



## Poetic Reflections in a Cemetery: A Comparative Study of English and Persian Graveyard School of Poetry

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**Abstract.** The literature of eighteenth century is imbued with the combination of melancholy and religious didacticism. The Graveyard Poets, known as the founders of the Graveyard School, were a number of pre-Romantic English poets of eighteenth century who emphasized the subjects of death, temporality of life, and sorrow in their poetry. As their group name suggests, they reveled in writing while in cemeteries, and their works portray death's physical manifestations, and consider phenomena related with death such as darkness, the tomb, death's odors, and ghosts. While relishing in the images of death and the grave, the poets in the graveyard school sought to depict the trappings of death in a way that the reader would gain an appreciation of death as a transitional phase. The present study scrutinizes the poetic and thematic impacts of English graveyard poetry on Persian poetry, especially in the poetry of Nader Naderpour and Nosrat Rahmani. It likewise demonstrates that these two renowned Iranian poets were under the influence of the English graveyard school of poetry.

**Keywords:** Comparative Literature, Graveyard Poets, Nader Naderpour, Nosrat Rahmani

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Graveyard Poets, also called "Churchyard Poets," were a group of poets from the mid to late eighteenth century. A great deal of poetry of the Graveyard School is considered as a reaction to, and development from what has been termed the infection of the seventeenth century, melancholy. They additionally present detailed imagery bringing out the grave and the tomb, and lay stress on subjective experience, often consolidating personal material from the poet's own life. In their accentuation on the personal and individual, the graveyard poets are often viewed as forerunners of Romanticism, due to the reflection on emotional states. This emotional reflection could be traced in Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" or Keats's "Ode on Melancholy."

Furthermore, the graveyard school, with its depictions of graves, churchyards, night, death, and ghosts, is considered as laying the foundation for Gothic literature. It imparted to the dark, dim and abstruse temperament, and story lines that make up a Gothic novel. In the eighteenth century they became more about just the lament of a death, their purpose was rarely sensationalist. Most of graveyard poets were Christian clergymen. Since they were Christian writers, their writings often centered around considering human mortality, our man's relation to the divine, and also on the lives of ordinary and unidentified characters.

The graveyard poetry contemplate "the joy of gloom, the fondness for bathing one's temples in the dank night air and the musical delight of the screech owl's shriek" (Phelps, 1893, p. 100). It is considered as a poetic mode portrayed by a grave, dim and melancholy tone that undertakes religious reflections upon the triviality of common life, mortality and the comfort of the Christian faith in the form of sermons. This gloomy school of poets rises around the second half

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of the eighteenth century at the climax of the extreme religious sect of sensibility, “between the decline of neoclassical ‘Reason’ and the eruption of Romantic ‘Imagination’” (Keymer & Mee, 2004, p. 81). It remarks the “spontaneous overflow of the feeling heart with its tender emotions of pity and compassion” (Lessenich, 1989, p. 3), and obtains its pedantic and dim stroke from the mournful elegy, which predominated as a major sub-genre in the puritan milieu of the seventeenth century, “the overwhelming diversity of poetic forms...and the insufficient thematic deviation from previous traditions of memento mori...to justify a distinct poetic mode” (Draper, 1967, p. 340).

The Graveyard poetry inhales nostalgia for the golden past of Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton and inspires compassion and sensibility towards the neglected echelons of the Post-Augustan eighteenth century society. Poems are purposefully composed to rouse significant contemplations, sorrow and compassion, and to pass on the thought that adversity is the ultimate state of human beings and that the true reward is only attainable beyond the threshold of death. Moreover, the style of their poems is unique since its treatment of the landscape, illustrated under the light of the night, at the point when encompassed by the tombs of churches, inerasable memories of spiritual grandeur.

The most representative poets of the Graveyard School include Robert Blair (1699-1746), Edward Young (1683-1765), Thomas Gray (1716-1771), and more importantly, Thomas Parnell (1679-1718). He is regarded as the father of this gloomy mode, who goes beyond his peers in “A Night-Piece on Death” (1721), in which he effectively depicts the dim atmosphere of the night, graveyard, and the tomb. Robert Blair is also the father of the tomb who composed “The Grave” (1743), in which the poet appeals to death and inflames the sublime sentiment of horror in his errand poetic voice through his contemplations of the tomb in a lifeless landscape which recounts man’s predicament.

Thirdly, Edward Young in “Night Thoughts” (1742) encourages Lorenzo to convert to faith as the sole path prompting everlasting life in which a graveyard frames the whole scenario. The prose writer appears to the gloomy atmosphere of the graveyard and the abandoned church to skillfully blend it with the metaphysics of the cycle of life and death, the repetitive dichotomy between light and darkness, melancholy, the ravages of time, seclusion and religious reflections. Last but not least, Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751), deals with the cycle of life, death and spiritual salvation through a contemplation of the landscape to a meditation on the short and simple annals of the poor with strong moral considerations. There is a master alternation between generalized abstract ideas and individual examples in the poem.

Thus, the aestheticism of the graveyard school is characterized by an omnipresent poetic voice that uncovers the gloomy scene with which he encounters melancholy in his meditations upon the decadence of matter. It also avoids provoking the supernatural and superstitious because of its serious religious tone, “‘The graveyard school’ would encourage poetic addition to the other-worldly; yet a serious religious context seems to prevent frequent reference even to ghosts” (Spacks, 1962, p. 82). Then the presence of the spiritual and the unimaginable God and his evil antagonist, Satan, is explained through faith.

Among Iranian contemporary poets, the concepts associated with graveyard school of poetry could be observed in the poems of Nader Naderpour (1929-2000) and Nosrat Rahmani (1929-2000). Naderpour was regarded as one of the leaders of the movement of “New Poetry” in Iran. His poetry is “rich in imagery and deeply imbedded in the texture of Persian language” (Mozaffari & Karimi-Hakkak, 2005, p. 395). Likewise, Rahmani’s poetry is the poetry of the adamant, mortified, and revolting down-town people in Tehran’s slums. As a whole, his poetry is dramatic, sensational, and phenomenal both in structure and effect, frequently attempting to

regain the past by poeticizing its memories. The attitude of these two poets towards the surrounding world, death, and also their pessimistic view of life are the common features between their poetry and the poetry of graveyard school.

Since translation movement in the Iranian contemporary literature is extremely considerable with regard to the amount of poems translated from western literature into Persian in recent years, it enriches this hypothesis that Iranian contemporary poets were certainly under the influence of the western literary schools such as graveyard school of poetry and their poets. Therefore, this study undertakes to make a comparative study between English and Persian graveyard poetry and the impacts of this school of poetry on the Iranian contemporary poets by providing examples and examining the concepts utilized.

## 2. THE GRAVEYARD POETRY IN CONTEXT

The focus of this section is mainly on the poetry of graveyard school in order to discuss the poetic and thematic impacts of the English graveyard poets on the Iranian poets. Discussed in detail, images of death, grave, skulls, coffins, epitaphs, and worms are the recurring themes in English graveyard poetry. In addition, similar motifs could be tracked in the poetry of Nosrat Rahmani and Nader Naderpour. In fact, these two poets conveyed images, senses, dictions, thoughts, and themes utilized in the English graveyard poetry into the Persian poetry. Then it is time to undertake a comparative analysis of the concepts discussed above to demonstrate the essence of this study.

Death is a subject regularly dealt with poetry. The image of death and transcendence as the ultimate and most mysterious change of state, has accumulated a large amount of attention. It is one of the most crucial concepts utilized by graveyard poets, which is considered to lay the foundations for the graveyard poetry. An early example of the English graveyard poetry is Thomas Parnell's "A Night-Piece on Death," which narrates the story of an individual, perhaps the poet, reflecting on life and death:

The marble tombs that rise on high,  
Whose dead in vaulted arches lie,  
Whose pillars swell with sculptured stones,  
Arms, angels, epitaphs, and bones,  
These, all the poor remains of state,  
Adorn the rich, or praise the great,  
Who, while on earth in fame they live,  
Are senseless of the fame they give. (39-46)

The poem begins in the speaker's room, where his friends are studying the writings of scholars and philosophers. He gets tired and sails out to a graveyard at the dead of night. In the graveyard he is able to contemplate and meditate on his life and his eventual death. As the speaker steps on the cemetery, he considers the gravestones, trees, tombs, and the charnel-house. He describes how they are associated to each other in perceiving death. As he proceeds with his midnight travel through the cemetery he confronts with phantoms, which rise from the earth and question the poet. At the end of the poem, he encounters a mysterious voice, who unveils certain truths about death; truths that compel the poet and reader to understand the reality of death.

How great a king of fears am I!  
They view me like the last of things:  
They make, and then they dread, my stings.

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Fools! if you less provoked your fears,  
No more my spectre form appears. (62-66)

The poet tires of sitting at the feet of the sages and seeks a lesson from the grave. Then from the charnel-house he hears a voice, and bids the ravens cease their croaking and the clocks their tolling, that he may hear the message of the spirit of death. Thus, these lines are filled with the usual machinery of melancholy poetry, such as funeral yew, charnel-house, ravens, tolling clocks, mid night, and bones. It congratulates the soul on its escape from the flesh, it strikes the note of other worldliness, and is thus marked by that characteristic of the poems of melancholy which is, to depreciate the joys of this life.

However, Parnell's poem is filled with images of death, including a burial ground, tombs, the shade dark, and funerals. The poem likewise depicts images of immortality, and also Parnell's description of death as a necessity to obtain everlasting life in heaven. The horrors of death are represented by the shades, ghosts and phantoms, which burst forth from the ground, wrapped in burial clothes. Their sober screams are presented with comments on death. A "king of fears" appears through the bones of the dead and speaks to the poet about the truth of death. A charnel-house is described in the poem, and Parnell writes that a yew (a tree normally grown in graveyards) has covered the house. The same images and themes are reflected in Robert Blair's "The Grave," which is on the subject of death and the graveyard, as the title suggests. It was influential in giving rise to the graveyard school:

The keys of hell and death. The Grave, dread thing!  
Men shiver when thou'rt nam'd: nature appall'd  
Shakes off her wonted firmness. Ah! how dark  
Thy long-extended realms, and rueful wastes,  
Where nought but silence reigns, and night, dark night. (9-13)

The poem is energetic, provocative and sermonic in tone, and can be perused as an attempt by Blair to develop his ministerial office in an effort to restore the tradition of fiery and enthusiastic preaching. Irlam (1999, p. 82) labels Blair's poem as an example of where graveyard poetry "becomes winnowed from any clear religious-didactic or moral intent and becomes the pursuit of pure frisson." The poem's ghastly detail of the vicious change of death turns into an exotic torrent, and the intimacy gained by the use of directives likewise gives the impression of reducing space between the dead and the reader, serving to warn that death is constantly close.

In the opening lines, the reader stands removed from the action: it is the narrator that sees and identifies with the reader the story of the school-boy running frightened from the ghostly sounds, and the widow mourning at her husband's grave. However, Blair utilized the images of death, darkness, grave, tomb in his poetry, and also he could well illustrate the transience of life, the imminence of death, and the consolation accorded by a Christian afterlife. However, the poem is an admirable piece of English literature, not alone as a poem of melancholy and gloom, but as one with a healthy moral and spiritual atmosphere. There is gloom in the poem to satisfy the most morbid, and one can easily fancy the larger part to have been written by the light of a candle stuck in a skull. Among the single didactic poems of a gloomy cast, of which so many were produced during the eighteenth century, "The Grave" stands highest in point of execution, and is the least overweighed with mere rhetoric and commonplace.

In addition, Edward Young's "Night-Thoughts" is a long poem published in nine parts or "nights," which describes the poet's thoughts on death over an arrangement of nine nights in

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which he considers the loss of his wife and companions, and mourns human frailties. A lonely traveler in a cemetery considers frightfully:

This is the desert, this the solitude :  
How populous, how vital is the grave !  
This is creation's melancholy vault,  
The vale funereal, the sad cypress-gloom ;  
The land of apparitions, empty shades !  
All, all on earth is shadow, all beyond (115-120)

In the wake of depicting the melancholy air of the night, the poet proceeds with contemplation sprung from individual distress, which gives the poem a highly personal tone. The poem is a sort of rambling meditation on life's difficulties, death, and immortality. The poet despises the deaths of Lucia, Narcissa, and Philander, loosely identified as his wife, his stepdaughter, and her husband. Thus, a certain narrative and autobiographical interest is added to his inspirations of delightful anguish and the crowded grave.

DEATH ! great proprietor of all ! 't is thine  
To tread out empire, and to quench the stars.  
The sun himself by thy permission shines ;  
And, one day, thou shalt pluck him from his sphere.  
Amid such mighty plunder, why exhaust  
Thy partial quiver on a mark so mean? (205-210)

Among distinguishing excellences of the poem are the spirit of sublime piety and strict morality which animates the whole; dignity of thought and language, bold and lively descriptions, proper and well-supported similes, and striking repetitions, or breaks in the expression. "It irresistibly seizes the mind of the reader, arrests his attention, and powerfully interests him in the midnight sorrows of the plaintive, bard" (Bell, Bradfute, John, & Arch, 1794, p. xviii). It has a merit which no production, except one of real genius, ever possesses with scarce any facts or incidents to awaken curiosity, it speaks to the heart through the medium of the imagination. Then "a sentimental charm which hangs about moonlight graves, and whispering night winds, and funereal cypress, in which those persons especially love to indulge, who have known no deeper wounds of sensibility than those of fictitious grief or philosophical pensiveness" (Young, 1839, p. 7).

Finally, Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" which describes the supposed death of the melancholy and the early death of his friend Richard West in 1742. The first four stanzas are given over to the setting, and in these are found nearly all the properties of poets of melancholy: darkness, solemn stillness, ivy-mantled tower, owl, moon, solitary, yew tree, moldering heap, narrow cell. However, a more pensive and smooth temperament is attained in the opening verse of the poem:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.  
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea,  
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

.....  
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? (1-44)

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The poem embodies a meditation on the recurrent theme of death, and remembrance after death, the gloomy atmosphere of a graveyard, tomb, and coffins. The poem contends that the narrator attains comfort in contemplating the lives of the dark rural buried in the churchyard. It argues that all must one day lie underneath the earth, as the rustic men and women now buried in the churchyard. It further contends that no noble memorials and no complimenting words about the deceased can bring him or her back from death. The poem moves from a contemplation in a particular place upon the graves of the poor to an impression on the mortality of all humankind and on a portion of the profits of being obliged by poverty. The poem alludes to the wish of all individuals not to die and to the ways in which each is recalled after death. Gray comes to an end by conceiving his own death and how he hopes to be remembered. If this progression of thought is not entirely logical, it is all the more understandable. The popularity of Gray's elegy lies in the all-inclusive harmony managed to strike not only with the thoughts he expressed but, perhaps even more important, with the progression he gave those thoughts.

The "Elegy" is not the extreme type of melancholy poetry, and one wonders if it is for this reason that some critics consider it the high-water mark of the graveyard school of poetry. For a delight in lingering among the tombs and listening to harangues by departed spirits, the "Grave" and the "Night Piece on Death" far exceed it. Blair delights in drawing the frailties of the departed from their "dread abode", while Gray cautions in particular against such behavior. It seems that among the poems of calm, pensive melancholy the "Elegy" stands first, but that among those which express a delight in ghastliness of the tomb, that is, those properly termed "Graveyard poems", it must yield first place to such pieces as the "Grave" and the "Night Piece on death."

However, among the Iranian contemporary poets, Nader Naderpour and Nosrat Rahmani, conveyed the concepts explained in the English graveyard poetry into Persian poetry. They were certainly under the impacts of the English Graveyard School of poetry. Inspired by English graveyard poetry, Naderpour and Rahmani began to compose poems in the similar sense and structure. Naderpour's strength in creating dark and gloomy images of death, creating pictures of imperceptible contexts and making them perceptible, as well as making ambiguous sentiments and feelings comprehensible makes his poem eternal. He is considered the greatest pictorial creator in Iranian poetry in recent times:

There is nothing else except dread silence  
There is nothing else except desire for death  
It is anger and revenge distressed in eye  
It is body and weary soul in search of death  
I became alone, escaped from myself, escaped  
Perhaps this gives life to me  
I became alone if death helps  
Maybe [death] frees me from this bondage. (1-8)

The above lines of Naderpour's "There is nothing else" from his poetry collection *Eyes and Hands* (1954), introduces a descriptive style colored with great, elegant expressions and dark images. It seems when the poet composed the poem, all of nature's symbols inspired his very delicate and sensitive feelings. However, these lines explain that Naderpour is unable to release the deep pains of his life, he is overwhelmed with nature and uses beautiful expressions and terminology. His point of view toward the life is colored with melancholy and nostalgia. He is despaired in his life, escaped from himself, and wishes for death. As he says "It is body and weary soul in search of death," his soul is in search of death. He is seeking death as a means to freedom: "Maybe [death] frees me from this bondage," life is like a prison for Naderpour which

he believes that death just could comfort him and free him from this thralldom. In his poem “Through the night” from same collection he writes:

Tonight you [death] knock the door of my heart,  
That no one is aware of me  
My dark night is without any light  
You, dark eyes! Burn a light. (45-48)

However, Naderpour is akin to illustrate the darkness of the night, and he also utilizes the dim image of death. He sees death as a light; “You, dark eyes! Burn a light.” It is a light in the dark and gloomy atmosphere of his life, which could give him a new life and therefore the comfort that is he is seeking. He conveyed a vision of existence above and beyond the immediate dynamics of the period, his poetry changed the direction toward the gloomy atmosphere of the late eighteenth century of English literature. Despair, solitude, and death remained in growing intensity in the background of most of his poems throughout his life.

Nosrat Rahmani is also the poet who practiced the themes and motifs of the English graveyard school of poetry. In “desert” from *Migration and Desert* (1954), he is waiting for death. Rahmani has the same attitude towards life. He is seeking death to grant him a new life; a life that he could live in comfort:

Where is my coffin that waiting for death  
I’ve been sleeping in this dark desert  
Hey! Death put your head on my shoulder  
I’ve written a poem for your coming. (17-20)

In the above lines Rahmani appeals for death to come so as to free him from the dark desert in which he lives. He is looking for his coffin in which he ponders he may rest in peace. He likewise demands death to come closer in “Hey! Death put your head on my shoulder,” so that he could feel it since he believes that death could comfort him. He even says that he composed a poem for death to come. Then his poetry exhibits a meditation on the recurrent theme of death, coffins, and the gloomy atmosphere of a grave. Also, Rahmani in “cemetery” from the same collection of poems writes:

It was the smell of burnt rubble  
From the body of cemetery road  
.....  
Burnt branches and leaves  
Tired sky, tired Earth  
A dry and cracked pond  
A dead and care-worn cat  
In the shadow of a coffin  
A thirsty and care-worn traveler  
Hungry and empty tombs. (1-13)

In these lines the poet considers himself in a cemetery road in which everything in its surrounding is burnt and dead as “Burnt branches and leaves / Tired sky, tired Earth.” He pictorialized death, coffin, and tombs well. He personified the tombs as “Hungry and empty tombs” in such a way that they are hungry and awaiting for the dead people to devour them. Utilizing these literary devices and the melancholy and dark atmosphere of death, cemetery, and a graveyard proves that the poet incorporates the techniques of the English graveyard school.

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However, Nader Naderpour and Nosrat Rahmani regarded death as a way to achieve freedom; freedom from this overwhelming world. The repetition of the word “Death” justifies the case. They desire death because they think life was not fair and just to them. Since the English graveyard poets were Christian clergymen, they regard death as a transitional phase and also as a bridge to transfer the individuals from this devastating world to the everlasting life in which they may rest in peace and comfort. Naderpour and Rahmani likewise believed death brings peace to them and it will be their only remedy. Both poets by creating gloomy and dark atmosphere demand death. In their poems, melancholy expresses a preoccupation with death and the vanity of life, sometimes accompanied by a philosophic detachment or religious optimism regarding the next life, and an emphasis on withdrawal, solitude, and contemplation. They additionally extend the scope of enthusiastic reactions to death to incorporate sorrow, delicacy, mournfulness, sentimentality, and other states of mind, which at times verge on an aesthetic pleasure in pondering of mortality.

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The graveyard poets were a small group of poets whose given literary name stands for the theme of their works. The graveyard school of poetry focused on imagery of death, nature, the afterlife, funeral imagery, passionate language, and symbolism eluding to death and the afterlife. They lived between 1740 and 1790, and also were called as Pre-Romantics. They are occasionally considered with changes in the literary tones of the eighteenth century poetic front. It is critical to mention their influence on the development of the gothic novel as a popular literary development. Images of death, grave, night and darkness, tomb, and funerals could be observed obviously in their poetry. Their poetry seems focused on human mortality, and likewise they have often lead unfortunate lives, and were relatively dark people by personality.

However, in any consideration of the cause of the rise of the graveyard school of poets, it should not be forgotten that the period was one of spiritual and moral regeneration, and much of the melancholy literature of the period was written with the evident purpose of being spiritually and morally helpful. They were interested in dwelling on death, churchyards, the grave, and the Day of Judgment. The atmosphere in their poems is largely morbid, full of death and ghosts and mediations of the future life. However, “night, solitude and self-examination are all key tropes of the graveyard poetry but it is the accretion of these tropes into a specific consideration of death and morality that is essential characteristic of this poetic mode” (Parisot, 2013, p. 37).

All the pleasing gloom that appealed to the authors of the most representative of the graveyard poems attracted in the same way some Persian poets such as Nader Naderpour and Nosrat Rahmani. They tread through the graveyards and taking into account the objects in their presence: the gravestones, trees, tombs, and the charnel-house. They recount how these objects are connected to each other in deciphering death. Throughout their poems, the poets show little fear of death. They leave behind the troubles of the world to seek solitude in a graveyard during the dead of night. The English graveyard poets consider death as just another step in life that must be completed. They reject the fear that surrounds death, then they state who die await eternal life with God, for a religious individual, the ultimate prize that can be achieved. They portray death as brutal and rough, they characterize it as a state of ease from the troubles of the world.

The world is filled with violence, disease, and instability, and they take this chance to show the stability of death, a safe haven that ultimately leads to a union with God. Naderpour and Rahmani likewise employed the concepts utilized in the English graveyard poetry. They make use of a blend of diction associated with the poetry of the eighteenth century, focusing on individuality and gaining its inspiration from nature. They likewise depict the characteristics of

graveyard poetry, using diction to incorporate themes on death, morality and religion. They obviously utilized diction when they write on the individuals thoughts in the graveyard. Their poetry colored with images of death, including a gloomy atmosphere of a graveyard, tombs, and funerals. The tone of their poetry, solemnity, is supported by focusing attention on certain words so that the reader holds a serious attitude towards the meaning of the poem.

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