CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

The Task

William Cowper · *1785 · original English text*

I sing the Sofa: Cowper's long poem in six books begins as a joke about furniture and becomes a meditation on the country, the town, work, retirement, and a life under God. The hosted file also contains later companion poems; this map is The Task itself.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a poem that begins by singing a sofa still tell the truth about a made town, a made country, and a soul that would live quietly under God?

"I sing the Sofa."
Book I, the opening

The hosted text is Cowper's original English. Project Gutenberg #3698 is The Task and Other Poems. The site EPUB includes The Task (Books I–VI) and then companion poems; the file's tail includes "My Mary!" Map The Task; flag the companion poems; do not quote them as this work. The opening is exact. The famous contrast is also exact: "God made the country, and man made the town." A long, gentle, sometimes satirical English meditation, Christian in its close weather, for a wide older band. Not a tight novel-plot.

KEY CHARACTERS

the poet at home
The singer of the sofa, who lately sang more solemn themes, and who will walk.

the country
The made-by-God landscape of work, garden, and retirement.

the town
The made-by-man contrast, a moral weather as well as a place.

the retired life
The later books' subject: not idleness, but a life under God.

GOD MADE THE COUNTRY

> *"God made the country, and man made the town."*
> Book I

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
I Sing the Sofa
BOOK I, THE OPENING

The poet, who lately sang Truth, Hope, and Charity, now takes a lighter theme. The joke is the porch of a much longer walk.

- 'I sing the Sofa.' is exact in both witnesses.
- The mock-epic start is deliberate.
- Books I–VI are the Task proper.

> *"I sing the Sofa."*
> Book I

02
A Walk Out of Doors
BOOK I CONTINUED

The poem leaves the parlor. Country scenes, rural work, and a mind glad to be out of doors become the real subject.

- The Task is a walk as much as an argument.
- Keep Cowper's exact, quiet wording.
- The six books are one work, not six fragments.

03
God Made the Country
THE FAMOUS CONTRAST

God made the country, and man made the town. The line is a hinge, not a cheap slogan; health and virtue are in the next breath.

- The line is exact in both witnesses.
- Teach it as Cowper's claim, to be weighed, not merely posted.
- The town in this poem is a moral weather, not only a place.

> *"God made the country, and man made the town."*
> Book I

04
Work, Retirement, and a Life Under God
THE LATER BOOKS

The poem turns through work, the garden, the winter evening, and a retired life that is not idleness. The close weather is Christian.

- Retirement here is a discipline, not an escape only.
- The satire of public follies should be taught as part of the Task.
- Do not quote the later companion poems as these six books.

05
The Task, and What Follows
THE HOSTED FILE

The site EPUB continues after Book VI with other Cowper poems; the tail includes "My Mary!" Project Gutenberg #3698 is likewise The Task and Other Poems. Map The Task; flag the rest.

- Flag the companion poems in the file.
- A long, complete six-book poem, for a wide older band, beginning in a joke and ending in a quiet faith.
- Quote stretches that appear in both witnesses, from The Task itself.

A Mock Beginning | Country and Town | Labor and Retirement | A Quiet Faith | A Long Walk

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. The hosted text is Cowper's original English. Project Gutenberg #3698 is The Task and Other Poems. The site EPUB includes The Task (Books I–VI) and then companion poems; the file's tail includes "My Mary!" Map The Task; flag the companion poems; do not quote them as this work.
2. The opening is exact: "I sing the Sofa." Also exact: "God made the country, and man made the town." A long, gentle, sometimes satirical meditation, Christian in its close weather, for a wide older band. Not a tight novel-plot.
3. Quote only stretches of The Task that appear in both witnesses.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #3698: The Task, and Other Poems (Cassell's National Library, 1899), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-task-cowper/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.