

Classic Poetry Series

Ernest Christopher Dowson

- poems -

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Ernest Christopher Dowson (1867-1900)

Ernest C. Dowson, poet, was born in Kent. He received some of his education in France, and in 1866 entered Queen's College, Oxford. Having read considerably and widely, Dowson left without obtaining a degree. He went to London where he joined the literary circle of Aubrey Beardsley, Oscar Wilde, and their friends. He was also one of the Rhymers' Club and contributed to *The Books of the Rhymers' Club* (1892 and 1894), *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*. In 1891 he met 'Missie' Adelaide Foltinowicz, a twelve-year-old who later became a key image of innocence and lost love in his poetry.

In September 1891 he converted to Roman Catholicism, which is reflected in his devotional poetry, such as 'Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration' and 'Carthusians'. These were his most successful poems. His father died in 1894 having suffered from advanced tuberculosis. Within months of his death, Dowson's mother hanged herself. A number of stories called *Dilemmas* appeared in 1895. After this, Dowson travelled between London, France and Ireland, drinking heavily. He published the first of his two books of poetry, *Verses*, in 1896, which included the acclaimed 'Non Sum Qualis Eram' or 'Cynara', and the second, *Decorations in Verse and Prose* in 1899. His one-act verse play, *The Pierrot of the Minute* came out in 1897. In addition, he translated Voltaire, Zola and Balzac. Amongst his verse which celebrates nature is 'Breton Afternoon', and the poems representing weariness and the monotony of life include 'Vitae Summa Brevis' and 'To One in Bedlam'.

A Last Word

Let us go hence: the night is now at hand;
The day is overworn, the birds all flown;
And we have reaped the crops the gods have sown;
Despair and death; deep darkness o'er the land,
Broods like an owl; we cannot understand
Laughter or tears, for we have only known
Surpassing vanity: vain things alone
Have driven our perverse and aimless band.

Let us go hence, somewhither strange and cold,
To Hollow Lands where just men and unjust
Find end of labour, where's rest for the old,
Freedom to all from love and fear and lust.
Twine our torn hands! O pray the earth enfold
Our life-sick hearts and turn them into dust.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

A Song of the setting sun

A song of the setting sun!
The sky in the west is red,
And the day is all but done;
While yonder up overhead,
All too soon,
There rises so cold the cynic moon.

A Song of a Winter day!
The wind of the north doth blow,
From a sky that's chill and gray,
On fields where no crops now grow,
Fields long shorn
Of bearded barley and golden corn.

A song of a faded flower!
'Twas plucked in the tender bud,
And fair and fresh for an hour,
In a Lady's hair it stood,
Now, ah! now,
Faded it lies in the dust and low.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Ad Domnulam Suam

Little lady of my heart !
Just a little longer,
Love me: we will pass and part,
Ere this love grow stronger.

I have loved thee, Child! too well,
To do aught but leave thee :
Nay! my lips should never tell
Any tale, to grieve thee.
Little lady of my heart !
Just a little longer,
I may love thee: we will part,
Ere my love grow stronger.

Soon thou leavest fairy-land;
Darker grow thy tresses;
Soon no more of hand in hand;
Soon no more caresses !

Little lady of my heart !
Just a little longer,
Be a child: then, we will part,
Ere this love grow stronger.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Amor Profanus

Beyond the pale of memory,
In some mysterious dusky grove;
A place of shadows utterly,
Where never coos the turtle-dove,
A world forgotten of the sun:
I dreamed we met when day was done,
And marvelled at our ancient love.

Met there by chance, long kept apart,
We wandered through the darkling glades;
And that old language of the heart
We sought to speak: alas! poor shades!
Over our pallid lips had run
The waters of oblivion,
Which crown all loves of men or maids.

In vain we stammered: from afar
Our old desire shone cold and dead:
That time was distant as a star,
When eyes were bright and lips were red.
And still we went with downcast eye
And no delight in being nigh,
Poor shadows most uncomforted.

Ah, Lalage! while life is ours,
Hoard not thy beauty rose and white,
But pluck the pretty fleeing flowers
That deck our little path of light:
For all too soon we twain shall tread
The bitter pastures of the dead:
Estranged, sad spectres of the night.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

April Love

We have walked in Love's land a little way,
We have learnt his lesson a little while,
And shall we not part at the end of day,
With a sigh, a smile?

A little while in the shine of the sun,
We were twined together, joined lips forgot
How the shadows fall when day is done,
And when Love is not.

We have made no vows - there will none be broke,
Our love was free as the wind on the hill,
There was no word said we need wish unspoke,
We have wrought no ill.

So shall we not part at the end of day,
Who have loved and lingered a little while,
Join lips for the last time, go our way,
With a sigh, a smile.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Beyond

Love's aftermath! I think the time is now
That we must gather in, alone, apart
The saddest crop of all the crops that grow,
Love's aftermath.

Ah, sweet,--sweet yesterday, the tears that start
Can not put back the dial; this is, I trow,
Our harvesting! Thy kisses chill my heart,
Our lips are cold; averted eyes avow
The twilight of poor love: we can but part,
Dumbly and sadly, reaping as we sow,
Love's aftermath.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Epigram

Because I am idolotrous and have besought
With grievous supplication and consuming prayer,
The admirable image that my love has wrought
Out of her swan's neck and her dark, abundant hair:
The jealous gods who brook no worship save their own,
Turned my live idol marble and her heart to stone.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Exchanges

All that I had I brought,
Little enough I know;
A poor rhyme roughly wrought,
A rose to match thy snow:
All that I had I brought.

Little enough I sought:
But a word compassionate,
A passing glance, or thought,
For me outside the gate:
Little enough I sought.

Little enough I found:
All that you had, perchance!
With the dead leaves on the ground,
I dance the devil's dance.
All that you had I found.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Grey Nights

A while we wandered (thus it is I dream!)
Through a long, sandy track of No Man's Land,
Where only poppies grew among the sand,
The which we, plucking, cast with scant esteem,
And ever sadlier, into the sad stream,
Which followed us, as we went, hand in hand,
Under the estranged stars, a road unplanned,
Seeing all things in the shadow of a dream.

And ever sadlier, as the stars expired,
We found the poppies rarer, till thine eyes
Grown all my light, to light me were too tired,
And at their darkening, that no surmise
Might haunt me of the lost days we desired,
After them all I flung those memories!

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Growth

I watched the glory of her childhood change,
Half-sorrowful to find the child I knew,
 (Loved long ago in lily-time),
Become a maid, mysterious and strange,
With fair, pure eyes - dear eyes, but not the eyes I knew
 Of old, in the olden time!

Till on my doubting soul the ancient good
Of her dear childhood in the new disguise
 Dawned, and I hastened to adore
The glory of her waking maidenhead,
And found the old tenderness within her deepening eyes,
 But kinder than before.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

If we must part

If we must part,
Then let it be like this.
Not heart on heart,
Nor with the useless anguish of a kiss;
But touch mine hand and say:
"Until to-morrow or some other day,
If we must part".

Words are so weak
When love hath been so strong;
Let silence speak:
"Life is a little while, and love is long;
A time to sow and reap,
And after harvest a long time to sleep,
But words are weak."

Ernest Christopher Dowson

In a Breton Cemetery

They sleep well here,
These fisher-folk who passed their anxious days
In fierce Atlantic ways;
And found not there,
Beneath the long curled wave,
So quiet a grave.

And they sleep well,
These peasant-folk, who told their lives away,
From day to market-day,
As one should tell,
With patient industry,
Some sad old rosary.

And now night falls,
Me, tempest-tost, and driven from pillar to post,
A poor worn ghost,
This quiet pasture calls;
And dear dead people with pale hands
Beckon me to their lands.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

In Tempore Senectutis

When I am old,
And sadly steal apart,
Into the dark and cold,
Friend of my heart!
Remember, if you can,
Not him who lingers, but that other man,
Who loved and sang, and had a beating heart, -
When I am old !

When I am old,
And all Love's ancient fire
Be tremulous and cold:
My soul's desire !
Remember, if you may,
Nothing of you and me but yesterday,
When heart on heart we bid the years conspire
To make us old.

When I am old,
And every star above
Be pitiless and cold:
My life's one love !
Forbid me not to go :
Remember nought of us but long ago,
And not at last, how love and pity strove
When I grew old !

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Jadis

Erewhile, before the world was old,
When violets grew and celandine,
In Cupid's train we were enrolled:

Erewhile!

Your little hands were clasped in mine,
Your head all ruddy and sun-gold
Lay on my breast which was your shrine,
And all the tale of love was told:
Ah, God, that sweet things should decline,
And fires fade out which were not cold,
Erewhile.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Non Sum Qualis eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynarae

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;
And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat,
Night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay;
Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
When I awoke and found the dawn was gray:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,
Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,
Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, all the time, because the dance was long:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,
But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,
Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine;
And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration

Calm, sad, secure; behind high convent walls,
These watch the sacred lamp, these watch and pray:
And it is one with them when evening falls,
And one with them the cold return of day.

These heed not time; their nights and days they make
Into a long returning rosary,
Whereon their lives are threaded for Christ's sake;
Meekness and vigilance and chastity.

A vowed patrol, in silent companies,
Life-long they keep before the living Christ.
In the dim church, their prayers and penances
Are fragrant incense to the Sacrificed.

Outside, the world is wild and passionate;
Man's weary laughter and his sick despair
Entreat at their impenetrable gate:
They heed no voices in their dream of prayer.

They saw the glory of the world displayed;
They saw the bitter of it, and the sweet;
They knew the roses of the world should fade,
And be trod under by the hurrying feet.

Therefore they rather put away desire,
And crossed their hands and came to sanctuary
And veiled their heads and put on coarse attire:
Because their comeliness was vanity.

And there they rest; they have serene insight
Of the illuminating dawn to be:
Mary's sweet Star dispels for them the night,
The proper darkness of humanity.

Calm, sad, secure; with faces worn and mild:
Surely their choice of vigil is the best?
Yea! for our roses fade, the world is wild;
But there, beside the altar, there is rest.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Spleen

(For Arthur Symons)

I was not sorrowful, I could not weep,
And all my memories were put to sleep.

I watched the river grow more white and strange,
All day till evening I watched it change.

All day till evening I watched the rain
Beat wearily upon the window pane

I was not sorrowful, but only tired
Of everything that ever I desired.

Her lips, her eyes, all day became to me
The shadow of a shadow utterly.

All day mine hunger for her heart became
Oblivion, until the evening came,

And left me sorrowful, inclined to weep,
With all my memories that could not sleep.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

The Garden of Shadow

Love heeds no more the sighing of the wind
Against the perfect flowers: thy garden's close
Is grown a wilderness, where none shall find
One strayed, last petal of one last year's rose.

O bright, bright hair! O mouth like a ripe fruit!
Can famine be so nigh to harvesting?
Love, that was songful, with a broken lute
In grass of graveyards goeth murmuring.

Let the wind blow against the perfect flowers,
And all thy garden change and glow with spring:
Love is grown blind with no more count of hours
Nor part in seed-time nor in harvesting.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

The Moon Maiden's Song

Sleep! Cast thy canopy
Over this sleeper's brain,
Dim grow his memory,
When he wake again.

Love stays a summer night,
Till lights of morning come;
Then takes her winged flight
Back to her starry home.

Sleep! Yet thy days are mine;
Love's seal is over thee:
Far though my ways from thine,
Dim though thy memory.

Love stays a summer night,
Till lights of morning come;
Then takes her winged flight
Back to her starry home.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

This Libation, Cupid, Take

This libation, Cupid, take,
With the lilies at thy feet;
Cherish Pierrot for their sake
Send him visions strange and sweet,
While he slumbers at thy feet.
Only love kiss him awake!
Only love kiss him awake!

Ernest Christopher Dowson

To One in Bedlam

With delicate, mad hands, behind his sordid bars,
Surely he hath his posies, which they tear and twine;
Those scentless wisps of straw, that miserably line
His strait, caged universe, whereat the dull world stares,

Pedant and pitiful. O, how his rapt gaze wars
With their stupidity! Know they what dreams divine
Lift his long, laughing reveries like enchanted wine,
And make his melancholy germane to the stars'?

O lamentable brother! if those pity thee,
Am I not fain of all thy lone eyes promise me;
Half a fool's kingdom, far from men who sow and reap,
All their days, vanity? Better than mortal flowers,
Thy moon-kissed roses seem: better than love or sleep,
The star-crowned solitude of thine oblivious hours!

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Villanelle

Come hither, child, and rest,
This is the end of day,
Behold the weary West!

Sleep rounds with equal zest
Man's toil and children's play,
Come hither, child, and rest.

My white bird, seek thy nest,
Thy drooping head down lay,
Behold the weary West!

Now eve is manifest
And homeward lies our way,
Behold the weary West!

Tired flower! upon my breast
I would wear thee alway,
Come hither, child, and rest -
Behold the weary West!

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Villanelle of the Poet's Road

Wine and woman and song,
Three things garnish our way:
Yet is day over long.

Lest we do our youth wrong,
Gather them while we may:
Wine and woman and song.

Three things render us strong,
Vine leaves, kisses and bay:
Yet is day over long.

Unto us they belong,
Us the bitter and gay,
Wine and women and song.

We, as we pass along,
Are sad that they will not stay;
Yet is day over long.

Fruits and flowers among,
What is better than they:
Wine and women and song?
Yet is day over long.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Vitae Summa Brevis Spem Nos Vetat Incohare Longam

They are not long, the weeping and the laughter,
Love and desire and hate:
I think they have no portion in us after
We pass the gate.

They are not long, the days of wine and roses:
Out of a misty dream
Our path emerges for a while, then closes
Within a dream.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

What Is Love?

What is Love?
Is it a folly,
Is it mirth, or melancholy?
Joys above,
Are there many, or not any?
What is Love?

If you please,
A most sweet folly!
Full of mirth and melancholy:
Both of these!
In its sadness worth all gladness,
If you please!

Prithee where,
Goes Love a-hiding?
Is he long in his abiding
Anywhere?
Can you bind him when you find him;
Prithee, where?

With spring days
Love comes and dallies:
Upon the mountains, through the valleys
Lie Love's ways.
Then he leaves you and deceives you
In spring days.

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Who Is This Mortal

Who is this mortal
Who ventures to-night
To woo an immortal,
Cold, cold the moon's light
For sleep at this portal,
Bold lover of night.
Fair is the mortal
In soft, silken white,
Who seeks an immortal.
Ah, lover of night,
Be warned at the portal,
And save thee in flight!

Ernest Christopher Dowson

Yvonne of Brittany

In your mother's apple-orchard,
Just a year ago, last spring:
Do you remember, Yvonne!
The dear trees lavishing
Rain of their starry blossoms
To make you a coronet?
Do you ever remember, Yvonne,
As I remember yet?

In your mother's apple-orchard,
When the world was left behind:
You were shy, so shy, Yvonne!
But your eyes were calm and kind.
We spoke of the apple harvest,
When the cider press is set,
And such-like trifles, Yvonne,
That doubtless you forget.

In the still, soft Breton twilight,
We were silent; words were few,
Till your mother came out chiding,
For the grass was bright with dew:
But I know your heart was beating,
Like a fluttered, frightened dove.
Do you ever remember, Yvonne,
That first faint flush of love?

In the fulness of midsummer,
When the apple-bloom was shed,
Oh, brave was your surrender,
Though shy the words you said.
I was glad, so glad, Yvonne!
To have led you home at last;
Do you ever remember, Yvonne,
How swiftly the days passed?

In your mother's apple-orchard
It is grown too dark to stray,
There is none to chide you, Yvonne!
You are over far away.
There is dew on your grave grass, Yvonne!
But your feet it shall not wet:
No, you never remember, Yvonne!
And I shall soon forget.

Ernest Christopher Dowson