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## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Word Choice and the Value of a Dictionary

#### VOCABULARY WORDS

From “*Aftermath*”:

**Aftermath**, *n.*

1. A consequence, especially of a disaster
2. A second growth in the same season

**Fledged**, *v. intr.*

To grow the plumage needed for flight

**Rowen**, *n.*

A second growth of grass or hay in a season

**Tufts**, *n. plural*

A short cluster of elongated strands, as of yarn, hair, or grass

**Mead**, *n.*

A meadow

Begin each day’s lesson by reading the poem aloud in class.

Before a poem can be appreciated for its deeper meanings, it must first be read literally. We often overlook words we can already define. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in *Nature*, “Every word...if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance. *Right* means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*. *Spirit* primarily means *wind*; *transgression*, the crossing of a *line*; *supercilious*, the *raising of the eyebrow*.” Students should even look up words that are commonly understood to understand better the careful, conscious choices poets make. To develop your students’ vocabulary, several words from each lesson’s assigned poems are already defined in the color margins of this Teacher’s Guide.

### ?? Discussion Activities

On the surface, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem “*Aftermath*,” published in 1873, might seem simple and straightforward. However, much of its total effect depends on a reader’s knowing the literal—and in some cases, archaic—meanings of a few words. Here, the most crucial word to understand is the title. Like many seemingly abstract words, *aftermath* was originally a concrete descriptive term that referred to the usually meager second growth of crop in a field that had already been mowed that season—“math” being a word for mowing that is rarely used today.

The poem “*Aftermath*” describes this activity of mowing the second growth in a winter field, but Longfellow’s treatment suggests symbolic interpretations as well. He does not specify this subtext, so a reader can project his or her own meaning into the poem. Longfellow’s insight, though, is painfully clear: to revisit a scene of the past can be devastating.

Define and discuss the meanings of several words in “*Aftermath*” (including, but not limited to, the words in the column on the left). How does knowing the exact meaning of these words add to both your literal and symbolic readings of Longfellow’s poem?

### Writing Exercise

After reading the poem once, write a one-page essay explaining the poem’s meaning. Read the poem a second time with a focus on understanding the meaning of one or two terms in the poem. Write a one-page essay to explain how those terms are relevant to the meaning of the poem. Does it change your first reading? Does it deepen your understanding of the poem?

### Homework

From the Reader’s Guide, read Longfellow’s biography and timeline (pp. 4–6) and “*Longfellow’s Ballads and Lyric Poetry*” (pp. 8–9). Then read Longfellow’s sonnet “*Mezzo Cammin*.”

Some of this lesson’s content is taken from *An Introduction to Poetry*, eds. X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, 11th edition, and its accompanying instructor’s manual.