

Henry wadsworth  
longfellow an  
american writing icon  
essay



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## Henry Wadsworth Longfellow an American Writing Icon

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a powerful figure in nineteenth century America. He is considered to be one of the most influential writers of this time. There are many reasons for the popularity and significance of Longfellow's poetry.

The most evident is the manner in which he uses the gift of effortless rhyme.

He writes poetry with a natural grace, read or heard once, his rhyme and meters cling to the mind long after the initial sense may be forgotten. No other American poet has so penetrated the general consciousness of the entire English speaking world as is apparent through the way that he uses common themes which appeal to all kinds of people. To first understand the unique genius of Longfellow and the way he created his writings one must learn a little about his life. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was born in Portland Maine; he grew up of modest means and was exposed to the conditions of everyday life. His first major achievement in his literary career was his acceptance to Bowdoin College at the age of 14; he stayed there for a few years and graduated in 1825.

After his graduation he went to further his study in Europe and then came back to America and accepted a position at Bowdoin College teaching as a professor of modern language. After teaching for five years he once again returned to Europe to study and stayed for a year but once he returned he accepted a position at Harvard University and taught there for eighteen years. Many people who have been acquaintances with Longfellow agree that he was "such a thoroughbred gentleman, in his everyday life that even the most timid were at ease in his company" (Moulton 386). While Longfellow was at college he became good friends with a man named Nathaniel

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Hawthorne. Longfellow was not only a gentleman in his social life but was a devoted husband to his two wives, both which ended in tragedy due to their untimely deaths.

Longfellow grew up as your average child of the early nineteenth century with nature surrounding him. He saw the things that happened in everyday life people working and the changing of the seasons. His boyhood was spent mostly in his native town, which he never ceased to love, and whose beautiful surroundings quaint and pure, found its way into some of the main theme of his poems. Even though they varied a little they had the same overtone one of simplicity that any individual that picked up his writings could connect with and understand them. Many of his poems were derived from nature some of them consisted of “ The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls”, “ A Glean of Sunshine” and “ Autumn”.

The next major influence in his poems was the integration of American history, including Indians, the ride of Paul Revere and the life of slaves. The last selection was that of everyday life the lessons, like “ Something Left Undone” and “ The Reaper and the Flowers”. The idea to incorporate common themes, of nature, American history and everyday life was a first and truly appealed to the readers. The subjects of Longfellow’s poetry are, for the most part, aspects of nature as influencing human feeling, either directly or through historical association, the tender or pathetic sides and incidents of life, or heroic deeds preserved in legend or history. He had a special fondness for records of human devotion and self-sacrifice, whether they were monkish legends, Indian tales or bits of American History.

The reason for his choice of such familiar topics was to reach the general public and connect with them. All of the topics which he chose were easy to understand and were common occurrences in people's lives at this time. The choice of topics such as waves in the ocean, a man working and the life of a slave were topics that the people related to and up until this time most poets wrote about European ideas, things that had no relation ship with the people who lived in America. He brought about the topics of Native Americans and their way of life, in the many poems of " Hiawatha". The concept of these poems was to take the reader back into early America and show them what the life of an Indian was like, this captured the reader " With the Song of Hiawatha Mr. Longfellow has broken the silence compelled us to listen once again restored the legends by giving them zest" (Harris 447).

When Longfellow used the topics of Nature in his poems, he connected with the reader and held on to him. He talked about the waves crashing on a beach and the sun shining through the sky in the poem " Milton", when he wrote of these topics he knew that the people would connect for numerous reasons, the most evident are the commonness of the poems and the fact that many people in the world have already seen these events take place, sequentially the readers can relate. Readers response to his new way of writing were astonishing and it made him one of the most revolutionary poets of his time, some called him the father of modern day poetry. By writing poems that soothed and encouraged readers, Longfellow became the first American to reach such a wide range and create an interest in poetry. Many people agree that " The same gentle spirit which characterized his writings showed itself also in the manners of man" (Moulton 384). Longfellow

on many accounts can be credited with the advance of poetry through commonality.

The central thing that set Longfellow apart with his poems was that they “ appeal to the sympathies, and falls within the comprehension of every reader” (Harris 479). The impact from his first poem collection “ Voices of the Night”, achieved him almost immediate popularity among American and soon the whole English speaking world. With poems like “ A Psalm of Life” and “ The Light of Stars” he connected with the reader and they could not wait for more. “ So when storms of wild emotion/ Strike the ocean” (Longfellow 1). The vivid picture that this sentence embodies shows the manner of which Longfellow would write his poems.

He wanted the reader to see and feel the poems not just sit and listen. Throughout his poems Longfellow’s use of imagery is always evident whether talking about the Native Americans or describing nature. “ The poetry of Mr. Longfellow is marked by a very vivid imagination, great susceptibility to the impressions of natural scenery.... and the feelings of the human heart” (Harris 471). This use of imagery allows him to connect with the reader and show him the world.

The setting for his poems were simple, they were of a common place like a work place a house or a forest. This idea for a common place to set his poetry was so that all his readers could relate to the poems. Even though his choice of setting was not extravagant his poems still captivated the world through his vivid description. In the poem “ Milton” Longfellow describes the scene of him walking on the beach “ I pace the sounding sea-beach and

behold / How the voluminous billows roll and run / Upheaving and subsiding,  
while the sun / Shines through their sheeted emerald far unrolled”

(Longfellow 1).

With this description most of the people were able to relate and for this reason, his poems became started a sensation. The subjects in his poems have a deep connection with the story; through this the reader feels an attachment to the story. His way of writing makes it feel as if the story is taking place right in front of your eyes. “ In his lodge beside a river, / Close beside a frozen river, / Sat an old man, sad and lonely.

/White his hair was as a snow-drift; /Dull and low his fire was burning, / And the old man shook and trembled” (Longfellow 1). Through way Longfellow describes a scene makes it life like and in turn captures the reader.

Longfellow uses many key literary elements in his poems to evoke the reader’s response it is said that “ He had a knack for expressing commonplace thoughts very memorably” (Derbyshire 3). The most obvious tool that he used was his natural, masterful gift of rhyme; his poems flowed with ease and made a lasting impression on the reader. One of his most famous poems to use this gift was “ The Song and the Arrow” “ Long, long afterward, in an oak/I found the arrow, still unbroke; / And the song, from beginning to end, /I found again in the heart of a friend” (Longfellow 1).

This use of rhyme so simply captivates the reader and makes him read on.

The second most evident implement that Longfellow uses is meter.

Longfellow was famous for using meters that had never, or hardly ever, been used in English poetry before. In the introduction to “ The Song of Hiawatha”

is one of his most famous examples, using the same metre," Should you ask me,/ whence these stories" (Longfellow 1) for many lines, and all going to prove that there is a reason for this to capture an audience through a new way of writing. Through Longfellow's unique approach to writing that captured the whole English speaking world, it is said that he is one of the most influential writers of the nineteenth century.

He was the first to use native topics about our heritage and things that people of the time can relate to. Not only did his writings captivate the reader's when they first came out, they still do to this day Through the themes which his poems imbed that evokes the feelings of the many readers of his poems it is evident that, no other American poet has so penetrated the general consciousness of the entire English speaking world as apparent through the way he uses common themes which appeal to all kinds of people. Works Cited Derbyshire, John. " In the Bivouac of Life: Longfellow and the Fate of Poetry" Literary Criticism by John Derbyshire.

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