



ERNEST DOWSON (1867-1900)



Ernest Dowson. 1905. Photograph. The Poems of Ernest Dowson. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, vii.

Ernest Dowson was the purest representative of the movement referred to as the “Decadence.” His life of exquisite verse, classical learning, French travel, dissolution, blighted love and Catholic conversion made him the archetypal 1890s character even before he set the seal on his iconic status with an early death.

Dowson had no formal education but benefited from some private tutoring as his family travelled around the resorts of Europe seeking respite for his father’s tuberculosis. Though deficient in other areas of knowledge, Dowson became a fine linguist and a lover of the verses of Horace, Catullus and Propertius,

which became significant influences on his writing.

He spent five terms at Oxford before being called back to London to help out with the family’s failing dry dock business in London’s East End. He began writing poetry while still a teenager, exploring from the start themes of love and death. Later in life he included religious elements, pointing towards the genuineness of his conversion to Catholicism that took place in 1891.

He was a regular part of the London literary and drinking scenes from 1888 onward, contributing to *The Yellow Book*, *The Savoy* and both *Books of the Rhymers' Club*. The Rhymers brought him into regular contact with such leading characters as W.B. Yeats, Arthur Symons, Ernest Rhys, Richard Le Gallienne, John Davidson, John Gray and Lionel Johnson. He was also a friend of Oscar Wilde and a supporter of him at the time of his trial and after his release from jail. He knew Paul Verlaine and spent much time in his later years, after the financial failure of the family dock, in Paris and Brittany. He was frequently a companion of Leonard Smithers, who published Dowson's later writing and gave him work translating erotic French novels.

Dowson had a fascination with girl children which was considered eccentric rather than deviant to his contemporaries. He fell in love with the young daughter of a Soho restaurant owner, Adelaide, to whom his first book of verse and his book of stories are dedicated. After six years of courtship, her marriage to another man, coupled with Dowson's parents' deaths (perhaps both from suicide), precipitated the poet's final decline. He died in R.H. Sherard's home in the London suburb of Catford, from tuberculosis exacerbated by depression and alcoholism, at the age of thirty-two.

He had lived for little but literature, dying with virtually nothing to his name but the clothes he stood up in and his tattered manuscript book of verse. In *A Comedy of Masks*, one of the novels he co-wrote with Arthur Moore, he depicts Oswyn, an intense, drunken, bohemian character who gives a creed so close to Dowson's that it seems to be a self portrait. Oswyn's personal failings are not intended to diminish his moral stature as an artist. He says: "I may fail or I may succeed, as the world counts those things. It is all the same: I believe in myself."

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Selected Publications by Dowson

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