

Longfellow and the American Sonnet

Lesson Plan

A resource developed through the *Longfellow and the Forging of American Identity* program

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Suggested Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: English

Learning Results:

English Language Arts:

Literature and Culture: B9

Language and Images: C4

Time Required:

One class period (45 minutes)

Materials and Resources Required:

The following documents are included in this lesson plan packet:

- Introduction
- Discussion questions
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Cross of Snow" with accompanying images

Preparation Required/Preliminary Discussion:

Students should have a basic understanding of the Petrarchan sonnet.

Learning Objectives:

The student will be able to explain why Longfellow's sonnets are a variation of the Petrarchan sonnet and to explain how Longfellow used an image/setting to describe an emotion.

Introduction:

Traditionally the Petrarchan sonnet as used by Francesco Petrarch was a 14 line lyric poem using a pattern of hendecasyllables and a strict end-line rhyme scheme; the first twelve lines followed one pattern and the last two lines another. The last two lines were the "volta" or "turn" in the poem. When the sonnet came to the United States sometime after 1775, through the work of Colonel David Humphreys, Longfellow was one of the first to write widely in this form, which he adapted to suit his tone. Since 1900 poets have modified and experimented with the traditional traits of the sonnet form.

The form Longfellow frequently used was a 14 line lyric poem written in iambic pentameter and divided into an octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). The rhyme scheme for the octave was "abbaabba" and for the sestet was "cdecde." The "volta"

usually occurred between the octave and the sestet. In most sonnets that follow this form, the octave describes an image/setting and the sestet describes a concept/feeling.

Longfellow's sonnet "The Cross of Snow" was inspired by two images familiar to Longfellow. One was Fanny's portrait by Samuel Worcester Rowse (1859) and the other was an engraving of Jackson's photograph of the "Mountain of the Holy Cross" (1875). This engraving showed a striking natural phenomenon in the Rocky Mountains; snow-filled crevices on the side of a mountain in the Rockies projected the image of a cross which could be seen from many miles away. Because the crevices were so high on the mountain, the crevices remained snow-filled year around. In the mid 1800's few Easterners, including Longfellow, had visited the Rocky Mountains, and such an image created much interest back East.

Also of interest back East was the rather old-fashioned practice of sealing a lock of a child's hair into a paper packet. While doing so, Fanny's dress caught fire. She ran to Henry's study where he put out the flames. However, her lower body and torso were badly burned, and she died the following morning, July 10, 1861. Eighteen years after Fanny's tragic death, Longfellow uses the image on the mountain to describe his feelings about her and her death. The octave locates her portrait in their bedroom where she died. He agonizes over her physical pain and extols the virtue of her soul. The "volta" is after the eighth line and turns the reader's focus to the first three lines of the sestet, which describe the cross-shaped, snow-filled crevices on the side of the mountain "in the distant West." The last three lines of the sestet metaphorically describe the cross of sorrow Henry has worn for eighteen years. Just as the snow in the crevices remains an entire season and season after season, his love for Fanny remains "changeless since the day she died."

Discussion questions:

1. What is the rhyme scheme? Grammatically, how many sentences are there in the sonnet? What does each sentence describe?
2. What color dominates the sonnet? What does that color symbolize?
3. What do the words "martyrdom" and "benedight" mean?
4. What is the dominant symbol in the sonnet? What does it signify?

“THE CROSS OF SNOW”
by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

In the long, sleepless watches of the night,
A gentle face--the face of one long dead--
Looks at me from the wall, where round its head
The night-lamp casts a halo of pale light.
Here in this room she died; and soul more white
Never through martyrdom of fire was led
To its repose; nor can in books be read
The legend of a life more benedight.
There is a mountain in the distant West
That, sun-defying, in its deep ravines
Displays a cross of snow upon its side.
Such is the cross I wear upon my breast
These eighteen years, through all the changing scenes
And seasons, changeless since the day she died.



Fannie Appleton Longfellow
From www.MaineMemory.net, item 15474,
courtesy of Longfellow National Historic Site



“Mountain of the Holy Cross,” 1875, by Thomas Moran
courtesy of Autry National Center