

William Cowper

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William Cowper (1731-1800) was born in Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, England and is known for his success in writing and enduring an immense amount of suffering in his life. When he was only a child, Cowper's mother passed away (1737), causing some emotional trauma. Shortly after, he moved to a boarding school in Westminster, London where he continued his education. In 1749, Cowper began to study law and eventually became a lawyer's apprentice. Although he was called to take the bar exam in 1754, Cowper declined because he no longer wanted to be a lawyer. During his time at university, he fell in love with his cousin, Theodora Cowper, but her father called off their engagement.

In 1763, Cowper experienced his first attack of insanity and attempted suicide. He attempted suicide three, possibly four, times during his life. After this first attempt, his physician Dr. Nathaniel Cotton placed Cowper in his private asylum with hopes to help Cowper escape from his mental illness and depression. As a result of religious discussions with Cotton, Cowper began reading the Bible and converted to Calvinistic Evangelicalism.

After leaving the asylum in 1765, Cowper moved to Huntingdon and lived with the Evangelical Unwin family. It was here Cowper formed a quiet routine where he lived alongside many pets, including hares, dogs, cats, and birds. They therapeutically brought him joy. We see Cowper's love for animals through positive references in his poetry. When pets were not enough distraction, he began gardening, carpentry, reading, and writing poetry. After two years of Cowper's living with the Unwin family, Clergyman Morley Unwin passed away. Cowper remained with Unwin's widow for the remainder of his life. In 1779 he published a volume of hymns called *Olney Hymns* with the Rev. John Newton. Shortly after this, Cowper published a book of poems called *Poems: by William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.* which includes "The Doves."

Cowper's poem "The Doves" features quatrains that use an alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter style and an ABAB rhyme scheme, in other words hymn stanza. This poem uses an allegorical pair of birds to encourage its readers to live in a virtuous way. "The Doves" is one of Cowper's poems that uses positive animal metaphors, such as turtle doves, a common symbol of love, to promote the idea that marriage is an ideal act of virtue.

In 1785, Cowper released his greatest work, *The Task*, a blank verse poem that contains six books. The first book within *The Task* is titled "The Sofa." This is because Cowper claimed he had nothing to write about at this time; however, Cowper's friend and neighbour, Lady Anna Austen, suggested that he should

write about the sofa he sat on. Shortly after the release of *The Task*, Cowper published his blank verse translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (1791).

Cowper continued to live in Huntingdon in an affectionate but innocent relationship with Mary Unwin. Her passing in 1796 introduced a new wave of mental illness to Cowper. Only four years later, Cowper was overcome by dropsy,³⁴⁷ causing his death. After his death, Cowper's reputation suffered due to questions about a link between Calvinism and suicide (Faubert). Today Cowper remains a well-known Calvinist poet, though he is now more famous for "The Castaway" than *The Task*.

Further Reading

Parker, Erin. "Doubt Not an Affectionate Host': Cowper's Hares and the Hospitality of Eighteenth-Century Pet Keeping." *Eighteenth-Century Life*, vol. 38, no.2, 2014, pp.75–104.

Reference

Faubert, Michelle. "Calvinism, Enthusiasm, and Suicide: The Regulation of Subjectivity in the Romantic Period." *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2018, pp.79–102.

³⁴⁷ *Dropsy* today is called edema: "A morbid condition characterized by the accumulation of watery fluid in the serous cavities or the connective tissue of the body" (*OED*)

The Doves³⁴⁸

REAS'NING at every step he treads,
 Man yet mistakes his way,
 While meaner³⁴⁹ things whom instinct leads
 Are rarely known to stray.

One silent eve I wander'd late,
 And heard the voice of love,
 The turtle³⁵⁰ thus address'd her mate,
 And sooth'd the list'ning dove.³⁵¹

5

Our mutual bond of faith and truth,
 No time shall disengage,³⁵²
 Those blessings of our early youth,
 Shall cheer our latest age.

10

While innocence without disguise,
 And constancy sincere,³⁵³
 Shall fill the circles of those eyes,
 And mine can read them there,

15

Those ills that wait on all below,³⁵⁴

³⁴⁸ *Poems: by William Comper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.* 1782, pp. 299–301; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

³⁴⁹ *Meaner* inferior

³⁵⁰ *Turtle* a turtle dove

³⁵¹ *Dove* a symbol of love

³⁵² *No time shall disengage* no time could free from obligation or engagement

³⁵³ *Constancy sincere* being faithful and loyal

³⁵⁴ *All below* all that is below heaven

Shall ne'er be felt by me,
Or gently felt, and only so,
As being shared with thee.

20

When light'nings flash among the trees,
Or kites³⁵⁵ are hov'ring near,
I fear lest thee alone they seize,
And know no other fear.

'Tis then I feel myself a wife,
And press thy wedded side,
Resolv'd an union form'd for life,
Death never shall divide.

25

But oh! if fickle and unchaste³⁵⁶
(Forgive a transient thought³⁵⁷)
Thou couldst become unkind³⁵⁸ at last,
And scorn thy present lot,³⁵⁹

30

No need of light'nings from on high,
Or kites with cruel beak,
Denied th' endearments of thine eye
This widow'd heart would break.

35

³⁵⁵ *Kites* a bird of prey

³⁵⁶ *Unchaste* lacking chastity or impure

³⁵⁷ *Transient thought* a brief thought

³⁵⁸ *Unkind* acting in a way that is not considered morally good

³⁵⁹ *Present lot* an individual's destiny or situation in life as given by God (*OED*)

Thus sang the sweet sequester'd³⁶⁰ bird

Soft as the passing wind,

And I recorded what I heard,

40

A lesson for mankind.

³⁶⁰ *Sequester'd* cut off from surroundings



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