

William Cowper

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William Cowper was born in 1731 in Great Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, England to Rector²⁷² John Cowper and his wife, Anne. As a child, Cowper attended boarding school, followed by the Westminster School in London, and went on to study law. However, he held little interest in pursuing the field and eventually abandoned the venture. When he was six years old, Cowper's mother died giving birth to his younger brother, an event that Arthur Waugh states greatly affected Cowper's worldview and emotional tendencies (593).

Cowper was a sensitive and nervous child and, as a result, struggled with mental health issues later in his life, aggravated by various life events including the loss of his mother, his inability to fit in with his male peers, and his failure to wed his first love and cousin, Theodora. This manifested in a series of mental breakdowns and several suicide attempts. Following one of these, Cowper was admitted into a private asylum for two years. Shortly after his release, he wrote a book recounting his life, *Memoir of the Early Life of William Cowper* (published posthumously, 1816), which detailed his troubled upbringing, emotional turmoil, and eventual spiritual awakening. Cowper acquired much of his religious knowledge and devotion from the Unwin family, who took him in as a housemate after he left the asylum. It was also through the Unwins, particularly Mrs. Mary Unwin, that Cowper's love of poetry, nature, and animals grew.

The poem "On a Goldfinch Starved to Death in His Cage" was first published in Cowper's 1782 book *Poems: by William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.* It is written in alternating iambic trimeter and tetrameter with an AABCCB rhyme scheme. The goldfinch is most known in literature for its religious symbolism as a figure of hope, happiness, and joy, and often associated with the Madonna and the Christ Child in Renaissance art. Cowper's decision to write about the spiritual goldfinch in a state of entrapment alludes to his mental struggles and how these ailments may have affected his relationship with his Evangelist beliefs.

²⁷² A cleric who functions as a minor administrative leader in a church

Cowper lived out the remainder of his days in East Dereham, Norfolk, with his companion, Mrs. Unwin, until her death in 1796. The passing of Mrs. Unwin led to another bout of depression. Four years later, Cowper was diagnosed with dropsy²⁷³ and died in 1800. He is buried in the chapel of St. Thomas of Canterbury, St Nicholas's Church in East Dereham. Today, Cowper is most known for his work in poetry, translations of Homer, and *Olney Hymns*, an Anglican hymnbook published in 1779 with John Newton, an evangelical preacher famous for writing "Amazing Grace."

Further Reading

Friedmann, Herbert. *The Symbolic Goldfinch: Its History and Significance in European Devotional Art*. Pantheon Books, 1946.

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

References

Waugh, Arthur. "William Cowper." *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 130, 1931, pp. 590–603.

²⁷³ Swelling in the body that is caused by excessive fluid trapped in the bodily tissues

On a Goldfinch starved to Death in his Cage²⁷⁴

TIME was when I was free as air,
 The thistle's downy seed my fare,
 My drink the morning dew;
 I perch'd at will on ev'ry spray,²⁷⁵
 My form genteel, my plumage gay,
 My strains for ever new.

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But gawdy²⁷⁶ plumage, sprightly²⁷⁷ strain,
 And form genteel were all in vain
 And of a transient date,
 For caught and caged and starved to death,
 In dying sighs my little breath
 Soon pass'd the wiry gate.

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Thanks, gentle swain,²⁷⁸ for all my woes,
 And thanks for this effectual close
 And the cure of ev'ry ill!
 More cruelty could none express,
 And I, if you had shewn me less
 Had been your pris'ner still.

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²⁷⁴ *Poems: By William Couper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.*, J. Johnson, 1782, pp. 329-330; *Eighteenth Century Poetry Archive*

²⁷⁵ *spray* a flowering branch

²⁷⁶ *gawdy* “brilliantly fine or colourful, highly ornate, showy” (*OED*)

²⁷⁷ *sprightly* full of vitality

²⁷⁸ *swain* “a lover, wooer, or sweetheart, esp. in pastoral poetry” (*OED*)