

## On the Auditory Narrative in “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”

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### Abstract

“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is rich in sound resources. Based on the theory of auditory narrative, this paper tries to display the various sound phenomena in “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”, and then explore the auditory world in the poem. The study explores the auditory narrative in the poem from three aspects: structure, characterization and theme. It is found that the poem mainly consists of the voicelessness of the common people and high voices of the powerful and the rich, while voicelessness is sounded through the poem. Through this poem, the poet expresses his deep sympathy and praise for the obscure people of the lower class, and at the same time his scorn and ridicule for the powerful and the rich. And the poet's invocation of sound as a sensory function is conducive to further understanding of what makes “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” a transitory work to English Romanticism.

### Keywords

Auditory Narrative, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”, Romanticism.

### 1. Introduction

Thomas Gray was a representative of the 18th century English Graveyard School poets, and his poem “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is a classic of English sentimental poetry. Composed between 1742 and 1750, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” was originally written to mourn Gray's close friend at Eton, but the content of the poem has gone beyond mourning for a specific person to expressing deep sympathy for the obscure people of the lower classes and contempt for the powerful and vain. As an important topic in the field of literary studies, scholars have excavated the poem in depth from the aspects of theme, imagery and language. In terms of theme, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is not only a natural outpouring of the author's sentimental feelings of loneliness, isolation and helplessness, but also an existential reflection on the loneliness, isolation and helplessness of human beings. (Ma Xian, 2012: 31). In terms of imagery, the main image of the “peasants” runs through the whole poem, which develops from the feelings of a ploughman at the end of his labours to a reflection on the class of people. The poem portrays life and death from one man to many people as a class, which makes the whole poem rich in dynamic changes and the tension of thoughts about life. (Bo Ruqian, 2012: 36). In terms of language, the rhetorical pattern of “hypallage” is used a lot in this poem, and the thoughts, emotions and behaviours belonging to human beings are shifted to inanimate objects, which makes “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” achieve an unexpected and fascinating artistic effect. (Niu Guiling, 2013: 97)

In contrast, the auditory narrative in the work is to some extent obscured. The aural world in “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” has yet to be explored: examples range from the sound of the knell tolling the parting day and the lowing of the herd in the opening of the poem to the story recited from the mouth of the hoary-headed swain and the epitaph at the end of the poem. Auditory narrative is a theory of post-classical narratology, which refers to the expression and

writing related to auditory perception in narrative works, which not only includes the sound itself, but also covers the perception of and reaction to the sound. (Fu Xiuyan, 2021: 89) Eyes and ears are the two main sense organs for human beings to perceive the world, and a narrative that only “paints colours” but not “sounds” is like letting people watch a silent film, in which the world can hardly give people a real feeling. (Fu Xiuyan, 2021: 92) Auditory narratives help readers build an auditory world beyond the visual world on the basis of the literary text, so that readers can not only see the story, but also hear it. Therefore, this paper will focus on the auditory narrative in “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”, trying to display the various sound phenomena in the poem, and then explore the auditory world of the poem, with a view to providing new perspectives for our understanding of “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” and its literature value.

## 2. The Soundscape in “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”

“Soundscape” is an important concept put forward in “Primary Study on Auditory Narrative”. And the “soundscape” consists of three levels: the first one is “keynote sound”, which determines the tonality of the whole “soundscape” and supports or frames the basic outline of the whole sound background; the second is “sound signal”. Some sounds are especially easy to attract attentions for the distinctive features in the “soundscape” as they are foregrounded in the whole background, such as whistles, bells and chimes belong to this category; the third is “soundmark”. This concept is derived from the word “landmark”, which is the symbolic sound that constitutes the characteristics of the “soundscape”. For example, the famous sound of Big Ben is the “soundmark” of London as Big Ben is the “landmark” of modern London. (Fu Xiuyan, 2013: 225) Sound can not only outline the whole background, but also play a key role in characterization, since characters are both the listeners and the emitters of sounds. Therefore, it can be seen that sound can advance the structure and construct the ideological theme.

Structurally, “Elegy Written in the Country Churchyard” is advanced by a series of different sounds. The poem opens with the tolling of the knell, which creates a heavy and mournful atmosphere, foreshadowing the end of day and the approach of death. The lowing of herd and the wheeling the beetle create a fusion of movement and silence with the quiet dusk before ploughman, which suggests the co-existence of life and death as well as the cycle of life. The drowsy tinklings and the complaining owl hint the lonely night scene of the cemetery, and it is in this seemingly static mouldering heap that the rude forefathers and foremothers of the hamlet sleep peacefully. The poet then moves from the silence or the faint and distant sounds of the cemetery to the sound that symbolizes life. The twittering swallow, shrilling cock and echoing horn all represent the sound of life, while even such vibrancy cannot rouse people from their lowly bed, which takes away the blazing hearth and the lisping children, which indicated the poet's reflection on life and death. It can be seen that the power of the silent is far greater than that of the audible as death would all pervade life, in that sound always fades in time and space. The poet then turns to depiction of the mockery of the powerful and the rich on the silent life. The ordinary people who are already obscure when they are still alive are even more silent after their death. The contrast appears between the high voice of the mockery of the people who pursue fame and vain and the weak voice of the ordinary people, which unveils the poet's criticism of the arrogance and ignorance of the powerful and the rich, since “the paths of glory lead but to the grave”. Then the poet writes “some heart pregnant with celestial fire” and “hands that are waked ecstasy the living lyre”. However, the chill penury had frozen the music that could have been played in their life, which at the same time makes them no longer spit out any fragrance to the world. They can only be muted in the corner of the world that no one would know. They should also live in the, while they are made silent by their poor fate and can only walk along the silent road to the voiceless grave. It was not until the “thee” in the poem wrote

the verse about them that their life was eventually told. Some swain talked about the dewdrops that fell from your toes, the foot of nodding beech where you lay, the muttering you uttered as you rove, and the lines on your epitaph in the graveyard. In the poem you no longer walk silently from life to death. The verses write your life and chant your death. In the structure of the poem, the poet first writes from the silent or weak voice of the common people to the high voice of the powerful and the rich. Then the poet in the poem chants the life and death of the common people. A typical example is the whole epitaph at the end, which voices the loud sound of the death of the common people. And the sound relocates the ordinary people and the powerful back to their equal position, giving the whole poem an aural rhythm and rhyme.

“The uniqueness of voice” is another concept put forward by Professor Fu Xiuyan, which refers to the uniqueness of the voice itself. It’s believed that the voice and breath come from the depths of each person's lungs, thus having unique perceptual characteristics and personality mark. (Fu Xiuyan, 2021: 96) Hence, it can be seen that the sound can reflect the character's features and play an important role in characterization. “Elegy Written in the Country Churchyard” mainly mentions two classes of people, the obscure ‘they’ and the ambitious and powerful. The poem is rich in the sounds of nature: the lowing of herd, the wheeling of beetles and the twittering of swallows. These sounds of nature sometimes implied the quiet environment and sometimes movement, which foreshadows the silence of death and the resonance of life of ordinary people. In this way, it can be seen that the sounds of nature are closely related to the obscure ‘they’. On the one hand, their existence is embodied by the sounds of nature, which shows that they are close to nature; on the other hand, there are very few voices emitted by “they” themselves, which ca also represents how these voiceless people pass from life to death without a trace. In this poem, although these people seldom make their own voices, there is no lack of portrayal of their actions, such as: “ply her evening care”, “broke their furrow oft the stubborn glebe”, and “drive their team afield”. Although it is written that “how bow’d the woods beneath their sturdy stroke Although the poem says ‘how bow’d the woods beneath their sturdy stroke”, their behaviour is still silent. On the contrary, the powerful people in the poem often make piercing noises. They are mocking at the useful toil of the common people and sneering with a disdainful smile at the homely joys and obscure destiny, and all they admire and flaunt is their heraldry and power. The poem also mentions the pealing anthem that are possessed by the powerful after death while it was never enjoyed by the ordinary people. And the poet asks the rhetorical question that “can Honour’s voice provoke the silent dust, or flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death?” to satirize the fact that these powerful people, who had anthem of praise and at the same time mock the destiny of the ordinary people, would not be able to escape from the fate that all beings are equal and all have to die. In the poem, the poet also imagines that ordinary people should be able to get the same applause as the powerful did. However, the reality is that they cannot escape the destiny of obscurity. Therefore, the poet finally tell the life of common people with the words of the hoary-headed swain, so that the voiceless people can be sounded eternally in art. The epitaph at the end echoes a deafening sound on behalf of those obscure ordinary people.

A series of sounds in “Elegy Written in the Country Churchyard” link up the whole structure of the poem, which sets its emotional tone and reflects the poet's thoughts on life and death. The ordinary people in Gray's poem are born in nature and return to nature after death, representing the close relationship between life and nature. And the joyful scene in the poem depicting ordinary people ploughing in nature conveys the poet's admiration for the natural authenticity of life. When describing the obscure, the poem often depicts a set of silent soundscapes, which include the silent sound of nature like the complaining owl in the cemetery, the drowsy tinklings in the distance, and the heaving of the turf in many a mouldering heap beneath those rugged elms, etc.. All of these render the atmosphere of death and point to the silence of the ordinary people who sleep in their lowly bed. When describing the powerful and

the rich, the poem is often characterized by the sounds of mockery and ridicule, as well as anthem that praises death. Contrasting the silence of the common people and the sound of the powerful, the powerful and the rich in the poem achieve spatial occupation through sound occupation. Nowadays, human beings mainly develop their spatial imagination from the visual perspective, while in the distant past, many animals, including human ancestors, relied on their own sounds and smells to delineate their territorial boundaries. Therefore, whether it is a tiger's whistling, a lion's roaring, a wolf's howling or an ape's cry, it can't be said that they don't have the function of promoting their own spatial rights. (Fu Xiuyan, 2015: 63) Therefore, we can also read the compression of the survival space of ordinary people at that time by the occupation of sound dimension. They are not only a group of voiceless people, but also a group of invisible people. However, the poet mentions in the poem that Honour's voice cannot provoke the silent dust and flattery cannot soothe the dull cold ear of Death. Therefore, those who have wealth and power would still walk to the grave eventually. The voices of the powerful and the rich are ironically no more than mirrors to the voicelessness of the common people, which is illusory and absurd. The hoary-headed swain is the speaker inside the poem, who narrates the life of the common people. As the poem "Elegy Written in the Country Churchyard", his words makes the life of the obscure sounded. Though the youth was unknown to Fortune and Fame, he has also been sent a recompense, and would eventually go to the bosom of his Father and his God. Through this poem and the words of some hoary-headed swain, the poet gives voice to the voiceless ordinary people, and the poet puts all living creatures back on an equal position after his contemplation of death. To draw a conclusion, "Elegy Written in the Country Churchyard" is no longer only a poem of condolence for a close friend, but more a hymn of praise for the common people. Though death would always take people to their graves, the voiceless will exist and be sounded eternally in the verse.

### 3. For Whom the Knell Tolls

Literature, as a form of artistic expression, is an important way to help people understand a period. In the 18th century of England, the Enlightenment opened the door of intellectual liberation to people, but the social conflicts brought by the gap between the rich and the poor made ordinary people still live in injustice. This paper analyses and explores the auditory world of "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard" from the dimension of auditory narrative, which mainly consists of the voicelessness of the common people and the high voices of the powerful and the rich. And the voicelessness is sounded through the poem. Through this poem, the poet expresses the deep sympathy for and praise of the obscure people of the lower class, and at the same time, and at the same time shows the scorn and ridicule of the powerful and the rich, the vanity and their luxurious life. In this way, "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard" is not only Gray's eulogy for his close friend, but more the poet's hymn celebrating the common people. The use of sound as a sensory function to help people perceive the world seems to run counter to the rationalism advocated in the West, but it is consistent with the emotional sensibility advocated during the sentimental period in which the poet composed the poetry, and with the transcendence of sensory experience advocated by nineteenth-century Romanticism. Thus, "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard", as a transitory work to English Romanticism, is not only reflected in the egalitarian spirit presented in the poem, but also can be glimpsed through its positive use of the function of the senses.

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