

**THE RIVERSIDE LITERATURE SERIES.  
UNDER THE OLD ELM, AND OTHER  
POEMS; THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL  
AND OTHER STORIES. WITH  
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH AND NOTES**

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The Riverside Literature Series. Under the Old Elm, and Other Poems; The Vision of Sir Launfal and Other Stories. With Biographical Sketch and Notes by James Russell Lowell

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**JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL**

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*The Riverside Literature Series*

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## JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

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### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL died August 12, 1891, at Elmwood, Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the house where he was born, February 22, 1819. His early life was spent in Cambridge, and he has sketched many of the scenes in it very delightfully in *Cambridge Thirty Years Ago*, in his volume of *Fireside Travels*, as well as in his early poem, *An Indian Summer Reverie*. His father was a Congregationalist minister of Boston, and the family to which he belonged has had a strong representation in Massachusetts. His grandfather, John Lowell, was an eminent jurist, the Lowell Institute of Boston owes its endowment to John Lowell, a cousin of the poet, and the city of Lowell was named after Francis Cabot Lowell, an uncle, who was one of the first to begin the manufacturing of cotton in New England.

Lowell was a student at Harvard, and was graduated in 1838, when he gave a class poem, and in 1841 his first volume of poems, *A Year's Life*, was published. His bent from the beginning was more decidedly literary than that of any contemporary American poet. That is to say, the history and art of literature divided his interest with the production of literature, and he carries the unusual gift of rare critical power, joined to hearty,

spontaneous creation. It may indeed be guessed that the keenness of judgment and incisiveness of wit which characterize his examination of literature have sometimes interfered with his poetic power, and made him liable to question his art when he would rather have expressed it unchecked. In connection with Robert Carter, a littérateur who died before Lowell, he began, in 1843, the publication of *The Pioneer, a Literary and Critical Magazine*, which lived a brilliant life of three months. A volume of poetry followed in 1844, and the next year he published *Conversations on Some of the Old Poets*, — a book which he did not keep alive, but interesting as marking the enthusiasm of a young scholar, treading a way then almost wholly neglected in America, and intimating a line of thought and study in which he afterward made most noteworthy ventures. Another series of poems followed in 1848, and in the same year *The Vision of Sir Launfal*. Perhaps it was in reaction from the marked sentiment of his poetry that he issued now a *jeu d'esprit*, *A Fable for Critics*, in which he hit off, with a rough and ready wit, the characteristics of the writers of the day, not forgetting himself in these lines: —

"There is Lowell, who 's striving Parnassus to climb  
 With a whole bale of *isms* tied together with rhyme;  
 He might get on alone, spite of brambles and boulders,  
 But he can't with that bundle he has on his shoulders;  
 The top of the hill he will ne'er come nigh reaching  
 Till he learns the distinction 'twixt singing and preaching;  
 His lyre has some chords that would ring pretty well,  
 But he'd rather by half make a drum of the shell,  
 And rattle away till he 's old as Methusalem,  
 At the head of a march to the last new Jerusalem."

This, of course, is but a half serious portrait of himself, and it touches but a single feature; others can say

better that Lowell's ardent nature showed itself in the series of satirical poems which made him famous, *The Biglow Papers*, written in a spirit of indignation and fine scorn, when the Mexican War was causing many Americans to blush with shame at the use of the country by a class for its own ignoble ends. The true patriotism which marked these and other of his early poems burned with a steady glow in after years, and illumined poems of which we shall speak presently.

After a year and a half spent in travel, Lowell was appointed in 1855 to the Belles Lettres professorship at Harvard, previously held by Longfellow. When the *Atlantic Monthly* was established in 1857 he became its editor, and not long after relinquishing that post he assumed part editorship of the *North American Review*. In these two magazines, as also in *Putnam's Monthly*, he published poems, essays, and critical papers, which have been gathered into volumes. His prose writings, besides the volumes already mentioned, include two series of *Among my Books*, historical and critical studies, chiefly in English literature; and *My Study Windows*, including, with similar subjects, observations of nature and contemporary life. During the war for the Union he published a second series of *The Biglow Papers*, in which, with the wit and fun of the earlier series, there was mingled a deeper strain of feeling and a larger tone of patriotism. The limitations of his style in these satires forbade the fullest expression of his thought and emotion; but afterward in a succession of poems, occasioned by the honors paid to student-soldiers in Cambridge, the death of Agassiz, and the celebration of national anniversaries during the years 1875 and 1876, he sang in loftier, more ardent strains. The interest