

An Analysis of Longfellow's Dual Attitudes towards the American Indian in *The Song of Hiawatha*

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Abstract: *The Song of Hiawatha* remains a fascinating source of American Indian myths and nearly the only memorable American Indian epic written in the 19th century. However, myth is a double-faced concept, which is used of both the deepest insights and the most deluding lies. Henry David Longfellow has adapted the American Indian myths in *The Song of Hiawatha*. Although he attempts to restore the brilliant Indian legends, he still can't get rid of his white identity, consciously showing his racial prejudice in his poem. And this paper aims to analyze Longfellow's dual attitudes towards the American Indian in *The Song of Hiawatha* and digs out reasons for his contradictory opinions.

KeyWords: Dual attitudes; The American Indian; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; *The Song of Hiawatha*

The Song of Hiawatha written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, consists of twenty-three sections vividly recounts the adventures of an American Indian hero who fights for the better life of his people. an culture. However, readers are always confused by the arbitrarily imposed ending in which Hiawatha vacates his native village so that his fellow Indians might be more inclined to listen to the redeeming gospel of Christianity brought to them by European missionaries. This ending implicitly shows the whites' traditional prejudice on the native Americans from the perspective of colonialists. Therefore, although Longfellow spare no effort to restore the brilliant Indian legends, he still can't get rid of his white identity, consciously showing his racial prejudice in his poem. And this paper aims to analyze Longfellow's dual attitude towards the American Indian in *The Song of Hiawatha* and digs out reasons for his contradictory opinions.

1 Explicit theme: Praise of the Indian hero

In *The Song of Hiawatha*, Longfellow mainly lauds the kindness, wisdom, and bravery that are embodied in his title character Hiawatha in the former part. The mighty creator of the nations, Gitche Manito brings the various tribes together to smoke the peace pipe and sends a prophet to the people "Who shall guide you and shall teach you, / Who shall toil and suffer with you." (I: line 115-22) The prophet is Hiawatha and he indeed succeeds in carrying out his duty. The poem centers on the explicit theme of this Indian hero.

The physical prowess is demonstrated by Hiawatha in this poem. As Hiawatha is enduring days of fasting "For profit of his people/ For advantage of the Nations", he encounters a youth dressed in garments green and yellow. (V: line 7-8) This stranger insists that Hiawatha must wrestle him so as to gain what he has prayed for by struggle and by labor. Hiawatha continues his fast and simultaneously engages in the contest and finally conquers the stranger. The gift of corn he wins is for his people who have lived for hunting and fishing receive more reliable sources of food. In addition, in order to fight off a fever plaguing his people, Hiawatha challenges Megissogwon, the powerful magician who sends disease and death among his people. He arms himself with all his war-gear and arrives in the land of the magician, where he battles with the fiery serpent guards firstly. Then when finally combating with Megissogwon face to face, Hiawatha fears nothing and finally vanquishes Megissogwon with the help of a woodpecker, which enables Hiawatha to save his village from the fever and death.

Besides, the poem also promotes the intelligence and wisdom of Hiawatha. For example, when battling with his father Mudjekeewis, Hiawatha misleads his father to considering that the bulrushes are his weakness in order to allure his father's confession on his own vulnerability. What's more, Hiawatha taunts Nahma the sturgeon into swallowing him so that he can kill the giant fish from the inside. Most importantly, Hiawatha also builds a canoe, invents picture writing, and develops corn production, making him an epic hero because of both his mind and his brawn. In order to deepen the heroic image of Hiawatha, Longfellow contrasts Hiawatha with his two friends Chibiabos, the artistic singer who dies during a hunt, and Kwasind, who is strong but foolish enough to allow himself to be killed by the Little People. Different from his two friends, Hiawatha represents the ideal blend of wisdom and courageous strength.

The figure of Hiawatha represents the ideal blend of wisdom and courageous strength in Longfellow's poem, which emphasizes how intelligence and bravery is highly valued among the American Indian.

2 Implicit voice: uncivilized savage from the perspective of colonist

Longfellow praises the Indian hero in the former parts, but he abruptly converts to the friendliness and salvation from the whites at the ending. This relationship between the ending and its pre-text shows the obvious connection of the racial and political problems

inherent in the poem.

Longfellow's reconstruction of the Indian legends is unavoidably based on the traditional value of imperialism, degrading the American Indian as an alien kind who is waiting for the salvation of Christianity. Longfellow describes them as noble "savage" under the gaze of colonists. In the introduction part, the poet claims that if they "who have faith in God and Nature", they can "touch God's right hand in that darkness/ And are lifted up and strengthened" in "even savage bosoms". (Introduction, line 90-100) Through the promotion of European authority and civilization, Longfellow implicitly suggests that the Indian savage will finally converts to Christianity. Therefore, the wisdom and brave hero of the Indian nation is suddenly transformed as the spokesperson of the colonist in the last two chapters, directly proclaiming the supreme of European civilization.

Besides, Longfellow's transformation of the Indian myths covers up some historical truth of the Indian tragedy in the course of European colonization. Colonists' claims on the salvation of the American Indian are used to rationalize their crime in the colonial expansion and conceal the suffering they brings to the native people with improper appropriation of the Indian myths. Longfellow manipulates the historical truth in order to maintain the rationality of imperialism. Confronted with the invasion of the white people, the Indian nation follows their prophet: "Let us welcome, then, the strangers/ Hail them as our friends and brothers/ And the heart's right hand of friendship/ Give them when they come to see us." (XXI: line 167-70) This vision of peace and brotherhood is immediately obliterated by another totally different vision. Hiawatha sees his "nation scattered" and the "remnants of the people" swept away "Like the withered leaves of Autumn." (XXI: line 195-200) Actually, it reveals the historic fate of the American Indian that the white destroys the optimistic dream and their home brutally in history. Longfellow does not assign any blame to the white people for their destruction of the life of the Indians. Though Hiawatha beholds his nation scattered, he blames his own people for their forgetful of his counsels and warring with each other instead of showing us the historical truth of the invasion of the white man. This reconstruction of the history of the American Indian helps to conceal the truth of the colonists' cruelty onto the Natives, depriving the voice of the minority and finally degrading them as the silent "others".

3 Reasons for Longfellow's contradictory attitudes

When Longfellow rewrites the Indian legends in his poem, he actually presents both the most faithful and the most faithless of the nineteenth-century versions of the Indian. While he bases the Indian legends in his poem, he also implicitly describes more cruel and grotesque aspects of the Native, especially some uncivilized acts of the American Indian. In fact, among the realistic literature in the colonial period, Native Americans are always regarded as violent, satanic, dangerous. Longfellow to some degree can't get rid of the traditional bias and his view of the American Indian proves to be paradoxical by regarding them as noble savages in the poem.

It is important for the white to believe that the Native Americans are savages, so Longfellow's attempt to deal with the Indian materials is bound to be problematic. Critics claim that Longfellow has failed to deal with the political equality by ignoring the truth that the Native has been dispossessed and killed by the white colonists during the colonial period. The relationship of the European-American and American Indian is between settler and aboriginal, colonizer and colonized, noble and slave, which precludes cultural continuity. And this racial discontinuity underlies the whole poem, especially the abrupt ending of the arrival of the "friendly" Europeans who will guide the Native with their noble religion. If the white believes that they were savages, then the conquest of them becomes much more justifiable. And all the inhuman crime the white commit to the Native can be justified as education and indoctrination. The white can tell themselves that these people are really bad people who deserve to be subjugated. The white deserves their land because the European-Americans are a superior people to them not only technologically but also morally. Therefore, Longfellow also hold this view of the American Indian because his nation needs to feel that they are right in taking their land and it needs to justify the invasion.

Longfellow's reshaping of the Indian elements in his poem mediates the radical conflicts that lay behind American's traditional attitudes to the Indian. To some degree, this mythological poem was an imaginative truth that made possible the flourishing of American artistic greatness and the development of national literature. However, it is argued that these nineteenth-century myths, which included the "savages of America", the "empty continent", the "vanishing race", have legitimized nineteenth-century racism and imperialism. The imperialist discourse gradually speeds up the displacement of the Indians and American expansionism.

4 Conclusion

Although Longfellow writes this poem within a year, it is the product of at least two decades of interest in the Indian legends. Recognizing that these tales are in danger of disappearing, he tries to preserve them within the framework of an epic poem, reconstructing the epic heroic images of the Indian tribes. However, the poem reflects the European legend of the noble savage and the classical conventions of the heroic poem. Longfellow's adaptation at some degree fails to loyally represent the Indian culture. Therefore, although he attempts to reconstruct the Indian culture with the hope to protect them, he is confused by his white identity and can't escape the limitation of his national culture and era.

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