

**POETRY IS THE
RHYTHMICAL CREATION
OF BEAUTY IN WORDS.
—Edgar Allan Poe**

Unit 4—Lesson 8

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

INTRODUCTION

Although William Cullen Bryant was an American poet, his poems still reflected an English tradition. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's work, on the other hand, was American through and through. He wrote on American people, nature, and history, helping to create and describe a culture that owed little to its European counterparts. One of his most famous and most American poems, "Paul Revere's Ride" appears in this lesson. Other examples include "Song of Hiawatha" and "The Courtship of Miles Standish."

Longfellow was born in 1807, the second of eight children. He was apparently a pleasant, affectionate child. Unusually in those days, he was sent to school by age three, and could read, add, and multiply by the time he was six. Longfellow was an early and avid reader, and among his favorites was Washington Irving's *Sketch Book*, which he later said was the first book to fascinate his imagination. He would continue to be verbally adept throughout life, eventually learning at least 13 languages well enough to read all and speak most of them.

After graduation from Bowdoin College (where he became friends with Nathaniel Hawthorne), Longfellow traveled through Europe. He returned to the United States and became a professor at his alma mater at age twenty-two. Soon Longfellow married, and returned to Europe with his wife, Mary, in preparation to take another professorship at Harvard. While in Europe, his wife died, and Longfellow returned to Cambridge, Massachusetts alone. Seven years later (1843), he married Fanny Appleton, the daughter of his landlord. The house where he had been boarding was given to the couple as a wedding gift, and Longfellow would live there the rest of his life.

The next several years were happy ones for Longfellow. He began to publish his poems, including many of his most famous, his marriage was seemingly perfect, and he fathered five children. The happiness ended in 1861 when Longfellow's wife burned to death when her dress caught fire. His face and hands were also burned while trying to save her.



**LESSON
PREVIEW**

This lesson is on meter in poetry. Like rhyme, meter is very important to poetry, even more important. It's more subtle than rhyme, though, and sometimes takes awhile to detect. Once you've had practice, you'll notice it more easily.

At about this time, the start of the Civil War compounded Longfellow's gloom. Although Longfellow wrote much about America, he was not particularly interested in politics. He was strongly against slavery, but rather than fight it politically he wrote poems expressing his views. The Civil War posed a moral quandary for Longfellow: on the one hand he hated slavery and opposed appeasing the South; on the other he abhorred war. In the end, he felt the Civil War was necessary to end slavery.

Longfellow returned again to Europe, where he was given many awards and accolades. He died of an infection at age seventy-five in 1882.

THE SELECTIONS

Like William Cullen Bryant, Longfellow was very popular and respected in his lifetime, but unlike Bryant he is still widely known and loved today (though more so by “common” readers than academics). This is no doubt because he wrote so frequently about American subjects and because his rhyme and meter are usually regular and song-like. The three selections here each exemplify some or all of these qualities.

WHILE YOU READ

Here are some questions to keep at the back of your mind while reading Longfellow's poems:

- Can you detect the metric patterns in the poems?
- Can you hear which syllables are accented?
- What sorts of words are accented?
- Does the meter of any of the poems contribute to its meaning or feeling?
- Do you especially like the meter of any of these poems? If so, can you say why?

PAUL REVERE'S RIDE

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year. 5

He said to his friend, "If the British march
By land or sea from the town to-night,
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch
Of the North Church tower as a signal light,—
One, if by land, and two, if by sea; 10
And I on the opposite shore will be,
Ready to ride and spread the alarm
Through every Middlesex village and farm,
For the country folk to be up and to arm."

Then he said "Good-night!" and with muffled oar 15
Silently rowed to the Charlestown shore,
Just as the moon rose over the bay,
Where swinging wide at her moorings lay
The Somerset, British man-of-war;
A phantom ship, with each mast and spar 20
Across the moon like a prison bar,
And a huge black hulk, that was magnified
By its own reflection in the tide.

Meanwhile, his friend, through alley and street,
Wanders and watches with eager ears, 25
Till in the silence around him he hears
The muster of men at the barrack door,
The sound of arms, and the tramp of feet,
And the measured tread of the grenadiers,
Marching down to their boats on the shore. 30

Then he climbed the tower of the Old North Church,
By the wooden stairs, with stealthy tread,
To the belfry chamber overhead,
And startled the pigeons from their perch
On the sombre rafters, that round him made 35
Masses and moving shapes of shade,—
By the trembling ladder, steep and tall,
To the highest window in the wall,
Where he paused to listen and look down
A moment on the roofs of the town, 40
And the moonlight flowing over all.

Beneath, in the churchyard, lay the dead,
In their night-encampment on the hill,
Wrapped in silence so deep and still
That he could hear, like a sentinel's tread, 45
The watchful night-wind, as it went
Creeping along from tent to tent,
And seeming to whisper, "All is well!"
A moment only he feels the spell
Of the place and the hour, and the secret dread 50
Of the lonely belfry and the dead;
For suddenly all his thoughts are bent
On a shadowy something far away,
Where the river widens to meet the bay,—
A line of black that bends and floats 55
On the rising tide, like a bridge of boats.

Meanwhile, impatient to mount and ride,
Booted and spurred, with a heavy stride
On the opposite shore walked Paul Revere.
Now he patted his horse's side, 60
Now he gazed at the landscape far and near,
Then, impetuous, stamped the earth,
And turned and tightened his saddle girth;
But mostly he watched with eager search
The belfry-tower of the Old North Church, 65
As it rose above the graves on the hill,
Lonely and spectral and sombre and still.
And lo! as he looks, on the belfry's height
A glimmer, and then a gleam of light!
He springs to the saddle, the bridle he turns, 70
But lingers and gazes, till full on his sight

Unit 4—Lesson 8: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

A second lamp in the belfry burns!
A hurry of hoofs in a village street,
A shape in the moonlight, a bulk in the dark,
And beneath, from the pebbles, in passing, a spark 75
Struck out by a steed flying fearless and fleet:
That was all! And yet, through the gloom and the light,
The fate of a nation was riding that night;
And the spark struck out by that steed, in his flight,

Kindled the land into flame with its heat. 80
He has left the village and mounted the steep,
And beneath him, tranquil and broad and deep,
Is the Mystic, meeting the ocean tides;
And under the alders that skirt its edge,
Now soft on the sand, now loud on the ledge, 85
Is heard the tramp of his steed as he rides.

It was twelve by the village clock;
When he crossed the bridge into Medford town.
He heard the crowing of the cock,
And the barking of the farmer's dog, 90
And felt the damp of the river fog,
That rises after the sun goes down.

It was one by the village clock,
When he galloped into Lexington. 95
He saw the gilded weathercock
Swim in the moonlight as he passed,
And the meeting-house windows, black and bare,
Gaze at him with a spectral glare,
As if they already stood aghast
At the bloody work they would look upon. 100

It was two by the village clock,
When he came to the bridge in Concord town.
He heard the bleating of the flock,
And the twitter of birds among the trees,
And felt the breath of the morning breeze 105
Blowing over the meadow brown.
And one was safe and asleep in his bed
Who at the bridge would be first to fall,
Who that day would be lying dead,
Pierced by a British musket-ball. 110

You know the rest. In the books you have read,
How the British Regulars fired and fled,—
How the farmers gave them ball for ball,
From behind each fence and farmyard wall,
Chasing the redcoats down the lane, 115
Then crossing the fields to emerge again
Under the trees at the turn of the road,
And only pausing to fire and load.

So through the night rode Paul Revere;
And so through the night went his cry of alarm 120
To every Middlesex village and farm,—
A cry of defiance, and not of fear,
A voice in the darkness, a knock at the door,
And a word that shall echo forevermore!
For, borne on the night-wind of the Past, 125
Through all our history, to the last,
In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
The people will waken and listen to hear
The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,
And the midnight message of Paul Revere. 130

THE TIDE RISES, THE TIDE FALLS

The tide rises, the tide falls,
The twilight darkens, the curlew calls;
Along the sea-sands damp and brown
The traveler hastens toward the town, 5
And the tide rises, the tide falls.

Darkness settles on roofs and walls,
But the sea, the sea in darkness calls;
The little waves, with their soft, white hands,
Efface the footprints in the sands, 10
And the tide rises, the tide falls.

The morning breaks; the steeds in their stalls
Stamp and neigh, as the hostler calls;
The day returns, but nevermore
Returns the traveler to the shore, 15
And the tide rises, the tide falls.

THE VILLAGE BLACKSMITH

Under a spreading chestnut-tree
The village smithy stands;
The smith, a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands;
And the muscles of his brawny arms 5
Are strong as iron bands.

His hair is crisp, and black, and long,
His face is like the tan;
His brow is wet with honest sweat,
He earns whate'er he can, 10
And looks the whole world in the face,
For he owes not any man.

Week in, week out, from morn till night,
You can hear his bellows blow;
You can hear him swing his heavy sledge, 15
With measured beat and slow,
Like a sexton ringing the village bell,
When the evening sun is low.

And children coming home from school
Look in at the open door; 20
They love to see the flaming forge,
And bear the bellows roar,
And catch the burning sparks that fly
Like chaff from a threshing-floor.

He goes on Sunday to the church, 25
And sits among his boys;
He hears the parson pray and preach,
He hears his daughter's voice,
Singing in the village choir,
And it makes his heart rejoice. 30

It sounds to him like her mother's voice,
Singing in Paradise!
He needs must think of her once more,
How in the grave she lies;
And with his hard, rough hand he wipes 35
A tear out of his eyes.

Toiling,—rejoicing,—sorrowing,
Onward through life he goes;
Each morning sees some task begin,
Each evening sees it close; 40
Something attempted, something done,
Has earned a night's repose.

Thanks, thanks to thee, my worthy friend,
For the lesson thou hast taught!
Thus at the flaming forge of life 45
Our fortunes must be wrought;
Thus on its sounding anvil shaped
Each burning deed and thought.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

“PAUL REVERE’S RIDE”

1. What is the rhyme scheme of the first stanza of “Paul Revere’s Ride”?
2. What is the signal for Paul Revere to begin his ride?
3. What is in the churchyard?
 - a. Pigeons
 - b. A ladder
 - c. A creek
 - d. A graveyard
4. What is the primary tone of stanza 6 (beginning “Beneath, in the churchyard, lay the dead”)?
 - a. Cheerfulness
 - b. Eeriness
 - c. Terror
 - d. Peacefulness
5. What two words in the stanza 7 tell the reader how Paul Revere was feeling during his wait?
 - a. Lonely and spectral
 - b. Sombre and still
 - c. Impatient and impetuous
 - d. None of the above
6. “Struck out by a steed flying fearless and fleet.” What literary device does Longfellow use here?
7. Which three of the reader’s senses does Longfellow engage in stanza 9?
8. “And the meeting-house windows, black and bare,/Gaze at him with a spectral glare,/As if they already stood aghast/At the bloody work they would look upon.” What type of figurative language does Longfellow use in these lines (primarily)?
9. In what order does Revere ride through the towns?
10. What was probably Longfellow’s primary purpose in writing this poem?
 - a. To teach history
 - b. To impart a feeling of patriotism
 - c. To protest war
 - d. To honor those who died in the Revolutionary War

[continued]

“THE TIDE RISES, THE TIDE FALLS”

1. What does the word *efface* mean in line 9?
 - a. Create
 - b. Copy
 - c. Erase
 - d. Fill
2. For what is the title of this poem most likely a metaphor?
 - a. Time passing
 - b. Spiritual guidance
 - c. Reoccurring events
 - d. Love

“THE VILLAGE BLACKSMITH”

1. Based on the description of the blacksmith in the first two stanzas, which of these adjectives would least apply to him?
 - a. Powerful
 - b. Hard-working
 - c. Fearful
 - d. Responsible
2. Which sense does Longfellow concentrate on in the third stanza?
3. What misfortune happened to the blacksmith?
4. What is the lesson of this poem, according to Longfellow?

LITERARY LESSON: METER IN POETRY

Meter is the measurable rhythm (stresses of words) in poetry. Although you probably don't think about it, every syllable you say has a certain amount of stress, some more than others. For example, say the word *penguin* aloud. If you listen, you'll notice that the first syllable is stressed more than the second: *PEN-guin*. If you said *pen-GUIN*, it would sound odd. This is true of longer words, too. *Elephant*, a word with three syllables, is also emphasized on the first syllable: *EL-e-phant*.

Emphasis is largely unconscious in our speech, but very important. Sometimes it even dictates the meaning of a word. Consider these two sentences:

They have no record of your purchase.
I want to record a few songs off that CD.

Both sentences contain the word *record*—or, rather, each sentence contains a different word, each of which is spelled *r-e-c-o-r-d*. But they mean different things and are pronounced differently. The first is accented on the first syllable: *RE-cord*; the second is accented on the second syllable: *re-CORD*.

It's usually unimportant in speech to be aware of stress, but it's always important when writing poetry. Poets choose certain words to set certain metrical patterns and to reinforce the poem's meaning. (Not all poems can be scanned. Free verse is poetry written without a regular meter. There are no free verse poems in this course.)

Feet

In poetry, a metrical unit of two or more syllables is called a foot. These syllables need not be within one word. This will become clearer shortly. Since each syllable is either stressed or not, different combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables are given different names.

- Iambic foot (iamb)—an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. This is the most common foot. (*a-ROUND*)
- Trochaic foot (trochee)—A stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. (*PEN-guin*)
- Dactylic foot (dactyl)—A stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables. (*EL-e-phant*)
- Anapestic foot (anapest)—Two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable. (*in-ter-VENE*)
- Spondaic foot (spondee)—Two stressed syllables. (*DAY-BREAK*)
- Pyrrhic foot (pyrrhic)—Two unstressed syllables. (Every English word of more than one syllable has an accent somewhere, so I can't give you a similar example of a pyrrhic foot. Some people don't even use pyrrhic feet when analyzing poetry; instead, they only acknowledge feet that have at least one stressed syllable.)

Most poetry is written with iambs, with the other feet sprinkled throughout to add variety and to emphasize certain words or phrases. Notice that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s name consists of two trochees followed by a dactyl. Can you figure out the feet your name consists of?

Scansion

The marking of meter in a poem is called *scansion*. It is done with these two symbols: / ∪. The first indicates a stressed syllable; the second marks an unstressed syllable. Vertical lines (|) are standard notation for separating feet.

To analyze a poem’s meter, you have to hear it. You may be able to hear it well enough in your head just by reading the poem to yourself. It will be much easier, however, if you read the poem aloud. Read it in a natural tone of voice, not dramatically. If you still have trouble hearing which syllables are stressed, ask a parent to read the poem for you, ideally onto a tape, so you can play it over and over. It’s best if you don’t explain why you need it read (sometimes when people are conscious of meter they alter their speaking patterns); just ask them to read the poem in a clear, natural voice. It is only by listening that you can determine a poem’s meter. You cannot depend on a poet following a certain pattern, because poets almost always introduce variety into their meter.

As you listen to the poem, begin marking the stress of the syllables. Once you see the pattern of the stressed and unstressed syllables, you’ll be able to divide the lines into feet. The more regular a line’s rhythm, the easier this is to do. If you start on a line that seems too difficult, skip instead to another part of the poem where the rhythm is more regular.

Here is the scansion of the third line of “The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls”:

∪ / ∪ / ∪ / ∪ /
Along | the sea- | sands damp | and brown

This line consists of four iambs in a row, with no variation. “Along” is the first foot, “the sea-” is the second foot, etc. Notice that although “sea-sands” is one word (albeit a hyphenated one) it is broken into two different feet. Remember that a foot can consist of more than one word and that an individual word can have its parts in more than one foot.

Most lines of poetry do not consist of merely one type of foot with no variation. Here is line 4 of “The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls”:

∪ / ∪∪ / ∪∪ / ∪ /
The trav | eler hast | ens toward | the town

Here we have an iamb, followed by two anapests, then ending with another iamb.

Finally, let's look at the first two lines of this poem:

U / / U U / /
The tide | rises, | the tide | falls,

U / U / U U / U /
The twi | light dark | ens, the cur | lew calls

Line one is iamb, trochee, iamb, then seemingly a single stressed syllable on its own. Line two is iamb, iamb, anapest, and iamb.

First, let's consider whether *falls* is really a lone stressed syllable. For this line to be symmetrical, it would have the following pattern: iamb, trochee, iamb, trochee. The only thing missing here for that last trochee is an unstressed syllable after *falls*. A common way of creating variety is to drop unstressed syllables, particularly at the ends of lines. This creates a greater pause in the poem, which has a similar effect to an unstressed syllable.

In line four, an unstressed syllable is added, turning an iamb into an anapest. This is also a very common device for adding variety.

Once you've done a scansion on one line of a poem, you can tell whether the line is iambic, trochaic, etc. That is, which type of foot predominates in that line? You cannot, however, tell if an entire poem is in a certain style from merely one line. For that, you must analyze at least one stanza. (A *stanza* is roughly equivalent to a paragraph. If the poem you're analyzing doesn't have stanzas, you'll probably need to analyze at least six lines.)

We have now analyzed the meter of four lines of this poem, and the iamb is clearly the dominant foot. I recommend you analyze at least the next two lines on your own, and determine whether you think this poem can be said to be iambic, overall.

How Many Feet Do You Have?

In addition to some type of foot predominating in a poem, most poems will have a predominate number of feet per line. Notice that every line I analyzed in "The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls" has four feet. The vocabulary for this is pretty simple: monometer (one foot per line), dimeter (two feet), trimeter (three feet), tetrameter (four feet), pentameter (five feet), hexameter (six feet), heptameter (seven feet), octameter (eight feet). Of these, pentameter is the most famous (partly because Shakespeare wrote in iambic pentameter), but tetrameter and hexameter are also very common.

If one were forced to come to a conclusion about the meter of "The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls" with an analysis only of the first four lines, it would be safest to categorize this poem as iambic tetrameter. This means the majority of the lines have four feet, and the majority of

the feet are iambs. Scansion is not, however, an exact science, and two people may scan a poem differently even though neither is wrong (i.e., they both follow the rules of scansion). What matters is that you can intelligently defend your scansion.

*If a poem is good,
its meter should
contribute to its
meaning and tone
rather than detract
from it.*

Meter and Meaning

If a poem is good, its meter should contribute to its meaning and tone rather than detract from it. If a poem is about a tragic event, it should not have a rollicking meter, for example (unless irony is intended). Conversely, a humorous poem will be more enjoyable if its meter swings a bit.

Again, let's examine the first line of "The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls"—a line which is repeated three more times in this short poem (it is also the last line), and which serves as its title.

U / / U U / /
The tide rises, the tide falls

The line consists of these syllables: unstressed, stressed, stressed, unstressed, stressed, stressed, pause (which, as explained above, for all practical purposes can equal an unstressed syllable). Using lower-case *s* for "unstressed" and upper-case *S* for "stressed," here's a visual representation of this pattern:

sSSsSSs

Now, take a minute to close your eyes and imagine the sound of waves in your head. There is a growing noise as the water rushes in, then a fading noise as it washes back out to sea. This sound is echoed by the meter Longfellow chose for the most important line in the poem. To repeat this meter in every line would become monotonous, so Longfellow applied it only to a line which, on its own, expresses the entirety of the poem's heart. In this way, the meter greatly enhances the poem's meaning.

When you've discovered a poem's basic pattern, look at the variations carefully. Often a poet will include variation to emphasize a word or thought. Here is line six of "The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls":

/ U / U U / U /
Darkness | settles | on roofs | and walls

The first two feet here are trochees, an uncommon occurrence in this poem. Also, a trochee is a more startling replacement for an iamb than an anapest is, because an anapest is simply

Unit 4—Lesson 8: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

the insertion of one more unstressed syllable. The ear may easily glide over this. But changing the order of the stress calls more attention. If Longfellow had wanted this line to be more consistent with the rest of the poem, he might have written:

 u / u / u u / u /
When dark | ness set | tles on roofs | and walls
 u / u / u / u /
The sea, | the sea | in dark | ness calls

This would have created a line with two iambs, followed by an anapest and another iamb, and the next line would have been purely iambic. This is very consistent with the rest of the poem. Instead, Longfellow draws attention to the line and to the darkness with the inclusion of two trochees. Add to this the observation that two thirds of the poem takes place in the dark or near dark (twilight), and I come to the conclusion that darkness is important to this poem, and contributes to its dreamy, lullaby quality.

WRITING EXERCISES

1. Choose any other poem (another of the Longfellow poems, a poem in the lesson on Bryant, or any poem you wish) and analyze its meter, addressing all the aspects covered in the lesson. This means not only identifying the meter, but explaining how the meter affects the meaning and/or tone of the poem, with specific examples.
2. Write a research paper on Paul Revere's famous ride.
3. Write a poem in iambic tetrameter, pentameter, or hexameter, at least three stanzas long, each stanza being at least four lines (12 lines total). Include a scansion of your poem, and explain the variations in meter you included and why you included them.
4. Write a poem, at least four stanzas long, four lines per stanza, about another famous historical event. You must have a regular rhyme scheme and strong meter, but choose any rhyme and metric scheme you wish.
5. Write an opinion paper explaining either a) why you prefer Bryant or Longfellow as a poet or b) which of the poems in this guide you liked best. Be specific, and quote lines from the poem(s) to support your views.
6. Marial all that you've learned about poetry so far (rhyme, meter, the introductory lesson about poetry, and anything you've learned about poetry before this class) and write as thorough an analysis as you can on any poem of your choice. Remember to discuss how these various aspects affect the content and tone of the poem, whenever appropriate.