

8

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: Narrative Poetry and Characters

VOCABULARY WORDS

*From Evangeline Part the
Second, Section 1:*

Dirge, *n.*
A funeral hymn

Sylvan, *adj.*
Relating to woods or forests

Cultural and historical contexts give rise to dilemmas and themes that can act as powerful forces within a literary work. Studying and appreciating the details of setting can help readers understand a character's motivations. The central character in a work of fiction is called the *protagonist*. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw such as weakness or ignorance to achieve new understanding by the work's end. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters with different goals, motives, or beliefs. Often the *antagonist* opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her progress.

As a character, Evangeline seems like someone out of a myth or fable. She is certainly Longfellow's ideal of a patient, virtuous woman. In a century of literature that usually featured a heroic male protagonist, Evangeline's strength and determination cannot be underestimated: she searches for her beloved Gabriel, and she chooses to hope for his return.

?? Discussion Activities

Most of the poem describes Evangeline's search for Gabriel, which takes her all over America: down the Mississippi River, across the Nebraskan prairie, into the Ozark Mountains, through the forests of Michigan, and finally to Louisiana. Break your class into groups, asking each to highlight one state or place where Evangeline travels. Does the country itself become a character? Students should pay attention to Longfellow's use of figurative language in these passages. You might give students a blank U.S. map to enhance their understanding of her vast journey.



Writing Exercise

Write a short essay to describe Evangeline's character. Answer the following questions: What aspects of Evangeline's character seem unrealistic? Does she have any flaws? What admirable qualities does she possess? What are her motivations? Does she learn anything, or grow, by the poem's end? Use specific passages to support your answer.



Homework

Read the Reader's Guide essay "Longfellow's *Tales of a Wayside Inn*" (pp. 12–13) and Handout Two, "The Landlord's Tale: 'Paul Revere's Ride.'" Also read the prelude to *Tales of a Wayside Inn* and summarize the key attributes of each storyteller. Then read *The Landlord's Tale*, "Paul Revere's Ride" and *The Poet's Tale*, "The Birds of Killingworth."