

Lesson Plan: “Longfellow, Dvorak, and the American West”

Introduction

In 1855 (the same year as Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published *The Song of Hiawatha*, an epic poem based on legends and tales about Indians, collected by pioneering ethnologists like Henry Schoolcraft, George Catlin, and John Heckewelder. Revising their work, Longfellow used a historical Onondaga chief, Hiawatha, who was known for his code of laws for the Onondaga and a treaty that created the Iroquois Confederation to present a humane vision of the ‘noble savage.’ Although Hiawatha was an Iroquois rather than the Ojibway Indian of Lake Superior of the poem, Longfellow preferred the more melodious name to his original choice, Manabozho. In Longfellow’s self-declared myth-making, Hiawatha, as an exemplar of American Indians, was humane and dedicated to the welfare of his people, and Longfellow called on his readers to learn of Hiawatha’s “wondrous birth and being/ How he prayed and how he fasted,/How he lived, and toiled, and suffered,/That the tribes of men might prosper,/That he might advance his people!” The readers of *Hiawatha* would be “Ye who love the haunts of Nature,/Ye who love a nation's legends,/Love the ballads of a people,/Ye whose hearts are fresh and simple,/Who have faith in God and Nature,/Who believe that in all ages/Every human heart is human,/That in even savage bosoms/There are longings, yearnings, strivings/For the good they comprehend not,/Ye, who sometimes, in your rambles/Through the green lanes of the country,/Stay and read this rude inscription,/Read this Song of Hiawatha!”

Read the public did. By 1857, 50,000 copies of the poem had been sold in the United States, and it was being translated into numerous foreign languages. It became a part of everyday life. Schoolchildren memorized parts of it for class. Donald McKay, the clipper ship builder, named one of his newly constructed ships *Minnehaha* after Hiawatha’s bride; a St. Louis steamboat had the same name. There were public recitations of the poem by prominent actresses. Currier and Ives, the popular print-makers, put out seven Hiawatha prints over the ten years from 1858 to 1868, even though literary subjects generally did not sell well. By 1900, a number of prominent painters and sculptors had used *Hiawatha* as a subject in their work. This popularity occurred in one of the most tumultuous eras in American History. In the years from the publication of the poem to the dawn of the new century, the United States fought a civil war, emancipated the slaves, reunited the country, resolved the Indian issue, emerged as one of the great industrialized urban societies in the world, and entered the age of imperialism with Europe.

One of the numerous readers of *Hiawatha* was Antonin Dvorak, a Bohemian (or Czech) composer, famous for his musical works using the peasant character of Bohemia. In the fall of 1892, Jeannette Thurber, head of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City welcomed Dvorak as the new artistic director and professor of composition for the Conservatory. An advocate of American music, Thurber had convinced a reluctant Dvorak to come to America and train Americans to compose music based on American themes. Dvorak, in his three years as head of the Conservatory, proceeded to do just that. Not only were composers including African-Americans like Maurice Arnold, trained at the school, but Dvorak also encouraged the arranging of

black spirituals by African Americans baritone soloists like Harry Burleigh and the use of 'plantation songs' and Indian melodies in American music. Dvorak's own 'New World Symphony' was one of the best examples of this; music critics of its first public presentation in December 1893 noted that the largo was based on *Hiawatha*. Other evidence indicates that the "New World Symphony" had possible roots in Dvorak's exposure to Buffalo Bill's Wild Show and Dvorak's stay in Spillville, Iowa, among emigrant Czechs where he experienced first hand the spectacular, yet frightening, vastness of the prairie and the Kickapoo Medicine Show, a traveling, huckster-like, minstrel show, promoting Indian herbal cures (that were manufactured from everyday pharmaceuticals in Connecticut).

Dvorak's interest in the American Indian and the West through *Hiawatha* and the lenses of Buffalo Bill's show and the Kickapoo peddlers was not unique among Americans of the mid to late 19th century. The Wild West show toured Europe frequently as well as the United States, and a version of it still exists today. The Kickapoo Medicine Show was one of many such shows that toured the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century. The widespread interest in the Kickapoo and Buffalo Bill shows and the enduring popularity of *Hiawatha* indicate that Dvorak's incorporation of Indian and/or western themes in his 'New World Symphony' was, perhaps, only surprising to those who thought American music should not reflect the native values of the United States. Dvorak, already well-known in Europe for his *Slavonic Dances* based on the peasant songs of Bohemia, came to the United States with the intention using the folk music of the United States, especially that of the African Americans and American Indians, in American classical music.

The purpose, then, of this lesson plan is to show that Dvorak's use of American Indian and the American West motifs actually fit easily with the experiences of most Americans in regard to the west and Indians. This will be accomplished through the use of visual, written, and musical documents.

Objectives

The objective of this lesson is to combine art, music, and literature to show how the fine arts and popular culture, at times, interrelated and became an American culture during the Gilded Age of the late 19th century. A complementary, but no less important, objective is to incorporate in an Advanced Placement United States History course some music other than the jazz of the 1920s and the rock and roll of the 1950s and 1960s. Dvorak and Longfellow can have a place in an APUSH curriculum.

Duration

This exercise can be done in one 80 minute block period or two 45 minute class periods.

Resources

You can do this exercise at the end of your reading in the textbook on the Gilded Age. This will give the student some context of the times in regard to westward expansion and Indian relations, urbanization and industrialization, intellectual currents and popular

culture, and politics and foreign policies during that era. All of the necessary resources will be in this presentation except *The Song of Hiawatha* and the music from Dvorak's 'New World Symphony.'

Procedure

Prior to the reading of the documents, the students will have read chapters X, XI, XII, and XX of *The Song of Hiawatha* for homework. The teacher will also play the Largo of the 'New World Symphony' at the beginning of the exercise and after the students have finished the documents. The students will then examine the documents that follow while keeping in mind the following questions: 1) How popular was Longfellow's *Hiawatha* in the years after its publication? 2) What image is presented of Indians in *Hiawatha*? 3) How do painters and sculptors portray scenes or individuals from *Hiawatha*? 4) Are there differences between the Currier and Ives prints and the art of Moran, Eakins, and Bierstadt? 5) Compare the Moran and Turner paintings. 6) Which documents give the best evidence? 7) In listening to the Largo of the 'New World Symphony,' are you convinced that Dvorak has incorporated *Hiawatha* and the West into his symphony? 8) Explain how there might be an interconnection between popular culture and the fine arts in regard to Dvorak, *Hiawatha*, and the West. **This is the key question.**

Sources for Introduction and Exercise

Horowitz, Joseph. *Classical Music in America: A History of its Rise and Fall*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005.

Horowitz, Joseph. *Dvorak in America: In Search of the New World*. Chicago: Cricket Books, 2003.

Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. *Hiawatha; a poem*. Wallace Rice, editor. Chicago: Reilly and Britton Co., 1909. Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library.
<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/modeng/modengL.browse.html>

Nickerson Cynthia D., "Artistic Interpretations of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 'The Song of Hiawatha,' 1855-1900," *American Art Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Summer, 1984), 49-77.

Winter, Robert and Peter Boganoff. *From the New World: A Celebrated Composer's American Odyssey*. DVD, Arts Interactive, 2010.

Documents

1) Henry Longfellow, letter to Charles Sumner, United States Senator from Massachusetts, 13 December 1855 (quoted in Nickerson, 49)

“Hiawatha goes on his way rejoicing. The Tenth Thousand is now . . . printed.”

2) “Longfellow’s Poem,” *New York Daily Times*, 28 December 1855

“Hiawatha” we feel convinced will never add to Mr. LONGFELLOW’S reputation as a poet. It deals with a subject in which we of the present day have little interest; a subject, too, which will never command any interest upon its own intrinsic merits. Those Indian legends, like Indian arrow-heads, are well enough to hang up in cabinets for the delectation of the curious. Let antiquaries make use of them. They are too clumsy, too monstrous, too unnatural to be touched by the Poet.

3) “Review of *The Song of Hiawatha* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,” *Chamber’s Journal* [England], 5 January 1856 (quoted in Nickerson, 50)

In *Hiawatha*, Longfellow has gone right away from European subjects and their second-hand influences, which have hitherto mingled so largely in American poetry, and struck out a new and rich vein in the poetic mine. He has turned to the past of his country, as it peers out of the backwoods and hunting-grounds of the red man — to the past, so fertile in legend and mystery. He has endeavoured to give the world America’s first written epic. . . .⁸

4) "A Plum for Hiawatha," *New York Daily Times*, 27 February 1856

A PLUM FOR HIAWATHA.

1 Mr. BRIGHT, in his recent speech at Manchester, commenting upon the effect of the war² upon all departments of English effort, spoke of its influence upon the tone of English poetry,—and contrasted TENNYSON'S war lyrics with LONG-³FELLOW'S *Hiawatha*, thus:

"Take the Poet-Laureate as an example—[hear, hear]—a gentleman whom I have never seen or met, I believe, but once accidentally—a gentleman of great refinement of manner, and of mind, who has written poetry in our language—[hear, hear]—yet such was the pestilent influence of these scenes of carnage on a mind so accomplished and elevated as that, that he puts forth a poem which his friends are anxious should never be spoken of. I have had the opportunity lately of reading a poem from another country—written by the American poet, LONGFELLOW—[applause]—a poem which treats of the legends of the Indian tribes; and while I have turned from the poem of our Poet-Laureate, in which I find him descending to slang of almost the grossest character, I turn with delight to the exquisite poem, which has come to us from the other side of the Atlantic. [Hear, hear.]

1. John Bright was a Member of Parliament from the Liberal Party
2. The war is the Crimean War. It lasted from 1854 through 1856. Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire were fighting Russia.
3. The poem was probably Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. This was written about a mistaken, suicidal charge by English cavalry on a heavily defended Russian position.

- 5) Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, letter to Ferdinand Freiligrath, translator of the German edition, March, 1856 (quoted in Nickerson, 49)

You will be glad to know that thirty thousand copies have been sold already and the sales go on with unabated vigor. There is something in the poem, which has taken hold of the popular fancy. Some of my friends say it is only curiosity; which is a flattering way of putting it!⁴

- 6) "Hiawatha," *New York Daily Times*, 12 April 1856

Hiawatha.

Miss KIMBERLEY—a lady who has considerable reputation in the East, and is favorably known here as a reader of SHAKESPEARE—gave her third reading of LONGFELLOW'S trochaic poem of "Hiawatha" last evening at Hope Chapel. Miss KIMBERLY possesses many natural qualifications for fixing the attention of an audience, and interesting them in the subject of her discourse. She has an attractive person and a fine voice; and so far, is the best reader of the poem we have yet had in New-York. But we are doubtful if a woman ever can read "Hiawatha" with the dignity and impressiveness requisite for its Indian character.

- 7) Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, journal entry, 1860 (quoted in Nickerson, 49)

"My publisher says he shall print next week a new edition of Hiawatha. He sells two thousand a year; which is a great sale for an old book."⁵

8) J. Cameron, *The Death of Minnehaha*, Currier and Ives lithograph, 1867
corbisimages.com



And he rushed into the wigwam,
Saw the old Nokomis slowly
Rocking to and fro and moaning,
Saw his lovely Minnehaha
Lying dead and cold before him,
And his bursting heart within him
Uttered such a cry of anguish,
That the forest moaned and shuddered,
That the very stars in heaven
Shook and trembled with his anguish.

9) Artist unknown, "Hiawatha's Departure," 1868, Currier and Ives lithograph

publicdomainclip-art.blogspot.com



And the evening Sun descending
Set the Clouds on fire with redness,
Burned the broad Sky like a prairie,
Left upon the level water
One long track and trail of splendour,
Down whose stream as down a river,
Westward westward Hiawatha
Sailed into the fiery Sunset,
Sailed into the purple vapours,
Sailed into the dusk of evening.
Thus departed Hiawatha,
Hiawatha the beloved,

10) Albert Bierstadt, *Departure of Hiawatha*, 1868 hwwlongfellow.org



Fig. 5. Albert Bierstadt, DEPARTURE OF **HIAWATHA**, c. 1868. Oil on paper, 6 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{8}$ ". Collection, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Longfellow National Historic Site, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

11) Thomas Moran, "The Spirit of the Indian," 1869 BohemianFineArt.com



Straight he took his bow of ash-tree,
On the sand one end he rested,
With his knee he pressed the middle,
Stretched the faithful bow-string tighter,
Took an arrow, jasperheaded,
Shot it at the Shining Wigwam,
Sent it singing as a herald,
As a bearer of his message,
Of his challenge loud and lofty:
"Come forth from your lodge, Pearl-Feather!
Hiawatha waits your coming!"

12) J. M. W. Turner, *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus*, 1829 www.j-m-w-turner.co.uk



13) Thomas Eakins, *Hiawatha*, 1874 commons.wikipedia.org

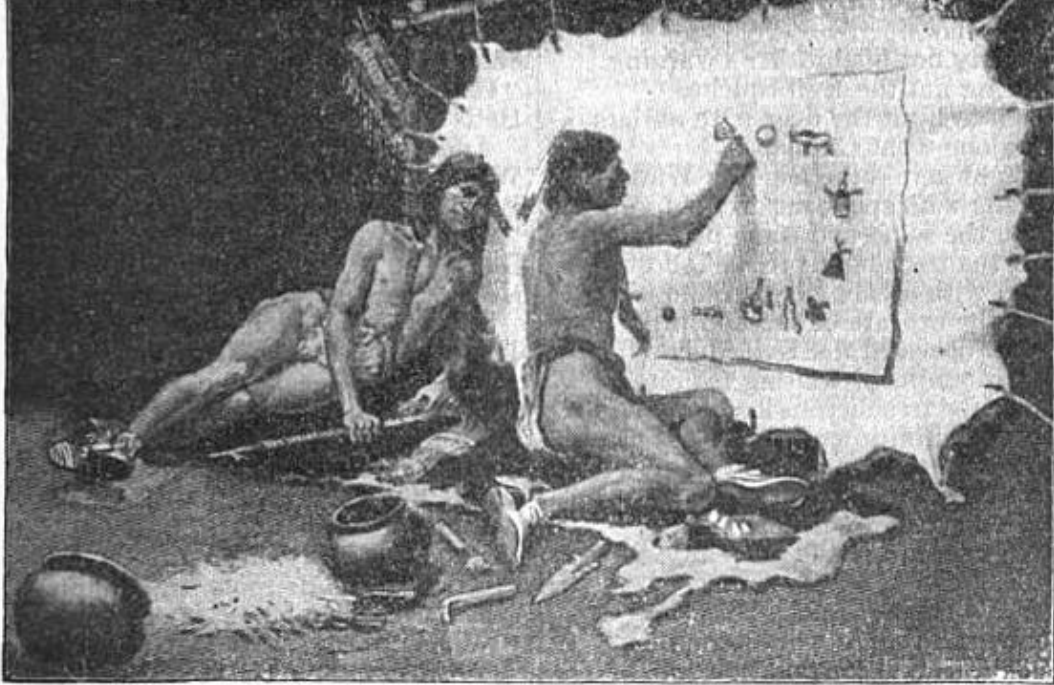


Suddenly upon the greenward
All alone stood Hiawatha,
Panting with his wild exertion,
Palpitating with the struggle;
And before him breathless, lifeless,
Lay the youth, with hair dishevelled,
Plumage torn, and garments tattered,
Dead he lay there in the sunset.³⁶

14) Edmonia Lewis, American Indian/African American Sculptor, *Hiawatha* and *Minnehaha*, 1867 www.antiquesandfineart.com



15) Frederic Remington, *Picture-writing*, published 1890 in a new edition of *The Song of Hiawatha* (Nickerson, 70)



“Such as these the shapes they painted
On the birch-bark and the deer-skin ”

16) H. E. Krehbiel, “Antonin Dvorak,” *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, Vol. XLIV (May-October, 1892), 657-660 (DVD)

The coming of Antonin Dvorak to be director of the National Conservatory of Music is an episode in the musical culture in America which has unusual elements of interest. . . . The significance of Dvorak’s compositions lies in their blending together of popular elements and classical forms. These forms were . . . in their origin . . . the people’s songs and dances. . . . [O]riginality and power in the composer rest upon the use of dialects and idioms which are national or racial in origin. . . . The forcefulness and freshness of Dvorak’s music come primarily from his use of dialects and idioms derived from the folk music of the Czechs.

17) Jeannette M. Thurber, “Dvorak as I Knew Him,” *The Etude*, vol. 37 (November, 1919) (DVD). Thurber convinced Dvorak to head the American Conservatory of Music in 1892.

‘In one of his [Dvorak’s] letters to me, he says, ‘As you know I am a great admirer of Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* and I get so attached to it that I can not resist the attempt to write an opera on this subject. . . . I took him to see Buffalo’s Bill’s Indians dance as a suggestion for ballet. It is really to be regretted that this operatic project came to naught.’”

18) Hazel Kinsella, “Dvorak and Spillville, Forty Years Later,” *Musical America* (1933) (DVD)

“ . . . Dvorak was greatly interested in the Indians and one day while he was still in Spillville a band of Indians came to town selling medicinal herbs. We were told they were ‘Kickapoo’ and belonged to the Iroquois tribe. Every evening they gave a little performance of their music and dancing and Dvorak was so interested that he made it a point always to be present.”

19) Poster advertising the Wild West Show in the late 19th or early 20th century. The commentary at the bottom after 'A Congress of Indians' reads: "representing various tribes, characters and peculiarities of the wily, dusky warriors in scenes from actual life, giving their weird war dances and picturesque style of showmanship."

cometoevergreen.com



20) Letter, Antonin Dvorak to Mr. and Mrs. Hlavka, Prague, 27 November 1892 (DVD)

I came to Boston to conduct my obligatory concert. . . . [It] will be for only the wealthy and intelligentsia, but the preceding day my work will also be performed for poor workers . . . , the purpose being to give the poor and uneducated people the opportunity to hear the musical works of all times and all nations. That's something isn't it? I am looking forward to it like a child. . . . The Americans expect great things of me. I am to show their way into the Promised Land, the realm of a new independent art, in short a natural style of music. . . .

21) Late 19th century advertisement for the Kickapoo herbal medicines.
www.antiquebottles.com



22) Antonin Dvorak to Dr. Kozanek, Kromeriz, Bohemia, 15 Sept 1893, written from Spillville, Iowa (DVD)

“These [Czech] people—all the poorest of the poor--- came [to Spillville, Iowa] about forty years ago. . . . And after great hardships and struggle, they are very well off here. I like to hear stories about the harshness of the early winters and the building of the railroad. . . . It is very strange. Few people and a great deal of empty space. A farmer’s nearest neighbor is often four miles off. Especially in the prairies (I call them the Sahara), there are only endless acres of field and meadow and that is all. You are glad to see in then woods and meadows the huge herds of cattle, which summer and winter, are out to pasture in the broad fields. And it is very ‘wild’ here and sometimes very sad--- sad to despair. But habit is everything.”

23) [James Creelman], “Dvorak’s Symphony a Historic Event,” *New York Herald*, 17 December 1893, a review of Dvorak’s ‘New World Symphony’ (DVD)

“[Dvorak] made up his mind to write a symphony founded upon the suggestion of American negro [sic] and Indian melodies and so to prove that the thematic material for a national school of composition already abounded in North America.”

24) [William James Henderson]. “Dr. Dvorak’s Latest Work,” *New York Times*, 17 December 1893, a review of Dvorak’s New World Symphony (DVD)

“In what manner has [Dvorak] used negro [sic] or Indian music? . . . We are authoritatively informed that the second and third movements of the symphony were written as the expression of certain moods found in American literature and definitely embodied in Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*. Dr. Dvorak’s appreciation of our national spirit is demonstrated by his appeal to the poem. . . . Something of this awful buried sorrow of the prairie must have forced itself upon Dr. Dvorak’s mind when he saw the plains after reading ‘The Famine’ [the 20th chapter in Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha*]. It is a picture of the peace and beauty of to-day colored by a memory of sorrows gone that the composer has given to us at the end of the movement [of the symphony]. . . . We Americans should thank and honor the Bohemian master who has shown us how to build our national school of music.”

25) Play the largo of Dvorak’s ‘New World Symphony’

Assessment

Once the documents have been read and the music played, then the students will discuss the questions, especially the **key question**, number 8, on the interconnections of popular culture and the finer arts.