Abolitionists, Anti-Slavery and Popular Authors of the 19th Century  
--Including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow--

In the mid 1800s the Abolitionist Movement in America focused attention on the injustice and horror of slavery. Prominent abolitionist preachers and politicians made slavery an issue that was impossible to ignore. Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman and abolitionist song writers like George W. Clark helped spread the anti-slavery message. Many writers of essays, prose and poetry were instrumental in forwarding the cause of ending slavery and promoting racial equity and justice.

Two of the most prominent abolitionist authors are William Lloyd Garrison and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Garrison wrote verse to promote anti-slavery sentiment. His poetry was set to music; the familiar tunes made the words easier to learn and share. In 1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote the novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin. The story focuses on the cruelties of slavery and the separation of family members. Stowe toured America and Europe speaking against slavery. It is said that when Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe, he said, “So you are the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war.”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow disliked controversy and rarely got involved in politics. However, he was influenced by his abolitionist friend, Massachusetts’s politician Charles Sumner; he was also inspired by Charles Dickens’ outspoken intolerance for slavery. Consequently Longfellow wrote eight Poems on Slavery, which were published in a volume in 1842. “The Slave’s Dream,” “The Slave Singing at Midnight,” “The Witness,” and “The Warning” are perhaps the most well known.

An extremely popular poet during his lifetime, Longfellow’s slavery poems pleased the abolitionists, but he refrained from getting directly involved in antebellum politics. Longfellow was better known and liked for his more sentimental poetry. His despair over the Civil War is expressed in his popular poem “Christmas Bells.” The poem expresses Longfellow’s dismay over the war but at the same time it sends a message of hope, of peace on earth and good-will to men.

To learn more about slavery, abolition, the Civil War and the “African American Odyssey,” a great source is the Library of Congress website,  
http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aaohtml/exhibit/aointro.html