

Elizabeth Carter

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Elizabeth Carter was born on 16 December 1717 in Deal, Kent, England. Carter lived there most of her life with her family. Her father, Nicholas, advocated for educating his children and keeping them well informed. Carter grew up being very persistent in further educating herself, leading her to become a heavy user of snuff.¹⁶⁶ This allowed her to stay awake for long hours to study. Carter learned nine languages at a young age. Unfortunately, her mother died when Carter was aged ten. After this, she became very comfortable with the concept of death. Carter's literary career began early at the age seventeen, when she published her first work in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. She later moved from Deal to London to advance her literary knowledge. Her dear friend Samuel Johnson promoted her work in his *Rambler*. Later, she published her own anonymous translation of *Examen de l'essai de Monsieur Pope sur l'homme*, by Jean Pierre de Crousaz. This translation gave her many opportunities to publish more significant literary pieces in the mid-1700s. Carter acquired a lot of attention for her writings about the afterlife. In 1797, she was struck with a severe illness. She did not fully recover and died in February of 1806.

In her day, people thought she was “the most learned lady in England” (cited by Dorr 138). Her famous poems include “Ode to Melancholy” and “A Night Piece.” The poem “To —” has themes of death, retirement, nature, and solitude, and was published sometime between 1750–1780. In the eighteenth century, death was a moral concern, with social implications. The act of dying became as important to human life as to the afterlife (Filippo 7). The poem has a recurring theme that nature will eventually die, just like humans die.

The poem is quatrains of iambic pentameter rhymed abab and discusses in a naturalistic manner of an act of dying. The poem uses imagery to emphasize the harmony and beauty of the natural world. Elizabeth wrote this musical-sounding poem for a friend who has not been named.

Further Reading

Myers, Sylvia Harcstark. “Elizabeth Carter: Essayist, Translator, Poet.” Chapter 6 in *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England*, Oxford Academic, 1990, pp. 157–176.

¹⁶⁶ *snuff*: A preparation of powdered tobacco for inhaling through the nostrils.

- Williams, Carolyn D. "Poetry, Pudding, and Epictetus: The Consistency of Elizabeth Carter." Chapter 1 in *Tradition in Transition: Women Writers, Marginal Texts, and the Eighteenth-Century Canon*, edited by Alvaro Ribeiro and James G. Basker, Oxford Academic, 1996, pp. 3–24.
- Easton, Celia. "Were the Bluestockings Queer? Elizabeth Carter's Uranian Friendships." *The Age of Johnson*, vol. 9, 1998, pp. 257–294.

References

- Dorr, Priscilla. "Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806) UK." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1986, pp. 138–40.
- San Filippo, David. *Historical Perspectives on Attitudes concerning Death and Dying*. Kimball, 2006. ResearchGate.
- "Smokeless Tobacco" Edited by Elana Pearl Ben-Joseph, *KidsHealth*, The Nemours Foundation, Jan. 2024.

To —¹⁶⁷

HOW sweet the calm of this sequester'd¹⁶⁸ shore,

Where ebbing¹⁶⁹ waters musically roll:

And Solitude and silent Eve¹⁷⁰ restore

The philosophic temper¹⁷¹ of the soul.

The sighing gale, whose murmurs lull to rest

5

The busy tumult¹⁷² of declining day,

To sympathetic quiet soothes the breast,

And every wild emotion dies away.

Farewell the objects of diurnal¹⁷³ care,

Your task be ended with the setting sun:

10

Let all be undisturb'd vacation here,

While o'er yon wave ascends the peaceful Moon.

What beauteous visions o'er the soften'd heart,

In this still moment all their charms diffuse,¹⁷⁴

Serenity joys and brighter hopes impart,

15

And cheer the soul with more than mortal views.

Here faithful Memory wakens all her powers,

¹⁶⁷ *A Collection of Poems in Four Volumes. By Several Hands.* Second edition, vol. I, printed for G. Pearch, 1770, pp. 162–163.

¹⁶⁸ *Sequester'd*: “to segregate, separate in thought from the surroundings” (*OED*).

¹⁶⁹ *Ebbing*: “the action of flowing back or retiring of the sea or a tidal river; also, of springs” (*OED*).

¹⁷⁰ *Eve*: the evening.

¹⁷¹ *Philosophic Temper*: a calm state of mind

¹⁷² *Tumult*: “commotion, agitation, disturbance; disorderly or noisy movement or action” (*OED*).

¹⁷³ *Diurnal*: daytime.

¹⁷⁴ *Diffuse*: “spread throughout or over a large area, widespread; scattered; widely separated or dispersed” (*OED*).

She bids her fair ideal forms ascend,
 And quick to every gladden'd thought restores
 The social virtue,¹⁷⁵ and the absent friend. 20

Come *****,¹⁷⁶ come, and with me share
 The sober¹⁷⁷ pleasures of this solemn scene,
 While no rude¹⁷⁸ tempest clouds the ruffled¹⁷⁹ air,
 But all, like thee, is smiling and serene.

Come, while the cool, the solitary hours 25
 Each foolish care, and giddy¹⁸⁰ wish controul,
 With all thy soft persuasion's wonted¹⁸¹ powers,
 Beyond the stars transport my listening soul.

Oft, when on earth detain'd by empty show,
 Thy voice has taught the trifler¹⁸² how to rise; 30
 Taught her to look with scorn on things below,
 And seek her better portion in the skies.

Come: and the sacred eloquence repeat:
 The world shall vanish at its gentle sound,
 Angelic forms shall visit this retreat, 35
 And opening heaven diffuse its glories round.

¹⁷⁵ *Social Virtue*: "of or relating to society, as social background, social climate, social duty, social fabric, social issue, social question, social virtue, etc" (OED).

¹⁷⁶ "*****": the name is unknown. It has two syllables.

¹⁷⁷ *Sober*: quiet.

¹⁷⁸ *Rude*: boisterous

¹⁷⁹ *Ruffled*: "disordered, disarranged; made uneven or irregular; rumpled, crumpled" (OED).

¹⁸⁰ *Giddy*: "of persons, their attributes and actions: Mentally intoxicated, 'elated to thoughtlessness'" (OED).

¹⁸¹ *Wonted*: usual.

¹⁸² *Trifler*: "one who is not serious or earnest in what he or she does" (OED).



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