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## A New Look at Longfellow's "Evangeline"

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## **Abstract**

It seems a thoroughly safe opinion to believe that among French-speaking Canadians nothing in American literature has greater celebrity than Longfellow's *Evangeline*. In Canada it is doubtless considered unquestionably the poet's chef-d'oeuvre, the authentic and moving account of the tragedy of a people, the dispersion of the Acadians in 1755.

# A NEW LOOK AT LONGFELLOW'S "EVANGELINE"

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It seems a thoroughly safe opinion to believe that among French-speaking Canadians nothing in American literature has greater celebrity than Longfellow's *Evangeline*. In Canada it is doubtless considered unquestionably the poet's chef-d'oeuvre, the authentic and moving account of the tragedy of a people, the dispersion of the Acadians in 1755.

What does the average American of today think of the poet Longfellow—if he ever thinks of him at all? Probably, as an off-hand opinion, he would be inclined to classify that poet as a rather stodgy conservative. Yet from some points of view at least, such a notion is utterly unrealistic. Not merely for his own time, but for any period, Longfellow should be recognized as a daring innovator. He set out to do things in poetry which had never before been seriously attempted in the English language, and which on the face of them would have seemed impossible. They were things which apparently had never before occurred to any capable maker of verse in English. And he succeeded almost unbelievably well.

For one thing, he was certainly the first American ever to succeed in writing poems of considerable length. Of course we do not forget Poe's dogma that "there is no such thing as a long poem," but Poe had in mind only poetry of lyric intensity. The long poem is a different form of art. It does not deal merely with momentary ecstasy of emotion which obviously cannot endure, but represents, as it induces, a calmer esthetic enjoyment which may continue indefinitely. It requires a different kind of "inspiration" from that which Poe envisaged; it calls for patience and sustained power, untiring energy and artistry such as comparatively few poets have ever had at their command.

As a poet Longfellow was ambitious; he was determined to be a *great* poet. In the course of a letter written to his father before his graduation from college, December 5, 1824, he said: "I most eagerly aspire after future eminence in literature; my whole soul burns most ardently for it, and every earthly thought centres in it." He was sufficiently earnest in this desire that he was willing to go through a long period of preparation, and to devote himself tempor-

arily to non-literary occupations, never losing sight of the goal while working toward it only very indirectly.

Now it is traditional, from Homer down, that in order to stand as a great poet one should produce an epic poem. Yet the epics which have timeless existence as literary landmarks were not created out of hand. The materials for their construction had gradually accumulated through oral tradition, in ballads and folklore in general, during many generations from primitive ages to a time when a race or nation was becoming conscious of its identity. Coming at the proper moment, the epic poet fused these materials into a coherent, unified form which of course bore the stamp of his personal genius but was made possible only by the myriad preparations of countless others who had gone before.

Longfellow, however, was a poet in a new country, a nation which simply did not have a past such as epics require. There was no background of evolution of a race from the dawn of its civilization; America was settled by people who were products of civilizations already developed far beyond any point at which anything like an epic poem could evolve in the old way as a "natural" outgrowth. What, then, could the poet do? In truly modern spirit, he boldly took short-cuts. He seized upon the folklore of the Indians, the native inhabitants whose way of life *had* been developed upon American soil. From this material he constructed what most critics consider his greatest work, *Hiawatha*, which was actually accepted as genuine by the Indian people themselves. And this he was able to do, not by virtue of any first-hand acquaintance with Indian life, but merely by reading books about it, chiefly the accounts of the pioneer Schoolcraft. *Hiawatha* appeared in 1855. Meanwhile, in 1847, he had produced *Evangeline*, the poem which concerns us here.

*Evangeline* also was inspired by a background of reading, with no personal experience or observation whatever of the regions in which the action of the narrative had taken place. It seems to have been considerably influenced by the descriptions of American scenery in the works of Chateaubriand, which Longfellow was enthusiastically reading about that time. There is evidence that he obtained some helpful information from a former Harvard law student living in Louisiana, concerning the Acadians who were exiled there and the nature of their new home along the Mississippi. The story of the two lovers which forms the central thread of the narrative was related to him by a friend of Hawthorne's. Both Hawthorne and Whittier had considered using the story for literary purposes, but relinquished it

in favor of Longfellow, who was evidently more eager for it, and whom they felt to be the better man to handle it.

It is in the *form* of his long poems, however, that Longfellow shows his remarkable originality. For through the long history of poetry in English, it had been virtually axiomatic that any *long* poem—as well as most shorter ones—had to be in iambic pentameter, whether unrimed as in Shakespeare's plays or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in the "heroic stanzas" of Dryden, or in the rimed couplets of Pope.

This is not an arbitrary notion; it seems to fit in with the very nature of the English language as it happens to be. The iambus, a "foot" composed of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one, corresponds to the inevitable stresses of so many word-combinations in English: prepositional phrases, nouns preceded by articles, verbs preceded by pronouns, nouns preceded by short adjectives, and countless situations less obviously separable from phrasing as a whole. As for the five feet of a pentameter line, that seems to be just about the average mouthful of words, approximately the "right" length for an ordinary clause, long phrase, or complete sentence in English.

Now Longfellow had the courage and linguistic ability to carry through successfully a most astonishing *tour de force*. He wrote long poems in metrical patterns to which English was not habituated and yet made these unaccustomed rhythms seem quite convincingly "natural." For *Hiawatha* he adopted the metre of the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, which by coincidence rang true as appropriate for the Indian legend. For *Evangeline* (as later for *The Courtship of Miles Standish*) he used classical dactylic hexameter. Riming, of course, was out of the question with such form for any but a short poem of humorous intent. Likewise of course, the last foot of each line had to be a trochee rather than a dactyl, else it would seem unfinished, and many feet along the way had to be trochees also. The "weight" of these feet of fewer syllables is generally compensated by their length, or at least somehow they achieve an air of being as "standard" as their technically dactylic counterparts. Always the metrical pattern fits naturally as it should; there is no forcing of intonation such as we find in the lines of unskillful versifiers. If you read the words as they simply have to be said, you follow the established pattern inevitably; *This is the forest primeval*. The *murmuring pines* and the *hemlocks . . .*

Yet in connection with the story which the poem has to tell, and the "atmosphere" which that story logically implies, the metrical form in which Longfellow saw fit to cast it is indeed a curious paradox.

It is common knowledge that Longfellow was a professor of modern languages, particularly French. Since the study of *modern* languages in college was a new thing in his day, he even had to prepare his own textbooks, including a French grammar and a book of French readings. That he had done very extensive *reading* in French cannot be doubted. Having spent about eight months in Paris (1826-27), he was supposed to have "acquired a good practical knowledge" of the language. With whatever brilliance of intelligence and persistent effort, however, he could hardly escape the ineluctable consequences of constructing all the foundation of one's "knowledge" of a living language on a purely bookish basis. Certain intrinsic qualities of the spoken tongue, in which the whole thing is profoundly rooted, must always have somewhat eluded his grasp. Otherwise how *could* he have done just what he did with this poem, and felt right about it?

Could he have fully realized the simple, fundamental fact that French words cannot be written in "metre"? Was he quite aware—English-speaking people so seldom are—that in French all syllables are practically equal in force, so that as soon as you put French words in metrical "feet," they cease to be French? One wonders how he would have read French orally! At any rate, the metre of *Evangeline* absolutely obliges the reader to distort, that is to anglicize, the pronunciation of every French name that appears therein. Try pronouncing these names as in French, in any line where any of them occurs, and you immediately throw the dactylic pattern out of joint.

Perhaps the most discordant note of all is the very title, the name of the heroine, *Evangeline*. Any currency that name may ever have had in French is so slight as to be quite negligible; the poet appears to have invented it. As a theoretical French name, phonetic principles would require it to be *É-van-gé-line*. Of course everyone calls it "i-VANGE-uh-lun," in accordance with the way modern English is naturally pronounced, and with the metre of the poem, in every line where the name occurs.

On November 1, 1951, *Evangeline* was presented dramatically over the network of the Columbia Broadcasting System, with Joan Fontaine reading the title-rôle. Mr. James Hilton, who presented the program, called it "a story which is part of our history." It was based upon textual quotations from Longfellow's poem.

In view of what we have been considering, the pronunciation of proper names in this poem presents a real problem to the oral reader. It is not surprising that the handling of it in this instance was something of a hodge-podge. *Grand Pré* was usually pronounced approxi-

mately as in French (sometimes simply English “grand”) though Longfellow’s rhythm requires the un-French accentuation of *Grand*. The name *Bellefontaine*, as enunciated by various actors, was robbed of its feminine form and given a pseudo-French pronunciation of “Bellefontain,” whereas *Felician* came out as “Felicianne.” The name of *Gabriel* sounded usually about as in French, though that character himself always said “i-vange-uh-lun” as in English. Perhaps as strange as anything, for a linguistically sensitive listener, was hearing “Evangeline,” supposedly a French girl, speak with the British diphthong of “o” and suppression of “r” which have had a certain vogue in American theatrical circles since World War I! Maybe the problem was simply insoluble. But for those of us who dislike incoherent mixtures of dialect, it would have been better just to read the whole thing as plain, straightforward (but good!) American English.

How important are such matters anyhow? Is it pedantic to take these details seriously? Well, that depends. If it be read without any preoccupations, the poem must impress anyone with the harmonious music of its well-chosen words. No doubt it “rings true” to the reader, because its narrative was sincerely imagined, vividly seen and felt in the poet’s mind. It must have won a good deal of sympathy for the cruel misfortunes of the exiled Acadians whose sad fate it typifies in the moving story of the tragically parted lovers.

Yet we may as well face its limitations. How *can* one read it comfortably, if he is aware of how French names sound, so that they seem “natural” to him only in their true form? How can anglicized reading of such names—including some which have no anglicized form—or reading anything in this metre—be reconciled with the French “atmosphere” which belongs with the story?

There can be only one conclusion: the poem is *not* written for bilingual readers. The esteem in which it has been held in French Canada shows that French-speaking people can read it with pleasure, doubtless because they are not sufficiently at home in English to recognize the rhythm as the poet wrote it. Most Americans read it before they learn any French (if they ever do) and probably never go back to read it again. So it escapes criticism on both sides. Maybe this is all for the best.

There is no need to belittle Longfellow’s achievement in writing this poem, which is a wonderful piece of work in any case. Yet for the serious student of literature there may be a “moral” in these flaws of *Evangeline* as we deem them to be. No matter how intelligent or industrious, an author can never avoid the danger of making

egregious blunders, if he “knows” very little of his subject through real life but is acquainted with it only through books—books which, in the full-toned sense of reading a living language, as it is read by one who naturally speaks it, he could not perfectly read.