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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Great Poet?

Poets articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of figurative language inform the themes and characters of the work. A great poem is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to list the characteristics of a great poem. Put these on the board. What elevates a poem to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other poems or songs they know that include some of the same characteristics. Do any of these works remind them of any of Longfellow's poetry?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. Does Longfellow have a consistent voice throughout the poems you have studied? (Make sure to draw a distinction between the voice of the poem's narrator and Longfellow's voice.) What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of Longfellow's generation? How does Longfellow's depiction of the experiences and emotions of the common person allow him to be a voice of his generation?

Writing Exercise

These ten lessons have highlighted several different kinds of Longfellow poems: lyric poems, sonnets, ballads, and narrative poems. Using more than two Longfellow poems to support your argument, write a short essay to illustrate how a central theme emerges in Longfellow's work. Explain the theme in detail, referring to specific lines to support your argument. Which poem illustrates the theme most effectively and why?

Homework

Read Handout Three, "Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*". Write a paragraph in response to this question: What would you say is Longfellow's legacy in the twenty-first century?