

"WHITTIER!"

Paul Boyles 'NOTION
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1906 - "master of arts".

John Greenleaf Whittier was born in 1807 in Essex County, Massachusetts. His parents were Quakers and their simple, religious customs influenced him to lead an exemplary Christian life. Their training turned him from "the trinity, pleasure, profit, and honor, to take the side of the poor and oppressed." They encouraged his manual labors as well. An ancestor bequeathed to Whittier's uncle, and his descendants, a hive of bees. This was given as a symbol of industry, and Whittier throughout his entire life, lived up to its suggestion. His father looked with favor upon his industrious labors on the farm, but it was from his mother, only, that he received encouragement to seek a good education in order to develop his poetic abilities.

Like Burns, Carlyle, and Defoe, he sprang from a laboring class, and spent his childhood on a farm. He enjoyed the usual sports of a country boy, but was unable to enter into them with average vim and vigor, because of physical weakness, from which he suffered until death. He lived in such close touch with nature that she left a lasting impress on him. In later life when his poetic flame had burst forth to its greatest height, he was able to depict her phases, influences, and beauties, more sincerely and truly than other poets who viewed her workings from afar, without coming into close contact with her. His little cottage was surrounded by trees and so far from others that, as he says in "Snow-bound", he lived where "No church-bell lent its Christian tone." Even at that time with nature as a companion to satisfy his boyish tastes, he yearned for a greater knowledge of things.

His education was scant. Living as far as he did from towns and cities, he had little access to good schools. His formal education was restricted to a few years in a district school, supplemented by

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two in an Academy, yet he was familiar with the literature of which his library consisted, namely, the Bible and Pilgrim's Progress. At a time when his poetic gift was ripe for stimuli he fell in with a copy of Burns' poetry. This marked his first acquaintance with verse. Luckily for him Burns became his model rather than Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, or Keats. For by Burns he was inspired to love things around him, and to refrain from dealing with imaginary things. Of Burns' influence he writes,

"With clearer eyes I saw the worth
Of life among the lowly,
The Bible at his Cotter's hearth
Had made my own more holy."

Burns acted more as a stimulus to his imagination than as a model to be imitated. Although Whittier wrote several dialect poems, mostly humorous, the range of thought may have come from Burns, but the form was imitated from current models. But from Burns he first obtained the idea of the lyric verse, with which he so excellently succeeded.

He had aspirations for a college education, but he realized what a struggle it would be for him to attain such with poor means, so for three years he gave up this as well as his poetry to become a journalist. From the years 1829 to 1860 he divided his time between journalism, abolition, reform, and poetry. It was not until 1860 that he gave up his entire energies to the production of verse. While he was a journalist and politician he spent a busy, active life, and left his quiet, peaceful home to mingle with the noisy crowds of cities. As a journalist he counseled work, and wrote several poems which may be classed under the head, "Songs of Labor" such as "The Ship-builders," "The Shoe-makers," "The Fishermen," and "The Huskers." In each he praises the good, honest, and brave lives led by those who live by the toil of their hands. He contributed matter to his journals both in

prose and in verse. Many of his verses so contributed were merely rhymed editorials. Politics was not neglected. Soon after he became an editor he contributed verses to the Cincinnati American in answer to a charge that Clay and Jackson were making a political deal. In the Review he upheld Webster and Clay, and his editorials were excellent. He was soon compelled to give up this work and return home sick. He loved poetry and considered it holy, but he thought his influence as a politician greater. He wrote to a friend, "I know and feel that

To other chords than mine belong
The breathing of immortal song."

While he was an energetic politician he had the ambition to become a congressman, but failed in his attempt. At a later date when his chances were good, he sacrificed this ambition to lead the stormy life of a reformer.

At this period he was undecided whether to become a writer of prose or verse. His verse written at this time is Byronic in character, rebellious and despairing. This is true of "Moll Pitcher." The witch's revenge, and the despair of the heart-broken girl are Byronic in style. Similar to this is the theme of the "Minstrel Girl," whose despair at her lover's death drove her to religious seclusion. Up to 1832 when he began his life as a reformer and abolitionist he had written only three poems of any value, "The Song of the Vermonters," "The Star of Bethlehem," and "The Vaudois Teacher." The last two appealed to Protestants for both dealt with the spread of the Gospel. The Vaudois has become a classic among the Waldenses. He now gave up all idea of Byronic fame and enlisted as a staunch Abolitionist. He said "I set a higher value on my name as appended to the Anti-Slavery Declaration of 1833 than on the title-page of any book." In upholding his cause he was beset with many disasters and was even mobbed several times. Some one said that while other young poets of his age were making love-ditties to their sweet-hearts, he was facing turbulent

mobs. His appearance as an abolitionist was his second entrance into public life. He served one year in the Massachusetts legislature, but soon gave up his second active career for a quiet home at Amesbury. His political poems occur in collections of anti-slavery verse like "The North Star," "The Liberty Bell" and "Song of the Free." We must be familiar with contemporary history to appreciate his verses on politics, and anti-slavery. Whittier was true to his convictions and risked fame and popularity to express his beliefs. This is seen in Expostulation when he says,

"And shall we scoff at Europe's kings,
When Freedom's fire is dim with us,
And round our country's altar clings
The damning shades of Slavery's curse."

He shows his disregard for public opinion when he lashes the men of his own section for their subserviency, "Yet shame upon them! there they sit,

Men of the North, subdued and still;"

Everything written between 1840 and 1860 was concerning reform. Mogg Megone was typical of the various forces at strife. He did not restrict himself to reform at home, but cheered whoever fought for liberty - intellectual or industrial. In the "Vaudois Teacher" he commemorated the efforts of the Waldenses to be free in their religion, and to disseminate its seeds among the Catholics.

From 1860 to his death in 1892 we find Whittier spending his life as a poet. The subject matter of his poems changes. He no longer writes of stirring events, of abolition or reform, but deals with religion, and his childhood loves. His mind and heart commune with calmer and more spiritual things. When old age and physical weakness seize upon him so strongly, he spends his time visiting friends who for the most part are women. First among them are Mrs. Clarlin and Mrs. Fields. A few others, for he had scores, are Lucy Larcam, Alice and

Phoebe Cary, Celia Thaxter, Mrs. Stowe, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. It is not strange that his circle of friends was restricted to women, for, if we stop to consider, we shall realize that it was the natural consequence of ill-health and his inability to enter into the active life of a man. But in his old age he received visits from prominent men of America, as well as of foreign countries.

Among them were Paul Hamilton, Hayne, Longfellow, Dickens, and Arnold. In 1892, while visiting a friend at Hampton Falls, New Hampshire, he died a calm, quiet death surrounded by friends. He was buried in the village cemetery overlooking the valley he loved. He was the last survivor of the circle that gathered around the hearth of the snow-bound homestead.

In the study of Whittier's verse we find that his poems are mostly written in ballad or lyric form, though his master-piece, "Snow Bound," is an idyl. He is considered the most natural balladist among the American poets. His ballads give a clue to his genius. "Cassandra Southwick" ranks among his strongest. Whittier was well known as a skilled imitator, and in this production he lives up to his reputation by imitating the form of Macaulay's "Battle of Ivry." A colonial tone is maintained throughout. It is a picture of the maiden's temptation to recant, her endurance, her trial, and her victory. A group of the populace, cloaked citizens, and sea-captains stand by cold and grave. The bigoted priest is there too, and arouses Whittier's scorn because he upholds slavery. In the same rank with "Cassandra Southwick" stands "Barclay of Ury." This would be perfect but for the moralizing stanzas at the close.

His ballads deal with various subjects but he succeeds especially well with traditional tales, supernaturalism, and witchcraft. "The Doubleheaded Snake of Newbury" shows his knowledge of the most trivial tradition. This tells of a mysterious snake that was never seen, but which shed yearly a skin that revealed two heads, and caused constant

fear to the maidens, but gave greater zest to the sports of the boys. Even from this he draws a humorous moral. "And, still, whenever husband and wife Publish the shame of their daily strife, The gossips say,-

"Look at the Double Snake!

One in body and two in will,
The Amphisbaena is living still."

He was so familiar with New England life that he knew all legends connected with it. The "Witch's Daughter" reveals the primitive condition of the minds of the early colonists. They still had belief in the evil doings of witches and hanged one through fear of her. Her daughter suffered taunts and persecutions because she was supposed to have inherited from her witch-mother all of the mysterious charms of witchcraft. Her cause was finally championed by a brave New Englander.

His ballads vary in excellence as in kind. Among the best are "Mary Garvin," "Parson Avery," "John Underhill," and "Marguerite." The "Marblehead Skipper" ranks high. In it we find imagination, humor, and dramatic force. The end is stronger than usual. This is remarkable for the absence of one of his most common faults, his inability to stop at the right place. He shows his ingenuity and skill in the choice of words by changing the entire feeling of the poem with the one word "poor."

A balladist should be a good narrator, and this Whittier was. His story-book in verse, the "Tent on the Beach" like Longfellow's "Tales of a Wayside Inn," follows the method of Chaucer. The home tales are the best among them such as "The Wreck of Rivermouth" and "Abraham Davenport". With the exception of a few ballads Whittier's story-book in verse may be said to have been taken from Longfellow's extended work

As Scott influenced him in narrative verse, so Mrs. Hemans stimulated him to make a romantic and lyrical treatment of historical events.

The title of "The Eve of Election" expresses the event he commemorates. He urges the need of prayerful and thoughtful votes in a matter so weighty and of such import to the whole nation as that of election.

"O take me where

Are hearts of prayer,

And foreheads bowed in reverent fear!"

"The Pipes at Lucknow" contains the incident of the siege of Lucknow, held by the Scots when the native troops mutinied.

"Lines" for the Burns festival celebrated the hundredth anniversary of that poet.

In the "Agricultural" and "Horticultural Exhibition at Amesbury" he tells how the orchards and farming lands had been improved since first they were systematically cultivated in the seventeenth century. The entire poem is written in iambic four stressed lines with interwoven rhyme, and has a very musical flow. His lyrics were spiritual messages as well as works of art, and in the closing stanza of this we find a moral, beautifully expressed.

"And soon or late, to all who sow,

The time of harvest shall be given:

The flower shall bloom, the fruit shall grow

If not on earth, at last in heaven!"

In "Telling the Bees" he comes nearer the art of Tennyson and Browning. It is more a lyric than a narrative. We find in it deep feeling delicately expressed, and in the closing stanza the highest degree of pathos.

We rarely ever find Whittier dealing in fanciful or imaginative things, but in "The Sisters," Annie and Rhoda, he gives his fancy full sway.

Though Whittier was a prolific writer and produced verses concerning innumerable things, his main subjects may be included under three heads, Reform, New England life, and Religion.

In regard to the first subject we may say, that in order to carry out his views, for he was an enthusiastic politician, he was in constant fighting, not with arms, but with pen and intellect. During the years of actual fighting between the North and the South little poetry was produced. The three best poems were Whitman's "My Captain," Lowell's "Commemorations," and Whittier's "Barbara Frietchie." The last only is a battle of the conflict, and is a picture of the emotion of the people. Whittier was such an ardent opponent to slavery that in the "Slave-Ships" he exaggerates the cruelty of the slave holders. In "Hunters of Men" he rails out on priest, warrior, and statesman, and scornfully hails them as hunters of men,

"Right merrily hunting the black man, whose sin
Is the curl of his hair and the hue of his skin."

There is a ring of freedom in all of his war verse. In the "Song of the Free" he exclaims,

"Up to our altars, then
Haste we and summon
Courage and loveliness,
Manhood and woman!
Deep let our pledges be:
Freedom forever."

He scorns those who do not oppose slavery. "Ichabod" is written after he learns that Daniel Webster had made a speech in support of compromise and the Fugitive Slave Law. This contains the deepest invective and raillery that Whittier ever gave expression to.

(paraphrase) In "The Lost Occasion," after the death of Webster, he becomes less rigorous in his judgment, and bemoans the fact that Webster did not live longer to see his flag "trampled under the feet of slavery," as he expressed it, and fight for Liberty and Union. Some say that Whittier at a later date believed Webster right, for a compromise would have prevented such a loss of blood, which was repugnant to the

Quakerish belief. But, whether or not he changed his conviction later, his verses will ever remain to express the hatred of scores of people for one who at one time had been their esteemed leader.

The second main topic of his verse is New England life. He was familiar with all of the old traditions told by his elders. "Mogg Megone" is the culmination of his efforts in New England legend, and his efforts to retell the tales of the early settlers. It is written in the style of Scott, but Whittier disliked it because it suggested to him "a big Indian in his war-paints strutting about in Sir Walter Scott's plaids." It revealed the strife between England and France, Catholicism and Protestantism. The main figures are the base frontiersman, the great Sachem, the daring girl who struck so boldly for revenge when she saw her lover's scalp, and lastly the Jesuit plotting for the supremacy of France in America.

Whittier was a child of nature, and it is not strange that he could deal with her familiarly and naturally. Poets hold nature dear when they are displeased with everything else, as Burns, when too well acquainted with the fickle world, and Goldsmith, after years of wandering. But a maker of rural verse should be countrybred. Longfellow's verse was made by an ingenious workman who regarded his themes objectively, and put them to good use. Lowell seems miles above his people. But Whittier seems one of his people, and is truly a poet of the Essex farm. His most vivid scenes lie near the heart, and relate to common life. His noblest and best expression of New England life on a farm is found in "Snow-Found," his masterpiece. His family is bound indoors, as the title would suggest, by the snow of a northern winter. This idyl is of threefold interest. First, because Whittier's life becomes typical of the experiences of all New England. He describes his homestead, his well-sweep, his brook, his family circle and his school-master, yet each is merely a type of all the other brooks, well-sweeps, and school-masters of New England. Secondly, because he gene-

realizes his poetry by emphasizing the human side. He is more interested in the family circle than the beauties of nature outside. Thirdly, because this picture is drawn by an old man, who with his brother remains the sole survivor of that group, the memory of which stands clearer in his mind than more recent events. He recalls fond memories of his father with his tales of wood-craft, and adventure; of his mother at the spinning wheel telling her children stories from Chalkley and Sewell; of his uncle, "innocent of books", but "rich in lore of fields and brooks;" of his aunt, - "The sweetest woman ever Fate

Perverse denied a household mate; of his elder sister," A full, rich, nature, free to trust;" of "our youngest and our dearest;" of the "brisk wielder of the birch and rule

The master of the district school;" lastly, of the strange pilgrim, "A woman tropical, intense,

In thought and act, in soul and sense."

This poem possesses fancy, imagination, and realism. But his boyish fancy and imagination seem natural and not grotesque, as when he says

"The old familiar sights of ours
Took marvelous shapes, strange domes and towers
Rose up where sty or corn-crib stood."

He gives play to his imagination in the following, "The shrieking of the mindless wind

The moaning tree-boughs swaying blind."

He possesses the art of graphic description as is seen when he speaks of the building and lighting of the wood-fire, the hovering family group that "watched the first red blaze appear,

Heard the sharp crackle."

"Snow-bound" is a classic in American literature, and has the same standing in America that Burns' "Cotter's Saturday Night" holds in Scotland. It is a perfect picture of New England home life, written

artistically, simply, and sincerely.

The last themes of his verse are religious and retrospective in character. After his strenuous political life was over, he sank into quiet and calm moods, which he had felt luring and drawing him into themselves for a long time.

"For while he wrought with strenuous will

The work his hands had found to do,

He heard the fitful music still

Of winds that out of dream-land blew."

In respect to religion he held the simple faith of the Quaker. He was broad and liberal minded in his views, scorning bigotry, especially clerical bigotry, of which he exclaims, "Woe to the priesthood! woe to them whose hire is with the price of blood."

In "Questions of Life," his highest intellectual development, he confronts his share of our modern doubts, questioning earth, air, and heaven. But he finds solace and consolation in his faith and "Inward Light." With these weapons he wards off the despair and gloom accompanying doubt. This faith gives tone to all of his productions. He believes in an after life of the good and gifted. We find him saying, "I have friends in spirit-land; not shadows in shadow-land."

In his old age his mind reverts to his childhood days, and we find no better example of his retrospective mood than "Snow-Found!" In his poem "In School-Days" he wanders back to childhood, and beautifully expresses the childish loves of two class mates. "You have written", said Holmes to Whittier, "the most beautiful school-boy poem in the English language."

There is still another subject which Whittier was prone to dwell upon - love. Though he never married he is said to have had his loves, and commemorated them, as well, in verse. A beautiful example of his

love poetry is "My Playmate," of which Tennyson said, "It is a perfect poem; in some of his descriptions of scenery and wild flowers he would rank with Wordsworth." "The Henchman" was written at the request of a young lady who claimed that she had never read a love poem by Whittier. "Memories" is dramatic, and it is thought that behind it some private experience must have stood. "Among the Hills," "Amy Wentworth," and "The Maids of Attitash" are companion pieces of "Maud Muller," one of his best lyrical effusions. "Maud Muller" is written so beautifully and simply that it appeals to everyone and has been considered a miniature classic. He draws from it and its companion-pieces, as he so often does from other poems, a moral. It is, that social standing should be overcome by love.

The chief qualities of Whittier's style are simplicity, sincerity, fluency, rhythm, and force. Of him it may be said "The style is the man," for the simplicity and sincerity of his works reflect faithfully his simple and sincere Quaker life. He wrote, with ease, lines commemorating any event, when inspired by his anti-slavery spirit. A great number of them were temporary and short-lived but Stedman says "His rudest shafts of song were shot true and far and tipped with flame."

He has been criticized for the looseness of his verse, and his tendency to moralize. Many of his verses lack compactness and finish. He wanted the ability to stop at the right place. This looseness is found principally in his anti-slavery verse, which he composed in his enthusiastic moments. In many of his poems as in "Maud Muller," "Amy Wentworth," "Bryant on His Birthday," and "Farclay of Ury," his closing stanzas contain some moral, which oftentimes becomes objectionable, and destroys the whole effect of the poem.

His rhyming is very inaccurate, but this is partly due to his Quaker pronunciation. He makes such rhymes as, "joins" and "pines,"

"faults" and "revolts," "flood" and Hood." He was a natural born lyricist, therefore he determined his rhyme by his ear, and often there are great discrepancies.

He never attempted difficult meters, but was well satisfied with iambic four-stressed lines with alternate rhyme, rhyming couplets, or interwoven rhyme. He was never confident nor well-satisfied with the arrangement of his verse, and would make any change in it, at the slightest suggestion of any one.

There are varying opinions as to the rank of Whittier. By some of the northern critics he is considered a national poet. We of the South call him merely a sectional poet, because he limits the range of his works to New England life. He is too decidedly a Northerner to appeal to anyone of Southern blood. In his war-time verse his slavery poems exaggerate the cruelty to the slaves by their white owners. And in the "Farewell" of a slave mother to her daughter sold into southern bondage, he shows his utter ignorance of the negro race. He gives to the negro mother, such delicate feelings, and bonds of love, as are utterly foreign to their makeup.

Whittier and Longfellow alike appeal to the plain people. Both were simple-minded, though there was a wide difference in their educational advantages. Longfellow had a greater breadth of mind, Whittier a greater intensity. Longfellow possessed more richness of tone, Whittier more sincerity. Whittier's lack of education and intellectual depth bar him from comparison with poets "of intricate art or intricate feeling or intricate thought." He must be classed with poets of simple thought and feeling. He finds an excellent model in Burns. His rank with the first class poets of America is established in the United States, but his popularity with foreign people is doubtful.

Carl Boyler
sources: - Steadman, Burton, Crispenter, and Higginson