

American Studies Analysis and Discussion
Transition to Contextual Analysis of Longfellow's
"Paul Revere's Ride"
Teacher Instructions

This .pdf contains the teacher instructions for completing each of the activities related to an American Studies analysis of Longfellow's works. The student worksheets and other necessary documents are included in a document packet, which can be downloaded separately, along with these instructions. The notes in red after each section of the instructions indicate which resources accompany that section. The outline below corresponds to the order of the documents in the document packet as well as to the Teacher Instructions below.

Outline:

- A. Discussion of 1860 date
- B. Creation of a hero
 - 1. A brief biographical sketch of Paul Revere
 - 2. "The Midnight Ride of William Dawes"
- C. Connections to Longfellow's past
 - 1. General Peleg Wadsworth: Revolutionary War Hero
 - 2. George Washington/Craigie House Background
- D. Viewing Longfellow's Civil War poetry
 - 1. Biography of Charles Sumner
 - 2. Longfellow's anti-slavery poetry
 - a. "The Slave's Dream"
 - b. A request from Charles Sumner for slavery poems
 - c. Additional anti-slavery poems (optional)
 - d. "Paul Revere's Ride"
- E. Longfellow's personal connection with the Civil War
 - 1. "Christmas Bells"
 - 2. Longfellow's personal life
 - a. Civil War Casualties
 - b. Son Charley's Civil War experiences, from *Longfellow: A Rediscovered Life*
 - c. Labeled "Christmas Bells"
- F. Closing discussion of importance of American Studies approach - How is poem changed?

American Studies Analysis and Discussion: Transition to Contextual Analysis of Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride"

After students have a strong understanding of the text of the poem, we then move them toward a deeper understanding of the context. The goal is for them to experience an "ah-ha!" moment during which they realize that this is, in fact, not just a poem about the Revolutionary War, but was instead inspired by events leading to the Civil War. This can only be done by placing the poem in its time.

The most exciting way to do this is during a round table discussion. What follows is a series of questions with related information needed for answers. Teachers can either be the informational source for the class or make copies for individual student use. If you have done the biographical reading to begin the unit, you may also find that students who had responsibility for certain relevant chapters in the book will be able to contribute great input.

A. Have a discussion of the date the poem was written. Does this change the big message of the poem? See if students can recognize that the United States was also threatened in 1860. Ask if they see evidence of Longfellow's hope and belief that the Union should not be broken.

Most copies of "Paul Revere's Ride" include the date it was written - 1860. We did not include this date in the copy of the poem we provided since we just might (!) have observant students who would immediately note it and understand the poem's inspiration. We want a strong example of how contextualization can virtually change a text's message.

Once students have found the date, whether on-line or in a Longfellow collection, we discuss what was happening in the United States at that time. We then ask students to find the worksheet they did about the poem's message and we revisit it. When applied to the Civil War, the message still works. Clearly, the Union was threatened and Longfellow

was reminding his fellow Americans that earlier Americans fought for the right to be a nation and now Americans must fight to preserve it.

B. Have a discussion of the creation of a hero and poetic license.

Some useful questions: Why did Longfellow focus only on Paul Revere? Did he deliberately make him into a national hero by eliminating what other people did that night? Why did he choose to immortalize Paul Revere and not William Dawes?

When the class read the true historical accounts of what happened on the night the American Revolution began, it was clear that Longfellow omitted certain facts and emphasized others when he wrote this poem. Here is a good time to discuss what poetic license is and have students discuss how they feel about it. Included in the discussion should be the question of whether they feel Longfellow deliberately made Paul Revere a lone hero and why he might have done that. It is also a good time to remind students that William Dawes also rode the alarm that night. Here is some information to feed the discussion:

1. Use “a brief biographical sketch of Paul Revere”
2. Use “The Midnight Ride of William Dawes”

C. From where did Longfellow’s inspiration to create a new hero come? Did Longfellow feel that the American Revolution had heroes that could serve as inspirations at the beginning of the Civil War?

Longfellow clearly had heroes from the Revolutionary War that he respected. One was his own grandfather Peleg Wadsworth with whom he often spent summers in Hiram. Another was George Washington who had set up headquarters in the Craigie House for an extended time during the war. In one essay below is the history of Peleg Wadsworth’s service during the Revolutionary War and in the other is information about George Washington’s connection to the Craigie House.

1. [Use “General Peleg Wadsworth: Revolutionary War Hero”](#)
2. [Use “George Washington/Craigie House Background”](#)

D. Viewing Longfellow’s Civil War poetry.

With an analysis of the following three poems, the class can follow Longfellow’s changing feelings about the war that would have paralleled changing feelings in the North as the war progressed and the death toll mounted.

Besides patriotic feelings, did Longfellow also have abolitionist beliefs? Did he write antislavery poetry?

Longfellow did write anti-slavery poetry. In large part, this was in response to a request from Charles Sumner. His friendship with Sumner goes back to his first year at Harvard when Sumner was lecturing at Harvard’s law school and lived on a street called Professor’s Row as did Longfellow. Sumner was a member of “The Five of Clubs” social group with Longfellow and their close friendship would remain strong until Sumner’s death. Included in the document packet is a short biography of Sumner that shows his anti- slavery interests.

1. [Use “Biography of Charles Sumner”](#)

2. Longfellow's anti-slavery poetry

a. “The Slave’s Dream” – 1842

Discussion about this poem should start with a class discussion of propaganda. This was one of the poems Longfellow wrote in response to a request from his old friend Charles Sumner. For background

- a. [Use “The Slave’s Dream”](#)
- b. [Use Charles Sumner’s Request from *Longfellow: a rediscovered life*](#)
- c. [Use other anti-slavery poetry if interested](#)

Note: If the class has read *An American Bard*, discussion of Longfellow’s lack of travel to South helps establish the fact that Longfellow is an observer and not present in the poem. It recounts a melodramatic story that could be used to incite movement to end such a cruel system.

d. “Paul Revere’s Ride” – 1860.

Having established a different way of approaching a poem, the class now looks at “Paul Revere’s Ride” in terms of its time period.

1. I guide them to still recognize it as a patriotic poem, but as one that hails the beginning of the Civil War. This is the type of inspirational message that soldiers sing as they march off to war. The country is threatened by the South’s desire to secede and the North must fight to save the Union. Have students revisit lines 125 to 130 and make connections to 1860.
2. Ask the class if Longfellow is present in the poem. From the first lines, they’ll note that he is the storyteller and now personally connected to the content.

“Listen my children and you shall hear
of the Midnight Ride of Paul Revere”

d. Use “Paul Revere's Ride”

E. Longfellow's personal connection with the Civil War

1. “Christmas Bells” – 1864.

On December 23, 1863, Longfellow wrote “Christmas Bells.” The poem is both a personal expression of Longfellow’s grave concerns for his son, Charley, and a reflection of the mood of the nation. It can be used as an extension for the further study of Longfellow’s life and work or as a link to a social studies unit on the Civil War. Read aloud.

1. Use “Christmas Bells” poem

2. Longfellow's personal life

a. By 1864, his beloved wife Fanny had died in a terrible accident and the Craigie House was in deep mourning with Longfellow now a single parent with two teenage sons and three younger daughters. (Covered in *An American Bard*)

At the same time, newspapers are filled with bloody war time accounts. It was clear by this time that whichever side won, it would be a Pyrrhic victory.

a. Use Civil War Casualties

b. At eighteen, his son Charley, always an adventuresome boy, ran away and enlisted causing his father great worry. Charles Calhoun’s expert voice tells this tale in Longfellow: a rediscovered life.

b. Use Son Charley’s Civil War experiences

c. Moods in the poem that parallel changes in country. Use the labeled poem to point out changes. Note that it is consistent with Longfellow’s personality that he ends the poem with hope and faith in God and the cause.

c. Use labeled copy of “Christmas Bells”

Once again ask whether Longfellow is present in the poem. Student response should that he is voicing his anger at the South for starting the war and causing so much injury and death.

This is a good time to link Longfellow’s changing poetry and feeling other American wars. World War I, World War II, Vietnam War and even Afghanistan and Iraq.

F. Closing discussion of the importance of the American Studies approach

How are poems understood more deeply?

Do meanings and messages change?