

# Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Poet's Tale: The Birds of Killingworth"

## 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, Science and Technology

## Maine Learning Results:

*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:

One class or more. This poem includes allusions to events and historical figures that are not commonly known to middle school students, and the writing style is a bit flowery. Therefore, I suggest introducing the tale, and then reading and discussing the poem together.

## Learning Objectives:

Students will read one of the narrative poems from *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, a work that distinguishes Longfellow as one of the America's first environmentalists. This is a lesser known tale; however, it is one that middle school students are apt to enjoy for its humor and environmental message. This lesson plan can be used as an introduction to the *Tales* followed by reading/study of one or more of the other better-known tales including "Paul Revere's Ride."

## Materials and Resources Required:

Copies of "The Birds of Killingworth," dictionaries for all students. A copy of Charles Calhoun's book *Longfellow: A Rediscovered Life* for the teacher's reference.

## Preparation:

It is important to provide the students with some background information on *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, a series of long narrative poems told by an assortment of colonial figures to a Yankee innkeeper. Read to the students from Charles Calhoun's *Longfellow: A Rediscovered Life*, pages 230 -235. In these pages, Calhoun explains the biographic foundation of the characters, their stories, and the inn; Longfellow actually visited the Red-Horse Inn in Sudbury and based his narrators on frequent visitors to the inn. Included in this section of Calhoun's book are a summary and some excerpts from "The Birds of Killingworth."

**Lesson Outline:**

1. Introduce the *Tales of a Wayside Inn*; the Calhoun comments are comprehensive.
2. Read and discuss the poem together. Be prepared to explain the allusions and any new vocabulary. This is a good opportunity for students to practice figuring out meaning from context. Have them think about people they know today who are like the characters in the tale.
3. Relate the story to what we know about the interdependence of all life. Talk or write about some contemporary environmental problems caused by human interference with nature.

**Works Referenced:**

Calhoun, Charles. *Longfellow: A Rediscovered Life*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004.

## The Poet's Tale: The Birds Of Killingworth

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

It was the season, when through all the land  
The merle and mavis build, and building sing  
Those lovely lyrics, written by His hand,  
Whom Saxon Caedmon calls the Blitheheart King;  
When on the boughs the purple buds expand,  
The banners of the vanguard of the Spring,  
And rivulets, rejoicing, rush and leap,  
And wave their fluttering signals from the steep.

The robin and the bluebird, piping loud,  
Filled all the blossoming orchards with their glee;  
The sparrows chirped as if they still were proud  
Their race in Holy Writ should mentioned be;  
And hungry crows assembled in a crowd,  
Clamored their piteous prayer incessantly,  
Knowing who hears the ravens cry, and said:  
"Give us, O Lord, this day our daily bread!"

Across the Sound the birds of passage sailed,  
Speaking some unknown language strange and sweet  
Of tropic isle remote, and passing hailed  
The village with the cheers of all their fleet;  
Or quarrelling together, laughed and railed  
Like foreign sailors, landed in the street  
Of seaport town, and with outlandish noise  
Of oaths and gibberish frightening girls and boys.

Thus came the jocund Spring in Killingworth,  
In fabulous day; some hundred years ago;  
And thrifty farmers, as they tilled the earth,  
Heard with alarm the cawing of the crow,  
That mingled with the universal mirth,  
Cassandra-like, prognosticating woe;  
They shook their heads, and doomed with dreadful words  
To swift destruction the whole race of birds.

And a town-meeting was convened straightway  
To set a price upon the guilty heads  
Of these marauders, who, in lieu of pay,  
Levied black-mail upon the garden beds  
And cornfields, and beheld without dismay  
The awful scarecrow, with his fluttering shreds;  
The skeleton that waited at their feast,  
Whereby their sinful pleasure was increased.

Then from his house, a temple painted white,  
With fluted columns, and a roof of red,  
The Squire came forth, august and splendid sight!  
Slowly descending, with majestic tread,  
Three flights of steps, nor looking left nor right,  
Down the long street he walked, as one who said,  
"A town that boasts inhabitants like me  
Can have no lack of good society!"

The Parson, too, appeared, a man austere,  
The instinct of whose nature was to kill;  
The wrath of God he preached from year to year,  
And read, with fervor, Edwards on the Will;  
His favorite pastime was to slay the deer  
In Summer on some Adirondac hill;  
E'en now, while walking down the rural lane,  
He lopped the wayside lilies with his cane.

From the Academy, whose belfry crowned  
The hill of Science with its vane of brass,  
Came the Preceptor, gazing idly round,  
Now at the clouds, and now at the green grass,  
And all absorbed in reveries profound  
Of fair Almira in the upper class,  
Who was, as in a sonnet he had said,  
As pure as water, and as good as bread.

And next the Deacon issued from his door,  
In his voluminous neck-cloth, white as snow;  
A suit of sable bombazine he wore;  
His form was ponderous, and his step was slow;  
There never was so wise a man before;  
He seemed the incarnate "Well, I told you so!"  
And to perpetuate his great renown  
There was a street named after him in town.

These came together in the new town-hall,  
With sundry farmers from the region round.  
The Squirt presided, dignified and tall,  
His air impressive and his reasoning sound;  
Ill fared it with the birds, both great and small;  
Hardly a friend in all that crowd they found,  
But enemies enough, who every one  
Charged them with all the crimes beneath the sun.

When they had ended, from his place apart,

Rose the Preceptor, to redress the wrong,  
And, trembling like a steed before the start,  
Looked round bewildered on the expectant throng;  
Then thought of fair Almira, and took heart  
To speak out what was in him, clear and strong,  
Alike regardless of their smile or frown,  
And quite determined not to be laughed down.

"Plato, anticipating the Reviewers,  
From his Republic banished without pity  
The Poets; in this little town of yours,  
You put to death, by means of a Committee,  
The ballad-singers and the Troubadours,  
The street-musicians of the heavenly city,  
The birds, who make sweet music for us all  
In our dark hours, as David did for Saul.

"The thrush that carols at the dawn of day  
From the green steeples of the piny wood;  
The oriole in the elm; the noisy jay,  
Jargoning like a foreigner at his food;  
The bluebird balanced on some topmost spray,  
Flooding with melody the neighborhood;  
Linnet and meadow-lark, and all the throng  
That dwell in nests, and have the gift of song.

"You slay them all! and wherefore! for the gain  
Of a scant handful more or less of wheat,  
Or rye, or barley, or some other grain,  
Scratched up at random by industrious feet,  
Searching for worm or weevil after rain!  
Or a few cherries, that are not so sweet  
As are the songs these uninvited guests,  
Sing at their feast with comfortable breasts.

"Do you ne'er think what wondrous beings these?  
Do you ne'er think who made them and who taught  
The dialect they speak, where melodies  
Alone are the interpreters of thought?  
Whose household words are songs in many keys,  
Sweeter than instrument of man e'er caught!  
Whose habitations in the tree-tops even  
Are half-way houses on the road to heaven!

"Think, every morning when the sun peeps through  
The dim, leaf-latticed windows of the grove,  
How jubilant the happy birds renew

Their old, melodious madrigals of love!  
And when you think of this, remember too  
'T is always morning somewhere, and above  
The awakening continent; from shore to shore,  
Somewhere the birds are singing evermore.

"Think of your woods and orchards without birds!  
Of empty nests that cling to boughs and beams  
As in an idiot's brain remembered words  
Hang empty 'mid the cobwebs of his dreams!  
Will bleat of flocks or bellowing of herds  
Make up for the lost music, when your teams  
Drag home the stingy harvest, and no more  
The feathered gleaners follow to your door?"

"What! would you rather see the incessant stir  
Of insects in the windrows of the hay,  
And hear the locust and the grasshopper  
Their melancholy hurdy-gurdies play?  
Is this more pleasant to you than the whir  
Of meadow-lark, and her sweet roundelay,  
Or twitter of little field-fares, as you take  
Your nooning in the shade of bush and brake?"

"You call them thieves and pillagers; but know,  
They are the winged wardens of your farms,  
Who from the cornfields drive the insidious foe,  
And from your harvests keep a hundred harms;  
Even the blackest of them all, the crow,  
Renders good service as your man-at-arms,  
Crushing the beetle in his coat of mail,  
And crying havoc on the slug and snail.

"How can I teach your children gentleness,  
And mercy to the weak, and reverence  
For Life, which, in its weakness or excess,  
Is still a gleam of God's omnipotence,  
Or Death, which, seeming darkness, is no less  
The selfsame light, although averted hence,  
When by your laws, your actions, and your speech,  
You contradict the very things I teach?"

With this he closed; and through the audience went  
A murmur, like the rustle of dead leaves;  
The farmers laughed and nodded, and some bent  
Their yellow heads together like their sheaves;  
Men have no faith in fine-spun sentiment

Who put their trust in bullocks and in bees.  
The birds were doomed; and, as the record shows,  
A bounty offered for the heads of crows.

There was another audience out of reach,  
Who had no voice nor vote in making laws,  
But in the papers read his little speech,  
And crowned his modest temples with applause;  
They made him conscious, each one more than each,  
He still was victor, vanquished in their cause.  
Sweetest of all the applause he won from thee,  
O fair Almira at the Academy!

And so the dreadful massacre began;  
O'er fields and orchards, and o'er woodland crests,  
The ceaseless fusillade of terror ran.  
Dead fell the birds, with blood-stains on their breasts,  
Or wounded crept away from sight of man,  
While the young died of famine in their nests;  
A slaughter to be told in groans, not words,  
The very St. Bartholomew of Birds!

The Summer came, and all the birds were dead;  
The days were like hot coals; the very ground  
Was burned to ashes; in the orchards fed  
Myriads of caterpillars, and around  
The cultivated fields and garden beds  
Hosts of devouring insects crawled, and found  
No foe to check their march, till they had made  
The land a desert without leaf or shade.

Devoured by worms, like Herod, was the town,  
Because, like Herod, it had ruthlessly  
Slaughtered the Innocents. From the trees spun down  
The canker-worms upon the passers-by,  
Upon each woman's bonnet, shawl, and gown,  
Who shook them off with just a little cry  
They were the terror of each favorite walk,  
The endless theme of all the village talk.

The farmers grew impatient but a few  
Confessed their error, and would not complain,  
For after all, the best thing one can do  
When it is raining, is to let it rain.  
Then they repealed the law, although they knew  
It would not call the dead to life again;  
As school-boys, finding their mistake too late,

Draw a wet sponge across the accusing slate.

That year in Killingworth the Autumn came  
Without the light of his majestic look,  
The wonder of the falling tongues of flame,  
The illumined pages of his Doom's-Day book.  
A few lost leaves blushed crimson with their shame,  
And drowned themselves despairing in the brook,  
While the wild wind went moaning everywhere,  
Lamenting the dead children of the air!

But the next Spring a stranger sight was seen,  
A sight that never yet by bard was sung,  
As great a wonder as it would have been  
If some dumb animal had found a tongue!  
A wagon, overarched with evergreen,  
Upon whose boughs were wicker cages hung,  
All full of singing birds, came down the street,  
Filling the air with music wild and sweet.

From all the country round these birds were brought,  
By order of the town, with anxious quest,  
And, loosened from their wicker prisons, sought  
In woods and fields the places they loved best,  
Singing loud canticles, which many thought  
Were satires to the authorities addressed,  
While others, listening in green lanes, averred  
Such lovely music never had been heard!

But blither still and louder carolled they  
Upon the morrow, for they seemed to know  
It was the fair Almira's wedding-day,  
And everywhere, around, above, below,  
When the Preceptor bore his bride away,  
Their songs burst forth in joyous overflow,  
And a new heaven bent over a new earth  
Amid the sunny farms of Killingworth.