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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Analyzing a Poem's Context

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “Paul Revere’s Ride”:

Belfry, n.

A bell tower

Muster, n.

A gathering of troops

Sentinel, n.

One that keeps guard

Alders, n.

A type of tree of the genus *Alnus* having alternate simple toothed leaves and tiny fruits in woody, conelike catkins

Tales of a Wayside Inn was published in three installments between 1863 and 1873. It is often said that the poem is an American retelling of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. This long narrative poem begins with a prelude that introduces a diverse group of storytellers—a Sicilian political refugee, a Spanish Jew, a Norwegian musician, a youthful student, a broad-minded theologian, and a tender-hearted poet. It comprises twenty-two linked narratives with great variety of theme, meter, and tone. Longfellow’s tales are diverse also in subject matter, character, and historical reference. The interludes between each story provide commentary from the other listeners. In this way, the longer poem suggests that the stories we tell are reflections of our own thoughts, dreams, and desires.

?? Discussion Activities

Read “Paul Revere’s Ride” and the interlude that follows aloud with your class. Ask your students to pay attention to the meter’s galloping beat.

Longfellow would not have called himself a political man, but he abhorred slavery and opposed the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. He was a lifelong friend of lawyer Charles Sumner, the congressman who was physically attacked on the Senate floor by South Carolina congressman Preston Brooks after giving an anti-slavery speech.

Discuss the importance of interpreting this poem’s historical context (April 18, 1775) alongside its 1861 publication in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Use this opportunity to teach your students some details about the Civil War. What ideas or lines in “Paul Revere’s Ride” suggest that Longfellow might be referring to the Civil War? Why might he have set his poem during this earlier period? How might this either enhance or hinder any point he might be trying to make about the Civil War?

Writing Exercise

The only original tale in *Tales of a Wayside Inn* is titled “The Birds of Killingworth.” Certainly the birds are literal in the story, but there may be several figurative interpretations as well. Write a short essay on how Longfellow’s use of birds might be related to his historical context. What might the birds represent? How might Longfellow’s original audience have interpreted the birds? How might we today?

Homework

Read the Finale of *Tales of a Wayside Inn*.