

Eton's Bard: Thomas Gray and his Elegy



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An online exhibition

2021 marks the 250th anniversary of Thomas Gray's death on 30 July 1771. Long known as 'Eton's poet', Thomas Gray's legacy extends far beyond his school: his 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (1751) is among the most well-known and best loved of all English poems. His collected poems have long been the standard leaving gift to boys leaving the College. The exhibition tells the story of Gray's life and works through the books and manuscripts that he owned and created.

This tutor guide will help teachers and secondary-age students to navigate the exhibition, and to explore its themes more fully. For each section we have chosen a star item, and provided some more information on it. You may prefer to focus on other items and use their captions for context. We have posed some questions to get you thinking and talking; there are no right or wrong answers, but you may find helpful information within the exhibition.

Thomas Gray

Gray was born in 1716 in the City of London, where his father was a scrivener (a scribe or professional copyist), and his mother co-owned a millinery business. Of their 12 children, only Thomas survived childhood. In 1725 Gray was sent to be educated at Eton College. Here he read, studied and composed Latin verse. He also formed close friendships with Richard West, Thomas Ashton and Horace Walpole; the four young Etonians called themselves 'the Quadruple Alliance'.

In 1734 he went up to Peterhouse College, Cambridge. He remained at Cambridge, later as a fellow-commoner and then as Professor of Modern History, for the rest of his life. In the 1740s he began writing 'Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard', and it was published in 1751. Other works of poetry followed, including 'Odes by Mr Gray' in 1757. Gray died, possibly of kidney failure, on 30 July 1771.

The exhibition

This exhibition is on the Collections website at collections.etoncollege.com/thomas-gray.

You can **enter the full exhibition** and proceed from page to page or go to **explore by theme** for an overview of each section.

Related material, such as blog posts or competition entries, will be visible at the bottom of the introduction page.

The exhibition is divided into four sections: Gray's classical education at Eton; the printing of the 'Elegy'; Gray's manuscripts; Gray and Romanticism.

Gray at Eton: a classical education

Star item: Thomas Gray, 'Vah, tenero quodcunq[ue] potest obsistere amori ...', Eton, 1730s? [MS 401]

In the 18th century, all boys in the fifth and sixth forms were required to compose three Latin exercises every week, both in prose and in verse. Gray soon became skilled in composing Latin verses, inspired by classical and contemporary models. This manuscript leaf contains Gray's school translation into Latin verse of an anonymous poem from David Lewis's anthology *Miscellaneous poems by several hands*, published in 1726. The verso of the manuscript bears a single line of English verse by Gray which reads: 'The rude Columbus of an infant world'.

- Why do you think Gray reused the same paper sheet?
- Why did he use a pencil?
- What classical authors have you heard about or studied?

Sudden fame: Gray's Elegy in print

Star item: Thomas Gray, *An elegy wrote in a country church yard*, London: R. Dodsley, 1751 [Iaa2.5.21(09)]

This is a copy of the first authorised edition of the Elegy commissioned by Gray from the printer Robert Dodsley and donated to Eton College Library by the Etonian Nicholas Mann in 1754, only three years after its publication. Gray circulated a few manuscript copies of the Elegy among their circle, but without his name. Before long, the verses ended up in the hands of some unscrupulous London printers, who to Gray's dismay printed the poem without his authorisation. With support from his friend Horace Walpole, Gray immediately arranged for the London printer and poet Robert Dodsley to rush out an authorised but anonymous edition.

- Why would a poet or author actively try to hide his or her identity?
- Can you spot where the book was printed and sold, and at what price?
- Why did printers take a copy and print it without his permission?

Gray's manuscripts: the Elegy and the Ode

Star item: Thomas Gray, 'Stanzas wrote in a country church-yard' ('Fraser MS'), England, 1747-1750 [MS 281A]

Eton's manuscript draft of Gray's most famous poem reveals something of his writing process. Gray had begun writing the poem by 1746. By 1750 Gray had returned to his draft and removed the final four stanzas, replacing them with the ten stanzas of its final form.

- How does this manuscript differ from the second manuscript, 'Ode, on a prospect of Windsor and the adjacent country'? Did they have different purposes?
- Some of Gray's first draft of the 'Elegy' is obscured by fold lines, but his later revisions avoid the folds. What does this tell you?
- How many well-known phrases can you spot? You might like to see the full poem here: <https://www.thomasgray.org/cgi-bin/display.cgi?text=elcc>

Gray and Romanticism

Star item: Thomas Gray, 'The Bard: a Pindaric ode' in *Odes by Mr Gray*, Strawberry Hill: R. & J. Dodsley, 1757 [Iaa2.5.27]

Gray became fascinated by medieval literature and studied Welsh literature. In the 1750s and 1760s he wrote several poems that drew on Welsh legend and history. In this poem he recalls the Welsh bards of old whose courtly role was to share and record the nation's identity in poetic form.

- What does the term "bard" mean to you? What do you think Gray meant by it?
- Is this poem neoclassical? Is it Romantic? Why?
- How is this poem different to Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard'?