

William Cowper

Norah Gillen, Simon Fraser University

Born in 1731 in Hertfordshire, England, Cowper³⁰⁴ had a tumultuous life, suffering from profound loss, childhood bullying, and mental illness as he grew older. At age six, his mother passed away, after which his father, a practicing barrister, sent Cowper to a prestigious boarding school, where he was ostracized by his classmates. In 1756, his father passed, further damaging Cowper's mental health. Shortly after this, he attempted suicide and subsequently stayed for eighteen months at St. Albans insane asylum.³⁰⁵ It was here that he experienced a deep religious mania, convincing himself that he was eternally damned, and converting to Evangelicalism. Afterward, much of his time was dedicated to his healing, while he remained religious. The most productive period of his literary career then began.

Cowper's work was extremely popular and well-known. Maurice James Quinlan describes Cowper as "a transitional poet" (117), one of many who paved the way for the Romantic movement. Cowper wrote about the minutiae of daily life while simultaneously tackling complex psychological concepts, such as the passage of time. He possessed a "direct and discursive personal style" that had a widespread accessibility and appeal (Rider 1). The strong voice and lyrical style of his poetry influenced his similarly famous successors such as Wordsworth.

"A Comparison" is in iambic pentameter couplets. It was published in *Poems: by William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.* in 1782, his first published volume of poetry. The poem's themes, while broadly falling under the idea of aging in respect to this anthology, also touch on the general concept of time. Cowper's analogizing of time to rivers is reminiscent of Heraclitus's saying that we "cannot step in the same river twice." While we have no direct evidence of Cowper's familiarity with Heraclitus, he was likely familiar with Kantian philosophy, as it was popular in Europe at the time. Kant's ideas are reflected in "A Comparison" in that he states that every action produces a different occurrence, which "presupposes another state in which cause is found" (Chignell 585).

Further Reading

Chignell, Andrew, et al. "Kant's Theory of Causation and Its Eighteenth-Century German Background." *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 119, no.4, 2010, pp. 565–591.

Packer, Barbara. "Hope and Despair in the Writings of William Cowper." *Social Research*, vol. 66, no.2, summer 1999, pp. 545–564.

³⁰⁴ Pronounced "Cooper."

³⁰⁵ St. Albans was run by Dr. Nathaniel Cotton, whose work is also featured in this anthology.

References

- Rider, Clare. "William Cowper of the Inner Temple." *The Inner Temple, 1998-2009*,
<https://www.innertemple.org.uk/who-we-are/history/historical-articles/william-cowper-of-the-inner-temple/>.
- Quinlan, Maurice James. *William Cowper, a Critical Life*. U of Minnesota P, 1953.

A Comparison³⁰⁶

THE lapse of time and rivers is the same,
 Both speed their journey with a restless stream,
 The silent pace with which they steal away,
 No wealth can bribe, no pray'rs persuade to stay,
 Alike irrevocable both when past, 5
 And a wide ocean swallows both at last.
 Though each resemble each in ev'ry part,
 A difference strikes at length the musing heart;
 Streams never flow in vain; where streams abound,
 How laughs the land with various plenty crown'd!³⁰⁷ 10
 But time that should enrich the nobler mind,
 Neglected, leaves a dreary waste behind.



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³⁰⁶ *Poems: by William Comper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.*, printed for J. Johnson, 1782, p. 304; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

³⁰⁷ *Crown'd*: full to the brim; (hence) abundant, bounteous. Now rare and historical (*OED*)