

William Cowper

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William Cowper (pronounced “Cooper,” 1731-1800) was born in Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire in England. Cowper was known best for his poetry and was one of the most popular poets of the eighteenth century. His more famous poems are *The Task*, “The Castaway,” and his works in *Olney Hymns*. Many of his poems are autobiographical reflections of his life and experiences.

His father, John Cowper, was a rector,¹ and his aunt, Judith Madan, was a poet, both of which influenced his later religious and writing practices. Cowper studied law for three years and was offered an administrative position at the House of Lords. This position, however, became extremely stressful for him due to the examination process, and it was the beginning of Cowper’s descent into severe mental illness. In 1763 he had his first period of insanity. Over his lifetime, he tried to commit suicide multiple times because of stress and self-doubt.

After being admitted into an asylum under the care of Nathaniel Cotton,² Cowper began to find solace in Evangelical religion. Once he recovered, Cowper settled down in Olney, Buckinghamshire with his close friends Morley and Mary Unwin. There he met Rev. John Newton (author of the hymn “Amazing Grace”), who encouraged him to pursue poetry, and together they published *Olney Hymns* in 1779. Cowper’s other religious teachers of Evangelicalism were strict on him, and he soon became religiously despondent. Cowper’s religious journey and his mental illness were connected because his constant self-doubt led him to believe that he was not worthy of God’s love and damned. He lived out the rest of his life with Mary Unwin after Morley had passed away, in the quiet countryside where she encouraged him to write poetry and took care of him. When she passed away in 1796, Cowper became distraught and once again he fell into the grasp of mental illness. He passed away from dropsy³ in 1800.

His poem “The Love of the World Reproved: Or, Hypocrisy Detected” was published in a book titled *Poems: by William Cowper, Of the Inner Temple, Esq.* in

¹ *Rector* a minor member of the clergy of the Church of England, in charge of a parish

² *Nathaniel Cotton* was both a physician and another English poet of the 18th century; for more information, see Max D’Ambrosio’s headnote to “The Bee, the Ant, and the Sparrow: A Fable”

³ *Dropsy* “A morbid condition characterized by the accumulation of watery fluid in the serous cavities or the connective tissue of the body” (*OED*), known today as edema

1782. The poem is in iambic tetrameter couplets and describes satirically a supposed ambiguity in the Islamic teachings about not eating pork. During the eighteenth century, Muslims were a very small minority in Great Britain compared to Christians, and Cowper would not have been well-versed in Islamic teachings. Cowper's target audience for his poems was Christian and would have mocked Muslims in the same way the poem does, but Cowper turns the tables on his readers and accuses them also of hypocrisy.

Further Reading

Brunström, Conrad. *William Cowper: Religion, Satire, Society*. Bucknell UP, 2004.

Matar, Nabil. "Islam in Britain, 1689-1750." *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 284–300.

The Love of the World Reproved: Or, Hypocrisy Detected⁴

THUS says the prophet of the Turk,⁵
 Good mussulman⁶ abstain from pork;
 There is a part in ev'ry swine,
 No friend or follower of mine
 May taste, whate'er his inclination, 5
 On pain of excommunication.⁷
 Such Mahomet's⁸ mysterious charge,⁹
 And thus he left the point at large.
 Had he the sinful part express'd
 They might with safety eat the rest; 10
 But for one piece they thought it hard
 From the whole hog¹⁰ to be debarr'd,¹¹
 And set their wit at work to find
 What joint¹² the prophet had in mind. 15
 Much controversy strait arose,
 These chuse the back, the belly those;
 By some 'tis confidently said
 He meant not to forbid the head,

⁴ *Poems: by William Cowper, Of the Inner Temple Esq.* 1782, pp. 320–322; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

⁵ *Turk* people from Turkey, Muslims

⁶ *Mussulman* Muslim person

⁷ *Excommunication* “the exclusion of an offending member from [a] religious community” (*OED*)

⁸ *Mahomet's* Muhammed, the main prophet of Islam

⁹ *Charge* a mandate or order

¹⁰ *The whole hog* the phrase “to go the whole hog” may originate from Cowper’s poem and it means “to do something completely, thoroughly, or fully” (*OED*)

¹¹ *Debarr'd* to exclude or prohibit

¹² *Joint* a portion of meat (e.g., the leg or shoulder) (*OED*)

While others at that doctrine rail,¹³
 And piously prefer the tail. 20
 Thus, conscience freed from ev'ry clog,
 Mahometans¹⁴ eat up the hog.
 You laugh — 'tis well — the tale apply'd
 May make you laugh on t'other side.
 Renounce the world,¹⁵ the preacher cries — 25
 We do — a multitude replies.
 While one as innocent regards
 A snug and friendly game at cards;
 And one, whatever you may say,
 Can see no evil in a play;¹⁶ 30
 Some love a concert or a race,¹⁷
 And others, shooting and the chase.¹⁸
 Revil'd¹⁹ and lov'd, renounc'd and follow'd,
 Thus bit by bit the world is swallow'd;
 Each thinks his neighbour makes too free, 35
 Yet likes a slice as well as he,
 With sophistry²⁰ their sauce they sweeten,
 'Till quite from tail to snout 'tis eaten.

¹³ *Rail* “to complain persistently or vehemently” (*OED*)

¹⁴ *Mahometans* followers of Prophet Muhammed, Muslims

¹⁵ *Renounce the world* “to withdraw from the secular world in order to lead a spiritual life” (*OED*)

¹⁶ *Play* a theatrical performance

¹⁷ *Race* horse race

¹⁸ *Shooting and the chase* hunting

¹⁹ *Revil'd* to reject something or treat it with contempt

²⁰ *Sophistry* “employment of arguments which are intentionally deceptive” (*OED*)



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