International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education (INT-JECSE)
DOI: 10.48047/intjecse/v12i2.201234 ISSN: 1308-5581 Vol 12, Issue 02 2020

Spiritual Growth and National Pride: A Comparative Study of Oliver Wendell Holmes's Poems "The Chambered Nautilus" (1858) and "Old Ironsides" (1830)

Dr.Mrinalini B.Chavan

Department of English, D.E.S's Willingdon College , 416415.MH.India .
Email : mrinalinihc@gmail.com

Abstract

American literature of the nineteenth century reflects the young nation's efforts to articulate its identity through both individual spiritual aspiration and collective historical memory. The present paper deals with the problem of understanding how Oliver Wendell Holmes employs poetic form and imagery to express themes of spiritual growth and national pride in two of his most celebrated works: "The Chambered Nautilus" (1858) and "Old Ironsides" (1830). The purpose of this study is to comparatively analyze these poems, examining how Holmes uses extended metaphor, rhetorical strategy, and formal structure to address complementary dimensions of human aspiration. The research paper employs the research method of comparative textual analysis, examining both poems' imagery, prosody, and thematic content within their historical and literary contexts. The research paper concludes that despite their different subjects and occasions, both poems express a unified vision of transcendence wherein material objects—the nautilus shell and the warship—become vehicles for meditation on immaterial values, with spiritual growth and national pride functioning as parallel imperatives to move beyond limitation toward higher purpose. The future perspective of research is to situate Holmes's poetic vision within the broader context of New England intellectual culture and Transcendentalist thought.

Keywords: Spiritual Growth, National Pride, Holmes, Chambered Nautilus, Old Ironsides

1. Introduction

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (1809–1894) occupied a distinctive position in nineteenth-century American letters as physician, essayist, novelist, and poet. A member of the Boston Brahmin intellectual elite and a founding contributor to *The Atlantic Monthly*, Holmes combined scientific rationalism with literary artistry in ways that shaped American cultural discourse for half a century.

DOI: 10.48047/intjecse/v12i2.201234 ISSN: 1308-5581 Vol 12, Issue 02 2020

Two poems in particular have secured Holmes's place in the American literary canon: "Old Ironsides" (1830), the youthful protest poem that saved the USS *Constitution* from demolition, and "The Chambered Nautilus" (1858), the mature meditation on spiritual aspiration that Holmes himself considered his finest poetic achievement. These works, separated by nearly three decades, reveal different facets of Holmes's poetic sensibility while sharing fundamental concerns with aspiration and transcendence.

This study conducts a comparative analysis of these two celebrated works, examining how Holmes employs distinct poetic strategies to address complementary themes. "The Chambered Nautilus" presents spiritual growth as an individual's progressive journey toward higher consciousness, using the shell of the nautilus mollusk as an extended metaphor for the soul's development. "Old Ironsides" presents national pride as collective commitment to historical memory, using the threatened warship as a symbol of American valor that demands preservation.

The main aim of the research study is to comparatively analyze the themes of spiritual growth and national pride in Oliver Wendell Holmes's poems "The Chambered Nautilus" and "Old Ironsides." The major objectives of the research study are: to examine the use of extended metaphor and symbolism in each poem; to analyze how formal elements reinforce thematic content; and to evaluate how the poems together express a unified vision of aspiration and transcendence in American literary tradition.

The researcher intends to study how Holmes's "The Chambered Nautilus" and "Old Ironsides" represent complementary expressions of aspiration, with spiritual growth in the former and national pride in the latter both functioning as calls to transcend material limitation and embrace higher purposes—individual in the case of the soul's development, collective in the case of national memory.

2. Review of Literature

Critical engagement with Holmes's poetry has fluctuated significantly over time. During his lifetime and the decades immediately following, Holmes was celebrated as a major American poet, his work widely anthologized and memorized by schoolchildren. The modernist revolution, however, relegated Holmes to minor status, dismissing his verse as conventional and sentimental.

Recent scholarship has sought to reassess this judgment. Giordano (1991) examined Holmes's poetry within the context of nineteenth-century American literary culture, arguing that his work deserves serious attention for its engagement with scientific and philosophical questions of its era. This rehabilitation has opened new avenues for critical inquiry.

Studies of "Old Ironsides" have emphasized its cultural and political impact. Tilton (1947) traced the poem's role in the campaign to preserve the USS *Constitution*, demonstrating how Holmes's verses mobilized public sentiment and achieved concrete historical effect. This

approach illuminates the poem's significance as occasional verse with lasting consequences.

"The Chambered Nautilus" has attracted attention for its philosophical and religious dimensions. Howe (1979) situated the poem within New England's religious transition from orthodox Calvinism to more liberal forms of spirituality, arguing that Holmes articulates a vision of progressive spiritual development consistent with Unitarian theology.

Formal analyses have examined Holmes's prosodic craftsmanship. Warren (1988) demonstrated the careful construction of both poems, analyzing how meter, rhyme, and stanzaic form reinforce thematic content. This attention to technique counters the assumption that Holmes's apparent simplicity reflects lack of artistry.

Comparative approaches remain relatively rare in Holmes scholarship. This study addresses that gap by examining the two poems in relation to each other, identifying thematic connections that illuminate Holmes's broader poetic vision.

3. Methodology

This research employs comparative textual analysis as its primary methodology, examining the two poems' formal structures, imagery, thematic content, and rhetorical purposes. Close reading techniques illuminate specific poetic choices, while contextual analysis situates the works within antebellum American culture and Holmes's broader literary career.

The primary texts utilized are "The Chambered Nautilus" as published in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (1858) and "Old Ironsides" as originally published in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* (1830) and subsequently collected in Holmes's *Poems* (1836). Secondary sources include critical editions, scholarly monographs on American poetry, and peer-reviewed articles addressing Holmes's work.

The analysis proceeds by first examining each poem individually, analyzing its formal properties, central imagery, and thematic concerns. A subsequent section conducts comparative analysis, identifying parallels and contrasts between the works. The conclusion evaluates the significance of these findings for understanding Holmes's poetic vision.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 "The Chambered Nautilus": Structure and Form

"The Chambered Nautilus" consists of five stanzas of seven lines each, employing a distinctive rhyme scheme (AABBCCC) that combines couplets with a concluding triplet. This form creates a sense of accumulation and completion within each stanza, mirroring the poem's theme of progressive growth toward ultimate fulfillment.

The poem opens with contemplation of the nautilus shell:

DOI: 10.48047/intjecse/v12i2.201234 ISSN: 1308-5581 Vol 12, Issue 02 2020

1 "This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,
2 Sails the unshadowed main,—
3 The venturous bark that flings
4 On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
5 In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren sings,
6 And coral reefs lie bare,
7 Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their streaming hair."

The opening stanza establishes a realm of poetic imagination ("poets feign") populated by classical allusions—Sirens, sea-maids—that elevate the nautilus from biological specimen to mythological vessel. The "ship of pearl" sails an "unshadowed main," suggesting a realm beyond ordinary experience, illuminated by imagination rather than natural light.

The second stanza transitions from myth to scientific observation:

8 "Year after year beheld the silent toil
9 That spread his lustrous coil;
10 Still, as the spiral grew,
11 He left the past year's dwelling for the new,
12 Stole with soft step its shining archway through,
13 Built up its idle door,
14 Stretched in his last-found home, and knew the old no more."

The nautilus's biological process—building successively larger chambers as it grows, sealing off the old—becomes the poem's central metaphor. The creature "left the past year's dwelling for the new," a process of continuous transcendence that Holmes will apply to human spiritual development.

4.2 "The Chambered Nautilus": Spiritual Growth as Theme

The poem's final three stanzas develop the application to human spiritual life. The third stanza addresses the shell directly:

15 "Thanks for the heavenly message brought by thee,
16 Child of the wandering sea,
17 Cast from her lap, forlorn!
18 From thy dead lips a clearer note is born
19 Than ever Triton blew from wreathèd horn!
20 While on mine ear it rings,
21 Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings."

The shell delivers a "heavenly message"—natural object becomes spiritual teacher. The reference to Triton, the classical sea-god, continues the mythological framework while asserting that the nautilus's silent teaching surpasses even divine music. The "deep caves of thought"

DOI: 10.48047/intjecse/v12i2.201234 ISSN: 1308-5581 Vol 12, Issue 02 2020

where the speaker hears this voice suggest the interior space of consciousness where spiritual growth occurs.

The fourth stanza makes the application explicit:

22 "Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
23 As the swift seasons roll!
24 Leave thy low-vaulted past!
25 Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
26 Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
27 Till thou at length art free,
28 Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!"

The soul is commanded to imitate the nautilus, building "more stately mansions" as it develops. The "low-vaulted past" must be abandoned for "nobler" temples—spiritual growth requires leaving behind earlier, smaller conceptions. The final image of leaving the "outgrown shell" suggests death as the ultimate transcendence, the soul freed from bodily limitation entirely.

4.3 "Old Ironsides": Structure and Rhetoric

"Old Ironsides" employs a different formal strategy appropriate to its rhetorical purpose. The poem consists of three eight-line stanzas in iambic tetrameter with an ABABCDCD rhyme scheme—a form suited to public declamation and memorable impact.

The poem opens with bitter irony:

1 "Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!
2 Long has it waved on high,
3 And many an eye has danced to see
4 That banner in the sky;
5 Beneath it rung the battle shout,
6 And burst the cannon's roar;—
7 The meteor of the ocean air
8 Shall sweep the clouds no more."

The imperative "tear her tattered ensign down!" appears to endorse the ship's destruction, but the context makes clear this is bitter sarcasm. The stanza catalogues what will be lost: the flag that inspired joy ("many an eye has danced"), the site of heroic combat ("battle shout," "cannon's roar"), the "meteor of the ocean air" that will no longer sail.

The second stanza continues the ironic catalogue:

DOI: 10.48047/intjecse/v12i2.201234 ISSN: 1308-5581 Vol 12, Issue 02 2020

"Her deck, once red with heroes' blood,
Where knelt the vanquished foe,
When winds were hurrying o'er the flood,
And waves were white below,
No more shall feel the victor's tread,
Or know the conquered knee;—
The harpies of the shore shall pluck
The eagle of the sea!"

The deck "red with heroes' blood" evokes sacrifice and valor. The image of the "vanquished foe" kneeling establishes the ship's record of victory. The final couplet introduces explicit condemnation: those who would destroy the ship are "harpies"—the monstrous creatures of Greek myth—while the *Constitution* is the "eagle of the sea," noble prey threatened by ignoble predators.

4.4 "Old Ironsides": National Pride as Theme

The final stanza shifts from irony to direct exhortation:

"Oh, better that her shattered hulk
Should sink beneath the wave;
Her thunders shook the mighty deep,
And there should be her grave;
Nail to the mast her holy flag,
Set every threadbare sail,
And give her to the god of storms,
The lightning and the gale!"

Holmes proposes an alternative to ignominious scrapping: heroic destruction at sea. The ship should "sink beneath the wave" where "her thunders shook the mighty deep"—returned to the element where she achieved glory. The flag is now "holy," elevated to sacred status. The concluding image of surrender to "the god of storms" transforms destruction into apotheosis, the ship ascending through elemental dissolution rather than descending through bureaucratic demolition.

The poem's national pride operates through several mechanisms. First, it identifies the ship with American military honor, making its destruction an insult to national valor. Second, it creates a community of feeling ("many an eye has danced") that includes the reader in collective memory. Third, it elevates the particular ship to symbolic status, making the *Constitution* representative of American naval power and, by extension, national identity.

DOI: 10.48047/intjecse/v12i2.201234 ISSN: 1308-5581 Vol 12, Issue 02 2020

4.5 Comparative Analysis: Aspiration and Transcendence

Despite their different subjects and occasions, "The Chambered Nautilus" and "Old Ironsides" share fundamental thematic concerns that illuminate Holmes's poetic vision.

Both poems employ central objects—the nautilus shell, the warship—as vehicles for meditation on value and transcendence. In each case, a material thing (biological specimen, wooden vessel) becomes the occasion for reflection on immaterial significance. The nautilus teaches spiritual growth; the *Constitution* embodies national honor. Both objects are threatened with destruction (the shell is "cast from her lap, forlorn"; the ship faces demolition), and both become more meaningful through that threat.

Both poems present growth or development as movement beyond limitation. "The Chambered Nautilus" commands the soul to "build thee more stately mansions," progressively transcending earlier, smaller dwelling places. "Old Ironsides" imagines the ship freed from mundane fate through surrender to elemental forces, ascending through destruction rather than suffering ignoble decay. In each case, transcendence requires leaving behind what was once sufficient.

The poems differ, however, in the locus of aspiration. "The Chambered Nautilus" addresses the individual soul, commanding personal spiritual development. Its rhetoric is meditative, its audience the solitary reader engaged in self-examination. "Old Ironsides" addresses the collective nation, summoning public sentiment to preserve historical memory. Its rhetoric is persuasive, its audience citizens capable of political action.

This difference reflects the poems' distinct genres. "The Chambered Nautilus" belongs to the tradition of meditative poetry, using natural objects as prompts for spiritual reflection. "Old Ironsides" belongs to the tradition of occasional verse, responding to specific historical circumstances to produce immediate effect. Yet both employ classical allusions (Sirens, Triton; harpies, eagles) that connect American experience to the grandeur of classical tradition.

5. Conclusion

This comparative analysis has demonstrated that Oliver Wendell Holmes's "The Chambered Nautilus" and "Old Ironsides," despite their different subjects and occasions, express complementary dimensions of a unified poetic vision. Both poems employ material objects as occasions for meditation on immaterial values, and both present aspiration as movement beyond limitation toward higher purpose.

"The Chambered Nautilus" presents spiritual growth as the individual soul's progressive development toward higher consciousness. The nautilus's biological process—building ever-larger chambers, sealing off the old—becomes a metaphor for the soul's journey beyond earlier, smaller conceptions of self. The poem commands continuous transcendence, culminating in death as the ultimate liberation.

"Old Ironsides" locates national pride in the collective preservation of historical memory. The threatened warship becomes a symbol of American valor, its proposed destruction an insult to national honor. The poem mobilizes public sentiment to preserve heritage, demonstrating poetry's capacity for political effect while elevating patriotism to quasi-religious status.

Together, these poems articulate a vision of aspiration that encompasses both personal and national dimensions of American identity. The individual soul must grow beyond its limitations; the nation must honor its heritage. Both imperatives reflect Holmes's fundamental conviction that human beings—individually and collectively—are called to transcend the material and embrace the ideal.

Future research might situate Holmes's poetic vision within the broader context of New England intellectual culture, examining his relationship to Transcendentalist thought and Unitarian theology. Additionally, study of Holmes's influence on subsequent American poetry might trace how his combination of scientific observation and spiritual aspiration anticipated later developments in American verse.

References

[1] Arms, George. *The Fields Were Green: A New View of Bryant, Whittier, Holmes, Lowell, and Longfellow*. Stanford UP, 1953.

[2] Giordano, Matthew J. "Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation." *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 3, 1991, pp. 361–387.

[3] Holmes, Oliver Wendell. *Poems*. Otis, Broaders, 1836.

[4] Holmes, Oliver Wendell. *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*. Phillips, Sampson, 1858.

[5] Howarth, William L. *The Book of Concord: Thoreau's Life as a Writer*. Viking Press, 1972.

[6] Howe, Daniel Walker. *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805–1861*. Harvard UP, 1979.

[7] Martin, Jay S. "Oliver Wendell Holmes." *The American Renaissance in New England*, edited by Joel Myerson, Gale Research, 1981, pp. 83–89.

[8] Small, Miriam Rossiter. *Oliver Wendell Holmes*. Twayne Publishers, 1962.

[9] Tilton, Eleanor M. *Amiable Autocrat: A Biography of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes*. Henry Schuman, 1947.

[10] Wagenknecht, Edward. "Oliver Wendell Holmes: Poet." *The Fireside Poets*, edited by Edward Wagenknecht, Oxford UP, 1969, pp. 78–112.

[11] Walker, Robert H. *The Poet and the Gilded Age: Social Themes in Late Nineteenth-Century American Verse*. U of Pennsylvania P, 1978.

[12] Warren, Austin. "Oliver Wendell Holmes." *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, edited by Jay Parini, Columbia UP, 1988, pp. 138–152.