

Eccentrics

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Glass Half-Full

By Chloe Lizotte

We have all heard the name Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, even if many of us have never actually read any of his works. Most would probably nonetheless recognize his most famous works in an instant: *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* and *Song of Hiawatha*. But beyond this high-level recognition, who exactly was Henry?

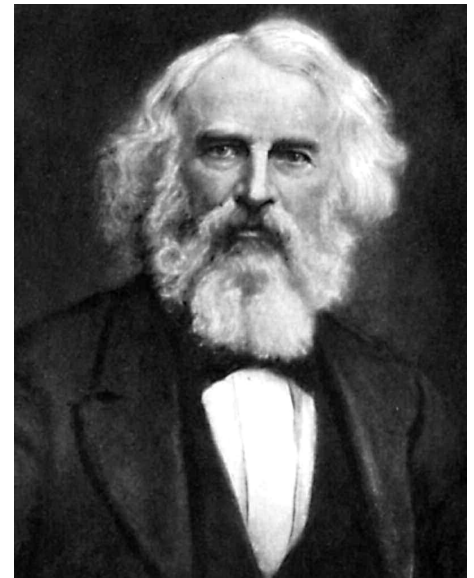
Born in the wilds of Maine, Henry, whose brother Samuel once described him as both “laid-back” and poetic, graduated from Bowdoin College by age 18, a school that his grandfather helped found and where his father was a trustee. In adult life, Henry would return to Bowdoin to teach, especially after it established a modern languages department and asked him to become its first instructor. This experience coupled with his earlier education contributed to an exposure to a wide variety of literature that ultimately influenced his work. Mythology in particular was a huge influence on Henry, enjoying as a boy books by Washington Irving as well as classics like *Don Quixote*.

Though a gifted writer early on, Henry’s literary prowess was not the main reason he became so successful. His writing style, straightforward and easily understood, made it easier for people to connect with his optimistic, glass half-full perspective. Writing style became a vehicle for a peek into Henry’s eccentric, in the sense of supremely positive, frame of mind.

As a result, Henry’s work earned him a place alongside the “Fireside Poets” – a group of highly prestigious American poets thought to be on the same level as poets in England. In those days, poetry wasn’t considered true art unless it emanated from Europe. Thus Henry, along with William Cullen Bryant, John Greenleaf Whittier, James Russell Lowell, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., acquired a special status in America on a par with these more respected poets across the pond.

Henry’s personal life, however, wasn’t quite so successful. He had two wives for starters, both of whom died young. After the death of his first wife Mary Storer Potter (from complications due to a miscarriage), Henry lapsed into a severe depression until he met his second wife, Fanny Appleton. He spent seven years working hard to gain her affection while she resisted his advances every time. But Fanny finally gave in, impressed by his persistence not to mention his early celebrity status. Following their wedding, however, a tragic incident occurred one evening in which sealing wax caught fire and spread to Fanny’s clothing. By the next morning Fanny was dead. At this point, Henry couldn’t bear to face creating original work any longer, turning instead to a translation of Dante that is still regarded very highly to this day.

Although Henry may have been the most adored poet of his time, not everyone appreciated his work.



Transcendentalist writer Margaret Fuller, for one, called Henry’s writings “artificial and imitative,” adding they possessed “little force.” Walt Whitman agreed that Henry tended to imitate other poets though Whitman did admit admiration for Henry’s ability to connect so strongly with his audience. Writer Lewis Mumford may have been Henry’s toughest critic of all, calling his work “totally devoid” of influence, and claiming that if Longfellow were removed from the course of history... no one would even notice!

Few people today would agree with Mumford’s harsh assessment but such indictments do demonstrate how the life of a creative, respected and accomplished writer does will not necessarily ensure happiness. The consolation prize may be that Henry’s literary achievements continue to be read and enjoyed today, some 150 years later, and continue to generate optimism and reflection.

To learn more, visit The Longfellow House & Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts:
<http://www.nps.gov/long/index.htm>

Chloe Lizotte is a student at Concord Carlisle High School '12.