

For the Legend. Lowell's indebtedness to old tales of quests for the Holy Grail was general and indefinite. He drew from mediæval literature, with which he was intimately acquainted, a typical outline for the narrative of his own invention, and the traditions that have made the search for the Grail a symbol of consecration to some noble end enabled him to embody a hidden ethical purpose in his tale. The name of his knight appears in one form and another in the romances of the Middle Ages. This form of it is most commonly associated with the metrical romance entitled *Launfal*, by Sir Thomas Chestre, published in the reign of Henry VI, and now to be found in volume i of Ritson's *Ancient English Metrical Romances*. The tale is a free and enlarged version of some French romance, and it relates amorous adventures of the knight Sir Launfal, or Lancelot, in another spelling, in which King Arthur and Queen Guinevere appear. From it Lowell borrowed no more than the name.

For poetic figures and conceits. The poet's indebtedness to Wordsworth and to Cowper is far greater. Each of these poets touched his imagination, and he re-minted in poetic fervor the figures and fancies of their poems, but no idea or vision came from him unchanged. The indebtedness is in that subtle form to be traced only through the creative imagination. His brain reproduced in form of vision idyllic pictures corresponding to the words he read. The phrases slipped away, but the creations called up by them remained a possession of his mind, and stimulated activity of the same kind. With true poetic instinct, he transmuted each fancy into the scenes and the detail of nature familiar by observation. If one reads the earlier poems of these authors and, immediately after, Lowell's preludes, there comes to the critical sense a strong impression of greater condensation, closer organization of material, and lighter, freer handling of phrase and fancy in the work of the American poet. Thus he made good his own words, "T is his at last who has said it best."

The source of the inspiration of the Prelude to Part First, both in rich detail and in deeper meaning, cannot be mistaken. Suggestions for comparison of this prelude with Wordsworth's Ode will be found elsewhere. In Cowper's *The Task*, Book V, "The Winter Morning Walk," lines 97-176, are descriptions that suggest the very figures and fancies of the Prelude to Part Second. The quotation of a few lines will illustrate, and also suggest comparison at greater length:—

. "On the flood,
Indurated and fixed, the snowy weight
Lies undissolved; while silently beneath,
And unperceived, the current steals away.
And see where it has hung the embroidered banks
With forms so various, that no powers of art,
The pencil or the pen, may trace the scene;
Here glittering turrets rise, uprearing high
(Fantastic misarrangement!) on the roof
Large growth of what may seem the sparkling trees
And shrubs of fairy land. The crystal drops
That trickle down the branches, fast congealed,
Shoot into pillars of pellucid length,
And prop the pile they but adorned before."

Here, perhaps, is the suggestion of Lowell's **steel-stemmed trees**.

TOPICS FOR STUDY

PRELUDE TO PART FIRST

1. In what is the key to the artistic presentation of the Prelude?
2. What is the plan of the Prelude?
3. Builds a bridge from Dreamland for his lay is a figure of speech in which the poet wishes each one of us to recognize a parallel between something that takes place in the mind of the organist seated at his instrument and the real act of the figure. Find as many parts of the parallel as you can. Do you notice any respect in which the parallel is not a good one?

4. **Nearer draws his theme.** What did the poet mean by his theme,—the story, or the purpose in the story, or something else? What is the meaning of **nearer draws**, here?
5. What is the thought in the mind of the poet which is illustrated by the figure **faint auroral flushes**?
- NOTE.—In answer, describe faint auroral flushes, or flashes, as seen in the sky; then describe the process in the mind indicated by the words **theme draws nearer**. Finally, point out any resemblances between the two which make the figure a fit one for the poet's use.
6. What did Wordsworth mean when he said that heaven is especially about the soul of the young child?
In lines 11 and 12, Lowell means that older persons, year by year, come nearer to heaven in another way; if you would understand these lines and their relation to the story that follows, answer the following questions carefully, in order:
- Where is Mount Sinai, geographically?
 - How long ago did the incident in the history of the Jews to which Lowell refers take place?
 - For what did the leader of the tribes go up into the mountain? Why did he go alone?
- NOTE.—See page 89 for Lowell's figurative use of the mountain in other poems.
- Why was this incident important in the life of the Jewish nation?
 - How many reasons can you find for describing the process by which any one becomes daily better and more noble as climbing Sinai?
 - What did Lowell mean when he said we climb our Sinais with souls that cringe and plot?
7. In the third paragraph, Lowell describes in a poetic way five influences which seem to plead with every one who feels them to live more nearly in accord with his highest ideals. Name and describe in plain English words these influences. Are they different influences, or different forms of the same influence?
8. Explain especially the meaning in:
- Our fallen and traitor lives.
- NOTE.—For one explanation, see Lowell's poem *Freedom*.
- prophecies, uttered by great winds?

9. Why did the poet call men faint-hearted? What did he mean by the striving of the mountain with the faint heart?
10. Can you show whether **Druid** is a fit adjective for woods? For what special reason did Lowell choose it here? For the use of this word in other poetry, see p. 2.
11. What is the dictionary meaning of the Latin word **benedicite**? What part of the church service does it suggest?
12. If (his figure, in lines 17, 18, is borrowed from the church service, can you explain the four parts, the waiting wood, the outstretched arms, the benedicite, the worshippers?
13. Can you explain the parallel between the figure and the meaning in lines 19, 20, in the same way?
14. **Earth gets its price for what earth gives us** is a general statement which Lowell illustrates by particulars. Name in order the illustrations he chooses and for each ask:
- What the words mean literally.
 - Whether the statement is true in life as you know it; give illustrations of your own, if you can.
- NOTE.—Earth is a figure by which one thing is used for another entirely different because it suggests the idea, or has come by common consent to stand for it. The personification of Earth is an aid in conveying this transferred meaning, and this figure is carried out in the conceit of bargain and price paid. Other expressions, the **Devil's dross**, a cap and bells, etc., must be understood in the same figurative way.
15. Lines 29-32 are arranged in contrast with lines 21-28, at every point. In these lines,
- Underline every phrase which seems to you hard to understand; as, **ounce of dross**, **Devil's booth**, etc.
 - Think what meaning each phrase has in your own mind, and write an explanation of it with illustration, as you would for a friend who could see no meaning in the poetic language used.
 - Find as many points of contrast between lines 29-32 and lines 21-28 as you can.
16. What connection have these lines with the beginning of *Prelude to Part First*, lines 1-12?
17. **A Day in June.** How is this beautiful description of a day in June prepared for and introduced in the preceding stanza?

18. Why was Lowell unwilling to pass at once from his prelude to his narrative ?
19. Show the plan or organization of this description by lines, and also how the poet leads the reader easily from one division to the next.

NOTE. — Lowell leads readers to the acceptance of the point of view he desires in this prelude by many steps of transition. In a large way, the poetic paragraphs divide in meaning into three parts. In the first, the poet narrates with genuine feeling how with the turn of the year and the strengthening warmth of the sun, life, like a high tide, floods the old channels, stirring first in the clod, then climbing and spreading until the wide view palpitates and thrills. Then, by the easiest transition, he tells how the new life of springtime affects all the happy creatures of the world out of doors. Then, again, by the figure of the tide flooding back into every bare inlet, and creek, and bay, he leads our thought to the influence of the season on the emotions and feelings of the human heart. He dwells in detail upon the multitudinous ways in which human beings respond to the quickening of life and activity in nature. The renewal of health and hope begets an impulse to achieve, and the soul lies open to inspirations that will lead to renewed purpose and effort. Thus, at length, we accept the suggestion of the poet, that from the divine influence in nature, the striving of the mountain, the benediction of the Druid-wood, the tender beauty of June, came the impulse to the heart of Sir Launfal to remember the keeping of his vow. Poetic diction is often obscure and indirect as a means of expressing thought, and the questions below are intended to aid students in the interpretation of the hidden meaning of the poet.

20. **The high tide of the year.** Let each student describe from his own experience and memory the earliest signs of returning spring at the end of winter, and the changes that follow until the time of full bloom.
21. What two things did Lowell personify in the first paragraph of this description? How did he create a personal relation for these personifications? In what is it shown?
22. Add other suitable and beautiful illustrations of the poet's thought from your own observation. Lowell chose the illustrations and figures for this poem from the immediate surroundings of his own home at Elmwood, for a description of which see pages v, vi.

23. Compare this description with Lowell's description of spring in other poems in, —
- The things observed and enjoyed most.
 - In the order in which details are introduced.
 - In the observer's point of view.

NOTE. — This topic (No. 23) may be omitted if the poems referred to in the discussion, p. 95, are not found in the library.

24. How do living creatures out of doors respond to the influence of a June day?
25. In Lowell's thought, what is the influence to which every living thing in nature responds? Is it in the beauty of the day, or in something else?
26. What passage in the description of June do you like best? Why? What passage do you think most beautiful? Why?
27. What is the keynote, or artistic centre, of this description of June?
28. Show from lines 80-93 what influence the high tide of the year exerts on the human heart.
29. *a.* The last stanza of the prelude is tied to the first in a certain way; show how.
b. In another way, to the second stanza; explain this relation between the stanzas.
c. In still another, to the description of June; show in what the connection lies.
30. The last two lines of the prelude introduce a character and tell of something antecedent to the June when the story of Part First begins. Do these lines really belong in the prelude?

NOTE. — If these lines belong in the prelude, they must have some relation to its purpose, and connected steps in the plan must lead the mind to them as a conclusion.

31. In the Prelude to Part First as a whole, what was the main purpose of the poet?
32. Which is longer, the prelude, or the narrative of Part First which it introduces?
33. Is there any part of the prelude for which the main purpose of the introduction is not a sufficient excuse? Would any other reason serve? Express here simply your own feeling and opinion.

PART FIRST

34. What narrative elements for the story have been given in the Prelude ?
35. Describe the appearance and character of Sir Launfal from the impression given by Lowell.
36. How much more than he tells in words does the author make you understand ? How does he do this ?
37. Describe Sir Launfal's life as you imagine it up to the beginning of the story ?
38. In the Siege of Summer, lines 119-127,
a. What is personified ?
b. What was the reason for the siege ?
c. In how many details is the picture of a siege carried out ?
d. For each detail what is the parallel between the literal thing and the meaning in the figure ?
e. Explain the use of the adjectives *churlish*, *chilly*.
f. The pavilions of summer tall, the tents, the murmur at night, mean what literally ?
39. In the story of Sir Launfal's quest, what is Lowell trying to make clear by this beautiful and extended figure ?
40. What is the real beginning of the story of Part First ?
41. Why did Sir Launfal sleep on the rushes the night before starting on his quest ?
42. Find every plot element, or step, before the beginning of the dream.
43. In the beginning of the dream, what was the time of year ?
 NOTE. — Lowell may have borrowed the suggestion of the dream from the belief in the time of the crusades that a vision was often sent to guide one consecrated to some holy quest.
44. Of what elements in the real story is the first part of the dream made up ?
45. In the start what do you learn about Sir Launfal ? Why did Lowell choose *surlly* as the adjective for clang ?
46. What was the real purpose of the knight's quest ? What was the vow he had sworn ? What particulars are contrasted in the narrative of the start ? Why ?
47. Sir Launfal's first adventure. Make a little plot outline for this incident showing:
a. The cause, or the beginning.

- b.* The most important moment.
c. The result and the end of the incident.
48. What is dwelt upon in the description of the leper ?
49. In this little plot which is more important, the refusal of the gift, or the reason for it ?
 NOTE. — This must be shown by the influence of one or the other upon Sir Launfal. The moral force of the reason in itself is not an argument to the point.
50. How far on his quest has the knight gone when Part First closes ?
51. At the close of Part First what part of the story remains untold ? That is, what more do you care to hear about Sir Launfal's quest ?

PRELUDE TO PART SECOND

52. Why did the author choose a winter scene for the Prelude to Part Second ?
53. What is the keynote, or artistic centre, for this description ?
54. In this prelude what is personified ? What is the relation between the persons of the figure ?
55. What is the purpose of the first seven lines ?
56. In the description of the winter palace of ice the terms and figures are borrowed from architecture :
a. Who is the builder ? What material was used ?
b. Is the description of the palace from without, or from within ? What difference does this make ?
- NOTE. — In *An Indian-Summer Reverie*, p. 47, Lowell describes the river as protected from the onslaught of winter in another way; the material used, and the agent that builds, the frost, are the same, but the point of view of the description and the details are different. The student may compare.
57. In the description of the hall within the castle Lowell uses many figures of speech ; one follows another very closely and sometimes the means of transition is no more than some habitual association in the mind.
 What is the reason that the mind passes easily from the personification of Christmas to the figure in the next two

NOTE. — Definitions with illustrations will be found in the Century and unabridged dictionaries.

- lines? Is sprouting a good adjective here? Show reasons for your opinion from the picture in your mind, etc.
58. In lines 215-224, how many times does the poet change his comparison, and thus suggest a new picture in the mind?
59. Which of these comparisons belong to the picture of the great fireplace and the blazing yule log?
60. For each of the following explain—
- What two things the poet compares.
 - In what the similarity lies.
 - Whether differences come to your mind in spite of yourself as you read? The numbers refer to the lines of the poem.
- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 215. deep gulf. | 220. hunted to death. |
| 216. roaring tide. | 220. galleries blind. |
| 217. pennons droop. | 221. troops of sparks. |
| 219. a locust shrills. | 223. soot-forest. |
61. In the figure which the line **Like herds of startled deer** completes, carry out two descriptions, one of deer fleeing from the scent of the hunter on the wind, the other of the picture in the fireplace which it parallels, and point out every similarity you can find, and also anything in which the two pictures are very dissimilar.
62. There is one very unpleasant figure in this stanza; what is it? Why is it poor? Why did Lowell use it?
63. In the Prelude to Part Second, Lowell attempted to write a parallel to the Prelude to Part First in plan, arrangement, and relation to the story that follows, and at the same time to contrast the two preludes sharply in the details described and in the hidden meaning. Make in brief outline a parallel showing for each prelude,—
- Time of year.
 - Place of scene.
 - Description of scene without the castle.
 - Description of castle within.
 - The meaning of the description in relation to the story.
64. In the first part of the narrative the castle was gloomy and churlish. Why this change in the description of it? Has there been any change in its use? Is this change consistent with the allegorical meaning of the poem? Prove by comparison and contrast; the two descriptions of

- Sir Launfal, the first and the second incident of the leper, furnish material.
65. Does the description of winter, as you read, seem to belong in Sir Launfal's dream, or out of it? Which did Lowell intend?
66. Is there any hint in the descriptions of the Prelude to Part Second that they illustrate some special thought or meaning?
67. Do the descriptions, figures, etc., of the second prelude guide the reader to any starting point for the narrative of Part Second?
68. What is the purpose of this prelude?

PART SECOND

69. What is omitted between Part First and Part Second (a) in time; (b) in incidents; (c) in the experience of the knight; (d) in change of character.
70. Are any narrative elements essential to the story given in the Prelude to Part Second?
71. In what is the beginning of the story, or plot, of Part Second?
72. Contrast the opening scene with the first adventure of the knight in Part First in, (a) time; (b) place; (c) description of Sir Launfal; (d) plot element, or action.
73. **Sir Launfal mused as he sat.**
- What pictures are given?
 - Why are these pictures introduced here just before the beggar addresses the knight?
74. **The incident of the leper.**
Compare this incident with the former one in
- The description of the leper.
 - The description and situation of Sir Launfal.
 - The gift; the reason for giving.
 - The most important moment of the incident.
 - The result and the conclusion.
75. How do you explain the difference in the outcome of these two incidents?
76. In the dream, in what was the beginning?
77. What is the most important moment, or climax of the dream?

78. What is the result or conclusion?
79. If the dream were not a dream but a story, could you find a title for it that would give a hint of its real meaning?
The waking of Sir Launfal.
80. How long a time had passed since the story began?
81. How long a time did the dream seem to cover?
82. What was the result of the dream in Sir Launfal's life?
83. In the whole story, where do you find the climax?
84. In what is the end of the story?
85. What is meant by **The Summer's long siege at last is o'er?**
86. Show by comparison whether Lowell continues and carries out the figure used in Part First here, or whether this line is no more than an allusion to carry the mind back to the conditions of an earlier time in the story.
87. Do you think of Sir Launfal at the end as an old man or as a young one? Which did Lowell intend? Support your opinion from the poem.

GENERAL TOPICS

- I. What is the theme or real purpose of the poem, *The Vision of Sir Launfal*?
- II. What ethical truth, or lesson, did Lowell intend to embody clearly and effectively in this poem?
- III. In Part Second, what do you find that corresponds to and illustrates exactly the line in the Prelude to Part First, **We Sinais climb and know it not?**
- IV. Lowell invented his plot. What did he borrow from old traditions and stories? Did he change the meaning of anything that he borrowed?
- V. If Lowell thought of the Quest, and the Holy Grail as allegorical symbols which he might use to convey a spiritual meaning, explain for what part stood in his mind at the time of the writing of the poem.
 - a. The castle in the North Countree.
 - b. The knight.
 - c. The object of the quest.
 - d. The leper.
 - e. The finding of the Grail.
- VI. A poem is great when the special meaning in the mind of

- the author at the time of its composition includes also some wider truth or meaning which will always interpret common human experience, and inspire new love of beauty and of noble conduct. In this wider meaning, for what does the knight stand? The castle? The siege of summer?
- VII. What definition of the true meaning, in all time, of the Grail is given?
 - VIII. What is the quest? What is the significance of the finding of the Grail?
 - IX. What special belief of Lowell's do you find in this poem?
 - X. What evidence or illustration do you find of the characteristics of a poet as different from a philanthropist, or a writer of prose?
 - XI. Which passage in this poem do you think noblest? Why?
 - XII. Which passage do you like best? Why?
 - XIII. Which passage do you think most full of poetic beauty and meaning? Why?

metaphor

allegory

hyperbole

personification

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