John Greenleaf Whittier and His Relation to the Abolition of Slavery

Augusta Griffing
Among our American poets stands one whose fame is not derived merely from the literary quality of his work. For many years political and humanitarian interests caused his poetical abilities to become merely a means to an end. Not until the prime of life was past did he find himself free to write as a poet and not as an advocate. The best years of his manhood were given to the work of furthering a just but unpopular cause—a cause wherein he was often misunderstood and unappreciated.

John Greenleaf Whittier was born December 17, 1807, at the old homestead, near Haverhill, Massachusetts. His parents, John Whittier and Abigail (Nussey) Whittier, were strict Quakers of the old New England type. The father was a stern, upright, just man, noted for his high ideals and rigid integrity. But he had little sympathy with his son's poetical ambitions and desire for an education. His mother was a sweet, benignant lady of commanding appearance and deep religious faith. From her Whittier inherited his imaginative faculty and poetic fancies. Two sisters, a brother and
and uncle and aunt completed the family group which is described so graphically in "Snow Bound."

Our uncle, innocent of books,
Was rich in lore of fields and books,
The ancient teachers never dumb
Of Nature's unhoused lyceum."

** ** ** **

"A simple, guileless, childlike man
Content to live where life began."

Among the rugged hills of New England
the life of a farmer boy was peaceful and wholesome, notwithstanding its privations
and hardships. The knowledge obtained in
the log schoolhouses was necessarily limited
since the terms were short, the teachers in-
competent, and books scarce. The library
of the Whittier family consisted of about
twenty volumes of biography, history and
reports of Quaker proceedings, until
Joshua Coffin, teacher and student, added
a copy of Burns's Poems. John was over-
joyed to secure this little volume and
read it enthusiastically. The simple
rustic verses of the Scottish Bard appealed
to this country youth as could nothing
else, and inspired him to attempt some
verses of his own, following the style of Burns more or less closely. His Sister encouraged him in his literary attempts, and finally, unknown to him, sent one of his best to William Lloyd Garrison, then an enterprising young editor. This poem was written, June 7, 1826, and was entitled, The Exile's Departure. June 8, 1826, it was published in the Newburyport Free Press. John was pleased to read his verses in print and sent another poem himself—a bit of blank verse called The City.

Surprised and charmed with the effusions of the youthful poet, Garrison and Abijah W. Thayer, editor of the Haverhill Gazette, persuaded Mr. Whittier to allow his son to attend the Haverhill Academy. The youth was expected to pay his own expenses while at school, and to do this he kept books, taught school, and worked at the shoemaking trade. For two terms he enjoyed the social and educational privileges of Haverhill, reading, studying, and writing. Prose and poetry from his pen appeared frequently in the Gazette. In his work at this period he evidently followed
other writers rather closely—Burns, Moore, Wilkie, Bryant, Byron, and Mrs. Hemans, were his favorites. In many ways he reminds one of Burns. Like the Scotch singer he was a country lad with a very limited education; his heart was with the common people and he wrote for them, and it was by them that his writings were best appreciated.

Upon leaving the Academy where he had obtained his meager education, Whitman became editor of the “American Manufacturer,” a Boston paper. The salary was small, but his work was light—his duties consisting mainly of writing the editorials. In these editorials various topics were touched upon. Several were criticisms of the authors and literary productions of the time. He also wrote a series of editorial addresses to the young mechanics of New England.” In addition these appeared at various times—poems of both a political and a non-political character.

During the next two or three years many articles of various descriptions—literary criticisms, poems, historical sketches, essays and political satires appeared rapidly. The majority of these articles were excellent and
showed the mental growth of the man as well as the extent of his study.

New England at that time was at the receptive stage, pleased and even-eager
to accept the effusions of a young poet, whose style was new and effective and
whose subject-matter and mode of treatment were original.

While at home on the farm Whittier began to turn his attention to politics in
stead of poetry. The plans he laid did not develop; but it was about this time (1833)
that he allied himself with the unpopular abolitionist movement. It seemed that
when Whittier cast aside his literary hopes and political ambitions to ally himself
with a band of reformers, whose cause was as unpopular as it was apparently impossible, he was abandoning all that would make him famous and was entering upon a career that could bring only trouble and obscurity. But the doctrines of his religion, as well as the humanitarian elements of his nature induced him to devote his life to breaking the chains and securing the freedom of the negro. Then he had once decided to cast his lot with the
Abolitionists, his whole soul was given to the work.

Whittier showed his Yankee parentage in his shrewdness and ability to plan and conduct political campaigns, so as to further the cause. He guarded every point by which the opposition might gain a foothold. Soon after taking up the cause which his conscience bade him promote, he published a pamphlet entitled, Justice and Expediency: or, Slavery considered with a view to its Rightful and Effectual Remedy, Abolition. This pamphlet attracted much attention and was widely circulated. One of the Southern papers printed extracts of it with severe comments upon the spirit of the production, whereupon Whittier replied with, The Abolitionists: Their Sentiments and Objects, which was published in the Harvill Gazette.

December 1833, Mr. Whittier was one of the delegates from Massachusetts to assist in organizing the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. For the sum of one hundred and fifty dollars, he devoted all of his time and energies, for six months, to the cause of the Anti-Slavery Society. This small sum
barely paid his expenses and in no way remunerated him for the dangers he underwent from mob-violence and personal spite, or for the injury to his never robust health.

In 1836, he was elected to the Massachusetts legislature and was reelected in 1836. In this same year he again undertook the editorship of the Haverhill Gazette; and also assisted in editing the Emancipator and the Anti-Slavery Reporter. Two years later he took charge of the Pennsylvania Freeman in Philadelphia. While there he had more experience with mob-rule.

In 1836, the old homestead had been disposed of and he had settled himself in a cottage in the little village of Amesbury, near the sea. In this secluded place he continued his work in his own quiet way. His poems though excellent were written merely for the cause that lay next his heart and therefore lacked much of the literary interest that they might otherwise have contained.

Whittier's work for the cause of abolition was as varied as it was efficient. He was a valued member of the American Anti-
Slavery Society of which he was, at different times, agent, manager and secretary. He was also vice-president of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. In addition to the duties devolving upon him from these offices, he directed the political action of the societies and thus enabled them to advance the reform that those who merely preached were unable to forward. Aside from this service, his experience and ability as a journalist and pamphleteer were invaluable to the cause. His political poems as they appeared were published in the various anti-slavery papers of the vicinity, and hence were copied far and wide. In 1837 and again in 1838, some of these poems were collected and published. Both volumes, in the form of tracts, were widely distributed by the Abolitionists.

All of these poems were of lasting importance. They were written for a cause—any topic then before the public was taken as a theme for a poem. The death of a nobleman, a newspaper article, an action of Congress or of the Court—anything for or against the cause, was taken and immediately embodied in verse, that rang clear as a bugle call through the land. His reflective
mind was quick to grasp the real issue
to realize that but one reform could be
established at once. His practiced hand
unerringly hit the mark. He satirized, Elliot
and expostulated, until after thirty years
he had the satisfaction of seeing the slaves
set free and given the rights of citizenship.

We of the present generation think of him
as Whittier, the poet, but those of his time
thought more of his work as a reformer and
abolitionist. His New England bring-up,
his Quaker parentage, and his environ-
ment tended to make him practical and
far-seeing. He appreciated the fact that but
one thing could be done at a time and
that other reforms must wait. He realized
too that abolition could be accomplished
only by political means. With this knowledge
he went about the work in a shrewd, calculat-
ing manner that eventually brought success.
His poems and prose were bold calls and
battle cries that encouraged the disheartened
and called others to the field.

In "The New Year," written in 1837, Whittier
lays the lash upon the backs of the Northern
Politicians who were indifferent to, or in
favor of slavery.
yet, shame upon them! there they sit, men of the North, subdued and still; much, pliant boltroons, only fit to work a master’s will.”

Sold, - bargained off for Southern notes. A passive herd of mules, Just braying through their purchased throat What’s their owner’s rules.”

When Texas was about to be admitted into the Union, Whittier used every means to prevent the act, since he thought that its admission would only be a means of promoting Slavery. "Texas" is a result of his thoughts upon this subject.

"Make our Union bond a chain! We will snap its links in vain We will stand erect again."

In Massachusetts to Virginia," he typifies the sectional feeling then prevalent among those of the North and South.

"All that a sister state should do, all that a free state may, heart, hand and purse we proffer, as in our early day; But that one dark, loathsome burden ye must stagger with alone,"
And reap the bitter harvest which ye yourselves have sown."

The clergymen and church people who upheld slavery and considered it a gift of God, are severely criticized in:
"Clerical Oppressors."

"Feed fat, ye locusts, feed!
And in your tasseled pulpits thank the Lord,
That from the toiling bondman's utter need,
Ye feed your own full board."

A poem, pathetic and beautiful in its sad portrayal of the existing evil, is "The Christian Slave."

A Christian! going, gone!
Who bids for God's own image?
For his grace
Which that poor victim of the market place
Hath in her suffering won."

It was such poems as these written humbly but earnestly and thoughtfully, that
helped arouse men to take up arms for the negro slave; caused clergymen and statesmen to proclaim from pulpit and platform the wrong and injustice of human slavery.

As examples of poetical art these poems are doubtless excelled by those of other poets, but no others ever wrought a greater effect upon a nation. Although without the beauty of form and expression which some of his poems have, they are beautiful in their evidently strong and honest purpose and genuine feeling. Thus he contributed in no small measure to make this nation wholly free.