

FAVORITE POEMS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

"I would give all I am worth, and go into debt, to be able to write so fine a piece as I think that is. Neither do I know who is the author. I met it in a straggling form in a newspaper last summer, and I remember to have seen it once before, about fifteen years ago, and this is all I know about it." Abraham Lincoln wrote those lines in a letter to a friend, Andrew Johnston (a lawyer in Quincy, Illinois) on April 18, 1846.

The piece Lincoln was referring to was titled

Mortality* or *Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud? The author was a Scotsman named William Knox (1789-1825). Lincoln was first introduced to the poem by Dr. Jason Duncan when the two were living in New Salem. Lincoln memorized the entire poem and recited it so often that some folks mistakenly thought he was the author. The poem's melancholy tone appealed to Lincoln. William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner, thought the poem was (for Lincoln) a remembrance of Ann Rutledge as well as a discourse on the delicate nature of human life.

The lines of *Mortality* are as follows:

Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?

Like a swift-fleeting meteor, a fast-flying cloud,

**A flash of the lightning, a break of the
wave,
He passes from life to his rest in the
grave.**

The leaves of the oak and the willow shall
fade,
Be scattered around, and together be laid;
And the young and the old, the low and the
high,
Shall molder to dust, and together shall lie.

The infant a mother attended and loved;
The mother that infant's affection who
proved;
The husband, that mother and infant who
blessed;
Each, all, are away to their dwelling of rest.

The maid on whose cheek, on whose brow,
in whose eye,
Shone beauty and pleasure - her triumphs
are by;
And the memory of those who loved her

and praised,
Are alike from the minds of the living
erased.

The hand of the king that the sceptre hath
borne,
The brow of the priest that the mitre hath
worn,
The eye of the sage, and the heart of the
brave,
Are hidden and lost in the depths of the
grave.

The peasant, whose lot was to sow and to
reap,
The herdsman, who climbed with his goats
up the steep,
The beggar, who wandered in search of his
bread,
Have faded away like the grass that we
tread.

The saint, who enjoyed the communion of
Heaven,

The sinner, who dared to remain
unforgiven,
The wise and the foolish, the guilty and just,
Have quietly mingled their bones in the
dust.

So the multitude goes - like the flower or the
weed
That withers away to let others succeed;
So the multitude comes - even those we
behold,
To repeat every tale that has often been
told.

For we are the same that our fathers have
been;
We see the same sights that our fathers
have seen;
We drink the same stream, we feel the
same sun,
And run the same course that our fathers
have run.

The thoughts we are thinking, our fathers

would think;

From the death we are shrinking, our
fathers would shrink;

To the life we are clinging, they also would
cling -

But it speeds from us all like a bird on the
wing.

They loved - but the story we cannot unfold;
They scorned - but the heart of the haughty
is cold;

They grieved - but no wail from their
slumber will come;

They joyed - but the tongue of their
gladness is dumb.

They died - aye, they died - we things that
are now,

That walk on the turf that lies over their
brow,

And make in their dwellings a transient
abode,

Meet the things that they met on their
pilgrimage road.

Yea, hope and despondency, pleasure and
pain,
Are mingled together in sunshine and rain;
And the smile and the tear, the song and
the dirge,
Still follow each other, like surge upon
surge.

'Tis the wink of an eye - 'tis the draught of a
breath -
From the blossom of health to the paleness
of death,
From the gilded saloon to the bier and the
shroud
Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be
proud?

**Abraham Lincoln had a lifelong interest in
both reading and writing poetry. Another
favorite of his was *The Last Leaf* by Oliver
Wendell Holmes.**

**A good source of poetry written about
Abraham Lincoln is *The Poets' Lincoln:
Tributes in Verse to the Martyred President*
edited by Osborn H. Oldroyd.**

The Last Leaf

**By Oliver Wendell
Holmes
(1809-1894)**

Published 1831

I saw him once
before,
As he passed by the
door,

And again
The pavement stones
resound,
As he totters o'er the
ground
With his cane.

They say that in his
prime,
Ere the pruning-knife
of Time
Cut him down,
Not a better man was
found

By the Crier on his
round
Through the town.

But now he walks the
streets,
And he looks at all he
meets
Sad and wan,
And he shakes his
feeble head,
That it seems as if he
said,
"They are gone!"

The mossy marbles
rest
On the lips that he has
prest
In their bloom,
And the names he
loved to hear
Have been carved for
many a year
On the tomb.

My grandmamma has
said--
Poor old lady, she is

dead
Long ago--
That he had a Roman
nose,
And his cheek was
like a rose
In the snow;

But now his nose is
thin,
And it rests upon his
chin
Like a staff,
And a crook is in his

back,
And a melancholy
crack
In his laugh.

I know it is a sin
For me to sit and grin
At him here;
But the old three-
cornered hat,
And the breeches,
and all that,
Are so queer!

And if I should live to
be
The last leaf upon the
tree
In the spring,
Let them smile, as I
do now,
At the old forsaken
bough
Where I cling.

THE HISTORY OF THIS POEM

(by the author)

My publishers tell me that it would add to the interest of the Poem if I would mention any circumstances connected with its composition, publication, and reception. This request must be the excuse of my communicativeness. Just when it was written I cannot exactly say, nor in what paper or periodical it was first

published. It must have been written before April, 1833; probably in 1831 or 1832. It was republished in the first edition of my poems, in the year 1836.

The Poem was suggested by the sight of a figure well known to Bostonians of the years just mentioned, that of Major Thomas Melville, "the last of the cocked hats," as he was sometimes called. The Major had been a personable young man, very evidently, and retained evidence of it in

"The monumental pomp

of age,"--

which had something imposing and something odd about it for youthful eyes like mine. He was often pointed at as one of the "Indians" of the famous "Boston Tea-Party" of 1774. His aspect among the crowds of a later generation reminded me of a withered leaf which has held to its stem through the storms of autumn and winter, and finds itself still clinging to its bough while the new growths of spring are bursting their buds and spreading their foliage all around it. I make

this explanation for the benefit
of those who have been
puzzled by the lines

The last leaf upon the
tree
In the Spring.

The way in which it came to
be written in a somewhat
singular measure was this. I
had become a little known as a
versifier, and I thought that
one or two other young writers
were following my efforts
with imitations, not meant as
parodies and hardly to be
considered improvements on
their models. I determined to

write in a measure which would at once betray any copyist. So far as it was suggested by any previous poem, the echo must have come from Campbell's "Battle of the Baltic," with its short terminal lines, such as the last of these two,

By thy wild and stormy
steep,
Elsinore.

But I do not remember any poem in the same measure, except such as have been written since its publication.

The Poem as first written had one of those false rhymes which produce a shudder in all educated persons, even in the Poems of Keats and others who ought to have known better than to admit them. The guilty verse ran thus:--

But now he walks the
streets,
And he looks at all he
meets
So forlorn,
And he shakes his feeble
head
That it seems as if he
said

"They are gone!"

A little more experience, to say nothing of the sneer of an American critic in an English periodical, showed me that this would never do. Here was what is called a "cockney rhyme,"--one in which the sound of the letter *r* is neglected,--maltreated as the letter *h* is insulted by the average Briton by leaving it out everywhere except where it should be silent. Such an ill-mated pair as "forlorn" and "gone" could not possibly pass current in good rhyming

society. But what to do about
it was the question. I *must*
keep

"They are gone!"

and I could not think of any
rhyme which I could work in
satisfactorily. In this
perplexity my friend, Mrs.
Folsom, wife of that excellent
scholar, Mr. Charles Folsom,
then and for a long time the
unsparing and infallible
corrector of the press at
Cambridge, suggested

"Sad and wan,"

which I thankfully adopted and have always retained.

The Poem has been occasionally imitated, often reprinted, and not rarely spoken well of. I hope I shall be forgiven for mentioning three tributes which have been especially noteworthy in my own remembrance.

Good Abraham Lincoln had a great liking for it, and repeated it from memory to Governor Andrew, as the Governor himself told me.

I have a copy of it made by the

hand of Edgar Allan Poe, with an introductory remark which I will quote in connection with the one which precedes it.

"If we regard at the same time accuracy, rhythm, melody, and invention, or novel combination of metre, I would have no hesitation in saying that a young and true poetess of Kentucky, Mrs. Amelia Welby, has done more in the way of really good verse than any individual among us. I shall be pardoned, nevertheless,

for quoting and
commenting upon an
excellently well
conceived and well
managed specimen of
versification, which will
aid in developing some
of the propositions
already expressed. It is
the 'Last Leaf' of Oliver
W. Holmes."

Then follows the whole poem
carefully copied in the well-
known delicate hand of the
famous poet and critic. The
roll of manuscript nearly five
feet long closes with this

poem, so that the promised comment is missing. The manuscript was given me by the late Mr. Robert Carter, a former collaborator with Mr. James Russell Lowell, one of Poe's biographers. Poe was not always over civil in speaking of New England poets. To such as were sensitive to his vitriolic criticism, his toleration was tranquillizing, and his praise encouraging. Fifty years ago those few words of his would have pleased me if they had been published, which they never were. But the morning

dew means little to the
withered leaf.

The last pleasant tribute
antecedent to this volume of
illustrations, of which it is not
for me to speak, is the printing
of the poem, among others, in
raised letters for the use of the
blind.

Reminiscences--idle, perhaps,
to a new generation. It is all
right; if these egotisms amuse
them they amuse me, too, as I
look them over; and so

Let them smile as I do
now

At the old forsaken bough
Where I cling.

OLIVER WENDELL
HOLMES.

BEVERLY FARMS, July 9,
1885.

Author's note

[When this poem was issued with an accompaniment of illustration and decoration in 1894, Dr. Holmes wrote to his publishers (this is reproduced in Holmes's own quaint

script):--

"Beverly Farms, July 9, 1894

"I have read the proof you sent me and find nothing in it which I feel called upon to alter or explain.

"I have lasted long enough to serve as an illustration of my own poem. I am one of the very last of the leaves which still cling to the bough of life that budded in the spring of the nineteenth century. The days of my years are threescore and twenty, and I am almost half way up the steep incline which

leads me toward the base of
the new century so near to
which I have already climbed.

"I am pleased to find that this
poem, carrying with it the
marks of having been written
in the jocund morning of life,
is still read and cared for. It
was with a smile on my lips
that I wrote it; I cannot read it
without a sigh of tender
remembrance. I hope it will
not sadden my older readers,
while it may amuse some of
the younger ones to whom its
experiences are as yet only
floating fancies.

"Oliver Wendell Holmes."]

Source for the poem, MORTALITY
and its commentary is:

<http://home.att.net/~rjnorton/Lincoln38>

Source for the poem, THE LAST
LEAF and its commentaries are:

<http://eldred.ne.mediaone.net/owh/ll.h>

The Complete Poetical Works of
Oliver Wendell Holmes,
Cambridge Edition, 1895,
Houghton-Mifflin, p. 4-5, 811.4,
H752c

