

Grass of Parnassus

Grass of Parnassus by Andrew Lang is a poetic collection celebrating nature, mythology, and the depth of human emotion through graceful and evocative verse.

TO RHODOCLEIA - ON HER MELANCHOLY SINGING.

In "Grass of Parnassus," Chapter 6 delves into a poignant reflection addressed to Rhodocleia, a figure immortalized within the Greek Anthology for her melancholy allure. She is forever intertwined with the essence of Rufinus, a lamented poet of ancient grace, whose affections for her transcend the mere boundaries of their era. The text embodies a profound dialogue, not merely with Rhodocleia but with the essence of grief and remembrance itself. She is depicted as dwelling in the shadows of her sorrows, her song a conduit to the asphodel meadows, realms devoid of mortal joy, where echoes of the dead whisper across the void of time.

Rhodocleia's lament, steeped in the perpetual twilight of the underworld, reflects a soul ensnared by the allure of death's solemnity, yearning for the somber peace found beyond the veil of life. The narrative eloquently paints her as a beacon of despair, whose very being longs for the cold embrace of oblivion, seeking to join the spectral chorus of those long passed. Her melancholy is not born of fancy but of a profound, intimate acquaintance with the shadowy halls and golden stairs where the departed dwell in eternal dusk.

The author, through evocative imagery, bestows upon Rhodocleia a timeless beauty, a vision of sorrow crowned with cloudy hair and lips once kissed by joy, now portals to a soul marred by ancient wounds. Her eyes, pools of latent misery, betray her identity: the last jewel of Hellas, whose essence captivated the final bard of a golden age now dimmed. Her allure, once celebrated in roses and hymns, remains undiminished, encapsulated in the mourning of Rufinus, who veiled his adoration in the blooms of the earth and the enduring scent of nocturnal offerings.

This chapter is not merely a tribute to a forgotten muse but a tapestry of loss and longing, woven with the threads of poetic memory. It invites the reader to traverse the bridge between the ephemeral and the eternal, to feel the weight of history in the heart's quiet recesses, where the echoes of ancient loves and tragedies linger, timeless, beneath the canopy of stars and the gaze of the indifferent sun.

THE LIMIT OF LANDS.

In "Circe's Isle Revisited," the poem communicates a profound sense of nostalgia and loss. The speakers call out to Circe, a figure from Greek mythology known for her enchanting nature, only to find silence and ruin in place of the once-thriving magical isle. This desolation symbolizes the passage of time and the inevitable decay of once-vivid memories and youthful delights. The absence of laughter, music, and beauty in the once enchanted wood reflects the speakers' realization of their lost youth and the ephemeral nature of joy. The vivid imagery of faded eyes, wasted hair, and drooping wings personifies their nostalgia, highlighting the stark contrast between their past happiness and present sorrow.

In their contemplation, the speakers question the wisdom of ever seeking or leaving this magical isle, symbolizing the human inclination to yearn for the unattainable and to mourn its loss once it's gone. Their flight from the isle back to the westward fading light signifies a retreat from their pursuit of lost time and the acceptance of the night's solitude over the pain of endless regret.

"The Limit of Lands" further explores themes of boundaries and the transient nature of life. This piece places the reader between the tangible edges of the known world and the ethereal threshold of the afterlife, represented by the ocean and the poplars of Persephone. This liminal space is marked by barrenness, sacrifice, and a sense of waiting or transition, underscoring the inevitability of endings and the solemn beauty found in the acceptance of mortality. The imagery of misty mists, barren sands, and ancient sacrifice altars evokes a deep sense of melancholy and introspection, inviting the reader to ponder the fleeting connections between life, death, and the natural cycles that encompass them.

Together, these poems weave a tapestry of reflection on the cycles of loss, desire, and the passage of time, encapsulating the human experience in their lyrical embrace of nature and myth.

THE SHADE OF HELEN

In "Grass of Parnassus", the text weaves a contemplative narrative, exploring the theme of return and transformation. It begins with a poetic meditation on the soul's journey through life and its desire to merge once again with the eternal essence from which it originated. This eternal flame represents a form of pure being and consciousness that stands in stark contrast to the transient joys and sorrows that mark human existence. The passage suggests that while there is a yearning to return to this state of unity and to relive one's former existence, such a possibility remains beyond our grasp. Instead, human beings are left with sleep as their only refuge—a state that, instead of providing solace, often brings with it reminders of lost pleasures and loved ones, making awakening to reality all the more difficult.

The narrative then shifts to an intriguing mythological tale regarding Helen of Troy. Contrary to the widely held belief that Helen was taken to Troy, igniting the Trojan War, the text proposes an alternative myth: Helen never went to Troy but stayed in Egypt. Instead, the gods created a replica of Helen from clouds and shadows, sending this ethereal double to be Paris's bride. This narrative thread raises themes of identity, illusion, and the futility of war, as both Greeks and Trojans are depicted as fighting fervently over an illusion.

This segues into a first-person lamentation from Helen (or her shade) herself, questioning why she was taken from the serene hills—her place of true belonging, characterized by gentle rains and the interplay of light and shadow—into the tumultuous world of human affairs, characterized by war and unrequited love. Helen's reflections emphasize a sense of alienation and dissonance with the mortal world, where her existence seems to cause chaos and passion, much against her nature. Her form, though desired and fought over, brings her no solace, as the love offered to her is based on a misconception of her true essence.

Through these reflections, the chapter moves past the external narrative of war and love to probe deeper philosophical questions about existence, the craving for a return to a purer state of being, and the tragic pursuit of illusions.

Pontus De Tyard, 1570

Dreams and Despair: In this contemplative segment of "Grass of Parnassus," the concept of dreams versus reality and the fleeting hope provided by the emotion of love are deeply explored. The passage opens with a lament for a figure who, without the saving grace of love, is deemed to spend her days in desolation, her wisdom derived from dull experiences rather than joyful discovery. This character's last hope is the transformative power of Love—a force capable of rendering her the "fairest of fair things" and rescuing her from the brink of death with its healing touch, even if it's just a shadow passing by.

The narrative then delves into the nature of dreams, challenging the assertion that sleep brings equality of fortune to the happy and the hapless. Dreams are portrayed not as a unifying experience but as paths

divergent, leading to reflections of regret, battles of existential dread, or flights of fantasy to realms beyond the waking life's reach. The distinction is stark; dreams can be a playground for cherished memories and desires, or they can be a battleground of fears and struggles, highlighting the unequal fortunes that follow us even into our subconscious.

Two Sonnets of the Sirens: Transitioning from the individual's introspection, the text introduces the tale of the Sirens—mythological beings associated with allure and doom—as once being maidens who shared an intimate bond with Proserpine. The narrative shifts from the inner turmoil and dreams of mortals to a mythic example of loss and mourning. Consumed by despair over Proserpine's abduction, the Sirens transformed, becoming symbols of irresistible but fatal attraction. Their mournful songs, once perhaps expressions of sorrow and longing, now serve to lure sailors to their demise—a stark transformation from innocence to instruments of death, underscoring themes of transformation, the persuasive power of despair, and the fatal allure of seeking comfort in illusions.

Conclusion: Through a combination of solemn reflections on love's potential to redeem, the varied tapestry of dreams, and the tragic fate of the Sirens, this segment of "Grass of Parnassus" weaves together the complex interplay between hope, despair, and the human condition. Each element—whether it be the yearning for love, the escapism found in dreams, or the mythic cautionary tales—serves to highlight the fragility of happiness and the omnipresence of longing and loss.