

**FIFTY
PERFECT POEMS**

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Fifty Perfect Poems by Charles A. Dana & Rossiter Johnson

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PERFECT POEMS**



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PERFECT POEMS.

SELECTED AND EDITED BY
CHARLES A. DANA AND ROSSITER JOHNSON.

WITH SEVENTY TWO ILLUSTRATIONS.

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P R E F A C E .

THE title of this volume may perhaps appear a little audacious to those who recall Pope's familiar dictum as to the impossibility of a faultless piece. In the absolute sense of the term, there is, of course, no perfect poem, because there is no perfect thing of any kind. But, as every art has its limitations, in whatsoever work the imperfections are caused by these limitations alone, the artist may fairly be said to have succeeded to perfection. On this principle the poems here collected have been chosen.

Poetry has manifold applications: the telling of a story, the picturing of a landscape, the analysis of a motive, the awakening of a national sentiment, the utterance of a passion, the suggestion of a dream; and, in the hands of a master, verse may lend its charm to almost any subject, however homely. The endeavor has been made to include in this group of poems a wide variety in kind, only demanding that each shall be perfect after its kind, and having a reasonable regard for the possibilities of illustration. It was believed that such a collection, enriched by the pencils of the best artists, would have a peculiar and permanent value for the lovers of poetry.

In no instance have the editors subordinated their own critical judgment to a popular verdict, though in many, as was to be expected, the two most perfectly agree. A glance over the minor poems of our language showed some singular

discrepancies, as well as coincidences, between the rule here applied and the test of popularity. Burns's oft-quoted "Highland Mary" contains not a single good rhyme in all its thirty-two lines; and Byron was not able to get through the twenty-four lines of the "Maid of Athens" without a gross grammatical error woven into the very structure of the verse. In these cases the natural beauty of the sentiment and fitness of expression have easily overborne the technical imperfections. Every reader is aware that Gray's "Elegy," at its twenty-fourth stanza, suddenly drops to the level of mediocrity; but, notwithstanding this blemish, it still remains, after a century and a quarter, immeasurably the finest composition of its kind in the English tongue. If an occasional question should arise as to the justness of this or that selection or omission, its answer will be readily suggested by the principle laid down and the instances here cited.

Our acknowledgments are due to Messrs. Houghton, Mifflin, and Co. for permission kindly given to use copyrighted pieces, from distinguished American poets, published by that firm.

LIST OF POEMS.

	PAGE
PROTHALAMION	<i>Edmund Spenser</i> 1
SONNETS	<i>William Shakespeare</i> 8
DEATH'S FINAL CONQUEST	<i>James Shirley</i> 10
LYCIDAS	<i>John Milton</i> 11
THEY ARE ALL GONE	<i>Henry Vaughan</i> 19
THE DESERTED VILLAGE	<i>Oliver Goldsmith</i> 21
ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD	<i>Thomas Gray</i> 37
ON A PICTURE OF PEEL CASTLE IN A STORM	<i>William Wordsworth</i> 43
SHE WAS A PHANTOM OF DELIGHT	<i>William Wordsworth</i> 46
KILMENY	<i>James Hogg</i> 48
LOCHINVAR	<i>Sir Walter Scott</i> 60
HYMN BEFORE SUNRISE, IN THE VALE OF CHAMOUNI	<i>Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i> 63
TO NIGHT	<i>Joseph Blanco White</i> 67
LOCHIEL'S WARNING	<i>Thomas Campbell</i> 68
HALLOWED GROUND	<i>Thomas Campbell</i> 72
THE DESTRUCTION OF SENNACHERIB	<i>Lord Byron</i> 76
SONG OF THE GREEK POET	<i>Lord Byron</i> 78
THE BURIAL OF SIR JOHN MOORE	<i>Charles Wolfe</i> 82
TO A SKYLARK	<i>Percy Bysshe Shelley</i> 84
LINES TO AN INDIAN AIR	<i>Percy Bysshe Shelley</i> 89
THE CAVERN OF THE THREE TELLS	<i>Félicia Hemans</i> 90
THE BATTLE-FIELD	<i>William Cullen Bryant</i> 93

		PAGE
✓ MARCO BOZZARIS	<i>Fitz-Greene Halleck</i>	96
ODE ON A GRECIAN URN	<i>John Keats</i>	101
JEANIE MORRISON	<i>William Motherwell</i>	104
THE BRIDGE OF SIGHS	<i>Thomas Hood</i>	108
NASEBY	<i>Thomas Babington Macaulay</i>	113
○ EACH AND ALL	<i>Ralph Waldo Emerson</i>	117
○ THE ARSENAL AT SPRINGFIELD	<i>Henry Wadsworth Longfellow</i>	119
○ OUR RIVER	<i>John Greenleaf Whittier</i>	122
○ THE HAUNTED PALACE	<i>Edgar Allan Poe</i>	125
○ THE RAVEN	<i>Edgar Allan Poe</i>	127
THE LOTOS-EATERS	<i>Alfred Tennyson</i>	131
ULYSSES	<i>Alfred Tennyson</i>	142
BREAK, BREAK, BREAK	<i>Alfred Tennyson</i>	145
MOTHER AND POET	<i>Elizabeth Barrett Browning</i>	146
○ THE LAST LEAF	<i>Oliver Wendell Holmes</i>	150
HOW THEY BROUGHT THE GOOD NEWS FROM GHENT TO AIX	<i>Robert Browning</i>	152
LOVE AMONG THE RUINS	<i>Robert Browning</i>	155
THE FORGING OF THE ANCHOR	<i>Samuel Ferguson</i>	159
ODE TO HAPPINESS	<i>James Russell Lowell</i>	164
○ DRIFTING	<i>Thomas Buchanan Read</i>	169
TOMMY'S DEAD	<i>Sydney Dobell</i>	173
A NICE CORRESPONDENT	<i>Frederick Locker</i>	177
SUMMER	<i>John Townsend Trowbridge</i>	180
THE HIGH TIDE ON THE COAST OF LINCOLNSHIRE (1571)	<i>Jean Ingelow</i>	183
HE WHO DIED AT AZIM	<i>Edwin Arnold</i>	190
AUX ITALIENS	<i>Robert Bulwer, Lord Lytton</i>	193
DORIS	<i>Arthur Joseph Munby</i>	198
THE OLD POLITICIAN	<i>Robert Buchanan</i>	200