

Paul Revere's Ride (1863)

By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)

Listen my children and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.

He said to his friend, "If the British march
By land or sea from the town to-night,
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch
Of the North Church tower as a signal light,--
One if by land, and two if by sea;
And I on the opposite shore will be,
Ready to ride and spread the alarm
Through every Middlesex village and farm,
For the country folk to be up and to arm."

Then he said "Good-night!" and with muffled
oar
Silently rowed to the Charlestown shore,
Just as the moon rose over the bay,
Where swinging wide at her moorings lay
The Somerset, British man-of-war;
A phantom ship, with each mast and spar
Across the moon like a prison bar,
And a huge black hulk, that was magnified
By its own reflection in the tide.

Meanwhile, his friend through alley and street
Wanders and watches, with eager ears,
Till in the silence around him he hears
The muster of men at the barrack door,
The sound of arms, and the tramp of feet,
And the measured tread of the grenadiers,
Marching down to their boats on the shore.

Then he climbed the tower of the Old North
Church,
By the wooden stairs, with stealthy tread,
To the belfry chamber overhead,
And startled the pigeons from their perch
On the sombre rafters, that round him made
Masses and moving shapes of shade,--
By the trembling ladder, steep and tall,
To the highest window in the wall,
Where he paused to listen and look down
A moment on the roofs of the town
And the moonlight flowing over all.

Beneath, in the churchyard, lay the dead,
In their night encampment on the hill,
Wrapped in silence so deep and still
That he could hear, like a sentinel's tread,
The watchful night-wind, as it went
Creeping along from tent to tent,
And seeming to whisper, "All is well!"
A moment only he feels the spell
Of the place and the hour, and the secret dread
Of the lonely belfry and the dead;
For suddenly all his thoughts are bent
On a shadowy something far away,
Where the river widens to meet the bay,--
A line of black that bends and floats
On the rising tide like a bridge of boats.

Meanwhile, impatient to mount and ride,
Booted and spurred, with a heavy stride
On the opposite shore walked Paul Revere.
Now he patted his horse's side,
Now he gazed at the landscape far and near,
Then, impetuous, stamped the earth,
And turned and tightened his saddle girth;
But mostly he watched with eager search
The belfry tower of the Old North Church,
As it rose above the graves on the hill,
Lonely and spectral and sombre and still.
And lo! as he looks, on the belfry's height
A glimmer, and then a gleam of light!
He springs to the saddle, the bridle he turns,
But lingers and gazes, till full on his sight
A second lamp in the belfry burns.

A hurry of hoofs in a village street,
A shape in the moonlight, a bulk in the dark,
And beneath, from the pebbles, in passing, a
spark
Struck out by a steed flying fearless and fleet;
That was all! And yet, through the gloom and
the light,
The fate of a nation was riding that night;
And the spark struck out by that steed, in his
flight,
Kindled the land into flame with its heat.
He has left the village and mounted the steep,
And beneath him, tranquil and broad and deep,
Is the Mystic, meeting the ocean tides;
And under the alders that skirt its edge,
Now soft on the sand, now loud on the ledge,
Is heard the tramp of his steed as he rides.

It was twelve by the village clock
When he crossed the bridge into Medford town.
He heard the crowing of the cock,
And the barking of the farmer's dog,
And felt the damp of the river fog,
That rises after the sun goes down.

It was one by the village clock,
When he galloped into Lexington.
He saw the gilded weathercock
Swim in the moonlight as he passed,
And the meeting-house windows, black and
bare,
Gaze at him with a spectral glare,
As if they already stood aghast
At the bloody work they would look upon.

It was two by the village clock,
When he came to the bridge in Concord town.
He heard the bleating of the flock,
And the twitter of birds among the trees,
And felt the breath of the morning breeze
Blowing over the meadow brown.
And one was safe and asleep in his bed
Who at the bridge would be first to fall,
Who that day would be lying dead,
Pierced by a British musket ball.

You know the rest. In the books you have read
How the British Regulars fired and fled,---
How the farmers gave them ball for ball,
From behind each fence and farmyard wall,
Chasing the redcoats down the lane,
Then crossing the fields to emerge again
Under the trees at the turn of the road,
And only pausing to fire and load.

So through the night rode Paul Revere;
And so through the night went his cry of alarm
To every Middlesex village and farm,---
A cry of defiance, and not of fear,
A voice in the darkness, a knock at the door,
And a word that shall echo for evermore!
For, borne on the night-wind of the Past,
Through all our history, to the last,
In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
The people will waken and listen to hear
The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,
And the midnight message of Paul Revere.

On "Paul Revere's Ride" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

By Dana Gioia

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was the most popular poet in American history. His work commanded a readership that is almost unimaginable today even for best-selling novels. In terms of their reach and influence, Longfellow's poems resembled studio-era Hollywood films: they were popular works of art enjoyed by huge, diverse audiences that crossed all social classes and age groups. Writing in a period before the electronic media usurped the serious literary artist's role as society's story-teller, Longfellow did as much as any author or politician of his time to shape the way nineteenth-century Americans saw themselves, their nation, and their past. At a crucial time in American history—just as the Revolutionary War receded from living memory and the disastrous Civil War inexorably approached—Longfellow created the national myths for which his new and still unstoried country hungered. His poems gave his contemporaries the words, images, myths, and heroes by which they explained America to one another and themselves. There is no better example of Longfellow's genius at creating meaningful and enduring national myth than "Paul Revere's Ride."

The opening lines of "Paul Revere's Ride" are still so famous that even people who have not read the entire poem often know them by heart. They have become, in fact, so familiar that most readers might easily take them for granted and miss the striking and paradoxical rhetorical figures they contain. The poem's narrator, for example, begins by saying, "Listen, my children, and you shall hear." He addresses the tale specifically to children, and yet the work is not in any narrow sense a children's poem. "Paul Revere's Ride" was published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, hardly a juvenile journal, and was eventually collected in Longfellow's masterful book of interwoven narrative poems, *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863), where it is spoken by the Landlord to an audience of adult men. Why then does the poem begin by addressing only one part of its intended audience?

By invoking children in the opening line of his patriotic poem, Longfellow implicitly defines his narrative as a story the older generation considers important enough to pass down to posterity. What will follow, therefore, is not merely an interesting story but a legacy—one of the traditional tales that defines both the audience and the speaker's identity. Perhaps for this reason, Longfellow placed "Paul Revere's Ride" as the first story told in *Tales of a Wayside Inn*. The characters in the book meet and tell their tales at a tavern in Sudbury, Massachusetts, not far from Boston. Revere's historical exploits would have been a proud part of their shared local lore.

Longfellow's inclusion of the date in the third line serves a similar rhetorical function. (Once again the familiarity of the opening lines makes us forget how odd it is to present a complete date—day, month, and year—in a poem. Longfellow never did so elsewhere in his poetry.) The implicit message of the line is clear: Paul Revere's achievements were of such singular importance that we must learn the date by heart and teach it to posterity. Everyone in Longfellow's original audience would have understood the significance of the date. April 18, 1775 was the day before the American Revolution began. The next morning at Lexington and Concord, the American colonists would fire their "shot heard round the world" and initiate their successful armed resistance against the British Empire. The narrator also explains the necessity of passing this piece of heritage on by reminding the listeners that "hardly a man is now alive / who remembers that famous day and year." The original witnesses are now mostly dead. It has become the audience's responsibility to preserve the memory of Revere's heroic deeds.

Longfellow was an immensely versatile poet who excelled at virtually every form and genre from the epic to the sonnet. No form, however, better displayed his distinctive gifts than the short narrative poem. Nineteenth century readers greatly esteemed the form, which combines the narrative pleasures of fiction with the verbal music of verse. Modern critics, however, have generally downgraded narrative poetry in favor of lyric verse. Longfellow's reputation has been especially hard hit by the change in critical consensus, and once popular poems like "Paul Revere's Ride" have consequently disappeared from academic anthologies. The special qualities of these poems seem antithetical to the lyric traditions of modern poetry, which prize verbal compression, intellectual complexity, elliptical style, and self-referential movement. Longfellow's greatest gifts were best suited to more public poetry—forceful clarity, evocative simplicity, emotional directness, and a genius for memorable (indeed often unforgettable) phrasing.

William Butler Yeats once commented that Longfellow's popularity came because "he tells his story or idea so that one

needs nothing but his verses to understand it." That observation particularly applies to "Paul Revere's Ride," which takes a complicated historical incident embedded in the politics of Revolutionary America and retells it with narrative clarity, emotional power, and masterful pacing. From the poem's first publication, historians have complained that Longfellow distorted the actual incident and put far too much emphasis on Revere's individual role. But Longfellow was not interested in scholarly precision; he wanted to create a stirring patriotic myth. In the process he took Paul Revere, a regional folk hero hardly known outside Massachusetts, and turned him into a national icon. To accomplish this feat, Longfellow mythologized both the incident and the man. The new Revere became the symbolic figure who awakens America to fight for freedom. The actual incident, a literal call to arms for the Revolution, required less mythologization. After all, revolutions are already the stuff of myth. Longfellow had only to streamline the historical narrative so that the poem could focus on a central heroic figure. The resulting story—despite the scholarly complaints—is actually not too far from fact. (Longfellow took considerably fewer liberties than Shakespeare did with British history.) The final poem does not merely recount an historical incident; it dramatizes unconquerable Yankee individuality against the old order of European despotism.

Longfellow was a master of narrative pacing. His description of Revere's friend climbing the Old North Church tower displays the poet's ability to make each narrative moment matter. By slowing down the plot at this crucial moment, Longfellow not only builds suspense; he also adds evocative physical details that heightens the moods. (Decades later Hollywood would discover the same procedures.) Reaching the belfry, the friend startles "the pigeons from their perch." Fluttering around in they make "masses and moving shapes of shade." The man now pauses to look down at the graves that surrounded an eighteenth century church—an image that perhaps, prefigures the deadly battle to be fought the next day. This lyric moment of reflection provides a false sense of calm before the explosive action that will follow. The man now remembers the task at hand. There is a crucial deed to do.

The scene now shifts suddenly—with a decisive cinematic cut—to the opposite shore where the solitary Revere waits for the signal. (What other nineteenth-century American poet would have handled this transition so boldly?) The historical Revere was one of many riders, but Longfellow understood the powerful appeal of the single heroic individual who fights oppression and makes a decisive impact—another narrative lesson not lost on Hollywood. Longfellow's Revere is not a revolutionary organizer; he is a man of action. As soon as he sees the first lantern, he springs into the saddle, though he is smart enough to wait for the second light before he rides off.

The rest of the poem is pure action—mostly one long tableau of Revere's ride from village to town to village. Once again the effect, to a modern reader, is quintessentially cinematic. Longfellow's galloping triple meters create a thrilling sense of speed, and the rhetorical device of stating the time of night when Revere enters each village adds a cumulative feeling of the rider's urgency. Few poets could sustain a single, linear action for nearly forty lines as Longfellow manages so compellingly in the poem's extended climax. The last two stanzas also demonstrate Longfellow's narrative authority. As the poet makes the sudden but clear transition from Revere's arrival in the town of Concord to the following day's conflict, Longfellow masterfully summarizes the Battle of Concord in only eight lines. Once again, however, he rhetorically conscripts the listener to collaborate in completing the story. "You know the rest," says the narrator, "In the books you have read." Ingeniously, Longfellow acknowledges the importance of the next day's battle without accepting the artistic necessity to describe it in detail.

The final stanza returns to the image of Revere riding through the night. Now presented outside of the strictly linear chronology that has hitherto characterized the poem, the galloping Revere acquires an overtly symbolic quality. He is no longer the historical figure awakening the Middlesex villages and farms. He has become a timeless emblem of American courage and independence. Significantly, the verb tenses in the final stanza shift from the past (*rode*) in the opening five lines to the future tense (*shall echo, will waken*) in the closing lines. The relevance of Longfellow's patriotic symbol would not have been lost on the poet's original audience—the mostly New England Yankee readers of the Boston-based *Atlantic Monthly*. Although Longfellow ostensibly mythologizes the Revolutionary War, his poem addresses a more immediate crisis—the impending break-up of the Union. Published a few months before the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter initiated America's bloodiest war, "Paul Revere's Ride" was Longfellow's reminder to New Englanders of the courage their ancestors demonstrated in forming the Union. Another "hour of darkness and peril and need," the poem's closing lines implicitly warn, now draws near. The author's intentions were overtly political—to build public resolve to fight slavery and protect the Union—but he embodied his message in a poem compellingly told in purely narrative terms. Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride" was so successful that modern readers no longer remember it as a poem but as a national legend. Underneath the myth, however, a fine poem waits to be rediscovered.

<http://www.danagioia.net/essays/elongfellow.htm>