

THE DAILY NEBRASKAN LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Published monthly as a literary section of
The Daily Nebraskan, official publication of
the University of Nebraska.

Editorial

This number of the literary supplement is devoted to the essays and poems which were awarded prizes in the competitions held this spring by a faculty committee composed of Prof. J. A. Rice, Jr., chairman; Prof. Louise Pound; Miss Constance M. Syford; Prof. P. H. Frye; Prof. S. B. Gass.

The essays were judged by Prof. H. M. Belden, chairman of the department of English at the University of Missouri. Verse was judged by Prof. Jay B. Hubbel, chairman of the English department at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, and editor of the *SOUTHWEST QUARTERLY*, with Prof. John O. Beaty, and Mr. George Bond of the same institution, who are associated with Professor Hubbel in the editing of the quarterly.

Special mention should be made of the class of 1898, which has made the fifty-dollar prize for poetry a permanent award, in the hope of stimulating endeavor of the kind represented by the contests.

The poetry prize of fifty dollars, offered by this class was awarded to the three sonnets submitted by Helen Rummons. The second prize, twenty-five dollars offered by Vestals of the Lamp, organization of women in the College of Arts and Sciences, was won by Marie Mengers. Third place was won by the poem "Immortality" written by Ione Gardner.

Ruth Moore's essay, "On Epitaphs and Tombstones," was awarded the first prize of fifty dollars given by an anonymous donor. The second essay prize of twenty-five dollars, also contributed anonymously, was won by Alice Dougan with "Dickens and the Childlike Mind."

On Epitaphs and Tombstones

(Continued from Page One)

their souls in patience until the cycle swings once more in favor of the classics.

Dryden's inscription and perhaps a few others to the contrary, I think that ordinarily the humanity and graciousness of the true epitaph is far preferable to the cold dignity of the official funeral record. As I walked through the cemetery at home I discovered that I actually preferred the trite and flowery verses of the 1860's, with all their dilute Victorian sentimentalism, to the unfeeling "Born....., Died" The monument-makers of that artless day must have published a pamphlet of tombstone poems for the convenience of sorrowing relatives, and there must have been only a few verses in the slender little book, — either that, or a certain group of five or six made universal appeal, for all through the cemetery the same couplets and quatrains were repeated endlessly on the tombs of the 'Sixties and 'Seventies.

Here, on a small grave, is an old white stone engraved with a blurred rose; on another is a dove, bearing a branch of olive in her mouth; still another bears a spray of lilies-of-the-valley. The names and dates are different, but the epitaphs on the three tombs are the same.

Montie J.
SHACKELFORD
Daughter of H. D. & M. M.
Shackelford

Born Feb. 14, 1859 Died June 4, 1862
Sleep on Sweet Babe and take thy rest
God hath called thee home he thought it best.

Quite unaccountably, the strange abbreviations, the limping meter, and the lack of punctuation do not disturb one. Looking at the small rectangle of green grass and the white head-stone softened by many rains,

the commonplaceness of grief's expression does not seem to matter. Sorrow and death dignify the poor lines. Phrases one would smile at in Mrs. L. T. Meade do not seem funny when one is close enough to touch a grave. Then, one imagines the mother and father of Monte J. sadly perusing the monument-maker's pamphlet, — or perhaps her father was at Bull Run, and Mrs. Shackelford selected the verse alone, the page blurring through her rush of blinding tears.

The most trite and stereotyped of these verses have a breath of sincerity and individuality simply because they were selected in preference to others. Just as there must have been some word or phrase in *Sleep on Sweet Babe* which appealed to Montie J's mother as descriptive of her little girl, so all of the sentimental lines must have been, in some few respects, reminiscent of the departed persons.

There was a hand with a heaven-pointing forefinger, and below it the inscription:

STELLA OSPREY ELLIOT

Born Aug. 3, 1845 Died Jan. 2, 1882
Her happy soul has winged its way
To one pure bright eternal day.

This couplet appeared on no less than eight monuments. On many others was a device of clasped hands, and the motto:

The sweet remembrance of the just
Shall linger when they sleep in dust.

Here, carved between a sculpture Bible and the open gates of Heaven, is the inscription:

G R A Y

Laura Lisle Hope

Born March 1, 1873 Died March 16, 1899
Laura, thou are gone to rest,
Thine is an early tomb —
But Jesus summoned thee away,
Thy savior called thee home.

The inability of the simple and ignorant people to express with adequacy their profound sorrows is a very tragic thing. In the end they are usually forced to choose some poor worn phrase like *Gone But Not Forgotten*, or *Asleep in Jesus*. These inscriptions were actually seen on a number of tombs. Surely the relatives felt a sense of the weakness and impotency of these words in expressing the desperate grief they had experienced. Perhaps we are wrong; perhaps they thought *Gone But Not Forgotten* "pretty," and *Asleep in Jesus* an elegant phrase. But there must be some who sorrow deeply, and do not know how to say properly what they feel.

On some tombs were small scrolls with the one word: "Rest;" on others "Farewell," with its slightly pagan connotation of *Vale!* *Vale!* to a departed spirit hesitating between Orcus and Elysium. The simplicity of such expressions is, I think, immeasurably superior to the awful flippancy displayed in some seventeenth and eighteenth century epitaphs. Cleverness does not look well on a tombstone. One likes the debonair spirit of these cheerful persons who, during life, speak lightly of our inevitable approach to the grim valley; and even more admirable are they who go to the last adventure with a jest, — but how strangely lacking in a sense of relevancy is the type of mind which can place a pun over a grave!

Says one:

Here lies Anne Mann; she lived an
Old maid and died an old Mann.

Alexander Pope was a great offender in this respect. The great classicist wrote a large number of epitaphs, about half of which are characterized by an indecent flippancy. Of Lord Coningsby he said:

Here lies Lord Coningsby — be civil,
God knows the rest — so does the devil.

Now and then, often by accident, he wrote a good one. There are his famous lines on Newton —

Nature and Nature's laws law hid in Night;
God Said, Let Newton be! and there was light.

and on Sir Godfrey Kneller, most famous of the great host of eighteenth century portrait-painters:

Kneller, by Heaven, and not a master taught,
Whose Art was Nature, and whose pictures thought;

Living, great Nature feared he might outvie
Her works; and dying, fears herself may die.

But on charming John Gay, that light-hearted pioneer in the writing of operas, Pope wrote:

Well, then, poor G — lies underground!
So there's an end of honest Jack —
So little justice here be found
'Tis ten to one he'll ne'er come back.

We cannot but feel, however, that these lines are better than the epitaph Gay wrote for himself:

Life is a jest, and all things show it,
I thought so once, but now I know it.

In fact, as a general rule, I do not think persons should write their own epitaphs. People cannot epitomize themselves. Rare is the man who is able to stand off and sum up his life in the right perspective. We are too human; the most humorous of us would omit certain chapters of our lives, in making up the main account, and the most satiric would color their self-estimates with idealism in one place or another.

The tomb of Plautus once bore what is probably the most striking example of a conceited epitaph ever known:

*Postquam est mortem aptus Plautus; comoedia luget.
Scene deserta, dein risus ludus jacusque,
Et numeri innumeri simul omnes collacrumarunt.*

Benjamin Franklin's was another unsuccessful example of the autobiographical type of epitaph:

The body of Benjamin Franklin, Printer
(Like the cover of an old book, its contents torn
out, and strip of its lettering and gilding)
Lies here, food for worms;
But the work shall not be lost, for it will (as he
believed)
Appear once more in a new and elegant edition
Revised and corrected by the Author.

These lines are good, they are noble, but they do not describe Benjamin Franklin.

Consider poor Thomas Gray's *Sketch of His Own Character*; even had it not that title, all who ran could have told that the author was describing himself.

Too poor for a bribe, and too proud to importune,
He had not the method of making a fortune;
Could love, and could hate, so was thought somewhat odd,
No very great wit, he believed in a God.
A place or a pension he did not desire,
But left church and state to Charles Townshend
and Squire.

Of course, if the person does not attempt to characterize himself, if he simply leaves a request for some favorite quotation to be placed on his tomb, there is no valid ground for criticism. No one could find fault with Keats' "Here lies one whose name was writ in water."

I had once thought the material of tombstones an unimportant thing. Beyond a definite aversion to enormous blocks of rough or polished granite, and a vague approval, probably arising from curiosity, of Browning's peach-blossom marble, it had been my opinion that the material of a monument did not matter. Once in childhood, after burying in the garden a small yellow chicken, and marking its grave with a wooden cross, I remember reflecting that wooden tombstones would be quite as good as the other kind. But a certain grave on a little hill in the cemetery at home had changed my mind. It is a crumbling wooden monument, with its faint letters almost washed away: J. M. Woodbr — M. D. — B — —ied 1873.

Looking at the rotten wood, I shuddered and thought: Ah, let us deceive ourselves for a time! With marble for the ages, with jasper and basalt, with enduring bronze, let us deceive ourselves with a pretence of immortality. The symbolism of a decaying wooden monument is too realistic. It is true that the immortality of our bodies, after we leave the earth, can only exist in our children. But if we believe even dimly in the deathlessness of the mind, or soul, or of whatever it is that informs the body, let us