

# William Whitehead

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William Whitehead was an English poet and playwright born in Cambridge, England in 1715. Whitehead's literary talents were first discovered at the age of fourteen when he began attending Winchester College. In 1733, Charles Mordaunt, Earl of Peterborough inspected the college and offered ten prizes for verses composed on a topic chosen by popular poet Alexander Pope. The topic Pope picked was "Peterborough," and Whitehead was awarded one of the prizes.

In 1735, Whitehead was granted admission to Clare Hall at Cambridge University. Despite being admitted with a scholarship, Whitehead enrolled with the lowly status of a sizar (a term originally used to describe students who paid for their schooling by serving wealthier students). Although there is no evidence that Whitehead was required to serve his more affluent peers, he did spend his time developing relationships with those of a superior social rank.

While attending Cambridge, Whitehead's poems began to circulate beyond his immediate group of acquaintances. His poems were mildly satirical, modest in tone, limited in scope, and were written primarily in heroic couplets. Many were also significantly influenced by the work of Alexander Pope.

As Whitehead continued to gain attention for his plays and poems, a vacancy occurred for the Poet Laureate position with the passing of Colley Cibber in 1757. After his contemporary Thomas Gray quickly declined the offer and expressed significant contempt towards the role, Whitehead was offered the position and accepted it. Although the position does not entail specific duties, the Poet Laureate is expected to write verses for significant occasions such as royal birthdays.

Earlier laureates had often produced poetry that served as a mouthpiece for the ascendant party and extolled the king's virtues; however, Whitehead's works had always shown loyalty to the country rather than persons. Unfortunately, Whitehead's verse reflects few of the significant social changes that were happening around him, despite serving during mid-eighteenth-century turbulence (a time that saw the Seven Years' War, the American Revolution, and the reign of the controversial kings George II and George III). As a result, his poems as Laureate made an inconsequential impression on English literary history. Nevertheless, Whitehead was a man of courtliness and modesty and knew well

that he was no genius. Instead, he developed capable and sensible poetry, which, for his time, made him the ideal Poet Laureate.

Whitehead's "The Youth and the Philosopher," a fable written in iambic tetrameter, showcases the effects of vice on a Grecian youth. Despite being a promising student of the renowned philosopher Plato, the youth chooses to abandon his teachings to pursue a career in chariot racing. The poem may be interpreted as the youth pursuing his dreams; however, when seen through his teacher's eyes, his vice of racing has caused him to squander his academic talents, which could have led him to longer-lasting and more worthwhile fame.

### **Further Reading**

Kelley, Gregory G. "William Whitehead (February 1715-April 14th 1785)."

*Eighteenth-Century British Poets: Second Series*, edited by John E. Sitter, vol. 109,

*Gale Literature: Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 1991, pp. 280–288.

Russel, Nick. *Poets by Appointment: Britain's Laureates*. Blandford, 1982.

The Youth and the Philosopher<sup>258</sup>

A Grecian Youth,<sup>259</sup> of talents rare,  
 Whom Plato's philosophick<sup>260</sup> care  
 Had form'd for virtue's nobler view,  
 By precept<sup>261</sup> and example too,  
 Wou'd often boast his matchless skill, 5  
 To curb the steed<sup>262</sup> and guide the wheel.  
 And as he pass'd the gazing throng,<sup>263</sup>  
 With graceful ease, and smack'd the thong,<sup>264</sup>  
 The ideot<sup>265</sup> wonder they express'd  
 Was praise and transport<sup>266</sup> to his breast. 10  
 At length quite vain, he needs would shew<sup>267</sup>  
 His master what his art could do;  
 And bade<sup>268</sup> his slaves the chariot lead  
 To Academus<sup>269</sup> sacred shade.  
 The trembling grove confess'd its fright, 15

<sup>258</sup> *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes. By Several Hands.* Vol. II, Dodsley, 1763, pp. 259–260; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

<sup>259</sup> *Grecian Youth* a young man born in Greece during the Ancient, or Archaic, period (700–480 B.C.)

<sup>260</sup> *Philosophick* characteristic of or resembling a philosopher; wise, calm, stoical

<sup>261</sup> *Precept* a general rule intended to regulate behavior or thought

<sup>262</sup> *Curb the steed* to restrain or keep a horse in check

<sup>263</sup> *Throng* a large, densely packed crowd of people or animals

<sup>264</sup> *Thong* rein

<sup>265</sup> *Ideot* idiotic

<sup>266</sup> *Transport* ecstasy

<sup>267</sup> *Needs would shew* had to show

<sup>268</sup> *Bade* to command someone to do something

<sup>269</sup> *Academus* a school founded by Plato in Athens, c. 387 BC, source of the word “academic”

The wood-nymphs<sup>270</sup> startled at the sight,  
 The Muses<sup>271</sup> drop the learned lyre,<sup>272</sup>  
 And to their inmost shades retire!  
     Howe'er, the youth with forward air, 20  
 Bows to the sage,<sup>273</sup> and mounts the car,<sup>274</sup>  
 The lash resounds, the coursers<sup>275</sup> spring,  
 The chariot marks the rolling ring,<sup>276</sup>  
 And gath'ring crowds with eager eyes,  
 And shouts, pursue him as he flies. 25  
     Triumphant to the goal return'd,  
 With nobler thirst his bosom burn'd;  
 And now along th' indented plain,  
 The self-same<sup>277</sup> track he marks again,  
 Pursues with care the nice design, 30  
 Nor ever deviates from the line.  
     Amazement seiz'd the circling crowd;  
 The youths with emulation<sup>278</sup> glow'd;  
 Ev'n bearded sages hail'd the boy,  
 And all, but Plato, gaz'd with joy. 35  
 For he, deep-judging sage, beheld  
 With pain the triumphs of the field:

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<sup>270</sup> *Wood-nymphs* minor female forest deities in ancient Greek folklore

<sup>271</sup> *Muses* the nine daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus who each preside over an art or science

<sup>272</sup> *Lyre* a stringed instrument known for its use in ancient Greece

<sup>273</sup> *Sage* a person with profound wisdom

<sup>274</sup> *Car* chariot

<sup>275</sup> *Coursers* swift or spirited horses

<sup>276</sup> *Marks the rolling ring* inscribes wheel tracks in the dirt around the track

<sup>277</sup> *Self-same* identical: the second circuit's wheel tracks are exactly on top of the first's

<sup>278</sup> *Emulation* an effort to match or exceed a previously accomplished ambition or endeavor

And when the charioteer<sup>279</sup> drew nigh,<sup>280</sup>  
And, flush'd with hope, had caught his eye,  
Alas! unhappy youth, he cry'd, 40  
Expect no praise from me, (and sigh'd)  
With indignation<sup>281</sup> I survey  
Such skill and judgment thrown away.  
The time profusely squander'd<sup>282</sup> there,  
On vulgar<sup>283</sup> arts beneath thy care, 45  
If well employ'd, at less expence,  
Had taught thee honour, virtue, sense,  
And rais'd thee from a coachman's fate  
To govern men, and guide the state.

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<sup>279</sup> *Charioteer* the driver of a chariot

<sup>280</sup> *Nigh* near

<sup>281</sup> *Indignation* anger or annoyance evoked from unfair treatment

<sup>282</sup> *Squandered* wasted in a reckless or foolish manner

<sup>283</sup> *Vulgar* lacking sophistication or good taste, unrefined, low in class



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