

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Village Blacksmith*

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Under a spreading chestnut-tree
 The village smithy stands;
The smith, a mighty man is he,
 With large and sinewy hands;
And the muscles of his brawny arms
 Are strong as iron bands.

His hair is crisp, and black, and long,
 His face is like the tan;
His brow is wet with honest sweat,
 He earns whate'er he can,
And looks the whole world in the face
 For he owes not any man.

Week in, week out, from morn to night,
 You can hear his bellows blow;
You can hear him swing his heavy sledge,
 With measured beat and slow,
Like a sexton¹ ringing the village bell,
 When the evening sun is low.

And children coming home from school
 Look in at the open door;
They love to see the flaming forge
 And hear the bellows roar,
And catch the burning sparks that fly
 Like chaff from a threshing floor.

He goes on Sunday to the church,
 And sits among his boys;
He hears the parson pray and preach,
 He hears his daughter's voice,
Singing in the village choir,
 And it makes his heart rejoice.

It sounds to him like her mother's voice,
 Singing in paradise!
He needs must think of her once more,
 How in the grave she lies;

¹ See endnotes to Freneau poem.

And with his hard, rough hand he wipes
A tear out of his eyes.

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.

Thanks, thanks to thee my worthy friend,
For the lesson thou hast taught!
Thus at the flaming forge of life
Our fortunes must be wrought;
Thus on its sounding anvil² shaped
Each burning deed and thought.

This ballad³ was written in the fall of 1839 and appeared in 1840 in the Knickerbocker magazine. The inspiration for this poem is commonly believed to have come from the Cambridge smithy, which the poet passed every day as he walked to his position at Harvard College, but Longfellow told his father he wrote it in memory of their seventeenth-century ancestor, Stephen Longfellow, who was a blacksmith. The tree in question was a horse-chestnut tree that was not far away from Longfellow's home in Cambridge. The poem was immensely popular and was routinely memorized by American school children through the 1950s. One of the reasons for its popularity is because of its sympathetic portrayal of an unassuming but moral workman grieving for his wife and taking joy from his work and his family.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was one of the most famous American men of letters and the most widely read poet of his time writing in English. Longfellow was lionized, loved and respected during his lifetime [1807-1882]. Although his reputation waned somewhat during the twentieth century, it has begun to revive in the last decades. It is only a slight exaggeration to refer to Longfellow, as a recent major exhibition in his home state of Maine did, as the man who invented America. His role as a nation builder has begun to be better understood. He played a great role in the prominence of New England as the bearer of Colonial American culture; one of his most famous poems was "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere", in which the famed silversmith spreads the word that the British are coming. In actual fact, many rode out to spread the alarm, but

² An anvil is an iron block on which a blacksmith pounds metal into the desired shape. For other smithy terms, such as bellows, sledge, forge, see notes to the preceding blacksmith poem by Freneau.

³ A ballad is a poetic narrative in stanzas. The language is the language of the common man; it is simple with few or no dependent clauses. Although many ballads have stanzas of four lines with an abab rhyme scheme, Longfellow departs from this format with only lines 2, 4,6, rhyming. It also differs from the traditional ballad in that there is no element of superstition nor is there the traditional dialogue. However, it still has the movement and language of a ballad.

Longfellow's poem made him into a hero of the Revolution. Longfellow wrote the poem on the eve of the Civil War in 1860 as a plea for another great hero to come forth and keep the nation from falling apart. Longfellow had a firm belief in the valuable contributions of Western civilization and contributed much to the movement of Colonial Revivalism that began in the late nineteenth century, a spirit that became very much imbued with historic preservation. This movement saved much of American history and is still popular today, linked as it is with preservation of the environment.

Longfellow's interest in American history was no doubt greatly influenced by the chronicles of his own Puritan ancestors, who came on both sides from England, the Longfellows in 1651 and the Wadsworths, his mother's family, in 1632. Born in Portland, Maine, in 1807, he showed even as a young boy the affection and charm that won him many admirers in later life, as well as the conscientiousness and attention to duty that were hallmarks of his character. He entered Bowdoin College near Portland in 1822, where he continued his interest in the study of poetry. After a year at Harvard, he made his first trip to Europe to study French and German. Such voyages were common among families who could afford them at the time; the young student would spend months in a given area, often attending lectures in the local university and hiring private tutors. It was these experiences that gave him the background he ultimately needed to obtain professorial rank, first at Bowdoin and then at Harvard, where he introduced comparative literature as a field of study.

Questions on the Text [for discussion or writing of short papers]:

1. Is the picture of the blacksmith that Longfellow draws positive or negative? How does the poet characterize him?
2. The significance of the description of the forging activities in the first part of the poem only becomes clear near the end of the poem, with Longfellow's reference to "the burning forge of life." Keeping this last stanza in mind, what effect does Longfellow intend for the detail about the work of the blacksmith in the first part. [forging of character is a daily, life-long process that demands great effort, as does the job of the smith]
3. Why does the poet mention the family of the blacksmith? [to round out the picture of a loving husband and father]

Comparison of Freneau and Longfellow poems on the smith:

Both poems present a positive affirmative picture of the blacksmith, a picture that differs sharply from medieval attitudes towards the smith, yet both writers go about their descriptions in very different ways. Write a short essay comparing and contrasting the ways in which each poet reveals to us the goodness of the smith.

Note on "Magic Lantern" Slides

“Magic Lantern” (“Laterna Magica”) slides were a popular Victorian forerunner of the slide projector. Utilizing an oil lamp and a lens, they projected light onto a screen, through a glass plate, upon which an image had been painted. They were used for a variety of purposes, ranging from entertainment to education and moral instruction.

For recent appraisals of Longfellow’s contribution to the formation of American national identity, please see the following studies:

Longfellow: A Rediscovered Life by Charles C. Calhoun. Beacon Press, Boston, 2004.

Longfellow Redux by Christoph Irmscher. University of Illinois Press: Urbana/Chicago, 2006