

“Hope” is the thing with feathers - (314)

EMILY DICKINSON

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

An Introduction to Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 in Massachusetts. Although she was very close to her father and siblings, she rarely left her house and had very few visitors. By the 1860s, Dickinson lived in almost complete isolation from the outside world but still maintained some relationships through letters. It is only after her death that her poetry was discovered and published. Since their publication, Dickinson has become recognized as one of the strongest voices in American poetry.

Themes of Dickinson's Poetry

Because Emily Dickinson lived much of her life inside, her poetry focuses on her inner struggles. Throughout her poems, she questions God and writes of her own struggles with faith, particularly in her sufferings. In addition, her poems also focus on her confusion with self-identity. Though she lives alone, she becomes someone through her writing. However, if no one is reading the poems, is she really a person?

Dickinson often feels imprisoned in her own body. Furthermore, Dickinson often relates this question of self to her questions of God. What role does God play in defining self? What situations does He create for people?

Finally, Dickinson often writes on the power of words. The strongest voice Dickinson has is her own; however, this voice is really only seen in her poetry. Poetry becomes her language and her way to communicate with the outside world. She also shows a strong relationship between nature and her poetry. Often times, nature becomes a symbol in her writing to explain the complexity of her relationships.

Writing Style

Dickinson's poems are usually **lyrics**, short poems with a single speaker who expresses thoughts and feelings. Although the poems are usually written with 'I,' this does not mean it represents Dickinson, just the speaker of the poem. Many of Dickinson's poems do not have titles but are now recognized by the first few lines of the poem. Finally, she usually follows a specific writing pattern, **common meter**, which is alternating lines of eight syllables and then six syllables. It is important while reading her poems to listen to the syllables and accented words to find the pattern.

An Introduction to the poem

Emily Dickinson's poem '*Hope is the Thing with Feathers*' is perceived to have been published circa 1861. It was published posthumously as *Poems by Emily Dickinson* in her second collection by her sister. Emily uses *hope*, an abstract entity holding human spirits tightly, maneuvering their desire, trust, and spirits with its utter relentlessness. For her, hope can be signified as a bird, almost a living entity as humans.

The narrator perceives hope a-la a bird that resides inside humans. It persists dutifully without a break, singing constantly. Using metaphor, she emphasizes it sings vigorously during a hurricane, requiring a heavy storm to lay the bird in peace. As per the speaker, this bird never wavers by her side in coldest of lands and strangest of seas, yet it never demanded a bread crumb, singing away merrily.

Poetic Form of *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*

As is the case with Emily Dickinson's poems, '*Hope is the Thing with Feathers*' employs an iambic trimeter which uses a fourth stress at each line's end 'And sings the tune without the words'. As her poetic trait, the rhythmic flow is modified and broken using dashes and breaks such as 'And never stops-at-all'. In the case of stanzas, the verses of Emily Dickinson employs A-B-C-B scheme, whereas in '*Hope*' is the thing with feathers often uses carryover rhyming words for instance *heard*, *extremity*, and *bird* rhyme within their respective stanza. As a result, this forms the A-B-B-B rhyme scheme.

Poetic Structure of *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*

Rhyming and Techniques

Using approximate rhyme and quatrain, Emily successfully weaves a compelling poem. The rhyming scheme used is a-b-c-b is an erratic one. Each second and fourth are rhyming automatically. In case of second stanza, using rhyming scheme a-b-a-b, first and third verses rhyme with each other as does fourth and second. In concluding stanza, rhyming scheme is a-b-b-b, as per which, second, third and fourth verses rhyme.

Rhythm

Using erratic punctuation is a key constituent of her poem. Using many dashes and hyphens in order to break and modify the flow of poetic rhythm is commonplace here. It's done to give breaks and pauses while reading the poem. The rhythmic flow follows an iambic trimeter, accommodating the fourth stress as well.

Repetition

Emily uses 'that' and 'and' during the entirety of 'Hope is the Thing with Feathers'. Emily has used 'And' is used five times in the poem, showing the flip-flopping nature of humans.

Comparison

The poet has made use of personification and metaphor in this poem. As hope is an inanimate object, therefore it is referred to as bird/ thing with feathers. Dickinson gives hope some wings so as to keep it alive in human hearts.

Stanza wise analysis of the poem

Stanza One

That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune—without
the words, And never stops at
all,

Emily Dickinson is an expert employer of metaphors, as she uses the small bird to convey her message, indicating that hope burns in harshest of storms, coldest of winds, and in unknown of seas for that matter, yet it never demands in return. It persists continuously within us, keeping us alive.

In the case of the first stanza, the narrator feels that hope can be deemed as a bird with feathers, singing in its own tune merrily. It may not speak any specific language, yet it's certainly present within human souls. Just as importantly, Emily Dickinson voices that hope is an eternal spring, as it's a vital constituent of human beings, enabling us to conquer uncharted territories.

Stanza Two

And sweetest in the gale
is heard; And sore must
be the storm
That could abash the
little bird That kept so
many warm.

In case of second stanza, the poetess elucidates the expansive power hope wields over us. It gets merrier and sweeter as the storm gets mightier and relentless. The poetess

deems that no storm can sway hope and its adamant attitude. According to the poetess, it would take a deadly storm of astronomical proportions to flatten the bird of hope that has kept the ship sailing for most men.

Stanza Three

I've heard it in the
chillest land, And on the
strangest sea;
Yet, never, in
extremity, It
asked a crumb of
me.

In the last stanza, Emily Dickinson concludes her poem by stressing that hope retains its clarity and tensile strength in harshest of conditions, yet it never demands in return for its valiant services. Hope is inherently powerful and certainly needs no polishing, as it steers the ship from one storm to another with efficacy.

The metaphorical aspect of '*Hope is the Thing with Feathers*' is an old practice, used by well-known poets, the small bird represents hope in this poem. When abstract concepts are under study such as death, love and hope, they are often represented by an object from nature, in this case, the bird.

Historical Context

Being a globally renowned poet of her time, Emily Dickinson lived quite a prosaic life. During years of *American Civil War* when Walt Whitman (contemporary American legend himself) tended to the wounded and addressing American themes; at a time when war had brought poverty and pain with Abraham Lincoln getting assassinated in the process, American years were tumultuous, to say the least, yet Emily Dickinson lived far from the madding crowd in Amherst, Massachusetts. She was born in the same house and met her demise there as well. The popular myth being that Emily was a literary hermit-genius, she was active in social circles and adored human interaction company. Moreover, her travels were limited to her countryside and native town, evidenced by her poetry which remains aloof of political connotations/ commentary altogether.

Lastly, Emily Dickinson hardly ever published her massive stock of 1800 poems, succumbing to depths of obliviousness. Only her sister stumbled upon the prolific collection and took the liberty to publish the massive literary work.

Whereas Walt Whitman adored and eulogized Lincoln as his political champion, Emily was known as the poetess of inwardness. Reading her poetic collection can indicate almost zero evidence of the timeline she lived in.

'Hope is the Thing with Feathers' is a beautiful metaphorically driven poem, using the bird in her usual homiletic style, inspired from religious poems and Psalms for that matter. Introducing her metaphorical device (the bird), and further elucidates its purpose of existence. Hope, according to Emily Dickinson is the sole abstract entity weathering storms after storms, bypassing hardships with eventual steadiness. It remains unabashed in harshest of human conditions and circumstances, enabling a thicker skin on men.

Just Lost, When I Was Saved!



— Emily Dickinson

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Just lost, when I was saved!
Just felt the world go by!
Just girt me for the onset with Eternity,
When breath blew back,
And on the other side
I heard recede the disappointed tide!

Therefore, as One returned, I feel
Odd secrets of the line to tell!
Some Sailor, skirting foreign shores—
Some pale Reporter, from the awful doors
Before the Seal!

Next time, to stay!
Next time, the things to see
By Ear unheard,
Unscrutinized by Eye—

Next time, to tarry,
While the Ages steal—
Slow tramp the Centuries,
And the Cycles wheel!

Theme of death in Emily Dickinson's poem

Even a modest selection of Emily Dickinson's poems reveals that death is her principal subject; in fact, because the topic is related to many of her other concerns, it is difficult to say how many of her poems concentrate on death. But over half of them, at least partly, and about a third centrally, feature it. Most of these poems also touch on the subject of religion, although she did write about religion without mentioning death. Other nineteenth-century poets, Keats and Whitman are good examples, were also death-haunted, but few as much as Emily Dickinson. Life in a small New England town in Dickinson's time contained a high mortality rate for young people; as a result, there were frequent death-scenes in homes, and this factor contributed to her preoccupation with death, as well as her withdrawal from the world, her anguish over her lack of romantic love, and her doubts about fulfilment beyond the grave. Years ago, Emily Dickinson's interest in death was often criticized as being morbid, but in our time readers tend to be impressed by her sensitive and imaginative handling of this painful subject.

Her poems centering on death and religion can be divided into four categories: those focusing on death as possible extinction, those dramatizing the question of whether the soul survives death, those asserting a firm faith in immortality, and those directly treating God's concern with people's lives and destinies.

Dickinson wrote this poem between 1860 and 1862, if one accepts the Johnson chronology. Her sister included it among the small selection of poems published after the poet's death. It appears that the title "Called Back" was appended based on a note the poet had written to her cousins on the day before her death. Perhaps she was inspired by the sudden conviction she was recovering that affects many terminally ill people, or (equally likely) she did not want her cousins to worry. In any event, she wrote, "Little cousins,—Called Back. Emily."

In the early poem "Just lost, when I was saved!" (160), Emily Dickinson expresses joyful assurance of immortality by dramatizing her regret about a return to life after she — or an imagined speaker — almost died and received many vivid and thrilling hints about a world beyond death. Each of the first three lines makes a pronouncement about the false joy of being saved from a death which is actually desirable. Her real joy lay in her brief contact with eternity. When she recovers her life, she hears the realm of eternity express disappointment, for it shared her true joy in her having almost arrived there. The second stanza reveals her awe of the realm which she skirted, the adventure being represented in metaphors of sailing, sea, and shore. As a "pale reporter," she is weak from illness and able to give only a vague description of what lies beyond the seals of heaven. In the third and fourth stanzas, she declares in chanted prayer that when next she approaches eternity she wants to stay and witness in detail everything which she has only glimpsed. The last three lines are a celebration of the timelessness of eternity. She uses the image of the ponderous movements of vast amounts of earthly time to emphasize that her happy eternity lasts even longer — it lasts forever.

A ship metaphor serves to describe a brush with death. The poet had just been preparing herself for the “onset with Eternity” when a lucky wind blew her boat back to safety. She begins the poem with the interesting contrast of “lost” with “saved” and here “lost” means loss of hope of living and “saved” means rescued. That would seem conventional enough until you stop to think that in the religious milieu of 1860 Amherst “lost” and “saved” have very particular meanings. To be saved is to be saved from eternal damnation and to be lost is to be lost from hope of heaven. Yet in this poem the poet in her little boat is saved from going to “foreign shores” that do not seem at all like the shores of hell. The shores seem more like Paradise and Paradise seems to want the poet, in fact is “disappointed” that she returns to earthly shores.

The speaker has the lingering unearthly feeling expressed by many who have nearly died. She feels like a reporter come back with news of some amazing place, or a sailor who has glimpsed exotic lands. And although she experienced a sense of awe and maybe even dread by seeing “the awful doors” that guard the “Seal” between life and death, she is eager to meet death when her time comes.

Like an intrepid explorer, she looks forward – in due time! – to experiencing something that eyes and ears have never encountered, to “tarry” there for “Ages” while the “Centuries” slowly “tramp” by. The wheeling “Cycles” might be a tip of the hat to the Eastern, Vedic, thought just making its way into American discourse via, among others, Emerson and Thoreau, both of whom Dickinson read deeply and frequently.

Rather than employing a somber or reflective tone, Dickinson writes with the excitement of a great encounter. The first two words, “Just lost” are equally emphasized and function as an exclamation. The next two lines repeat the “Just ...” construction to underscore the immediacy of the event. The poem is sprinkled with exclamation marks and rushes headlong through the account until the last stanza. There, the word “tarry” signals a tarrying and slowing down, certainly of time but also of poetic pace. “Slow tramp the Centuries” is a much slower line than, say, “Next time, to stay!” The pace picks up again in the last line where “Cycles wheel” as if time were a flock of seagulls swirling overhead.

Home Burial

ROBERT FROST

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
She took a doubtful step and then undid it
To raise herself and look again. He spoke
Advancing toward her: 'What is it you see
From up there always—for I want to know.'
She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
And her face changed from terrified to dull.
He said to gain time: 'What is it you see,'
Mounting until she cowered under him.
'I will find out now—you must tell me, dear.'
She, in her place, refused him any help
With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
Blind creature; and awhile he didn't see.
But at last he murmured, 'Oh,' and again, 'Oh.'

'What is it—what?' she said.

'Just that I see.'

'You don't,' she challenged. 'Tell me what it is.'

'The wonder is I didn't see at once.
I never noticed it from here before.
I must be wonted to it—that's the reason.
The little graveyard where my people are!
So small the window frames the whole of it.
Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?
There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
On the sidehill. We haven't to mind *those*.
But I understand: it is not the stones,
But the child's mound—'

'Don't, don't, don't, don't,' she cried.

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;
And turned on him with such a daunting look,
He said twice over before he knew himself:
'Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?'

'Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air.'

I don't know rightly whether any man can.'

'Amy! Don't go to someone else this time.
Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs.'
He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.
'There's something I should like to ask you, dear.'

'You don't know how to ask it.'

'Help me, then.'

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

'My words are nearly always an offense.
I don't know how to speak of anything
So as to please you. But I might be taught
I should suppose. I can't say I see how.
A man must partly give up being a man
With women-folk. We could have some arrangement
By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off
Anything special you're a-mind to name.
Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.
Two that don't love can't live together without them.
But two that do can't live together with them.'
She moved the latch a little. 'Don't—don't go.
Don't carry it to someone else this time.
Tell me about it if it's something human.
Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.
I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
What was it brought you up to think it the thing
To take your mother-loss of a first child
So inconsolably—in the face of love.
You'd think his memory might be satisfied—'

'There you go sneering now!'

'I'm not, I'm not!

You make me angry. I'll come down to you.
God, what a woman! And it's come to this,
A man can't speak of his own child that's dead.'

'You can't because you don't know how to speak.
If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;
I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.'

I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.
Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,
But I went near to see with my own eyes.
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns.
You had stood the spade up against the wall
Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.'

'I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.
I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed.'

'I can repeat the very words you were saying:
"Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build."
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
What had how long it takes a birch to rot
To do with what was in the darkened parlor?
You *couldn't* care! The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all.
No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone, and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!'

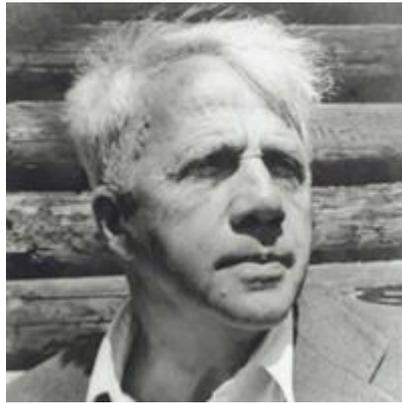
'There, you have said it all and you feel better.
You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door.
The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up.
Amy! There's someone coming down the road!'

'*You*—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—'

'If—you—do!' She was opening the door wider.
'Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.
I'll follow and bring you back by force. I *will!*—'

A Critical Analysis of “Home Burial”

This dramatic poem 'Home Burial' was written and published in 1914. In this dramatic narrative Frost has depicted a critical situation arising between husband and wife over the death of their son. There is the drama of social adjustment in human relationship. The son dies. This breaks the wife completely. She is standing at the top of the staircase and peeps through the window and sees that her husband is digging the grave of the child. On returning home, he talks of daily concerns.



Robert Frost (1874-1963)

Summary

The poem presents a few moments of charged dialogue in a strained relationship between a rural husband and wife who have lost a child. The woman is distraught after catching sight of the child’s grave through the window—and more so when her husband doesn’t immediately recognize the cause of her distress. She tries to leave the house; he importunes her to stay, for once, and share her grief with him—to give him a chance. He doesn’t understand what it is he does that offends her or why she should grieve outwardly so long. She resents him deeply for his composure, what she sees as his hard-heartedness. She vents some of her anger and frustration, and he receives it, but the distance between them remains. She opens the door to leave, as he calls after her.

Form

This is a dramatic lyric—“dramatic” in that, like traditional drama; it presents a continuous scene and employs primarily dialogue rather than narrative or description. It is dramatic, too, in its subject matter—“dramatic” in the sense of “emotional” or “tense.” Form fits content well in this poem: One can easily imagine two actors onstage portraying this brief, charged scene. Rhythmically, Frost approaches pure speech—and some lines, taken out of context, sound as prosaic as anything. For example, line 62: “I do think, though, you overdo it a little.” Generally, there are five stressed syllables per line, although (as in line 62), they are not always easy to scan with certainty. Stanza breaks occur where quoted speech ends or begins.

Pay special attention to the tone, vocabulary, and phrasing of the dialogue. At the time of “Home Burial’s publication, it represented a truly new poetic genre: an extended dramatic

exercise in the natural speech rhythms of a region's people, from the mouths of common, yet vivid, characters.

"Home Burial" is one of Frost's most overtly sad poems. There are at least two tragedies here: the death of a child, which antecedes the poem, and the collapse of a marriage, which the poem foreshadows. "Home Burial" is about grief and grieving, but most of all it seems to be about the breakdown and limits of communication.

The husband and the wife represent two very different ways of grieving. The wife's grief infuses every part of her and does not wane with time. She has been compared to a female character in Frost's *A Masque of Mercy*, of whom another character says, "She's had some loss she can't accept from God." The wife remarks that most people make only pretence of following a loved one to the grave, when in truth their minds are "making the best of their way back to life / And living people, and things they understand." She, however, will not accept this kind of grief, will not turn from the grave back to the world of living, for to do so is to accept the death. Instead she declares that "the world's evil."

The husband, on the other hand, has accepted the death. Time has passed, and he might be more likely now to say, "That's the way of the world," than, "The world's evil." He did grieve, but the outward indications of his grief were quite different from those of his wife. He threw himself into the horrible task of digging his child's grave—into physical work. This action further associates the father with a "way-of-the-world" mentality, with the cycles that make up the farmer's life, and with an organic view of life and death. The father did not leave the task of burial to someone else, instead, he physically dug into the earth and planted his child's body in the soil.

Frost brings larger issues into the forefront issues such as husband-wife relationship or that between man and woman, or life and death. The title of the poem is highly significant; it suggests not only the burial of the dead infant, but also of the domestic harmony. Home Burial, in beauty and grandeur, ranks with *The Death of the Hired Man*. Frost's these two dramatic narratives can favourably be compared with Robert Browning's peculiarly intense and character-analyzing dramatic monologues like *Andrea Del Sarto*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *My Last Duchess* and *The Pauper Witch of Graf-ton* (in *Two Witches*).

Cathedral
James Russell Lowell

Far through the memory shines a happy day,
Cloudless of care, down-shod to every sense,
And simply perfect from its own resource,
As to a bee the new campanula's
Illuminate seclusion swung in air.
Such days are not the prey of setting suns,
Nor ever blurred with mist of afterthought;
Like words made magical by poets dead,
Wherein the music of all meaning is
The sense hath garnered or the soul divined,
They mingle with our life's ethereal part,
Sweetening and gathering sweetness evermore,
By beauty's franchise disenthralled of time.

I can recall, nay, they are present still,
Parts of myself, the perfume of my mind,
Days that seem farther off than Homer's now
Ere yet the child had loudened to the boy,
And I, recluse from playmates, found perforce
Companionship in things that not denied
Nor granted wholly; as is Nature's wont,
Who, safe in uncontaminate reserve,
Lets us mistake our longing for her love,
And mocks with various echo of ourselves.

These first sweet frauds upon our consciousness,
That blend the sensual with its imaged world,
These virginal cognitions, gifts of morn,
Ere life grow noisy, and slower-footed thought
Can overtake the rapture of the sense,
To thrust between ourselves and what we feel,
Have something in them secretly divine.
Vainly the eye, once schooled to serve the brain,
With pains deliberate studies to renew
The ideal vision: second-thoughts are prose;
For beauty's acme hath a term as brief
As the wave's poise before it break in pearl,
Our own breath dims the mirror of the sense,
Looking too long and closely: at a flash
We snatch the essential grace of meaning out,
And that first passion beggars all behind,
Heirs of a tamer transport prepossessed.
Who, seeing once, has truly seen again
The gray vague of unsympathizing sea
That dragged his Fancy from her moorings back
To shores inhospitable of eldest time,

Till blank foreboding of earth-gendered powers,
Pitiless seignories in the elements,
Omnipotences blind that darkling smite,
Misgave him, and repaganized the world?
Yet, by some subtler touch of sympathy,
These primal apprehensions, dimly stirred,
Perplex the eye with pictures from within.
This hath made poets dream of lives foregone
In worlds fantastical, more fair than ours;
So Memory cheats us, glimpsing half-revealed.
Even as I write she tries her wonted spell
In that continuous redbreast boding rain:
The bird I hear sings not from yonder elm;
But the flown ecstasy my childhood heard
Is vocal in my mind, renewed by him,
Haply made sweeter by the accumulate thrill
That threads my undivided life and steals
A pathos from the years and graves between.

I know not how it is with other men,
Whom I but guess, deciphering myself;
For me, once felt is so felt nevermore.
The fleeting relish at sensation's brim
Had in it the best ferment of the wine.
One spring I knew as never any since:
All night the surges of the warm southwest
Boomed intermittent through the wallowing elms,
And brought a morning from the Gulf adrift,
Omnipotent with sunshine, whose quick charm
Startled with crocuses the sullen turf
And wiled the bluebird to his whiff of song:
One summer hour abides, what time I perched,
Dappled with noonday, under simmering leaves,
And pulled the pulpy oxhearts, while aloof
An oriole clattered and the robins shrilled,
Denouncing me an alien and a thief:
One morn of autumn lords it o'er the rest,
When in the lane I watched the ash-leaves fall,
Balancing softly earthward without wind,
Or twirling with directer impulse down
On those fallen yesterday, now barbed with frost,
While I grew pensive with the pensive year:
And once I learned how marvellous winter was,
When past the fence-rails, downy-gray with rime,
I creaked adventurous o'er the spangled crust
That made familiar fields seem far and strange
As those stark wastes that whiten endlessly
In ghastly solitude about the pole,
And gleam relentless to the unsetting sun:
Instant the candid chambers of my brain

Were painted with these sovran images;
And later visions seem but copies pale
From those unfading frescos of the past,
Which I, young savage, in my age of flint,
Gazed at, and dimly felt a power in me
Parted from Nature by the joy in her
That doubtfully revealed me to myself.
Thenceforward I must stand outside the gate;
And paradise was paradise the more,
Known once and barred against satiety.

What we call Nature, all outside ourselves,
Is but our own conceit of what we see,
Our own reaction upon what we feel;
The world's a woman to our shifting mood,
Feeling with us, or making due pretence
And therefore we the more persuade ourselves
To make all things our thought's confederates,
Conniving with us in whate'er we dream.
So when our Fancy seeks analogies,
Though she have hidden what she after finds,
She loves to cheat herself with feigned surprise.
I find my own complexion everywhere;
No rose, I doubt, was ever, like the first,
A marvel to the bush it dawned upon,
The rapture of its life made visible,
The mystery of its yearning realized,
As the first babe to the first woman born;
No falcon ever felt delight of wings
As when, an eyas, from the stolid cliff
Loosing himself, he followed his high heart
To swim on sunshine, masterless as wind;
And I believe the brown earth takes delight
In the new snowdrop looking back at her,
To think that by some vernal alchemy
It could transmute her darkness into pearl;
What is the buxom peony after that,
With its coarse constancy of hoyden blush?
What the full summer to that wonder new?

But, if in nothing else, in us there is
A sense fastidious hardly reconciled
To the poor makeshifts of life's scenery,
Where the same slide must double all its parts,
Shoved in for Tarsus and hitched back for Tyre,
I blame not in the soul this daintiness,
Rasher of surfeit than a humming-bird,
In things indifferent by sense purveyed;
It argues her an immortality
And dateless incomes of experience,

This unthrift housekeeping that will not brook
A dish warmed-over at the feast of life,
And finds Twice stale, served with whatever sauce.
Nor matters much how it may go with me
Who dwell in Grub Street and am proud to drudge
Where men, my betters, wet their crust with tears;
Use can make sweet the peach's shady side,
That only by reflection tastes of sun.

But she, my Princess, who will sometimes deign
My garret to illumine till the walls,
Narrow and dingy, scrawled with hackneyed thought
(Poor Richard slowly elbowing Plato out),
Dilate and drape themselves with tapestries
Nausikaa might have stooped o'er, while, between,
Mirrors, effaced in their own clearness, send
Her only image on through deepening deeps
With endless repercussion of delight,--
Bringer of life, witching each sense to soul,
That sometimes almost gives me to believe
I might have been a poet, gives at least
A brain dasaxonized, an ear that makes
Music where none is, and a keener pang
Of exquisite surmise outleaping thought,--
Her will I pamper in her luxury:
No crumpled rose-leaf of too careless choice
Shall bring a northern nightmare to her dreams,
Vexing with sense of exile; hers shall be
The invitiating firstlings of experience,
Vibrations felt but once and felt life long:
Oh, more than half-way turn that Grecian front
Upon me, while with self-rebuke I spell,
On the plain fillet that confines thy hair
In conscious bounds of seeming unconstraint,
The _Naught in overplus_, thy race's badge!

One feast for her I secretly designed
In that Old World so strangely beautiful
To us the disinherited of eld,--
A day at Chartres, with no soul beside
To roil with pedant prate my joy serene
And make the minster shy of confidence.
I went, and, with the Saxon's pious care,
First ordered dinner at the pea-green inn,
The flies and I its only customers.
Eluding these, I loitered through the town,
With hope to take my minster unawares
In its grave solitude of memory.
A pretty burgh, and such as Fancy loves
For bygone grandeurs, faintly rumorously now

Upon the mind's horizon, as of storm
Brooding its dreamy thunders far aloof,
That mingle with our mood, but not disturb.
Its once grim bulwarks, tamed to lovers' walks,
Look down unwatchful on the sliding Eure,
Whose listless leisure suits the quiet place,
Lisping among his shallows homelike sounds
At Concord and by Bankside heard before.
Chance led me to a public pleasure-ground,
Where I grew kindly with the merry groups,
And blessed the Frenchman for his simple art
Of being domestic in the light of day.
His language has no word, we growl, for Home;
But he can find a fireside in the sun,
Play with his child, make love, and shriek his mind,
By throngs of strangers undisprivacied.
He makes his life a public gallery,
Nor feels himself till what he feels comes back
In manifold reflection from without;
While we, each pore alert with consciousness,
Hide our best selves as we had stolen them,
And each bystander a detective were,
Keen-eyed for every chink of undisguise.

So, musing o'er the problem which was best,--
A life wide-windowed, shining all abroad,
Or curtains drawn to shield from sight profane
The rites we pay to the mysterious I,--
With outward senses furloughed and head bowed
I followed some fine instinct in my feet,
Till, to unbend me from the loom of thought,
Looking up suddenly, I found mine eyes
Confronted with the minster's vast repose.
Silent and gray as forest-leaguered cliff
Left inland by the ocean's slow retreat,
That hears afar the breeze-borne rote and longs,
Remembering shocks of surf that clomb and fell,
Spume-sliding down the baffled decuman,
It rose before me, patiently remote
From the great tides of life it breasted once,
Hearing the noise of men as in a dream.
I stood before the triple northern port,
Where dedicated shapes of saints and kings,
Stern faces bleared with immemorial watch,
Looked down benignly grave and seemed to say,
_Ye come and go incessant; we remain
Safe in the hallowed quiet of the past;
Be reverent, ye who flit and are forgot,
Of faith so nobly realized as this._
I seem to have heard it said by learned folk

Who drench you with aesthetics till you feel
As if all beauty were a ghastly bore,
The faucet to let loose a wash of words,
That Gothic is not Grecian, therefore worse;
But, being convinced by much experiment
How little inventiveness there is in man,
Grave copier of copies, I give thanks
For a new relish, careless to inquire
My pleasure's pedigree, if so it please,
Nobly, I mean, nor renegade to art.
The Grecian gluts me with its perfectness,
Unanswerable as Euclid, self-contained,
The one thing finished in this hasty world,
Forever finished, though the barbarous pit,
Fanatical on hearsay, stamp and shout
As if a miracle could be encored.
But ah! this other, this that never ends,
Still climbing, luring fancy still to climb,
As full of morals half-divined as life,
Graceful, grotesque, with ever new surprise
Of hazardous caprices sure to please,
Heavy as nightmare, airy-light as fern,
Imagination's very self in stone!
With one long sigh of infinite release
From pedantries past, present, or to come,
I looked, and owned myself a happy Goth.
Your blood is mine, ye architects of dream,
Builders of aspiration incomplete,
So more consummate, souls self-confident,
Who felt your own thought worthy of record
In monumental pomp! No Grecian drop
Rebukes these veins that leap with kindred thrill,
After long exile, to the mother-tongue.

Ovid in Pontus, puling for his Rome
Of men invirile and disnatured dames
That poison sucked from the Attic bloom decayed,
Shrank with a shudder from the blue-eyed race
Whose force rough-handed should renew the world,
And from the dregs of Romulus express
Such wine as Dante poured, or he who blew
Roland's vain blast, or sang the Campeador
In verse that clanks like armor in the charge,
Homeric juice, though brimmed in Odin's horn.
And they could build, if not the columned fane
That from the height gleamed seaward many-hued,
Something more friendly with their ruder skies:
The gray spire, molten now in driving mist,
Now lulled with the incommunicable blue;
The carvings touched to meaning new with snow,

Or commented with fleeting grace of shade;
The statues, motley as man's memory,
Partial as that, so mixed of true and false,
History and legend meeting with a kiss
Across this bound-mark where their realms confine;
The painted windows, freaking gloom with glow,
Dusking the sunshine which they seem to cheer,
Meet symbol of the senses and the soul,
And the whole pile, grim with the Northman's thought
Of life and death, and doom, life's equal fee,--
These were before me: and I gazed abashed,
Child of an age that lectures, not creates,
Plastering our swallow-nests on the awful Past,
And twittering round the work of larger men,
As we had builded what we but deface.
Far up the great bells wallowed in delight,
Tossing their clangors o'er the heedless town,
To call the worshippers who never came,
Or women mostly, in loath twos and threes.
I entered, reverent of whatever shrine
Guards piety and solace for my kind
Or gives the soul a moment's truce of God,
And shared decorous in the ancient rite
My sterner fathers held idolatrous.
The service over, I was tranced in thought:
Solemn the deepening vaults, and most to me,
Fresh from the fragile realm of deal and paint,
Or brick mock-pious with a marble front;
Solemn the lift of high-embowered roof,
The clustered stems that spread in boughs disleaved,
Through which the organ blew a dream of storm,
Though not more potent to sublime with awe
And shut the heart up to tranquillity,
Than aisles to me familiar that o'erarch
The conscious silences of brooding woods,
Centurial shadows, cloisters of the elk.,
Yet here was sense of undefined regret,
Irreparable loss, uncertain what:
Was all this grandeur but anachronism,
A shell divorced of its informing life,
Where the priest housed him like a hermit-crab,
An alien to that faith of elder days
That gathered round it this fair shape of stone?
Is old Religion but a spectre now,
Haunting the solitude of darkened minds,
Mocked out of memory by the sceptic day?
Is there no corner safe from peeping Doubt,
Since Gutenberg made thought cosmopolite
And stretched electric threads from mind to mind?
Nay, did Faith build this wonder? or did Fear,

That makes a fetish and misnames it God
(Blockish or metaphysic, matters not),
Contrive this coop to shut its tyrant in,
Appeased with playthings, that he might not harm?

I turned and saw a beldame on her knees;
With eyes astray, she told mechanic beads
Before some shrine of saintly womanhood,
Bribed intercessor with the far-off Judge:
Such my first thought, by kindlier soon rebuked,
Pleading for whatsoever touches life
With upward impulse: be He nowhere else,
God is in all that liberates and lifts,
In all that humbles, sweetens, and consoles:
Blessed the natures shored on every side
With landmarks of hereditary thought!
Thrice happy they that wander not life long
Beyond near succor of the household faith,
The guarded fold that shelters, not confines!
Their steps find patience In familiar paths,
Printed with hope by loved feet gone before
Of parent, child, or lover, glorified
By simple magic of dividing Time.
My lids were moistened as the woman knelt,
And--was it will, or some vibration faint
Of sacred Nature, deeper than the will?--
My heart occultly felt itself in hers,
Through mutual intercession gently leagued.

Or was it not mere sympathy of brain?
A sweetness intellectually conceived
In simpler creeds to me impossible?
A juggle of that pity for ourselves
In others, which puts on such pretty masks
And snares self-love with bait of charity?
Something of all it might be, or of none:
Yet for a moment I was snatched away
And had the evidence of things not seen;
For one rapt moment; then it all came back,
This age that blots out life with question-marks,
This nineteenth century with its knife and glass
That make thought physical, and thrust far off
The Heaven, so neighborly with man of old,
To voids sparse-sown with alienated stars.

'Tis irrecoverable, that ancient faith,
Homely and wholesome, suited to the time,
With rod or candy for child-minded men:
No theologic tube, with lens on lens
Of syllogism transparent, brings it near,--

At best resolving some new nebula,
Or blurring some fixed-star of hope to mist.
Science was Faith once; Faith were Science now,
Would she but lay her bow and arrows by
And arm her with the weapons of the time.
Nothing that keeps thought out is safe from thought.
For there's no virgin-fort but self-respect,
And Truth defensive hath lost hold on God.
Shall we treat Him as if He were a child
That knew not his own purpose? nor dare trust
The Rock of Ages to their chemic tests,
Lest some day the all-sustaining base divine
Should fail from under us, dissolved in gas?
The armed eye that with a glance discerns
In a dry blood-speck between ox and man
Stares helpless at this miracle called life,
This shaping potency behind the egg,
This circulation swift of deity,
Where suns and systems inconspicuous float
As the poor blood-disks in our mortal veins.
Each age must worship its own thought of God,
More or less earthy, clarifying still
With subsidence continuous of the dregs;
Nor saint nor sage could fix immutably
The fluent image of the unstable Best,
Still changing in their very hands that wrought:
To-day's eternal truth To-morrow proved
Frail as frost-landscapes on a window-pane.
Meanwhile Thou smiledst, inaccessible,
At Thought's own substance made a cage for Thought,
And Truth locked fast with her own master-key;
Nor didst Thou reckon what image man might make
Of his own shadow on the flowing world;
The climbing instinct was enough for Thee.
Or wast Thou, then, an ebbing tide that left
Strewn with dead miracle those eldest shores,
For men to dry, and dryly lecture on,
Thyself thenceforth incapable of flood?
Idle who hopes with prophets to be snatched
By virtue in their mantles left below;
Shall the soul live on other men's report,
Herself a pleasing fable of herself?
Man cannot be God's outlaw if he would,
Nor so abscond him in the caves of sense
But Nature still shall search some crevice out
With messages of splendor from that Source
Which, dive he, soar he, baffles still and lures.
This life were brutish did we not sometimes
Have intimation clear of wider scope,
Hints of occasion infinite, to keep

The soul alert with noble discontent
And onward yearnings of unstilled desire;
Fruitless, except we now and then divined
A mystery of Purpose, gleaming through
The secular confusions of the world,
Whose will we darkly accomplish, doing ours,
No man can think nor in himself perceive,
Sometimes at waking, in the street sometimes,
Or on the hillside, always unforwarned.
A grace of being, finer than himself,
That beckons and is gone,--a larger life
Upon his own impinging, with swift glimpse
Of spacious circles luminous with mind,
To which the ethereal substance of his own
Seems but gross cloud to make that visible,
Touched to a sudden glory round the edge,
Who that hath known these visitations fleet
Would strive to make them trite and ritual?
I, that still pray at morning and at eve,
Loving those roots that feed us from the past,
And prizing more than Plato things I learned
At that best academe, a mother's knee,
Thrice in my life perhaps have truly prayed,
Thrice, stirred below my conscious self, have felt
That perfect disenthralment which is God;
Nor know I which to hold worst enemy,
Him who on speculation's windy waste
Would turn me loose, stript of the raiment warm
By Faith contrived against our nakedness,
Or him who, cruel-kind, would fain obscure,
With painted saints and paraphrase of God,
The soul's east-window of divine surprise,
Where others worship I but look and long;
For, though not recreant to my fathers' faith,
Its forms to me are weariness, and most
That drony vacuum of compulsory prayer,
Still pumping phrases for the Ineffable,
Though all the valves of memory gasp and wheeze.
Words that have drawn transcendent meanings up
From the best passion of all bygone time,
Steeped through with tears of triumph and remorse,
Sweet with all sainthood, cleansed in martyr-fires,
Can they, so consecrate and so inspired,
By repetition wane to vexing wind?
Alas! we cannot draw habitual breath
In the thin air of life's supream heights,
We cannot make each meal a sacrament,
Nor with our tailors be disbodied souls,--
We men, too conscious of earth's comedy,
Who see two sides, with our posed selves debate,

And only for great stakes can be sublime!
Let us be thankful when, as I do here,
We can read Bethel on a pile of stones,
And, seeing where God has been, trust in Him.

Brave Peter Fischer there in Nuremberg,
Moulding Saint Sebald's miracles in bronze,
Put saint and stander-by in that quaint garb
Familiar to him in his daily walk,
Not doubting God could grant a miracle
Then and in Nuremberg, if so He would;
But never artist for three hundred years
Hath dared the contradiction ludicrous
Of supernatural in modern clothes.
Perhaps the deeper faith that is to come
Will see God rather in the strenuous doubt,
Than in the creed held as an infant's hand
Holds purposeless whatso is placed therein.

Say it is drift, not progress, none the less,
With the old sextant of the fathers' creed,
We shape our courses by new-risen stars,
And, still lip-loyal to what once was truth,
Smuggle new meanings under ancient names,
Unconscious perverts of the Jesuit, Time.
Change is the mask that all Continuance wears
To keep us youngsters harmlessly amused;
Meanwhile some ailing or more watchful child,
Sitting apart, sees the old eyes gleam out,
Stern, and yet soft with humorous pity too.
Whilere, men burnt men for a doubtful point,
As if the mind were quenchable with fire,
And Faith danced round them with her war-paint on,
Devoutly savage as an Iroquois;
Now Calvin and Servetus at one board
Snuff in grave sympathy a milder roast,
And o'er their claret settle Comte unread.
Fagot and stake were desperately sincere:
Our cooler martyrdoms are done in types;
And flames that shine in controversial eyes
Burn out no brains but his who kindles them.
This is no age to get cathedrals built:
Did God, then, wait for one in Bethlehem?
Worst is not yet: lo, where his coming looms,
Of earth's anarchic children latest born,
Democracy, a Titan who hath learned
To laugh at Jove's old-fashioned thunder-bolts,--
Could he not also forge them, if he would?
He, better skilled, with solvents merciless,
Loosened in air and borne on every wind,

Saps unperceived: the calm Olympian height
Of ancient order feels its bases yield,
And pale gods glance for help to gods as pale.
What will be left of good or worshipful,
Of spiritual secrets, mysteries,
Of fair religion's guarded heritage,
Heirlooms of soul, passed downward unprofaned
From eldest Ind? This Western giant coarse,
Scorning refinements which he lacks himself,
Loves not nor heeds the ancestral hierarchies,
Each rank dependent on the next above
In ordinary gradation fixed as fate.
King by mere manhood, nor allowing aught
Of holier unction than the sweat of toil;
In his own strength sufficient; called to solve,
On the rough edges of society,
Problems long sacred to the choicer few,
And improvise what elsewhere men receive
As gifts of deity; tough foundling reared
Where every man's his own Melchisedek,
How make him reverent of a King of kings?
Or Judge self-made, executor of laws
By him not first discussed and voted on?
For him no tree of knowledge is forbid,
Or sweeter if forbid. How save the ark,
Or holy of holies, unprofaned a day
From his unscrupulous curiosity
That handles everything as if to buy,
Tossing aside what fabrics delicate
Suit not the rough-and-tumble of his ways?
What hope for those fine-nerved humanities
That made earth gracious once with gentler arts,
Now the rude hands have caught the trick of thought
And claim an equal suffrage with the brain?

The born disciple of an elder time,
(To me sufficient, friendlier than the new,)
Who in my blood feel motions of the Past,
I thank benignant nature most for this,--
A force of sympathy, or call it lack
Of character firm-planted, loosing me
From the pent chamber of habitual self
To dwell enlarged in alien modes of thought,
Haply distasteful, wholesomer for that,
And through imagination to possess,
As they were mine, the lives of other men.
This growth original of virgin soil,
By fascination felt in opposites,
Pleases and shocks, entices and perturbs.
In this brown-fisted rough, this shirt-sleeved Cid,

This backwoods Charlemagne of empires new,
Whose blundering heel instinctively finds out
The goutier foot of speechless dignities,
Who, meeting Caesar's self, would slap his back,
Call him 'Old Horse,' and challenge to a drink,
My lungs draw braver air, my breast dilates
With ampler manhood, and I front both worlds,
Of sense and spirit, as my natural fiefs,
To shape and then reshape them as I will.
It was the first man's charter; why not mine?
How forfeit? when, deposed in other hands?

Thou shudder'st, Ovid? Dost in him forebode
A new avatar of the large-limbed Goth,
To break, or seem to break, tradition's clue.
And chase to dreamland back thy gods dethroned?
I think man's soul dwells nearer to the east,
Nearer to morning's fountains than the sun;
Herself the source whence all tradition sprang,
Herself at once both labyrinth and clue,
The miracle fades out of history,
But faith and wonder and the primal earth
Are born into the world with every child.
Shall this self-maker with the prying eyes,
This creature disenchanting of respect
By the New World's new fiend, Publicity,
Whose testing thumb leaves everywhere its smutch,
Not one day feel within himself the need
Of loyalty to better than himself,
That shall ennoble him with the upward look?
Shall he not catch the Voice that wanders earth,
With spiritual summons, dreamed or heard,
As sometimes, just ere sleep seals up the sense,
We hear our mother call from deeps of Time,
And, waking, find it vision,--none the less
The benediction bides, old skies return,
And that unreal thing, preeminent,
Makes air and dream of all we see and feel?
Shall he divine no strength unmade of votes,
Inward, impregnable, found soon as sought,
Not cognizable of sense, o'er sense supreme?
Else were he desolate as none before.
His holy places may not be of stone,
Nor made with hands, yet fairer far than aught
By artist feigned or pious ardor reared,
Fit altars for who guards inviolate
God's chosen seat, the sacred form of man.
Doubtless his church will be no hospital
For superannuate forms and mumping shams,
No parlor where men issue policies

Of life-assurance on the Eternal Mind,
Nor his religion but an ambulance
To fetch life's wounded and malingerers in,
Scorned by the strong; yet he, unconscious heir
To the Influence sweet of Athens and of Rome,
And old Judaea's gift of secret fire,
Spite of himself shall surely learn to know
And worship some ideal of himself,
Some divine thing, large-hearted, brotherly,
Not nice in trifles, a soft creditor,
Pleased with his world, and hating only cant.
And, if his Church be doubtful, it is sure
That, in a world, made for whatever else,
Not made for mere enjoyment, in a world
Of toil but half-requited, or, at best,
Paid in some futile currency of breath,
A world of incompleteness, sorrow swift
And consolation laggard, whatsoe'er
The form of building or the creed professed,
The Cross, bold type of shame to homage turned,
Of an unfinished life that sways the world,
Shall tower as sovereign emblem over all.

The kobold Thought moves with us when we shift
Our dwelling to escape him; perched aloft
On the first load of household-stuff he went:
For, where the mind goes, goes old furniture.
I, who to Chartres came to feed my eye
And give to Fancy one clear holiday,
Scarce saw the minster for the thoughts it stirred
Buzzing o'er past and future with vain quest.
Here once there stood a homely wooden church,
Which slow devotion nobly changed for this
That echoes vaguely to my modern steps.
By suffrage universal it was built,
As practised then, for all the country came
From far as Rouen, to give votes for God,
Each vote a block of stone securely laid
Obedient to the master's deep-mused plan.
Will what our ballots rear, responsible
To no grave forethought, stand so long as this?
Delight like this the eye of after days
Brightening with pride that here, at least, were men
Who meant and did the noblest thing they knew?
Can our religion cope with deeds like this?
We, too, build Gothic contract-shams, because
Our deacons have discovered that it pays,
And pews sell better under vaulted roofs
Of plaster painted like an Indian squaw.
Shall not that Western Goth, of whom we spoke,

So fiercely practical, so keen of eye,
Find out, some day, that nothing pays but God,
Served whether on the smoke-shut battle-field,
In work obscure done honestly, or vote
For truth unpopular, or faith maintained
To ruinous convictions, or good deeds
Wrought for good's sake, mindless of heaven or hell?
Shall he not learn that all prosperity,
Whose bases stretch not deeper than the sense,
Is but a trick of this world's atmosphere,
A desert-born mirage of spire and dome,
Or find too late, the Past's long lesson missed,
That dust the prophets shake from off their feet
Grows heavy to drag down both tower and wall?
I know not; but, sustained by sure belief
That man still rises level with the height
Of noblest opportunities, or makes
Such, if the time supply not, I can wait.
I gaze round on the windows, pride of France,
Each the bright gift of some mechanic guild
Who loved their city and thought gold well spent
To make her beautiful with piety;
I pause, transfigured by some stripe of bloom,
And my mind throngs with shining auguries,
Circle on circle, bright as seraphim,
With golden trumpets, silent, that await
The signal to blow news of good to men.
Then the revulsion came that always comes
After these dizzy elations of the mind:
And with a passionate pang of doubt I cried,
'O mountain-born, sweet with snow-filtered air
From uncontaminate wells of ether drawn
And never-broken secrecies of sky,
Freedom, with anguish won, misprized till lost,
They keep thee not who from thy sacred eyes
Catch the consuming lust of sensual good
And the brute's license of unfettered will.
Far from the popular shout and venal breath
Of Cleon blowing the mob's baser mind
To bubbles of wind-piloted conceit,
Thou shrinkest, gathering up thy skirts, to hide
In fortresses of solitary thought
And private virtue strong in self-restraint.
Must we too forfeit thee misunderstood,
Content with names, nor inly wise to know
That best things perish of their own excess,
And quality o'er-driven becomes defect?
Nay, is it thou indeed that we have glimpsed,
Or rather such illusion as of old
Through Athens glided menadlike and Rome,

A shape of vapor, mother of vain dreams
And mutinous traditions, specious plea
Of the glaived tyrant and long-remembered priest?'

I walked forth saddened; for all thought is sad,
And leaves a bitterish savor in the brain,
Tonic, it may be, not delectable,
And turned, reluctant, for a parting look
At those old weather-pitted images
Of bygone struggle, now so sternly calm.
About their shoulders sparrows had built nests,
And fluttered, chirping, from gray perch to perch,
Now on a mitre poising, now a crown,
Irreverently happy. While I thought
How confident they were, what careless hearts
Flew on those lightsome wings and shared the sun,
A larger shadow crossed; and looking up,
I saw where, nesting in the hoary towers,
The sparrow-hawk slid forth on noiseless air,
With sidelong head that watched the joy below,
Grim Norman baron o'er this clan of Kelts.
Enduring Nature, force conservative,
Indifferent to our noisy whims! Men prate
Of all heads to an equal grade cashiered
On level with the dullest, and expect
(Sick of no worse distemper than themselves)
A wondrous cure-all in equality;
They reason that To-morrow must be wise
Because To-day was not, nor Yesterday,
As if good days were shapen of themselves,
Not of the very lifeblood of men's souls;
Meanwhile, long-suffering, imperturbable,
Thou quietly complet'st thy syllogism,
And from the premise sparrow here below
Draw'st sure conclusion of the hawk above,
Pleased with the soft-billed songster, pleased no less
With the fierce beak of nature's aquiline.

Thou beautiful Old Time, now hid away
In the Past's valley of Avilion,
Haply, like Arthur, till thy wound be healed,
Then to reclaim the sword and crown again!
Thrice beautiful to us; perchance less fair
To who possessed thee, as a mountain seems
To dwellers round its bases but a heap
Of barren obstacle that lairs the storm
And the avalanche's silent bolt holds back
Leashed with a hair,--meanwhile some far-off clown,
Hereditary delver of the plain,
Sees it an unmoved vision of repose,

Nest of the morning, and conjectures there
The dance of streams to idle shepherds' pipes,
And fairer habitations softly hung
On breezy slopes, or hid in valleys cool,
For happier men. No mortal ever dreams
That the scant isthmus he encamps upon
Between two oceans, one, the Stormy, passed,
And one, the Peaceful, yet to venture on,
Has been that future whereto prophets yearned
For the fulfilment of Earth's cheated hope,
Shall be that past which nerveless poets moan
As the lost opportunity of song.

O Power, more near my life than life itself
(Or what seems life to us in sense immured),
Even as the roots, shut in the darksome earth,
Share in the tree-top's joyance, and conceive
Of sunshine and wide air and winged things
By sympathy of nature, so do I
Have evidence of Thee so far above,
Yet in and of me! Rather Thou the root
Invisibly sustaining, hid in light,
Not darkness, or in darkness made by us.
If sometimes I must hear good men debate
Of other witness of Thyself than Thou,
As if there needed any help of ours
To nurse Thy flickering life, that else must cease,
Blown out, as 'twere a candle, by men's breath,
My soul shall not be taken in their snare,
To change her inward surety for their doubt
Muffled from sight in formal robes of proof:
While she can only feel herself through Thee,
I fear not Thy withdrawal; more I fear,
Seeing, to know Thee not, hoodwinked with dreams
Of signs and wonders, while, unnoticed, Thou,
Walking Thy garden still, commun'st with men,
Missed in the commonplace of miracle.

James Russell Lowell 1819-1891

James Russell Lowell is an American poet, critic, essayist, and editor. Lowell is considered one of the most erudite and versatile American authors of the nineteenth century. In his earnest, formal verse, he sought to advance liberal causes and establish an American aesthetic. While such poems as *Ode Recited at the Commemoration of the Living and Dead Soldiers of Harvard University, July 21, 1865* (commonly referred to as the *Commemoration Ode*), and *The Vision of Sir Launfal* (1848) were widely admired in his day, Lowell's poetry is now considered diffuse and dated and is seldom read. Modern critics generally agree that his outstanding literary contributions were in the areas of satire and criticism in such works as *A Fable for Critics: A Glance at a Few of Our Literary Progenies* (1848) and *The Biglow Papers* (1848).

Biographical Information

Lowell was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts to a wealthy and influential Boston family. His privileged ancestry and Harvard education provided Lowell with access to the New England literati, and as a young man he became acquainted with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. A natural conservative, Lowell turned increasingly toward liberal humanitarianism after his marriage to Maria White, a poet and abolitionist who encouraged her husband to contribute poetry to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and the *Pennsylvania Freeman*. In 1848, Lowell achieved national acclaim with the publication of three of his best-known works: *Poems: Second Series*, *A Fable for Critics*, and *The Biglow Papers*. After his wife's death in 1853, Lowell concerned himself more with editing, scholarship, and criticism than with poetry. In 1855, he succeeded Longfellow as Smith Professor of Modern Languages at Harvard, a post which allowed him to travel abroad and study European languages and literature. Two years later, Lowell assumed additional responsibilities as first editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and later joined Charles Eliot Norton as coeditor of the *North American Review*. In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed Lowell minister to Spain. James Garfield, in 1880, transferred Lowell to England where the diplomat made himself known among London literary society. Lowell died in Cambridge in 1891.

Major Works

Representative of his early poetry, *A Year's Life* (1841) demonstrates numerous technical flaws and a didactic tone that was to mar much of Lowell's later lyrical work. In contrast, many of the selections in his *Poems: Second Series* are political in nature, and represent Lowell's strengths as a public poet. *A Fable for Critics*, a witty diatribe written in lively though sometimes careless verse, is remarkable for its numerous critical appraisals of American literary figures which have endured through time and changing styles. An ingenious combination of humor, poetry, and trenchant satire written in a brisk Yankee dialect, the first volume of *The Biglow Papers* records the sardonic observations of Hosea Biglow, a New England farmer, and his neighbors as the United States enters the

Mexican War. Lowell's popular verse fantasy *The Vision of Sir Launfal* follows an Arthurian knight in his search for the Holy Grail. Melancholy in tone, *The Cathedral* (1870) meditates on the subject of faith and was prompted by Lowell's visit to Chartres. His 1865 *Commemoration Ode* is considered among Lowell's most significant works of public poetry, and speaks to the enduring qualities of the American mind.

An Analysis of the poem "Cathedral"

"The Cathedral," originally called "A Day at Chartres," is Lowell's last notable contribution to poetry. It is full of thought and feeling, but the verse is intricate, and the meaning sometimes as obscure as Browning's "Sordello." The poet sees in the century growth of the cathedral the type of all historic progress. That progress is rooted in the faith of the past; it witnesses to the need of such faith in these times which boast advance but may mistake the key and later recognize the indwelling God as the source of such faith, imparting it to every child, and helping every man.

This poem forms the natural transition to a consideration of Lowell's theology. It was printed in 1869, before his public life began. He himself called it "a kind of religious poem." It is indeed a confession of faith, noble in many respects, yet lacking some of the best elements of Christian belief. "The Cathedral" will furnish us with material both for praise and for criticism. We may begin by pointing out that Lowell, while recognizing an imminent God, has no faith in a God who is transcendent, and therefore can believe in no miracle or special revelation. The closing lines of the poem make this plain:

Truth and error are so interwoven here that some insight is needed to disentangle them. The great truth that God is in all, and through all, is made to imply that this is his only being, and his only method of manifestation, and so to involve what Scripture would call a limitation of the Holy One of Israel. The apostle Paul avoids this error, when he declares that God is not only "in all," and "through all," but also "above all." "But a whisper is heard of Him," says the book of Job; "the thunder of his power who can understand!" To limit God to mere Nature is virtually to deny his omnipotence, and even his personality. But if God is above Nature, and not simply one with Nature, he can act upon Nature and apart from Nature, whenever there is need; and miracle and special revelation are possible.

The real question, then, is the question of need. Is there a moral need, which it is becoming that God should supply? Is the enlightenment, which the universal presence of God in nature gives, a sufficient enlightenment in man's actual moral condition? The answer to this question is given to us in John's Gospel, when the apostle asserts that before Christ came in the flesh "the light shone in the darkness, and the darkness apprehended it not." In other words, man's sin prevented God's light from having its normal and proper effect. Lowell's error with regard to miracle and revelation, then, is an error with regard to man's moral condition. He ignores man's, sin and perversity, which "hinder the truth in unrighteousness," and which necessitate special revelation to awaken conscience and to draw forth repentant love. Such a revelation must make plain God's personality, his holiness, his self-sacrificing desire to save; and such a revelation is actually given us in Christ's atoning death and in his offer to deliver the sinner from the bondage of his sins. But Lowell seems to have no personal experience of his need

as a sinner. He has no proper conception of God as the hater and punisher of sin, nor of Christ as the divine Saviour from its guilt and defilement.

In other words, Lowell's God will be a God of infinite good nature, who makes no moral distinctions. Such a God will be no terror to the ungodly, and no Mediator will be needed to make propitiation for men's sins. Christ is not "the fulness of the Godhead bodily," but only one of many guides and saviours, whose life and example have made the path of duty easier for our feet; and his Cross becomes only a model of patience in suffering the ills that afflict us all. With no inner experience of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, it is no wonder that the beliefs of the fathers should seem only the useful incidents of an historic past and quite inapplicable to the improved conditions of the present day:

But each man has within him the infinite Source, from whom have proceeded all the revelations of the past, and who is ready to give to us new evidences of his presence:

This may be theism, but it is not Christianity. The vagueness of its conception of God, its ignorance of God's holiness and of man's sin, the absence of faith in God's appointed way of salvation through Christ, show it to be a man-made scheme, incapable of giving relief to a burdened conscience, or of comforting a weak and afflicted soul. Man needs to see his own nature in God, or rather, needs to see God in human form. Hero worship, emperor-worship, Mithras-worship, are all of them efforts of mankind to find a human heart in the Godhead. This universal instinct is satisfied only by Christianity, which shows us the eternal Word made flesh, yet exalted to be King of kings and Lord of lords. With James Russell Lowell's "Cathedral" I would contrast Robert Browning's "Saul"; and would maintain that this latter poem furnishes a far better basis for communion with a personal God, for comfort amid the struggles of our earthly life, and for courage in the performance of social and civic duty, than does the poem we have been considering. Listen to David's heartening appeal to Saul:

What help did Lowell's religion give him in time of bereavement, and when he drew near to the gates of death? We have already seen that after the loss of his child he confessed himself a pagan. He derived no comfort from the thought of a present Christ, into whose loving arms he could commit his loved one, with the assurance that she should be restored to him, when life's short day was past, but cleansed from the dishonours of the tomb and clad with immortality.

Lowell was a moralist, and not a theologian; a theist. and not a Christian. It is an interesting question how far his conceptions of God affected his ideas of duty. What is the normal relation of morality to religion? I reply that religion is morality toward God, as morality is religion toward men. The two are meant to be obverse sides of one and the same great fact of life. But human perversity has separated them; the one seems at times to exist without the other; we see religion without morality, and morality without religion. When thus separated, neither one is of real or permanent value. Religion without morality is a tree without fruits; morality without religion is a tree without roots. Human progress consists in the ever increasing union of the two; human perfection will be attained only when love to God is the source of love to man, and love to man is the constant result and proof of love to God.

The moralist builds securely, only when the foundation of his system is laid upon the Rock of Ages. In just the proportion that he constructs his edifice without this foundation, he builds

upon the sand, and time undoes his work. Or, to change the simile, ethics without God, by which I mean ethics which ignores the Christian revelation, is an orchid-growth, that lives, on air; while Christian ethics is like the rose, which has deep root in virgin soil. The orchid has its beauty; but that beauty fades, and the light wind of passion sweeps it away; while the rose has a permanent loveliness, and a fragrance which the orchid never possesses. To apply my illustrations to the present case, I would say that Lowell, with all his moral earnestness, has missed the true theory of morals, and so has given us only detached maxims, truths which are the proper fruit of Christianity alone, and which, without connection with their source, lack both motive and life.