

The Life of Cowley Key Facts

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Title: The Life of Cowley

Author: Dr. Samuel Johnson

Publication Date: 1779–1781 (as part of Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets)

Point of View: Third-person, with critical commentary by the author

Key Notes

Metaphysical Poetry: Metaphysical poetry is a group of seventeenth-century English poems. It is filled with sharp thought and daring image. Poets blend science, faith, love, and daily life into a single frame. They link very unlike things by a “conceit”. This sudden comparison shocks yet pleases readers. They prize wit, tight logic, and bold wordplay. Rhythm is rough; lines shift in length and beat. Feeling exists, but the brain leads the heart. Pictures grow strange. Think of lovers as twin compasses or a tear stretched into a globe. John Donne leads the group; Herbert, Vaughan, Marvell, and Cowley also shine today.

Pindaric Ode: A Pindaric ode is a poem of high praise. It echoes the Greek poet Pindar. His odes were songs for Olympic victors, built in strophe, antistrophe, and epode. The chorus danced while singing. English poets kept the lofty tone but soon dropped the strict pattern. Abraham Cowley began the free Pindaric style. He used uneven lines, loose rhyme, and bold images. Later, Dryden and Gray refined it. The verse should rise like music, shift pace, and flash grand comparisons.

Abraham Cowley: Abraham Cowley was born in London in 1618. He was a child prodigy who published his first poems at thirteen. He studied at Cambridge and wrote plays. During the Civil War he served the royalist. That risky work led to arrest, jail, and years abroad. After the Restoration, he hoped for reward but received little. He retired to Chertsey and died there in 1667. His books include the love sequence “Mistress,” the epic fragment “Davideis,” Latin plant poems, and Pindaric odes. He is a leading metaphysical poet, praised for wit, learning, and inventive conceit.