

Oliver Wendell Holmes

(1809-1894)

The Chambered Nautilus (1858)

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

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl;
Wrecked is the ship of pearl!
Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,
As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,
And every chambered cell,
Before thee lies revealed, --
Its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt unsealed!

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

Thanks for the heavenly message brought by thee,
Child of the wandering sea,
Cast from her lap, forlorn!
From thy dead lips a clearer note is born
Than ever Triton blew from wreathed horn!
While on mine ear it rings,
Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings: --

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

ANALYSIS

“If you will look into Roget’s *Bridgewater Treatise*, you will find a figure of one of these shells [the nautilus], and a section of it. The last will show you the series of enlarging compartments successively dwelt in by the animal that inhabits the shell, which is built in a widening spiral. Can you find no lesson in this? I am as willing to submit this to criticism as any [poem] I have written, in form as well as substance, and I have not seen any English verse of just the same pattern.”

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“‘The Chambered Nautilus’ is unusually suggestive of Longfellow’s poems. Like ‘Excelsior’ or ‘The Builders,’ it preaches a sermon with the text ‘Onward and upward.’ The form, too, resembles Longfellow’s: an object is described in the three opening stanzas, and then, in the two stanzas addressed to the nautilus at the end, the moral is drawn. Holmes seems to have been bothered very little by the incongruity--distressing careful readers--of some of his images.”

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States I, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1966) 907