

# **COWPER'S POEMS**

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Cowper's poems by Sir A. T. Quiller-Couch

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**SIR A. T. QUILLER-COUCH**

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~~1844~~  
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CHOSEN BY

A. T. QUILLER-COUCH

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## INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM COWPER, son of a clergyman in Hertfordshire, grandson of a Justice of the Common Pleas, and grandnephew of the Lord Chancellor Cowper, was born at Great Berkhamstead, Nov. 26, 1731. He lost his mother young (for his recollections of her see the exquisite poem which opens our selection), and being a delicate nervous child was grossly bullied at his first school, a country academy at Market Street. From this small inferno he was removed by reason of a complaint in his eyes, and after passing through the care of a female oculist, and a severe attack of small-pox, proceeded to Westminster School, where he suffered anew from bullying—but we may suppose with mitigations, since he confesses that he 'excelled at cricket and football'. On leaving Westminster at the age of eighteen he was articled to a Mr. Chapman, an attorney, and had for companion a young fellow-clerk who lived to become Lord Thurlow. In his own words, 'I did actually live three years with Mr. Chapman; that is to say, I slept three years in his house. But I lived—that is to say, I spent my days—in Southampton Row . . . There was I and the future Lord Chancellor [Thurlow] constantly employed from morning to night in giggling and making giggle, instead of studying the law.' In this house in Southampton Row dwelt his uncle Ashley Cowper, with three romping daughters; and Cowper fell in love with Theodora, the eldest of the trio. But his uncle perhaps disapproved of cousins marrying, or perhaps already suspected brain-trouble in the young man: at any rate the lovers were parted. In 1752, Cowper's articles having expired, he entered the Temple, and in 1754 was called to the Bar. Little or no legal business came to him; but he was made free of the 'Nonsense Club', a literary coterie of old Westminster boys. The biographers lay too little stress on these phases of Cowper's life, which carried him to his thirty-second year. He was late indeed in 'finding himself' as a poet, and by that time he had turned a partially disordered mind almost wholly upon serious—not to say gloomy—subjects. But the natural Cowper was a cheerful liver, and his style to the end continued that of a man of the world, reminiscent of old gaiety.

His father died in 1756 leaving him a very small patrimony. In 1763 a kinsman procured for him a

sinecure clerkship of the Journals of the House of Lords. It was judged necessary that Cowper should appear and be examined as to his competency. The prospect filled him with disproportionate horror, and the day before the ordeal he went mad and attempted to hang himself in his bedroom. He was removed to an asylum kept by a Dr. Cotton, a pious man, given to holding religious conversations with his patients: Cowper came back to sanity—or rather to intermittent sanity—in a religious rapture. He took lodgings in Huntingdon with a clergyman named Unwin: and after Mr. Unwin's death in 1767 his widow continued to tend Cowper with a devotion that only ended with life itself. The pair moved to Olney, where they lived for nineteen years on their slender means, and during twelve of them in daily intercourse with the curate-in-charge, the Rev. John Newton—ex-captain of a slave-ship, now a terrifying Evangelist—whose sway over the poet's mind probably did it far more harm than good. In 1773 Cowper and Mrs. Unwin would have married: but another attack of suicidal mania put an end to the project, and they talked of it no more. For five years she coaxed him back to sanity with gentle occupations, such as making chairs for her and cages and hutches for his pets—'five rabbits, three hares, two guinea-pigs, a magpie, a jay and a starling; besides two goldfinches, two canary birds and two dogs.' She did better yet. Cowper had engaged with Newton upon hymn-writing, and the 'Olney Hymns' appeared in 1779. Finding that he was never so cheerful as when occupied with his pen, she suggested that he should write a poem of some length, and gave him as subject *The Progress of Error*. In happy succession followed *Table Talk*, *Truth*, *Expostulation*, *Hope*, *Charity*, *Conversation* and *Retirement*, and the whole was published in 1782 under the title of *Moral Satires*. Mr. Newton shook his head over these worldly levities: but Mr. Newton by this time had left Olney for London, and Mary Unwin rejoiced in her invalid's happiness and recovered spirits.

The *Moral Satires* made no great stir in the world, though *Retirement* in particular is a poem full of beauties. But already, in 1781, another good genius had descended upon Olney, in the form of a sprightly widow, Lady Austen. Her talk and companionship gave the poet a new trend, and to her direct inspiration we owe the delightful things by which Cowper is remembered. She told him the story which grew into the evergreen

*John Gilpin*. She suggested his *Wreck of the Royal George*. She proposed the theme of *The Task*, which made his reputation. In the end—as was but natural—she and Mrs. Unwin found they could not agree; and Cowper, having to choose between the two, chose faithfully the side of his Mary. Lady Austen packed up, and 'was obliged to repair to Bristol'. It is certain that Cowper could inspire affection. His first love, Theodora Cowper, died unmarried for his sake and cherished to the end the verses he had addressed to her.

*The Task* was published in 1785, when its author was fifty-four. He was already at work on a new poem *Tirocinium*, and started to translate Homer; but again fell insane in 1787, and never entirely recovered. The translation of Homer appeared in 1791. Meanwhile he and Mrs. Unwin had removed to Weston, a couple of miles from Olney. In 1795 they shifted their quarters again to East Dereham, in Norfolk. Cowper was now engaged upon an edition of Milton. Mrs. Unwin died at the close of 1796. If words can immortalize self-devotion, hers will live for ever in the two poems which close this little book. Her co-mate lingered on until the spring of 1800. At intervals he still wrote verses, and almost the last was *The Castaway*, in the last stanza of which he suddenly, poignantly, likens the fate of the drowning seaman with his own:—

No voice divine the storm allay'd,  
 No light propitious shone,  
 When snatched from all effectual aid  
 We perish'd, each alone:  
 But I beneath a rougher sea,  
 And whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he.

His life from thirty-two onwards had been sad, yet not by any means uncheerful: and his verse owes much of its piquancy to its combination of sobriety with wit, of solemn subject with the deft Horatian form he had practised and enjoyed in his unregenerate days of youth and sanity.



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, SELECTIONS FROM COWPER  
ON THE RECEIPT OF MY MOTHER'S  
PICTURE OUT OF NORFOLK

OH that those lips had language! Life has passed  
With me but roughly since I heard thee last.  
Those lips are thine—thy own sweet smiles I see,  
The same that oft in childhood solaced me;  
Voice only fails, else, how distinct they say,  
'Grieve not, my child, chase all thy fears away!'  
The meek intelligence of those dear eyes  
(Blest be the art that can immortalize,  
The art that baffles time's tyrannic claim  
To quench it) here shines on me still the same.

Faithful remembrancer of one so dear,  
Oh welcome guest, though unexpected, here!  
Who biddest me honour with an artless song,  
Affectionate, a mother lost so long,  
I will obey, not willingly alone,  
But gladly, as the precept were her own;  
And, while that face renews my filial grief,  
Fancy shall weave a charm for my relief—  
Shall steep me in Elysian reverie,  
A momentary dream, that thou art she.

My mother! when I learned that thou wast dead,  
Say, wast thou conscious of the tears I shed?  
Hovered thy spirit o'er thy sorrowing son,  
Wretch even then, life's journey just begun?  
Perhaps thou gavest me, though unseen, a kiss;  
Perhaps a tear, if souls can weep in bliss—  
Ah that maternal smile! it answers—Yes.  
I heard the bell tolled on thy burial day,  
I saw the hearse that bore thee slow away,  
And, turning from my nursery window, drew  
A long, long sigh, and wept a last adieu!  
But was it such!—It was.—Where thou art gone  
Adieus and farewells are a sound unknown.

May I but meet thee on that peaceful shore,  
The parting sound shall pass my lips no more!  
Thy maidens grieved themselves at my concern,  
Oft gave me promise of a quick return,  
What ardently I wished, I long believed;  
And, disappointed still, was still deceived,  
By disappointment every day beguiled,  
Dupe of *to-morrow* even from a child.  
Thus many a sad to-morrow came and went,  
Till, all my stock of infant sorrow spent,  
I learned at last submission to my lot;  
But, though I less deplored thee, ne'er forgot.  
Where once we dwelt our name is heard no more,  
Children not thine have trod my nursery floor;  
And where the gardener Robin, day by day,  
Drew me to school along the public way,  
Delighted with my bauble coach, and wrapt  
In scarlet mantle warm, and velvet capt,  
'Tis now become a history little known,  
That once we called the pastoral house our own.  
Short-lived possession! but the record fair  
That memory keeps of all thy kindness there,  
Still outlives many a storm that has effaced  
A thousand other themes less deeply traced.  
Thy nightly visits to my chamber made,  
That thou mightest know me safe and warmly  
laid;  
Thy morning bounties ere I left my home,  
The biscuit, or confectionary plum;  
The fragrant waters on my cheeks bestowed  
By thy own hand, till fresh they shone and glowed;  
All this, and more endearing still than all,  
Thy constant flow of love, that knew no fall,  
Ne'er roughened by those cataracts and breaks  
That humour interposed too often makes;  
All this still legible in memory's page,  
And still to be so, to my latest age,  
Adds joy to duty, makes me glad to pay  
Such honours to thee as my numbers may;