



THOMAS GRAY : A ROMANTIC BEFORE TIME

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Abstract: *Thomas Gray is one of the great poets of the eighteenth century. His most important contribution lies in preparing a strong background for the Romantics. He was interested in criticism, metaphysics, morals and politics. He had a fine taste in painting, prints, architecture, and gardening. He excelled in the knowledge of botany, zoology and entomology. He was also a good musician. Apart from all this his love for history, imagination and aesthetic pleasure makes him a romantic before time.*

Key words: *Thomas gray, history, imagination, aesthetic pleasure, romanticism.*

The great academician Thomas Gray holds a strong position in the realm of English literature. His significance lies in the fact that he was not only a great scholar but he was a romantic before the time. There are some special traits of his literary creations which bear the impact of romantic tendencies. The object of this paper is to discuss the issue and for that purpose a short survey of Gray's scholarly career is mandatory.

Born in London on 26th December, 1716, Gray was a man of shy and sensible temperament and studious disposition. He had great passion for accurate knowledge in subjects like entomology and botany. He was also a voracious reader of Greek, French, Italian and Latin. Reputed to be the most learned man in Europe, Gray has well been appreciated by Patterson who says:

"Gray is perhaps the least productive of all the greater English poets, if he be, as he usually is, admitted to their number. No man has won so large a reputation with so small an amount of work". (Patterson p. 169)

So far as Gray's literary career is concerned definitely he was a wonderful scholar, good poet and letter writer. He also spent most of the years of his life in Cambridge where he taught as Professor at Pembroke College Cambridge. Through out his life he devoted himself in search of knowledge. However, he could not provide ample literary

production. His poems occupy a few pages only in any collection yet they are among the best poems of their kind. Thus Gray's significance as a learned academician is undeniable. He is acclaimed worldwide as the writer of *Elegy* which is popular because as Patterson has quoted:

"It contains much commonplace thought more exquisitely expressed than it had been before or is ever likely to be again".(Patterson p.170)

His other principal works are *The Progress of Poesy, The Bard, The Descent of Odin, The Triumphs of Owen and The Death of Hoel*. Gray's *Letters* are also important literary creations and they exhibit the whole story of his life and experiences. In the words of Patterson:

"They are full of scholarship, wisdom and wit in the best sense of the word."(Patterson p.170)

Gray is known for intense love for history, aesthetic pleasure and imagination. It is because of his responsiveness to all these romantic phenomena that he is sometimes called a romantic before his time. Lord David Cecil praises him. He says:

"His (Gray's) sensibility was extremely varied. And such other subjects as appealed to him were in some way associated in his mind with aesthetic pleasure. His interest in botany, for instance, came primarily from the fact that he thought plants beautiful. All the same, there was another side to him, only second in

importance to his aesthetic sense, namely, his intense feeling for history."(Cecil p. 236)

Gray's specialty lies in the fact that whenever he looked at a landscape, immediately he started thinking about the people who had lived there in past. An example can be illustrated from one of his letters in which he is describing his fancies during a visit to the ruins of Netley Abbey:

"In the bosom of the woods (concealed from profane eyes) lie hid the ruins of Netley Abbey; there may be richer and greater houses of religion, but the Abbot is content with his situation. See there, at the top of that hanging meadow, under the shade of those old trees that bend into a half circle about it, he is walking slowly (good man!) and bidding his beds for the souls of his benefactors, interred in that venerable pile that lies beneath him."(Cecil p.p. 237-238)

Here we observe that his aesthetic emotion becomes intense when it is inspired by his historic interest. In fact Gray is the first great English writer who is inspired by imaginative sense of history. In the poems like *The Bard* and *The Progress of Poesy*, he had dealt with the theories of past writers. We find a lingering pathos in his poems. The circumstances of personal life, were not favourable to him. Due to this he became aware of the gloomier side of human existence. For instance in his poem *The Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* he laments over the death of those unknown people who are lying buried in the Country Church-yard. Some lines can be quoted from the poem:

*"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."*(Quoted from Patterson p. 170)

The Elegy is popular because it has much commonplace thought. Besides this he has written two Pindaric odes. Though in them he has used lots of personifications but they are important because they are like a Pindar's poem. An example from his *Ode on the Spring* reads:

*"Lo! where the rosy-bosomed Hours,
Fair Venus' train, appear,
Disclose the long-expecting flowers,
And wake the purple year!"*(Quoted from Patterson p.174)

Sometimes we find Gray dealing with personal relation to life. His letters are the expression of real story of his life and personality. But in this kind of works he could not succeed like romantics due to the limitations of his own age. David Cecil comments:

"In one poem, indeed- the sonnet on the death of his friend West- he draws no conclusion: the poem is a simple sigh of lamentation. But in all the other expressions of this phase of his work sentiment leads to reflection and reflection to a moral."(Cecil p. 241)

However, Gray's historical position can not be doubted because his sensibility was essentially romantic.

Particularly because of the presence of romantic elements in Gray's poetry a well known critic Margaret Drabble has compared him with William Wordsworth with whom the romantic movement began in reality. Drabble has quoted an extract from Gray's *Elegy* in which the poet is speaking of the unknown people who lie in the graves:

*"Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear :
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.
Some village Hampden, that with dauntless breast
The little Tyrant of his fields withstood,
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwel' guiltless of his country's bloods".*
(Drabble p. 28)

Drabble is not satisfied with the thoughts expressed in these lines. She says :

"He (Gray) is watching the courage of the village labourer not with real attention and interest but with the detached, kindly amusement of a grown-up watching children at play. He is not really thinking of a man of Milton's power and intellect when he writes

of 'Some mute inglorious Milton'; he does not really think that the man in the grave before him could have written like Milton if he had been given a chance. His reflections have not got anything to do with the situation or difficulties of those he is talking about; they are the products of fancy, not of hard thought, deep feeling and true human insight."(Drabble p. 29)

After giving her remarks on Gray Drabble turns to Wordsworth. According to her:

"When Wordsworth writes about country people, he writes in quite a different manner. He too held that uneducated people, like shepherds, can look at the world with 'a poet's eye', but when he says this he is not indulging in the fancy that they might all be mute inglorious Miltons who have just not had a chance to produce *Paradise Lost*. He does not imagine that the

Lake District is peopled with thwarted poets. What he does say is something more serious, and far more probable ; he says that even the humblest and least sophisticated of men can have a true sense of the depth and meaning of life, and that the feelings of the humble are as important as those of the most famous and fortunate. The shepherd may be inarticulate, he does not write or read poetry, he may not even know what the word 'poetry' means, but he can still know the sources of poetic feeling in his own heart, even though they are quite different from the poetic feelings of literary people."(Drabble p. 29)

Wordsworth's way of looking at the life of the rural people was different from Gray. Whereas Wordsworth tried to feel the pulse of the rural people by understanding the practical difficulties of their lives, Gray looked at them from a distance.

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