# Tithonus

BY [ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alfred-tennyson)

## About Alfred Lord Tennyson

[Alfred Lord Tennyson](https://poemanalysis.com/alfred-tennyson/) was born in 1809 in Somersby, Lincolnshire, England. He was one of twelve children and had, by the age of twelve, written his first [epic poem](https://poemanalysis.com/genre/epic-poetry/) which consisted of 6,000 lines. In 1827 Tennyson left his home to attend Trinity College, Cambridge. It was there he and his brother, Charles, co-published a book of poems titled, *Poems by Two Brothers.*This book put Tennyson on the radar of other prolific college writers and he made friends with another student, Arthur Hallam. After a brief but intense friendship, Hallam died, leaving a bereft Tennyson to devote a number of poems to his memory. From 1830 to 1832, Tennyson published two more books of poetry. These were not met with outstanding reviews and the poet was greatly disappointed. His naturally shy disposition would keep him from publishing again for another nine years. Tennyson finally met with some success in 1842 after the publication of this book, *Poems*in two volumes. When Tennyson published *In Memoriam,*one of the pieces dedicated to his college friend, Hallam, his reputation was solidified throughout Britain. That same year he married Emily Sellwood, with whom he would have two sons.

‘Tithonus‘ by Lord Alfred Tennyson is written in the form of a [dramatic monologue](https://poemanalysis.com/poetic-form/dramatic-monologue/) in which only one [speaker](https://poemanalysis.com/diction/speaker-in-poetry/) is used to tell an entire story. There is no consistent [rhyme scheme](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/rhyme-scheme/) or pattern of [meter](https://poemanalysis.com/poetic-meter/meter/) in the piece, meaning that it is written in blank or [free verse](https://poemanalysis.com/poetic-form/free-verse/).

‘Tithonus‘ was first written under the title “Tithon” in 1833. It did not appear to a wide readership until 1859 when it was published under its full name. While not one of Tennyson’s most popular or well-known pieces, ‘Tithonus‘ is characteristic of the poet’s [style](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/style/) and a wonderful example of his ability to expand on already existing [myths](https://poemanalysis.com/genre/myth/) and [legends](https://poemanalysis.com/genre/legend/).

## Analysis of Tithonus

### First Stanza

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,

The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,

Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,

And after many a summer dies the swan.

Me only cruel immortality

Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,

Here at the quiet limit of the world,

A white-hair’d shadow roaming like a dream

The ever-silent spaces of the East,

Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn.

The poem begins with the poet’s speaker, Tithonus, son of Laomedon, a King of Troy, bemoaning his immortality as he looks around the woods.

Around him, he can see the “woods decay.” He [repeats](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/repetition/) the phrase twice for emphasis as this simple act of life moving on to death is beyond the realm of his understanding. After decaying the woods, “fall,” and a “vapour” or mist covers the ground. This vapor is part of the process of reincarnation through which every living thing participates. “The vapors weep their burthen to the ground,” and the men come along and till the field and all that lies within it. The earth is reused and reborn, every living thing goes through this except for Tithonus.

Tithonus is alone in the world. He is isolated by immortality and he despises it. Many members of mankind have desired the ability to live forever. Tithonus was no exception and his story, and how he came to hate his own eternal life will be described by the speaker throughout the poem.

He is being “consumed” by his own immortality and is “slowly” withering within his own arms. There is no one there to soothe him who can understand what he is going through, so he must take comfort in his own presence. In the next lines, he describes himself as a “white-hair’d shadow” that is traveling the world in a dream. He has seen and done everything, he is at the “limit of the world” trapped in the East with Eos. The speaker has seen all the beauty the planet has to offer and is now completely alone and miserable.

### Second Stanza

         Alas! for this gray shadow, once a man—

So glorious in his beauty and thy choice,

Who madest him thy chosen, that he seem’d

To his great heart none other than a God!

I ask’d thee, ‘Give me immortality.’

Then didst thou grant mine asking with a smile,

Like wealthy men, who care not how they give.

But thy strong Hours indignant work’d their wills,

And beat me down and marr’d and wasted me,

And tho’ they could not end me, left me maim’d

To dwell in presence of immortal youth,

Immortal age beside immortal youth,

And all I was, in ashes. Can thy love,

Thy beauty, make amends, tho’ even now,

Close over us, the silver star, thy guide,

Shines in those tremulous eyes that fill with tears

To hear me? Let me go: take back thy gift:

Why should a man desire in any way

To vary from the kindly race of men

Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance

Where all should pause, as is most meet for all?

In the second [stanza](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/stanza/) of this piece, the speaker explains how he came to be in this sorry state. He is now a “gray shadow,” but was once, “So glorious in his beauty” that he was chosen by “thy” to be granted immortality. It is understood from the original myth, as summarized above, that the “thy” is a reference in this poem to Eos or Aurora, the [personification](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/personification/) of the dawn. After she fell in love with Tithonus he begged her, as many a mortal would, to “‘Give me immortality.’”

In this version of the story, Eos granted Tithonus’ wish like a “wealthy [man]” who can give away things at will without being concerned about their own wellbeing. The immortality was not what Tithonus was expecting though. Eos granted him eternal life but not eternal youth. Since he was made immortal Tithonus has been aging as would any normal man. At this point in the story the “Hours have worked “their wills,” they have “beat [him] down” and “wasted” him until he was a shell of his former self.

Although time was unable to force him towards a final death it did continue the aging process. Now, Tithonus is forced to “dwell in the presence of immortal youth,” referring to Eos, while he is “in ashes.” His never-ending age is made worse by the fact that Eos is completely untouched by time.

In the next lines of the poem, the speaker is pleading with Eos to please, “take back thy gift.” He hopes to convince her that he is, at this point, better off dead. She has tears in her “tremulous eyes” as she listens to his plea. He tells her that no man would “desire” to diverge so far from normal mankind and that no one, if they knew what misery this was, would wish to hide from death. As was demonstrated in the first stanza, he now understands the importance of the cycle of life, he would never make this mistake again.

### Third Stanza

         A soft air fans the cloud apart; there comes

A glimpse of that dark world where I was born.

Once more the old mysterious glimmer steals

From thy pure brows, and from thy shoulders pure,

And bosom beating with a heart renew’d.

Thy cheek begins to redden thro’ the gloom,

Thy sweet eyes brighten slowly close to mine,

Ere yet they blind the stars, and the wild team

Which love thee, yearning for thy yoke, arise,

And shake the darkness from their loosen’d manes,

And beat the twilight into flakes of fire.

Lo! ever thus thou growest beautiful

In silence, then before thine answer given

Departest, and thy tears are on my cheek.

In the third stanza, the speaker is watching the sky right before the dawning of the sun and the coming of Eos. The sky is like that “dark world” that all of humankind came from before they were born. It holds a mystery to Tithonus that he believes he will never now know the answer to.

In the following lines, he describes what Eos looks like as she is cresting the horizon. He can see her “pure brows and…shoulders.” Her cheeks light up red and her eyes find his. Her team of horses, “the wild team / Which love thee” then shake off the “darkness from their…manes.” The horses plow forward and hoist Eos into the sky.

The speaker concludes this section of the poem by saying that whenever he makes his new request of her, that she takes back his immortality, she “Departest.” He is wretched and unable to even receive a yes or no answer from the god that used to be his beloved.

### Fourth Stanza

         Why wilt thou ever scare me with thy tears,

And make me tremble lest a saying learnt,

In days far-off, on that dark earth, be true?

‘The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts.’

Ay me! ay me! with what another heart

In days far-off, and with what other eyes

I used to watch—if I be he that watch’d—

The lucid outline forming round thee; saw

The dim curls kindle into sunny rings;

Changed with thy mystic change, and felt my blood

Glow with the glow that slowly crimson’d all

Thy presence and thy portals, while I lay,

Mouth, forehead, eyelids, growing dewy-warm

With kisses balmier than half-opening buds

Of April, and could hear the lips that kiss’d

Whispering I knew not what of wild and sweet,

Like that strange song I heard Apollo sing,

While Ilion like a mist rose into towers.

In the fourth stanza, he asks Eos if she will ever give him an answer, even if it is one shown in tears. He knows if he were to see her crying he would know that “The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts.” The speaker is afraid that there is no way for Eos to take back what she has given.

In the next lines of the poem, the speaker is reminiscing on the better days of his life when “with…another heart” he laid down beside another lover. He is remembering happier times in his life before he even became involved with Eos. Perhaps, he is thinking, if this had been his chosen path he would have lived a better, fuller life. He remembers the curls of this lover’s hair in the light and her “outline” pressed against the light of the sun. He was the most alive then. Tithonus could feel his “blood / Glow with glow” as he lay with her. Together they pressed their “Mouth[s], forehead[s], and eyelids and kissed balmy kisses.

Tithonus is dreaming of this better time in which this unknown lover whispered “that strange song I heard Apollo sing” while the city of Troy, or Ilion, was being built. While this is a past life that he thinking of it is wrapped up in his thoughts of Eos. He cannot even see this past lover without her being present as the light behind the lover’s body.

### Fifth Stanza

         Yet hold me not for ever in thine East:

How can my nature longer mix with thine?

Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold

Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet

Upon thy glimmering thresholds, when the steam

Floats up from those dim fields about the homes

Of happy men that have the power to die,

And grassy barrows of the happier dead.

Release me, and restore me to the ground;

Thou seëst all things, thou wilt see my grave:

Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;

I earth in earth forget these empty courts,

And thee returning on thy silver wheels.

In the final stanza of the poem, Tithonus is asking Eos to no longer hold him “in thine East” where the sun always rises. His “nature” is unable to mix with her own. Even though they may both be immortal, his visage and constitution are no longer what they were. Tithonus does not feel for Eos the same way as he used to. Her light feels to him like a cold bath that “wrinkle[s]” his feet. This he experiences every morning when the sun is rising and [setting](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/setting/) “steam” floating up off the fields around him.

He pleads with her to “Release” him and let him return to the “ground.” If she was to release him as he so deeply desires, she will still be able to “renew” her beauty every morning and see his grave within the earth. He will die and “earth in earth forget these empty courts,” or the empty days in which he has been living.