

Chapter & Verse

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PREPARED FOR DESTRUCTION: William Cowper (1731 -1800)



At the end of the 18th century, William Cowper was perhaps the best loved poet in England. His hymns such as *God Moves In A Mysterious Way* and *O For A Closer Walk with God* were sung in churches throughout the land. Although his hymns are still frequently sung, his poetry is now little read despite the fact that he is the subject of perhaps the most beautiful and moving biography ever written about an English poet entitled, *The Stricken Deer* by David Cecil.

He was born in Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire where his father was an Anglican vicar. After leaving school in London, he trained as a solicitor. It was at this time that he fell in love with his cousin Theodora who he wished to marry. However, her father strictly forbade the union and Cowper was heartbroken. In 1763, he was offered an administrative position in the House of Lords but the stress of undertaking the necessary examinations was too much for his delicate mental health to bear and he suffered a breakdown and tried repeatedly to take his own

life by hanging and by swallowing poison. He was then sent to a private asylum in St. Albans and when he had at least partially recovered, he went to live in Huntingdon with a retired clergyman and his wife, Mary Unwin with whom he developed a deep bond of friendship. When the Unwins moved to Olney in Buckinghamshire, close to the River Ouse, William moved with them. When Mary's husband died, William lived with her for the rest of her life although the relationship never became a sexual one.

It was in his early years at Olney that William met the former slave trader, John Newton who had repented of his former ways and had become a fervent, dogmatic Christian. Newton is best known for writing the well-loved hymn, *Amazing Grace*. In many respects, this meeting and the subsequent friendship between those men was unfortunate for Cowper as it encouraged his tendency for Christian fundamentalism and in

particular his unshakeable belief in the damnation of sinners. Indeed, Cowper had long been convinced that he was heading for Hell and that there was nothing he could do to alter God's predetermined ways. He was drawn to the famous words of St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans that he was one of those *vessels of wrath prepared for destruction*. In 1773, William suffered a severe bout of insanity and it was only the tender care of Mary that he was able to overcome this dark period in his life.

He drew solace from the natural world which surrounded him and with the small, domestic pleasures which his secluded life afforded him. He was very fond of gardening and he grew devoted to two pet hares which were given to him as a present and which he allowed into the living-room each evening.

from **The Task**

Unnumbered branches waving in the blast,
And all their leaves fast fluttering, all at once.
Nor less composure waits upon the roar
Of distant floods, or on the softer voice
Of neighbouring fountain, or of rills that slip
Through the cleft rock, and, chiming as they fall
Upon loose pebbles, lose themselves at length
In matted grass, that with a livelier green
Betrays the secret of their silent course.
Nature inanimate employs sweet sounds,
But animated Nature sweeter still
To soothe and satisfy the human ear.

