

Longfellow's anti slavery attitude in "The Slave's Dream"

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Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was one of the most widely known and best-loved American poets of the 19th century. He achieved a level of national and international prominence previously unequalled in the literary history of the United States and is one of the few American writers honoured in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey—in fact, he is believed to be the first as his bust was installed there in 1884. Poems such as "Paul Revere's Ride," *Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie* (1847), and "A Psalm of Life" were mainstays of primary and secondary school curricula, long remembered by generations of readers who studied them as children. Longfellow's achievements in fictional and nonfictional prose, in a striking variety of poetic forms and modes, and in translation from many European languages resulted in a remarkably productive and influential literary career. His celebrity in his own time, however, has yielded to changing literary tastes and to reactions against the genteel tradition of authorship he represented. Even if time has proved him something less than the master poet he never claimed to be, Longfellow made pioneering contributions to American literary life by exemplifying the possibility of a successful authorial career, by linking American poetry to European traditions beyond England, and by developing a surprisingly wide readership for Romantic poetry.

Born on February 27, 1807, in Portland (while Maine was still a part of Massachusetts), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow grew up in the thriving coastal city he remembered in "My Lost Youth" (1856) for its wharves and woodlands, the ships and sailors from distant lands who sparked his boyish imagination, and the historical associations of its old fort and an 1813 offshore naval battle between American and British brigs. Erudite and fluent in many languages, Longfellow was endlessly fascinated with the byways of history and the curiosities of the legend. His many poems on literary themes, such as his moving homage to Dante and Chaucer, his verse translations from Lope de Vega, Heinrich Heine, Michaelangelo and his verse dramas, notably *The New England Tragedies* are remarkable in their range and style. *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) is his remarkable work. *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1858) is his another notable work. *The Tales of a Wayside Inn*, modelled roughly on Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* reveals his narrative craftsmanship. The first poem *Paul Revere's Ride* became a national favourite. *A Psalm of Life*, *Evangeline*, *The Children's Hour*, *The Village Blacksmith* offer the readers to taste the different flavours of poetry.

His poetic career has offered the readers a variety of range and the poem *A Slave's Dream* reminds the readers of his other poems based on slavery such as *The Quadroon Girl*, *The Slave in the Dismal Swamp*, *The Slave Singing at Midnight*, *The Witnesses*, *The Good Part, That Shall Not be Taken Away*. He wrote against slavery, he was highly moved by the horrendous life of the slaves of Africa. Dana Longfellow, Henry's grandson, has later cited one of his grandfather's desire from the age of 17 to do something for the great cause of Negro emancipation. This desire was rekindled by Dickens in England. Freiligrath did the same thing in Germany. Henry had association with these two and it worked as a stimulant to

further continue his anti-slavery poems. In 1842, in his European tour Longfellow met Ferdinand Freiligrath, the German revolutionary poet and translator of his works into German. Freiligrath had a strong opposition to slavery and he already expressed that in his works. Longfellow met Charles Dickens in the same year. Dickens' anti slavery attitude has already been expressed in his many works which include novels like David Copperfield. Longfellow was highly influenced by Dickens' manuscript of *American Notes*. There was a separate chapter on slavery. On the request of Charles Sumner, Henry agreed to write poems on slavery to express his anti-slavery attitude. According to the poet and revolutionist John Greenleaf Whittier, Longfellow's poems on slavery is an important service to liberty movement.

Poems on slavery appeared on 1842. The eight poems included Top William E.Channing, The Slave's Dream, The Good Part, The Slave in the Dismal Swamp, The Slave Singing at Midnight, The Witness, the Quadroon Girl and the Warning. Several factors influenced Longfellow in writing these poems. As a youth he read Benjamin Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation* in his father's library. As a Unitarian he believed in the essential goodness in man and in the capacity of Christianity to help the human beings. In his letter to Freiligrath, Longfellow has acknowledged the fact that in *The Slave's Dream* he has borrowed one or two wild animals from Freiligrath's menagerie. The poems are sentimental in tone, rhetorical in style, they are little more than tracts in verse. The volume is dedicated to William E. Channing and commends him for his book, *Slavery*,

The pages of thy book I read,
And as I closed each one
My heart, responding, ever said,
Servant of God! Well done!

The Slave's dream and *The Slave in the Dismal Swamp* are picture poems which sentimentalize the Negro. *The Slave's Dream* recounts the vision of a slave as he lies asleep in a rice field. He recalls his native land where he was a king with a wife and children. He sees flamingos, lions and hyena. He smiles and feels

He did not feel the driver's whip
Nor the burning heat of day:
For death had illumined the land of sleep
And his lifeless body lay
A worn-out fetter that the soul
Had broken and thrown away.

In reference to this it can be pointed out that *The Slave in the Dismal Swamp* describes a “hunted Negro” cringing like a wild beast while he listens to the distant baying of pursuing hounds. “A poor old slave, infirm and lame”, the Negro bears the curse of Cain. Robert Morrison believed that Longfellow modelled this poem after Thomas Moore’s *The Lake of Dismal Swamp*.

The Slave’s Dream narrates the story of the slave who, one day, felt exhausted and unconscious with his sickle and in his dream he sees his native land. In his dream he is no more bound to the shackles of slavery. The slave is so moved by this dream that he hears the tinkle of caravans coming down the mountain road. The powerful images mentioned in the poem shake him in his sleep and he smiles at their expression of freedom. Was it a waking dream ? This is the question which recurs in the minds of the readers who feel the oneness with the slave, who could feel their pain.

References

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