

# LONGING

W. W. S T O R Y

Published in *The Pioneer*  
January 1843 (1:1)

Edited and Annotated by Shannon Higgins for the  
University of Arizona Antebellum Magazine Edition Project  
May 4th 2015

With weary heart, and dreary eye,  
    He gazed into the lonely night,  
Hour after hour dragged slowly by,  
    The shadows changed from left to right.

The solemn earth, the stars' sharp gleam,  
    The yearning wind's low ebb and swell,  
All things were but a mystic dream,  
    A riddle that he could not spell.

What is the worth of human art,  
    If the weak tongue can never speak  
That which lies heavy on the heart,  
    Even though the heavy heart should break.



## EDITOR'S NOTE

The feeling the speaker experiences in “Longing” of grasping something impossible through the medium of art shows the failure of ekphrasis and highlights ideas from Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Poetic Principle.” Ekphrasis is defined as the description of a visual work of art, although one of its first meanings referred to a description of any thing, person, or experience (“Ekphrasis”). It’s this transforming of art, or another medium of expression, into words that the poet seems to struggle with the most. W. W. Story portrays this failure of ekphrasis clearly in the line, “A riddle that he could not spell.” This shows how the man in the poem failed to find the correct words to express an experience that weighed heavily on his heart. This idea is continued until the last stanza when he questions what the worth of human art is if words can never successfully convey it. This shows how ekphrasis can evoke a competition between the art the poet is describing and the words he is using himself. The ability to paint a picture with words is what the poet fails with and possibly the inadequacy he is longing to overcome.

Poe’s essay “The Poetic Principle” argues that poetry should be called such only if “it excites, by elevating the soul.” Story’s speaker seems to struggle with this elevation of the soul and longs to find this higher state through his poetry. Poe also argues that long poems do not exist because they are a long thread of fragmented poems strung together under a single title. This idea helped shape the taste for poetry that was most popular in the twentieth century: “the short lyric that culminates in a single emotional effect, whose subject matter is either an idealized nature or the author’s reflections and impressions,” (Zuk). Perhaps it is this idea that short poetry is the most successful in achieving the elevation of the soul, resulting in Story using a three stanza poem to portray his speaker’s longing.

W. W. Story likely understood ekphrasis and the ideas expressed “The Poetic Principle” as he was versed in different mediums of art, including sculpting, poetry, and art criticism. Some of Story’s pieces have been subject to ekphrasis themselves (Phillips). One of his most famous sculptures, *Cleopatra*, was referenced in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*. The statue is described as:

She was draped from head to foot in a costume minutely and scrupulously studied from that of ancient Egypt, as revealed by the strange sculpture of that country, its coins, drawings, painted mummy-cases, and whatever other tokens have been dug out of its pyramids, graves, and catacombs. Even the stiff Egyptian head-dress was adhered to, but had been softened into a rich feminine adornment, without losing a particle of its truth. Difficulties that might well have seemed insurmountable had been courageously encountered and made flexible to purposes of grace and dignity; so that Cleopatra sat attired in a garb proper to her historic and queenly state, as a daughter of the Ptolemies, and yet such as the beautiful woman would have put on as best adapted to heighten the magnificence of her charms, and kindle a tropic fire in the cold eyes of Octavius.

This portraying a piece of art through words is probably an idea Story encountered not only through his sculpting and poetry, but also as an art critic. The difficulty of struggling and

failing to portray an emotion or a memory through art is shown through “Longing,” possibly rooted in Story’s artistic career.

SHANNON HIGGINS



## WORKS CITED

"Ekphrasis." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetryfoundation.org, n.d. Web. 02 May 2015.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Marble Faun; Or, The Romance of Monte Beni*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1968. Print.

Phillips, Mary Elizabeth. *Reminiscences of William Wetmore Story, the American Sculptor and Author*. Chicago and New York: Rand, McNally, 1897. Web. 02 May 2015.

Poe, Edgar Allen. "The Poetic Principle." American Studies at the University of Virginia, n.d. Web. 02 May 2015.

Zuk, Edward. "On 'The Poetic Principle' by Edward Zuk." *Expansive Poetry Online*. Expansivepoetryonline.com, 15 Oct. 2009. Web. 02 May 2015.