

C O W P E R   &   N E W T O N   M U S E U M

# The Transatlantic Slave Trade

Learning Resources

Abolition of the Slave Trade:  
William Cowper



Portrait of William Cowper, William Blake, 1801, Cowper & Newton Museum

This resource pack includes and quotes directly from 18th / early 19th century historical sources and contains language and details about the attitudes and violence towards people who were enslaved and trafficked from Africa during that time.



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# 'Desirous of some good ballads'

In 1787, the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the African Slave Trade was established. At that time, William Cowper was a well known poet and people were keen that he would write for the campaign. At first he was hesitant, pointing out that he had already published poems on the subject and that other poets had also done so. After several people approached him, Cowper finally produced some songs or ballads at their request.

**Letter from William Cowper to his cousin, Lady Harriet Hesketh,  
March 21st, 1788:**

My dearest Coz -

I am, after all, become a contributor to the poetical effusions at this time produced on the subject of the Slave-trade. Since I wrote last the following reached me enclosed in a letter from Mr Newton to whom it was address'd.

My dear Sir,

We had some Gentlemen employed about the abolition of the Slave-trade with us the other day, they are very desirous of some good Ballads to be sung about the streets on that subject, which they mean to print and distribute, and think to be of use to the cause. If you think Mr. Cowper could by your means be prevailed on to do this for them, they would be extremely obliged to him, and nobody could do it so well. — Yours in haste

J. Balgonie

Thus assailed, what could I do less than surrender all my resolutions to the contrary? Accordingly, I have sent up two pieces. One a serious Ballad to the Tune of Hosiers's Ghost, called the Negro's Complaint - The other in a different strain and entitled - Sweet meat has sower [sour] Sauce, or the Slave-trader in the dumps. ...

William Cowper

*The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper,  
edited by James King and Charles Ryscamp*



A close-up of a handwritten signature in cursive, which reads 'Ever yours Wm Cowper'.

Cowper's signature

### Letter from William Cowper to his friend, Samuel Rose, March 29th, 1788:

If you hear ballads sung in the streets on the hardships of the negroes in the islands, they are probably mine. I was lately applied to for assistance in that way by a society of gentlemen, enlisted in that laudable service. I have sent them [three] ; two are serious, and one is not so. Of the former, one is called the *Negro's Complaint*, and one, *the Morning Dream*. The latter is entitled, *Sweet meat has sour sauce, or the slave trader in his dumps*. The subject, as a subject for song, did not strike me much, but the application was from a quarter that might command me, and the occasion itself, whatever difficulties might attend it, offered pleas that were irresistible.

*The correspondence of William Cowper, Thomas Wright, 1904.*

### Letter to Lady Hesketh, March 31st, 1788:

I have written one more song, and sent it. It is called *the Morning Dream*, and may be sung to the tune of Tweed-Side, or any other tune that will suit it, for I am not nice on that subject. I would have copied it for you, had I not almost filled my sheet without it; but now, my dear, you must stay till the sweet sirens of London shall bring it to you, or, if that happy day should never arrive, I hereby acknowledge myself your debtor to that amount. I shall now probably cease to sing of tortured negroes, a theme which never pleased me, but which, in the hope of doing them some little service, I was not unwilling to handle.

*The correspondence of William Cowper, Thomas Wright, 1904*



Portraits of William Cowper, Cowper & Newton Museum



Cowper's writings were used in various ways by those working for and supporting the campaign to abolish the slave trade, including being printed on ceramics and posters.

One method that was considered to be particularly effective was an information and discussion pamphlet, given the title of '*A Subject for Conversation at the Tea-Table*'.

'This little piece, Cowper presented in manuscript to some of his friends in London; and these, conceiving it to contain a powerful appeal in behalf of the injured Africans, joined in printing it. Having ordered it on the finest hot-pressed paper, and folded it up in a small and neat form, they gave it the printed title of "*A Subject for Conversation at the Tea-table*." After this, they sent many thousand copies of it in franks into the country. From one it spread to another, till it travelled almost over the whole island. Falling at length into the hands of the musician, it was set to music; and it then found its way into the streets, both of the metropolis and of the country, where it was sung as a ballad; and where it gave a plain account of the subject, with an appropriate feeling, to those who heard it.'

Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade*, vol. 2, 1808

*A Subject for Conversation at the Tea-table* included extracts from Cowper's earlier poems as well as the words for *The Negro's Complaint*.

Cowper's letters show that he wrote it as a song or a ballad to be sung to the tune *Hosier's Ghost*. The poem was likely first published in 1788 in *A Subject for Conversation at the Tea-table* but the document itself is not dated.

This was probably the earliest appearance of the poem in print.

- Compare William Cowper's sequence of letters with the extract from the account by Thomas Clarkson.
- Compare Thomas Clarkson's account of '*A Subject for Conversation at the Tea-table*' with the original document.
- Who would have been the likely recipients?
- What does the title tell us about how the abolitionists hoped that people would use this printed document?
- Identify the ways in which '*A Subject for Conversation at the Tea-table*' seeks to impact the thinking and behaviour of those who read it.



A  
S U B J E C T  
FOR  
CONVERSATION AND REFLECTION  
AT THE  
TEA TABLE.

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THE following beautiful pieces are the production of the pen of our deservedly admired, and most charming poet, MR. COWPER. The genuine poetic pathos they display, and the ardent love of freedom with which they glow, cannot fail of awakening the sympathy, engaging the attention, of the benevolent admirer of man.

When we take a survey of the benefits we derive from the universal commerce carried on between distant nations, and notice its natural tendency to unite them in one grand whole, under one common parent, kindreds of the earth, we cannot but admire the wisdom of that Being who so governs and overrules our passions and interested views of men, as to render the means of his bestowing most extensive blessings on the human race. But when, in the progress of our survey, and after having contemplated with pleasure and exultation the manifold diffusive advantages which by such means are enriching and felicitating the nations of the earth, from pole to pole, and from one end of heaven unto the other,—when, after having observed successively, barbarism hence giving place to civilization, confusion to order, despotism to liberty, and wretchedness and misery succeeded by prosperity and happiness,—when, after dwelling with rapture on this enchanting scene, our attention is directed to one particular but extensive part of the globe, to the vast regions of Africa, what an accursed species of commerce do we see there encouraged! a *traffic in men*!! what different emotions do we feel! Our whole frame receives a sudden shock, and, instead of being elevated with admiration, or soothed with tranquil joy, we are lost in pensive melancholy, and are agitated with horror! The mind, recovering a little the power of recollection which it had

thus well nigh lost, will naturally fall into the train of

A  
S U B J E C T  
FOR  
CONVERSATION, &c.



He, foreseeing what vexation  
Afric's sons would undergo,  
Fix'd their tyrants' habitation  
Where his whirlwind answers—No!

By our blood in Afric wasted  
Ere our necks receiv'd the chain—  
By the mis'ries which we tasted  
Crossing in your barks the main—  
By our suff'rings since ye brought us  
To the man-degrading mart,  
All sustain'd with patience taught us  
Only by a broken heart—

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

The testimonies which have been produced, of the horror and wretchedness which, in Africa and the West Indies, are the immediate offspring of slavery, stand unimpeached. This evidence is so strong as to maintain its ground against all which the art of interest and avarice can suggest. No arguments then are necessary to prove to the impartial mind, which has attentively considered the nature, perfect consistency, and united strength of these testimonies, that the above pieces present us with such ideas, and impress us with such sentiments of the slave-trade and slavery, as that evidence will fully justify. It is earnestly requested that every one, into whose hands this paper may chance to come, would, therefore, only fully realize this wretched condition, place themselves in the same situation, and then say, whether they can refuse to contribute all in their power to the abolition of a system of trade which has introduced anguish and distress into the abodes of hilarity and contentment—which has made the prince the plunderer of his country—which has overturned all moral principle, and, through an extent of thousands of miles, has reduced to an Aceldama the regions of simplicity. A system of trade which, after occasioning all these evils, and encouraging every wicked passion of the human heart, carries, annually, afar from their native plains, thousands of wretched victims to pine away oppressed with hunger, fatigue, and misery, and die a hundred deaths in one.

What humane mind can refuse to exert its whole influence, however small—what benevolent mind would not willingly sacrifice many gratifications, for the extermination of so accursed a traffic? Yea, what mind would not rejoice to be able to embrace an opportunity of making such sacrifices, and thus to give full proof of its abhorrence of what it professes to detest? Rejoice then, ye benevolent and humane, for such an opportunity is now offered you. Slavery depends on the consumption of the produce of its labour for support. Refuse this produce, and slavery *must* cease. Say not that individual influence is small. Every aggregate must be composed of a collection of individuals. Though individual influence be small, the influence of collected numbers is irresistible. It is only by such collected individual influence that any important end is attained, any great design is accomplished by man. The power of numbers supplies the want of sufficient force in the individual; and their being collected, so as to act with an unity of power, renders them as efficacious and certain as though the power of the whole were vested in one. Did the whole of this power reside in you, you acknowledge that you would readily exert it to attain so desirable an end as the destruction of slavery, the slave-trade, and all its concomitant horrors. Why then will you refuse to assist in forming that power *by numbers*, which you so much wish that you, as an individual, could exert? Let there not be so manifest a contradiction between your professed desires and your actual conduct. Weak indeed must those desires be, which exist only in words, which produce no influence on our conduct, which cannot excite us to any self-denial. Prove that your wishes are not empty words; let your conduct declare that these are the genuine desires of your heart, and be assured that in the end you shall reap, if you sownot. The number of those who have already refused the produce of slavery is large, it is increasing daily, and no bounds can be assigned to its future progress. Every individual who increases this number, increases the influence of the aggregate. Come, then, enlarge this number. Realize the period, when, through its increase, slavery shall cease, and all the horrors and miseries it produces, shall cease with it. Realize the delightful retrospect, the joyful sentiments, which the consideration that *you* have contributed to so important and glorious an end will afford. Such sublime pleasures will abundantly more than compensate the loss of the low gratifications of a mere animal, depraved appetite:

For 'tis a god-like privilege to save,  
And he that scorns it, is himself a slave.



Has God then giv'n its sweetness to the cane,  
 Unless his laws be trampled on—in vain?  
 Built a brave world, which cannot yet subsist,  
 Unless his right to rule it be dismiss'd?  
 Impudent blasphemy! so folly pleads,  
 And, av'rice being judge, with ease succeeds.  
 Know, souls have no discriminating hue,  
 Alike important in their Maker's view.  
 The wretch that works and weeps without relief,  
 Has one who notices his silent grief,  
 He from whose hands alone all power proceeds,  
 Ranks its abuse among the foulest deeds,  
 Considers *all* injustice with a frown,  
 But *marks* the man who treads his fellow down.  
 Not Mexico could purchase kings a claim  
 To scourge him, weariness his only blame.  
 Remember, heav'n has an avenging rod;  
*To smite the poor is treason against God.*

My ear is pain'd,  
 My soul is sick with ev'ry day's report  
 Of wrong and outrage with which earth is fill'd.  
 There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart,  
 It does not feel for man; the nat'l bond  
 Of brotherhood is sever'd as the flax  
 That falls asunder at the touch of fire.  
 He finds his fellow *guilty* of a skin  
*Not colour'd* like his own; and, having pow'r  
 T' enforce the wrong, for such a *worthy* cause  
 Dooms and devotes him as his lawful prey:  
 And worse than all, and most to be deplor'd  
 As human nature's broadest, foulest blot,  
 Chains him, and tasks him, and exacts his sweat  
 With stripes, that mercy with a bleeding heart  
 Weeps when she sees inflicted on a *beast*.  
 Then what is man? and what man seeing this,  
 And having human feelings, does not blush  
 And haag his head, to think himself a man!  
 I would not have a slave to till my ground,  
 To carry me, to fan me while I sleep,  
 And tremble when I wake, for all the wealth  
 Which sinews bought and sold have ever earn'd.  
 No: dear as freedom is, and in my heart's  
 Just estimation priz'd above all price,  
 I had much rather be myself the slave  
 And wear the bonds, than fasten them on him.  
 We have no slaves at home.—Then why abroad?  
 And they themselves, once ferried o'er the waves  
 That part us, are emancipate and loos'd.  
 Slaves cannot breathe in *England*: if their lungs  
 Receive our air, that moment they are free;  
 They touch our country, and their shackles fall.  
 That's noble, and bespeaks a nation proud  
 And jealous of the blessing. Spread it then,  
 And let it circulate through ev'ry vein,  
 Of all your empire; that where Britain's pow'r  
 Is felt, mankind may feel her *mercy* too.

After these noble sentiments and such glowing poetic  
 fire, in favour of liberty and in detestation of oppres-  
 sion, it may not be unpleasing to present the reader  
 without entering into any minute detail of all the mis-  
 eries which, by European avarice, cruelty and wicked-  
 nesses, are entailed on the ill-fated and wretched Africans.

with a simple and pathetic delineation of what may na-  
 turally be supposed to pass, at times, through the mind  
 of the enslaved negro. However incapable he may be  
 just in such a manner to speak the sentiments of his  
 mind, yet, from his condition and circumstances, we  
 may easily imagine that similar with the following he,  
 as a mere percipient being, must frequently feel.

To enter more fully into the spirit of this, let the  
 reader realize the situation of the poor and helpless Afri-  
 can. Jaded with excessive fatigue, and sinking under  
 the weight of inhuman punishments, he comes to his  
 miserable hut, throws himself on his mat, and seeks  
 relief from his woes in the forgetfulness of sleep.  
 Scarce does he slumber, but he starts, awakened with  
 the dreadful apprehension, that already the iron hand  
 of oppression is about to repeat the accustomed wanton  
 cruelties. Thus overpowered with fatigue and fear,  
 nature refuses her wonted balm. A crowd of thoughts  
 rush into his indignant mind, and, after long pon-  
 dering his condition, he breaks forth into the fol-  
 lowing

#### COMPLAINT.

Forc'd 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 theirs they have enroll'd me,  
*Minds* are never to be fold.

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,  
 Fetters, blood-extorting screws,  
 Are the means which duty urges,  
 Agents of his will to use?

Hark! he answers.—Wild tornadoes,  
 Screwing yonder shores with wrecks,  
 Wasting towns, plantations, meadows,  
 Are the voice with which he speaks.



## Extract from A SUBJECT FOR CONVERSATION AND REFLECTION

The following beautiful pieces are the production of the pen of our deservedly admired, and charming poet, Mr. Cowper. The genuine poetic pathos they display, and the ancient love of freedom with which they glow, cannot fail of awakening the sympathy, and engaging the attention, of the benevolent admirers of the muses.

When we take a survey of the benefits we derive from the universal commerce carried on between distant nations, and notice its natural tendency to unite together in one grand whole, under one common parent, all the kindreds of the earth, we cannot but admire the wisdom of that Being who so governs and over-rules the passions and interested views of men, as to render these the means of his bestowing most extensive blessings on the human race. But when, in the progress of the survey, and after having contemplated with pleasure and exultation the manifold diffusive advantages, which, by such means, are enriching and felicitating the nations of the earth, from pole to pole, and from one end of heaven to the other; — when, after having observed succesively, barbarism hence giving place to civilization, confusion to order, despotism to liberty and wretchedness and misery succeeded by prosperity and happiness; — when after dwelling

with rapture on this enchanting scene, our attention is directed to one particular, but extensive part of the globe, to the vast regions of Africa, what an accursed species of commerce do we see there encouraged! *a traffic* in MEN ! what different emotions do we feel! Our whole frame receives a sudden shock, and, instead of being elevated with admiration, or soothed with tranquil joy, we are lost in pensive menacholy, and are agitated with horror! The mind recovering a little the power of recollection, which it had thus well nigh lost, will naturally fall into the following train of:

### REFLECTIONS.

My God! what wish can prosper,  
or what prayer,

For merchants rich in cargoes of  
despair,

Who drive a loathsome traffic, gauge,  
and span,

And buy the muscles and the bones  
of man?

The tender ties of father, husband,  
friend,

All bonds of nature in that moment  
end;

And each endures, while yet he  
draws his breath,

A stroke as fatal as the scythe of  
death.

The sable warrior, frantic with regret  
Of her he loves, and never can forget,  
Loses in tears the far-receding shore,  
But not the thought that they must  
meet no more;  
Deprived of her and freedom at a  
blow,  
What has he left that he can yet  
forego?  
Yes, to deep sadness sullenly resign'd,  
He feels his body's bondage in his  
mind;  
Puts off his generous nature, and  
to suit  
His manners with his fate, puts on  
the brute.  
Nature imprints upon whate'er  
we see,  
That has a heart and life in it, Be free!  
The *beasts* are charter'd — neither  
age nor force  
Can quell the love of freedom in  
a horse.  
Canst thou, and honour'd with  
a Christian name,  
Buy what is *woman-born*, and feel  
no shame?  
Trade in the blood of innocence,  
and plead  
*Expedience* as a warrant for the deed?  
So may the wolf, whom famine has  
made bold  
To quit the forest and invade the fold:  
So may the ruffian, who with ghostly  
glide,

Dagger in hand, steals close to your  
bedside;  
Not he, but his *emergence* forced the  
door,  
He found it inconvenient to be poor.  
Has God then given its sweetness  
to the cane,  
Unless his laws be trampled on —  
in vain?  
Built a brave world, which cannot  
yet subsist,  
Unless his right to rule it be  
dismiss'd?  
Know, souls have no discriminating  
hue,  
Alike important in their Maker's  
view,  
The wretch that works and weeps  
without relief  
Has one that notices his silent grief.  
He, from whose hand alone all power  
proceeds,  
Ranks its abuse among the foulest  
deeds,  
Considers *all* injustice with a frown;  
But *marks* the man that treads his  
fellow down.  
Not Mexico could purchase kings  
a claim  
To scourge him, weariness his only  
blame.  
Remember, Heaven has an avenging  
rod,  
*To smite the poor is treason against God!*



Mr Cowpers own hand writing sent to Rev J P Bul  
The Negro's Complaint.

To the tune of  
Hosiers Ghost.

Forced from Home and all its pleasures  
Africs coast I left forlorn,  
To chase a Strangers treasures  
O'er the raging billows borne;  
Men from England bought and sold me,  
Pay'd my price in paltry gold,  
But though theirs they have enroll'd me,  
Minds are never to be sold.

Still in thought as free as ever  
What are Englands rights, I ask,  
Me from my delights to sever,  
Me to torture, me to task?  
Tawny cheeks and black complexion  
Cannot forfeit Natures claim,  
Skins may differ, but affection  
Dwells in White and Black the same.

Why did all-creating Nature  
Make the beast 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 you can afford.





Drawn by Rich<sup>d</sup> Westall, R.A.

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Engraved by John Romney

## THE NEGRO'S COMPLAINT.

HARK! HE ANSWERS — WILD TORNADOES.  
STREWING YONDER SEA WITH WRECKS:  
WASTING TOWNS, PLANTATIONS, MEADOWS—  
ARE THE VOICE WITH WHICH HE SPEAKS.

Vol. I.

LONDON, PUBLISHED JUNE 1. 1810. BY JOHN SHARPE, PICCADILLY.

*Poems By the Late William Cowper of the Inner Temple, Esq. Vol 1, John Sharpe, 1810*







# THE BATH CHRONICLE.

VOL. XXVII. No. 1439.

THURSDAY,

JUNE 26, 1788.

[Ready Money with Advertisements.]

Printed by R. CRUTTWELL,

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Persons residing in the Country at a Distance from any place through which the Newmarket pass, may have this Paper left where they please to appoint, or may have it sent free of Postage to any Part of Great-Britain or Ireland.

## SWEET MEAT HAS SOUR SAUCE; OR THE SLAVE-TRADER IN THE DUMPS.

A Trader I am to the African shore,  
But since that my trading is like to be o'er,  
I'll sing you a song that you ne'er heard before,  
Which nobody can deny, &c.

When I first heard the news it gave me a shock,  
Much like what they call an electrical knock,  
And now I am going to fell off my stock,  
Which nobody &c.

'Tis a curious assortment of dainty regales,  
To tickle the negroes with when the ship sails,  
Fine chains for the neck and a cat with nine tails.

Here's supple-jack plenty, and store of rat-tan,  
That will wind itself round the sides of a man  
As close as a hoop round a bucket or can.

Here's padlocks and bolts, and screws for the thumbs,  
That squeeze 'em so lovingly till the blood comes,  
They sweeten the temper like comfits or plumbs.

When a Negro his head from his victuals withdraws,  
And clenches his teeth and thrusts out his paws,  
Here's a notable engine to open his jaws.

Thus, going to market, we kindly prepare  
A pretty black cargo of African ware,  
For what they must meet with when they get there.

'Twould do your heart good to see 'em below  
Lie flat on their backs all the way as we go,  
Like sprats on a gridiron, scores in a row.

But, ah! If in vain I have studied an art  
So gainful to me—all boasting apart,  
I think it will break my compassionate heart.

For, oh! How it enters my soul like an awl!  
This pity, which some people self-pity call,  
Is sure the most heart-piercing pity of all.

So this is my song as I told you before,  
Come buy off my stock, for I must no more  
Carry Cæsars and Pompeys to sugar-cane shore,  
Which nobody &c.



[illegible]

This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 20 evenly spaced horizontal grey lines across the entire width of the page, typical of standard notebook or school paper. The background is white, and there are no margins, text, or other markings present.

# Sources

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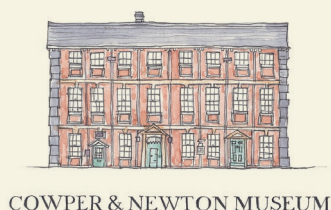
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