

# COMPLAINT OR NIGHT THOUGHTS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMO

Edward Young

## Table of Contents

<u>THE COMPLAINT OR NIGHT THOUGHTS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY.....</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Edward Young.....</u>	<u>1</u>

# THE COMPLAINT OR NIGHT THOUGHTS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY.

Edward Young

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NIGHT FIRST.

To the right honourable

ARTHUR ONSLOW, ESQ.,

Speaker of the House of Commons

TIRED Nature's sweet restorer, balmy Sleep!  
He, like the world, his ready visit pays  
Where Fortune smiles; the wretched he forsakes;  
Swift on his downy pinion flies from woe,  
And lights on lids unsullied with a tear.  
From short (as usual) and disturb'd repose,  
I wake: how happy they, who wake no more!  
Yet that were vain, if dreams infest the grave.  
I wake, emerging from a sea of dreams  
Tumultuous; where my wreck'd desponding thought  
From wave to wave of fancied misery  
At random drove, her helm of reason lost.  
Though now restored, 'tis only change of pain,  
(A bitter change!) severer for severe:  
The day too short for my distress; and night  
Even in the zenith of her dark domain,  
Is sunshine to the colour of my fate.  
Night, sable goddess! from her ebon throne,  
In rayless majesty, now stretches forth  
Her leaden sceptre o'er a slumbering world.  
Silence, how dead! and darkness, how profound!  
Nor eye, nor listening ear, an object finds;  
Creation sleeps. 'Tis as the general pulse  
Of life stood still, and nature made a pause;  
An awful pause! prophetic of her end.  
And let her prophecy be soon fulfill'd;  
Fate! drop the curtain; I can lose no more.  
Silence and darkness: solemn sisters! twins  
From ancient Night, who nurse the tender thought,  
To reason, and on reason build resolve

## THE COMPLAINT OR NIGHT THOUGHTS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY.

(That column of true majesty in man),  
Assist me: I will thank you in the grave;  
The grave, your kingdom: there this frame shall fall  
A victim sacred to your dreary shrine.  
But what are ye ?— Thou, who didst put to flight  
Primeval Silence, when the morning stars,  
Exulting, shouted o'er the rising ball;  
O Thou, whose word from solid darkness struck  
That spark, the sun; strike wisdom from my soul;  
My soul, which flies to thee, her trust, her treasure,  
As misers to their gold, while others rest.  
Through this opaque of nature, and of soul,  
This double night, transmit one pitying ray,  
To lighten, and to cheer. O lead my mind,  
(A mind that fain would wander from its woe),  
Lead it through various scenes of life and death;  
And from each scene the noblest truths inspire.  
Nor less inspire my conduct, than my song  
Teach my best reason, reason; my best will  
Teach rectitude; and fix my firm resolve  
Wisdom to  
Teach my best reason, reason; my best will  
Teach rectitude; and fix my firm resolve  
Wisdom to wed, and pay her long arrear:  
Nor let the phial of thy vengeance, pour'd  
On this devoted head, be pour'd in vain.  
The bell strikes one. We take no note of time  
But from its loss. To give it then a tongue  
Is wise in man. As if an angel spoke,  
I feel the solemn sound. If heard aright,  
It is the knell of my departed hours:  
Where are they ? With the years beyond the flood.  
It is the signal that demands despatch:  
How much is to be done ? My hopes and fears  
Start up alarm'd, and o'er life's narrow verge  
Look down— on what? a fathomless abyss;  
A dread eternity! how surely mine!  
And can eternity belong to me,  
Poor pensioner on the bounties of an hour ?  
How poor, how rich, how abject, how august,  
How complicate, how wonderful, is man!  
How passing wonder He who made him such!  
Who centred in our make such strange extremes!  
From different natures marvellously mix'd,  
Connexion exquisite of distant worlds  
Distinguish'd link in being's endless chain!  
Midway from nothing to the Deity!  
A beam ethereal, sullied and absorb'd!  
Though sullied and dishonour'd, still divine!  
Dim miniature of greatness absolute!  
An heir of glory! a frail child of dust!

## THE COMPLAINT OR NIGHT THOUGHTS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY.

Helpless immortal! insect infinite!  
A worm a god!—I tremble at myself,  
And in myself am lost! At home a stranger,  
Thought wanders up and down, surprised, aghast,  
And wondering at her own: how reason reels!  
O what a miracle to man is man,  
Triumphantly distress'd! what joy, what dread!  
Alternately transported and alarm'd!  
What can preserve my life, or what destroy?  
An angel's arm can't snatch me from the grave;  
Legions of angels can't confine me there.  
'Tis past conjecture; all things rise in proof:  
While o'er my limbs sleep's soft dominion spread,  
What though my soul fantastic measures trod  
O'er fairy fields; or mourn'd along the gloom  
Of pathless woods; or down the craggy steep  
Hurl'd headlong, swam with pain the mantled pool;  
Or scaled the cliff; or danced on hollow winds,  
With antic shapes, wild natives of the brain?  
Her ceaseless flight, though devious, speaks her nature  
Of subtler essence than the trodden clod;  
Active, aerial, towering, unconfined,  
Unfetter'd with her gross companion's fall.  
Even silent night proclaims my soul immortal:  
Even silent night proclaims eternal day.  
For human weal, Heaven husbands all events;  
Dull sleep instructs, nor sport vain dreams in vain.  
Why then their loss deplore that are not lost ?  
Why wanders wretched thought their tombs around,  
In infidel distress? Are angels there ?  
Slumbers, raked up in dust, ethereal fire ?  
They live! they greatly live a life on earth  
Unkindled, unconceived; and from an eye  
Of tenderness let heavenly pity fall  
On me, more justly number'd with the dead.  
This is the desert, this the solitude:  
How populous, how vital, is the grave!  
This is creation's melancholy vault,  
The vale funereal, the sad cypress gloom  
The land of apparitions, empty shades!  
All, all on earth, is shadow, all beyond  
Is substance; the reverse is Folly's creed:  
How solid all, where change shall be no more!  
This is the bud of being, the dim dawn  
The twilight of our day, the vestibule;  
Life's theatre as yet is shut, and death,  
Strong death, alone can heave the massy bar,  
This gross impediment of clay remove,  
And make us embryos of existence free.  
From real life, but little more remote  
Is he, not yet a candidate for light,

## THE COMPLAINT OR NIGHT THOUGHTS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY.

The future embryo, slumbering in his sire.  
Embryos we must be, till we burst the shell,  
Yon ambient azure shell, and spring to life,  
The life of gods, O transport! and of man.  
Yet man, fool man! here buries all his thoughts  
Inters celestial hopes without one sigh.  
Prisoner of earth, and pent beneath the moon,  
Here pinions all his wishes; wing'd by heaven  
To fly at infinite; and reach it there,  
Where seraphs gather immortality,  
On life's fair tree, fast by the throne of God.  
What golden joys ambrosial clustering glow  
In His full beam, and ripen for the just,  
Where momentary ages are no more!  
Where time, and pain, and chance, and death, expire!  
And is it in the flight of threescore years  
To push eternity from human thought,  
And smother souls immortal in the dust  
A soul immortal, spending all her fires,  
Wasting her strength in strenuous idleness  
Thrown into tumult, raptur'd, or alarm'd,  
At aught this scene can threaten or indulge,  
Resembles ocean into tempest wrought,  
To waft a feather, or to drown a fly.  
Where falls this censure? It o'erwhelms myself;  
How was my heart encrusted by the world!  
O how self-fetter'd was my grovelling soul!  
How, like a worm, was I wrapt round and round  
In silken thought, which reptile fancy spun,  
Till darken'd reason lay quite clouded o'er  
With soft conceit of endless comfort here,  
Nor yet put forth her wings to reach the skies!  
Night-visions may befriend (as sung above):  
Our waking dreams are fatal. How I dream'd  
Of things impossible! (could sleep do more?)  
Of joys perpetual in perpetual change!  
Of stable pleasures on the tossing wave!  
Eternal sunshine in the storms of life!  
How richly were my noontide trances hung  
With gorgeous tapestries of pictured joys!  
Joy behind joy, in endless perspective!  
Till at death's toll, whose restless iron tongue  
Calls daily for his millions at a meal,  
Starting I woke, and found myself undone.  
Where now my phrensy's pompous furniture  
The cobwebb'd cottage, with its ragged wall  
Of mouldering mud, is royalty to me!  
The spider's most attenuated thread  
Is cord, is cable, to man's tender tie  
On earthly bliss; it breaks at every breeze.  
O ye blest scenes of permanent delight!

## THE COMPLAINT OR NIGHT THOUGHTS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY.

Full above measure! lasting beyond bound!  
A perpetuity of bliss is bliss.  
Could you, so rich in rapture, fear an end,  
That ghastly thought would drink up all your joy,  
And quite unparadise the realms of light.  
Safe are you lodged above these rolling spheres;  
The baleful influence of whose giddy dance  
Sheds sad vicissitude on all beneath.  
Here teems with revolutions every hour;  
And rarely for the better; or the best,  
More mortal than the common births of fate.  
Each moment has its sickle, emulous  
Of Time's enormous scythe, whose ample sweep  
Strikes empires from the root; each moment plays  
His little weapon in the narrower sphere  
Of sweet domestic comfort, and cuts down  
The fairest bloom of sublunary bliss.  
Bliss! sublunary bliss!—proud words, and vain!  
Implicit treason to divine decree!  
A bold invasion of the rights of Heaven!  
I clasp'd the phantoms, and I found them air.  
Oh! had I weigh'd it ere my fond embrace,  
What darts of agony had miss'd my heart!  
Death! great proprietor of all! 'tis thine  
To tread out empire, and to quench the stars.  
The sun himself by thy permission shines;  
And, one day, thou shalt pluck him from his sphere  
Amid such mighty plunder, why exhaust  
Thy partial quiver on a mark so mean?  
Why thy peculiar rancour wreak'd on me?  
Insatiate archer! could not one suffice?  
Thy shaft flew thrice; and thrice my peace was slain;  
And thrice, ere thrice yon moon had fill'd her horn.  
O Cynthia! why so pale? dost thou lament  
Thy wretched neighbour? grieve to see thy wheel  
Of ceaseless change outwhirl'd in human life?  
How wanes my borrow'd bliss! from fortune's smile,  
Precarious courtesy! not virtue's sure,  
Self-given, solar ray of sound delight.  
In every varied posture, place, and hour,  
How widow'd every thought of every joy!  
Thought, busy thought! too busy for my peace!  
Through the dark postern of time long lapsed,  
Led softly, by the stillness of the night,  
Led, like a murderer, (and such it proves!)  
Strays (wretched rover!) o'er the pleasing past;  
In quest of wretchedness perversely strays;  
And finds all desert now; and meets the ghosts  
Of my departed joys; a numerous train!  
I rue the riches of my former fate;  
Sweet comfort's blasted clusters I lament;

## THE COMPLAINT OR NIGHT THOUGHTS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY.

I tremble at the blessings once so dear;  
And every pleasure pains me to the heart.  
Yet why complain? or why complain for one?  
Hangs out the sun his lustre but for me,  
The single man? Are angels all beside?  
I mourn for millions: 'tis the common lot;  
In this shape, or in that, has fate entail'd  
The mother's throes on all of woman born,  
Not more the children, than sure heirs, of pain.  
War, famine, pest, volcano, storm, and fire,  
Intestine broils, oppression, with her heart  
Wrapt up in triple brass, besiege mankind.  
God's image disinherited of day,  
Here, plunged in mines, forgets a sun was made.  
There, beings deathless as their haughty lord,  
Are hammer'd to the galling oar for life;  
And plough the winter's wave, and reap despair.  
Some, for hard masters, broken under arms,  
In battle lopp'd away, with half their limbs,  
Beg bitter bread through realms their valour saved,  
If so the tyrant, or his minion, doom.  
Want and incurable disease (fell pair!)  
On hopeless multitudes remorseless seize  
At once; and make a refuge of the grave.  
How groaning hospitals eject their dead!  
What numbers groan for sad admission there!  
What numbers, once in fortune's lap high-fed,  
Solicit the cold hand of charity!  
To shock us more, solicit it in vain!  
Ye silken sons of pleasure! since in pains  
Ye rue more modish visits, visit here,  
And breathe from your debauch: give, and reduce  
Surfeit's dominion o'er you: but so great  
Your impudence, you blush at what is right.  
Happy, did sorrow seize on such alone!  
Not prudence can defend, or virtue save;  
Disease invades the chastest temperance;  
And punishment the guiltless; and alarm,  
Through thickest shades pursues the fond of peace.  
Man's caution often into danger turns,  
And his guard falling, crushes him to death.  
Not happiness itself makes good her name!  
Our very wishes give us not our wish.  
How distant oft the thing we doat on most,  
From that for which we doat, felicity!  
The smoothest course of nature has its pains;  
And truest friends, through error, wound our rest.  
Without misfortune, what calamities!  
And what hostilities, without a foe!  
Nor are foes wanting to the best on earth.  
But endless is the list of human ills,

## THE COMPLAINT OR NIGHT THOUGHTS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY.

And sighs might sooner fail, than cause to sigh.  
A part how small of the terraqueous globe  
Is tenanted by man! the rest a waste,  
Rocks, deserts, frozen seas, and burning sands:  
Wild haunts of monsters, poisons, stings, and death.  
Such is earth's melancholy map! But, far  
More sad! this earth is a true map of man.  
So bounded are its haughty lord's delights  
To woe's wide empire where deep troubles toss,  
Loud sorrows howl, envenom'd passions bite,  
Ravenous calamities our vitals seize,  
And threatening fate wide opens to devour.  
What then am I, who sorrow for myself?  
In age, in infancy, from others' aid  
Is all our hope; to teach us to be kind.  
That, nature's first, last lesson to mankind; I  
The selfish heart deserves the pain it feels;  
More generous sorrow, while it sinks, exalts;  
And conscious virtue mitigates the pang.  
Nor virtue, more than prudence, bids me give  
Swoln thought a second channel; who divide,  
They weaken, too, the torrent of their grief.  
Take then, O world! thy much-indebted tear:  
How sad a sight is human happiness,  
To those whose thought can pierce beyond an hour!  
O thou! whate'er thou art, whose heart exults!  
Would'st thou I should congratulate thy fate?  
I know thou would'st; thy pride demands it from me.  
Let thy pride pardon, what thy nature needs,  
The salutary censure of a friend.  
Thou happy wretch! by blindness thou art blest;  
By dotage dandled to perpetual smiles.  
Know, smiler! at thy peril art thou pleased;  
Thy pleasure is the promise of thy pain.  
Misfortune, like a creditor severe,  
But rises in demand for her delay;  
She makes a scourge of past prosperity,  
To sting thee more, and double thy distress.  
Lorenzo, Fortune makes her court to thee,  
Thy fond heart dances, while the syren sings.  
Dear is thy welfare; think me not unkind;  
I would not damp, but to secure thy joys.  
Think not that fear is sacred to the storm:  
Stand on thy guard against the smiles of fate.  
Is Heaven tremendous in its frowns? Most sure;  
And in its favours formidable too:  
Its favours here are trials, not rewards;  
A call to duty, not discharge from care;  
And should alarm us, full as much as woes;  
Awake us to their cause, and consequence;  
O'er our scann'd conduct give a jealous eye,

## THE COMPLAINT OR NIGHT THOUGHTS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY.

And make us tremble, weigh'd with our desert;  
Awe nature's tumult, and chastise her joys,  
Lest, while we clasp, we kill them; nay, invert  
To worse than simple misery, their charms.  
Revolted joys, like foes in civil war,  
Like bosom friendships to resentment sour'd,  
With rage envenom'd rise against our peace.  
Beware what earth calls happiness; beware  
All joys, but joys that never can expire.  
Who builds on less than an immortal base,  
Fond as he seems, condemns his joys to death.  
Mine died with thee, Philander! thy last sigh  
Dissolved the charm; the disenchanting earth  
Lost all her lustre. Where her glittering towers?  
Her golden mountains, where? all darken'd down  
To naked waste; a dreary vale of tears:  
The great magician's dead! Thou poor, pale piece  
Of outcast earth, in darkness what a change  
From yesterday! Thy darling hope so near  
(Long-labour'd prize!), O how ambition flush'd  
Thy glowing cheek! ambition truly great,  
Of virtuous praise. Death's subtle seed within  
(Sly, treacherous miner!), working in the dark,  
Smiled at thy well concerted scheme, and beckon'd  
The worm to riot on that rose so red,  
Unfaded ere it fell; one moment's prey!  
Man's foresight is conditionally wise;  
Lorenzo! wisdom into folly turns  
Oft, the first instant, its idea fair  
To labouring thought is born. How dim our eye!  
The present moment terminates our sight;  
Clouds thick as those on doomsday, drown the next  
We penetrate, we prophesy in vain.  
Time is dealt out by particles; and each,  
Ere mingled with the streaming sands of life,  
By fate's inviolable oath is sworn  
Deep silence, 'where eternity begins'  
By nature's law, what may be, may be now  
There's no prerogative in human hours.  
In human hearts what bolder thought can rise,  
Than man's presumption on to-morrow's dawn!  
Where is to-morrow? In another world.  
For numbers this is certain; the reverse  
Is sure to none; and yet on this perhaps,  
This peradventure, infamous for lies,  
As on a rock of adamant, we build  
Our mountain hopes; spin out eternal schemes,  
As we the fatal sisters could out-spin,  
And, big with life's futurities, expire.  
Not even Philander had bespoke his shroud;  
Nor had he cause; a warning was denied.

## THE COMPLAINT OR NIGHT THOUGHTS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY.

How many fall as sudden, not as safe!  
As sudden, though for years admonish'd home.  
Of human ills the last extreme beware,  
Beware, Lorenzo! a slow sudden death.  
How dreadful that deliberate surprise!  
Be wise to-day; 'tis madness to defer;  
Next day the fatal precedent will plead;  
Thus on, till wisdom is push'd out of life.  
Procrastination is the thief of time;  
Year after year it steals, till all are fled,  
And to the mercies of a moment leaves  
The vast concerns of an eternal scene.  
If not so frequent, would not this be strange  
That 'tis so frequent, this is stranger still.  
Of man's miraculous mistakes, this bears  
The palm, 'That all men are about to live,'  
For ever on the brink of being born.  
All pay themselves the compliment to think  
They one day shall not drivel: and their pride  
On this reversion takes up ready praise;  
At least, their own; their future selves applaud;  
How excellent that life they ne'er will lead  
Time lodged in their own hands is folly's vails;  
That lodged in fate's, to wisdom they consign;  
The thing they can't but purpose, they postpone;  
'Tis not in folly, not to scorn a fool;  
And scarce in human wisdom to do more.  
All promise is poor dilatory man,  
And that through every stage: when young, indeed,  
In full content we, sometimes, nobly rest,  
Unanxious for ourselves; and only wish,  
As duteous sons, our fathers were more wise.  
At thirty, man suspects himself a fool;  
Knows it at forty, and reforms his plan;  
At fifty, chides his infamous delay,  
Pushes his prudent purpose to resolve;  
In all the magnanimity of thought  
Resolves; and re-resolves; then dies the same.  
And why? Because he thinks himself immortal.  
All men think all men mortal, but themselves:  
Themselves, when some alarming shock of fate  
Strikes through their wounded hearts the sudden dread;  
But their hearts wounded, like the wounded air,  
Soon close; where pass'd the shaft, no trace is found.  
As from the wing no scar the sky retains;  
The parted wave no furrow from the keel;  
So dies in human hearts the thought of death.  
Even with the tender tear which nature sheds  
O'er those we love, we drop it in their grave.  
Can I forget Philander? That were strange!  
O my full heart! But should I give it vent,

THE COMPLAINT OR NIGHT THOUGHTS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY.

The longest night, though longer far, would fail,  
And the lark listen to my midnight song.  
The sprightly lark's shrill matin wakes the morn;  
Grief's sharpest thorn hard pressing on my breast,  
I strive, with wakeful melody, to cheer  
The sullen gloom, sweet Philomel! like thee,  
And call the stars to listen: every star  
Is deaf to mine, enamour'd of thy lay.  
Yet be not vain; there are, who thine excel,  
And charm through distant ages: wrapt in shade,  
Prisoner of darkness! to the silent hours,  
How often I repeat their rage divine,  
To lull my griefs, and steal my heart from woe!  
I roll their raptures, but not catch their fire.  
Dark, though not blind, like thee, Maeonides  
Or, Milton! thee; ah, could I reach your strain!  
Or his, who made Maeonides our own.  
Man too he sung: immortal man I sing;  
Oft bursts my song beyond the bounds of life;  
What, now, but immortality, can please?  
O had he press'd his theme, pursued the track,  
Which opens out of darkness into day!  
O had he, mounted on his wing of fire,  
Soar'd where I sink, and sung immortal man!  
How had it bless'd mankind, and rescued me!