

**1894**

**THE SPHINX**

**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. Sphinx (Wilde) (1894) - Modelled somewhat after Poe's "The Raven," this poem tells of the Sphinx's thousand weary centuries of history. It is one of the earliest incidences of Wilde alluding to his secret sexual life.*

## **THE SPHINX**

In a dim corner of my room For longer than my fancy thinks, A beautiful and silent Sphinx Has watched me through the shifting gloom.

Inviolata and immobile She does not rise, she does not stir For silver moons are nought to her, And nought to her the suns that reel.

Red follows grey across the air The waves of moonlight ebb and flow But with the dawn she does not go And in the night-time she is there.

Dawn follows Dawn, and Nights grow old And all the while this curious cat Lies crouching on the Chinese mat With eyes of satin rimmed with gold.

Upon the mat she lies and leers, And on the tawny throat of her Flutters the soft and fur Or ripples to her pointed ears.

Come forth my lovely seneschal, So somnolent, so statuesque, Come forth you exquisite grotesque, Half woman and half animal, Come forth my lovely languorous Sphinx, And put your head upon my knee And let me stroke your throat and see Your body spotted like the Lynx, And let me touch those curving claws Of yellow ivory, and grasp The tail that like a monstrous Asp Coils round your heavy velvet paws.

A thousand weary centuries Are thine, while I have hardly seen Some twenty summers cast their green For Autumn's gaudy liveries, But you can read the Hieroglyphs On the great sandstone obelisks, And you have talked with Basilisks And you have looked on Hippogriffs O tell me, were you standing by When Isis to Osiris knelt, And did you watch the Egyptian melt Her union for Anthony, And drink the jewel-drunken wine, And bend her head in mimic awe To see the huge pro-consul draw The salted tunny from the brine?

And did you mark the Cyprian kiss With Adon on his catafalque, And did you follow Amanalk The god of Heliopolis?

And did you talk with Thoth, and did You hear the moon-horned Io weep And know the painted kings who sleep Beneath the wedge-shaped Pyramid?

Lift up your large black satin eyes Which are like cushions where one sinks, Fawn at my feet, fantastic Sphinx, And sing me all your memories.

Sing to me of the Jewish maid Who wandered with the Holy Child,  
And how you led them through the wild, And how they slept  
beneath your shade.

Sing to me of that odorous Green eve when crouching by the  
marge You heard from Adrian's gilded barge The laughter of  
Antinous, And lapped the stream, and fed your drouth, And  
watched with hot and hungry stare The ivory body of that rare  
Young slave with his pomegranate mouth.

Sing to me of the Labyrinth In which the two-formed bull was  
stalled, Sing to me of the night you crawled Across the temple's  
granite plinth When through the purple corridors The screaming  
scarlet Ibis flew In terror, and a horrid dew Dripped from the  
moaning Mandragores, And the great torpid crocodile Within the  
great shed slimy tears, And tore the jewels from his ears And  
staggered back into the Nile, And the Priests cursed you with shrill  
psalms As in your claws you seized their snake And crept away  
with it to slake Your passion by the shuddering palms.

Who were your lovers, who were they Who wrestled for you in the  
dust? Which was the vessel of your Lust, What Leman had you  
every day?

Did giant lizards come and crouch Before you on the reedy banks?  
Did Gryphons with great metal flanks Leap on you in your  
trampled couch, Did monstrous hippopotami Come sidling to you  
in the mist Did gilt-scaled dragons write and twist With passion as  
you passed them by?

And from that brick-built Lycian tomb What horrible Chimaera  
came With fearful heads and fearful flame To breed new wonders  
from your womb?

Or had you shameful secret guests And did you hurry to your  
home Some Nereid coiled in amber foam With curious rock-crystal  
breasts; Or did you, treading through the froth, Call to the brown  
Sidonian For tidings of Leviathan, Leviathan of Behemoth?

Or did you when the sun was set, Climb up the cactus-covered  
slope To meet your swarthy Ethiop Whose body was of polished  
jet?

Or did you while the earthen skiffs Dropt down the gray Nilotic  
flats At twilight, and the flickering bats Flew round the temple's  
triple glyphs Steal to the border of the bar And swim across the  
silent lake And slink into the vault and make The Pyramid your  
lupanar, Till from each black sarcophagus Rose up the painted,

swathed dead, Or did you lure unto your bed The ivory-horned  
Trageophos?

Or did you love the God of flies Who plagued the Hebrews and  
was splashed With wine unto the waist, or Pasht Who had green  
beryls for her eyes?

Or that young God, the Tyrian, Who was more amorous than the  
dove Of Ashtaroth, or did you love The God of the Assyrian,  
Whose wings that like transparent talc Rose high above his hawk-  
faced head Painted with silver and with red And ribbed with rods  
of Oreichalch?

Or did huge Apis from his car Leap down and lay before your feet  
Big blossoms of the honey-sweet, And honey-coloured nenuphar?

How subtle secret is your smile; Did you love none then? Nay I  
know Great Ammon was your bedfellow, He lay with you beside  
the Nile.

The river-horses in the slime Trumpeted when they saw him come  
Odorous with Syrian galbanum And smeared with spikenard and  
with thyme.

He came along the river bank Like some tall galley argent-sailed  
He strode across the waters, mailed In beauty and the waters sank.

He strode across the desert sand, He reached the valley where you  
lay, He waited till the dawn of day, Then touched your black  
breasts with his hand.

You kissed his mouth with mouth of flame, You made the horned-  
god your own, You stood behind him on his throne; You called  
him by his secret name, You whispered monstrous oracles Into the  
caverns of his ears, With blood of goats and blood of steers You  
taught him monstrous miracles, While Ammon was your  
bedfellow Your chamber was the steaming Nile And with your  
curved Archaic smile You watched his passion come and go.

With Syrian oils his brows were bright And wide-spread as a tent  
at noon His marble limbs made pale the moon And lent the day a  
larger light, His long hair was nine cubits span And coloured like  
that yellow gem Which hidden in their garments' hem, The  
merchants bring from Kurdistan.

His face was as the must that lies Upon a vat of new-made wine,  
The seas could not insapphirine The perfect azure of his eyes.

His thick, soft throat was white as milk  
 And threaded with thin veins of blue  
 And curious pearls like frozen dew  
 Were broidered on his flowing silk.

On pearl and porphyry pedestalled  
 He was too bright to look upon  
 For on his ivory breast there shone  
 The wondrous ocean-emerald,-  
 That mystic, moonlight jewel which  
 Some diver of the Colchian caves  
 Had found beneath the blackening waves  
 And carried to the Colchian witch.

Before his gilded galiot  
 Ran naked vine-wreathed corybants  
 And lines of swaying elephants  
 Knelt down to draw his chariot,  
 And lines of swarthy Nubians  
 Bore up his litter as he rode  
 Down the great granite-paven road,  
 Between the nodding peacock fans.

The merchants brought him steatite  
 From Sidon in their painted ships;  
 The meanest cup that touched his lips  
 Was fashioned from a chrysolite.

The merchants brought him cedar chests  
 Of rich apparel, bound with cords;  
 His train was borne by Memphian lords;  
 Young kings were glad to be his guests.

Ten hundred shaven priests did bow  
 To Ammon's altar day and night,  
 Ten hundred lamps did wave their light  
 Through Ammon's carven house,-  
 and now Foul snake and speckled adder with  
 Their young ones crawl from stone to stone  
 For ruined is the house, and prone  
 The great rose-marble monolith;  
 Wild ass or strolling jackal comes  
 And crouches in the mouldering gates,  
 Wild satyrs call unto their mates  
 Across the fallen fluted drums.

And on the summit of the pile,  
 The blue-faced ape of Horus sits  
 And gibbers while the fig-tree splits  
 The pillars of the peristyle.

The God is scattered here and there;  
 Deep hidden in the windy sand  
 I saw his giant granite hand  
 Still clenched in impotent despair.

And many a wandering caravan  
 Of stately negroes, silken-shawled,  
 Crossing the desert, halts appalled  
 Before the neck that none can span.

And many a bearded Bedouin  
 Draws back his yellow-striped burnous  
 To gaze upon the Titan thews  
 Of him who was thy paladin.

Go seek his fragments on the moor,  
 And wash them in the evening dew,  
 And from their pieces make anew  
 Thy mutilated paramour.

Go seek them where they lie alone And from their broken pieces  
make Thy bruised bedfellow! And wake Mad passions in the  
senseless stone!

Charm his dull ear with Syrian hymns; He loved your body; oh be  
kind!

Pour spikenard on his hair and wind Soft rolls of linen round his  
limbs; Wind round his head the figured coins, Stain with red fruits  
the pallid lips; Weave purple for his shrunken hips And purple for  
his barren loins!

Away to Egypt! Have no fear; Only one God has ever died, Only  
one God has let His side Be wounded by a soldier's spear.

But these, thy lovers, are not dead; Still by the hundred-cubit gate  
Dog-faced Anubis sits in state With lotus lilies for thy head.

Still from his chair of porphyry Giant Memnon strains his lidless  
eyes Across the empty land and cries Each yellow morning unto  
thee.

And Nilus with his broken horn Lies in his black and oozy bed  
And till thy coming will not spread His waters on the withering  
corn.

Your lovers are not dead, I know, And will rise up and hear thy  
voice And clash their symbols and rejoice And run to kiss your  
mouth,- and so Set wings upon your argosies!

Set horses to your ebon car!

Back to your Nile! Or if you are Grown sick of dead divinities;  
Follow some roving lion's spoor Across the copper-coloured plain,  
Reach out and hale him by the mane And bid him to be your  
paramour!

Crouch by his side upon the grass And set your white teeth in his  
throat, And when you hear his dying note, Lash your long flanks  
of polished brass And take a tiger for your mate, Whose amber  
sides are flecked with black, And ride upon his gilded back In  
triumph through the Theban gate, And toy with him in amorous  
jests, And when he turns and snarls and gnaws, Oh smite him with  
your jasper claws And bruise him with your agate breasts!

Why are you tarrying? Get hence!

I weary of your sullen ways.

I weary of your steadfast gaze, Your somnolent magnificence.

Your horrible and heavy breath Makes the light flicker in the lamp,  
And on my brow I feel the damp And dreadful dews of night and

death, Your eyes are like fantastic moons That shiver in some stagnant lake, Your tongue is like a scarlet snake That dances to fantastic tunes.

Your pulse makes poisonous melodies, And your black throat is like the hole Left by some torch or burning coal On Saracenic tapestries.

Away! the sulphur-coloured stars Are hurrying through the Western gate!

Away! Or it may be too late To climb their silent silver cars!

See, the dawn shivers round the gray, Gilt-dialled towers, and the rain Streams down each diamonded pane And blurs with tears the wannish day.

What snake-tressed fury, fresh from Hell, With uncouth gestures and unclean, Stole from the poppy-drowsy queen And led you to a student's cell?

What songless, tongueless ghost of sin Crept through the curtains of the night And saw my taper burning bright, And knocked and bade you enter in?

Are there not others more accursed, Whiter with leprosy than I? Are Abana and Pharphar dry, That you come here to slake your thirst?

False Sphinx! False Sphinx! By reedy Styx, Old Charon, leaning on his oar, Waits for my coin. Go thou before And leave me to my crucifix, Whose pallid burden, sick with pain, Watches the world with wearied eyes.

And weeps for every soul that dies, And weep for every soul in vain!!.

**THE END**