

The Burden of Itys Full Poem

Writer: Oscar Wilde | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

The Burden of Itys

[Oscar Wilde](#) (1854 -1900)

This English Thames is holier far than Rome,
Those harebells like a sudden flush of sea
Breaking across the woodland, with the foam
Of meadow-sweet and white anemone
To fleck their blue waves,—God is likelier there,
Than hidden in that crystal-hearted star the pale monks bear!
Those violet-gleaming butterflies that take
Yon creamy lily for their pavilion
Are monsignores, and where the rushes shake
A lazy pike lies basking in the sun
His eyes half-shut,—He is some mitred old
Bishop in partibus! look at those gaudy scales all green and gold.
The wind the restless prisoner of the trees
Does well for Palæstrina, one would say
The mighty master's hands were on the keys
Of the Maria organ, which they play
When early on some sapphire Easter morn
In a high litter red as blood or sin the Pope is borne
From his dark House out to the Balcony
Above the bronze gates and the crowded square,
Whose very fountains seem for ecstasy
To toss their silver lances in the air,
And stretching out weak hands to East and West
In vain sends peace to peaceless lands, to restless nations rest.
Is not yon lingering orange afterglow
That stays to vex the moon more fair than all
Rome's lordliest pageants! strange, a year ago
I knelt before some crimson Cardinal
Who bare the Host across the Esquiline,

And now—those common poppies in the wheat seem twice as fine.
The blue-green beanfields yonder, tremulous
 With the last shower, sweeter perfume bring
Through this cool evening than the odorous
 Flame-jewelled censers the young deacons swing,
When the grey priest unlocks the curtained shrine,
And makes God's body from the common fruit of corn and vine.
Poor Fra Giovanni bawling at the mass
 Were out of tune now, for a small brown bird
Sings overhead, and through the long cool grass
 I see that throbbing throat which once I heard
On starlit hills of flower-starred Arcady,
Once where the white and crescent sand of Salamis meets sea.
Sweet is the swallow twittering on the eaves
 At daybreak, when the mower whets his scythe,
And stock-doves murmur, and the milkmaid leaves
 Her little lonely bed, and carols blithe
To see the heavy-lowing cattle wait
Stretching their huge and dripping mouths across the farmyard gate.
And sweet the hops upon the Kentish leas,
 And sweet the wind that lifts the new-mown hay,
And sweet the fretful swarms of grumbling bees
 That round and round the linden blossoms play;
And sweet the heifer breathing in the stall,
And the green bursting figs that hang upon the red-brick wall.
And sweet to hear the cuckoo mock the spring
 While the last violet loiters by the well,
And sweet to hear the shepherd Daphnis sing
 The song of Linus through a sunny dell
Of warm Arcadia where the corn is gold
And the slight lithe-limbed reapers dance about the wattled fold.
And sweet with young Lycoris to recline
 In some Illyrian valley far away,
Where canopied on herbs amaracine
 We too might waste the summer-tranced day
Matching our reeds in sportive rivalry,
While far beneath us frets the troubled purple of the sea.

But sweeter far if silver-sandalled foot
Of some long-hidden God should ever tread
The Nuneham meadows, if with reeded flute
Pressed to his lips some Faun might raise his head
By the green water-flags, ah! sweet indeed
To see the heavenly herdsman call his white-fleeced flock to feed.
Then sing to me thou tuneful chorister,
Though what thou sing'st be thine own requiem!
Tell me thy tale thou hapless chronicler
Of thine own tragedies! do not contemn
These unfamiliar haunts, this English field,
For many a lovely coronal our northern isle can yield,
Which Grecian meadows know not, many a rose,
Which all day long in vales Æolian
A lad might seek in vain for, overgrows
Our hedges like a wanton courtesan
Unthrifty of her beauty, lilies too
Ilissus never mirrored star our streams, and cockles blue
Dot the green wheat which, though they are the signs
For swallows going south, would never spread
Their azure tents between the Attic vines;
Even that little weed of ragged red,
Which bids the robin pipe, in Arcady
Would be a trespasser, and many an unsung elegy
Sleeps in the reeds that fringe our winding Thames
Which to awake were sweeter ravishment
Than ever Syrinx wept for, diadems
Of brown bee-studded orchids which were meant
For Cytheræa's brows are hidden here
Unknown to Cytheræa, and by yonder pasturing steer
There is a tiny yellow daffodil,
The butterfly can see it from afar,
Although one summer evening's dew could fill
Its little cup twice over ere the star
Had called the lazy shepherd to his fold
And be no prodigal, each leaf is flecked with spotted gold
As if Jove's gorgeous leman Danaë

Hot from his gilded arms had stooped to kiss
The trembling petals, or young Mercury
Low-flying to the dusky ford of Dis
Had with one feather of his pinions
Just brushed them!—the slight stem which bears the burden of its suns
Is hardly thicker than the gossamer,
Or poor Arachne's silver tapestry,—
Men say it bloomed upon the sepulchre
Of One I sometime worshipped, but to me
It seems to bring diviner memories
Of faun-loved Heliconian glades and blue nymph-haunted seas,
Of an untrodden vale at Tempe where
On the clear river's marge Narcissus lies,
The tangle of the forest in his hair,
The silence of the woodland in his eyes,
Wooing that drifting imagery which is
No sooner kissed than broken, memories of Salmacis
Who is not boy or girl and yet is both,
Fed by two fires and unsatisfied
Through their excess, each passion being loth
For love's own sake to leave the other's side
Yet killing love by staying, memories
Of Oreads peeping through the leaves of silent moon-lit trees,
Of lonely Ariadne on the wharf
At Naxos, when she saw the treacherous crew
Far out at sea, and waved her crimson scarf
And called false Theseus back again nor knew
That Dionysos on an amber pard
Was close behind her, memories of what Maeonia's bard
With sightless eyes beheld, the wall of Troy,
Queen Helen lying in the carven room,
And at her side an amorous red-lipped boy
Trimming with dainty hand his helmet's plume,
And far away the moil, the shout, the groan,
As Hector shielded off the spear and Ajax hurled the stone;
Of wingèd Perseus with his flawless sword
Cleaving the snaky tresses of the witch,

And all those tales imperishably stored
In little Grecian urns, freightage more rich
Than any gaudy galleon of Spain
Bare from the Indies ever! these at least bring back again,
For well I know they are not dead at all,
The ancient Gods of Grecian poesy,
They are asleep, and when they hear thee call
Will wake and think 't is very Thessaly,
This Thames the Daulian waters, this cool glade
The yellow-irised mead where once young Itys laughed and played.
If it was thou dear jasmine-cradled bird
Who from the leafy stillness of thy throne
Sang to the wondrous boy, until he heard
The horn of Atalanta faintly blown
Across the Cumner hills, and wandering
Through Bagley wood at evening found the Attic poets' spring,—
Ah! tiny sober-suited advocate
That pleadest for the moon against the day!
If thou didst make the shepherd seek his mate
On that sweet questing, when Proserpina
Forgot it was not Sicily and leant
Across the mossy Sandford stile in ravished wonderment,—
Light-winged and bright-eyed miracle of the wood!
If ever thou didst soothe with melody
One of that little clan, that brotherhood
Which loved the morning-star of Tuscany
More than the perfect sun of Raphael
And is immortal, sing to me! for I too love thee well,
Sing on! sing on! let the dull world grow young,
Let elemental things take form again,
And the old shapes of Beauty walk among
The simple garths and open crofts, as when
The son of Leto bare the willow rod,
And the soft sheep and shaggy goats followed the boyish God.
Sing on! sing on! and Bacchus will be here
Astride upon his gorgeous Indian throne,
And over whimpering tigers shake the spear

With yellow ivy crowned and gummy cone,
While at his side the wanton Bassarid
Will throw the lion by the mane and catch the mountain kid!
Sing on! and I will wear the leopard skin,
And steal the moonéd wings of Ashtaroth,
Upon whose icy chariot we could win
Cithæron in an hour e'er the froth
Has overbrimmed the wine-vat or the Faun
Ceased from the treading! ay, before the flickering lamp of dawn
Has scared the hooting owlet to its nest,
And warned the bat to close its filmy vans,
Some Mænad girl with vine-leaves on her breast
Will filch their beechnuts from the sleeping Pans
So softly that the little nested thrush
Will never wake, and then with shrilly laugh and leap will rush
Down the green valley where the fallen dew
Lies thick beneath the elm and count her store,
Till the brown Satyrs in a jolly crew
Trample the loosestrife down along the shore,
And where their hornèd master sits in state
Bring strawberries and bloomy plums upon a wicker crate!
Sing on! and soon with passion-wearied face
Through the cool leaves Apollo's lad will come,
The Tyrian prince his bristled boar will chase
Adown the chestnut-copses all a-bloom,
And ivory-limbed, grey-eyed, with look of pride,
After yon velvet-coated deer the virgin maid will ride.
Sing on! and I the dying boy will see
Stain with his purple blood the waxen bell
That overweighs the jacinth, and to me
The wretched Cyprian her woe will tell,
And I will kiss her mouth and streaming eyes,
And lead her to the myrtle-hidden grove where Adon lies!
Cry out aloud on Itys! memory
That foster-brother of remorse and pain
Drops poison in mine ear,—O to be free,
To burn one's old ships! and to launch again

Into the white-plumed battle of the waves
And fight old Proteus for the spoil of coral-flowered caves!
O for Medea with her poppied spell!
 O for the secret of the Colchian shrine!
O for one leaf of that pale asphodel
 Which binds the tired brows of Proserpine,
And sheds such wondrous dew at eve that she
Dreams of the fields of Enna, by the far Sicilian sea,
Where oft the golden-girdled bee she chased
 From lily to lily on the level mead,
Ere yet her sombre Lord had bid her taste
 The deadly fruit of that pomegranate seed,
Ere the black steeds had harried her away
Down to the faint and flowerless land, the sick and sunless day.
O for one midnight and as paramour
 The Venus of the little Melian farm!
O that some antique statue for one hour
 Might wake to passion, and that I could charm
The Dawn at Florence from its dumb despair
Mix with those mighty limbs and make that giant breast my lair!
Sing on! sing on! I would be drunk with life,
 Drunk with the trampled vintage of my youth,
I would forget the wearying wasted strife,
 The riven vale, the Gorgon eyes of Truth,
The prayerless vigil and the cry for prayer,
The barren gifts, the lifted arms, the dull insensate air!
Sing on! sing on! O feathered Niobe,
 Thou canst make sorrow beautiful, and steal
From joy its sweetest music, not as we
 Who by dead voiceless silence strive to heal
Our too untented wounds, and do but keep
Pain barricaded in our hearts, and murder pillowed sleep.
Sing louder yet, why must I still behold
 The wan white face of that deserted Christ,
Whose bleeding hands my hands did once enfold,
 Whose smitten lips my lips so oft have kissed,
And now in mute and marble misery

Sits in his lone dishonoured House and weeps, perchance for me.
O memory cast down thy wreathèd shell!
Break thy hoarse lute O sad Melpomene!
O sorrow sorrow keep thy cloistered cell
Nor dim with tears this limpid Castaly!
Cease, cease, sad bird, thou dost the forest wrong
To vex its sylvan quiet with such wild impassioned song!
Cease, cease, or if 'tis anguish to be dumb
Take from the pastoral thrush her simpler air,
Whose jocund carelessness doth more become
This English woodland than thy keen despair,
Ah! cease and let the northwind bear thy lay
Back to the rocky hills of Thrace, the stormy Daulian bay.
A moment more, the startled leaves had stirred,
Endymion would have passed across the mead
Moonstruck with love, and this still Thames had heard
Pan plash and paddle groping for some reed
To lure from her blue cave that Naiad maid
Who for such piping listens half in joy and half afraid.
A moment more, the waking dove had cooed,
The silver daughter of the silver sea
With the fond gyves of clinging hands had wooed
Her wanton from the chase, and Dryope
Had thrust aside the branches of her oak
To see the lusty gold-haired lad rein in his snorting yoke.
A moment more, the trees had stooped to kiss
Pale Daphne just awakening from the swoon
Of tremulous laurels, lonely Salmacis
Had bared his barren beauty to the moon,
And through the vale with sad voluptuous smile
Antinous had wandered, the red lotus of the Nile
Down leaning from his black and clustering hair
To shade those slumberous eyelids' caverned bliss,
Or else on yonder grassy slope with bare
High-tuniced limbs unravished Artemis
Had bade her hounds give tongue, and roused the deer
From his green ambushade with shrill halloo and pricking spear.

Lie still, lie still, O passionate heart, lie still!
O Melancholy, fold thy raven wing!
O sobbing Dryad, from thy hollow hill
Come not with such desponded answering!
No more thou wingèd Marsyas complain,
Apollo loveth not to hear such troubled songs of pain!
It was a dream, the glade is tenantless,
No soft Ionian laughter moves the air,
The Thames creeps on in sluggish leadenness,
And from the copse left desolate and bare
Fled is young Bacchus with his revelry,
Yet still from Nuneham wood there comes that thrilling melody
So sad, that one might think a human heart
Breaks in each separate note, a quality
Which music sometimes has, being the Art
Which is most nigh to tears and memory,
Poor mourning Philomel, what dost thou fear?
Thy sister doth not haunt these fields, Pandion is not here,
Here is no cruel Lord with murderous blade,
No woven web of bloody heraldries,
But mossy dells for roving comrades made,
Warm valleys where the tired student lies
With half-shut book, and many a winding walk
Where rustic lovers stray at eve in happy simple talk.
The harmless rabbit gambols with its young
Across the trampled towing-path, where late
A troop of laughing boys in jostling throng
Cheered with their noisy cries the racing eight;
The gossamer, with ravelled silver threads,
Works at its little loom, and from the dusky red-eaved sheds
Of the lone Farm a flickering light shines out
Where the swinked shepherd drives his bleating flock
Back to their wattled sheep-cotes, a faint shout
Comes from some Oxford boat at Sandford lock,
And starts the moor-hen from the sedgy rill,
And the dim lengthening shadows flit like swallows up the hill.
The heron passes homeward to the mere,

The blue mist creeps among the shivering trees,
Gold world by world the silent stars appear,
And like a blossom blown before the breeze,
A white moon drifts across the shimmering sky,
Mute arbitress of all thy sad, thy rapturous threnody.
She does not heed thee, wherefore should she heed,
She knows Endymion is not far away,
'Tis I, 'tis I, whose soul is as the reed
Which has no message of its own to play,
So pipes another's bidding, it is I,
Drifting with every wind on the wide sea of misery.
Ah! the brown bird has ceased: one exquisite trill
About the sombre woodland seems to cling,
Dying in music, else the air is still,
So still that one might hear the bat's small wing
Wander and wheel above the pines, or tell
Each tiny dewdrop dripping from the blue-bell's brimming cell.
And far away across the lengthening wold,
Across the willowy flats and thickets brown,
Magdalen's tall tower tipped with tremulous gold
Marks the long High Street of the little town,
And warns me to return; I must not wait,
Hark! 'tis the curfew booming from the bell at Christ Church gate.