

William Cowper
'The Negro's Complaint' (1788)

To the tune of 'Hosier's Ghost' or 'As near Porto Bello lying'.

FORCED from home and all its pleasures
Afric's coast I left forlorn,
To increase a stranger's treasures
O'er the raging billows borne.
Men from England bought and sold me,
Paid my price in paltry gold;
But, though slave they have enrolled me,
Minds are never to be sold.

Still in thought as free as ever,
What are England's rights, I ask,
Me from my delights to sever,
Me to torture, me to task ?
Fleecy locks and black complexion
Cannot forfeit nature's claim;
Skins may differ, but affection
Dwells in white and black the same.

Why did all-creating nature
Make the plant for which we toil?
Sighs must fan it, tears must water,
Sweat of ours must dress the soil.
Think, ye masters iron-hearted,
Lolling at your jovial boards,
Think how many backs have smarted
For the sweets your cane affords.

Is there, as ye sometimes tell us,
Is there One who reigns on high?
Has He bid you buy and sell us,
Speaking from his throne, the sky?
Ask him, if your knotted scourges,
Matches, blood-extorting screws,
Are the means that duty urges
Agents of his will to use?

Hark! He answers!—Wild tornadoes
Strewing yonder sea with wrecks,
Wasting towns, plantations, meadows,
Are the voice with which he speaks.
He, foreseeing what vexations
Afric's sons should undergo,
Fixed their tyrants' habitations
Where his whirlwinds answer—"No."

By our blood in Afric wasted
Ere our necks received the chain;
By the miseries that we tasted,
Crossing in your barks the main;
By our sufferings, since ye brought us
To the man-degrading mart,
All sustained by patience, taught us
Only by a broken heart;

Deem our nation brutes no longer,
Till some reason ye shall find
Worthier of regard and stronger
Than the colour of our kind.
Slaves of gold, whose sordid dealings
Tarnish all your boasted powers,
Prove that you have human feelings,
Ere you proudly question ours!

William Cowper
'Pity for Poor Africans' (1788)

—Video meliora, proboque,
Deteriora sequor
My Mind far better Things approves,
My Heart far worse, in Practice, loves.

I own I am shock'd at this Traffic of Slaves,
And fear those who buy them and sell, them, are Knaves.
What I hear of their Hardships, their Tortures, and Groans,
Is almost enough to draw Pity from Stones.

I pity them greatly, but I must be mum,
For how could we do without Sugar and Rum?
Especially Sugar so needful we see;
What, give up our Deserts, our Coffee, and Tea?

Besides, if we do, the French, Dutch and Danes
Will heartily thank us, no Doubt, for our pains:
If WE do not buy the poor creatures, THEY will,
And Tortures and Groans will be multiply'd still.

If Foreigners *likewise* would give up the Trade,
Much more in behalf of your Wish might be said;
But, whilst *they* get Riches by purchasing Blacks,
Pray tell me, why we may not also go Snacks?

Your Scruples and Arguments bring to my Mind
A story so pat, you may think it was coin'd,
On Purpose to answer you, out of my Mint;—
But I can assure you I saw it in Print.

A Youngster at School, more sedate than the Rest,
Had once his Integrity put to the Test:
His Comrades had plotted an Orchard to rob,
And ask'd him to go and assist in the Job.

He was shock'd, Sir, like you, and answered, Oh, no!—
What, rob our good Neighbour?—I pray you don't go:
Besides the Man's poor, and his Orchard's his Bread;
Then think of his Children, for they must be fed.

You talk very fine, and you look very grave;
But Apples we want, and Apples we'll have;
If you will go with us, we'll give you a Share,
If not, you shall have neither Apple nor Pear.

They ceas'd, and Tom ponder'd, "I see they
will go;—
Poor Man! what a Pity to injure him so!—
Poor Man! I would save him his Fruit, if I
could;
But staying behind them will do *him* no Good.

"If the Matter depended alone upon me,
His Apples might hang till they dropp'd from
the Tree:
But since they will have them, I think, I'll go
too;
He'll lose none by me, tho' I get a few."

His Scruples thus silenc'd, Tom felt more at
Ease,
And went with his Comrades the Apples to
seize:
He blam'd, and protested, but join'd in the
plan;
He shar'd in the Plunder, but pity'd the Man.