

Lesson Title: **The Poetry of Henry Longfellow in the Context of the Civil War Era**

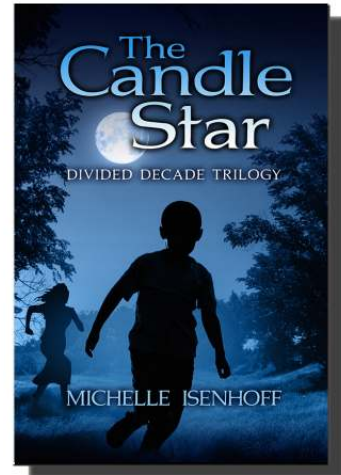
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Length: 45-60 min.

Grade Level: 5-8

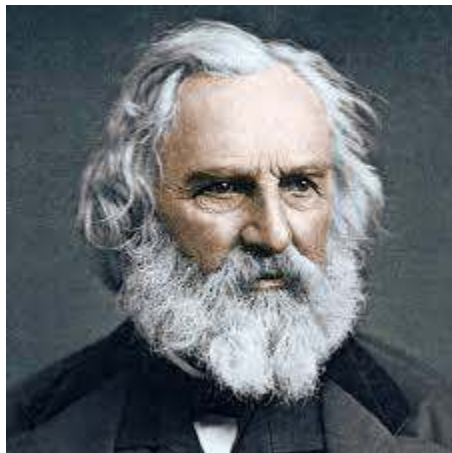
Lesson Overview:

Students will relate the experiences expressed within Longfellow's poems to the cultural context of the Civil War era portrayed within the children's historical novel, *The Candle Star*.



Introduction

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was America's most popular poet of the nineteenth century. He began his literary career in 1839 and wrote until his death in 1882, a span of years that included the American Civil War. Poetry was the primary storytelling media of the day—long before fiction and cinema overtook it. It was an age that still embraced Puritan thought and morality, which his work epitomized. His poems came across as unaffected and sincere, leading to a public image of a kindly, sympathizing, encouraging friend. His poems included his honest response to tragedy—with which so many could easily identify during the war—and simple everyday pleasures—to which a war torn nation longed to return. His popularity would decline sharply as America headed into the postmodernism and world wars of the early twenty-first century, but during Longfellow's own lifetime he enjoyed tremendous success.



Longfellow's work was melodic and easy to read. He used standard forms, regular meter, and rhymed verses. They were easy to memorize in school or recite at home, which made them popular as family entertainment. Keep in mind, there was no television, no radio, not even electric lighting. Evenings were dark, quiet, and spent together as a family.

"Autumn" and "The Bridge" were both published in the volume entitled *The Belfry of Bruges and Other Poems* (1845). "Autumn" is a metaphor for the changes that take place in life. "The Bridge" recalls the pain of personal tragedy.

Objectives:

1. Students will read, analyze, and understand two poems written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
2. Students will learn the terms simile and metaphor.
3. Students will identify mood created by word pictures within poetry.
4. Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience and identify its historical significance.
5. Students will respond to the poems and related them to their own life experience.

Preparation/Materials:

You will need a copy of Longfellow's poems "Autumn" and "The Bridge" (below). Some background knowledge of Longfellow's life and times is beneficial. Read his full biography here: <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/longfellow>.

Activity:

1. Begin by asking students what they know about the American Civil War based on their reading of *The Candle Star* and other prior knowledge. List their responses on the board. Then ask them what it might have been like to live in such a time period. Discuss such things as the lack of modern conveniences such as electricity, the lack of modern entertainment, and the hardships of war.
2. Introduce the two poems "Autumn" and "The Bridge." Explain that both are examples of poetry written by the very popular American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Explain that both were written in the two decades leading up to the Civil War but that Longfellow's works remained popular long after the war. Ask the class to consider what they know about life during the Civil War era and think about what might have made Longfellow's work so well liked during this time period.
3. Read "Autumn" aloud to the class. (Younger students: You may want to shorten it by choosing just one stanza.)
4. Identify and define any vocabulary words then discuss the meaning of the poem. (Older students: You may wish to also discuss how the poem's meaning can be extended to represent the changes in life, not just the weather.)
5. Introduce the idea of word pictures and explain the terms simile and metaphor. Identify some similes and metaphors within the poem and discuss how they create a mood. What mood does the poem set?
6. Ask the students how this poem might be received by people experiencing the Civil War.
7. Repeat the exercises 4, 5, and 6 with "The Bridge."

Assessment/Culminating Activity:

Ask the students to choose their favorite of the two poems. Assign a written response that explains why they chose that particular poem. What did they like or not like about it? What kind of emotion does it provoke? Then ask students to relate it to their own life experience. How are they able to identify with the poem? What has happened in their own lives that provokes their response?

Autumn

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

With what a glory comes and goes the year!
The buds of spring, those beautiful harbingers
Of sunny skies and cloudless times, enjoy
Life's newness, and earth's garniture spread out;
And when the silver habit of the clouds
Comes down upon the autumn sun, and with
A sober gladness the old year takes up
His bright inheritance of golden fruits,
A pomp and pageant fill the splendid scene.

There is a beautiful spirit breathing now
Its mellow richness on the clustered trees,
And, from a beaker full of richest dyes,
Pouring new glory on the autumn woods,
And dipping in warm light the pillared clouds.
Morn on the mountain, like a summer bird,
Lifts up her purple wing, and in the vales
The gentle wind, a sweet and passionate wooer,
Kisses the blushing leaf, and stirs up life
Within the solemn woods of ash deep-crimsoned,
And silver beech, and maple yellow-leaved,
Where Autumn, like a faint old man, sits down
By the wayside a-weary. Through the trees
The golden robin moves. The purple finch,
That on wild cherry and red cedar feeds,
A winter bird, comes with its plaintive whistle,
And pecks by the witch-hazel, whilst aloud
From cottage roofs the warbling blue-bird sings,
And merrily, with oft-repeated stroke,
Sounds from the threshing-floor the busy flail.

O what a glory doth this world put on
For him who, with a fervent heart, goes forth
Under the bright and glorious sky, and looks
On duties well performed, and days well spent!
For him the wind, ay, and the yellow leaves,
Shall have a voice, and give him eloquent teachings.
He shall so hear the solemn hymn that Death
Has lifted up for all, that he shall go
To his long resting-place without a tear.

The Bridge

by Henry Wadworth Longfellow

I stood on the bridge at midnight,
As the clocks were striking the hour,
And the moon rose o'er the city,
Behind the dark church-tower.

I saw her bright reflection
In the waters under me,
Like a golden goblet falling
And sinking into the sea.

And far in the hazy distance
Of that lovely night in June,
The blaze of the flaming furnace
Gleamed redder than the moon.

Among the long, black rafters
The wavering shadows lay,
And the current that came from the ocean
Seemed to lift and bear them away;

As, sweeping and eddying through them,
Rose the belated tide,
And, streaming into the moonlight,
The seaweed floated wide.

And like those waters rushing
Among the wooden piers,
A flood of thoughts came o'er me
That filled my eyes with tears.

How often, O, how often,
In the days that had gone by,
I had stood on that bridge at midnight
And gazed on that wave and sky!

How often, O, how often,
I had wished that the ebbing tide
Would bear me away on its bosom
O'er the ocean wild and wide!

For my heart was hot and restless,
And my life was full of care,
And the burden laid upon me
Seemed greater than I could bear.

But now it has fallen from me,
It is buried in the sea;
And only the sorrow of others
Throws its shadow over me.

Yet whenever I cross the river
On its bridge with wooden piers,
Like the odor of brine from the ocean
Comes the thought of other years.

And I think how many thousands
Of care-encumbered men,
Each bearing his burden of sorrow,
Have crossed the bridge since then.

I see the long procession
Still passing to and fro,
The young heart hot and restless,
And the old subdued and slow!

And forever and forever,
As long as the river flows,
As long as the heart has passions,
As long as life has woes;

The moon and its broken reflection
And its shadows shall appear,
As the symbol of love in heaven,
And its wavering image here.