



2020

Drowning in Depression: A Reading of William Cowper's "The Castaway"

Katrina B. Skalko
Middle Georgia State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/bjur>

Recommended Citation

Skalko, Katrina B. (2020) "Drowning in Depression: A Reading of William Cowper's "The Castaway", *Butler Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 6 , Article 19.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/bjur/vol6/iss1/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Butler Journal of Undergraduate Research by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

DROWNING IN DEPRESSION: A READING OF WILLIAM COWPER'S "THE CASTAWAY"

KATRINA B. SKALKO, MIDDLE GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY
MENTOR: LAURA THOMASON

Depression can feel like drowning in the agitated waters of a stormy sea. The unavoidable grip of mental illness can take hold of a person and pull them under in a turmoil of unstable emotion that can seem impossible to survive; some do not. Such is the case in William Cowper's elegiac poem "The Castaway," which takes the reader on a chaotic psychological journey of the literal and emotional meanings of drowning by the fictional sailor and the poet himself to understand the power that depression can wield over the afflicted. "The Castaway" is a metaphor for William Cowper's unstable mental state in the last year of his life and imposes the idea that the hopelessness and despair of depression could befall anyone.

Britannica Encyclopedia hails William Cowper as the upper echelon of English poets of the eighteenth century, the most widely read of his time, and one of the best letter-writers in the English language. The injections of his own tortured emotions into his writing contribute to our understanding of depression within Romantic literature, and his significance as a poet has been sustained through centuries. For future generations of poets, Cowper was to become an iconic figure because of, rather than in spite of, his madness (Darcy). The discoveries of his mental instability and frailty have shed light on the dominance of literary discourse over medical understandings of melancholy and madness in the 1800s.

William Cowper was a remarkable prose writer; he was also plagued by a lifelong severe affective disorder thrashing him about in waves of intense depression and brief moments of religious enlightenment. His mental illness thrust him into "serious bouts of depression and attempted suicides, with his life ending in emotional despair" (Lake 36). Prior to 1773, when the first mental health hospital was opened, doctors were predominantly concerned with minimizing the disruption on the general public by the mentally ill. Professionals in the medical field during Cowper's lifetime lacked the knowledge necessary to diagnose or effectively treat mental conditions; as a result, Cowper's poetry acts as a journal for the natural progression of depression. The fear and isolation of his vacillating mental illness were exposed notably in his poem "The Castaway," which lacks a fixed or unified position and point of view, revealing the internal uproar that Cowper experienced

through most of his life because of unsuccessful treatments for his condition. The frailty of the poet poured onto the pages of his writing, revealing the extent his desolation reached, as well as his consciousness that there was to be no cure for his suffering.

Further breakdown and “reading the text against itself” produce a sense of disunity, of a text engaged in a civil war with itself” (Barry 81). A person who is entrapped in the throes of depression will feel as if a war has been waged within the confines of their mind. If they do not seek the necessary assistance, they can drown in a metaphorical sea of anguish, despair, and isolation. Unfortunately, what a person suffering from depression reveals to the outside world can be in direct opposition to the terror and loss they are experiencing on the inside. Analysis of “The Castaway” discloses a stark contrast between what is professed in the poem and what is expressed in the meaning and tone of the words. A commonality among individuals suffering from depression is an inability to profess or acknowledge precisely what they are suffering through, as the disorder leads to significant difficulties in social functioning. Much like the poem, the afflicted may profess their own stability while those around them begin to see the expression of a life falling apart.

The Encyclopedia of Social Psychology defines depression as “a common disorder primarily characterized by either a low or depressed mood or a loss of interest or pleasure in nearly all activities.” Depression profoundly affects an individual’s thoughts and feelings, having severe consequences, including the risk of suicide. Interpersonal behaviors, combined with negative life experiences, can clash and contribute to an uncontrollable negative cycle of depression that can be difficult to escape. Cowper’s depression was amplified by the loss of his mother when he was six years old and was further fueled by the loss of his close friend Mary Unwin, from which he never fully recovered. The present-day understanding that mild symptoms of depression can increase over time in response to opposing factors helps us to interpret the downward spiral of Cowper’s mental state as he suffered devastating disappointments and losses throughout his life.

“The Castaway,” in an almost elegiac form, tells the story of a sailor who is washed overboard during a particularly stormy night at sea just after his ship has left Great Britain. Much of the poem is told from the perspective of the helpless and abandoned sailor, onto whom Cowper projects his own helplessness and despair, “a transition that I have made so often,” into what he ponders the sailor would be thinking and feeling (Cowper 254). The fierceness of the storm prevents the sailor’s crewmates from saving him, and they are forced to flee for their own

safety, leaving their shipmate to die at the hands of the open ocean. As early as the end of the first stanza, it is no secret that the sailor is going to lose everything, including his own life: “Of friends, of hope, of all bereft” (line 5). Though he is at first confident in his swimming abilities, his confidence falters, bitterness passes briefly, and he then is overcome with hopelessness as he realizes how dire his situation is. When he can no longer hear the cries of his fleeing shipmates, he gives up, allowing the ocean to take him, and he drowns in the crashing waves.

In all of the men Cowper describes in the poem, strength gives way to weakness. Initially, the crewmates are robust in their attempts to save the sailor, and he is described as an expert swimmer; however, strength and confidence both dissipate when the sailor experiences helplessness and an emotional breakdown at realizing the physical impossibility of his crewmates saving him.

Although medical professionals in the eighteenth century thought that religious radicalism caused madness, it was not yet medically reasoned whether Cowper’s spiritual beliefs caused his depression. The daily life and the spiritual life “cannot be compartmentalized. They ride parallel with each other. The issues of life influence spirituality and spirituality influences life” (Lake 41). Cowper suffered fluctuating periods of depression as early as 1743, when he was just a child. In the 1760s, during the immense wake of the Evangelical Revival, Cowper converted to Calvinism. The ensuing religious fanaticism convinced Cowper that he was damned by God, as he wrote to a friend: “As to myself, I have always the same song to sing—Well in body, but sick in spirit; sick, nigh unto death” (Cowper 345). During a time when medical science had not discovered the root of mental illness, an individual with a mental disorder could feel strongly that God was the ultimate judge, their sins against him unforgivable, and that God was the source of their mental anguish. Cowper was convinced that he was plummeted into the darkness of his mental illness by God because of his sinfulness, despite having lived a pious and reclusive life; he expressed in a letter to his spiritual mentor, John Newton, “for my spiritual props have long since been struck from under me” (Cowper 249). In 1763, he attempted one of numerous suicides and was placed in an institution. Despite regaining a stable state of mind, he experienced bouts of depression in 1787 and 1792, and his mental anguish was persistent from 1794 until his death in 1800.

Cowper’s case represents a pivotal point in the politics of madness and religious fanaticism, however (Darcy). Just after his death, the medical field began to accept that insanity and other forms of mental suffering were not caused by theological extremism but, in fact, quite the opposite. Jane Darcy, in a test case of

William Cowper and religious melancholy, documented that in the seventeenth century, a “new generation of physicians insisted that religious melancholy was a mental symptom, indicative of a diseased brain.” By the eighteenth century, religious melancholy had already begun to dissipate as a medical diagnosis, in favor of concrete psychological understandings that were emerging. Medical interest in Cowper’s case peaked in the nineteenth century after publications of his biography exposed the language he used to self-report his mental condition in letters to his friends.

Today, mental illness is understood to a much greater extent, though a degree of stigma still surrounds its causes and treatments. In the 1700s, however, mental illness was not scientifically understood. As a result, “prevailing treatments included solitary confinement, conditioned fear of the doctor, powerful but minimally effective drugs, bleeding, shackles, and plunge baths. It was thought that the patients had chosen a life of insanity and need[ed] to decide to change their ways” (Coy). Treatment facilities were barbaric, and further damage was done to the patients therein. Cowper was a victim of those popular yet ineffective treatments, and, given the numerous and devastating losses he suffered, along with the religious fanaticism that had a firm grip on him, he was never truly able to release himself from the damaging emotions that entrapped him for most of his life.

Through analysis of Cowper’s poem, we can suggest interpretations of his intentions and meanings, but the most hearty evidence of his dejected mental state can be found in his personal letters to his friend and mentor, John Newton, published in *The Private Correspondence of William Cowper Esq., with Several of His Most Intimate Friends*. Within these personal letters, Cowper lays bare his awareness of his mental deterioration after years of expressing his vehemently religious beliefs. He confessed that he was “overwhelmed with the blackest despair,” counterpointed by feelings of elation, for eleven years, these always coming and going as the rushing waves of the ocean. This emotional turmoil changed with the seasons, with Cowper always expressing more depression in the winter (Cowper 243). Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a mood disorder that most often recurs in autumn and winter, triggered by the increased number of dark hours as the daylight grows progressively shorter. Cowper experienced some of the symptoms of SAD: fatigue, difficulty concentrating, withdrawal from family and friends, and reclusion from social activities. Cowper seemed aware of the metaphorical waves of his depression many years before writing “The Castaway” in 1799, one year before his death. This cognizance is evidenced by his expression to Newton in a letter dated May 1785 that he has experienced feelings of

hopefulness, “though they have been of short duration; cut off, like the foam upon the waters” (Cowper 406). Having suffered from depression from a young age, Cowper was no novice to the feelings of emotional ups and downs that accompany mental illness, and he likely felt those waves of emotional chaos crashing over himself long before he composed his poem of the sailor who felt the waves of the stormy sea crashing over him.

In “The Castaway,” Cowper laments the last hours of the doomed sailor and conveys his own dejected state of mind as likened to the situation the sailor finds himself in. In line 6, the speaker refers to “[h]is floating home,” alluding to both the ship and the unstable ground of mental illness. From the poem’s evocation of this poignant impermanence, the reader can feel the sense of hopelessness and helplessness that the sailor experiences, which align strikingly with the feelings that consume those suffering from depression. Through the words of Cowper and those spoken by the narrator as the plight of the sailor is laid out on the page, it is apparent that no one is unsusceptible to the horror that is depression. Much like Cowper, the sailor is powerless to change his predicament, as is anyone lost in a sea of mental instability.

Cowper hints at the inspiration for his overboard sailor by referencing George Anson in line 52, who wrote of his expeditions in *A Voyage Round the World* in 1748. “The Castaway” is based on a particular incident in the book, in which one of the sailors was washed overboard as the ship rounded Cape Horn in the middle of a terrible storm (Packer n5). At first glance, the poem appears to be integrated and flowing coherently, yet contradictions between life and death, hope and despair, and closeness and isolation begin to emerge as the narrator draws the sailor from a life full of hope and companionship on shore to abandonment, isolation, and, ultimately, death at the hands of the open ocean. Cowper singles out an unknown sailor from Anson’s expeditions for his poem and intermingles his own hope and despair, and life and death, with those of the sailor: “But misery still delights to trace / Its semblance in another’s case” (lines 59–60). The line is blurred between Anson’s journaled recounts of his expeditions and Cowper’s poem when the speaker acknowledges the resemblance between the two. Such a reference also suggests that Cowper is presenting himself and his own life as the semblance to the abandoned and drowning sailor, as the poem is suggestive of his own depressive state.

The oppositions throughout the poem appear to create opposition in the sailor and Cowper as well, yet both are drowning and facing looming death. This lack of a fixed position lends itself to recognition of the psychological battle the

sailor endures when his confidence swiftly dissipates and is replaced by helplessness and despair:

Expert to swim, he lay;
 Nor soon he felt his strength decline,
 Or courage die away;
 But wag'd with death a lasting strife,
 Supported by despair of life (14–18).

Much as the poem seems to fluctuate between the thoughts and emotions of Cowper, his speaker, and the drowning sailor, depression can also feel as if the one suffering lacks a fixed position. The afflicted individual's mood, thinking, and behavior often shift drastically, creating feelings of instability, confusion, and helplessness, all symptomatic of depression, and those around the individual are powerless to save them. This helplessness is echoed in the crew members aboard the ship, whose attempts to save their crewmate are thwarted by the rough storm and the vicious Atlantic sea. The sailor is able to hold himself above water for a time, but ultimately, his fate cannot be escaped, and Cowper is no exception. Waves overtake them both; one drowns in the sea, the other in depression.

Analysis of this intensely personal and dramatic narrative poem divulges a stark contrast between what is said in the poem and what is expressed. Lack of unity and consistency can be found throughout the poem, from the fluctuations in tone, perspective, and point of view. Even the title suggests that the protagonist in the poem is “cast away,” implying that he is abandoned by his ship when, in truth, he is washed overboard by the storm and unable to be saved by his crewmates, despite their best efforts. Cowper felt cast away in a very literal sense and connected with the sailor's plight. Depression can cause the afflicted to feel as if they have been cast away from society, caught in their own internal storms until they drown in the emotional upheaval that overtakes them. Though the sailor does not blame his crewmates for leaving him and he recognizes “that flight, in such a sea / Alone could rescue them” (lines 33–34), he implies that they desert him in their efforts to save themselves. In fact, his feelings of resentment and desertion begin to appear in lines 23 and 24, when the speaker informs that “[t]hey *left* their *outcast* mate behind” (my italics), a clear indication that, although understanding was originally professed, the expression is not as positive. The entire sixth stanza is rife with descriptions of his bitterness; words such as “cruel,” “condemn,” “haste,” “bitter,” and “deserted” pepper the stanza and expose true feelings of resentment, which

often accompanies depression. By electing to use these terms, Cowper shows that his own experiences reside well within the norms of universal human suffering.

The perspective of speakers throughout the poem destabilizes the identity of whom we are receiving the narrative from: the sailor, the narrator, or Cowper himself. The poem implies that Cowper is injecting his own feelings about his depression into the narrative and relating directly with the drowning sailor, his depression amplifying his feelings of being cast aside by family and friends in his life. Depression causes negative feelings in individuals, which can result in isolation, avoiding situations that could potentially bring the perceived negativity to the forefront. The speaker in the poem acknowledges, on behalf of the sailor, that the crew had no choice but to flee the storm, yet the sailor expresses bitterness that more is not done to save him: "Whate'er they gave, should visit more" (line 30). His understanding turns to feelings of isolation, amplifying his dire situation when he realizes that, as close as his crewmates are in proximity, they are powerless to save him.

Cowper's presence can be felt at the beginning of the poem, as well as at the end. The chosen pronouns throughout the poem create a lack of a singular, fixed, point of view. The speaker at once refuses to identify with the sailor's plight yet melds his own emotions, fears, and isolation in nearly seamless alterations between the surface story of the sailor and the more in-depth story hiding beneath it: Cowper's own mental breakdown. Throughout the poem and the shifts between life and death, and between hope and despair, Cowper maintains the sailor's anonymity, allowing only glances at the metaphors between the drowning sailor and the poet himself. The shift from "I" to male pronouns in the first stanza indicates that Cowper immediately sees the narrative poem as a metaphor for his own life. Just as quickly, he abandons self-identity and refers to the sailor using male pronouns. He again shifts back to the use of self-identification in the tenth stanza, by saying, "I therefore purpose not, or dream" (line 55). The poem reveals two very individual layers, but the shifts are so erratic that the amalgamation creates a relationship between the imaginative story of the sailor drowning and Cowper's own feelings of isolation, abandonment, and loss. By viewing these destabilized borders between Cowper, his narrator, and the sailor, one can see how depression could befall anyone.

The last stanza entangles the loneliness felt by both Cowper and the sailor, a feeling so deep that even divine intervention cannot save either of them: "We perish'd, each alone: / But I beneath a rougher sea, / And whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he" (lines 64–66). In moments of crisis, the elasticity of time makes minutes

seem like hours: “He long survives, who lives an hour” (line 37). The last hour of the drowning sailor provides a striking metaphor for the last year of Cowper’s life, in which he struggled to keep from drowning in his own depression and fear, imagining himself “as a castaway on an even deeper sea than the one in which the sailor perished” (Packer). Profoundly alone and hollow of all hope, the speaker knows as early as line 11 that death is imminent for the sailor, and Cowper knew that his time was drawing near as well. “Pain and gloom were the first and last chapters to the story of William Cowper,” and Cowper projected that sentiment onto the sailor in his narrative poem at both the beginning and the end (Lake 44). He professed that the sailor loved Albion, or Great Britain, and the ship, but that love was in vain, as all would be lost to the sailor in the end, including the sailor’s own life. In an eerie prophecy of Cowper’s own demise, the lack of a happy ending in the poem reverberates with anyone who has experienced hopelessness through depression.

In 1792, just eight years before his death, Cowper succinctly expressed in a letter the instability he had felt for much of his life, an instability that reverberates with the drowning sailor: “The future appears gloomy as ever; and I seem to myself to be scrambling always in the dark, among rocks and precipices, without a guide, but with an enemy ever at my heels, prepared to push me headlong. Thus I have spent twenty years, but thus I shall not spend twenty more years” (Cowper 331). These same gloomy, scrambling, lost, and lonely feelings are universally shared by anyone afflicted with depression. Through the words of the speaker describing the sailor’s last moments, Cowper, consumed by his own fears of his imminent death, gives palpability to his own despair and abandonment, and he will soon drown as well. Waves eventually overtake both the sailor and Cowper, and neither survives the storm.

Works Cited

- Barry, Peter. "William Cowper, 'The Castaway.'" *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 4th ed. United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2017. 79–81, 346–348. Print.
- Cowper, William. *Private Correspondence of William Cowper, Esq., with Several of His Most Intimate Friends*. London: H. Colburn, 1824. Web. 5 Dec. 2019. <<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001368739>>.
- Coy, Abigail. "Mental Health in Colonial America." *The Hospitalist* May 2006. Web. 5 Dec. 2019. <<https://www.the-hospitalist.org/hospitalist/article/123117/mental-health-colonial-america>>.
- Darcy, Jane. "Religious Melancholy in the Romantic Period: William Cowper as Test Case." *Romanticism* 15.2 (July 2009): 144–155. Web. 5 Dec. 2019. <doi:10.3366/E1354991X09000622>.
- Lake, Vanessa L. "Happily Ever After? An Investigative Analysis on the Spiritual Life of William Cowper." *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 5.2 (Jan. 2005): 35–48. Web. 4 Dec. 2019. <search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=a9h&AN=36217265&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Merrill, Katherine, and Thomas Joiner. "Depression." *Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*. 1st ed. Ed. Roy F. Baumeister and Kathleen D. Vohs. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007. Web. 1 Mar. 2020. <<https://go.openathens.net/redirector/mga.edu?url=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fsagesocpsyc%2Fdepression%2F0%3FinstitutionId%3D3733>>.
- Packer, Barbara. "Hope and Despair in the Writings of William Cowper." *Social Research* 66.2 (1999): 545–564. Web. 29 Oct. 2019. <www.jstor.org/stable/40971337>.

“William Cowper.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 2020. Web. 29 Feb. 2020.
<<http://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Cowper>>.

“William Cowper.” Editorial. *Poetry* 2020. Web. 1 Mar. 2020.
<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-cowper>>.