The Poplar Field

POEM TEXT

The Poplars are fell'd, farewell to the shade
And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade,
The winds play no longer and sing in the leaves,
Nor Ouse on his bosom their image receives.

Twelve years have elapsed since I last took a view
Of my favourite field and the bank where they grew,
And now in the grass behold they are laid,
And the tree is my seat that once lent me a shade.

The black-bird has fled to another retreat
Where the hazels afford him a screen from the heat,
And the scene where his melody charm'd me before,
Resounds with his sweet-flowing ditty no more.

My fugitive years are all hasting away,
And I must e'er long lie as lowly as they,
With a turf on my breast and a stone at my head
E'er another such grove shall arise in its stead.

'Tis a sight to engage me if any thing can
To muse on the perishing pleasures of Man;
Though his life be a dream, his enjoyments, I see,
Have a Being less durable even than he.

SUMMARY

The poplar trees have been cut down. Goodbye to the shade that they offered, and to the quiet music the row of trees used to provide. The sound of wind blowing through their leaves is gone, and their image is no longer reflected by the surface of the Ouse River.

It has been twelve years since I last saw my favorite field of trees and the riverbank where they used to stand. Now, look at how they've all been laid down on the grass, and how I'm sitting on a tree once offered me shade.

The blackbird has gone off to some other place where different trees shelter him from the hot sun, and this field, where I used to love listening to the blackbird's beautiful music, is no longer filled with the sweet sounds of his songs.

My youth is quickly passing me by, and soon I will be like the trees, dead and buried in the ground, with a patch of grass and a gravestone to mark my resting place. I will die before another group of poplars grows to replace the one that's been cut down.

Seeing this field of cut-down trees makes me think about how the joys of life come to an end. Though life is wonderful, its pleasures, I now understand, have an even shorter lifespan than human beings themselves.

THEMES

TIME, CHANGE, AND MORTALITY

"The Poplar Field" is a nostalgic meditation on change and the passage of time. The speaker looks out on a field in which all the trees have been cut down. The field was once one of the speaker's favorite places, but it has changed drastically since this person was last there 12 years ago; what the speaker remembers being a place filled with life is now an abandoned, stump-filled patch of land. By contrasting the speaker's memories of the field with its very different reality in the present, the poem asserts that everything—from poplar trees to human life itself—inevitably changes over time.

The speaker emphasizes just how much the field has changed by highlighting the beauty of the natural environment that the trees once created. Gone is the trees' cool shade, the sound of the wind through their leaves, and their reflection in the water of the Ouse River. Now, the trees are "laid" down in the grass, and instead of enjoying their pleasant shade, the speaker uses one of them as a "seat." The blackbirds that used to sing in the trees have "fled" elsewhere, and the speaker misses their songs. In short, this environment is nothing like the place the speaker so loved earlier in life, and the speaker's memories are all that's left of the once-beautiful poplar field.

Of course, the poplar field isn't the only thing that has changed in the past 12 years—the speaker has too! Thinking about how the poplar field has changed pushes the speaker to realize, with a sudden sense of urgency, that the speaker is getting older. The speaker's "years are all hasting away"—or quickly disappearing—and the speaker isn't the same person who visited the poplar field all that time ago. Soon enough, the speaker will "lie as lowly" as the trees—that is, the speaker will be dead and buried in the ground. This will happen before another grove of poplars grows to replace the one that's been cut down.

The speaker concludes that nothing lasts long in the onward march of time, including human beings themselves. In other words, life is short and subject to the constant winds of change. Though this conclusion makes the speaker feel somber, the

poem also presents change and death as inevitable—things, perhaps, to embrace and think about deeply rather than try to avoid.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

HUMANITY VS. NATURE

The poplar field used to be a place of beauty and harmony, and the speaker enjoyed going there to relish the abundance of the natural world. Twelve years later, however, that abundance is gone, and the field has become a gloomy reminder of humanity's role in the destruction of nature. By contrasting these two versions of the poplar field, the poem laments the ongoing tension between human beings and the natural world they live in—a world, the poem implies, that people are willing to destroy in order to serve their own needs.

The speaker points out that the poplars were "fell'd," or cut down by people; they didn't fall down on their own or as the result of a natural process. And though the lumber from the trees was presumably used for an important purpose (perhaps to construct a building, produce heat, or make paper), cutting them down has destroyed the field's natural beauty.

That destruction isn't limited to the trees, either; the river, which no longer reflects the image of the trees, is also less beautiful now, and the birds have "fled" the field, leaving it silent. By exploring the wide scope of the destruction, the poem emphasizes the many losses that human activity has caused. In this way, the poem might suggest that people either don't fully understand, or don't really care about, the extent of their impact on the natural world.

In turn, the speaker suggests that people don't fully understand or appreciate the impact of the *natural world* on *humanity*. Though the timber likely improved human life in some way, cutting down the trees has also diminished people's (or at least the speaker's) enjoyment of their environment. And though the speaker sits on top of one of the felled trees, any dominance the speaker feels over the natural world doesn't bring pleasure. Quite the opposite: the speaker mourns the loss of the "pleasures" the poplar grove used to provide when it was in its prime. The poem thus explores the conflict between humanity's willingness to destroy the natural world and the desire to enjoy its pleasures, suggesting that *using* nature also leads to its tragic loss.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 1-20

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-8

AGING, LOSS, AND GRIEF

In "The Poplar Field," the speaker grieves for the beautiful "pleasures" of the poplar field that have been lost alongside the trees themselves. The destruction of the poplar field leads the speaker to reflect somberly on mortality and the inevitable end of life, but also on the notion that the *joys* of that life seem to disappear before people themselves do. Though the speaker finds comfort and pleasure in the wonders of the world, even calling life "a dream," the speaker also realizes that many of those wonders will disappear before the speaker actually dies. The poem thus attempts to make sense of loss and grief as essential parts of getting older.

The poem doesn't just describe how the poplar field has changed; rather, it laments the loss of specific aspects of this place that once brought the speaker joy. In so doing, the poem expresses the *grief* the speaker feels upon visiting the field after 12 years. What was once a beautiful space full of tall trees, cool shade, and singing blackbirds has now become an empty, silent space. The speaker yearns for the poplar field as it used to be. Such longing for the beauty of the past clashes with the stark reality of the present, and suggests the painful but inevitable sense of loss that goes hand-in-hand with getting older.

Seeing the dramatic decline of the poplar field makes the speaker think not just about mortality in general, but also more specifically about how so many of the joys of life start to slip away alongside the "fugitive years" of youth. The speaker, like the poplar trees, will soon face death and lie flat, dead and buried in the ground. Yet, though the poplar field makes the speaker think about death, that field itself—a source of joy and wonder for the younger speaker—*is already gone*. In other words, the speaker has outlived one of the major "enjoyments" of life. The poem, then, isn't just about the fleeting nature of life or the inevitability of change; it's also about the inevitability of the *loss* that change entails. The "perishing pleasures of Man," the speaker thus says, are even "less durable" than human beings themselves. It's not just life that's fleeting, but happiness as well.

Nonetheless, the poem doesn't offer any easy solutions to the difficulties of death and aging. The speaker is realistic about the inevitability of loss and death, and the poem doesn't try to sugarcoat the complicated feelings that result from an awareness of death and decline. Rather than offering a quick remedy for grief, the speaker "engage[s]" with it throughout the poem. The best response to the grief of loss and death, the poem suggests, is to acknowledge and embrace it—whether by revisiting favorite places from the past, thinking deeply about getting older, or even writing a poem like "The Poplar Field"!

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 5
- Line 9
- Lines 13-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

The Poplars are fell'd, farewell to the shade
And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade,

"The Poplar Field" begins with a sudden, surprising revelation: the poplar trees of the poem's title have been cut down. What might have been a relatively simple nature poem describing some beautiful trees thus quickly becomes something more complicated. The poem's tone is elegiac; rather than celebrate the field's beauty, the speaker bids it "farewell."

The speaker's mournful feelings are reflected in the language of the very first line. This is divided into two neat halves by the comma after "fell'd," which creates a strong caesura. The weighty pause here intensifies the impact of the poem's very first statement: "The Poplars are fell'd." The comma seems to break the line, almost mirroring how the speaker's beloved poplar trees were broken when they were cut down. But the caesura also *connects* the two parts of the line and establishes a logical relationship between them. The observation of the lines first half is what prompts the "farewell" of the second. This link is further emphasized by the consonance (on the /f/ and /l/ sounds) and assonance (on the /eh/ sound) between "fell'd" and "farewell."

Yet the poem doesn't stay quite so somber for long. The speaker's "farewell" rushes straight into the next line, and this enjambment leads into a different musical and emotional atmosphere. Even as the speaker continues bidding the field farewell, the poem's beautiful language begins to recreate the pleasing music of the field that the speaker remembers.

The pleasant consonance on the /c/ and /l/ sounds in "cool colonnade," for example, mirrors the beauty of the distinguished row of trees. The /l/ sound, especially, echoes the consonance of "fell'd" and "farewell" from line 1—but now, the sound is emblematic of peace and beauty, not destruction and the sadness of saying goodbye. Similarly, the /p/ sound in "Poplars" comes back in the word "whispering," suggesting that even though the poplars are gone, they still whisper sweet music in the speaker's mind.

Finally, let's take a look at the meter of these first two lines. The meter of line 1 is mixed:

The Pop- | lars are fell'd, | farewell | to the shade

The line opens with iamb (a foot with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern) and then an anapest (unstressed-unstressed-stressed). Then comes another iamb-anapest pair, for a total of four metrical feet. This is called tetrameter. Compared to the anapests, which feel light and musical, the iambs seem heavier and more serious, even somber. This makes sense—the iambs give weight, emphasis, and dignity to the "Poplars" and the speaker's mournful "farewell" to them. The alternation between iamb and anapest in the first line prepares a central tension in the poem between somber reflection and happy memory.

By contrast, notice how each foot in line 2 is an anapest:

And the whisp- | ering sound | of the cool | colonnade,

This is called anapestic tetrameter, and it is the dominant meter of the poem. The sudden change of meter (following the enjambment) makes this line feel light and happy, especially compared to the more serious, somber first line. The quick da-da-dum rhythm of the anapests echos the "whispering sound" of the wind in the trees and reflects how good the pleasant memories of the "cool colonnade" make the speaker feel.

LINES 3-4

The winds play no longer and sing in the leaves,
Nor Ouse on his bosom their image receives.

The speaker continues to remember the things that used to be beautiful about the field, setting up a contrast between the richness of the past and the emptiness of the present. Because the trees have been cut down, the wind can't "play" and "sing" in their leaves anymore, and the river's surface no longer shows the trees' beautiful reflection.

Even as the speaker laments the beauty that's been lost, the poem's music celebrates and memorializes that beauty in its language. By now, it's clear that each stanza consists of two rhyming couplets ("shade"/colonnade" and "leaves"/receives"). This steady rhyme scheme combines with steady meter to create music throughout the poem:

The winds | play no long- | er and sing- | in the leaves,
Nor Ouse | on his bos- | om their im- | age receives.

Both of these lines begin with an iamb (unstressed-stressed), and the rest of the metrical feet are more anapests (unstressed-unstressed-stressed). The anapests here continue to rousing, galloping rhythm of line 2. The speaker is sad, but the fond memories of how the wind and the river used to be keep the poem irrepressibly buoyant.

The strong consonance, assonance, and sibilance of these lines also contribute to their music. Though the lines themselves

describe lost beauty, their sounds seem to bring back some of that beauty, however briefly. Note in particular the repeated /l/, /n/, /z/, /m/, and short /ih/ sounds:

> The winds play no longer and sing in the leaves,
> Nor Ouse on his bosom their image receives.

Even though the winds literally "play no longer," the smooth music of these lines evokes the beautiful music that still exists in the speaker's memories of the field.

The order of the words in both lines is a little strange. In line 3, the adverb "no longer" would usually come at the end of the line, given that it modifies both of the verbs here ("play" and "sing"). The line literally means, "The winds play and sing in the leaves no longer." Likewise, line 4 means something like, "Nor does the Ouse receive their image on his bosom." The phrase "on his bosom" again comes earlier in the sentence than the usual rules of English syntax dictate.

This inversion of the usual order of words in a sentence is called anastrophe, and in these lines, it creates a slightly disorienting effect. Readers couldn't be blamed for being momentarily confused about just what these lines mean, and that difficulty might mimic the speaker's temporary shock at realizing that the trees are gone forever.

In line 4, the exaggerated distance between the verb ("receives") and the adverb ("on his bosom") emphasizes that the action *isn't actually happening*; the trees are no longer reflected in the river at all! What might seem, at first, like old-fashioned or strange language actually expresses the tender, perhaps confusing mix of emotions the speaker feels upon returning to the field only to find it empty.

LINES 5-8

> *Twelve years have elapsed since I last took a view*
> *Of my favourite field and the bank where they grew,*
> *And now in the grass behold they are laid,*
> *And the tree is my seat that once lent me a shade.*

The second stanza, like the first, begins with a surprise: it's been 12 years since the speaker last visited the poplar field (which used to be the speaker's "favourite field," no less). The meter of line 5 emphasizes the significance of the time that's passed:

> Twelve years | have elapsed | since I last | took a view

The double stress-stress of "Twelve years" is called a spondee, and the heaviness of this metrical foot marks the importance of the changes of those years. The alliteration of "favourite field," meanwhile, is simple but sweet; it recalls an earlier alliterative pair ("fell'd" and "farewell"), but this time around, the /f/ sound is warm and affectionate, not sad and foreboding.

The speaker's tender attitude toward the cut-down trees continues in lines 7 and 8. Whereas before, the trees were "fell'd"—a somewhat impersonal, harsh word—now, the speaker says they are "laid" in the grass. In one sense, the word implies tenderness; after all, babies are carefully "laid" down to rest by their parents.

This tenderness, of course, contrasts with the truth, which is that the trees were cut with saws and let to fall roughly down to the earth. Once again, the poem's meter highlights the contrast between the affection the speaker feels for the trees and the carelessness with which they have been treated:

> And now | in the grass | behold | they are laid,

As in line 1, the meter follows the pattern of iamb-anapest-iamb-anapest. The two iambs (feet that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern) on "And now" and "behold" draw attention to the trees' dramatic change of fortune. It's almost as if the speaker can't quite believe what has happened and therefore feels the need to say it again in a new way.

Line 8 then presents the striking image of the speaker sitting on a tree that once offered shade. On the one hand, the image represents humanity's dominance over nature; the people who cut down these trees had the tools and technology to do so. But in the speaker's case, this dominance causes pain; it's not something to be happy about at all.

The speaker's feelings are communicated, in part, by the end rhyme words of lines 7 and 8 ("laid" and "shade"), which repeat the rhyme sound of lines 1 and 2 ("shade" and "colonnade"). That repeated rhyme sound—and especially the way the repeated word "shade" encloses these first two stanzas—signals the finality of the speaker's loss. So far, the poem's musical richness has conjured the magic of the poplar field as it used to be, subtly counterbalancing the somber reality that it's now just a silent, empty field. But now the poem subtly acknowledges that no matter its own imaginative and musical powers, there's no bringing the trees back.

LINES 9-12

> *The black-bird has fled to another retreat*
> *Where the hazels afford him a screen from the heat,*
> *And the scene where his melody charm'd me before,*
> *Resounds with his sweet-flowing ditty no more.*

In the third stanza, the speaker moves from personal memories and observations of the poplar field to a consideration of the other living creatures that were affected when the trees were cut down.

The speaker focuses on a blackbird that has "fled to another retreat" where hazel trees, rather than poplars, shade him from the sun. While it's possible to read the stanza literally and assume the speaker is talking about a single bird, readers can

also take the bird as a symbol for *all* the wildlife that used to depend on the trees for shelter and have now "fled."

The example of the blackbird emphasizes the pain the destruction of the field has caused—not just to the speaker, but to an entire natural ecosystem. As in the first two stanzas, the language is carefully crafted to reflect the richness and beauty of the environment that's been lost. The enjambment between lines 9 and 10 ("retreat / Where the hazels") evokes the quick intensity with which the blackbird escaped the field's destruction and found a new place to live.

That place is beautifully described in line 10, whose smooth, lilting anapests reflect the speaker's imagination of the blackbird's calm relief at finding another source of shelter.

> Where the ha | zels af**ford** | him a **screen** | from the **heat**,

The alliteration on the /h/ sound ("**h**azels" and "**h**eat") and the assonance on the /ee/ vowel ("scr**ee**n" and "h**ea**t") also contribute to the relaxed, melodious atmosphere.

Lines 11 and 12 then describe the blackbird's song in order to highlight the present *silence* of the poplar field. The speaker used to find pleasure in listening to the bird, and the description of the blackbird's "ditty" as "sweet-flowing" subtly echoes the flow of the nearby river. This echo reflects how all the elements of the poplar field once blended together in harmony—a harmony that now exists only in the music of the poem.

LINES 13-16

My fugitive years are all hasting away,
And I must e'er long lie as lowly as they,
With a turf on my breast and a stone at my head
E'er another such grove shall arise in its stead.

The poem takes an inward, meditative turn as the speaker's lament for the poplars prompts the realization that the speaker is getting older and, all too soon, will be dead.

The word "fugitive" here carries a double meaning: the speaker's younger years are disappearing quickly, but they are also taking pleasures like this poplar field away with them. This subtle second meaning of "fugitive" (in the sense of a thief) anticipates the speaker's conclusion about "perishing pleasures" in the last lines of the poem.

The word "lowly" also carries multiple connotations. In a literal sense, it means the speaker will soon be low to the ground—buried *underground*, in fact. But in another sense, "lowly" means undistinguished or fallen from a former purpose. The trees used to provide shade, make beautiful music, and support a thriving natural ecosystem. Now, they are cut down and provide the speaker nothing more than a "seat."

Similarly, the poem suggests that people become more "lowly" in their relationship to the world as they age and eventually die. This concept relates to the speaker's conclusion that worldly pleasures are even more short-lived than human beings. People might become "lowly" as they approach death because they have fewer pleasures—which often animate a person's sense of purpose—left in the world to enjoy. In keeping with this, the consonance of this line feels a bit sickening, those slippery /l/ sounds in " l**o**ng l**ie** as l**o**wly" calling readers attention to the inevitability of loss and death.

In line 15, the speaker uses two direct metaphors to talk about death. The "turf" and "stone" here are the grass and gravestone, respectively, that will mark the speaker's grave. The speaker may use these metaphors in an attempt to make death seem less threatening. After all, a "stone" seems less ominous than a "gravestone," and "turf" seems like an innocent, springy surface ideal for playing sports. But the speaker doesn't seem to be avoiding death; rather, the poem presents death as something to be thought about realistically. In fact, death isn't the real preoccupation of the poem at all. The speaker, it turns out, is most upset about dying before another poplar field grows to replace the one that's been cut down. The real pity of life, perhaps, isn't dying—it's being stripped of pleasures that can't be experienced again.

LINES 17-18

'Tis a sight to engage me if any thing can
To muse on the perishing pleasures of Man;

The last stanza continues the speaker's reflection on the fading pleasures of human life. What's striking here is the speaker's calmness and levelheadedness in the face of such a serious subject. After all, the speaker is pondering something no less ominous than "the perishing pleasures of Man" (oh my!). And yet, the speaker uses the mild, even pleasant words "engage" and "muse" to describe what's going on.

The speaker says the cut-down poplar field is "a sight to engage me if any thing can." Seeing a beloved landscape destroyed does not disturb, shake, nor dismay, but simply "engage." To "muse," meanwhile, is to think or talk about something, usually in an imaginative way; the word often refers specifically to writing poetry.

Line 18 features crossed (or chiastic) alliteration on the /m/ and /p/ sounds:

> To **m**use on the **p**erishing **p**leasures of **M**an;

This symmetrical alliteration is beautiful, musical, and dignified; the sound of the line recalls earlier instances of alliteration like "**c**ool **c**olonnade" and "**f**avourite **f**ield." The speaker seems to suggest that it's okay to "muse" on complicated and difficult subjects in ways that are realistic (the speaker accepts the reality of mortality), but also beautiful. Indeed, it may be that the only proper response to "perishing pleasures" and

imminent death is to "engage" and "muse on" them—perhaps even by writing a poem like "The Poplar Field"!

Interestingly, the word "perishing" implies that the "pleasures of Man" inevitably die or disappear—or, alternatively, that they are killed or taken away. This double meaning again questions the relationship between humanity and nature. Was it inevitable that the poplars would be cut down? Did they serve a necessary purpose? Must all of humanity's pleasures perish? These are the questions the speaker seems to ponder without explicitly asking. Overall, these lines reiterate—simply, calmly, and with dignity—that the real focus of the poem isn't death itself. Rather, the poem is about the way (and the reasons *why*) the pleasures of life disappear as people get older.

LINES 19-20

Though his life be a dream, his enjoyments, I see,
Have a Being less durable even than he.

The poem's final couplet take the form of an aphorism, or a memorable piece of wisdom that is generally true. Though life is wonderful—"a dream," the speaker says, perhaps remembering a line from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (in which Prospero says, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on")—the things that make it enjoyable, like the poplar field, don't last very long.

The speaker's last words are serious and rather somber. The commas in line 19 slow things down, signaling the increasing intensity of the speaker's inner thoughts as the end of the poem nears. The assonance on the /ee/ sound between "dream" and "see" emphasizes the contrast between the "dream" of life and what the speaker has "see[n]" and come to realize in the harsh reality of the cut-down poplar field.

The assonance on the /ee/ sound continues in line 20 with the words "being," "even," and "he." The repeated sound makes the conclusion more powerful and memorable, though it also makes the lines pleasingly musical, like so much of the rest of the poem. Even as the speaker reflects somberly on the loss of worldly pleasures, the poem makes its own sort of pleasurable music. The sound reverberates, and the poem seems to "resound[]" even after its last word.

This effect emphasizes that humanity's pleasures have a lifespan that is tragically shorter than that of humans themselves. The poem suggests, finally, that people are left with their memories of the things they once enjoyed—and that musing fondly on those memories is one way, in the face of inevitable loss, to go on living.

SYMBOLS

THE BLACKBIRD

The blackbird (or, in Cowper's old-fashioned spelling, black-bird) symbolizes the large, less obvious effects the destruction of the poplar field has had on the natural world. The poplars weren't just trees; the field's beauty didn't come from them alone. Rather, they formed the foundation of a rich, thriving ecosystem filled with other living things, like the blackbird. Those creatures, in turn, contributed to the overall beauty of the poplar field the speaker misses so dearly.

It's possible that the speaker is literally talking about a single blackbird, though it's likely that the singular blackbird stands in for a whole *flock* of blackbirds. In a larger sense, this one blackbird represents all the animals who had to find new "retreat[s]" as a result of humanity's destruction of the poplar field. The blackbird calls to mind all creatures, in the poplar field of the poem and far beyond, who are displaced by humankind's destruction of nature.

The blackbird might also symbolize the poet—whether Cowper himself or poets in general. The beautiful song of birds has inspired many poets to use them as a symbol of poetic expression; this symbolism was particularly important to the Romantic poets, who were heavily influenced by Cowper. John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is a famous Romantic example of the use of the bird as a symbol. In this reading, the bird suggests that human destruction of the natural world also robs artists of poetic inspiration.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** "The black-bird has fled to another retreat / Where the hazels afford him a screen from the heat, / And the scene where his melody charm'd me before, / Resounds with his sweet-flowing ditty no more."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

There's a good deal of alliteration in "The Poplar Field," a poem that uses a rich range of sonic effects to communicate and emphasize its ideas. In a general sense, alliterative groupings like "fell'd, farewell," "cool colonnade," "favourite field," and "long lie as lowly" just make the poem more memorable, musical, and emotionally impactful for the reader.

It's useful, though, to examine some specific moments of alliteration in detail. In line 1, the repeated /f/ sound between "fell'd" and "farewell" heightens the tragedy of the line and links the trees' destruction to the speaker's mournful goodbye. Combined with the strong mid-line pause, or caesura, the assonance on the vowel sound /eh/ ("fell'd" and "farewell"), and the consonance on the /l/ sound ("fell'd" and "farewell"), this first instance of alliteration strongly connects the two halves of the line. The stark revelation that "[t]he Poplars are fell'd" carries into the speaker's moving "farewell" to the beloved grove of trees.

The alliteration of "cool colonnade" in line 2 displays a very different use of this sonic device. Whereas the repeated /f/ sound of line 1 communicated a sense of tragic dignity, the second line's repeated /c/ sound is joyful, gentle, and wistful. The alliteration reflects the relaxation and pleasure the "cool colonnade" used to bring the speaker. Similarly, the alliteration on the /f/ sound in line 6 emphasizes, in a straightforward but moving way, the genuine affection the speaker has for this "favourite field."

Line 14 shows another way in which alliteration contributes to the overall effect of the poem. The speaker's realization that "I must e'er long lie as lowly as they" picks up on the /l/ sound that has been repeated in subtle ways throughout the poem since the first line ("The Poplars are fell'd, farewell to the shade"). Now, though, the speaker looks to the future, not the past or present, and the close alliteration makes the moment stirringly emotional. Though the speaker is by no means distraught about the inevitability of death, it's clear that thinking about human mortality has stimulated the speaker's emotions in a profound way. Much of the line's emotional depth—indeed, much of the emotional impact of the poem as a whole—is thanks to alliteration.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "fell'd, farewell"
- **Line 2:** "whispering sound," "cool colonnade"
- **Line 3:** "winds play," "longer," "leaves"
- **Line 6:** "favourite field"
- **Line 9:** "black-bird"
- **Line 10:** "hazels," "heat"
- **Line 14:** "long lie," "lowly"
- **Line 15:** "stone"
- **Line 16:** "such," "stead"
- **Line 18:** "muse," "perishing pleasures," "Man"

CONSONANCE

Consonance contributes to the poem in much the same way as alliteration, and the two devices often work together to create music, link words, and draw readers' attention to certain images.

A good example of this can be found in lines 11 and 12, where the /d/ sound repeats in the words "melody," "charm'd," "Resounds," and "ditty." The effect is subtle, but the consonance makes its own kind of "sweet-flowing ditty," much like the blackbird's. Though the bird has fled the poplar field, the speaker's recollection of its pleasant song has created a new "melody" of its own sort.

The speaker does this throughout the entire poem, imbuing lines with a beautiful sense of melody by closing repeating sounds.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Poplars," "fell'd, farewell"
- **Line 2:** "whispering sound," "cool colonnade"
- **Line 3:** "winds play no longer," "sing," "leaves"
- **Line 4:** "Nor," "on," "bosom," "image"
- **Line 5:** "Twelve," "have," "elapsed," "last," " took," "view"
- **Line 6:** "favourite field," "bank," "grew"
- **Line 7:** "grass behold"
- **Line 8:** "tree," "seat," " that," "lent"
- **Line 9:** " black-bird"
- **Line 10:** "hazels," "him," "screen," "heat"
- **Line 11:** "scene," "melody charm'd me"
- **Line 12:** "Resounds," "sweet-flowing ditty," "more."
- **Line 14:** "long lie," "lowly"
- **Line 15:** "turf," "breast," "stone"
- **Line 16:** "stead"
- **Line 17:** "engage"
- **Line 18:** "muse," "perishing pleasures," "Man"
- **Line 19:** "dream"
- **Line 20:** "Being," "durable"

ASSONANCE

In "The Poplar Field," assonance often works together with alliteration and consonance to create connections between words and concepts, evoke a melodious atmosphere, or to emphasize a line's meaning. Like consonance, its effect is often more subtle than that of alliteration (which is usually the most obvious of these sonic devices).

Take, for example, lines 2–4:

> And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade,
> The winds play no longer and sing in the leaves,
> Nor Ouse on his bosom their image receives.

The repeated short /ih/ sounds works with ample consonance and alliteration to mimic the subtle "whispering sound" of the wind in the leaves. Even as the lines talk about how the wind plays *no longer*, their rich sounds conjure up the speaker's memories of how beautiful the poplar field was in the past.

Assonance can also add intensity to certain phrases. Take the /ah/ sounds of "have elapsed since I last" in line 2, the repetition of which subtly evokes the endless passage of time. And in the poem's final two lines, the return to the long /ee/ sound makes the speaker's final proclamation all the more memorable and emphatic for the reader:

> Though his life be a dream, his enjoyments, I see,
> Have a Being less durable even than he.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “fell’d, farewell”
- **Line 2:** “whispering”
- **Line 3:** “winds,” “sing,” “ in,” “leaves”
- **Line 4:** “his,” “image”
- **Line 5:** “have elapsed,” “last”
- **Line 6:** “favourite,” “bank”
- **Line 8:** “tree,” “seat”
- **Line 10:** “screen,” “heat”
- **Line 11:** “scene,” “me before”
- **Line 12:** “sweet”
- **Line 13:** “hasting away”
- **Line 14:** “lowly”
- **Line 15:** “breast,” “stone,” “head”
- **Line 16:** “grove”
- **Line 19:** “be,” “dream,” “see”
- **Line 20:** “Being,” “even,” “he”

SIBILANCE

Sibilance—that soft, subtle, suave repetition of /s/ (and, depending on how strict your definition is, /sh/ and /z/) sounds—might be the best poetic approximation of the sound of the wind in the trees. It makes sense, then, that "The Poplar Field" is absolutely *full* of it. Just listen to how, in the first stanza, the speaker uses sibilance to convey memories of the poplar field's past beauty and harmony:

> The Poplars are fell’d, farewell to the shade
> And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade,
> The winds play no longer and sing in the leaves,
> Nor Ouse on his bosom their image receives.

The colonnade's "whispering sound" would be much less hushed and sensual without these /s/ sounds, and the song of the wind in the leaves would be so much less tender, gentle, and convincing. Of course, the point of conjuring the beautiful sounds the speaker remembers is to emphasize that they can no longer be heard. All that's left of the poplar field is the speaker's memories—and, in turn, the poem those memories have inspired.

The last two stanzas have their fair share of sibilance, too. Now, when the speaker's thoughts turn toward loss, destruction, and death, the many /s/ sounds take on a slightly more sinister tone, especially in such close chimes as "breast" and "stone." In the last two lines, sibilance reinforces the speaker's balanced attitude toward the quickly fading "pleasures" of life while stressing just how much "less" durable they are than human beings themselves.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Poplars,” “shade”
- **Line 2:** “whispering sound”
- **Line 3:** “winds,” “sing,” “leaves”
- **Line 4:** “Ouse,” “bosom,” “receives”
- **Line 5:** “elapsed since,” “last”
- **Line 8:** “seat,” “once,” “shade”
- **Line 10:** “hazels,” “screen”
- **Line 11:** “scene”
- **Line 12:** “Resounds,” “sweet”
- **Line 13:** “years,” “hasting”
- **Line 14:** “must,” “as”
- **Line 15:** “breast,” “stone”
- **Line 16:** “such,” “shall arise,” “its ,” “stead”
- **Line 17:** “’Tis,” “sight”
- **Line 18:** “muse,” “perishing ,” “pleasures”
- **Line 19:** “his,” “his enjoyments,” “see”
- **Line 20:** “less”

CAESURA

There is only one true caesura in "The Poplar Fields," and it occurs in the very first line of the poem:

> The Poplars are fell’d, | farewell to the shade

The comma after "fell'd" creates a strong pause right in the middle of the line. That pause, or break, might be heard as reflecting the literal felling, or cutting down, of the poplar trees. It makes the speaker's first statement more stark and striking.

The pause also, however, creates a logical link between the first and second parts of the line. In the first, the speaker makes a sudden, surprising announcement. After a brief moment (perhaps to gather the speaker's thoughts), the poem continues with the speaker's touching "farewell" to the cherished place that has been lost.

It's notable that many of the rest of the poem's lines are well-balanced and somewhat symmetrical. Most lines, in fact, can be divided roughly in the middle into two major parts. Take the second stanza as an example:

> Twelve years have elapsed | since I last took a view
> Of my favourite field | and the bank where they grew,
> And now in the grass | behold they are laid,
> And the tree is my seat | that once lent me a shade.

These divisions, while not really caesuras, contribute to the poem's musical effect and communicate the strong sense that the speaker is a thoughtful, expressive, logical person. The neatly composed lines can also be seen as a hallmark of Neoclassicism. Though "The Poplar Field" in many ways displays a shift in Cowper's work away from that literary movement and toward Romanticism, the balance of the lines and stanzas indicates a lingering sense of Neoclassical restraint

and equilibrium.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The Poplars are fell'd, farewell to the shade"

METAPHOR

Though "The Poplar Field" contains only a few instances of metaphor, they make the poem much richer.

In the first metaphor—which is more specifically personification—the flowing surface of the River Great Ouse (just "Ouse" in the poem) is called its "bosom," a word that usually refers to a person's chest. The river's "bosom," moreover, is modified by the male possessive pronoun "his." While it's not unusual to refer to things, in this case the river, as if they were people, the particular choice of the word "bosom" is striking. People only hold things to their bosom that they value highly—loved ones, a cherished pet, or perhaps a favorite stuffed animal. This special word choice (or diction) indicates a tender, intimate relationship between the poplar trees and the river—a relationship that has been destroyed by the felling of the trees. The metaphor makes the speaker's loss of the trees even more touching.

In line 15, the speaker imagines being dead and buried in the ground, "[w]ith a turf on my breast and a stone at my head." The "turf" and "stone" are more than that—respectively, they stand for the patch of grass and the gravestone that will mark the speaker's final resting place. This metaphor is curious; the speaker almost seems to be understating, minimizing, or making light of death. The speaker's choice of words here could be read as indicating a stoic, realistic response to death. It could also indicate genuine fear of death and a wish to avoid naming things as they are—not a gravestone, just a "stone"; not a coffin's length of grass, just "turf." Either way, the metaphor contributes significantly to the complicated, rich tone of the poem's conclusion.

The poem's final metaphor is also perhaps its simplest: the speaker says that life is a "dream." The line may have been influenced by William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, in which the character Prospero famously says, "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on." In "The Poplar Field," the comparison of life to a dream emphasizes the vast scope of human pleasures. That emphasis, in turn, makes line 20's conclusion—that human pleasures are tragically short-lived—all the more poignant.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "on his bosom"
- **Line 15:** "With a turf on my breast and a stone at my head"
- **Line 19:** "Though his life be a dream,"

VOCABULARY

Poplars (Line 1) - In Britain, a poplar is any of several common species of shade tree, including the Aspen, White Poplar, and Grey Poplar. They are tall, green-leaved, and pretty.

Fell'd (Line 1) - Cut down, usually for timber.

Colonnade (Line 2) - This word often refers to a row of columns supporting a building. In the poem, it means a group of trees arranged in an impressive, dignified row.

Ouse (Line 4) - The poem is likely referring to the River Great Ouse, often just called the Ouse. (Though there are four rivers in England known as the Ouse, so it's a little confusing!) In Britain, the word "river" often comes before a river's actual name, as in the famous River Thames. Cowper was living in the town of Olney, near the River Great Ouse, when he wrote "The Poplar Field."

Bosom (Line 4) - The word "bosom" usually refers to a person's chest, but in this case, it means the flowing surface of the river. "Bosom" can also be an adjective meaning "close," as in the phrase "bosom friends." The word emphasizes the tender, intimate connection between the river and the trees.

Elapsed (Line 5) - Gone by. The speaker is saying that a certain amount of time has passed—in this case, 12 years.

Bank (Line 6) - In this poem, "bank" doesn't mean a place to keep money! It just means the area of land right next to a river, or the riverbank.

Hazels (Line 10) - A type of tree that produces delicious, edible nuts.

Screen (Line 10) - A protective shield or covering, in this case provided by the leaves and branches of the hazel trees.

Resounds (Line 12) - To echo, reverberate, or be filled with usually pleasant sound.

Ditty (Line 12) - A song or tune, usually a short or simple one.

Fugitive (Line 13) - Today, the word "fugitive" makes people think of an escaped criminal. However, the word can also refer to anything that is quick to disappear, fleeting, or running away—in this case, the years of the speaker's life!

Hasting (Line 13) - Hurrying.

E'er (Line 14, Line 16) - An old-fashioned or poetic contraction of "ever." Both times it's used in the poem, the word means "before."

Turf (Line 15) - A piece of grass. In the poem, the word refers to the grass that will grow on top of the speaker's grave.

Stone (Line 15) - A gravestone.

Grove (Line 16) - A group of trees.

Stead (Line 16) - "Stead" means "place." The new grove of trees will grow to replace the one that's been cut down, both in terms

of their physical presence and the role the trees play in environment.

Muse (Line 18) - In Greek mythology, the muses were the goddesses of artistic inspiration, and a "muse" can be any person who inspires the creation of art, especially poetry. In the poem, "muse" is a verb meaning to reflect, speak, or write about something—in the speaker's case, "the perishing pleasures of Man."

Perishing (Line 18) - Coming to an end, dying, or fading away.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Poplar Field" is divided into five quatrains, or four-line stanzas. These quatrains themselves each contain two rhymed couplets.

This form creates a sense of balance and tranquility. This is especially true in the first three stanzas, which evoke the beauty and harmony of the speaker's memories of the poplar field. The symmetry of the quatrains reinforces the poem's exploration of binaries like past and present, humanity and nature, and life and death. Their strength and flexibility provide a solid base for the poem's meditation on nature, destruction, and human mortality.

At a larger level, the poem displays a symmetrical shape. The first two stanzas bid "farewell" to the field while richly evoking the speaker's memories of the place's beauty. The last two stanzas focus on the speaker's thoughts about mortality, change, and the inevitable loss of "pleasures" as life goes on. The third stanza—the middle and perhaps climax of the poem—considers the blackbird, a symbol of the other creatures, besides the speaker, that were affected by the field's destruction. The imaginative progression of the poem—from the speaker's surroundings to the absent bird to the speaker's inner thoughts—constitutes an important aspect of its form.

METER

"The Poplar Field" is written in anapestic tetrameter, a meter in which each line contains four anapests (metrical feet with an unstressed-unstressed-stressed syllable pattern). Take line 2 as an example:

> And the whisp- | ering sound | of the cool | colonnade,

Having two unstressed syllables before every stressed syllable often gives the anapest a lilting, springy, song-like quality. That light, pleasant musicality can definitely be felt and heard in "The Poplar Field." In line 2 above, the meter perfectly captures the "whispering sound" of the wind in the trees that the line describes.

Sometimes, however, some of a line's anapests get replaced by iambs (feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern). Line 1 is a good example of this. Notice that the first and third feet are *iambs*, not anapests:

> The Pop- | lars are fell'd, | farewell | to the shade

The iambs sound a bit and more serious than the happy-go-lucky anapests. The initial iamb emphasizes the poplars, giving them a sense of physical presence that is touchingly ironic because, of course, they have already been "fell'd," or cut down. And the speaker's wistful "farewell" to their shade becomes even more emotionally charged by the emphasis the iamb puts on the word.

This use of iambs to mark moments of particular seriousness, emotion, or somber reflection can be found throughout the poem. Sometimes, the substitution happens in the first and third feet, as in line 1 above. And sometimes, it only happens in the first foot. This is the case in lines 3 and 4:

> The winds | play no long- | er and sing | in the leaves,
> Nor Ouse | on his bos- | om their im- | age receives.

The beginnings of these lines seem serious and wistful—their musicality expresses the sadness of losing the winds and the reflection of the trees in the Ouse. The remaining anapests, however, express the speaker's happy *memory* of those things. By starting with an iamb and finishing with three anapests, the lines express the speaker's mixed feelings of sadness (from the present reality of the poplar field) and pleasure (from the speaker's happy memories of how the field used to be). The occasional substitution of an iamb for an anapest allows for the speaker's complicated inner feelings to be communicated in subtle ways to the reader. In a broad sense, it makes the meter more flexible, allowing the poem to express both pleasant musicality and serious, somewhat somber meditation.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Poplar Field" is written in rhymed couplets, groups of two consecutive lines that rhyme. Each four-line stanza, or quatrain, contains two of these rhymed couplets. With only one exception (more on that later), the rhyme sound changes in each couplet. The rhyme scheme for the whole poem looks like this:

AABB CCAA DDEE FFGG HHII

Rhymed couplets were common in Cowper's time, and they continued to be used by the Romantics and later poets—many poets today still write in rhymed couplets! This rhyme scheme can create many effects, but it often creates a pleasing sense of continuity, musicality, and balance.

That's definitely the case in "The Poplar Field." In the first three stanzas, the rhyme helps to conjure the pleasant atmosphere of

the poplar field as the speaker remembers it: the cool shade, the quiet sounds of the breeze, and the blackbird's charming melodies. In the last two stanzas, the rhymes emphasize just how rapidly the speaker's time on earth is "hasting away." They lend the end of the poem an air of somber reflection and dignity that makes the speaker's conclusion more poignant.

As mentioned before, there's only one small exception to the pattern of different rhyme sounds. In lines 7 and 8, the very first rhyme sound of the poem, on "shade" and "colonnade," repeats on "laid" and "shade." The repeated rhyme strongly links the two stanzas, which together describe how the poplar field was in the past and how it is now. By framing the stanzas, the repeated rhyme subtly emphasizes how drastically the field has changed. Though "shade" and its rhyme sound may appear multiple times in the stanzas, the actual shade of the poplar trees is gone forever.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Poplar Field" is unidentified. Though it's possible that the speaker is William Cowper himself, there's no clear evidence in the poem that this is the case. It's helpful, however, to know that Cowper was living in the English town of Olney, on the River Great Ouse, when he wrote the poem.

Whoever the speaker is, the poem indicates that this person loved spending time in the poplar field, where the speaker enjoyed the shade, river, wind, and birds. The speaker is clearly someone who enjoys the pleasures of nature. For some reason, the speaker hasn't visited the field in 12 years. Upon returning, the speaker finds that the trees have been cut down, which inspires the speaker to remember how the place used to be and bid "farewell" to its former beauty.

These memories lead the speaker, who is getting older and will soon face death, to reflect on the fleeting nature of human pleasures and life itself. The speaker, who is clearly a thoughtful, perhaps even wise person, faces the disappointments of life and the inevitability of death with a realistic, balanced, and resolved attitude.

SETTING

As the title indicates, "The Poplar Field" takes place in a field of poplar trees—or, at least, what *used to be* a field of poplar trees. The trees have been cut down, and the speaker is surrounded by what is actually a scene of destruction, emptiness, and loss. Against that present reality, the speaker projects memories of the poplar field's beauty from 12 years ago. Even though the field is beautiful no longer, the speaker's fond memories of it occupy an important place in the poem.

Literally speaking, the poem is set in England, probably in the area known as East Anglia, and perhaps on the banks of the River Great Ouse near the town of Olney, where Cowper was living when he wrote the poem. Though Cowper himself is not necessarily the speaker, it's likely that his lived experiences strongly influenced the poem.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Poplar Field" was first published in 1785 in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, where another of Cowper's famous poems, "Epitaph on a Hare," also appeared. The poem underwent several revisions and republications until it was finally published in Cowper's collected *Poems* in 1800, the year of the poet's death.

William Cowper lived and wrote in a time of intense literary transition. He is perhaps the best-known figure in the shift from the Neoclassicism of Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson (sometimes known as Dr. Johnson) to the early Romanticism of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, both of whom admired and were strongly influenced by Cowper. Indeed, Cowper saw both the death of Dr. Johnson, in 1784, and the publication of the founding text of British Romanticism, the *Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth and Coleridge, in 1798! His life and work truly spans one of the most important historical shifts in literary fashion and tradition.

Neoclassicism embraced the "classical" authors of ancient Greece and Rome, including Homer and Virgil, as models of literary excellence. The movement favored elegance, balance, and restraint, and by the time the early Romantics came around, Neoclassical poetry was increasingly seen as old-fashioned, conservative, and even stuffy.

The Romantics, for their part, championed a poetry of emotional intensity and the language of common people, rather than the highly elevated language of Neoclassicism. They were interested in the relationship between humanity and nature, skeptical of traditional religion, and thought poetry was (as Wordsworth famously defined it) "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."

Perhaps more than any other figure, Cowper marked the transition between these movements. He was influenced by Neoclassical poetry, and he made translations of Homer that were highly indebted to the Latin-like English verse of John Milton. The rhymed couplets of "The Poplar Field" may have been influenced by Alexander Pope's famous heroic couplets. But whereas Pope's couplets are built on the sturdy, serious iamb (unstressed-stressed), Cowper's make expressive use of the lighter and more musical anapest (unstressed-unstressed-stressed).

Cowper's poems about the natural world, especially the English countryside, marked a distinct shift in 18th-century poetry. His

eccentric blend of religion, politics, struggles with mental illness, and delight in nature strongly influenced the Romantic poets who followed him, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge. By encouraging a direct confrontation with nature and using an intensely personal speaking voice, Cowper changed the course of poetry forever. The influence of "The Poplar Field" can be heard in such poems as Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," A. E. Housman's "Loveliest of Trees," and even perhaps Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Poplar Field" was published in 1785, just as significant changes were occurring in England and far beyond. The Industrial Revolution was well underway, leading people like Cowper to question humanity's relationship with the natural world. Nature was increasingly being used (and sometimes, like the poplar field, destroyed) in the name of human progress and industrial development. The later development of the steam locomotive and the spread of railways all over Britain inspired the Romantics, who were inspired by Cowper's poems, to continue probing the complex relationship between human beings and nature.

Political change was also underway: the United States had declared independence from Britain in 1776, and France would have its own revolution in 1789. Such political changes led to an increased concern for the language of the common people, rather than the high-and-mighty, elevated language of the Neoclassical poets. A new desire for the genuine expression of human emotions was beginning to arise in poetry. Cowper's intensely personal, meditative voice in "The Poplar Field" is an important early example of the more intimate poetic voice, which the Romantics would take up in their own way and most famously champion.

In Cowper's own life, the time when he wrote "The Poplar Field" was a relatively happy, tranquil one, following several earlier periods of intense depression and psychological instability. He was living in the small town of Olney, near the River Great Ouse, and he was fond of walking in the countryside. From his letters, it appears that there really was a grove of poplar trees that was cut down, so the poem was probably inspired, at least in part, by his life experiences.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Cowper's Life and Work — A short biography, plus several of Cowper's famous poems. (https://poets.org/poet/william-cowper)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of "The Poplar Field" and see footage of the English landscape that inspired the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAMGc6ZcSEg)
- All About William Cowper — An interactive page from the Cowper & Newton Museum. (https://cowperandnewtonmuseum.org.uk/william-cowper-1731-1800/)
- What Is Romanticism? — A brief overview of Romanticism, the major literary movement that Cowper helped inspire. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-romanticism)
- Poplar Trees — Learn more about the trees that have been "fell'd" in Cowper's poem. (https://www.britannica.com/plant/poplar)

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