at Eton and Cambridge. A close friend of English novelist Horace Walpole at Eton, Gray made a continental tour with him from 1739 to 1741. Returning to England after his tour with Walpole, he lived with his mother for a while in Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire, then went back to Cambridge where, except for brief intervals, he spent the rest of his life. Gray's learning was immense, not only in the classics (his early verse was written in Latin) but also in Celtic and Old Norse, art, and natural sciences. His letters, charming in their mixture of fun, sincere friendliness, and perceptive criticism of people and books, rank with those of English essayist Charles Lamb. His first poem, *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, was published anonymously in 1747 and again in 1748 with *Ode on the Spring* and *Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat* in *A Collection of Poems By Several Hands*, edited by English writer Robert Dodsley. *Poems by Mr Gray* was published in 1768.

The *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, begun in 1741, was immediately appreciated for its exquisite expression and natural pathos and sadness. Among his other poems are *Hymn to Adversity* and *Sonnet on the Death of Mr Richard West* (both 1748), commemorating the death of his close friend. Gray's works are few in number, yet he was a pioneer, a key figure in a transitional period, and the forerunner of Irish poet Oliver Goldsmith and English poet William Cowper in developing a style markedly different from that of the poetically dominant English poet, Alexander Pope; he was one of the first to celebrate the glories of mountain scenery and in this he was a precursor of the Romantics, especially in *The Fatal Sisters* (1761) and *The Descent of Odin* (also 1761).

quotations

Gray, Thomas

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Selected Poetry of Thomas Gray (1716–1771)

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