

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Christmas Bells"

Lesson Plan

A resource developed through Longfellow and the Forging of American Identity

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Suggested Grade Level: Middle School

Subject Area: English, Language Arts, Social Studies, History

Main 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:

This lesson will take several class sessions. Depending on the application it can be extended into a whole unit of study. Several ideas are presented below.

Learning Objectives:

Students will study an anti-slavery poem in the context in which it was written. They will learn some background information about the period, and read about how the poem was adapted into a popular Christmas Carol.

Materials and Resources Required:

Copies of the poem "Christmas Bells," and handouts "Abolitionists, Anti-Slavery and Popular Authors of the 19th Century," and "About 'Christmas Bells'."

Preparation:

Having knowledge of historical setting, and the poet's personal circumstances often adds to the understanding of the significance of a poem. Therefore, it is advisable to reproduce, distribute and discuss the handouts prior to reading the poem.

Lesson Outline:

1. Create a historical perspective.
 - A. Share the handouts *Abolitionists, Anti-Slavery and Popular Authors of the 19th Century* and *About Christmas Bells*.
 - B. Extension -Using the internet, have students visit the Library of Congress website (www.loc.gov) or check other sites to learn more about related background information

2. Read and discuss “Christmas Bells”
 - A. Talk about the content and message of the poem
 - B. Discuss the technical form – use of repetition, rhyme etc.

3. Possible Activities
 - A. Essay – Write an essay explaining the meaning of the poem. Let the reader know if you think Longfellow’s message is still appropriate today.
 - B. Poetry – Using “Christmas Bells” as a model create a poem that rhymes (AA, BB), has a repeating line at the end of each stanza, and makes a statement about something that is important to you.
 - C. Research and Report – The related topics are endless: prominent abolitionist authors, politicians, leaders; slavery and the Civil War; this poem is a fertile springboard for all sorts of investigations and the development of unique student products. A student with talent/interest in music could research alternate musical adaptations.

Assessment Summary:

Depending on the assignment, an appropriate rubric should be developed ahead of time so that the students will be clear on the expectations and evaluation process. Completed products should be filed in the student’s portfolio.

About “Christmas Bells”

“Christmas Bells” is a minor, yet well known, poem written by a very melancholy Henry Wadsworth Longfellow on Christmas morning in 1863 during the midst of the Civil War. It is anti-slavery poem as well as a seasonal favorite.

The poem was written six months after the battle of Gettysburg where 40,000 soldiers lost their life. In addition to despairing over the bloody war, Henry was also mourning the death of his beloved wife Fanny Appleton Longfellow. Fanny died in a tragic fire the same year that the Civil War broke out. In November of 1862 another personal tragedy added to his pain. His son, Union Lieutenant Charles Appleton, was wounded in the Army of the Potomac.

On Christmas morning in 1883, while sitting at his desk at the Craigie House in Cambridge, MA, Henry was inspired to write a poem as he listened to the church bells pealing. Their constancy and joyous ringing inspired him to write “Christmas Bells.” In spite of his sadness, Longfellow expresses his belief in God and innate optimism that indeed:

*God is not dead; nor doth he sleep
The Wrong shall fail;
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men!*

Sometime after 1872 Longfellow’s poem was adapted into a Christmas Carol. John B. Caulkin (1827-1905) was a famous English composer who set the lyrics to a gentle, melodic tune which is reminiscent of bells ringing. The carol is entitled “*I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.*” Alternative tunes have been written for the lyrics but Caulkin’s melody remains predominant.

Christmas Bells

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
 And wild and sweet
 The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
 Had rolled along
 The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
 A voice, a chime,
 A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
 And with the sound
 The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
 And made forlorn
 The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said:
 "For hate is strong,
 And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
 The Wrong shall fail,
 The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men!"