

Longfellow essay



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These are many great poets. Longfellow is one of the few poets that put together novel type works. He created some of the best poetry ever written. Longfellow's narrative poems, such as *Evangeline*, *The Song of Hiawatha*, and *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, gave a romanticized view of America's early history and democratic ideals.

Evangeline is one of the best long poems ever written by any author. Its popularity at through all class distinctions. It was read and loved and pondered over in humble cottages (Wagonknecht P. 85). *Evangeline* was the first long poem in America literature to live beyond its own time, and it would be impossible to exaggerate its vogue, either at home or abroad (Wagonknecht P. 85).

The historical basis of the story was supplied in 1755 by the expulsion of the French settlers from the vicinity of the bay of Minas in Acadie as an incident of the conflict between France and England for possession of the North American continent (Wagonknecht P. 86).

In the poem *Evangeline* they are unable to find Gabriel. *Evangeline's* party arrives at a village and finds Gabriel's father Basil, who tells *Evangeline* that Gabriel had left only the day before with a party going to the Ozark Mountains to trade for moles with the Spaniards. The priest assures her, however, that the party will return to the mission in autumn when the hunting season is over. *Evangeline* decides to accept the priest's advice to await her lover at the mission. But the autumn comes and passes, with no Gabriel, so she again resumes her pursuit (Williams P. 153 & 154).

Gabriel Lajeunesse, in his passivity and elusiveness, is unconsciously fleeing from Evangeline rather than seeking her out. Certainly he is no dominating and aggressive Odysseus, anymore than Evangeline is a merely steadfast and long-waiting Penelope; and the poem, in itself and in the popular imagination, is hers, not Gabriels (Arvin P. 100-101).

Evangeline is nothing if not persistent. It apparently never occurred to the Victorian Longfellow that anyone would question the virtue of a maiden who would voyage for years unchaperoned with the rough men of the frontier and even spend a summer and autumn as the only women in a mission full of men (Williams P. 154). It is what imparts to Evangeline its particular Longfellow character of delicate and rather feminine pathos, and deprives it of the true heroic strain. But pathos of this sort is a genuine poetic effect, and it is felt and expressed so purely, so appropriately, here as to escape the charge of sentimentality (Arvin P. 101-102).

The Song of Hiawatha is one of the few great long poems by Longfellow. Longfellow, in the eyes of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft (1793-1864), ethnologist, explorer, and Indian Agent, who had married a half Ojibway woman, and who would give credit to Longfellow with having, for the time, portrayed the Indian correctly in the literature. Longfellow combined the mythical with the historical and undercut the heroic stature of his characters by presenting them as childlike and immature, not universally human. Sometimes he presented nature as in different to human wants and sometimes as sympathetic (Wagenknecht p. 102 and 96).

Hiawatha is a long and many sided poem, in which readers may be trusted to find their own tastes and interests, but one can hardly believe that many would fail to respond to the famous passages from Hiawatha's childhood in canto 3 (Wagenknecht p. 99). Hiawatha is not born by immaculate conception nor does he spring full-grown from the brow of a god, but he does have a supernatural origin. The beautiful Nokomis, who is a wife, but not a mother, through the act of a jealous rival falls from the moon to a beautiful meadow on earth, where she gives birth to a winsome daughter, Wenonah. Nokomis warned Wenonah against the west wind, but vainly so she bore a son of love and sorrow. Thus was born my Hiawatha. Hiawatha's mother dies deserted by the faithless west wind, and the child of wonder is reared by his grandmother Nokomis until he finds out about his mother and his fickle father. Despite Nokomis' attempt to dissuade him, as he sets out to find his father, and he does. Mudjekeewis welcomes him because he brings back memories of the beautiful Wenonah. After they have talked for days, Hiawatha remembers his quarrel with his father, and they have a prodigious battle, resulting, in a draw, since neither can be killed. Hiawatha then returns to his people with his father's injunction. He pauses only once on the way home, to purchase an arrow from the ancient arrowmaker at the Falls of Minnehaha in the land of the Dakotahs. Here he becomes enamored of the arrow maker's dark-eyed daughter, for whom the falls are named. Thus from this you can see Hiawatha has a supernatural origin (Williams P. 160-161).

The Courtship of Miles Standish is third of four poems in a set. The characterization in The Courtship of Miles Standish is more detailed than in either Evangeline or Hiawatha, and the characters are presented more

realistically and with greater sophistication. Humor appears notably for the first time and the balance is held nicely even between comedy and drama. Standish's problem is that he himself loves Priscilla though he has never told her friends, though he recognizes, that the impossible has been asked of him, he knows too that the name of friendship is sacred, and he has no power to deny what is asked of him in that name. For what came to be called The New England conscience is already well developed in him, and he tries not only to face up to his or deal but to regard it as God's command and sorrow that he has brought upon himself through his own wickedness (Wagonknecht P. 108-109).

Longfellow was not done with the Indians they reappear in the Courtship of Miles Standish, only now they are not legendary prophets and singers, boosters and tricksters, but historical Wampunog Indians, such as the settlers of Plymouth had encountered in all their solid actuality on the shores and in the woods of Massachusetts. The young woman he is in love with is an appreciably stronger character, as Elsie and Evangeline had been. It is true Alder compares Priscilla sentimentally to a Mayflower, Modest and simple and sweet. The Puritan color of the poem is kept up not only by the austere landscape and seascape, but by the constant and always natural recurrence. Longfellow's resolution at a triangular romantic situation in the early days of little pilgrim colony of Plymouth is one of his most perfectly realized poems. (Arvin P. 161-170).

Longfellow wrote many great poems. The three stated here are probably the best ever wrote by this legendary poet. All three poems are well known and read to the day. That makes them great.

Bibliography: