

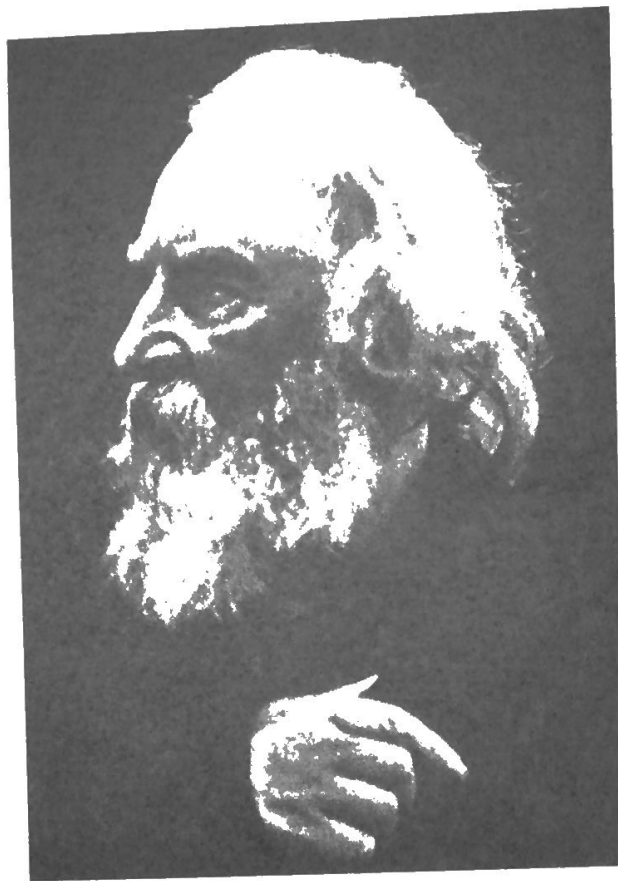
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

(1807–1882)

Longfellow was and still is the most popular poet America has ever produced. With the possible exception of Robert Frost (page 716), no twentieth-century poet has ever become a household name, let alone achieved the kind of recognition suggested by the word *popular*.

Longfellow's immense popularity was based largely on his appeal to an audience hungry for sermons and lessons. That audience wanted assurances that their cherished values would prevail over the new forces of history—such as industrialization—that were threatening to destroy them. The values Longfellow endorsed were positive forces in the making of the American character, but his tendency to leave these values unexamined led to poetry that often offered easy comfort at the expense of illumination.

Born in Portland, Maine, Longfellow was never far from the rocks and splashing waves of the Atlantic Coast or from the cultural and religious influences of the well-to-do families who lived north of Boston. Longfellow's early interest in foreign languages and literature led him naturally to an academic career. He attended Bowdoin College (where Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of his classmates) and then pursued three additional years of study in France, Spain, Italy, and Germany. When Longfellow returned, he joined the Bowdoin faculty, married, and began to write a series



Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Photograph by Julia Margaret Cameron.
Courtesy of George Eastman House.

of sketches about his experiences abroad.

During a second European trip in 1835, Longfellow's young wife died of a miscarriage. When he returned to America, the young widower became a professor of French and Spanish at Harvard; seven years later he married Frances (Fanny) Appleton, whom he had met in Europe after his first wife's death. He settled into eighteen years of happily married life, fathering six children and producing some of his most celebrated poetry, much of it

based on American legends, such as *Evangeline* (1847) and *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855).

By 1854, Longfellow had devoted himself to writing full time. Seven years later, though, a second tragedy struck: His wife, Frances, died in a fiery accident at home, when a lighted match or hot sealing wax ignited her summer dress. Longfellow tried to save her, smothering the flames with a rug, and was badly burned himself.

Longfellow now devoted himself to his work with a religious and literary zeal. By the end of his long and productive life, he had become for Americans the symbolic figure of the Poet: wise, graybearded, haloed with goodness, and living in a world of undiminished romance. Two years after his death, Longfellow's marble image was unveiled in the Poets' Corner in London's Westminster Abbey. He was the first American to be so honored.

The Children's Hour
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Between the dark and the daylight,
When the night is beginning to lower,
Comes a pause in the day's occupations,
That is known as the Children's Hour.

I hear in the chamber above me
The patter of little feet,
The sound of a door that is opened,
And voices soft and sweet.

From my study I see in the lamplight,
Descending the broad hall stair,
Grave Alice, and laughing Allegra,
And Edith with golden hair.

A whisper, and then a silence:
Yet I know by their merry eyes
They are plotting and planning together
To take me by surprise.

A sudden rush from the stairway,
A sudden raid from the hall!
By three doors left unguarded
They enter my castle wall!

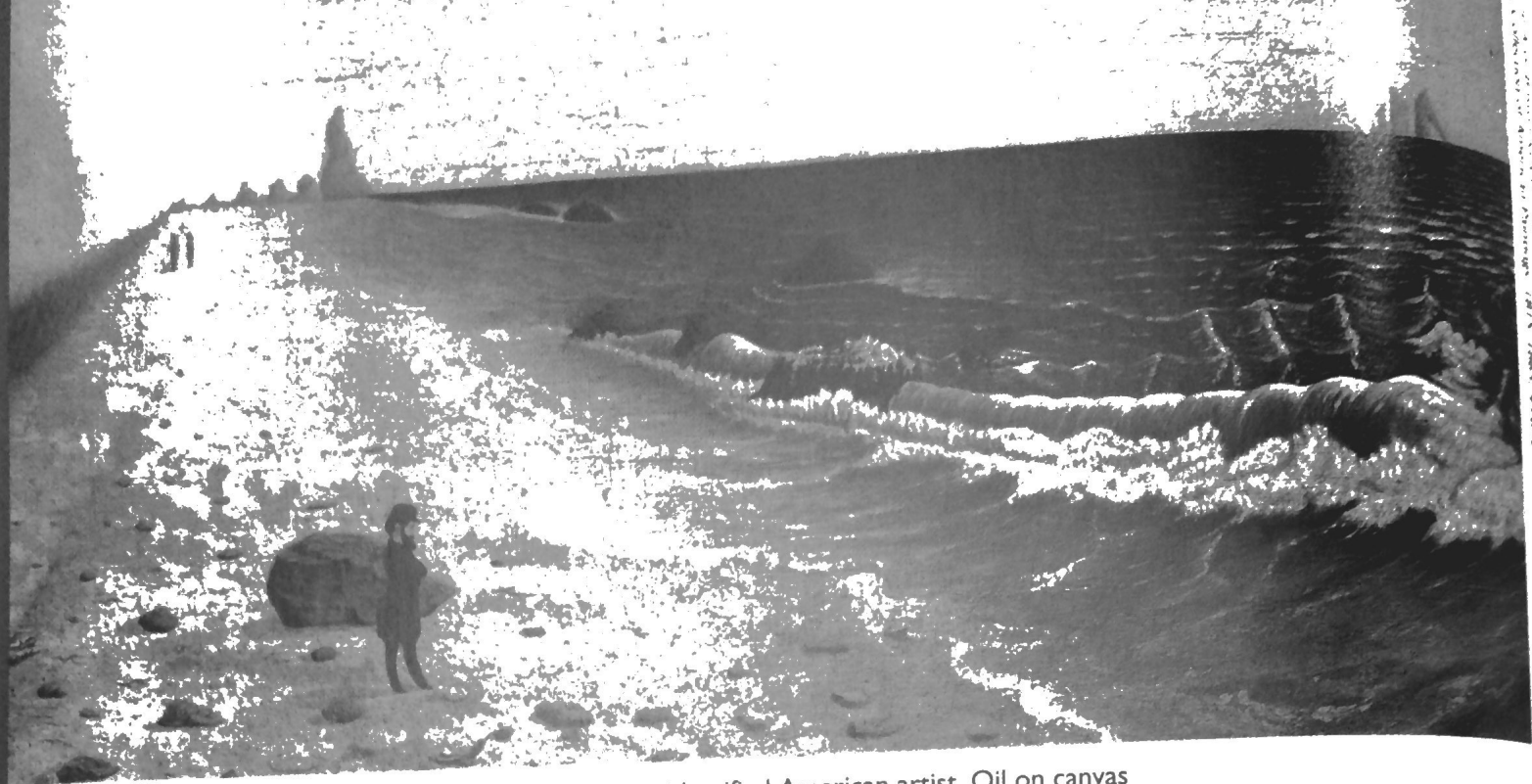
They climb up into my turret
O'er the arms and back of my chair;
If I try to escape, they surround me;
They seem to be everywhere.

They almost devour me with kisses,
Their arms about me entwine,
Till I think of the Bishop of Bingen
In his Mouse-Tower on the Rhine!

Do you think, O blue-eyed banditti,
Because you have scaled the wall,
Such an old mustache as I am
Is not a match for you all!

I have you fast in my fortress,
And will not let you depart,
But put you down into the dungeon
In the round-tower of my heart.

And there will I keep you forever,
Yes, forever and a day,
Till the walls shall crumble to ruin,
And moulder in dust away!



Meditation by the Sea (early 1860s) by an unidentified American artist. Oil on canvas (13⁵/₈" × 19⁵/₈") (34.6 cm × 49.8 cm).

The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

A The tide rises, the tide falls,
The twilight darkens, the curlew^o calls;
Along the sea-sands damp and brown
The traveler hastens toward the town,
5 And the tide rises, the tide falls.

B Darkness settles on roofs and walls,
But the sea, the sea in the darkness calls;
C The little waves, with their soft, white hands,
Efface^o the footprints in the sands,
10 And the tide rises, the tide falls.

D The morning breaks; the steeds in their stalls
Stamp and neigh, as the hostler^o calls;
The day returns, but nevermore
Returns the traveler to the shore,
15 And the tide rises, the tide falls.

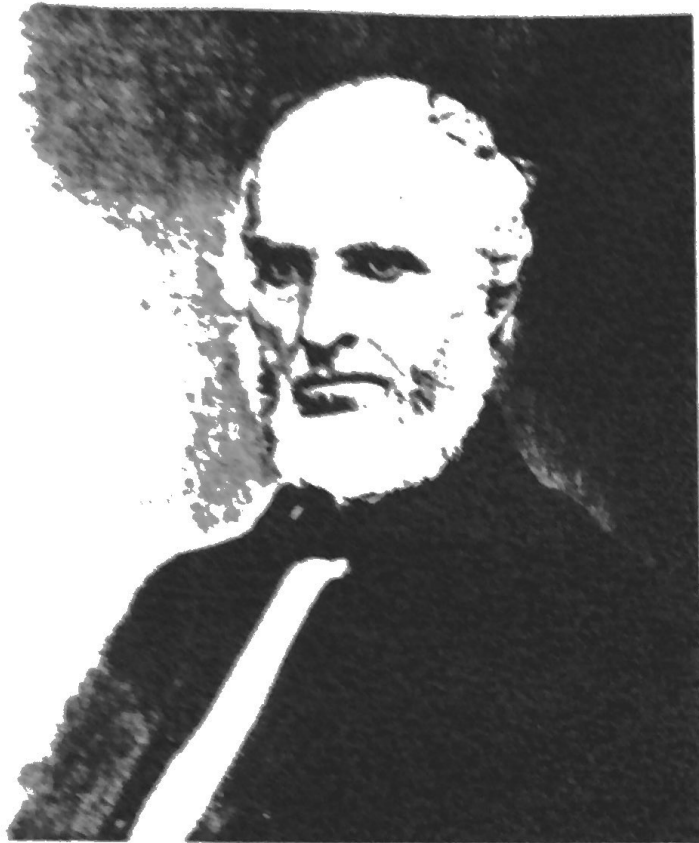
2. **curlew** (kər'loo') *n.*: large, brownish shore-bird with long legs.

9. **efface** (ə·fās') *v.*: wipe out; erase.

12. **hostler** (häs'lər) *n.*: person who takes care of horses.

John Greenleaf Whittier

1807-1892



John Greenleaf Whittier's background, unlike that of the other Fireside Poets, included no cultural or educational advantages. Whittier represented a very different New England tradition. He was born in a log house on a small farm that an ancestor had cleared from the Massachusetts wilderness in 1688. A feeling for rural family life, for the seasons and the land, for frugal ways and simple pleasures was deeply ingrained in Whittier, and it is the theme of his greatest poem, *Snowbound*.

Whittier received only a sketchy education in the local schools, but he found a lifelong intellectual influence and moral direction in his family's Quaker religion. By emphasizing the individual's intuition or "inner light" as the guide to spiritual truth, Quakerism makes study and self-expression a moral duty. From early childhood, Whittier's imagination was nourished by the Bible and the mysticism of religious writings. He was equally influenced by the social principles of his faith. Pacifists by conviction, Quakers emphasize the place of conscience in all social actions. It is appropriate that the most important moral and social

cause of Whittier's life should have been the abolition of slavery.

While still in his teens and working as a shoemaker's apprentice, Whittier began sending poems to newspapers. Soon he was drawn into a number of reform movements, devoting his principal energies to the antislavery cause. His meager income came from his work as a journalist for small antislavery newspapers. He became active in politics and served a term in the Massachusetts legislature. Once he was stoned and shot at as an "agitator" in New Hampshire. Tall, commanding, dressed in Quaker black, he was a notable speaker at abolitionist rallies. For these meetings and for newspapers, he wrote literally hundreds of political poems, most of them quickly forgotten. The long struggle had its costs for Whittier's career and for his conscience. He once called himself "a fighting Quaker" and added, sadly, that he was "sometimes more fighter than Quaker." A man who abhorred violence, he had hoped in vain that the violence of slavery could end without the violence of war. When the Civil War came and the abolition of slavery was achieved at long last, Whittier withdrew from public affairs to devote himself to his work.

Even in his busiest years of political activity, Whittier produced a thin trickle of poems that were more literary than political. By 1857, when he was fifty, his reputation among fellow writers was high enough so that he was asked to be one of the founders of a new literary magazine, *The Atlantic Monthly*. He had long lamented the fact that poets paid little attention to rural New England, to "the poetry of human life and simple nature, of the hearth and farm field." He was in effect describing the subject matter of his own best poems: the local customs and regional legends of rural people, the tightknit quality of family farm life, the historical narratives that passed from generation to generation in small villages. The publication of *Snowbound* in 1866 brought him national fame and, at last, modest prosperity. His seventieth birthday in 1877 was celebrated at a gathering of notable literary figures of three generations, from Bryant through Mark Twain; accounts of the event appeared in the press across the land. Despite this late recognition, Whittier remained modest and retiring, devoted always to the "plain speech" of his Quaker heritage. He was a faithful recorder of the simple rural life he knew best, a life that was fast disappearing.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

1809–1894

It would be hard to imagine the profession of literature in New England in the nineteenth century without the witty, energetic presence of Dr. Holmes. No one could more accurately represent one side of the New England tradition than this descendant of Anne Bradstreet, who had a gentleman traveler's easy familiarity with the great capitals of Europe but remained cheerfully convinced that "the Boston State House is the hub of the solar system." A man of immense vitality and wide-ranging interests, he was a natural leader in the cultural life of his beloved city. He helped organize the Saturday Club, a group of writers and scientists (he himself was both) whose monthly meetings for informal conversations were long remembered for their intellectual brilliance; and he was one of the founders of *The Atlantic Monthly*, a magazine that gave New England writers, including Holmes, a national audience. Characteristically, it was also Holmes who first called his own class of Boston aristocrats the "Brahmins," after the high priests of the Hindu religion. The name was half-humorous, and he was quick to add that this group was a "harmless, inoffensive, untitled aristocracy." But the remark was nevertheless revealing. Holmes felt both a certain reverence for the cultural aristocracy to which he belonged and a need to poke gentle fun at it. A mixture of traditional aristocratic social values and a democratic comic spirit was at the core of the man.

Holmes was born in Cambridge, in a house that had figured in battles of the American Revolution, to a minister's family that represented the best of traditional New England culture. He graduated from Harvard, briefly studied law, which bored him, and turned to medicine. Because France was then a leader in medical research, he took several years of his training in Paris, returning to complete his medical degree at Harvard in 1836. It is a measure of his enormous energy that in that same year he established a medical practice, published a long scientific study of fever, published his first volume of poems, won a major prize for science, and wrote a long poem (it took more than an hour to read aloud) for his class reunion at Harvard!

It was as a professor of medicine for many years at Harvard that Holmes made his reputation in sci-

ence. He was a brilliant teacher and an enthusiastic spokesman for progress in medicine. He was the champion of faith in Science, a word he capitalized to indicate its importance. This faith tempered his conservative social views. For instance, he made fun of many aspects of the feminist struggle for political equality, but he also advocated the admission of women to medical schools, a radical idea at that time. In sober essays and witty poems, and especially in what he called his "medicated" novels, Holmes also used his faith in science to attack the Puritan religious views of his forefathers. To deal with immorality and crime, he believed, we must replace the idea of "sin" with a scientific understanding of psychological disturbance and inherited behavior traits. Modern science, which he regarded as "the true successor" to earlier religions, gave Holmes his cheerful confidence in human progress.

If his "medicated" novels were too much like philosophical arguments to be successful as novels, Holmes invented a more genial form in the "conversations" that were collected in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (1858) and then in three further volumes. For these sketches he created several residents of a boardinghouse who talk, often wittily and sometimes wisely, of all the things that interested Holmes, from horse racing, prizefighting, and rattlesnakes to ancient warfare and mythology. This loose form permitted him to shift from the serious to the comic, to insert poems, jokes, and stories, to parade his great store of knowledge, and above all to express his delight in the play of ideas and personalities that makes good conversation.

Although he wrote in many forms, Holmes is best remembered for his poems. With the notable exception of "The Chambered Nautilus," his best poetry is light verse. If his emotions were stirred, he could write passionately: "Old Ironsides" was written to save the battleship *Constitution* from being scrapped. More often, poetry was for Holmes an exercise of wit and wordplay, a pleasure much like conversation. He had a modest estimate of his own talent, saying that his verse compared to major poetry as a tinkling instrument to the sound of a full band. Nevertheless, he observed, "I hold it to be a gift of a certain value to give that slight passing spasm of pleasure which a few ringing couplets often cause . . ." Generations of readers have agreed that Holmes gives that pleasure.

The Chambered Nautilus

The pearly nautilus is a snail-like sea creature of the South Pacific and Indian oceans. As it grows, the nautilus creates from its own secretions each year a new chamber of shell to house its expanding body. The name *nautilus*, meaning "sailor," grew out of the old belief that the little creature could sail by raising a membrane. No doubt the nautilus first interested the scientist in Holmes, but it touched the poet in him even more.

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 Siren⁵ 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!
And every chambered cell,
Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,
As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,
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 Triton²⁶ blew from wreathèd horn!
While on mine ears it rings,
Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings:

5. **Siren:** In classical mythology, the sirens were sea nymphs who lured mariners to their deaths by singing enchanting songs. 26. **Triton** (trī'tən): an ancient sea god whose lower half resembled that of a fish. He is usually represented as blowing a trumpet made of a seashell.



Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!

30

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!

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James Russell Lowell

1819–1891

Lowell's career was so varied that it might stand as a summary of the accomplishments of the Fireside Poets. He was Oliver Wendell Holmes's nearest rival in wit and cleverness, and Longfellow's in the ability to write in many verse forms. Like Whittier, Lowell was active in politics and worked as a journalist in the abolitionist movement. If as a sophisticated Harvard graduate he could not identify as closely with country life as Whittier did, he nevertheless invented in Hosea Biglow a rural New Englander whose vivid local dialect and salty opinions became widely known. Lowell was not only among the founders of *The Atlantic Monthly*, but served as its first editor, and later became a coeditor of the still more distinguished *North American Review*. Fame came quickly to this most versatile—and perhaps most gifted—of the Fireside Poets.

Like Holmes, who was his Cambridge neighbor, Lowell was the son of a minister and the descendant of a prominent family. After graduating from Harvard Law School he spent an unhappy year practicing law before publishing his first book of poems. With that, he turned gratefully to a career as a writer. Strongly influenced by the humanitarian views of his fiancée, Maria White, he was soon contributing regularly to antislavery journals, and after their marriage in 1844, he lived for a time in Philadelphia and wrote editorials for the abolitionist periodical *Pennsylvania Freeman*. Meanwhile, he carried forward the literary part of his work in essays and a constant output of poems. With his career firmly launched, he returned to Cambridge to live, and quickly made evident his widely varied interests and remarkable productivity. In a single year, 1848, when he was twenty-nine, he issued his collected poems in two volumes, published a long poetic narrative of medieval knighthood, gathered his popular dialect verse in book form as the first series of *Biglow Papers*, and wrote an important work of literary criticism, *A Fable for Critics*.

Lowell's new fame was soon overshadowed by personal tragedy in the deaths of three of his children and then, in 1853, of his wife. The loss of his beloved Maria, as he observed long afterward, changed not just his personal life but his career. Her influence had provided a discipline for his scat-



tered energies that he was seldom to feel again. His early achievements show an exceptional promise that was never fulfilled. The first *Biglow Papers* were a literary triumph. They were written as a protest against the Mexican War. But these verses transcend that political purpose. Lowell carried the tradition of Down East humor a major step forward through the satirical use of Yankee dialect and the creation of a memorable literary character in the shrewd, homespun poet Hosea Biglow. The later sections of the *Papers* are inferior to the first, and a second series is remembered now only for such nonpolitical portraits of country life as "The Courtin'."

There were many honors and accomplishments in Lowell's long career: his professorship, his editorial positions, diplomatic service as American minister to both Spain and England, honorary degrees from major universities. No literary man wrote more thoughtfully about the Civil War than Lowell did in essays on the meaning of the Union and the causes of rebellion. In his "Commemoration Ode" at the end of the war, he was among the first of our writers to recognize the greatness of Abraham Lincoln. Still, Lowell's work lacked coherence and development, making his literary career a minor one. He himself recognized this failure, observing in old age that his life had been "mainly wasted" and that he had "thrown away more than most men ever had." As he later estimated, his poetry contained "good bits"—isolated achievements—rather than a clear line of major works.

Stanzas on Freedom

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL



Men! whose boast it is that ye
Come of fathers brave and free,
If there breathe on earth a slave,
Are ye truly free and brave?
5 If ye do not feel the chain,
When it works a brother's pain,
Are ye not base¹ slaves indeed,
Slaves unworthy to be freed?

Women! who shall one day bear
10 Sons to breathe New England air,
If ye hear, without a blush,
Deeds to make the roused blood rush
Like red lava through your veins,
For your sisters now in chains,—
15 Answer! are ye fit to be
Mothers of the brave and free?

Is true Freedom but to break
Fetters² for our own dear sake,
And, with leathern hearts, forget
20 That we owe mankind a debt?
No! true freedom is to share
All the chains our brothers wear,
And, with heart and hand, to be
Earnest to make others free!

25 They are slaves who fear to speak
For the fallen and the weak;
They are slaves who will not choose
Hatred, scoffing, and abuse,
Rather than in silence shrink
30 From the truth they needs must think;
They are slaves who dare not be
In the right with two or three.

1. **base:** having little or no honor, courage, or decency; low or inferior.

2. **fetters:** chains or other bonds.

Thinking Through the Literature

1. **Comprehension Check** What does Lowell call those who are afraid to speak?

Author	Works	Education	Personal Details/ Personality	Style