**Q.3. Discuss Gray's *Elegy* as a specimen of Neo-classical elegy, and an eulogy to pastoral life.**

**Ans.** Grey's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is the first specimen of an elaborate general elegy, incorporating a depiction of pastoral life, in English literature. But neither as elegy, nor as pastoral poem does it mechanically follow the convention. Yet it retains much of its form and flavour to be accepted by the neo-classists. It is clearly different from the preceding famous elegy by Milton, *Lycidas*, and from the yet-to-be written elegy by Shelley, called *Adonais*. Milton's was prompted by the demise of his friend Edward King, and Shelley in his elegy expressed sorrow over the tragic premature death of Keats. Both these elegies start with personal lamentation. But Gray's *Elegy* does not lament the passing away of a particular person or special friend openly. We know that its immediate inspiration was the death of his dear friend, Richard West, in 1742. He wrote a sonnet on that occasion. But in the *Elegy* there is no clear and unequivocal mention of West. It is a general lamentation for the unhonoured, unsung but potentially talented rustics, who died with many promises unfulfilled in a world which is dominated by selfish, ambitious, heartless people. In this broad general appeal, and in its criticism of the vices of the world, it anticipates Matthew Arnold's elegy, *The Scholar Gipsy*.

In another respect Gray's *Elegy* is remarkably different from conventional pastoral elegies. It makes no effort, unlike *Lycidas* and *Adonais*, to camouflage learned poets as shepherds mourning for the death of their learned friend, given a fictitious shepherd-name. The peasant-cum-shepherd talked about in this *Elegy* are all real rustics, living close to the soil, and engaged in tilling the land, tending the herd of cattle and flock of sheep, cutting trees to secure the fuel, and living their humble day-to-day existence, till death brings an end to their obscure lives, and their bodies are buried in the churchyard. It is an absolutely authentic picture of the English rustic life as Gray saw it in the Buckinghamshire village of Stoke Poges.

Sitting amidst the graves of 'the rude forefathers of the hamlet', Gray recalls how these simple rustics lived their daily life, with a touch of sympathetic nostalgia.

"The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,
The Cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn
No more shall rouse them...

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke,
How jocund did they drive their team afield!
How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!"

Pastoralism and elegiac regret go hand in hand. But there is no false sentimentalism, as is found sometimes in the glorification of country life in other eighteenth century poems. Even Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* is not free from it.

Yet, in the conventional pattern of the pastoral, Gray celebrates the virtues of the poor rustics by contrasting them with the vices of the rich urban people, who boast of heraldry and wealth, and love to be flattered, and of the over ambitious who even 'wade through slaughter to a throne'.

Gray laments that the poor villagers lacked knowledge and had no way to develop their inborn talents or qualities with a touching, haunting melancholy:

"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".

But none of them could be a Milton or a Cromwell because

"Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,
And froze the genial current of the soul".

However the poet discovers one consoling fact, that the obscurity and poverty of the simple rustic also was a blessing in disguise; it saved them from vices and crimes of the privileged class. Honouring the tradition of neo-classic poetry, the pastoral life, as it is, is idealized:

"Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife
Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way".

It is a fine philosophic statement, nicely expressed in a mixed metaphor that neo-classical school favoured so much.

Accepting the fact, for consolation, that many gems and flowers do not receive the appreciation they deserve, and knowing full well that both costly memorials and humble tombs amount to same in the context of death's inflexible attitude to human beings, the poet yet insists on the virtue of pity, sympathy and human dignity that even the poors humble deceased deserve:

> "Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
> E'en from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
> E'en in our ashes live their wonted fires."

But though on the surface it is a general elegy on mankind, a personal lament is perceptible in the concluding part of the elegy. The focus is on the epitaph of a rural poet, unknown by name. Most critics take it as a sympathetic tribute to West; but is not Gray lamenting for what he could not be, and giving voice to his own impulse towards immortality in the guise of the nameless poet? Since the poetic convention of Gray's time stood in the way of any autobiographical expression of a lyrical mode, he has artistically conjured up a persona. Is he himself not the 'youth to Fortune and Fame unknown', at least till the publication of this elegy? The line 'Melancholy marked him for her own' is more applicable to Gray himself than to any other poet, real or imaginary. So in the final analysis it may be said, with due reason, that the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is not a sentimental or ghoulish grave-yard poem, but an anticipatory elegy by the poet on himself.