

# **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: A Collection of Lesson Plans for Middle School Students**

A resource developed through Longfellow and the Forging of American Identity

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## **Introduction**

As a middle school teacher, I have found the poetry of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to be appealing to young adolescents. Perhaps it is Longfellow's straightforward approach to his subject matter, his melodic rhythm and rhyme, the vivid imagery, his sentimentality, the celebration of American spirit and /or his optimism and perseverance that is engaging to young teens. Students tell me that they love the way Longfellow paints pictures with his words, tells a story, and the way his poetry just flows.

These lessons were developed for seventh graders. The lesson plans can stand on their own or they can be integrated into language arts, social studies or even a science curriculum. Teachers should feel free to adapt and use these plans to suit their needs. The objectives and activities are suggested as a starting point. It is my hope that after teachers and students are exposed to this sampling of Longfellow's poetry they will be motivated to read and study more of his works.

Additional poems by Longfellow which I have found appealing to middle school students are: "The Building of the Ship," "The Wreck of the Hesperus," "The Village Blacksmith," "The Rainy Day," "The Psalm of Life," "Hymn in the Night," "The Arrow and the Song," *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, "The Children's Hour," "Paul Revere's Ride," "The Cross of Snow," "Footsteps of Angels," *The Song of Hiawatha*, and *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*.

## Lesson plans:

### “Christmas Bells”

The words of this poem are more commonly known as the lyrics to a popular Christmas Carol of the same title. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote “Christmas Bells” in December of 1863 as the Civil War raged. It expresses his perpetual optimism and hope for the future of mankind. The poem’s lively rhythm, simple rhyme and upbeat refrain have assured its popularity through the years.

**Suggested Grade Level:** Middle School

**Subject Areas:** English, Language Arts, Social Studies, History

**Maine Learning Results:**

*English Language Arts:*

Process of Reading: A1, A2, A3, A4, A6, A7, A9

Literature and Culture: B1, B6, B8, B10

Language and Images: C1, C2, C3

Processes of Writing and Speaking: E1, E2, E3

Standard English Conventions: F1, F2

*Social Studies*

History: B2

**Time Required:** several class sessions

### “The Poet’s Tale – The Birds of Killingworth”

This poem is one of the numerous tales in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Tales of the Wayside Inn*. The collection was published in three parts between 1863 and 1873. Longfellow wrote this series of long narrative poems during the most difficult personal time of his life. While mourning the tragic death of his second wife (Fanny Appleton Longfellow) he produced this ambitious undertaking. During this same period he translated Dante’s *Inferno* from Italian to English. “The Poet’s Tale” is a humorous poem with a strong environmental message that reflects Longfellow’s Unitarian outlook on life.

**Suggested Grade Level:** Middle School

**Subject Areas:** English, Language Arts, and Science & Technology

*English Language Arts:*

Process of Reading: A1, A2, A3, A4, A6, A8, A9, A10

Literature and Culture: B3, B4, B5, B6, B7, B8, B10, B12, B13

Language and Images: C5

*Science and Technology:*

Ecology: B2, B3, B4

Continuity and Change: D3

**Time Required:** several class sessions

## “Haunted Houses”

Longfellow’s collection *The Courtship of Miles Standish and other Poems* was published in 1858. It sold 250,000 copies in two months and over 10,000 copies in London on the first day; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was extremely popular during his lifetime.

“Haunted Houses” is a work from that collection. It is a poem that is especially appealing around Halloween. The poem welcomes the reader to a place where “The spirit-world around the world of sense floats like an atmosphere . . .”

**Suggested Grade Level:** Middle School

**Subject Areas:** English, Language Arts, Social Studies, History

**Maine Learning Results:**

*English Language Arts:*

Process of Reading: A1, A2, A3, A4, A6, A7, A9

Literature and Culture: B1, B6, B8, B10

Language and Images: C1, C2, C3

Processes of Writing and Speaking: E1, E2, E3

Standard English Conventions: F1, F2

**Time Required:** several class sessions

## “The Slave’s Dream”

In December of 1842 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Poems on Slavery* was published. “The Slave’s Dream” is one of eight anti-slavery poems in the collection. A beautifully crafted and emotionally moving poem, it mesmerizes the reader with the last thoughts of an African King bound to slavery, as he lies dying in a field of rice. The ‘landscape of his dreams’ include the lordly Niger flowing, his green-eyed Queen, the Caffre huts and all of the sights and sounds of his homeland until at last ‘Death illuminates his Land of Sleep.’

**Suggested Grade Level:** Middle School

**Subject Areas:** English, Language Arts, Social Studies, History

**Maine Learning Results:**

*English Language Arts:*

Process of Reading: A1, A2, A3, A4, A6, A7, A9

Literature and Culture: B1, B6, B8, B10

Language and Images: C1, C2, C3

Processes of Writing and Speaking: E1, E2, E3

Standard English Conventions: F1, F2

*Social Studies:*

History: B2

**Time Required:** several class sessions

## Related Handouts:

“Poetry – Some Terms and Techniques”

“Abolitionists, Anti-Slavery and Popular Authors of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century”