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Oliver Wendell Holmes was termed the Occasional Poet because of his Poetry Celebrating Events

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Abstract

*Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes was an American physician, poet, and polymath based in Boston. A member of the Fireside Poets, he was acclaimed by his peers as one of the best writers of the day. His most famous prose works were the "Breakfast-Table" series, which began with *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (1858). He was also an important medical reformer. In addition to his work as an author and poet, Holmes also served as a physician, professor, lecturer, and inventor, and although he never practiced it, he received formal training in law. Holmes had made an ineffaceable imprint on the literary world of the 19th century. Many of his works were published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, a magazine that he named. Holmes's writing often commemorated his native Boston area, and much of it was meant to be humorous or conversational. He was often called upon to issue occasional poetry, or poems written specifically for an event, including many occasions at Harvard. Holmes also popularized several terms, including "Boston Brahmin" and "anesthesia". Holmes read a short article in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* about the renowned 18th century frigate USS Constitution, which was to be dismantled by the Navy. Holmes was moved to write "Old Ironsides" in opposition of the ship's scrapping. The patriotic poem was published in the *Advertiser* the very next day and was soon printed by papers in New York, Philadelphia and Washington. It not only brought the author immediate national attention, but the three-stanza poem also generated so much public sentiment that the historic ship was preserved. His major poem was "The Last Leaf", which was inspired by a local man named Thomas Melvill, "the last of the cocked hats" and one of the "Indians" from the 1774 Boston Tea Party. Holmes later wrote that Melvill had reminded him of "a withered leaf which had held to its stem through the storms of autumn and winter, and found itself still clinged to its bough while the new growths of spring were bursting their buds and had spread their foliage all around it." Literary critic Edgar Allan Poe called the poem one of the finest works in the English language. Years later, Abraham Lincoln also had become a fan of the poem; William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner and biographer, wrote in 1867: "I have heard Lincoln recite it, praise it, laud it, and swear by it".*

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Keywords: Physician, professor, polymath, reformer, poet, advertiser, ironsides.

Introduction: Oliver Wendell Holmes was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on August 29, 1809; he proceeded to Phillips Academy and Harvard, from where he graduated in 1829. His first, most popular poem, written at 21, was "Old Ironsides." Like most of Holmes' poems, this was an occasional piece, prompted by some incident. After graduation he studied law perfunctorily for a year and dabbled in literature, winning the public ear by a spirited lyric called forth by the order to destroy the old frigate "Constitution." These verses were sung all over the land, and induced the Navy Department to revoke its order and save the old ship. He studied in Boston, Harvard, and Paris medical schools before graduating with a Harvard M.D. in 1835. His career then turned to medical writing and taught as a professor of anatomy at Dartmouth College in 1838, and firmed up when he became Parkman Professor of Anatomy and Physiology, and Dean, at Harvard Medical School in 1847. Holmes kept up his old love for literature, serializing his *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* in the *Atlantic Monthly* and then brought it out as a book in 1858. It included what Holmes reasonably believed to be his best poems, "The Chambered Nautilus" and "The Deacon's Masterpiece, or the Wonderful 'One-Hoss-Shay.'" Composition never prevented Holmes from literary criticism. In 1853 he delivered a dozen lectures on the English poets at the Lovell Institute in Boston, and in 1872 the third of his "Breakfast-Table" books was published, *The Poet at the Breakfast-Table*. He wrote three novels that took advantage of his medical knowledge. His collected poems came out from Cambridge in 1895. Holmes died in Boston on October 7, 1894. Social, brilliant in conversation, and a writer of gay little poems, he seemed to the grave Bostonians not serious. However; he won prizes, for professional papers, and lectured on anatomy at Dartmouth College. He wrote two papers on homoeopathy, which he attacked with forceful wit; also a valuable paper on the malarial fevers of New England. In 1843 he published his essay on the *Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever*, which stirred up a fierce controversy and brought upon him bitter personal abuse; but he maintained his position with dignity, temper and judgment; and in time he was honoured as the discoverer of a beneficent truth. In fact, the volume of his medical essays holds some of his most sparkling wit, his shrewdest observation, his kindest humanity.

Literature Review: Lord Macaulay defines wit as the power of perceiving analogies between things which appear to have nothing in common. Thackeray called humour a mixture of love and wit, and had named Dickens as its representative. James Russell Lowell was indebted to wit, as his instrument in poetry. One may with equal truth speak of humour as the chief gift of Oliver Wendell Holmes. As Lowell was called as poetical moralist, one may call Holmes our poetical humorist. Oliver was a great believer in heredity; and, in spite of his dislike to Calvinism, he furnished in himself a demonstration of its doctrine with regard to the transmission of hereditary traits. The element of vivacity in his mental composition was almost certainly derived from his mother, Sarah Wendell; and his bent to poetry may be plausibly explained as an inheritance from Anne Bradstreet, who was called "the tenth Muse" in New England, and who was a remote ancestor. While his medical

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career was flourishing, Holmes also gained respect as a poet. He first caught the attention of the public in 1830 with the publication in a Boston newspaper of "Old Ironsides," a poem protesting the government's plans to dismantle the frigate *U.S.S. Constitution*. The poem touched a patriotic nerve, and the ensuing public outcry saved the ship from destruction. Buoyed by his early popular success, Holmes published *Poems* in 1836; expanded and revised editions of the collection followed in 1846, 1848, and 1849. Holmes wrote serious poetry but his output included a large number of occasional verses composed in either heroic or octosyllabic couplets or in the meter of the folk ballad. Most of Holmes's poems expressed his views about the human condition and his hopes for their improvement. In "The Chambered Nautilus," for example, Holmes speculated on the growth of the soul and in "The Last Leaf," he depicted the problems of old age. Holmes was generally considered neither an innovator nor an influence on the development of American poetry, and many commentators pointed out that his style was derived from the neo-classicism of the Augustan age of eighteenth-century England. Nevertheless, critics consistently noted that he successfully used poetry as a forum for expressing his philosophy, particularly in such pieces as "The Deacon's Masterpiece; or The Wonderful 'One-Hoss Shay,'" his strongest poetic statement against Calvinism. Holmes's approach to writing also demonstrated his scientific bent: he claimed that his meter was modelled on the pulse and respiration rate of a speaker reading poetry aloud. Scholars affirmed that his many later collections, including *Songs in Many Keys*, *Soundings from the Atlantic*, *Songs of Many Seasons*, and *The Last Leaf*, attest to the endurance of Holmes's poetic gift.

Background and Life: Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (March 8, 1841 – March 6, 1935) was an American jurist who served as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States from 1902 to 1932, and as Acting Chief Justice of the United States January–February 1930. Noted for his long service, his concise and pithy opinions and his deference to the decisions of elected legislatures, he is one of the most widely cited United States Supreme Court justices in history, particularly for his "clear and present danger" opinion for a unanimous Court in the 1919 case of *Schenck v. United States*, and is one of the most influential American common law judges, honoured during his lifetime in Great Britain as well as the United States. Holmes retired from the Court at the age of 90 years, making him the oldest Justice in the Supreme Court's history. He also served as an Associate Justice and as Chief Justice on the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, and was Weld Professor of Law at the Harvard Law School, of which he was an alumnus.

Profoundly influenced by his experience fighting in the American Civil War, Holmes helped move American legal thinking towards legal realism, as summed up in his maxim: "The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience." Holmes espoused a form of moral skepticism and opposed the doctrine of natural law, marking a significant shift in American jurisprudence. As he wrote in one of his most famous decisions, his dissent in *Abrams v. United States* (1919), he regarded the United States Constitution as "an experiment, as all life is an experiment" and believed that as a consequence "we should be eternally vigilant against attempts to check the expression of opinions that we loathe and

Oliver Wendell Holmes was termed the Occasional Poet because of his Poetry Celebrating... Thamarai Selvi believe to be fraught with death." During his tenure on the Supreme Court, to which he was appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt, he supported efforts for economic regulation and advocated broad freedom of speech under the First Amendment. These positions as well as his distinctive personality and writing style made him a popular figure, especially with American progressives. His jurisprudence influenced much subsequent American legal thinking, including judicial consensus supporting New Deal regulatory law, and influential schools of pragmatism, critical legal studies, and law and economics. He was one of only a handful of justices to be known as a scholar; *The Journal of Legal Studies* has identified Holmes as the third most cited American legal scholar of the 20th century.

Reader response criticism: According to reader response theory, emphasis was on the role of the reader in actively constructing texts rather than passively consuming them. With the close of this decade, 1847-1857, there came a new flowering forth of Holmes's genius, which took a form worth noting, since, being his own, it served most perfectly to embody his spiritual power. In what was popularly known as The Breakfast-Table series, namely, *The Poet at the Breakfast-Table*, the author distinctly said, what the observant reader of the series would be pretty sure to discover for himself:

"I have unburdened myself in this book, and in some other pages, of what I was born to say. Many things that I have said in my riper days have been aching in my soul since I was a mere child. I say aching, because they conflicted with many of my inherited beliefs, or rather traditions. I did not know then that two strains of blood were striving in me for the mastery,--two! twenty, perhaps,--twenty thousand for aught I know,--but represented to me by two,--paternal and maternal. But I do know this: I have struck a good many chords, first and last, in the consciousness of other people. I confess to a tender feeling for my little brood of thoughts. When they have been welcomed and praised it has pleased me; and if at any time they have been rudely handled and despitefully treated, it has cost me a little worry. I don't despise reputation, and I should like to be remembered as having said something worth lasting well enough to last."

This passage presented briefly three noticeable characteristics of Dr. Holmes's prose as contained in the series of *Atlantic* papers and stories. They gave the mature thought of the writer, held back through many years for want of an adequate occasion, and ripened in his mind during this enforced silence they illustrated the effect upon his thought of his professional studies, which predisposed him to treat of the natural history of man, and to import into his analysis of the invisible organism of life the terms and methods employed in the science of the visible anatomy and physiology; and finally they were warm with a sympathy for men and women, and singularly felicitous in their expression of many of the indistinct and half-understood experiences of life. Yet behind this threefold manifestation of individual genius one looked for the personality itself thus disclosed, and, guided by the clue offered in the biography of the author as already traced, saw the vivid nature, sensitive to impressions, yet stable through a substantial hold upon a highly developed community, the product of generations of specialized forces charged with electrical power and leaping

Oliver Wendell Holmes was termed the Occasional Poet because of his Poetry Celebrating... Thamarai Selvi into the light with gladness. We might please ourselves with the notion that the pent-up experience of New England found a vent in Dr. Holmes, but after all the nearest fact, behind which we need not go unless we chose, was that of a person speaking outright and not afraid of a large I. This note of egotism which struck at once in the very title, so felicitous, of the first book, sounded throughout the series and gave it its undying charm; for the man who did not shield himself behind the autobiographic form was rare, and the man who could dramatize other figured about a central one, and made that central one at once dramatic and dominant, was rarer still.

For the form of these writings, it might be said that the impression produced upon the reader of the *Autocrat* series, which was finally gathered into a volume, was of a growth rather than of a premeditated artistic completeness, and this made more evident the mature character of the work and its closeness to the personality of the writer. The first suggestion, as Holmes pointed out in *The Autocrat's Autobiography*, was to be found in the two papers published, under the title of *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, in *The New England Magazine* for November, 1831, and January, 1832. These were written by Dr. Holmes shortly after his graduation from college, and before he entered into his medical studies. They consisted of brief epigrammatic observations upon various topics, the desultory talk of a person engrossed in conversation at a table. The form was monologue, with scarcely more than a hint at interruptions, and no attempt at characterizing the speaker or his listeners. Twenty-five years later, when *The Atlantic Monthly* was founded, the author remembering the fancy resumed it, and under the same title began a series of papers which at once had great favor and grew, possibly, beyond the writer's original intention. Twenty-five years had not dulled the wit and gayety of the exuberant young writer; rather they had ripened the early fruit, and imparted a richness of flavour which greatly increased the value. The maturity was seen not only in the wider reach and deeper tone of the talk, but in the humanizing of the scheme. Out of the talk at the breakfast-table one began to distinguish characters and faces in the persons about the board, and before the *Autocrat* was completed there had appeared a series of portraits, vivid and full of interest.

Two characters meanwhile were hinted at by Dr. Holmes rather than described or very palpably introduced, the Professor and the Poet. It was not difficult to see that these were thin disguises for the author himself, who, in the versatility of his nature, appealed to the reader now as a brilliant philosopher, now as a man of science, now as a seer and poet. The Professor at the Breakfast-Table followed, and there was a still stronger dramatic element; some of the former characters remained, and others of even more positive individuality were added; a romance was interwoven and something like a plot sketched, so that, while the talk stood went on and eddied about graver subjects than before, the book which grew out of the papers had more distinctly the form of a series of sketches from life. It was followed by two novels, *Elsie Venner* and *The Guardian Angel*. The talks at the breakfast-table had often gravitated toward the deep themes of destiny and human freedom; the novels wrought the same subjects in the form of fiction, and action interpreted the thought, while still there flowed on the wonderful, apparently inexhaustible stream of wit, tenderness,

Oliver Wendell Holmes was termed the Occasional Poet because of his Poetry Celebrating... Thamarai Selvi passion, and human sympathy. Fourteen years after the appearance of the first of the series, came *The Poet at the Breakfast-Table*. A new group of characters, with slight reminders of former ones, occupied the pages; again talk and romance blended; and playfulness, satire, sentiment, wise reflection and sturdy indignation trooped across the pages.

The Breakfast-Table series formed a group independent of the intercalated novels, and with its frequent poems might be taken as an artistic whole. It was hardly too much to say, that it made a new contribution to the forms of literary art. It was not altogether novel. Such a book as Southey's *The Doctor*, for example, might be cited as a progenitor. Still all that went before it were characterized more by negligence and an unordered freedom. The distinctive mark of the Autocrat and its fellows was, as we had hinted, the frank dominance of the author's personality. The elasticity of the scheme rendered possible a comprehensiveness of material; the exuberance of the author's fancy and the fullness of his thought gave richness to the fabric; the poetic sense of fitness kept the whole within just bounds. It was illustrative of the native, personal character of this series, so stamped with his genius, that when in his old age Holmes felt a desire to write again, deliberately and at length, he returned to the same form, and in *Over the Teacups* essayed the old happy blending of prose and verse, the vivification of characters supposed to carry on discussion about a social board, when in reality one dominant voice, even if sometimes ventriloquial, was heard throughout,—that of the inventor of the characters. And it was interesting to observe how shadowy at the last these characters had become, so that they were scarcely more than numerical, and how instinctively the old man, musing over the board, had surrounded himself with the gracious presences of women.

The form of these books made poetical interludes easy and natural. Sometimes the verses introduced were not blossoms upon the wandering vine, but cut flowers fastened carelessly for the lightening of the effect; for the most part, however, they seemed to belong where we found them, and a survey of the groups as presented in this volume confirmed this impression. When arranging his poems for a final collective edition, Dr. Holmes brought together in successive sections the poems from each of the Breakfast-Table series, but removed those poems which had been more arbitrarily placed first in these books, such as those more properly arranged under the heading *Poems of the Class of '29*. Thus the poems included in *The Professor* were quite distinctly the outgrowth of that strain of religious speculation which characterizes the work; they were positive affirmations, as if the author found a relief in occasional clear poetic expression when engaged in the heat of theological discussion. The series *Wind-Clouds* and *Star-Drifts*, on the other hand, which constituted the main poetic apparatus of *The Poet*, was more distinctly philosophical in its nature; but when one turned to the volume and noted the form of insertion, he is reminded that the whole book is soberer in tone and more taken up with the structural treatment of the mysteries of human life, whereas *The Professor* was quite as markedly critical and more than once destructive of notions and conventions. The poems in *The Autocrat* partook of the swift, varied play of that book, and those in *Over the Teacups* showed the flaring up now and then of the old flame as the book itself was more or less of an effort.

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Conclusion: For the purpose of treating this notable series as a whole, we had departed from a chronological survey of Dr. Holmes's career. The Autocrat appeared in 1857-1858, The Professor in 1859. The gap of fourteen years which intervened between this book and The Poet was represented in the poetical writings by the collection under the title Songs of Many Seasons, and both the subdivisions of that section and the titles of many of the poems intimated how much the author's thoughts were upon the great affairs which stirred his own country,—the war, the restoration of peace, and the beginning of that second great ingathering of the nations which would render the period following the war a great period in American history. He had left his impressions both in prose and in verse. The Atlantic Monthly afforded a convenient vehicle, as did the several occasions now kept alive by his verses. One of his notable papers was that entitled My Hunt after "the Captain," and detailed his experience when he went to the seat of war in the fall of 1862 on the occasion of the wounding of a son, who bore his father's name and was now a justice on the bench of the Supreme Court of Massachusetts.

When John Lothrop Motley died, Dr. Holmes wrote a sketch of him for the Massachusetts Historical Society, which was afterward expanded and published as a volume. The book was more than a friendly testimony; it was an expression of patriotism. No one needed to be told who had read that, and the letters which he himself wrote to Motley, his Bread and the Newspaper, his oration on The Inevitable Trial, and the lyrics which were comprehended under the title In War Time, that the author of Old Ironsides had an ardent affection for the nation and a large-hearted belief in it. Yet great crises brought these expressions to pass; his familiar habit of mind was cordially local. His affection fastened upon his college, and in his college on his class; he had a worthy pride in the race from which he had sprung, and the noble clannishness which was one of the safeguards of social morality; he loved the city of his life, not with the merely curious regard of the antiquary, but with the passion of the man who could be at home only in one place; and he held to New England as to a substantial entity, not to a geographical section of some greater whole. He did not travel, because Boston and Berkshire contented him. His laboratory was at hand; human nature was under his observation from the vantage-ground of home. With the instinct of a man of science, he took for analysis that which was most familiar to him, assured that in the bit of the world where he was born, and out of which he had got his nourishment, he had all he needed for the exercise of his wit. There was no more pathetic yet kindly figure in our literature than Little Boston. With poetic instinct, Dr. Holmes made him deformed, but not ugly. He put into him a fiery soul of local patriotism, and transfigured him thus. Under the guise of a bit of nature's mockery he was enabled to give vent to a flood of feeling without arousing laughter or contempt. All Little Boston's vehemence of civic pride was a memorial inscription, and whatever might be the fortune of the city, however august might be its presence, there lied embedded in this figure of Little Boston a perpetual witness to an imperishable civic personality. The poems which had occupied the closing sections of this volume, Bunker-Hill Battle and other Poems, The Iron Gate and other Poems, and Before the Curfew, bore frequent witness to the strength of Dr. Holmes's fidelity to his people and his country.

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