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Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Author: Steven Allaback (University of California at Santa Barbara)

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About this Person

Born: February 27, 1807 in Portland, Maine, United States

Died: March 24, 1882 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Poet

WORKS:

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

MAJOR WORKS

- *Outre-Mer; A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea* (volume 1, Boston: Hilliard, Gray, 1833; volume 2, Boston: Lilly, Wait, 1834; enlarged edition, 2 volumes, New York: Harper, 1835; London: Bentley, 1835).
- *Hyperion, A Romance* (New York: Samuel Colman, 1839; revised edition, Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1869).
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- *Ballads and Other Poems* (Cambridge: John Owen, 1842).
- *The Spanish Student. A Play, in Three Acts* (Cambridge: John Owen, 1843).
- *Poems* (Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1845).
- *The Belfry of Bruges and Other Poems* (Cambridge: John Owen, 1846).
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- *Prose Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, 2 volumes (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1857).
- *The Courtship of Miles Standish and Other Poems* (London: Kent, 1858; Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1858).
- *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (London: Routledge, Warne & Routledge, 1863; Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1863).
- *The Complete Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Revised Edition*, 7 volumes (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1866).
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- *The New England Tragedies ... I. John Endicott II. Giles Corey of the Salem Farms* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1868; London: Routledge & Sons, 1868).
- *The Divine Tragedy* (Boston: Osgood, 1871).
- *Christus, A Mystery*, 3 volumes (Boston: Osgood, 1872)--includes *The New England Tragedies*, *The Divine Tragedy*, and *The Golden Legend*.
- *Three Books of Song* (Boston: Osgood, 1872; London: Routledge & Sons, 1872).
- *Aftermath* (Boston: Osgood, 1873; London: Routledge & Sons, 1873).
- *The Hanging of the Crane* (Boston: Osgood, 1874; London: Routledge & Sons, 1875).
- *The Masque of Pandora and Other Poems* (Boston: Osgood, 1875; London: Routledge & Sons, 1875).
- *Kéramos and Other Poems* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, 1878; London: Routledge & Sons, 1878).
- *The Early Poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, edited by Richard Herne Shepherd (London: Pickering, 1878).
- *Ultima Thule* (London: Routledge & Sons, 1880; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1880).
- *In the Harbor, Ultima Thule, Part II* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1882; London: Routledge & Sons, 1882).
- *Michael Angelo* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1883; London: Routledge & Sons, 1883).
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BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY:

During his lifetime and for some years after his death, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was by far the most popular and widely read American poet in the world. Although his reputation today is greatly diminished, a portion of his work is still respected by critics, is enjoyed by ordinary readers, and stands as a permanent addition to literature and folklore. Longfellow wrote prolifically for nearly a half century and was very much a man of his time. To students of history his work is a valuable repository of the moral and spiritual ideals of Victorian America. A remarkably well-educated and well-travelled man, Longfellow was also an important scholar and educator. He was a college professor, a translator, a writer of textbooks, a compiler of anthologies. Because he and his wife were famous for their hospitality and good natures, his home in Cambridge became a gathering place for prominent people of many different occupations--writers, politicians, musicians, businessmen, teachers. Their influence upon one another, under the benign auspices of Longfellow, is incalculable.

Stephen Longfellow, the poet's father, was a successful Portland lawyer and politician, a member of the Eighteenth Congress of the United States, and trustee of Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, where Henry went in 1822, at the age of fifteen, after a full and happy childhood. Henry's mother, Zilpah Wadsworth Longfellow, was highly intelligent, devoutly religious, a lover of books and culture, and encouraged her son to pursue his literary ambitions. While still a student at Bowdoin, Longfellow published poems and essays in such places as the *American Monthly Magazine* and the *United States Literary Gazette*. He began to "aspire after future eminence in literature," as he wrote his father during his senior year, "my whole soul burns most ardently for it." "Nothing delights me more," he realized, "than reading and writing...."

Upon graduation in 1825 (he was fourth in a class of thirty-eight), he read law in his father's office for a few months and then embarked for Europe, partly to satisfy what he called his "voracious appetite for knowledge" and partly to prepare himself for the newly established chair of modern languages at Bowdoin to which he would soon be appointed. For the next three years he studied and travelled in France, Germany, Spain, and Italy, trying to master the languages, meeting new people and establishing friendships, immersing himself in as many exotic settings as he could. His European experiences would subsequently be the inspiration for much of his work, including his first substantial literary effort, *Outre-Mer; A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea* (New York: Harpers, 1835), a series of sketches and observations in imitation of Washington Irving.

From 1829 to 1835 Longfellow was at Bowdoin College where he made himself into an admired teacher and one of the most promising young scholars of his day. Although he occasionally wrote poetry during these years, most of his time was spent preparing textbooks and translations for use in his own classes. Several essays on literary subjects, including "The Defense of Poetry" in 1832, appeared in the *North American Review* and helped to make his name known outside Brunswick. In late 1834, he was offered the position of Smith Professor of Modern Languages at Harvard to succeed George Ticknor. He was also given the opportunity to spend a year in Europe so that he could achieve, according to the letter of nomination, "a more perfect attainment of the German...." Weary of the insulated life in the small college town, still eager to make his mark on a wider world, he called himself "a very lucky fellow" and joyfully accepted the new job.

In the spring of 1835, accompanied by his pregnant wife, Mary, and two of her friends, Longfellow set out on his second trip to Europe. But in November of that year, in Rotterdam, his young wife died of complications following a miscarriage. This unexpected event caused him more sustained anguish than he had ever known and helped to turn him into a dedicated poet and away from an exclusively scholarly career. In Longfellow's highly autobiographical *Hyperion; A Romance* (New York: S. Colman, 1839), the hero, Paul Flemming, after the death of his wife, wanders distractedly over Europe. The world "seemed to him less beautiful, and life became earnest." *Hyperion* has some interest as an account of contemporary Europe as seen from an American viewpoint.

In the fall of 1836 Longfellow took up residence in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he would live for the rest of his life. For the next few years he devoted himself to his onerous teaching duties, to a long and frustrating courtship, to cultivating convivial friendships with such men as Charles Sumner and Cornelius Felton, and to his writing. His work appeared regularly in newspapers and magazines in New York and Philadelphia and poems like "A Psalm of Life" and "The Wreck of the Hesperus" were already famous by the time they were collected into *Voices of the Night* (1839) and *Ballads and Other Poems* (1841).

With these two volumes, however, Longfellow's popularity soared even higher. *Voices of the Night* went through six editions in two years and such lines as "Tell me not, in mournful number, / Life is but an empty dream!" became to thousands of readers more familiar than any lines yet written by an American. Longfellow dealt with important subjects clearly and forthrightly while adopting a frankly didactic and inspirational tone. He believed that poetry should be "an instrument for improving the condition of society, and advancing the great purpose of human happiness." Poetry could be, and often had been, debased and perverted, but its proper function was to exalt, to purify, to stir the human spirit. Longfellow admired Wordsworth because "the republican simplicity of his poetry" was "in unison with our moral and political doctrines." In *Voices of the Night*, as in the majority of his shorter poems for the next forty years, the emphasis is on simple truths: "Learn to labor and to wait"; "Know how sublime a thing it is / To suffer and be strong"; "Faith shineth as a morning star, / Our ghostly fears are dead."

Although an interest in foreign languages and literatures would always be a hallmark of Longfellow's work, in *Ballads and Other Poems* are several poems, including "The Village Blacksmith," written solely on American themes, the discovery and development of which became one of his enthusiasms. In 1840 he had told a friend that the national ballad "is a virgin soil here in New England; and there are good materials. Besides I have a great notion of working upon *people's feelings*," a notion which he retained throughout his career.

In "The Village Blacksmith" is the stanza:

Toiling,--rejoicing,--sorrowing,
 Onward through life he goes;
Each morning sees some task begin,
 Each evening sees it close;
Something attempted, something done,
 Has earned a night's repose.

As in so many of his poems, the metrical regularity here and the careful rhyme help to reinforce Longfellow's basic assumptions that life is meaningful, has its regular cycles and distinct rhythms, and that "toiling" and "sorrowing" should always be kept in clear perspective. In "The Rainy Day" are these couplets:

Be still, sad heart! and cease repining;
Behind the clouds is the sun still shining;
Thy fate is the common fate of all,
Into each life some rain must fall...

Bracing and confident, this is the voice of a man who is embarrassed by strident complainers and by overly complicated explanations of man's fate. Longfellow always believed that if a poet "wishes the world to listen and be edified, he will do well to choose a language that is generally understood."

Despite the success of his first two volumes of poetry, in 1842 Longfellow was in ill health, profoundly depressed, and very lonely, and so he took a leave of absence from Harvard and went again to Europe, this time to take the water-cure at Marienberg. During the year he finished *Poems on Slavery* (Cambridge: John Owen, 1842), an undistinguished but sincere collection which Longfellow himself called "mild" and which told of the evils of slavery and warned of the possible conflagration to come. He also formed lasting friendships with Charles Dickens and Ferdinand Freiligrath, the German poet.

The physical and emotional distress which prompted Longfellow's third trip to Europe had been caused principally by his failure, after nearly seven years of courtship, to win the hand of Frances Appleton, the beautiful and accomplished daughter of a wealthy Boston merchant. But a few months after his return to the United States, Fanny changed her mind, and Longfellow's life was instantly transformed. "My whole soul," he said in May 1843, "is filled with peace and serenity ... all that so agitated me, and sent me swinging and ill-poised through the void and empty space, all this is ended." For a wedding present, Nathan Appleton gave his daughter and new son-in-law the already famous Craigie House. The next eighteen years, until Fanny's death in 1861, were the happiest and most productive of Longfellow's career.

The Belfry of Bruges and Other Poems (1845) continued to increase his fame and to demonstrate his remarkable metrical facility and the great range of his subjects--from "The Arsenal at Springfield" to "Rain in Summer" to "Nuremberg" to the fine sonnet "Mezzo Cammin."

Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie (1847), his first long narrative poem, daringly written in hexameters, went through six printings in nine weeks and remained one of Longfellow's best-known works throughout the century. Set during the French and Indian War at the time when the English expelled about 6,000 French Acadians from Nova Scotia, it tells the story of Evangeline Bellefontaine's separation from her bridegroom, Gabriel Lajeunesse. After spending her life wandering over the United States in search of him, she finally encounters Gabriel, old and dying in an almshouse, in Philadelphia, where she had become a Sister of Mercy. Although the main characters themselves are a trifle insipid, Longfellow exploits the ancient themes of separation, exile, search, and constancy, and his careful attention to details of the landscape--rivers, prairies, forests, mountain ranges--makes the poem a distinctively American narrative.

The Seaside and the Fireside (1850) sold more than 30,000 copies in the next five years. It contains such gentle poems as "The Fire of Driftwood" and "The Secret of the Sea," the beginning of which reveals one of Longfellow's favorite subjects and most characteristic moods:

Ah! what pleasant visions haunt me
 As I gaze upon the sea!
All the old romantic legends,
 All my dreams, come back to me.

During the 1840s and into the 1850s Longfellow frequently complained in his journal and to his closest friends about his pressing

college obligations, his increasingly large numbers of visitors and distractions, and his ever-widening correspondence, yet he continued to work hard. In addition to poetry, he wrote a novel, *Kavanagh* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed & Fields, 1849), a verse drama, *The Golden Legend* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed & Fields, 1851), and he edited three anthologies, including the enormously influential *Poets and Poetry of Europe* (Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1845), a compendium of Longfellow's own scholarship and the most complete volume of its type to appear in America up to then. During these years he also fathered six children, watched over the affairs of his parents and his brothers, lived a busy social life, and shrewdly managed his financial arrangements with various publishers. Primarily because he had been able to change almost single-handedly the reading public's attitude towards poets and poetry, Longfellow also became the first American poet to make substantial sums from his work.

In 1854, after years of talking about it, Longfellow finally resigned from Harvard. Along with George Ticknor before him, he had succeeded in establishing the field of modern languages and literatures in this country, and his value as a one man force against American academic provincialism has perhaps never been fully appreciated. Shortly after he delivered his final college lecture, Longfellow set to work on *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), the epic about the son of the west wind. Hiawatha is raised among the Ojibwas, attains supernatural powers, has many adventures, including his separation from and return to his people, marries the beautiful Dacotah, Minnehaha, and becomes a benevolent and wise ruler. Eventually famine, fever, and the encroaching whites force him to leave, but he tells his people to heed the new religion brought by the missionaries. As early as 1823 Longfellow had told his father that the Indians "are a race possessing magnanimity, generosity, benevolence, and pure religion without hypocrisy" and who "have been most barbarously maltreated by the whites." Twenty years later in *Hiawatha* Longfellow intended to "weave together their beautiful traditions into a whole." It sold 50,000 copies within a year and a half. Even though shortly after publication a loud controversy developed over its indebtedness to the Finnish epic, *Kalevala*, *Hiawatha* became Longfellow's most popular work.

In the middle 1850s Longfellow's productivity fell off by comparison to earlier years, a fact which he lamented from time to time ("I lead the life of any respectable gentleman," he said in 1857, "whose time is frittered away with the nothings of every-day existence"), but he nevertheless continued to write whenever he could. Not long after his fiftieth birthday he calculated that his books had sold more than 300,000 copies. In 1858, after several false starts, Longfellow finally concluded his third long poem of American life, *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, which he called "an idyll of old Colony times." It tells how Captain Standish asks his friend John Alden to woo the maid Priscilla on his behalf and then loses her to him. On the day of John and Priscilla's wedding, however, all three are reconciled and vow to continue their friendship forever. As the happy bride and groom cross a brook to their new house,

Like a picture it seemed of the primitive, pastoral ages,
Fresh with the youth of the world, and
recalling Rebecca and Isaac,

Old and yet ever new, and simple and beautiful always,
Love immortal and young in the endless succession of lovers.

In July 1861, tragedy struck Longfellow for the second time. While sealing packets of her daughters' hair with wax, Fanny Longfellow's dress suddenly caught on fire. She ran to her husband and he tried to smother the flames with a small rug, but she was badly burned and died the next day. The Longfellows' marriage had been monumentally successful, their relationship the envy of everyone who knew them, and Fanny's death was a bitter blow to Henry. A muted sense of loss pervades much of his later work, but probably the most moving testimony of his grief is "The Cross of Snow," written eighteen years after the event.

In 1863 Longfellow published the first part of *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, a collection of tales and interludes in the manner of *The Canterbury Tales*, and among the more variegated, delightful, and underrated of his works. Gathered at a New England inn are a number of people--including a student, a musician, and a landlord--each of whom tell a tale, the most famous of which, told by the landlord, is "Paul Revere's Ride." It is a stirring example of a kind of American folk chant which Longfellow could often do so well: "Listen, my children, and you shall hear / Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere...." Further segments of *Tales of a Wayside Inn* were published in 1872 and 1873.

From the conclusion of the Civil War to the end of his life Longfellow experienced an outpouring of worldwide veneration and respect that few writers--few people--have ever known. With his long hair and white beard (which he had grown to conceal the scars from burns received while trying to save Fanny) he was an impressive looking figure, and because he was kind, friendly, and accessible, the public adored Longfellow the man as enthusiastically as it read his poetry. His trip to Europe in 1868 turned into a triumphant tour. Oxford and Cambridge granted him degrees, he was received by the Queen and the Archbishop of Canterbury, he visited Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson, William Gladstone, and on the continent he was acclaimed by Victor Hugo and became the center of attention wherever he travelled. In parts of the United States during the 1870s, school children celebrated his birthday as if it were a national holiday. He was continually being visited at the Craigie House by distinguished foreign visitors--Anthony Trollope, Wilkie Collins, the Duke of Argyll--as well as by hundreds of beginning authors and readers of his work. By the time of his death in 1882 he was, as one biographer has called him, the "grand old man of American letters."

In his later years, in addition to guiding his children to maturity, Longfellow completed several large projects including his translation of *The Divine Comedy*, 3 vols. (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1865-1867), a labor of love he had worked on since his Harvard days. His lifelong interest in Christianity culminated in the epic, *Christus: A Mystery* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1872). He was editor-in-chief of a huge, thirty-one volume anthology, *Poems of Places* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1877-1878; Boston: Houghton, Osgood, 1878-1879). But with the exception of an occasional medium length piece like "Keramos" and "Morituri Salutamus," written for the fiftieth reunion of his Bowdoin College class, his finest achievements were in the short lyric. A stately poem like "The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls," written three years before his death, is a good example of Longfellow's view of life as a somewhat sad but purposeful journey which is being taken in conjunction with certain orderly natural processes. It begins:

The tide rises, the tide falls,
The twilight darkens, the curlew calls,
Along the sea-sands damp and brown
The traveller hastens toward the town,

And the tide rises, the tide falls.

In Longfellow's later poetry there are a number of cheerless and somber moments, as in "Autumn Within":

It is autumn; not without,
But within me is the cold.
Youth and spring are all about;
It is I that have grown old.

And there are a number of ambivalent attitudes expressed toward God and Heaven, such as these lines from "Moonlight":

We see but what we have the gift
Of seeing; what we bring we find.

He refers frequently to the "vast Unknown" and often notes (with approval) how much is beyond man's knowledge: "There are great truths that pitch their shining tents / Outside our walls...."

But the majority of poems written in his final years are expressions of faith and hope: that "death is a beginning, not an end," that there is a balancing-out in life (the "lowest ebb is the turn of the tide"), and that we are faced less often with blank stone walls than with possibilities. The last lines he wrote, from "The Bells of San Blas," are, appropriately, these:

Out of the shadows of night
The world rolls into light;
It is daybreak everywhere.

Shortly after *Voices of the Night* was published in 1839 Hawthorne wrote Longfellow that "Nothing equal to some of them was ever written in this world,--this western world, I mean; and it would not hurt my conscience much to include the other hemisphere." The *North American Review* proclaimed that "they are among the most remarkable poetical compositions which have ever appeared in the United States." In 1851 John Ruskin said that Longfellow's poems have more influence than "all Byron's works put together" and appeal to "the strongest minds of the day." In 1869 the *Illustrated London News* said that there "is no English poet now living who has so many readers in England as Longfellow. His writings are, indeed, known to the million; they find a place on shelf or table in the humblest artisan's house, where Tennyson and Browning have not yet come." In 1876, by his own calculation, Longfellow had had twenty-two different publishers in England alone. Although there were always a few dissenting voices--Margaret Fuller and Edgar Allan Poe, to name two--Longfellow's reputation among both the public and literary critics remained uniformly high until long after his death.

By the end of the century, however, the new science and technology, the rise of realism and naturalism, westward expansion, industrialization, immigration, all began to make the quiet verities of Longfellow seem old-fashioned if not obsolete to most of the younger critics. But the ordinary reader continued to enjoy him. The British publishing house of Routledge sold more than 716,000 copies of his poems by 1900; Frederick Warne & Co. sold 411,000 between 1865 and 1900; and they were only two of many firms which sold his works. Longfellow remained a favorite in America until World War I.

Between the two wars Longfellow's reputation steadily declined among all readers. He began to be commonly regarded as an easy poet, a children's poet, a naive and sentimental man, something of an embarrassment. Some of his most famous poems had become shopworn, the object of parody and contempt, perhaps the object of too much memorization in the public schools. In 1915 Van Wyck Brooks said that Longfellow "is to poetry what the barrel-organ is to music," and in the early thirties Ludwig Lewisohn asked the now infamous question, "Who, except wretched school children, now reads Longfellow?" In Brooks and Warrens' *Understanding Poetry* (1938), a harbinger of the New Criticism, as important in its day as Longfellow's *Poets and Poetry of Europe* was in its own, the single Longfellow poem included is virtually laughed at.

In 1837, in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Longfellow had claimed that "the true poet is a friendly man" who looks upon all things "in the spirit of love." To him all things have "a life, an end and aim," and all things "are beautiful and holy." The poetic mind feels "a universal sympathy with Nature, both in the material world and in the soul of man." It is not surprising that in the fragmented and violent twentieth century most readers of poetry become distrustful, even resentful, of this sort of voice.

In 1955 Edward Wagenknecht published *Longfellow: A Full-Length Portrait*, and a reassessment of Longfellow began. In 1959 came Howard Nemerov's balanced and appreciative *Longfellow* in the widely distributed Laurel Poetry Series (Dell); in 1962 and 1964 came biographies by Newton Arvin and Cecil B. Williams; and several studies since have seen Longfellow as a folk poet or a parlor poet or a people's poet. Today, most readers would probably agree with Howard Nemerov that many Longfellow poems have "an interest other than historical, scholarly, or biographical--an interest truly poetical, and undiminished by time." The consensus among critics is that much of his work is bad, best forgotten, but there is a considerable portion that is quite good. As Newton Arvin puts it, the "author of *Hiawatha*, or *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, of *Michael Angelo* was a lesser but not a little writer, a minor poet but not a poetaster." For Longfellow a poem was often a deliberate idealization and simplification of idea and feeling, a sweet-sounding distillation of common truth. He has left at least thirty to fifty short, unpretentious lyrics, in addition to a few longer pieces, that are likely to have readers far into the future.

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The bulk of The Longfellow Papers are at the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

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FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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