

A Short Biography of John Greenleaf Whittier

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John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1893) was well known, in both England and the U.S., in the nineteenth century as an American poet. He was also famous as a prominent abolitionist, a journalist, writer, and humanitarian ("John"). His fame during his lifetime was such that his eightieth birthday was hailed as a national event (Iannone 132). The following examination of Whittier's life offers the principal facts of his biography, describing his achievements, and also presents the defining characteristic of his poetry.

Whittier was born on December 17, 1807 to a Quaker family that earned its living by farming. He was second child, but the first son, born to John and Abigail Whittier (Curtis). He received little in formal education. However, he attended a local school and was enrolled for two semesters in the Haverhill Academy (Curtis). This was where he developed a love for British poetry and was subsequently highly influenced by the lyrical approach of Robert Burns, who was Scottish, to describing rural life ("John"). Scholarship divides Whittier's life into four distinct periods, which are differentiated by his principal focus during these periods. From 1826 to 1832, Whittier focused on his poetry and he was also a journalist. From 1833-1842, he was preoccupied by the abolitionist cause. He was a writer and a humanitarian from 1843-64 and from 1866-1892, his focus was on creating Quaker poetry ("John").

At the age of 19, Whittier submitted a poem, "The Exile's Departure," to William Lloyd Garrison, the noted abolitionist and it was published in Garrison's *Newburyport Free Press* ("John"). Garrison encouraged the young poet and they became friends and fellow colleagues in the abolitionist movement ("John"). Whittier's interest turned to

journalism and he edited newspaper in both Boston and his hometown of Haverhill, Massachusetts ("John"). He went on to become editor of the *New England Weekly Review*, which was published in Hartford, Connecticut and this publication was considered to be the most significant Whig journal in New England ("John"). During this period of this life, Whittier also wrote "verse, sketches and tales" and his first volume of poetry, *Legends of New England*, was published in 1831 ("John"). In 1832, Whittier experienced ill health and a failed romantic relationship. He was also discouraged over not receiving literary recognition and these factors combined to discourage him to the extent that he resigned as editor and returned to Haverhill ("John").

Whittier was hopelessly in love with his distant cousin and fellow schoolmate, Mary Emerson Smith (Pickard 478). Letters that he wrote to Smith over the course of four years, from May 1829 to March 1833, demonstrate that Whittier felt a continuing attraction to Smith, despite her rejection of him as a suitor (Pickard 478). When he wrote the first letter to Smith, he was recovering from an attachment to Evelina Bray. However, his letter show that Whittier remained hopeful and committed to his affection for Smith until the time of her marriage, which coincided with his intense focus on the abolitionist cause (Pickard 478).

Whittier concluded that the setbacks he had suffered were caused by his personal vanity and he resolved to devote himself to altruistic activities, which led to him embracing abolitionism ("John"). He soon became prominent in this movement, primarily due to the effect of his antislavery pamphlet, *Justice and Expediency* ("John"). Over the course of the next decade, Whittier was abolition's most influential writer.

Through Garrison's publication, *The Liberator*, Whittier the imagery and doctrine of Christianity to motivate his readers to reject the

"sins promulgated by the government and the social majority" (Stratman 81). He also served a "term in the Massachusetts legislation, spoke at antislavery meetings and edited the *Pennsylvania Freeman* (1838-40)," which was located in Philadelphia ("John"). In 1840, he moved to Amesbury with his mother, aunt and sister ("John").

Whittier broke off relations with Garrison in 1842, as he believed that slavery could be ended using the political process, rather than through the radicalism that Garrison favored (Iannone 132). It was during the subsequent years that he became more active in literature ("John"). During the succeeding two decades, Whittier's poetry matured and he published several volumes of verse ("John"). The grief he experienced when his mother and "beloved younger sister" died, as well as the trauma of the Civil War, added to his development of his literary maturity ("John"). His poetry became more reflective, as he focused on the experience of personal loss, as well as the "potential for recovery and redemption," which became prominent themes in his verse (Iannone 133). At this point in his career, Whittier moved away from the "war on wrong," as he termed it in the preface to his verse collection *The Tend on the Beach*, which was published in 1867 (Iannone 133). His focus shifted towards writing verse drew upon experience and inspiration (Iannone 133).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Whittier never expressed regret that he had devoted so much of his early career to the Abolitionist movement. In a letter to E.L. Godkin, who was editor of the *Nation*, that he grateful to God that he was called early on to direct his "attention to the great interests of humanity," which saved him from the "poor ambitions and miserable jealousies of a selfish pursuit of literary reputation" (Iannone 133).

The Civil War created "tension between the Abolitionist and the Quaker within Whittier" (Stratman 82). In his 1846 poem "At Washington," readers recognize the pain evident in Whittier's verse, as he endeavors to warn the people of the doom that was looming on the national horizon due to the volatile issues of slavery (Stratman 83). It is indicative of Whittier's Quakerism and his approach to the deep emotions that compelled this conflict, that the decade prior to the war, during the war and afterward, his friendship with Southern writer Paul Hamilton Hayne never faltered (Griffin 41).

In 1866, his most acclaimed and best-known poem, *Snow-Bound: A Winter Idyll* was published. This poem illustrates the frequent literary allusions that were part of Whittier's verse. For example, in line 537 of *Snow-Bound*, Whittier includes a reference to St. Catherine of Siena and the juxtaposition of this reference to "'Petruccio's Kate,' in line 536," an allusion to Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, is clearly intended for comedic effect (Jordan 18). At this point in the poem, Whittier is chastising, as well as ridiculing and criticizing, Harriet Livermore for having a violent temper, so this reference to Shakespeare's fiery heroine is quite apt.

Harriet is not a member of the "'white wizards' circle,'" which constitutes the Whittier household, therefore, the "civilizing influence of the fire does not reach her," and there is a "coldness" about her that does not respond to the "love and religious discipline" of the family (Jordan 19). The reference to St. Catherine of Siena is also apt, as she is patron saint for the "prevention of fires" (Jordan 19). Harriet's coldness, which threatens to extinguish the love that the Holy Spirit provides for the Whittier family is analogous to the way in which St. Catherine extinguish fires for those who call on her in prayers (Jordan 19).

In addition to Harriet, another force that provides literary allusions within the poem is the North Wind. In the "Renaissance tradition of the Four Seasons," the North Wind was linked to winter and the image of an old man, who was symbolic of aging and death (Jordan 19). Whittier uses the North Wind, in line 176, to symbolize the "night that wraps Whittier's household in sleep," and engenders Whittier's lament in regards to the loss of his family members, which he reasons will be remedied via reunion with them, "somehow, somewhere" (Jordan 19).

As this illustrates, the two most prevalent symbols in *Snow-Bound*, which are wind and fire, draw specifically on an allusion to St. Catherine of Siena, "a woman of mystic passion," who had a "burning heart," but also the patron-saint for extinguishing fires (Jordan 19). The North Wind, similarly, not only symbolizes the cold of winter, but also symbolizes both death and the promise of the hereafter (Jordan 19).

Whittier outgrew the Romantic verse that he wrote in imitation of Robert Burns and became an "eloquent advocate for justice, tolerance and liberal humanitarianism" ("John"). His exemplary values and the loftiness of his spirituality "earned him the title of 'America's finest religious poet'" ("John"). Contemporary critics consider Whittier's poetry to be frequently "marred by sentimentality, poor technique and excessive preaching," but, nevertheless, his finest poems continue to convey a "moral beauty" and are appreciated for their "simple sentiments" ("John").

Desmond Powell points out that, with the sole exception of a handful of left-wing critics who praise Whittier as a "propagandist," contemporary American critics have afford Whittier "less than his due" (Powell 335). Howard Mumford Jones, writing in the first-half of the twentieth century, opined that Whittier, "'Like Longfellow...is read by the children, and his fame is therefore secure'" (Powell 335). However, his

ultimate opinion of Whittier is that he will be considered to be "minor sectional poet" (Powell 335).

Powell points out that while it is true that Whittier is required reading in public schools, this does not mean that he should be considered a "children's poet" (Powell 335). However, Powell also acknowledges that it is also true that Whittier is a "minor poet," as "the intensity, the mastery, the opulence of major poets is not his" (Powell 335).

In cataloging the numerous negative aspects of Whittier's verse, Powell points out that Whittier had a habit of writing "jogging verse," and also that he did not have the discernment to recognize when he had written a poor stanza, even when it occurred between two good ones (Powell 336). Additionally, Whittier routinely would spoil a poem by attaching a moral to the end (Powell 336).

Nevertheless, Whittier's verse also demonstrated positive features, as he, like Longfellow, knew how to include the features popular with the public and, thereby, energize his work. He also relied on what he knew to be true, even if he could not express this truth readily in terms of beauty (Powell 336). In this regard, Whittier's nature poetry provides good examples of his achievements. *Snow-Bound*, for example, provides an excellent example of Whittier's ability to etch a memorable scene in black-and-white (Powell 336). The images in this poem are striking, as Whittier describes a "sharp ravine cutting the expanse of snow, the ducks' black squadron lying beneath the gray November Cloud" or the "cat's dark silhouette crouching on the wall" (Powell 336).

Powell asserts that the study of Whittier is primarily a study of the poet's limitations and that, when people think of Whittier, they consider his mature years, when he was a "quiet old Quaker" with white whiskers, walking the country around Amesbury, rather than the "ardent

young abolitionist," which Whittier was when he was in his thirties (Powell 337). However, it is nevertheless true that there was heroism in Whittier's life, as he fought long and hard for the cause of abolition, suffering defamation of his name and ridicule. At one point, his office was sacked and burned by a mob, yet he continued to fight for this cause.

Nevertheless, he was never able to translate his dedication to this cause, except "for a few feeble successes" among his anti-slavery poetry, into literature (Powell 337-338). This was largely due to Whittier's inability to evaluate his own work properly. Powell writes that he could "challenge injustice, but he could not challenge untruth" nor could he "even perceive it" (Powell 338).

Whittier's basic philosophy towards his verse was that "poetry should be something plaintive and sweet which would charm the world away from its memory of bitter things" (Powell 338). This feature of Whittier's belief system indicates why he loved the work of Spencer and Sidney, as these poets, like Whittier, lived in a "drew world of their own" (Powell 338). This characteristic also explains another failing, which was Whittier's deficiency in regards to making his characters convincing (Powell 338).

Snow-Bound demonstrates that Whittier had the skill necessary to tell a convincing story and also create convincing characters, when he did not become overly obsessed with creating a romantic atmosphere, but, particularly in regards to his ballads, his goal was to escape from reality and his focus was on creating images that were soothing rather than portraying images or people that resembled reality (Powell 338).

This is also why so many of Whittier's anti-slavery poems fail to interest or move contemporary readers. However, the "wrath and indignation" that Whittier obviously felt are missing in all but a few

notable exceptions, such as "To a Southern Statesman" (Powell 339). The argument that is often presented, which is that his nature poetry "contains too much nature and too little Whittier," is—unfortunately—quite just (Powell 339). However, it is also true that Whittier was not cold, as he was not a "man who lacks fire," but rather he was a man "who banks it" (Powell 339).

In conclusion, the evaluation of Whittier as a minor poet is not unjust, as there are numerous limitations to his body of work. However, Whittier's verse and his writing in general also show his considerable gifts as a poet and a writer. A man of passion, who was restrained by his religious and literary views from exposing his emotions in his verse, his talent nevertheless shines forth in many of his poems, reminding contemporary readers of why Whittier's fame rivaled that of Longfellow.

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