

The Life of Cowley Summary

Writer: Samuel Johnson | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Early Life and Love for Poetry: Abraham Cowley was born in 1618. His father was a grocer who died before he was born. Cowley was raised by his mother. She worked hard to give him a good education. She lived long enough to see her son become a famous poet. One day, Cowley found "The Faerie Queene" by Edmund Spenser in his mother's room. He read it and felt the beauty of poetry. This moment made him fall in love with verse. From then on, he wanted to be a poet. Johnson says true genius comes from a strong mind, but sometimes a small event, such as reading a book, can change someone's life.

Cowley went to Westminster School. He was clever but did not like strict rules. He said he was an "enemy to constraint." He refused to memorize grammar rules because he could do his lessons without them. Johnson explains that this wasn't a memory problem. Instead, Cowley just did not like being forced to do things.

Early Writings and Student Life: Cowley began writing poems at a very young age. At the age of 13, he published a book of poems. These included "Pyramus and Thisbe" and "Constantia and Philetus." While still at school, he wrote a comedy called "Love's Riddle," which he later published at Cambridge. At university, he studied hard and wrote the early parts of "Davideis," a long religious poem based on the life of King David. He also wrote a Latin comedy called "Naufragium Jocularum."

Not all his early writings were successful. Some were weak in style or structure. But Johnson praises Cowley's hard work and his strong, active mind. He says Cowley had both imagination and discipline, which are essential for a true poet.

Political Life and Royalist Work: When the Civil War began, Cowley supported the King. He wrote a play called "The Guardian," which was performed before Prince Charles. He moved to Oxford and became close to many Royalists. Lord Falkland especially trusted him. Cowley also wrote against the Puritans.

When the royal side was losing, Cowley followed Queen Henrietta Maria to Paris. There, he worked in secret as a royal agent. His main task was to send and read letters in code between the King and Queen. It was a job that needed trust and skill. He worked long hours, even at night, to help the royal cause. Johnson praises Cowley's honesty and loyalty during this difficult

time.

Arrest, Return, and Later Career: In 1656, Cowley returned to England as a secret agent. But he was arrested by mistake and sent to prison. He was released after someone paid a large bail. He said he wanted to leave England and live a quiet life in the United States. Johnson comments that this wish could seem like a manifestation of fear. Some people also thought Cowley tried to please the ruling Parliament to stay safe.

Later, he got a medical degree but never practiced as a doctor. Johnson defends Cowley, saying he only promised to remain quiet, not to help the enemy. After some time, Cowley returned to France. He stayed there until 1660, when King Charles II came back to power.

Disappointment After Restoration: Cowley expected a reward upon the King's return. He had served the royal family with complete loyalty. But he was disappointed. His comedy "The Cutter of Coleman Street" failed badly. Some people even thought it criticized the King's side. Cowley felt hurt. He wrote a poem called "Complaint," where he called himself "the melancholy Cowley."

He left London and moved to the countryside. First, he stayed at Barn-Elms and then at Chertsey. He wanted peace and a simple life. But village life was not easy. He got sick, had money problems, and felt lonely. Johnson shows sympathy for Cowley. He says Cowley was tired of public life and longed for quiet, but even peace brought him pain.

Death and Final Years: Cowley died in 1667 at the age of 49. He was buried with great honour near Chaucer and Spenser. King Charles II said Cowley was one of the best men in England. His friend Dr. Sprat described him as kind, gentle, and honest. Johnson agrees and praises Cowley as a man of virtue.

But Cowley never found happiness in public life. He always wanted a calm and simple life. Even in retirement, his life was full of trouble. Johnson's portrait of Cowley is warm and respectful. It shows both his achievements and his struggles.

Cowley's Poetry and Literary Style: Cowley belonged to the "metaphysical school" of poets. These poets used complex ideas, clever images, and far-fetched comparisons. They liked to surprise readers with new and strange thoughts. Johnson says they often forgot to express real emotions. Their poems were more about showing off the brain than touching the heart.

Cowley was full of wit and learning. But sometimes his poems were too difficult. His love poems were filled with images such as fire, ice, hearts, and souls. Yet they felt cold and artificial.

Johnson says Cowley wrote about love, but not from genuine feeling. He was like a man dreaming about love, not living it.

Metaphysical Conceit and Its Limitations: Johnson explains the idea of metaphysical conceit. It means linking two very different things in one image. For example, comparing a lover's heart to a hand grenade. Johnson says these comparisons are clever but often feel unnatural.

The metaphysical poets were full of learning. They showed off their knowledge, but they forgot beauty and truth. They used long sentences and difficult words. Johnson says this kind of poetry may surprise the mind but fails to please the heart. Cowley, like other metaphysical poets, focused more on intellect than emotion.

Cowley's Use of Pindaric Style: Cowley tried to copy the Greek poet Pindar. He wrote Pindaric odes with irregular lines and rhymes. Johnson says Cowley misunderstood Pindar's real style. Cowley's odes had no clear structure. They were filled with heavy images and forced thoughts.

Still, some parts of Cowley's odes are beautiful. Johnson says Cowley had the power to rise high in poetry, but he often went off track. He mixed great lines with poor ones. He had strength, but not balance. His odes showed promise, but not perfection.

Epic Qualities in Davideis: Cowley sought to write an epic in the vein of "Paradise Lost." His epic poem "Davideis" was based on the life of King David. Johnson says the subject was good, but Cowley could not handle it well. The poem was not finished. It lacked action and intense emotion.

Instead of telling a story, Cowley added too much moral talk. Johnson says an epic needs drama and life. "Davideis" had big ideas but not good execution. Cowley was too focused on religious and moral lessons. His poem was more like a sermon than an epic.

Johnson as a Critic and Biographer: Johnson's biography of Cowley shows his skill as a critic. He provides a comprehensive picture of Cowley's life, including his successes, failures, emotions, and works. Johnson is honest. He praises Cowley where he deserves it, but also points out his faults.

Johnson also shares his thoughts about poetry. He explains clearly what makes poetry good or bad. He believes poetry must be clear, accurate, and emotional. Johnson's critical style is calm, wise, and based on reason. He writes not only about Cowley, but about poetry itself.

Cowley's Legacy: Cowley was famous in his time, but his popularity faded later. Johnson says this happened because Cowley did not write for timeless feelings. He tried to impress the people of his own time. But fashion changes.

Cowley's short poems, like the "Anacreontiques," were more enjoyable. They were light, cheerful, and easy to read. Johnson liked these poems more than Cowley's long, serious works. Johnson ends by saying that Cowley was a great mind, but his poems were not always graceful. He was a good man who deserved respect, even if his poetry was not always perfect.

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