

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's Poetry: Giving students a biographical background

Contents:

An American Bard Assignment Sheet

Biography outline for *An American Bard* by Ruth Langland Holbert

Overview:

Although we all realize that knowing about an author's life and times before we read his work can make a critical difference, acquiring a significant depth of biographical information is often skipped because it is time consuming. One creative way to expose students to the whole of an author's life without taking too much time is to divide the research among students in the class. This has been done successfully for years by teachers who find a good biography, assign chapters to individuals or partners, and then, have students make a presentation of their chapter material, thereby telling the story of the author's life in sequence. If a large wall-sized timeline that can be easily read from a distance and used for reference purposes during the unit can also be constructed at this time, so much the better!

An American Bard by Ruth Langland Holberg, published in 1963 and now out of print, is an accurate, richly detailed account of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's life. Starting with a family history and his childhood in Portland, the narrative moves smoothly through his college years at Bowdoin, his travels in Europe, the professional and personal life he created in Cambridge as a Harvard professor and through to the final years of his life. The biography is especially helpful to the teacher who wants to use a contextual approach to Longfellow's poems as Holberg includes context about when poems were written so students can look for information about what is happening in the country and poet's life that might have shaped the work.

Written at about a fifth grade reading level and containing thirteen chapters, this biography assignment can be finished in about five 70-minute periods:

First night - Students read their chapters.

First class period - Make a list of events. For timeline, circle the key words in this list, and brainstorm possible visuals. (Student assignment sheet follows)

Second night and second class - collect / create visuals. In class, students can also work on creating the presentation. This is a great time to make sure library time is available.

Third class - Time to place text and visuals on timeline and work on presentation.

Fourth and Fifth classes – Student presentations progressing from chapter one to chapter thirteen in order. Now the entire class has a sense of the author's life story.

We've just given you a brief overview here. Details are on the student assignment sheet.

You do need to create your own syllabus to give to students at the beginning of the assignment. We have also included a chapter-by-chapter list of key words which we found invaluable. This list can be used as a check on student work before they place events on the timeline so important information is present and is also helpful during the student presentations for assessment purposes.

An American Bard Assignment Sheet **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow biography**

Knowing about an author's life can give us a better understanding of his work because we can link what is happening in his life with the messages and stories in his poems. In fact, this information can sometimes completely change our understanding of a poem. Since Longfellow writes primarily narrative and inspirational poems, there is often a close connection.

Here's how we'll do this without expecting everyone in class to read the whole biography. Isn't that a relief?

Assignment:

1. Read your assigned chapter.
2. Meet with your partner (if you have one) and make a list of important events in the chapter. This should include milestones in his life, poems that were written during this time as well as important current events of the day.
3. Reduce this list to keywords you can put on a wall-sized timeline. (e.g.: Born 1807)
4. Decide on a visual for each event- perhaps a picture of Paul Revere on his horse if that poem was written during your chapter, a picture of the Eiffel Tower if Longfellow was in Paris, or a gravestone if there was a death. You may either print an image or do your own drawing. Try to be original and colorful.
5. We will then spread out a long piece of paper, draw a black line all the way along the paper and label chapter areas to create a timeline. You'll be given a class period to place your text and visuals onto the timeline.
6. In the next two classes, everyone will present the information about Longfellow's life from their chapters to the class using the images they placed on the timeline as visuals.

In order to entertain, and to affix the facts more securely in the minds of your audience, be creative. Storytelling, puppets, skits, interviews, Power Points, etc. are all ideas that have been used successfully in the past to explain a chapter. When the timeline and presentations are finished, we'll have a wall poster we can refer to as we read Longfellow's poems and we'll know all about his life.

Pretty impressive considering everyone read only one chapter!

Biography outline for *An American Bard* by Ruth Langland Holberg (1963)

This is not a detailed list of the events that should be included on the timeline or in the presentation, but an outline of the topics and events that each chapter covers. Students should cover most of the highlights in their timelines by translating the text into keywords and images.

Example: birth date and birthplace:

“Henry was born on February 27, 1807. At the time, his parents were living in Portland on the corner of Fore and Hancock streets with Zilpah’s sister, whose husband was a sea captain, Captain Samuel Stephenson. They had been married three years and already had one son named Stephen. When her second son Henry was born, Zilpah named him after her only brother who had died in Tripoli off the northern coast of Africa fighting the Barbary pirates.”

On timeline this becomes:

Henry b. Feb. 27,1807 in Capt. Stephenson’s house
[Images of this house are available]
brother - d. Tripoli fighting Barbary Pirates [Image - map
of northern Africa] or [Image – Barbary pirate]

Chapter 1 (Childhood)

Parents Zilpah and Stephen
Grandparents
Birth date and birthplace
Description of family home on Congress
Street
Siblings
Religion
Entertainment
Education

Chapter 2 (College)

Harvard vs. Bowdoin
Portland Academy
Rev. Mr. Titcomb’s house
Daily schedule
Henry / Stephen comparison
Boston holiday

Chapter 3 (Graduation)

Graduation ceremonies
His speech
Job offer
Study law with father
Visited George Ticknor

Chapter 4 (France)

Philadelphia - editors
Cadmus - Le Havre-de-Grace
Parents’ letters
Rouen visit
Paris - Madame Potel’s
Study of French
Summer in Auteuil - convalescent home
Father’s letter - Spain
Loire Valley trip
Pierre Irving - To Spain

Chapter 5 (Spain -> Italy)

Stagecoach through mts. - highwaymen

Madrid - Lt. Alexander Slidell

Tourist travel – Sergovia / El Escorial

Washington Irving

Social life - landlady's daughters/
bullfights/dances

Travel to Italy -Seville, Cadiz, Gibraltar,

Malaga, Granada (Alhambra)

Marseilles -> Genoa -> Florence

Rome - Persani family

Naples with George Greene

Ill in Rome - Julia

Bowdoin College job offer withdrawn

To Germany

Chapter 6 (Germany -> Bowdoin College -> Europe)

Dresden - social

University of Gottingen - Ned Preble

Summer travel

Elizabeth's death / Return home

New job - responsibilities and salary

Mary Storer Potter

Outre Mer published

Harvard job

Travel to Germany (party of 4)

Chapter 7 (European travel -> wife's death -> Harvard job)

London - Thomas Carlyle

Stockholm, Sweden - Swedish and Finnish

Copenhagen, Denmark (Goddard -> home)

Amsterdam / Rotterdam, Netherlands

Wife's miscarriage and death

Heidelberg, Germany -> Clara

Switzerland, Austria

Appleton family - Fanny

Cambridge - Stearns

Five of Clubs

Harvard job description

Hawthorne friendship

Summer in Portland (Ellen's death)

Move to Craigie House- Washington

Chapter 8 (Fanny rejects - poetic success - illness)

Courts Fanny - "Flowers" -rejection

"A Psalm of Life"

"The Light of Stars"

Hyperion

Lectures - Emerson

Voices of the Night published

"The Wreck of the Hesperus" - ballad

New York City

The Spanish Student – play

Newport, Rhode Island - "Skeleton in
Armor"

Philadelphia - Sumner

Ballads and Other Poems published -

"Village Blacksmith"

Illness-> German spa

Chapter 9 (To Germany -> happy family life)

Bruges Belgium -> "Carillon"
Marienberg spa -water cure
London - Charles Dickens
Voyage - Slavery poetry
Fanny accepts - wedding
Honeymoon -> Portland -> Pittsfield, MA ->
Springfield
Craigie House - gift
Eyestrain -*Poets and Poetry of Europe*
Translating Dante's *Divine Comedy*
Charles born
"The Evening Star"

Chapter 10

Happy / peaceful
b. Ernest
Writing - story of *Evangeline*
Louis Agassiz
40th birthday
b. Frances (Fanny) - ether
Summer - Oak Grove (Martin's Point)
Evangeline success
Kavanagh
d. Baby Fanny
d. HWL's father
Seaside and Fireside - "The Building of the Ship"
Washington trip
Summer - Nahant
Christus, a Mystery

Summer - Newport, Rhode Island

b. Alice and Edith

Retired as Harvard professor

Chapter 11

Summer in Nahant

Song of Hiawatha

West Wind and Wenonah

Nokomis

bow/arrows/ mittens/ moccasins

Punish father - battle

Minnehaha

Mondamin

Grave and corn

The Courtship of Miles Standish

b. Annie Allegra

Chapter 12

Lincoln - President

Prince of Wales

Civil War begins

d. Fanny - burns

Charles enlists - commission

Charles wounded

Tales of a Wayside Inn published

"The Saga of King Olaf"

"Paul Revere's Ride"

d. Hawthorne

Dante Club

Family information

Family European tour

Chapter 13

64th birthday

Important visitors

Charles

Earnest

“The Hanging of the Crane”

“Three Friends of Mine”

Bowdoin’s 50th anniversary-

“Morituri Salutamus”

Neuralgia

“Keramos”

Edith m. Richard Dana

72nd birthday - Village Blacksmith chair

b. Richard Henry Dana III

75th birthday

“The Bells of San Blas”

Peritonitis

d. March 1882

Craigie House -> museum

Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey

Longfellow Mountains