

ANALYZING
POETRY:

PAUL REVERE'S RIDE

BY HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW



“Paul Revere’s Ride” is a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a 19th-century American poet. In the poem, Longfellow immortalizes Paul Revere’s role in alerting the local militias and townspeople about the British forces’ impending attack. Originally published in 1861, Longfellow’s poem also bears the alternate title “The Landlord’s Tale” in his poetry collection *Tales of a Wayside Inn*. While Paul Revere’s ride is an actual historical event, Longfellow takes poetic liberties with the facts, adjusting the details as he tells the tale of Revere’s famous ride.

Read and analyze “Paul Revere’s Ride.” First, read the poem all the way through. Then, re-read the poem, stopping to answer the questions to the right of the text. Finally, answer the questions on the last page.

- 1** 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
- 5** Who remembers that famous day and year.
- He said to his friend, “If the British march
By land or sea from the town tonight,
Hang a lantern aloft in the **belfry**-arch
Of the North Church tower as a signal light,—
- 10** One if by land, and two, if by sea;
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.”
- 15** Then he said, “Good night!” and with muffled oar
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;
- 20** A phantom ship, with each mast and **spar**
Across the moon like a prison bar,
And a huge black **hulk**, that was magnified
By its own reflection in the tide.
- ★ **Lines 1-5:** What stands out to you about the first stanza?
Student answers will vary but might mention that it sounds like the beginning of a story told to a group of children.
- ★ **Lines 6-14:** What is Paul Revere’s plan for alerting American colonists of the approaching British Army?
Paul Revere tells his friend to use lanterns in the church tower to communicate how the British soldiers plan to march on the colonists. One lantern means the British are coming by land, and two lanterns mean they’re coming by sea. Then, Revere will ride his horse through towns to alert the colonists.
- ★ **Lines 19-21:** What type of figurative language is used, and what is its meaning or impact?
The simile compares the British ships to a prison bar. It makes the reader feel uneasy or threatened.

belfry: a bell tower

spar: a stout, rounded wood or metal piece used to support rigging on a ship

hulk: a heavy, clumsy ship

ANALYZING POETRY: PAUL REVERE'S RIDE**Keep going!**

Meanwhile, his friend, through alley and street,
25 Wanders and watches with eager ears,
 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**,
30 Marching down to their boats on the shore.

Then he climbed the tower of the Old North Church,
 Up the wooden stairs, with stealthy tread,
 To the belfry-chamber overhead,
 And startled the pigeons from their perch
35 On the somber rafters, that round him made
 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
40 A moment on the roofs of the town,
 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
45 That he could hear, like a **sentinel's** tread,
 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
50 Of the place and the hour, and the secret dread

★ **Lines 24–31:** What does Revere's friend observe?

He hears the British troops getting ready and walking down to their boats.

★ **Lines 31–41:** Draw a picture capturing a moment from lines 31–41.

Student drawings will vary.

★ **Lines 42–56:** Identify one type of figurative language in these lines and explain its meaning or impact.

Student answers will vary, but may note that Longfellow personifies the wind, which walks through the graveyard like a guard, whispering, "All is well." The personification creates a vivid image in the reader's mind, emphasizing a sense of eerie quiet and tense anticipation.

muster: the act of assembling for a formal military inspection

grenadier: a soldier who carries and throws small hand-held bombs called grenades

sentinel: a soldier standing guard

ANALYZING
POETRY:

PAUL REVERE'S RIDE

Keep going!



- 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,—
- 55** A line of black that bends and floats
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.
- 60** Now he patted his horse's side,
Now 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
- 65** The belfry-tower of the Old North Church,
As it rose above the graves on the hill,
Lonely and **spectral** and somber and still.
And lo! as he looks, on the belfry's height
A glimmer, and then a gleam of light!
- 70** He springs to the saddle, the bridle he turns,
But lingers and gazes, till full on his sight
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,
- 75** And beneath, from the pebbles, in passing, a spark
Struck out by a steed flying fearless and fleet:
That was all! And yet, through the gloom and the light,
- ★ **Lines 52–56:** Draw a picture capturing a moment from lines 52–56.
Student drawings will vary.
- ★ **Lines 57–72:** Label the rhyme scheme in this stanza. What is the effect?
The rhyme scheme is AABABCCDDEEFFGFG. Student answers will vary but might mention the rhyme's impact on the rhythm and cadence. They might notice that when the rhyme changes, it forces the reader to slow down and pay attention.
- ★ **Lines 73–80:** The word “spark” is used literally and figuratively in this stanza.
a. What is the literal meaning?
b. What is the figurative meaning?
a. The “spark” is a small piece of burning material.
b. The “spark” might mean that Revere's ride inspired the American colonists to join the fight against the British.

impetuous: extreme impatience or impulsiveness

girth: a band around a horse's belly that holds the saddle in place

spectral: of, relating to, or suggesting a ghost

ANALYZING POETRY: PAUL REVERE'S RIDE**Keep going!**

The fate of a nation was riding that night;
And the spark struck out by that steed, in his flight,

80 Kindled the land into flame with its heat.

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,

85 Now soft on the sand, now loud on the ledge,
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.

90 He heard the crowing of the cock,
And the barking of the farmer's dog,
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, blank and bare,
Gaze at him with a spectral glare,
As if they already stood aghast

100 At the bloody work they would look upon.

★ **Lines 81-110:** List the towns that Revere goes through on his ride.

Medford, Lexington, and Concord

★ **Line 86:** What does "tramp" mean in this context?

The repeated sound of the horse's hooves on the road

★ **Lines 97-100:** What type of figurative language is used, and what is its meaning or impact?

Longfellow uses personification to illustrate the meeting-house windows watching as if they know they will soon see a battle.

Mystic: a river that runs north from Boston, Massachusetts

alders: a type of birch tree

gilded weathercock: a golden weathervane in the shape of a rooster that tells the direction of the wind

ANALYZING POETRY: **PAUL REVERE'S RIDE**

Keep going!



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,
105 And felt the breath of the morning breeze
 Blowing over the meadows 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,
110 Pierced by a British musket-ball.

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,
115 Chasing the Redcoats down the lane,
 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;
120 And so through the night went his cry of alarm
 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!
125 For, borne on the night-wind of the Past,
 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,
130 And the midnight message of Paul Revere.

- ★ **Lines 101-110:** A juxtaposition places two things together to create a contrasting effect. What is juxtaposed in **lines 101-106** and **lines 107-110**? What's the effect?
In lines 101-106, Longfellow describes the daily experience of a small town waking up. In lines 107-110, Longfellow describes that someone will die from a bullet wound later today. The effect is jarring because it compares beauty to agony.

- ★ **Lines 111-130:** What makes the final two stanzas different from the rest of the poem?
The last two stanzas transition from describing the detailed events of the ride to the narrator directly addressing an audience in the present.

- ★ **Line 125:** Why do you think Longfellow capitalizes the word "Past"?
Student answers will vary but may include that he wanted to personify the past to emphasize how historical events still impact our lives today.

- ★ **Lines 119-130:** What is Longfellow's message to the American people?
Student answers will vary but may include that Longfellow emphasizes Paul Revere's impact on the course of history.

British Regulars: British foot soldiers known for wearing a red uniform

ANALYZING POETRY: PAUL REVERE'S RIDE

Answer the following questions about the poem.



- Which of the following statements best explains why “Paul Revere’s Ride” is classified as a narrative poem?
 - It has a comical tone and a rhyme scheme.
 - It includes a first-person expression of emotion.
 - It has a mournful tone about a person’s death.
 - It tells a story with a beginning, middle, and end.
- In lines 24–80, the speaker describes the moments leading up to the signal in the belfry. What can you infer about how Paul Revere and his friend feel in these moments? Complete the table below using evidence from the poem.

	FEELING	EVIDENCE
PAUL REVERE	anxious	“Now gazed at the landscape far and near, / Then, impetuous, stamped the earth, / And turned and tightened his saddle-girth” (lines 61–63)
FRIEND	observant	“Where he paused to listen and look down / A moment on the roofs of the town, / And the moonlight flowing over all.” (lines 39–41)

- Read the excerpts from the poem and explain the meaning of each bolded word.

EXAMPLE	WORD MEANING
“Beneath, in the churchyard, lay the dead, In their night- encampment on the hill” (lines 42–43)	a camp
“And lo! as he looks, on the belfry's height A glimmer, and then a gleam of light!” (lines 68–69)	a small, bright light
“And the spark struck out by that steed, in his flight, Kindled the land into flame with its heat” (lines 79–80)	set on fire
“And so through the night went his cry of alarm To every Middlesex village and farm,— A cry of defiance and not of fear” (lines 120–122)	an open refusal to do something

- Longfellow uses poetic license to recount the story of Paul Revere. For example, according to historical records, Paul Revere was captured and held briefly by the British, so he didn’t reach the town of Concord. Why did Longfellow alter the historical facts in his poem?

Student answers will vary but may include that Longfellow took liberties with the actual historical facts and placed Revere at the scene of a famous battle in order to reinforce Revere's bravery.