

William Cowper

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William Cowper (1731–1800) was born in Great Berkhamsted. His father, John Cowper, was the Rector of Berkhamsted, at the Church of St. Peter. Cowper's mother died in 1737, overwhelming him emotionally. After her death, William was sent to a local boarding school and then to Westminster School in London for eight years. He went on to study law in 1749 but did not pursue the career further. A year later, he fell in love with his cousin, Theodora Cowper; however, the engagement was called off by her father due to Cowper's depression.

Cowper endured a great amount of suffering in his lifetime. From grieving his mother's death, to dealing with his own mental health issues, there was always something that he was battling against. In 1763, Cowper had an anxiety attack at the age of thirty-two, evidence (to us) of an underlying severe anxiety disorder; however, at the time people believed that Cowper was insane. He even convinced himself that God was damning him eternally for sinning against the Holy Ghost. Because of this, he became more depressed and attempted to commit suicide three, possibly four, times but ultimately failed. He sought help for his mental illness from a physician, Dr. Cotton (who was also a poet and has a poem in this anthology), who temporarily persuaded him that he was delusional.

Cowper converted to Evangelical Christianity in 1764, before deciding to move in with the family of Mrs. Unwin, with whom he had a complicated platonic relationship. After a terrible dream in 1773, he became convinced that he was unable to be saved by any amount of prayer or by the church itself. To keep himself distracted from the conviction of his damnation, he took up an interest in pets such as dogs, cats, and birds. In addition to his interest in animals, Cowper found relief in carpentry and gardening.

When Cowper was fifty years old, he became serious about writing poetry. In 1782, he published a variety of poems such as "Table Talk," "The Progress of Error," "Truth," and "Human Frailty." "Human Frailty" was published in his book called *Poems by William Cowper of the Inner Temple, Esq.* ("of the Inner Temple" means someone with a law degree). "Human Frailty" explores the idea of man being weak in mental and emotional health. If we take into account his many attacks of insanity and attempts at suicide, this poem displays Cowper's sensitivity towards the concept of mental health issues. "Human Frailty" consists of twenty-

four lines in hymn stanza (alternating iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter in quatrains) with a rhyme scheme of ABAB.

“Human Frailty” did not receive much critical or public attention, but *The Task* (1785) gave him an incredible amount of exposure and built his reputation. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, many considered him to be the most famous English poet. He was offered the laureateship (a prestigious award) for his famous poem *The Task* but declined the offer in 1788. In 1791, after working on them for several years, he published his blank verse translations of *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Five years later, Mrs. Unwin died. Cowper died in 1800 at the age of sixty-eight, due to a disease called dropsy (edema).

Further Reading

Rosen, George. “Social Attitudes to Irrationality and Madness in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Europe.” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, Vol. 18, no.3, 1963, pp.220–240.

Human Frailty⁴⁸⁶

1.

WEAK and irresolute⁴⁸⁷ is man;
 The purpose of to day,
 Woven with pains into his plan,
 To morrow rends away.

2.

The bow well bent and smart the spring,⁴⁸⁸
 Vice seems already slain,
 But passion⁴⁸⁹ rudely snaps the string,
 And it revives again.

5

3.

Some foe to his upright⁴⁹⁰ intent
 Finds out his weaker part,
 Virtue engages his assent,⁴⁹¹
 But pleasure wins his heart.

10

4.

'Tis here the folly of the wise⁴⁹²
 Through all his art we view,
 And while his tongue the charge⁴⁹³ denies,
 His conscience owns it true.

15

⁴⁸⁶ *Poems by William Cowper*, J. Johnson, 1782, pp.311–313; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*. *Frailty* “moral weakness; instability of mind; liability to err or yield to temptation” (*OED*)

⁴⁸⁷ *Irresolute* “unresolved or undecided as to a course of action” (*OED*)

⁴⁸⁸ *Spring* the action of the archery weapon

⁴⁸⁹ *Passion* any strong emotion

⁴⁹⁰ *Upright* “adhering to or following correct moral principles; of unbending integrity or rectitude; morally just honest, or honourable” (*OED*)

⁴⁹¹ *Assent* agreement

⁴⁹² *Wise* possibly a reference to 1 Corinthians 3:19

⁴⁹³ *Charge* a legal accusation

5.

Bound on a voyage of awful⁴⁹⁴ length

And dangers little known,

A stranger to superior strength,

Man vainly⁴⁹⁵ trusts his own.

20

6.

But oars⁴⁹⁶ alone can ne'er prevail

To reach the distant coast,

The breath of heav'n must swell the sail,

Or all the toil is lost.

⁴⁹⁴ *Awful* inspiring awe

⁴⁹⁵ *Vainly* "with personal vanity; conceitedly" (*OED*) but also futilely

⁴⁹⁶ *Oars* referring to the objects with which to row a boat



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