

Longfellow Amongst His Contemporaries: The Ship of State DBQ

Lesson Plan

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

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Suggested Grade Level: 10-12

Subject Area: American literature, American history, composition

Learning Results:

English Language Arts:

Process of Reading: A1, A5, A6, A9, A10, A11 Literature and Culture: B10, B11

Stylistics and Rhetorical Aspects of Writing: G5, G6, G7, G9, G10 Research-Related Writing: H9, H11

Social Studies:

Civics and Government: B1, C2 History: A1, B4, C1, C2

Time Required: 1 1/2 to 2 hours

Preparation Required/Preliminary Discussion: Lesson plans should be done in the context of a course of study on American literature and/or history from the Revolution to the Civil War.

The ship of state is an ancient metaphor in the western world, especially among seafaring people, but this figure of speech assumed a more widespread and literal significance in the English colonies of the New World. From the middle of the 17th century, after all, until revolution broke out in 1775, the primary system of governance in the colonies was the Navigation Acts. The primary responsibility of colonial governors, according to both Parliament and the Crown, was the enforcement of the laws of trade, and the governors themselves appointed naval officers to ensure that the various provisions and regulations of the Navigation Acts were executed. England, in other words, governed her American colonies as if they were merchant ships.

This metaphorical conception of the colonies as a naval enterprise not only survived the Revolution but also took on a deeper relevance following the construction of the Union. The United States of America had now become the ship of state, launched on July 4th 1776 and dedicated to the radical proposition that all men are created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights. This proposition is examined and tested in any number of ways during the decades between the Revolution and the Civil War. Novelists and poets, as well as politicians and statesmen, questioned its viability: Whither goes the ship of state? Is there a safe harbor somewhere up ahead or is the vessel doomed to ruin and wreckage? Is she well built and sturdy or is there some essential flaw in her structural frame?

Directions for Students:

The following question requires you to construct a coherent essay that integrates your interpretation of Documents 1-10 and your knowledge of the period referred to in the question. You must both cite key pieces of evidence from the documents and draw upon outside knowledge to compose a strong, persuasive argument.

Using these documents and your knowledge of the period 1783-1865, assess the validity of this statement:

The ship of state metaphor represents an effective strategy for depicting the social values and political conflicts that characterize the state of the Union during the crucial decades between the Revolution and the Civil War.

Document 1:

Monarchy is like a splendid ship, with all sails set; it moves majestically on, then it hits a rock and sinks forever. Democracy is like a raft. It never sinks, but, damn it, your feet are always in the water.

--Fisher Ames, 1783, from The Works of Fisher Ames, published in Boston 1854

Document 2:



--U.S. Frigate Constitution, ca. 1896 reproduction of painting by Marshall Johnson, Maine Historical Society.

Document 3:

The crew pace the deck with unquiet and tremulous step; but there is upon their countenances an expression more of the eagerness of hope than of the apathy of despair.

In the meantime the wind is still in our poop, and, as we carry a crowd of canvas, the ship [DISCOVERY] is at times lifted bodily from out the sea—Oh, horror upon horror! The ice opens suddenly to the right, and to the left, and we are whirling dizzily, in immense concentric circles, round and round the borders of a gigantic amphitheatre, the summit of whose walls is lost in the darkness and the distance. But little time will be left me to ponder upon my destiny—the circles rapidly grow small—we are plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool—and amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and of tempest, the ship is quivering, oh God! and—going down.

--from Edgar Allan Poe, "M.S. Found in a Bottle," 1831

Document 4:

I look to the educated and literary class in the country to save it. No matter who commands for the voyage, if we cannot find pilots who understand the channels we must pass, with their windings and their soundings, who know where hidden dangers lurk and how only we may avoid them, and who will aid us with their skill and their counsel to bring us into port, still I would hope on; but I should think the odds most fearfully against us, and not much to choose between going down in the deep sea and waiting a little to be stranded in shoal water where we may perish no less miserably and certainly, though close upon the land. But there is more to be done than merely to conduct the business of navigation—to set the canvass, and hold the helm, and study the chart. We must take care that the ship be well found and well provided for the adventure, and especially that we be not caught in the midocean with unsound timbers in her...

--from Daniel D. Barnard, "Address Delivered Before Rutgers College,"
Albany, 1837

Document 5:

It has been found necessary to vest in every government, even the most democratic, some extraordinary and, at first sight, alarming powers; trusting in public opinion, and subsequent accountability, to modify the exercise of them. These are provided to meet exigencies, which all hope may never occur, but which yet by possibility may occur; and if they should, and there were no power to meet them instantly, there would be an end put to the government at once. So it is with the authority of the shipmaster.

--from Richard Henry Dana, Jr., Two Years Before the Mast, New York, 1840

Document 6:

In my humble opinion, this law [the Fugitive Slave Law] is a wedge—sharp at one end, but wide at the other—put in between the lower planks of our ship of state. If it be driven home, we go to pieces. But I have no thought that that will be done quite yet. I believe the great politicians who threatened to drive it through the gaping seams of our argosy will think twice before they strike again...I do not expect this of their courage but of their fears; not of their justice—I am too old for that—but of their concern for property which it is the "great object of government" to protect.

--from Theodore Parker, "The State of the Nation," sermon delivered on
Thanksgiving Day, 1850

Document 7:

“Thus,” said he [“the Master” shipwright], “will we build this ship!
Lay square the blocks upon the slip,
And follow well this plan of mine.
Choose the timbers with greatest care;
Of all that is unsound beware;
For only what is sound and strong
To this vessel shall belong.
Cedar of Maine and Georgia pine
Here together shall combine.
A goodly frame, and a goodly fame,
And the UNION be her name! ...”

Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State!
Sail on, O UNION, strong and great!
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!
We know what Master laid thy keel,
What Workmen wrought thy ribs of steel,
Who made each mast, and sail, and rope,
What anvils rang, what hammers beat,
In what a forge and what a heat
Were shaped the anchors of thy hope!
Fear not each sudden sound and shock,
‘T is of the wave and not the rock;
‘T is but the flapping of the sail,
And not a rent made by the gale!

In spite of rock and tempest’s roar,
In spite of false lights on the shore,
Sail on, nor fear to breast the sea!
Our hearts, our hopes, are all with thee,
Our hearts, our hopes, our prayers, our tears,
Our faith triumphant o’er our fears,
Are all with thee,--are all with thee!

--from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Building of the Ship,” Boston, 1850

Document 8:

First of all was Queequeg, whom Starbuck, the chief mate, had selected for his squire... Next was Tashtego, an unmixed Indian from Gayhead, the most westerly promontory of Martha's Vineyard... Tashtego was Stubb the second mate's squire... Third among the harpooneers was Daggoo, a gigantic, coal-black negro-savage, with a lion-like tread—an Ahasuerus to behold... this imperial negro was the Squire of little Flask, who looked like a chess-man beside him. As for the residue of the Pequod's company, be it said, that at the present day not one in two of the many thousand men employed in the American whale fishery, are Americans born, though pretty near all the officers are. Herein it is the same with the American whale fishery as with the American army and military and merchant navies, and the engineering forces employed in the construction of the American Canals and Railroads. The same, I say, because in all these cases the native American liberally provides the brains, the rest of the world as generously supplying the muscles. No small number of these whaling seamen belong to the Azores, where the outward bound Nantucket whalers frequently touch to augment their crews from the hardy peasants of these rocky shores. How it is, there is no telling but Islanders seem to make the best whalemens. They were nearly all Islanders in the Pequod, Isolatos too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each Isolato living on a separate continent of his own. Yet now, federated along one keel, what a set these Isolatos were! An Anarcharsis Cloutz deputation from all the isles of the sea, and all the ends of the earth, accompanying old Ahab in the Pequod to lay the world's grievances before that bar from which not very many of them ever came back.

--from Herman Melville, "Knights and Squires," in Moby Dick, New York, 1851

Document 9:

From the ship's starboard bow, nearly all the seamen now hung inactive; hammers, bits of plank, lances, and harpoons, mechanically retained in their hands, just as they had darted from their various employments; all their enchanted eyes intent upon the whale, which from side to side strangely vibrating his predestinating head, sent a broad band of overspreading semicircular foam before him as he rushed. Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in his whole aspect, and spite of all that mortal man could do, the solid white buttress of his forehead smote the ship's starboard bow, till men and timbers reeled. Like dislodged trucks, the heads of the harpooners aloft shook on their bull-like necks. Through the breach, they heard the water pour, as mountain torrents down a flume.

"The ship! The hearse! —the second hearse!" cried Ahab from the boat; "its wood could only be American!" Soon they through dim, bewildering mediums saw her sidelong fading phantom, as in the gaseous Fata Morgana; only the uppermost masts out of water; while fixed by infatuation, or fidelity, or fate, to their once lofty perches, the pagan harpooners still maintained their sinking lookouts on the sea. And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight.

But as the last whelmings intermixingly poured themselves over the sunken head of the Indian at the mainmast, leaving a few inches of the erect spar yet visible, together with long streaming yards of the flag, which calmly undulated, with ironical coincidings, over the destroying billows they almost touched;--at that instant, a red arm and a hammer hovered backwardly uplifted in the open air, in the act of nailing the flag faster and yet faster to the receding spar. A sky-hawk that tauntingly had followed the main-truck downwards from its natural home among the stars, pecking at the flag, and incommoding Tashtego there; this bird now chanced to intercept its broad fluttering wing between the hammer and the wood; and simultaneously feeling that ethereal thrill, the submerged savage beneath, in his death-grasp, kept his hammer frozen there; and so the bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell until she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it.

Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.

--from Herman Melville, "The Chase—Third Day," in Moby Dick, New York, 1851

Document 10:

O Captain! My Captain!
O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
Here Captain! dear father!
This arm beneath your head!
It is some dream that on the deck,
You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchored safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

--from Walt Whitman, Memories of President Lincoln, New York, 1866