

1881

HUMANITAD

Oscar Wilde

Wilde, Oscar (1854-1900) - An Irish-born English poet, novelist, and playwright. Considered an eccentric, he was the leader of the aesthetic movement that advocated “art for art’s sake” and was once imprisoned for two years with hard labor for homosexual practices. Humanitad (1881) - One of Wilde’s long poems — a good example of his early philosophical poetry. Opening lines: It is full winter now: the trees are bare, / Save where the cattle huddle from the cold ...

HUMANITAD

It is full winter now: the trees are bare, Save where the cattle huddle from the cold Beneath the pine, for it doth never wear The Autumn's gaudy livery whose gold Her jealous brother pilfers, but is true To the green doublet; bitter is the wind, as though it blew From Saturn's cave; a few thin wisps of hay Lie on the sharp black hedges, where the wain Dragged the sweet pillage of a summer's day From the low meadows up the narrow lane; Upon the half-thawed snow the bleating sheep Press close against the hurdles, and the shivering housedogs creep From the shut stable to the frozen stream And back again disconsolate, and miss The bawling shepherds and the noisy team; And overhead in circling listlessness The cawing rooks whirl round the frosted stack, Or crowd the dripping boughs; and in the fen the ice-pools crack Where the gaunt bittern stalks among the reeds And flaps his wings, and stretches back his neck, And hoots to see the moon; across the meads Limp the poor frightened hare, a little speck; And a stray seamew with its fretful cry Flits like a sudden drift of snow against the dull gray sky.

Full winter: and a lusty goodman brings His load of faggots from the chilly byre, And stamps his feet upon the hearth, and flings The sappy billets on the waning fire, And laughs to see the sudden lightning scare His children at their play; and yet,- the Spring is in the air, Already the slim crocus stirs the snow, And soon yon blanched fields will bloom again With nodding cowslips for some lad to mow, For with the first warm kisses of the rain The winter's icy, sorrow breaks to tears, And the brown thrushes mate, and with bright eyes the rabbit peers From the dark warren where the fir-cones lie, And treads one snowdrop under foot and runs Over the mossy knoll, and blackbirds fly Across our path at evening, and the suns Stay longer with us; ah! how good to see Grass-girdled Spring in all her joy of laughing greenery Dance through the hedges till the early rose, (That sweet repentance of the thorny briar!) Burst from its sheathed emerald and disclose The little quivering disk of golden fire Which the bees know so well, for with it come Pale boy's love, sops-in-wine, and daffodillies all in bloom.

Then up and down the field the sower goes, While close behind the laughing younker scares, With shrilly whoop the black and thievish crows.

And then the chestnut-tree its glory wears, And on the grass the
 creamy blossom falls In odorous excess, and faint half-whispered
 madrigals Steal from the bluebells' nodding carillons Each breezy
 morn, and then white jessamine, That star of its own heaven, snap-
 dragons With lolling crimson tongues, and eglantine In dusty
 velvets clad usurp the bed And woodland empery, and when the
 lingering rose hath shed Red leaf by leaf its folded panoply, And
 pansies closed their purple-lidded eyes, Chrysanthemums from
 gilded argosy Unload their gaudy scentless merchandise And
 violets getting overbold withdraw From their shy nooks, and
 scarlet berries dot the leafless haw.

O happy field! and O thrice happy tree!

Soon will your queen in daisy-flowered smock, And crown of
 flower-de-luce trip down the lea, Soon will the lazy shepherds
 drive their flock Back to the pasture by the pool, and soon Through
 the green leaves will float the hum of murmuring bees at noon.

Soon will the glade be bright with bellamour, The flower which
 wantons love, and those sweet nuns Vale-lilies in their snowy
 vestiture Will tell their bearded pearls, and carnations With mitred
 dusky leaves will scent the wind, And straggling traveller's joy
 each hedge with yellow stars will bind.

Dear Bride of Nature and most bounteous Spring!

That can'st give increase to the sweet-breath'd kine, And to the kid
 its little horns, and bring The soft and silky blossoms to the vine,
 Where is that old nepenthe which of yore Man got from poppy root
 and glossy-berried mandragore!

There was a time when any common bird Could make me sing in
 unison, a time When all the strings of boyish life were stirred To
 quick response or more melodious rhyme By every forest idyll;- do
 I change? Or rather doth some evil thing through thy fair
 pleasaunce range?

Nay, nay, thou art the same: 'tis I who seek To vex with sighs thy
 simple solitude, And because fruitless tears bedew my cheek
 Would have thee weep with me in brotherhood; Fool! shall each
 wronged and restless spirit dare To taint such wine with the salt
 poison of his own despair!

Thou art the same: 'tis I whose wretched soul Takes discontent to
 be its paramour, And gives its kingdom to the rude control Of
 what should be its servitor,- for sure Wisdom is somewhere,

though the stormy sea Contain it not, and the huge deep answer
 "Tis not in me."

To burn with one clear flame, to stand erect In natural honor, not to
 bend the knee In profitless prostrations whose effect Is by, itself
 condemned, what alchemy Can teach me this? what herb Medea
 brewed Will bring the unexultant peace of essence not subdued?

The minor chord which ends the harmony, And for its answering
 brother waits in vain, Sobbing for incompleated melody Dies a
 swan's death; but I the heir of pain A silent Memnon with blank
 lidless eyes Wait for the light and music of those suns which never
 rise.

The quanchd-out torch, the lonely cypress-gloom, The little dust
 stored in the narrow urn, The gentle XAIPE of the Attic tomb, Were
 not these better far than to return To my old fitful restless malady,
 Or spend my days within the voiceless cave of misery?

ay! for perchance that poppy-crowned God Is like the watcher by a
 sick man's bed Who talks of sleep but gives it not; his rod Hath lost
 its virtue, and, when all is said, Death is too rude, too obvious a
 key To solve one single secret in a life's philosophy.

And love! that noble madness, whose august And inextinguishable
 might can slay The soul with honeyed drugs,- alas! I must From
 such sweet ruin play the runaway, Although too constant memory
 never can Forget the arched splendor of those brows Olympian

Which for a little season made my youth So soft a swoon of
 exquisite indolence That all the chiding of more prudent Truth
 Seemed the thin voice of jealousy,- O Hence Thou huntress
 deadlier than Artemis!

Go seek some other quarry! for of thy too perilous bliss My lips
 have drunk enough,- no more, no more, Though Love himself
 should turn his gilded prow Back to the troubled waters of this
 shore Where I am wrecked and stranded, even now The chariot
 wheels of passion sweep too near, Hence! Hence! I pass unto a life
 more barren, more austere.

More barren- ay, those arms will never lean Down through the
 trellised vines and draw my soul In sweet reluctance through the
 tangled green; Some other head must wear that aureole, For I am
 Hers who loves not any man Whose white and stainless bosom
 bears the sign Gorgonian.

Let Venus go and chuck her dainty page, And kiss his mouth, and
 toss his curly hair, With net and spear and hunting equipage Let

young Adonis to his tryst repair, But me her fond and subtle-
fashioned spell Delights no more, though I could win her dearest
citadel.

Ay, though I were that laughing shepherd boy Who from Mount
Ida saw the little cloud Pass over Tenedos and lofty Troy And
knew the coming of the Queen, and bowed In wonder at her feet,
not for the sake Of a new Helen would I bid her hand the apple
take.

Then rise supreme Athena argent-limbed!

And, if my lips be musicless, inspire At least my life: was not thy
glory hymned By one who gave to thee his sword and lyre Like
Aeschylus at well-fought Marathon, And died to show that
Milton's England still could bear a son!

And yet I cannot tread the portico And live without desire, fear
and pain, Or nurture that wise calm which long ago The grave
Athenian master taught to men, Self-poised, self-centered, and self-
comforted, To watch the world's vain phantasies go by with
unbowed head.

Alas! that serene brow, those eloquent lips, Those eyes that
mirrored all eternity, Rest in their own Colonos, an eclipse Hath
come on Wisdom, and Mnemosyne Is childless; in the night which
she had made For lofty secure flight Athena's owl itself hath
strayed.

Nor much with Science do I care to climb, Although by strange and
subtle witchery She draw the moon from heaven: the Muse of Time
Unrolls her gorgeous-colored tapestry To no less eager eyes; often
indeed In the great epic of Polymnia's scroll I love to read How
Asia sent her myriad hosts to war Against a little town, and
panoplied In gilded mail with jewelled scimeter, White-shielded,
purple-crested, rode the Mede Between the waving poplars and the
sea Which men call Artemisium, till he saw Thermopylae Its steep
ravine spanned by a narrow wall, And on the nearer side a little
brood Of careless lions holding festival!

And stood amazed at such hardihood, And pitched his tent upon
the reedy shore, And stayed two days to wonder, and then crept at
midnight o'er Some unfrequented height, and coming down The
autumn forests treacherously slew What Sparta held most dear and
was the crown Of far Eurotas, and passed on, nor knew How God
had staked an evil net for him In the small bay of Salamis,- and yet,
the page grows dim.

Its cadenced Greek delights me not, I feel With such a goodly time
too out of tune To love it much: for like the Dial's wheel That from
its blinded darkness strikes the noon Yet never sees the sun, so do
my eyes Restlessly follow that which from my cheated vision flies.

O for one grand unselfish simple life To teach us what is Wisdom!
speak ye hills Of lone Helvellyn, for this note of strife Shunned
your untroubled crags and crystal rills, Where is that Spirit which
living blamelessly Yet dared to kiss the smitten mouth of his own
century!

Speak ye Ridalian laurels! where is He Whose gentle head ye
sheltered, that pure soul Whose gracious days of uncrowned
majesty Through lowliest conduct touched the lofty goal Where
Love and Duty mingle! Him at least The most high Laws were glad
of, he had sat at Wisdom's feast, But we are Learning's
changelings, known by rote The clarion watchword of each
Grecian school And follow none, the flawless sword which smote
The pagan Hydra is an effete tool Which we ourselves have
blunted, what man now Shall scale the august ancient heights and
to old Reverence bow?

One such indeed I saw, but, Ichabod!

Gone is that last dear son of Italy, Who being man died for the sake
of God, And whose unrisen bones sleep peacefully.

O guard him, guard him well, my Giotto's tower, Thou marble lily
of the lily town! let not the lower Of the rude tempest vex his
slumber, or The Arno with its tawny troubled gold O'erleap its
marge, no mightier conqueror Clomb the high Capitol in the days
of old When Rome was indeed Rome, for Liberty Walked like a
Bride beside him, at which sight pale Mystery Fled shrieking to her
furthest somberest cell With an old man who grabbed rusty keys,
Fled shuddering for that immemorial knell With which oblivion
buries dynasties Swept like a wounded eagle on the blast, As to the
holy heart of Rome the great triumvir passed.

He knew the holiest heart and heights of Rome, He drave the base
wolf from the lion's lair, And now lies dead by that empyreal
dome Which overtops Valdarno hung in air By Brunelleschi- O
Melpomene Breathe through thy melancholy pipe thy sweetest
threnody!

Breathe through the tragic stops such melodies That Joy's self may
grow jealous, and the Nine Forget a-while their discreet emperies,
Mourning for him who on Rome's lordliest shrine Lit for men's

lives the light of Marathon, And bare to sun-forgotten fields the
fire of the sun!

O guard him, guard him well, my Giotto's tower, Let some young
Florentine each eventide Bring coronals of that enchanted flower
Which the dim woods of Vallombrosa hide, And deck the marble
tomb wherein he lies Whose soul is as some mighty orb unseen of
mortal eyes.

Some mighty orb whose cycled wanderings, Being tempest-driven
to the furthest rim Where Chaos meets Creation and the wings Of
the eternal chanting Cherubim Are pavilioned on Nothing, passed
away Into a moonless void- and yet, though he is dust and clay, He
is not dead, the immemorial Fates Forbid it, and the closing shears
refrain, Lift up your heads ye everlasting gates!

Ye argent clarions sound a loftier strain!

For the vile thing he hated lurks within Its sombre house, alone
with God and memories of sin.

Still what avails it that she sought her cave That murderous mother
of red harlotries? At Munich on the marble architrave The Grecian
boys die smiling, but the seas Which wash Aegina fret in loneliness
Not mirroring their beauty, so our lives grow colourless For lack of
our ideals, if one star Flame torch-like in the heavens the unjust
Swift daylight kills it, and no trump of war Can wake to passionate
voice the silent dust Which was Mazzini once! rich Niobe For all
her stony sorrows hath her sons, but Italy!

What Easter Day shall make her children rise, Who were not Gods
yet suffered, what sure feet Shall find their graveclothes folded?
what clear eyes Shall see them bodily? O it were meet To roll the
stone from off the sepulchre And kiss the bleeding roses of their
wounds, in love of Her Our Italy! our mother visible!

Most blessed among nations and most sad, For whose dear sake
the young Calabrian fell That day at Aspromonte and was glad
That in an age when God was bought and sold One man could die
for Liberty! but we, burnt out and cold, See Honour smitten on the
cheek and gyves Bind the sweet feet of Mercy: Poverty Creeps
through our sunless lanes and with sharp knives Cuts the warm
throats of children stealthily, And no word said:- O we are
wretched men Unworthy of our great inheritance! where is the pen
Of austere Milton? where the mighty sword Which slew its master
righteously? the years Have lost their ancient leader, and no word
Breaks from the voiceless tripod on our ears; While as a ruined

mother in some spasm Bears a base child and loathes it, so our best
 enthusiasm Genders unlawful children, Anarchy Freedom's own
 Judas, the vile prodigal License who steals the gold of Liberty And
 yet nothing, Ignorance the real One Fratricide since Cain, Envy the
 asp That stings itself to anguish, Avarice whose palsied grasp Is in
 its extent stiffened, moneyed Greed For whose dull appetite men
 waste away Amid the whirr of wheels and are the seed Of things
 which slay their sower, these each day Sees rife in England, and
 the gentle feet Of Beauty tread no more the stones of each unlovely
 street.

What even Cromwell spared is desecrated By weed and worm, left
 to the stormy play Of wind and beating snow, or renovated By
 more destructful hands: Time's worst decay Will wreath its ruins
 with some loveliness, But these new Vandals can but make a
 rainproof barrenness.

Where is that Art which bade the Angels sing Through Lincoln's
 lofty choir, till the air Seems from such marble harmonies to ring
 With sweeter song than common lips can dare To draw from actual
 reed? ah! where is now The cunning hand which made the
 flowering hawthorn branches bow For Southwell's arch, and
 carved the House of One Who loved the lilies of the field with all
 Our dearest English flowers? the same sun Rises for us: the
 season's natural Weave the same tapestry of green and gray: The
 unchanged hills are with us: but that Spirit hath passed away.

And yet perchance it may be better so, For Tyranny is an
 incestuous Queen, Murder her brother is her bedfellow, And the
 Plague chambers with her: in obscene And bloody paths her
 treacherous feet are set; Better the empty desert and a soul
 inviolate!

For gentle brotherhood, the harmony Of living in the healthful air,
 the swift Clean beauty of strong limbs when men are free And
 women chaste, these are the things which lift Our souls up more
 than even Agnolo's Gaunt blinded Sibyl poring o'er the scroll of
 human woes, Or Titian's little maiden on the stair White as her
 own sweet lily and as tall, Or Mona Lisa smiling through her
 hair, Ah! somehow life is bigger after all Than any painted angel
 could we see The God that is within us! The old Greek serenity
 Which curbs the passion of that level line Of marble youths, who
 with untroubled eyes And chastened limbs ride round Athena's
 shrine And mirror her divine economies, And balanced symmetry
 of what in man Would else wage ceaseless warfare,- this at least
 within the span Between our mother's kisses and the grave Might

so inform our lives, that we could win Such mighty empires that
 from her cave Temptation would grow hoarse, and pallid Sin
 Would walk ashamed of his adulteries, And Passion creep from
 out the House of Lust with startled eyes.

To make the Body and the Spirit one With all right things, till no
 thing live in vain From morn to noon, but in sweet unison With
 every pulse of flesh and throb of pain The Soul in flawless essence
 high enthroned, Against all outer vain attack invincibly bastioned,
 Mark with serene impartiality The strife of things, and yet be
 comforted, Knowing that by the chain causality All separate
 existences are wed Into one supreme whole, whose utterance Is joy,
 or holier praise! ah! surely this were governance Of life in most
 august omnipresence, Through which the rational intellect would
 find In passion its expression, and mere sense Ignoble else, lend
 fire to the mind, And being joined with it in harmony More
 mystical than that which binds the stars planetary Strike from their
 several tones one octave chord Whose cadence being measureless
 would fly Through all the circling spheres, then to its Lord Return
 refreshed with its new empery And more exultant power,- this
 indeed Could we but reach it were to find the last, the perfect
 creed.

Ah! it was easy when the world was young To keep one's life free
 and inviolate, From our sad lips another song is rung, By our own
 hands our heads are desecrate, Wanderers in drear exile and
 dispossessed Of what should be our own, we can but feed on wild
 unrest.

Somehow the grace, the bloom of things has flown, And of all men
 we are most wretched who Must live each other's lives and not our
 own For very pity's sake and then undo All that we live for- it was
 otherwise When soul and body seemed to blend in mystic
 symphonies.

But we have left those gentle haunts to pass With weary feet to the
 new Calvary, Where we behold, as one who in a glass Sees his own
 face, self-slain Humanity, And in the dumb reproach of that sad
 gaze Learn what an awful phantom the red hand of man can raise.

O smitten mouth! O forehead crowned with thorn!

O chalice of all common miseries!

Thou for our sakes that loved thee not hast borne An agony of
 endless centuries, And we were vain and ignorant nor knew That
 when we stabbed thy heart it was our own real hearts we slew.

Being ourselves the sowers and the seeds, The night that covers
and the lights that fade, The spear that pierces and the side that
bleeds, The lips betraying and the life betrayed; The deep hath
calm: the moon hath rest: but we Lords of the natural world are yet
our own dread enemy.

Is this the end of all that primal force Which, in its changes being
still the same, From eyeless Chaos cleft its upward course, Through
ravenous seas and whirling rocks and flame, Till the suns met in
heaven and began Their cycles, and the morning stars sang, and
the Word was Man!

Nay, nay, we are but crucified, and though The bloody sweat falls
from our brows like rain, Loosen the nails- we shall come down I
know, Stanch the red wounds- we shall be whole again, No need
have we of hyssop-laden rod, That which is purely human that is
Godlike that is God.

THE END