

The Courtship of Miles Standish

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

In 1858, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the poem The Courtship of Miles Standish. One of his most popular romantic poems, it tells of a love triangle between three Pilgrims from Plymouth Colony. Both Miles Standish and John Alden are in love with Priscilla Mullins. Standish is a brash soldier and leader of the Plymouth Colony. Alden, however, is quieter and shyer than Standish. The characters in the poem were actual Pilgrims on the Mayflower and later in Plymouth. In this stanza, John brings Priscilla flowers while she works at a spinning wheel.

So he entered the house: and the hum of the wheel and the singing
Suddenly ceased; for Priscilla, aroused by his step on the threshold,
Rose as he entered, and gave him her hand, in signal of welcome,
Saying, "I knew it was you, when I heard your step in the passage;
For I was thinking of you, as I sat there singing and spinning."
Awkward and dumb with delight, that a thought of him had been mingled
Thus in the sacred psalm, that came from the heart of the maiden,
Silent before her he stood, and gave her the flowers for an answer,
Finding no words for his thought. He remembered that day in the winter,
After the first great snow, when he broke a path from the village,
Reeling and plunging along through the drifts that encumbered the doorway,
Stamping the snow from his feet as he entered the house, and Priscilla
Laughed at his snowy locks, and gave him a seat by the fireside,
Grateful and pleased to know he had thought of her in the snow-storm.
Had he but spoken then! perhaps not in vain had he spoken;
Now it was all too late; the golden moment had vanished!
So he stood there abashed, and gave her the flowers for an answer.

Questions

1. Longfellow repeats the phrase “and gave her the flowers for an answer.” Why is this phrase important when analyzing John Alden’s personality?
2. What does the phrase “Awkward and dumb with delight” mean?
3. Find one example of a metaphor or simile in the passage.
4. What does encumbered mean in the phrase "drifts that encumbered the doorway"?