“The Deacon’s Masterpiece”

No study of the “Deacons Masterpiece” would be complete without some background information about the author, his place in history, his father or his religious upbringing. Additionally, a little about Calvinism and its development must be discussed in order to gain a full appreciation for the literary merits of this particular poem. The author’s style is of course, another integral component, which is used to develop the underlying themes of “The Deacons Masterpiece.” The central theme of this poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes is that man cannot avoid his fate; no theological ideology, no rational invention of his, and no physical creation of man outlasts time.

Oliver Wendell Holmes lived from 1809 until 1894. His father was the Reverend Abiel Holmes, a puritanical Calvinist minister. Although, it is known that, the son rejected the father’s teachings it is also important to note that Oliver was known as one of the staunchest conservatives of the time, a trait which can be attributed to the influence of his Calvinist upbringing. According to Vernon L. Parrington, “hatred of Calvinistic dogma was an obsession with him: it dominated his thought and colored much of his work, Elsie Venner and his Table-talk as frankly as The One-Hoss Shay. The criticism to which he subjected the old school dogmas was always vehement, often vindictive” (Parrington, 126). He was a doctor, a teacher, a public speaker and a writer. Many of his poems and essays used “urbane wit and comic sensibility” to deal with the issues of the day. One of the major issues of the day was religion, or rather a rebirth of religious fervor and a search for the true way to salvation.

Oliver Wendell Holmes life was affected by the religious ministry of his father, who as a Puritan preacher, taught the narrow views of Calvinist doctrine to his son. Even though
Calvinism was founded in the 1500’s it had been through many changes and its teachings were modified many times, most notably in 1618 with the Five Articles of the Synod of Dort (Calvin, 479). The last major reformation took place during a period referred to as “the Great Awakening”, a revivalist movement led by George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards that swept the country in the 1740’s (Calvin, 481). Puritan theology was rigid, narrow, and exclusive. Few people belonged to the elect, and even though there existed the irresistible grace of God, only the chosen few could be saved. It is this principle belief that Holmes addresses in his poem “The Deacon’s Masterpiece”.

The title is the first clue that this poem is not a simple tale written to amuse the reader. The author takes the time to give it two titles, “The Deacons Masterpiece” or “The Wonderful One- Hoss Shay”. The poem tells a story about a carriage that was built by a Deacon with the intent of making it perfect. However, just as Plato explained in the “Allegory of the Cave”, the title tells the reader that not all is what it appears to be. According to one critic, Van Wyck Brooks, “the doctor had no use for Calvinism, and he knew that, while they laughed at the one-Hoss Shay in Boston and at Harvard, it was no laughing matter in the Country” (Brooks, 129). In this sense, Holmes lets the reader know, through the title, that the poem is an allegory. Each point about the “One-Hoss Shay” corresponds to a point about the religious teachings of Calvinism.

Looking at the “one-Hoss Shay”, some analogies are obvious. It is a vehicle designed to carry a few people from one location to some destination. The author uses this vehicle to represent Calvinism as it had become in his day. A religious theology designed as a vehicle for man to ascend to heaven, but only capable of carrying a few, the elect. As a consequence of
design, the one-hoss shay and Calvinism serve a very limited number of people; Calvinism the 
elect, and the one-hoss shay the deacon and his successors.

The next point made in the poem is that the deacon had come to a revelation of sorts, 
things break down because some part is weaker than the rest. He concludes that the only way to 
make anything last is to discover all the weak spots and make them as strong as the whole, and 
then it could not breakdown. This parallels the development of Calvinist ideology. Calvinism in 
its earliest form was a reformation of Christianity and was a simple creed that appealed to many. 
During the years leading to the Puritan movement to the New World, Calvinism underwent 
several reformations of its own. The philosophy was refined, and the concept of an “elect” few 
developed. By the time of the “Great Awakening” this religious vehicle was further refined and 
would not breakdown, now all of its parts had been crafted in the same vein, and every tenet was 
as strong as the entire religious doctrine. This is the “Deacon’s Masterpiece”.

Our author carries the analogy further, he brings it into his present, one hundred years 
after the creation of the “One-Hoss Shay”, which is no accident in timing, and it falls apart. His 
view of Calvinist doctrine is one hundred years after the great awakening, and in his view, it too 
has fallen apart. According to another critic, John Macy, one problem with Calvinism for 
Holmes was its insistence on final answers. Macy writes “his intellectual curiosity warily eludes 
closed final statements: to him the universe is going on all the time and was not concluded with 
the last remark that any of us happened to regard as ultimate” (Macy, 125). So Holmes tells us 
this by “Little of all we value here, Wakes on the morn of its hundredth year, …, So far as I 
know, but a tree and truth”. This is a direct reproach to the ministers of the day, like his father, 
telling them that the reason why their congregations are leaving them is they do not preach the 
truth.
The one eternal truth according to Holmes is that only the creations of God, as evidenced by nature, embody the truth. So quite naturally, the author concludes, “Logic is logic. That’s all I say.” Logic is a creation of God given to man embodied as reason to understand this world and with it man can determine the truth. This idea stands in contrast to the doctrines of Calvinism and is probably best stated by another literary critic. In 1936 Van Wyck Brooks wrote “for what was the logical mind of Calvinism but the parent of all injustice, …, narrow judgement, rigid condemnation, all those moral plagues, in other words, from which the American mind so patently suffered” (Brooks, 129).

Taken as a whole, the attitude of the author, the undeniable influence of Calvinism, that of his father and the main body of critical essays compel me to see “The Deacon’s Masterpiece” as a deep reflection of the author’s view of the world and religion. He has come to an understanding of nature and through his poem shares this view with the world. That the truth is man cannot avoid his fate. No theological ideology, no rational invention of his, and no physical creation of man outlasts time. All things come to an end, so too must “The Wonderful One-hoss Shay” and so too “The Deacon’s Masterpiece”.

 Works Cited


