

**UNDER THE OLD
ELM: AND OTHER
POEMS, PP. 3-80**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649336630

Under the Old Elm: And Other Poems, pp. 3-80 by James Russell Lowell

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The Riverside Literature Series

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115

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191

BY

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

WITH NOTES

AND

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY

Boston: 4 Park Street; New York: 11 East Seventeenth Street

Chicago: 28 Lakeside Building

The Riverside Press, Cambridge

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The Riverside Press, Cambridge, Mass., U. S. A.
Electrotyped and Printed by H. O. Houghton & Company.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL was born February 22, 1819, at Elmwood, Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the house where he died August 12, 1891. 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 Recreie*. 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 litterateur who has lately died, 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 is now out of print, 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

which readers have in Lowell is still divided between his rich, abundant prose, and his thoughtful, often passionate verse. The sentiment of his early poetry, always humane, was greatly enriched by larger experience; so that the themes which he chose for his later work demanded and received a broad treatment, full of sympathy with the most generous instincts of their time, and built upon historic foundations.

In 1877 Lowell went to Spain as Minister Plenipotentiary. In 1880 he was transferred to England as Minister Plenipotentiary near the Court of St. James. His duties as American Minister did not prevent him from producing occasional writings, chiefly in connection with public events. Notable among these are his address at the unveiling of a statue of Fielding, and his address on Democracy.

He returned to the United States in 1885, and the rest of his life was passed quietly in his Cambridge home, his impaired health preventing the accomplishment of much literary work. In 1888, however, he published a collection of his later poems under the title *Heartsease and Rue*, and in 1890 finished a careful revision of his complete works, which were issued in ten volumes.

UNDER THE OLD ELM.

[NEAR Cambridge Common stands an old elm, having at its base a stone with the inscription, "Under this tree Washington first took command of the American Army, July 3d, 1775." Upon the one hundredth anniversary of this day the citizens of Cambridge held a celebration under the tree, and Mr. Lowell read the following poem.]

I.

1.

WORDS pass as wind, but where great deeds were done
A power abides transfused from sire to son :
The boy feels deeper meanings thrill his ear,
That tingling through his pulse life-long shall run,
5 With sure impulsion to keep honor clear,
When, pointing down, his father whispers, " Here,
Here, where we stand, stood he, the purely Great,
Whose soul no siren passion could unsphere,
Then nameless, now a power and mixed with fate."
10 Historic town, thou holdest sacred dust,
Once known to men as pious, learned, just,
And one memorial pile that dares to last ;
But Memory greets with reverential kiss
No spot in all thy circuit sweet as this,

12. Memorial Hall, built by the alumni of Harvard, in memory of those who fell in the war for the Union, a building of more serious thought than any other in Cambridge, and among the few in the country built to endure.