

Classic Poetry Series

William Collins
- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

William Collins(1721 - 1759)

William Collins was born at Chichester and was educated at Winchester College and at Magdalen College, Oxford. His Persian Eclogues (1742) were published anonymously when he was seventeen. Coming up to London from Oxford he tried to establish himself as an author. He published Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegorical Subjects (1746) with his friend Joseph Warton whilst in London. The volume did not do well, and when his father died in 1744, Collins was left in debt and without a job. He got to know Dr Johnson who arranged an advance for him to write a translation of Aristotle's Poetics. However, when an uncle died leaving him £2000, Collins abandoned the project and paid his debts. After this he travelled for a while, but fits of depression became more serious and debilitating. He broke down completely on a journey in France in 1750, and died insane at the age of 38 in his sister's house in Chichester.

The poet Thomas Gray commented favourably on Collins's work, and as the century progressed, he gained in reputation. Some of his finest odes as said to be 'Ode to Evening' and 'Dirge in Cymbeline'. His last know poem is Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands , written in 1749. His sister destroyed his manuscripts after his death. The Complete Works are edited by Richard Wendorf and Charles Ryskamp for the Oxford English Texts Series (1978).

In The Downhill Of Life

In the downhill of life, when I find I'm declining,
May my lot no less fortunate be
Than a snug elbow-chair can afford for reclining,
And a cot that o'erlooks the wide sea;
With an ambling pad-pony to pace o'er the lawn,
While I carol away idle sorrow,
And blithe as the lark that each day hails the dawn
Look forward with hope for tomorrow.

With a porch at my door, both for shelter and shade too,
As the sunshine or rain may prevail;
And a small spot of ground for the use of the spade too,
With a barn for the use of the flail;
A cow for my dairy, a dog for my game,
And a purse when a friend wants to borrow;
I'll envy no Nabob his riches or fame,
Nor what honours may wait him tomorrow.

From the bleak northern blast may my cot be completely
Secured by a neighbouring hill;
And at night may repose steal upon me more sweetly
By the sound of a murmuring rill;
And while peace and plenty I find at my board,
With a heart free from sickness and sorrow,
With my friends may I share what today may afford,
And let them spread the table tomorrow.

And when I at last must throw off this frail cov'ring
Which I've worn for threescore years and ten,
On the brink of the grave I'll not seek to keep hov'ring,
Nor my thread wish to spin o'er again;
But my face in the glass I'll serenely survey,
And with smiles count each wrinkle and furrow;
As this old worn-out stuff, which is threadbare today,
May become everlasting tomorrow.

William Collins

Ode To Evening

If aught of oaten stop or pastoral song
May hope, chaste Eve, to soothe thy modest ear,
Like thy own solemn springs,
Thy springs, and dying gales,
O nymph reserved, while now the bright-haired sun
Sits in yon western tent, whose cloudy skirts,
With brede ethereal wove,
O'erhang his wavy bed:

Now air is hushed, save where the weak-eyed bat
With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wing,
Or where the beetle winds
His small but sullen horn,
As oft he rises 'midst the twilight path,
Against the pilgrim borne in heedless hum:
Now teach me, maid composed,
To breathe some softened strain,
Whose numbers stealing through thy dark'ning vale
May not unseemly with its stillness suit,
As, musing slow, I hail
Thy genial loved return!

For when thy folding-star arising shows
His paly circlet, at his warning lamp
The fragrant hours, and elves
Who slept in buds the day,
And many a nymph who wreathes her brows with sedge
And sheds the fresh'ning dew, and lovelier still,
The pensive pleasures sweet
Prepare thy shadowy car.

Then let me rove some wild and heathy scene,
Or find some ruin 'midst its dreary dells,
Whose walls more awful nod
By thy religious gleams.
Or if chill blust'ring winds or driving rain
Prevent my willing feet, be mine the hut
That from the mountain's side
Views wilds and swelling floods

And hamlets brown and dim-discovered spires,
And hears their simple bell, and marks o'er all
Thy dewy fingers draw
The gradual dusky veil.

While Spring shall pour his showers, as oft he wont,
And bathe thy breathing tresses, meekest Eve;
While Summer loves to sport
Beneath thy lingering light;
While fallow Autumn fills thy lap with leaves;
Or Winter, yelling through the troublous air,
Affrights thy shrinking train
And rudely rends thy robes;
So long, regardful of thy quiet rule,
Shall fancy, friendship, science, smiling peace,
Thy gentlest influence own,
And love thy favourite name!

William Collins

Ode Written In The Beginning Of The Year 1746

How sleep the brave, who sink to rest,
By all their country's wishes blest!
When Spring, with dewy fingers cold,
Returns to deck their hallowed mould,
She there shall dress a sweeter sod
Than Fancy's feet have ever trod.
By fairy hands their knell is rung;
By forms unseen their dirge is sung;
There Honour comes, a pilgrim grey,
To bless the turf that wraps their clay;
And Freedom shall awhile repair
To dwell a weeping hermit there!

William Collins

The Passions

An Ode for Music

When Music, heavenly maid, was young,
While yet in early Greece she sung,
The Passions oft, to hear her shell,
Thronged around her magic cell,
Exulting, trembling, raging, fainting,
Possess beyond the Muse's painting:
By turns they felt the glowing mind
Disturbed, delighted, raised, refined;
Till once, 'tis said, when all were fired,
Filled with fury, rapt, inspired,
From the supporting myrtles round
They snatched her instruments of sound,
And, as they oft had heard apart
Sweet lessons of her forceful art,
Each (for Madness ruled the hour)
Would prove his own expressive power.

First Fear his hand, its skill to try,
Amid the chords bewildered laid,
And back recoiled, he knew not why,
E'en at the sound himself had made.

Next Anger rushed, his eyes on fire,
In lightnings owned his secret stings:
In one rude clash he struck the lyre,
And swept with hurried hand the strings.

With woful measures wan Despair
Low sullen sounds his grief beguiled;
A solemn, strange, and mingled air,
'Twas sad by fits, by starts 'twas wild.

But thou, O Hope, with eyes so fair,
What was thy delighted measure?
Still it whispered promised pleasure,
And bade the lovely scenes at distance hail!
Still would her touch the strain prolong;

And from the rocks, the woods, the vale,
She called on Echo still, through all the song,
And, where her sweetest theme she chose,
A soft responsive voice was heard at every close;
And Hope enchanted smiled, and waved her golden hair.
And longer had she sung;—but, with a frown,
Revenge impatient rose:
He threw his blood-stained sword in thunder down;
And, with a withering look,
The war-denouncing trumpet took,
And blew a blast so loud and dread,
Were ne'er prophetic sounds so full of woe!
And ever and anon he beat
The doubling drum with furious heat;
And though sometimes each dreary pause between
Dejected Pity, at his side,
Her soul-subduing voice applied,
Yet still he kept his wild unaltered mien,
While each strained ball of sight seemed bursting from his head.
Thy numbers, Jealousy, to nought were fixed:
Sad proof of thy distressful state!
Of differing themes the veering song was mixed;
And now it courted Love, now raving called on Hate.
With eyes up-raised, as one inspired,
Pale Melancholy sat retired;
And from her wild sequestered seat,
In notes, by distance made more sweet,
Poured through the mellow horn her pensive soul;
And, dashing soft from rocks around,
Bubbling runnels joined the sound;
Through glades and glooms the mingled measure stole,
Or, o'er some haunted stream, with fond delay,
Round an holy calm diffusing,
Love of Peace, and lonely musing,
In hollow murmurs died away.
But Oh! how altered was its sprightlier tone
When Cheerfulness, a nymph of healthiest hue,
Her bow across her shoulder flung,
Her buskins gemmed with morning dew,
Blew an inspiring air that dale and thicket rung
The hunter's call, to Faun and Dryad known!
The oak-crowned Sisters, and their chaste-eyed Queen,

Satyrs and Sylvan Boys, were seen
Peeping from forth their alleys green:
Brown Exercise rejoiced to hear;
And Sport leapt up, and seized his beechen spear.
Last came Joy's ecstatic trial:
He, with viny crown advancing,
First to the lively pipe his hand addrest;
But soon he saw the brisk awakening viol,
Whose sweet entrancing voice he loved the best:
They would have thought who heard the strain
They saw, in Tempe's vale, her native maids
Amidst the festal-sounding shades
To some unwearied minstrel dancing,
While, as his flying fingers kissed the strings,
Love framed with Mirth a gay fantastic round:
Loose were her tresses seen, her zone unbound;
And he, amidst his frolic play,
As if he would the charming air repay,
Shook thousand odours from his dewy wings.

O Music, sphere-descended maid,
Friend of Pleasure, Wisdom's aid!
Why, goddess, why, to us denied,
Lay'st thou thy ancient lyre aside?
As, in that loved Athenian bower,
You learned an all-commanding power,
Thy mimic soul, O Nymph endeared,
Can well recall what then it heard;
Where is thy native simple heart,
Devote to Virtue, Fancy, Art?
Arise, as in that elder time,
Warm, energetic, chaste, sublime!
Thy wonders, in that godlike age,
Fill thy recording Sister's page—
'Tis said, and I believe the tale,
Thy humblest reed could more prevail,
Had more of strength, diviner rage,
Than all which charms this laggard age;
E'en all at once together found
Cecilia's mingled world of sound—
O! bid our vain endeavours cease:
Revive the just designs of Greece:

Return in all thy simple state!
Confirm the tales her sons relate!

William Collins