

“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”: A Critique of the British Political Agenda

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Abstract: *The Restoration and the eighteenth century brought great changes to the islands of Great Britain. It was a time that witnessed the Act of Union which joined Scotland and Wales to Britain in 1707. Britain achieved political stability and commercial prosperity. New standards of politeness and social behavior prevailed to distinguish between civilized and vulgar citizens. The standards of hierarchy and order helped people participate in and contribute to the emergence of the British Empire and culture. For the sake of expansion, Britain started to drive many of its population and soldiers to settle in its newly occupied territories to encourage the British hegemony in those colonies. For that reason, several English writers, critics, and poets approached the theme of political and social transformation in their literary works. Although Thomas Gray’s poem “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” has been predominantly analyzed as a poem that mourns the death of marginalized poor people, this paper aims to put the poem in its socio-political context. Within a historical framework, this study argues that the poem does not only lament the death of England’s underprivileged individuals but that it also contains a prophecy that started to be fulfilled decades later.*

Keywords: eighteenth-century, elegy, Restoration, Great Britain, Thomas Gray, hierarchy

1. Introduction

Eighteenth-century England was a place of many unresolved problems. The age of enlightenment was also an age that stressed the necessity of holding tight onto older beliefs and traditions; the age of

population explosion was also an age of individualism; the age that developed the slave trade was also the age that gave rise to the abolitionist movement; the age that codified rigid standards of conduct for women was also an age when many women took the chance to read and write and think for themselves; the age of reason was also the age when sensibility flourished; the last classical age was also the first modern age. (Greenblatt 2006: 2080)

Therefore, the literary canon of the age was facing a great challenge to cope with the swift and radical transformation of the period. This social and political alteration affected the life of English people regardless of their social class or political affiliation. Around mid-century, “the popularity of the word *sentimental*, which locates the bases of social conduct in instinctual feeling rather than divinely sanctioned moral codes” (Ibid: 2065) increased. People started to sense the pleasure of exercising charity and reconsidering the life conditions of poor people. This sense of sentimentality led to a larger social reform that included the improvement of jails, the establishment of hospitals for abandoned children, and the relief of imprisoned debtors. However, underprivileged people suffered from the social hierarchy as they were marginalized and, most importantly, considered as a burden on the Empire. The increasing population was a threat to the thriving British island. Therefore, many working-class people were dispatched to the empire’s new colonies to reinforce the workforce and solidify British presence in its newly seized lands. Thus, the relocation of such people helped solve the problem of overpopulation and ensured British hegemony over the newly seized lands.

In the late 16th century, vagrancy and poverty were singled out as an economic and social threat to the prospering British Empire. Vagabonds and underdogs were filling the streets of England with their insatiable desire for scarce food and shelter. Therefore, some British legislators

hinted at an understanding of population as a resource to be managed for the benefit of the commonwealth. . . though overshadowed by a more elemental anxiety that “masterless” masses posed a threat to social order that could not be controlled through the agency of available social and economic institutions, to which a statutory regime of criminally disciplinable subordinations was the first and main retort. (Tomlins 2010: 76)

Such hints supported the position of Richard Hakluyt, branded as one of the pioneers promoting colonization of North America, regarding the poor and downtrodden. In his “Discourse of Western Planting,” emphasizing the colonial process, he states that through settlement overseas “the poore and Idle persons w^{ch} now are either burdensome or hurtfull to this Realme at home” might be made ‘profitable members’” (qtd in Tomlins: 77).

The population of England doubled from the mid-seventeenth through the eighteenth century. This increasing population diminished the chances for the underprivileged to survive in a fast-growing society and widened the gap between the low and high classes. Consequently, it was almost impossible to dispense with the country’s social hierarchy. Such dire poverty and harsh life conditions led poor people to the path of lawbreaking. A. Roger Ekirch remarks that “the crime rate grew and many offences were committed not only by professional criminals, but by the needy poor as well” (Ekirch 1990: 1). Ekirch’s remark accentuates the fact that a great number of the criminals belonged to the low class. Vagrancy and wandering vagabonds may also be the result of this growth. However, others chose to emigrate on a quest for better living conditions. Those were “labouring men in their twenties who travelled to the colonies by themselves, not with families. For many of them,

America seemingly offered a means of employment not available either in the countryside or in large cities like London and Bristol” (Ibid: 59).

2. Review of related literature

Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” has in many ways puzzled several literary critics and scholars for its use of highly elevated poetic language and extravagantly vivid images. Although Gray was not an impressive person or poet in Samuel Johnson’s view, this poem, in particular, impressed Johnson as he states that it “abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo” (Thwaite 1984: 107). In his article entitled “Phonology and Stylistics: A Phonaesthetic Study of Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’” (2013), Bassey Garvey Ufot conducts a syntactic and stylistic study of the poem and argues that upon a “detailed investigation of all the phonaesthetic devices,” his paper concludes that “the poem [is] a happy and celebratory elegy” (Ufot 2013: 110). For Ufot, the stylistic scrutiny of the poem proves that the sound devices employed to make “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” more of a “contemplative poem of eulogy (panegyric) rather than a traditional elegy” (Ibid: 125).

Education in the eighteenth century was crucial for individuals. Classical literacy was a distinguishing feature of the elite. However, “when the Elegy was published in 1751, the education system in England was certainly socially uneven and inequitable” (McKendry 2012: 105). Andrew McKendry argues that in Gray’s “Elegy” the underprivileged individuals are not only expelled or marginalized due to their economic status, it is also education that diminishes their opportunity to thrive in society. For McKendry, the poem departs from the conventional way of distinguishing people in terms of their economic status (poor/rich) since it depicts the poor’s inaccessibility to education as their devastating dilemma. In other words, the poem laments people whose illiteracy prevents them from climbing the social ladder. To borrow McKendry’s words, “the forgotten villagers the speaker imagines are excluded from cultural life by their illiteracy – by their inability to read” (McKendry 2012: 104). McKendry calls for the need to put the poem in its historical context, which is in line with the thrust of our paper’s objective of scrutinizing the poem as a literary work that captures the spirit of its age.

In his article “Eliot Written in a Country Churchyard: The Elegy and Four Quartets” (1976), George T. Wright traces Gray’s influence on the twentieth-century poet T. S. Eliot. Wright apparently compares Gray’s “Elegy” with T. S. Eliot’s poem *Four Quartets*. In Wright’s view, in addition to some other features, “both the *Elegy* and *Four Quartets* are quiet, elegiac poems, set in country places whose landscapes and remoteness from the pressures of urban life encourage in the meagerly characterized speaker-poet a train of melancholy reflections on the relation of the dead to the living, of the past (and other temporal dimensions) to the present, of time to eternity, and of himself to his world” (Wright 1976: 229). Wright also argues that sensibility can be found in the two poems; “both Gray and Eliot work through a sensibility intensely aware of man’s mortality and of the rural

and urban life-pattern” (Ibid: 232). He refers to their sensibility of time and how the two poets try to emphasize man’s mortality and aging over time.

In “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard: Gray Expresses the Sympathy for the Common Man” (2014), Muna Shrestha attempts to explore the poem as Gray’s intention to lament the death of common people who ultimately suffer from marginalization even after their death. Shrestha also depicts the didacticism of Gray’s “Elegy” as she states that Gray also attempts to show that all “the paths of glory lead but to the grave. By implication, the futility of all human ambition and aspiration is hinted at” (Shrestha 2014: 196). However, Shrestha’s argument is also in accord with the standards of hierarchy in eighteenth-century England in degrading the stature of the poor in comparison with that of the rich. Howard D. Weinbrot’s article “Gray’s Elegy: A Poem of Moral Choice and Resolution” (1978) stresses the poem’s morality and Gray’s intention to remind the reader of the course of the world around him. He also argues that the poem is divided into seven parts. Each part tackles a certain issue:

Its initial tone and setting (ll. 1-28); the speaker's defense of the poor and insistence upon the futility of riches in keeping one from death (ll. 29-44); the difficulty of being successful if one is poor (ll. 45-64); the danger of being successful if one is rich or fortunate (ll. 65-76); the universal longing for some human memorial, as seen among the poor (ll. 77-92); the Swain's report, which indicates the speaker's acceptance of his lot (ll. 93-116); and, finally, the Epitaph, in which the speaker's earned resolution is projected in the future, as an emblem of his newly won control (ll. 117-128 (Weinbrot 1987:538-9).

Therefore, according to Weinbrot, Gray’s “Elegy” can contribute to the understanding of the human self and the world around him. Yet, the current paper extends upon this foundation in a new direction, namely to scrutinize Gray’s “Elegy” as a critique of the English political and social situation in the age of radical transformation. Moreover, it argues that Gray’s “Elegy” captures the spirit of the age since it criticizes the devastating effects of the hierarchy on poor people and promotes the popularity of the term ‘sentimentality’ in the eighteenth century. It also conceals prophetic subtext hinting at the social transformation that was ultimately to manifest decades later.

3. Textual analysis

Gray’s “Elegy” disrupts the conventional meaning of the poetic term “elegy.” In “Elegy unto epitaph: Print culture and commemorative practice in Gray’s ‘elegy written in a country churchyard’” (2002), Michele Turner Sharp states that Gray’s “Elegy” “diverges significantly from elegiac convention” (Sharp 2002: 4). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2001) defines an elegy as “an elaborately formal *LYRIC poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure” (Baldick 2001: 76), and David Mikics states that “The term elegy is usually used for a poem of mourning, lamenting the death of a friend, lover, or family member” (Mikics 2007: 99). “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” does not mourn the death of a “friend” or “public figure”; instead, it laments the death of an entire class,

the English paupers. Thus, Gray's masterfulness lies in his capability to universalize and expand the scope of the elegy's lamentation. However, this does not indicate that the poem ceases to be an elegy in all respects. Gray's poem can be considered more of a pastoral elegy since it fits snugly the conventions of the pastoral elegy which include, but are not limited to:

(a) the scene is pastoral; the poet and the person he mourns are represented as shepherds; (b) the poet begins with an invocation to the Muses and refers to diverse mythological characters during the poem; (c) Nature is involved in mourning the shepherd's death; Nature feels the wound, so to speak; (d) the poet enquires of the guardians of the dead shepherd where they were when death came; (e) there is a procession of mourners; (f) the poet reflects on divine justice and contemporary evils; (g) there is a 'flower' passage, describing the decoration of the bier, etc. (Cuddon 2013: 230)

Except for the "shepherd part", which is replaced by farmers or poor people, all of the aforementioned conventions can be found in Gray's "Elegy".

Gray begins his "Elegy" with a description of the end of an English peasant's typical day. The curfew bell tolls to declare the end of the working day, and farmers head home alongside their cattle. The first stanza may reflect the rigid rules imposed upon those simple people at the hands of their superiors, in that their day's end is strictly determined by the sound of the bell; it reminds one of a highly regimented school day. Then the speaker describes how silence fills the space and only some insects can be heard.

The point of departure for this paper's analysis with respect to the literary consensus lies within the third stanza, in which the speaker, after describing the end of the day, realizes the presence of an owl:

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as, wand'ring near her secret bow'r,
Molest her ancient solitary reign. (9-12)

At the literal level, the speaker notices, amid the silence, an owl that hides in its "tower" (nest), which is covered with "ivy". The owl complains to the moon about the speaker's trespassing and expresses its uneasiness at his company. At the figurative level, however, this stanza reflects Gray's implied criticism of the British Empire. For the sake of illustration, we first need to explore the symbolic ramifications of Gray's word choices. Specifically, why does Gray choose an owl, not any other bird; and why does he also choose "ivy" over any other plant?

The owl may symbolize the elite British rulers as they sit high and reign over a hierarchical empire. Similarly, the government is, like the owl depicted in the above stanza, has never had a commoner interfere in its political affairs or inquire about its policies for running the country. Thus, it starts complaining about the speaker's sudden appearance which "Molests" its political domain and hierarchical reign. Furthermore, Gray personifies the owl as a person who is "moping" and "complaining"; such a personification affirms Gray's intention to use the owl as a symbol of the British empire which bitterly keeps its marginalized and poor citizens away. In botanical research, the Center for Invasive Species and Ecosystem Health

of the University of Georgia states that “ivy”, whose scientific name is *Hedera helix*, is “an aggressive invader threatening all levels of forested and open areas, growing along the ground as well as into the forest canopy. Vines climb up tree trunks and envelop branches and twigs, blocking sunlight from the host tree’s foliage, impeding photosynthesis”. The ivy’s invasive characteristic evokes perfectly the empire’s rapid expansion by seizing more colonies. Consequently, the owl in its “ivy-mantled tower” represents, metaphorically, the rulers presiding over the rapidly growing British empire. Accordingly, Gray’s speaker might be questioning the fate of the empire’s needy citizens and criticizing its policy of sending them to the newly annexed territories. Moreover, this encounter between the owl and the speaker may reflect the status quo among eighteenth-century individuals; that is, people were not allowed to trespass and cross the lines established by the hierarchical elite ruling the empire.

On another level, the owl perched upon its ivy tower may invoke a different type of metaphor. Since ancient times, the owl, through its association with the mythological Greek goddess Minerva, has come to represent ancient wisdom. Although the owl is often considered old and wise, its high perch and association with an ancient goddess atop the distant Mount Olympus consequently renders it aloof, a symbol of solemn divine power as much as knowledge. The entrenched wisdom of the ancients is often at odds with the struggles of the day, especially during such an era of tumult and social upheaval as existed during 18th century England (Greenblatt 2006: 2080). It is hard to escape the connotation that the owl represents the outlook of the privileged elite, who hold not only positions of influence but also the wisdom conferred by their access to knowledge and education. The importance of separating the lower social class from access to education, as well as Gray’s own emphasis thereon, will become increasingly apparent later in our treatment of lines 49-52 below. However, the owl, despite its symbolic association with wisdom, is also a hunter and opportunist, long recognized for using its nest tucked away within ivy towers to stake out its prey by night: “Nor must we forget that the owl, the best hunter of mice and such small deer, prefers to nest in an ivy-tower for the warmth and dryness and darkness, and perhaps also for proximity to the prey its attentions, when hunger calls, are chiefly devoted to” (Shirley 1872: 35). The owl as a dual metaphor fittingly captures the duality of the English hegemony it represents: knowledgeable yet opportunistic, solemn yet predatory.

The appreciation of the human soul and existence has grown dramatically in the eighteenth century, which led to a deepened social and individual conscience. Patricia Meyer Spack points to this notion stating that “humanitarian issues became vivid in the second half of the eighteenth century. The injustices of slavery, the brutalities of the *penal system*, and the suffering of the poor all attracted increasing attention” (Spack 2001: 250). In addition to the transportation of the paupers to the new colonies, the *penal system* stipulated that prisoners with particular crimes should be exiled to the new colonies. As such, “serious offenders who were not hanged were transported to the colonies, an alternative form of punishment

introduced by an Act of Parliament in 1718” (UK parliament). In light of such a historical fact, the following lines can reflect the spirit of the poem’s time:

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep. (13-16)

Gray’s diction greatly contributes to the interpretation of the stanza. The three keywords for this interpretation are “elms”, “cell”, and “rude”. The origins of the elm tree can be traced back to central Asia, America, and Eurasia, and the word “cell” connotes the idea of imprisonment more than being buried in a tomb. The fact that the elm tree’s origins descend from the previously mentioned geographical spots, away from Britain, paves the way for a different interpretation. The speaker’s observation of the forefathers who sleep under the elm trees evokes the idea that they are buried in a place of foreign connections. The fate of the rude forefathers buried under the elms serves as a reminder of the prisoners or poor people who were sent to the colonies to face an unknown fate in their new environment. The fact that they were buried in “moldering heaps” further invokes the feeling of lingering, long-term neglect as they decayed within their “cells.” Furthermore, Gray’s reference to the “yew” tree contributes magnificently to the establishment of the poem’s setting. Historically, this specific tree was of great importance to the indigenous people of the United States (Native Americans) as they traditionally used it to make archery bows. Thus, the tree itself was a symbol of courage, protection, and bravery. In his book *The General Historie of Virginia, New England & the Summer Isles (Vol. I), Together with the True Travels, Adventures and Observations, and a Sea Grammar* (1907), John Smith, who “was a leading member of the English company that had established the colony of Jamestown, in what is now Virginia” (Levine 2016: 110), states that as he and his crew were exploring the New World, they “found . . . all sorts of ordinary trees, besides, Vines, Currants, Spruce, Yew, Angelica, and divers gummess” (p.75). Therefore, Gray’s description of the two trees cannot be taken at the surface meaning. He deliberately refers to such species of trees to establish the setting of his poem, which echoes the New World.

Gray assumes that those convicts, as they were the first to be sent to the colonies, are other people’s rude forefathers, and “hamlet” (a small town) represents the colonies where they are entrapped. For further illustration, and contrary to the common interpretation of this stanza, Gray by extension seems also to lament the fate of those English individuals (prisoners, poor, or children) who are dispatched to the British colonies where they remain forgotten and marginalized in their life and death.

Gray also adds to the configuration of the poem’s setting as he points to the place where the paupers can be found. In the most celebrated line, which Thomas Hardy used as the title for his famous novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), Gray alludes to the spot where these underprivileged are buried; it is “Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,” (73). They rest in peace away from the immoral, hierarchal, crowded, and destructive British society. This strengthens the

assumption that the speaker criticizes the British political agenda as the poor are relocated to its newly annexed colonies. These poor people rest with “Their sober wishes” (74) in this “sequester'd” (75) (isolated) valley of life. For the poor, to be buried in this sequestered valley of life (the place where they are buried) is a blessing since they “kept the noiseless tenor of their way” (76); it is only now that they peacefully and quietly enjoy the course of their new life.

Gray's criticism of British society, as well as politics, can be seen in the following quatrain:

Their lot forbade: nor circumscrib'd alone
 Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;
 Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
 And shut the gates of mercy on mankind, (65-68)

The speaker here presents two opposite ideas embedded in one stanza. He accentuates the notion that poverty can be a mixed blessing; it is a curse as it prevents people from achieving their goals and developing their skills and a blessing as it deters them from committing terrible crimes. However, what kind of terrible crimes does the speaker refer to? It is simply killing people to achieve power or “throne”. It may be clear here that the speaker criticizes the British politicians by referring to their way of gaining power. This can only happen by killing “slaughter[ing]” a countless number of people; a crime that poverty prevents the paupers from committing. Also, this practice, the merciless killing of people, “shut[s] the gates of mercy on mankind” (68). In other words, Gray tends to connect wealth and power with terrible crimes to criticize the spoiled, rich, and powerful class and poverty with innocence.

In stanzas (5-6), Gray clearly expresses his sensibility towards the anonymous, poor, dead people. They cannot now enjoy their old life and nobody cares about their absence. The speaker gives examples of the joyous things that those underprivileged can enjoy no more

The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
 The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,
 The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn, (17-18)

He finally concludes that these vigorous natural attractions “shall rouse them from their lowly bed”(19); that is, they are deprived of the free things that a self can enjoy in its course of life. The speaker then moves to project their heavy loss to include the familial intimacy that a self naturally enjoys;

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, (20-23).

The warm, domestic atmosphere is deconstructed in the lines above. The quatrain depicts a typical familial end of the day; a wife cooking for her husband who has just returned from an exhausting working day, and his children are impatiently waiting to celebrate his arrival or compete to “climb his knees” to win a “kiss”. Unfortunately, this affectionate moment is not an option anymore. He also reminds the reader of their day-to-day activities and what they used to do joyfully. The

speaker's sympathy with the poor reflects Gray's sentimental tendencies in the poem.

In stanzas (8-9), Gray criticizes the prevailing British social hierarchy and warns the reader against bragging about his power or ridiculing the commoners' daily routine because everyone is going to die, and death "th' inevitable hour" (35) surly eradicates all social boundaries when the rich and the poor both die. Gray also portrays death as a leveling force that wipes out the social hierarchy. However, the poorest were often allotted shoddy mass graves, while the rich enjoyed beautiful plots. This further contributes to the marginalization of the poor even after death.

Hints of Gray's criticism of the expansion of the British empire and its political agenda can be gleaned in the following quatrain:

Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of death? (40-44)

The speaker here asks some rhetorical questions about the value of these people's sacrifices. The fact that the speaker is in a churchyard among tombs of unknown people could by extension allude to the soldiers sent to fight in the British colonies. He underlines the notion that these soldiers fought for their country and did their duty, but they were finally buried and forgotten. However, the speaker affirms that even if these soldiers were honored and praised, these worldly rewards will not bring them back to life.

The following stanza strengthens the possibility that Gray might be referring to and including in his lamentation the marginalized British soldiers dying on foreign lands in colonial wars in defense of the Empire:

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre. (45-50)

The speaker thinks that in this "neglected spot" (churchyard), some distinguished people are possibly buried. He hints at the soldier whose heart was "pregnant with celestial fire"; that is full of passion or love towards his country. Or there might be the one who fought and died on foreign lands for the sake of the "empire's" expansion; all of these soldiers are now forgotten as they are buried in this "neglected" churchyard. Consequently, Gray mourns the great sacrifice of those soldiers whose only reward was their improper burial. He also compares their heroic deeds and sacrifices to "a flower [that] is born to blush unseen / And waste its sweetness on the desert air" (55-56). "Unseen" may also refer to the fact that their home country (Britain) was continents away, and hence they literally could not physically be seen. The speaker also sheds light on the poor's inability to access education due to their dire poverty:

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;
Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,
And froze the genial current of the soul (49-52).

If we are to rearrange the first two lines, it reads: “But knowledge did never unroll her ample pages to their eyes”. By manipulating the sentence, Gray personifies Knowledge as a person who refuses to share whatever she has with the poor. Yet, Gray states the reason why “Knowledge” refrains from sharing her “ample pages” that are “rich with the spoils of time”; it is the “Chill Penury” (extreme poverty) that “repress'd their noble rage”; the needy people are not able to access schools or get proper education because of their poverty. Furthermore, in a metaphor, Gray compares poverty to something that also “froze” (blocked) the passion, ambition, and aspiration of the poor to gain more knowledge. Furthermore, in addition to their poverty, McKendry states that the paupers’ lack of proper knowledge is a major reason for marginalization; “While material “Penury” underpins the cultural disadvantages the Elegy examines, the poem attributes their situation as much to their ignorance, ascribing their obscurity to the fact that “Knowledge to their eyes her ample page / Rich with the spoils of time did ne’er unroll.” (McKendry 2012: 104).

Gray’s speaker acts like a seer who has a prophecy to spell out. To him, among those buried people may rest some great thinkers, leaders, or literary figures:

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood. (57-60)

In the above quatrain lies the core of our interpretation. Drawing on the previous paraphrasing and historical facts about the British Empire’s policy toward the poor, Gray in this stanza anticipates a future for the New World in which many great people, who had been regarded as a burden on the empire and therefore sent to a foreign land, will establish their own utopia and write their names on the pages of history just like Milton, Cromwell, and John Hampden. Furthermore, in lines (40-44), the speaker’s allusion to the soldiers who fought for the empire but were expelled from its glorious history seems to speak to the fate of the many British colonists who fought for their motherland (Britain) in the American revolution some 15 years later. This unfortunate group was dubbed the “Loyalists” and is largely considered neglected or forgotten by history, disowned by their revolutionary brethren and the English monarchy alike. Worse, these loyalists would not largely come to be honored by busts or flattering epitaphs either, as indeed the Crown scrambled to downplay its defeat a mere few decades later. Similar situations later arose with many of England’s other colonies around the world, and indeed those colonists loyal to the Empire in these colonies now too mostly lie buried and forgotten, while those who seized instead upon “their noble rage” and toppled the predatory ruling “owl” from its ivy tower were able to “unroll” the pages of knowledge for themselves and achieve enduring greatness akin to Milton and Cromwell.

Interestingly enough, Thomas Paine (1737- 1809), whose pamphlets *Common Sense* (1776) and *The American Crisis* (1776-1783) initiated the first spark of the American Revolution and influenced many patriots to declare independence from Great Britain in 1776, fits perfectly this predicted future of the

poor. Under a sub-heading entitled “Independence Declared”, James A. Henretta et al. stress Paine’s contribution to the declaration of independence of the United States as it reads: “Inspired by Paine’s arguments and beset by armed Loyalists, Patriot conventions urged a break from Britain” (Henretta et al. 2011: 232).

Exactly like those poor individuals who cannot attain proper education because of their poverty, Paine’s father “was a poor corset-maker who could barely afford to send his son to a free school where he was taught just enough to master reading, writing and arithmetic” (Foner 1945: ix). In his thirties, Paine was an eyewitness to the distress and mistreatment of the underprivileged due to the prevailing social hierarchy. He “saw enough misery in England, enough of the contrast between the affluence of the upper classes and the poverty and suffering of the masses” (Ibid: X). It was this involvement that “influence[d] his thinking for the remainder of his days” (Ibid). Therefore, Paine’s life experience can snugly affirm what Gray tries to lament in his “Elegy”. Paine’s experience and status as a celebrated heroic figure can be compared to John Hampden’s movement to oppose the arbitrary taxation imposed by Charles I. Also, Paine’s rebellious thoughts and his great contribution to the American Revolution and the declaration of independence can go side by side with Hampden’s arrest in 1642 that sparked the First English Civil War. Paine’s achievement, as an example of some distinguished poor who emigrated to America, can be a fulfillment of Gray’s prophecy that stipulates we will “read their hist’ry in a nation’s eyes” (p.64).

According to Sharp, whom we mentioned earlier, elegies accomplish the task of detaching the elegist from the deceased person by “making recourse to the substitutive and differential powers of language to place the dead at a remove from the living, and posit a compensatory figure. . . that marks the transformation of loss into gain” (Sharp 2002:3). What we need to consider in Sharp’s statement is “the transformation of loss into gain”. In Gray’s “Elegy”, the loss of the paupers in England is transformed into a “gain” of some great historical figures in different fields in the New World. According to his embedded prophecy, the infamous poor or convicts who burden England would someday be the glorious, patriotic, and distinguished figures of another nation once they are given equal opportunity and education, a prophecy that has been borne out into the present day.

4. Conclusion

Gray’s “Elegy” has been mainly considered as a poem that reflects both the neoclassical and the romantic periods, and plenty of scholars approached it as a typical elegy that mourns the death of poor English people. Others have approached it from linguistic and stylistic perspectives to stress its purpose of mourning or celebrating the poor through Gray’s use of sound and aesthetic devices. However, this paper concludes that Gray’s “Elegy” needs to be read and analyzed in light of its historical context, which was marked by an expanding social hierarchy in England accompanied by population explosion and colonialism. Such a perspective reveals that Gray, in a substantial part of the poem, tends to covertly criticize the political and social situation of his time. Education is a weapon that could have empowered the poor and enhanced their chances of climbing the socio-economic

ladder, but unfortunately, the top elite has worked hard to make education inaccessible to the poor. It also proves that Gray is a keen observer of the social hierarchy around him, as he ends the poem by identifying himself with those poor people who are left on the margins of history. Importantly, Gray hints at the intellectual and social greatness that could have been achieved (and indeed later would be) by the marginalized poor once given the opportunity and education, sentiments which ultimately have proven to be prophetic given the fate of the English colonial agenda. Gray's use of symbols, the owl, the trees, and the ivy paves the way for an unconventional analysis of the poem. These symbols prove it true that the poem is intended to not only mourn the death and destiny of the poor, but it, most importantly, also criticizes the English social hierarchy which encouraged and fueled the government's resolution to dispense with those underprivileged by dispatching them to the Empire's newly annexed lands. Although their destiny was vague and nobody could predict what they could face, Gray, in his "Elegy", foresees a prosperous future for these people. This can be true as the case of Thomas Paine, mentioned earlier in our analysis. Thus, the American Revolution is a perfect example of what Gray had predicted in his poem.

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