

COMMON CORE

RL 1 Cite evidence to support analysis of inferences drawn from the text. **RL 5** Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text contribute to its structure and meaning, as well as its aesthetic impact.

The Chambered Nautilus Old Ironsides

Poetry by Oliver Wendell Holmes

Meet the Author

Oliver Wendell Holmes 1809–1894

Many people climb the ladder of success, but few make their mark in two very different fields. Oliver Wendell Holmes was both a prize-winning physician and a wildly popular poet. His discovery of the contagious nature of puerperal (“childbed”) fever changed the practice of medicine. And his verse was so beloved that he was frequently called upon to write poems for public occasions.

A Cultural Elite Holmes grew up in a family steeped in history and tradition. He was descended from prominent Boston families and early Dutch settlers. His father, a Calvinist minister in Cambridge, Massachusetts, nurtured his interests in books, religion, and nature. “I am very thankful,” wrote Holmes, “that the first part of my life was not passed shut in between high walls and treading the unimpressible and unsympathetic pavement.”

Literary Triumph At 15, Holmes enrolled at Phillips Andover Academy, where he impressed his teachers by translating the Roman poet Virgil’s *Aeneid*. After receiving a bachelor’s degree and a medical degree from Harvard University, he entered private practice in Boston. Holmes achieved literary stardom at

the age of 21 with the appearance of his poem “Old Ironsides.” Written to protest the planned destruction of a ship that fought in the War of 1812, the poem won Holmes instant fame. Following its publication, the USS *Constitution* was returned to active duty.

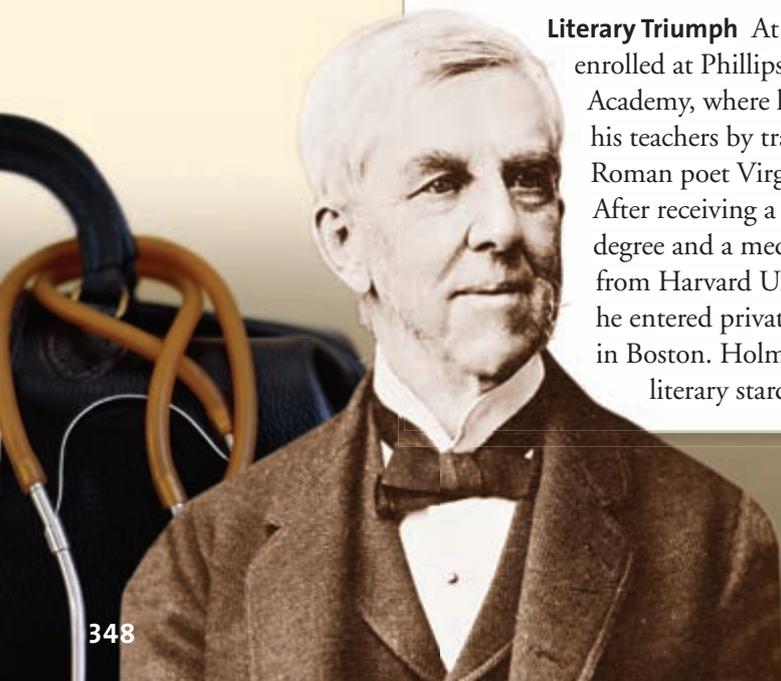
Talent for Talk After his first book of poems was published in 1836, Holmes joined the lecture circuit, where he entranced audiences with his ready wit. He was equally charming in the classroom, causing his students at Harvard Medical School to greet his lectures with “a mighty shout and stamp of applause.” Holmes’s eloquence was also on display at the Saturday Club, a group including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The writers met regularly to share their latest works.

Renaissance Man In addition to poetry, Holmes wrote three novels, a biography of Emerson, and numerous essays. Many of the essays appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, a magazine edited by Holmes’s friend James Russell Lowell. Printed under the title “The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table,” these essays combined prose and poetry and explored the themes of human destiny and freedom.

DID YOU KNOW?

Oliver Wendell Holmes . . .

- dropped out of law school because it bored him.
- became dean of the Harvard Medical School.
- called the subconscious mind “the underground workshop of thought” 20 years before Freud published his study of the unconscious.



Author Online



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● TEXT ANALYSIS: METER

Meter is one of the tools used by poets to make language memorable and pleasing to the ear. It is defined as the repetition of a regular rhythmic unit in a line of poetry. Each unit, known as a **foot**, has one stressed syllable (indicated by a ') and either one or two unstressed syllables (indicated by a -). The two basic types of metrical feet used by Holmes in these poems are the **iamb**, in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable (- '), and the **trochee**, in which a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed syllable (' -). Two words are used to describe the meter of a line. The first word identifies the type of metrical foot—iambic, trochaic—and the second word indicates the number of feet in a line: **monometer** (one), **dimeter** (two), **trimeter** (three), **tetrameter** (four), **pentameter** (five), **hexameter** (six), and so forth. Here is a line from “Old Ironsides” with the meter marked:

Hĕr deĕk, ońce rĕd wĭth hĕroĕs' blóod

As you read these two poems by Holmes, note the meter in each and consider what it contributes to the poem’s meaning and aesthetic appeal.

● READING SKILL: MAKE INFERENCES

Making inferences involves “reading between the lines”—making logical guesses based on evidence in the text to figure out what is not directly stated. As you read these two poems by Holmes, you will need to make inferences to get at the author’s meaning. For each poem, create a chart like the one shown.

<i>“The Chambered Nautilus”</i>		
<i>Details or Evidence from Text</i>	<i>What I Know from Experience</i>	<i>Ideas Inferred</i>
<i>“Year after year beheld the silent toil / That spread his lustrous coil”</i>	<i>It takes a lot of practice to become good at a sport.</i>	<i>Change requires effort.</i>



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

When is it time to MOVE ON?

Sometimes people have to choose between cherishing the past and looking toward the future. For example, when you move out of your parents’ house, will you expect them to keep your room exactly as it is or to convert it to a home office? Change can produce a renewed sense of well-being as well as a sense of loss.

DISCUSS Working with a partner, list situations or occasions in life when one must decide between holding on to the past and making a change. In each case, what are the benefits of either choice? After discussing this question with your partner, share your conclusions with others.



The Chambered Nautilus

Oliver Wendell Holmes

This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,¹
Sails the unshadowed main,—
The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
5 In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren² 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!
10 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,³ its sunless crypt unsealed! **A**

15 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,
20 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!
25 From thy dead lips a clearer note is born

A METER

Although the basic meter of this poem is **iambic**, what kind of **foot** is substituted for the iamb at the beginning of many of the lines? How does this variation affect the feel of these lines?

1. **feign**: imagine.

2. **Siren**: a partly human female creature in Greek mythology that lured sailors to destruction with sweet, magical songs.

3. **its irised ceiling rent**: its rainbow-colored ceiling ripped apart.



◀ Analyze Visuals

As the nautilus grows, it adds a new chamber to its spiral shell, abandoning the old chamber for the new one. What might this process of growth suggest about the role of change in life?

Than ever Triton blew from wreathèd horn!⁴
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,
30 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,
35 Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea! **B**

B MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 29–35. What inference can you make about what it might mean for the soul to escape its shell?

4. **Triton . . . wreathèd horn:** Triton, a sea god in Greek mythology, is usually pictured blowing a wreathed, or coiled, conch-shell horn.



OLD IRONSIDES

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Ay, tear her tattered ensign¹ down!
 Long has it waved on high,
And many an eye has danced to see
 That banner in the sky;
5 Beneath it rung the battle shout,
 And burst the cannon's roar;—
The meteor of the ocean air
 Shall sweep the clouds no more.

Her deck, once red with heroes' blood,
10 Where knelt the vanquished foe,
When winds were hurrying o'er the flood,
 And waves were white below,
No more shall feel the victor's tread,
 Or know the conquered knee;—
15 The harpies² of the shore shall pluck
 The eagle of the sea! **C**

Oh, better that her shattered hulk
 Should sink beneath the wave;
Her thunders shook the mighty deep,
20 And there should be her grave;
Nail to the mast her holy flag,
 Set every threadbare sail,
And give her to the god of storms,
 The lightning and the gale! **D**

1. **ensign:** flag.

2. **harpies:** evil monsters from Greek mythology that are half woman and half bird.

C ALLUSION

Oliver Wendell Holmes assumed that his readers would be familiar with the basics of Greek mythology, so it is not surprising that his poems include classical **allusions**—references to characters, locations, or events in classical myths that enrich the reader's experience of Holmes's poems. Read footnote 2 on page 350 and footnote 2 at the bottom of this page. How do the allusions explained here contribute to your understanding of the poems? Explain your response.

D MAKE INFERENCES

Reread the third stanza. Based on what has been said in previous stanzas about the ship's gloried past, do you think the speaker is being sincere or **ironic** about the fate of Old Ironsides? Explain.

Comprehension

- 1. Recall** What event involving Old Ironsides took place during the war?
- 2. Recall** According to the speaker, what should be the ship's fate?
- 3. Summarize** In lines 1–14 of “The Chambered Nautilus,” what does the speaker imagine and notice about the nautilus?

Text Analysis

- 4. Analyze Symbol** What do you think the chambered nautilus **symbolizes**, or represents, for the speaker of the poem? Use evidence to support your answer.
- 5. Make Inferences** Look back at the inferences and evidence you recorded as you read. What ideas about change does Holmes convey in “The Chambered Nautilus”? How does Holmes use each of the following images to express his thoughts about change?
 - the shell’s appearance in the speaker’s hands (lines 8–14)
 - the growth of the shell (lines 15–21)
 - the message the shell conveys (lines 29–35)
- 6. Identify Tone** The attitude that a writer takes toward a particular subject is called **tone**. How would you describe the tone of each poem? What words and figures of speech help establish this tone? Use a chart like the one shown to record your answers.
- 7. Interpret Meter** Review the metric pattern you identified in “Old Ironsides.” Then read the poem aloud. How does this meter reflect the poem’s subject matter? Explain.

“Old Ironsides”

Tone: sardonic

Words: “Oh, better that her shattered hulk / Should sink beneath the wave” (lines 17–18)

“The Chambered Nautilus”

Tone:

Words:

COMMON CORE

RL 1 Cite evidence to support analysis of inferences drawn from the text. **RL 2** Provide an objective summary of the text. **RL 4** Analyze the impact of specific words on meaning and tone. **RL 5** Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text contribute to its structure and meaning, as well as its aesthetic impact.

Text Criticism

- 8. Author’s Style** Recall from Holmes’s biography on page 348 that the poem “Old Ironsides” was instrumental in saving the USS *Constitution*. What techniques and details used in the poem might have motivated readers to act? Cite evidence to support your answer.

When is it time to **MOVE ON?**

Consider the “heavenly message” presented in “The Chambered Nautilus.” In what ways might you leave your “low-vaulted past” and “build more stately mansions” throughout your life?