

# The Environmental Imagination in Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*

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## Abstract

After the successful outcome of the American Revolution, many American writers in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries attempted to pursue cultural, intellectual and literary independence. These writers employed a literary strategy of “possessing” the land in order to establish a distinct literary tradition, thereby fostering a national literature. But *what* exactly was this strategy? And precisely *how* did they construct an autochthonous and independent cultural identity? This paper focuses on a 19<sup>th</sup> century writer—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—examining how Longfellow in *The Song of Hiawatha* appropriated the American primeval environment and its primitive inhabitants, the Indians, in order to shape a distinct national character and establish an indigenous tradition. But in his construction of a national mythology, Longfellow defined the American “self” and its “other.” This here I am attempting to show how Longfellow appropriated the wild American nature and (“wild”) Indians for the purpose of constructing the American “national ego,” and how he depicted the destruction of the wilderness and of the Indians in order to convey the message of American expansionism and imperialism. Thus I am inquiring into the inherent ambivalence, or indeed contradiction, in 19th-century American cultural nationalism.

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