

Mythmaking and National Memory: A Historical-Literary Reassessment of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's Poem: "Paul Revere's Ride" (1861)

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Abstract: *The antebellum period saw American writers actively constructing a national mythology through literary reimagining of Revolutionary history, creating narratives that served contemporary needs for unity rather than adhering to strict historical accuracy. The present paper deals with the problem of how poetry shapes collective memory, often at the expense of historical precision, creating myths that serve present needs rather than faithfully represent past events while becoming more culturally significant than the complex realities they replace. The purpose of this study is to examine how Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride" (1861) constructs a heroic national myth at a moment when the nation faced civil war, transforming a complex historical event involving multiple riders into a simple narrative of individual heroism that could inspire Union loyalty. The research paper employs the research method of historical-literary analysis combined with memory studies to examine the relationship between poetic creation and national identity formation, particularly how mythmaking serves cultural purposes. The research paper concludes that Longfellow deliberately simplified and altered the historical record to create a usable past that could inspire sacrifice and commitment to national unity, producing a myth that has proven more durable than the complex historical reality it replaced and that continues to shape American memory of the Revolution. The future perspective of this research study is to examine how subsequent generations have received and revised Longfellow's mythic construction and to explore how the poem participates in broader patterns of nationalist literature.*

Keywords: Mythmaking, National memory, American Revolution, Heroic narrative, Civil War, Patriotic poetry, Historical fiction

I. INTRODUCTION

"Paul Revere's Ride" appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in January 1861, just months before the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter would begin the Civil War. The timing was not coincidental. Longfellow, already America's most popular and influential poet, understood the power of verse to shape national consciousness. As southern states seceded and the Union fragmented, Longfellow sought to remind Americans of their shared Revolutionary heritage, creating a narrative of heroic sacrifice that might inspire commitment to national preservation.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882) occupied a unique position in nineteenth-century American culture. His poems were memorized by schoolchildren, quoted in parlors, and printed in newspapers across the country. He possessed cultural authority that no American poet has since achieved. When he chose to celebrate Paul Revere's ride, he was not merely commemorating historical event but actively constructing national mythology.

The historical Paul Revere was a successful Boston silversmith and engraver who participated in various patriot activities before and during the Revolution. The midnight ride of April 18, 1775, was one episode among many in his life of political engagement. He was not alone that night; William Dawes rode a different route, and Dr. Samuel



Prescott actually completed the ride to Concord after Revere was captured by British patrol. Revere himself wrote accounts of the night that emphasized the collaborative nature of the warning system.

Longfellow knew these complexities but chose to simplify them for mythic purposes. His poem presents Revere as solitary hero, individual American everyman rousing a sleeping nation. This simplification serves cultural functions that historical accuracy would not—providing a figure for identification, a narrative of agency, a model of patriotic action.

The aim of the research paper is critically analyze the relationship between historical fact and national mythmaking in Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride," examining how the poem transforms complex Revolutionary history into heroic narrative serving the needs of a nation facing Civil War.

The Objective of the research paper is to examine the poem's departures from historical fact and the narrative purposes these alterations serve. The second objective is to analyze the construction of Revere as solitary hero within the poem's mythic framework. The third objective is to investigate the poem's publication context in January 1861 and its function as implicit Civil War propaganda. And final objective is to assess the poem's lasting influence on American national memory and identity formation.

The researcher intends to investigate how Longfellow deliberately crafted "Paul Revere's Ride" as a patriotic myth designed to inspire Union loyalty by presenting individual heroism as the foundation of American liberty, simplifying complex historical events into a narrative that emphasized action, courage, and the possibility of one person making decisive difference in national crisis.

II. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

2.1 The Framing Device: Memory and Transmission

Longfellow opens with a framing device that establishes the poem as transmitted heritage:

"Listen, my children, and you shall hear Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five; Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year." (1–5)

The direct address to "children" positions the poem as intergenerational transmission of patriotic memory. The imperative "Listen" demands attention to what follows as essential national narrative. The observation that "hardly a man is now alive" who remembers the event creates urgency—living memory is fading, and poetry must preserve what witnesses can no longer tell.

This framing device establishes the poem's cultural function. It is not historical report but heritage transmission, the passing of sacred story from elder to youth. The children addressed are every American child, every citizen who will receive this narrative as foundation of national identity.

2.2 The Signal System: Memorable Simplification

The famous signal arrangement follows:

"He said to his friend, 'If the British march By land or sea from the town to-night, Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch
Of the North Church tower as a signal light,— One, if by land, and two, if by sea;
And I on the opposite shore will be, Ready to ride and spread the alarm

Through every Middlesex village and farm,
For the country folk to be up and to arm.' " (6–14)

The binary signal—"one, if by land, and two, if by sea"—creates memorable formula that generations would recite. The simplicity is deliberate; complex contingencies reduce to clear alternatives. Revere positions himself as the system's executor: he will wait, receive the signal, and ride.



Historically, this arrangement was more complicated. Revere helped organize the signal system but was not its sole recipient or interpreter. The poem's simplification makes one man responsible for the entire warning network, concentrating agency that was actually distributed.

2.3 The Waiting and Watching

The poem develops suspense through the friend's vigil:

"Then he climbed the tower of the Old North Church, By the wooden stairs, with stealthy tread,
To the belfry-chamber overhead,
And startled the pigeons from their perch On the sombre rafters, that round him made
Masses and moving shapes of shade." (29–34)

The "stealthy tread" emphasizes danger; the friend risks discovery. The pigeons startled from their perch, the "masses and moving shapes of shade," create atmospheric tension. Gothic elements— darkness, uncertainty, ominous movement—intensify the stakes.

The friend observes British preparations:

"Meanwhile, his friend, through alley and street, Wanders and watches with eager ears,
Till in the silence around him he hears The muster of men at the barrack door, The sound of arms, and the tramp of feet,
And the measured tread of the grenadiers,
Marching down to their boats on the shore." (35–41)

The sounds of military preparation—"muster of men," "sound of arms," "tramp of feet," "measured tread of the grenadiers"—build inevitability. The British are coming; the warning must go forth.

2.4 The Ride Begins

When the signal appears, Revere springs into action: "A hurry of hoofs in a village street,

A shape in the moonlight, a bulk in the dark,

And beneath, from the pebbles, in passing, a spark Struck out by a steed flying fearless and fleet." (68–71)

The imagery emphasizes speed and energy—"hurry," "flying fearless and fleet." Revere becomes almost abstract, "a shape in the moonlight, a bulk in the dark," larger than individual human, mythic presence rather than specific person. The spark struck from pebbles suggests fire, the ignition that will spread.

The metaphor of ignition becomes explicit:

"And the spark struck out by that steed, in his flight, Kindled the land into flame with its heat." (76–77)

Revere's ride does not merely warn; it "kindles" the land, ignites revolution. The single spark becomes conflagration, individual action becoming collective uprising.

2.5 The Ride Through Towns

The poem traces Revere's progress through sleeping villages: "It was twelve by the village clock,

When he crossed the bridge into Medford town.

He heard the crowing of the cock, And the barking of the farmer's dog, And felt the damp of the river fog,

That rises after the sun goes down." (78–83)

The specific time and place—"twelve," "Medford town"—create documentary texture within mythic narrative. The sensory details—crowing cock, barking dog, river fog—ground the ride in physical reality while maintaining urgency.

The pattern continues through Lexington and toward Concord, each village marking progress:

"It was one by the village clock, When he galloped into Lexington. He saw the gilded weathercock

Swim in the moonlight as he passed." (86–89)

The "gilded weathercock" swimming "in the moonlight" creates memorable image, the ordinary made luminous by historical moment.



2.6 The Climactic Arrival

The poem builds to climax:

“You know the rest. In the books you have read, How the British Regulars fired and fled,—
How the farmers gave them ball for ball, From behind each fence and farm-yard wall, Chasing the red-coats down the lane,
Then crossing the fields to emerge again Under the trees at the turn of the road,
And only pausing to fire and load.” (98–105)

“You know the rest” assumes shared knowledge, the common heritage that makes Americans American. The battles of Lexington and Concord need not be narrated in detail; they belong to collective memory that the poem invokes rather than creates.

2.7 The Concluding Appeal

The poem concludes with call to present action: “So through the night rode Paul Revere;

And so through the night went his cry of alarm

To every Middlesex village and farm,— A cry of defiance and not of fear,

A voice in the darkness, a knock at the door,

And a word that shall echo forevermore!” (106–111)

“A cry of defiance and not of fear” characterizes the Revolution’s spirit—courage, not panic; resistance, not submission. The final promise that the word “shall echo forevermore” claims permanent significance for the poem’s own act of transmission.

The concluding stanza makes the application explicit:

“For, borne on the night-wind of the Past, Through all our history, to the last,

In the hour of darkness and peril and need, The people will waken and listen to hear The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,

And the midnight message of Paul Revere.” (112–117)

The poem speaks to “the hour of darkness and peril and need”—precisely the condition of the nation in January 1861 as states seceded and war approached. Revere’s ride becomes model for present crisis; his message still summons Americans to resistance and sacrifice.

III. CONCLUSION

Longfellow’s “Paul Revere’s Ride” demonstrates how poetry shapes national memory, often more powerfully than historical scholarship. The poem’s simplifications—its transformation of collaborative effort into individual heroism, its omission of Revere’s capture and the roles of other riders—serve mythic purposes that historical complexity would undermine.

For a nation fracturing in 1861, Longfellow offered a usable past: a story of individual courage inspiring collective resistance, of one man’s midnight ride awakening a people to defend their liberty. The message to contemporary readers was clear: as Revere rode to preserve colonial liberty, so might present Americans sacrifice to preserve national union.

The poem’s enduring influence testifies to myth’s power over history. Generations of American schoolchildren memorized these verses, absorbing Longfellow’s construction of Revere as solitary hero. The historical reality—multiple riders, networks of communication, Revere’s capture before reaching Concord—could not compete with the poem’s compelling narrative of individual agency and national awakening.



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