

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **William Ernest Henley**

**- poems -**

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## **Ballade of Dead Actors**

Where are the passions they essayed,  
And where the tears they made to flow?  
Where the wild humours they portrayed  
For laughing worlds to see and know?  
Othello's wrath and Juliet's woe?  
Sir Peter's whims and Timon's gall?  
And Millamant and Romeo?  
Into the night go one and all.  
Where are the braveries, fresh or frayed?  
The plumes, the armours -- friend and foe?  
The cloth of gold, the rare brocade,  
The mantles glittering to and fro?  
The pomp, the pride, the royal show?  
The cries of war and festival?  
The youth, the grace, the charm, the glow?  
Into the night go one and all.  
The curtain falls, the play is played:  
The Beggar packs beside the Beau;  
The Monarch troops, and troops the Maid;  
The Thunder huddles with the Snow.  
Where are the revellers high and low?  
The clashing swords? The lover's call?  
The dancers gleaming row on row?  
Into the night go one and all.

William Ernest Henley

## **Barmaid**

Though, if you ask her name, she says Elise,  
Being plain Elizabeth, e'en let it pass,  
And own that, if her aspirates take their ease,  
She ever makes a point, in washing glass,  
Handling the engine, turning taps for tots,  
And countering change, and scorning what men say,  
Of posing as a dove among the pots,  
Nor often gives her dignity away.  
Her head's a work of art, and, if her eyes  
Be tired and ignorant, she has a waist;  
Cheaply the Mode she shadows; and she tries  
From penny novels to amend her taste;  
And, having mopped the zinc for certain years,  
And faced the gas, she fades and disappears.

William Ernest Henley

## **Between the Dusk of a Summer Night**

Between the dusk of a summer night  
And the dawn of a summer day,  
We caught at a mood as it passed in flight,  
And we bade it stoop and stay.  
And what with the dawn of night began  
With the dusk of day was done;  
For that is the way of woman and man,  
When a hazard has made them one.  
Arc upon arc, from shade to shine,  
The World went thundering free;  
And what was his errand but hers and mine --  
The lords of him, I and she?  
O, it's die we must, but it's live we can,  
And the marvel of earth and sun  
Is all for the joy of woman and man  
And the longing that makes them one.

William Ernest Henley

## **Croquis**

The beach was crowded. Pausing now and then,  
He groped and fiddled doggedly along,  
His worn face glaring on the thoughtless throng  
The stony peevishness of sightless men.  
He seemed scarce older than his clothes. Again,  
Grotesquing thinly many an old sweet song,  
So cracked his fiddle, his hand so frail and wrong,  
You hardly could distinguish one in ten.  
He stopped at last, and sat him on the sand,  
And, grasping wearily his bread-winner,  
Staring dim towards the blue immensity,  
Then leaned his head upon his poor old hand.  
He may have slept: he did not speak nor stir:  
His gesture spoke a vast despondency.

William Ernest Henley

## Double Ballade on the Nothingness of Things

The big teetotum twirls,  
And epochs wax and wane  
As chance subsides or swirls;  
But of the loss and gain  
The sum is always plain.  
Read on the mighty pall,  
The weed of funeral  
That covers praise and blame,  
The -isms and the -anities,  
Magnificence and shame:--  
"O Vanity of Vanities!"

The Fates are subtle girls!  
They give us chaff for grain.  
And Time, the Thunderer, hurls,  
Like bolted death, disdain  
At all that heart and brain  
Conceive, or great or small,  
Upon this earthly ball.  
Would you be knight and dame?  
Or woo the sweet humanities?  
Or illustrate a name?  
O Vanity of Vanities!

We sound the sea for pearls,  
Or drown them in a drain;  
We flute it with the merles,  
Or tug and sweat and strain;  
We grovel, or we reign;  
We saunter, or we brawl;  
We search the stars for Fame,  
Or sink her subterraneanities;  
The legend's still the same:--  
"O Vanity of Vanities!"

Here at the wine one birls,  
There some one clanks a chain.  
The flag that this man furls  
That man to float is fain.  
Pleasure gives place to pain:  
These in the kennel crawl,  
While others take the wall.  
She has a glorious aim,  
He lives for the inanities.  
What come of every claim?  
O Vanity of Vanities!

Alike are clods and earls.  
For sot, and seer, and swain,  
For emperors and for churls,  
For antidote and bane,  
There is but one refrain:

But one for king and thrall,  
For David and for Saul,  
For fleet of foot and lame,  
For pieties and profanities,  
The picture and the frame:--  
"O Vanity of Vanities!"

Life is a smoke that curls--  
Curls in a flickering skein,  
That winds and whisks and whirls,  
A figment thin and vain,  
Into the vast Inane.  
One end for hut and hall!  
One end for cell and stall!  
Burned in one common flame  
Are wisdoms and insanities.  
For this alone we came:--  
"O Vanity of Vanities!"

Envoy  
Prince, pride must have a fall.  
What is the worth of all  
Your state's supreme urbanities?  
Bad at the best's the game.  
Well might the Sage exclaim:--  
"O Vanity of Vanities!"

William Ernest Henley

## England, My England

WHAT have I done for you,  
England, my England?  
What is there I would not do,  
England, my own?  
With your glorious eyes austere,  
As the Lord were walking near,  
Whispering terrible things and dear  
As the Song on your bugles blown,  
England--  
Round the world on your bugles blown!

Where shall the watchful sun,  
England, my England,  
Match the master-work you've done,  
England, my own?  
When shall he rejoice agen  
Such a breed of mighty men  
As come forward, one to ten,  
To the Song on your bugles blown,  
England--  
Down the years on your bugles blown?

Ever the faith endures,  
England, my England:--  
'Take and break us: we are yours,  
England, my own!  
Life is good, and joy runs high  
Between English earth and sky:  
Death is death; but we shall die  
To the Song on your bugles blown,  
England--  
To the stars on your bugles blown!'

They call you proud and hard,  
England, my England:  
You with worlds to watch and ward,  
England, my own!  
You whose mail'd hand keeps the keys  
Of such teeming destinies,  
You could know nor dread nor ease  
Were the Song on your bugles blown,  
England,  
Round the Pit on your bugles blown!

Mother of Ships whose might,  
England, my England,  
Is the fierce old Sea's delight,  
England, my own,  
Chosen daughter of the Lord,  
Spouse-in-Chief of the ancient Sword,  
There 's the menace of the Word  
In the Song on your bugles blown,



England--  
Out of heaven on your bugles blown!

William Ernest Henley

## **I am the Reaper**

I am the Reaper.  
All things with heedful hook  
Silent I gather.  
Pale roses touched with the spring,  
Tall corn in summer,  
Fruits rich with autumn, and frail winter blossoms—  
Reaping, still reaping—  
All things with heedful hook  
Timely I gather.

I am the Sower.  
All the unbodied life  
Runs through my seed-sheet.  
Atom with atom wed,  
Each quickening the other,  
Fall through my hands, ever changing, still changeless.  
Ceaselessly sowing,  
Life, incorruptible life,  
Flows from my seed-sheet.

Maker and breaker,  
I am the ebb and the flood,  
Here and Hereafter,  
Sped through the tangle and coil  
Of infinite nature,  
Viewless and soundless I fashion all being.  
Taker and giver,  
I am the womb and the grave,  
The Now and the Ever

William Ernest Henley

**I. M. R. T. Hamilton Bruce (1846-1899)**

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.  
In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.  
Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.  
It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

William Ernest Henley

## **If I Were King**

If I were king, my pipe should be premier.  
The skies of time and chance are seldom clear,  
We would inform them all with bland blue weather.  
Delight alone would need to shed a tear,  
For dream and deed should war no more together.

Art should aspire, yet ugliness be dear;  
Beauty, the shaft, should speed with wit for feather;  
And love, sweet love, should never fall to sere,  
If I were king.

But politics should find no harbour near;  
The Philistine should fear to slip his tether;  
Tobacco should be duty free, and beer;  
In fact, in room of this, the age of leather,  
An age of gold all radiant should appear,  
If I were king.

William Ernest Henley

## **Invictus**

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll.  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

William Ernest Henley

## London Voluntaries IV: Out of the Poisonous East

Out of the poisonous East,  
Over a continent of blight,  
Like a maleficent Influence released  
From the most squalid cellerage of hell,  
The Wind-Fiend, the abominable--  
The Hangman Wind that tortures temper and light--  
Comes slouching, sullen and obscene,  
Hard on the skirts of the embittered night;  
And in a cloud unclean  
Of excremental humours, roused to strife  
By the operation of some ruinous change,  
Wherever his evil mandate run and range,  
Into a dire intensity of life,  
A craftsman at his bench, he settles down  
To the grim job of throttling London Town.  
So, by a jealous lightlessness beset  
That might have oppressed the dragons of old time  
Crunching and groping in the abysmal slime,  
A cave of cut-throat thoughts and villainous dreams,  
Hag-rid and crying with cold and dirt and wet,  
The afflicted City, prone from mark to mark  
In shameful occultation, seems  
A nightmare labyrinthine, dim and drifting,  
With wavering gulfs and antic heights, and shifting,  
Rent in the stuff of a material dark,  
Wherein the lamplight, scattered and sick and pale,  
Shows like the leper's living blotch of bale:  
Uncoiling monstrous into street on street  
Paven with perils, teeming with mischance,  
Where man and beast go blindfold and in dread,  
Working with oaths and threats and faltering feet  
Somewhither in the hideousness ahead;  
Working through wicked airs and deadly dews  
That make the laden robber grin askance  
At the good places in his black romance,  
And the poor, loitering harlot rather choose  
Go pinched and pined to bed  
Than lurk and shiver and curse her wretched way  
From arch to arch, scouting some threepenny prey.  
Forgot his dawns and far-flushed afterglows,  
His green garlands and windy eyots forgot,  
The old Father-River flows,  
His watchfires cores of menace in the gloom,  
As he came oozing from the Pit, and bore,  
Sunk in his filthily transfigured sides,  
Shoals of dishonoured dead to tumble and rot  
In the squalor of the universal shore:  
His voices sounding through the gruesome air  
As from the Ferry where the Boat of Doom  
With her blaspheming cargo reels and rides:  
The while his children, the brave ships,  
No more adventurous and fair,

Nor tripping it light of heel as home-bound brides,  
But infamously enchanted,  
Huddle together in the foul eclipse,  
Or feel their course by inches desperately,  
As through a tangle of alleys murder-haunted,  
From sinister reach to reach out -- out -- to sea.  
And Death the while --  
Death with his well-worn, lean, professional smile,  
Death in his threadbare working trim--  
Comes to your bedside, unannounced and bland,  
And with expert, inevitable hand  
Feels at your windpipe, fingers you in the lung,  
Or flicks the clot well into the labouring heart:  
Thus signifying unto old and young,  
However hard of mouth or wild of whim,  
'Tis time -- 'tis time by his ancient watch -- to part  
From books and women and talk and drink and art.  
And you go humbly after him  
To a mean suburban lodging: on the way  
To what or where  
Not Death, who is old and very wise, can say:  
And you -- how should you care  
So long as, unreclaimed of hell,  
The Wind-Fiend, the insufferable,  
Thus vicious and thus patient, sits him down  
To the black job of burking London Town?

William Ernest Henley

## **Madam Life's a Piece in Bloom**

Madam Life's a piece in bloom  
Death goes dogging everywhere:  
She's the tenant of the room,  
He's the ruffian on the stair.

You shall see her as a friend,  
You shall bilk him once or twice;  
But he'll trap you in the end,  
And he'll stick you for her price.

With his kneebones at your chest,  
And his knuckles in your throat,  
You would reason -- plead -- protest!  
Clutching at her petticoat;

But she's heard it all before,  
Well she knows you've had your fun,  
Gingerly she gains the door,  
And your little job is done.

William Ernest Henley



## **Margaritae Sorori**

A LATE lark twitters from the quiet skies:  
And from the west,  
Where the sun, his day's work ended,  
Lingers as in content,  
There falls on the old, gray city  
An influence luminous and serene,  
A shining peace.

The smoke ascends  
In a rosy-and-golden haze. The spires  
Shine and are changed. In the valley  
Shadows rise. The lark sings on. The sun,  
Closing his benediction,  
Sinks, and the darkening air  
Thrills with a sense of the triumphing night--  
Night with her train of stars  
And her great gift of sleep.

So be my passing!  
My task accomplish'd and the long day done,  
My wages taken, and in my heart  
Some late lark singing,  
Let me be gather'd to the quiet west,  
The sundown splendid and serene,  
Death.

William Ernest Henley

## **O Gather Me the Rose**

O gather me the rose, the rose,  
While yet in flower we find it,  
For summer smiles, but summer goes,  
And winter waits behind it.

For with the dream foregone, foregone,  
The deed foreborn forever,  
The worm Regret will canker on,  
And time will turn him never.

So were it well to love, my love,  
And cheat of any laughter  
The fate beneath us, and above,  
The dark before and after.

The myrtle and the rose, the rose,  
The sunshine and the swallow,  
The dream that comes, the wish that goes  
The memories that follow!

William Ernest Henley

## **The Rain and the Wind**

The rain and the wind, the wind and the rain --  
They are with us like a disease:  
They worry the heart, they work the brain,  
As they shoulder and clutch at the shrieking pane,  
And savage the helpless trees.

What does it profit a man to know  
These tattered and tumbling skies  
A million stately stars will show,  
And the ruining grace of the after-glow  
And the rush of the wild sunrise?

Ever the rain -- the rain and the wind!  
Come, hunch with me over the fire,  
Dream of the dreams that leered and grinned,  
Ere the blood of the Year got chilled and thinned,  
And the death came on desire!

William Ernest Henley

## There's a Regret

There's a regret  
So grinding, so immitigably sad,  
Remorse thereby feels tolerant, even glad. ...  
Do you not know it yet?

For deeds undone  
Rnacle and snarl and hunger for their due,  
Till there seems naught so despicable as you  
In all the grin o' the sun.

Like an old shoe  
The sea spurns and the land abhors, you lie  
About the beach of Time, till by and by  
Death, that derides you too --

Death, as he goes  
His ragman's round, espies you, where you stray,  
With half-an-eye, and kicks you out of his way  
And then -- and then, who knows

But the kind Grave  
Turns on you, and you feel the convict Worm,  
In that black bridewell working out his term,  
Hanker and grope and crave?

"Poor fool that might --  
That might, yet would not, dared not, let this be,  
Think of it, here and thus made over to me  
In the implacable night!"

And writhing, fain  
And like a triumphing lover, he shall take,  
His fill where no high memory lives to make  
His obscene victory vain.

William Ernest Henley

## Villon's Straight Tip to All Cross Covets

"Tout aux tavernes et aux filles."  
Suppose you screeve? or go cheap-jack?  
Or fake the broads? or fig a nag?  
Or thimble-rig? or knap a yack?  
Or pitch a snide? or smash a rag?  
Suppose you duff? or nose and lag?  
Or get the straight, and land your pot?  
How do you melt the multy swag?  
Booze and the blowens cop the lot.  
Fiddle, or fence, or mace, or mack;  
Or moskeneer, or flash the drag;  
Dead-lurk a crib, or do a crack;  
Pad with a slang, or chuck a fag;  
Bonnet, or tout, or mump and gag;  
Rattle the tats, or mark the spot;  
You can not bank a single stag;  
Booze and the blowens cop the lot.  
Suppose you try a different tack,  
And on the square you flash your flag?  
At penny-a-lining make your whack,  
Or with the mummers mug and gag?  
For nix, for nix the dibbs you bag!  
At any graft, no matter what,  
Your merry goblins soon stravag:  
Booze and the blowens cop the lot.  
THE MORAL

It's up the spout and Charley Wag  
With wipes and tickers and what not.  
Until the squeezer nips your scrag,  
Booze and the blowens cop the lot.

William Ernest Henley