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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Narrative Poetry, Meter, and Voice

VOCABULARY WORDS

*From the prologue of
Evangeline:*

Primeval, *adj.*

Having existed from the beginning;
in the earliest state

Druids, *n.*

A member of an order of priests
in the ancient Celtic religion who
appear in legend as prophets and
sorcerers

Disconsolate, *adj.*

Seeming beyond consolation

Roe, *n.*

A type of deer

List, *v.*

Archaic: listen, listen to

Narrative poems tell stories, draw characters and settings, shape plots, and engage the reader—qualities that are also important for fiction writers. In Western literature, narrative poetry dates back to the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (composed about 2000 B.C.) and Homer’s epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (composed before 700 B.C.).

Longfellow’s four book-length poems—*Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie* (1847), *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1858), and *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863–73)—established his status as a major poet. These narrative poems tell the untold story of a new nation, in memorable lines of emotional power and vivid drama.

?? Discussion Activities

Read the Reader’s Guide essay on *Evangeline* aloud with your class (pages 10–11). The end of this essay notes that *Evangeline* is an extraordinary piece of literary experimentation because of its meter: unrhymed *dactylic hexameter* (see glossary). For about 500 years, English-language poets had been trying to make this meter work in English—the ancient meter in which Homer (Greek) and Virgil (Latin) wrote. Notice the scansion of *Evangeline*’s opening lines:

This is the | forest pri|meval. The | murmuring | pines and the | hemlocks,
Bearded with | moss, and in | garments green, | indistinct | in the twilight...

In groups, ask your students to scan several lines from the prologue, paying attention to the sounds and words that Longfellow emphasizes.

Writing Exercise

Narrated by the “murmuring pines and the hemlocks” and the ocean waves, the poem opens with a mystery: where are the people in this seemingly idyllic place called Acadie? Write a short essay to explain how Longfellow utilizes narrative form to tell this story. Why might Longfellow begin his poem with the cry of the forest? What effect does this have on the reader? What does this story convey about America?

Homework

Read *Evangeline*, Part the Second (approximately 30 pages). Trace Evangeline’s journey across America as she searches for her beloved fiancé, Gabriel. Map the specific places across America where she travels. Then read Handout One, “Longfellow and Multiculturalism,” in this guide.