



# An Appreciation of “A Psalm of Life”

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## Abstract

“A Psalm of Life”, often subtitled “What the Heart of the Young Man Said to the Psalmist”, is a lyric written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, an American romantic poet [1]. In order to have an aesthetic appreciation, the author consults some literature and analyzes the poem in terms of its gist, theme, poetical features and practical significance. The conclusion is that full of aesthetics, this poem reveals an optimistic theme, appeals to readers’ minds and emotions and shows the poet’s noble spiritual world.

## Subject Areas

Literature

## Keywords

Plot, Theme, Poetical Features, Significance

## 1. Introduction

“Psalm” means “glorification with respect”. So it shows the poet’s admirable attitude towards life and the keynote of the poem.

In 1838, “A Psalm of Life” was first published in *Voice of the Night*. It is very influential in China, because it is said to be the first English poem translated into Chinese. It was when Longfellow was struck with great dismay—the death of his wife and an unrequited courtship of a young woman that the lyric poem was created. However, despite all the frustrations Longfellow tried to encourage himself, which can be proved in the following parts.

## 2. The Gist of the Poem

There are total nine stanzas in the poem.

In the first two stanzas, Longfellow begins his poem straightly with the question “what is the life”. He doesn’t agree the opinion that the destiny of dying

means we should waste our time. On the contrary, we should save time to achieve our value. From the third stanza, he starts to tell readers how to spend life which is the theme of *A Psalm of Life*. He points out that the goal of life is to act and to be better. Now that life truly exists, we should “act in the glorious present”. In the seventh and eighth stanza, the poet illustrates the meaning of life which is to leave a glorious name behind us and to give the later generation encouragement. The ninth stanza is a generalization of the whole poem. He urges people to act now, to pursue their dreams, to make progress, so that everyone can have a meaningful life.

### 3. The Theme of the Poem

As for the theme of the poem, it's very clear to see. Full of the spirit of struggle and optimism, the poem is undoubtedly very inspiring in light of the bad situation where Longfellow was at that time [2]. The poem was written three years after Longfellow's wife died. However, he was strong enough to fight for his own future. He wrote this poem to tell us that life is short while art is eternal. He encourages and inspires not only himself but also millions upon millions of readers.

The didactic tone and content expresses the theme of the poem—time is fleeting, act in the living present. (It corresponds to Longfellow's writing style: often using didacticism in his poetry.) Specifically speaking, Longfellow uses a passionate and spirited style to inspire us to face cherished life positively with hope like daring generals. And during the voyage of life, we should display our subjective initiative and constantly strive to make a difference. Act in the living present and don't let time slip through our fingers by living in the past or day-dreaming about the future. At the same time, we shouldn't waste time or to be hesitate to act, just seize every opportunity.

## 4. Literature Characteristics of the Poem

### 4.1. Rhyme Scheme

“*A Psalm of Life*” adopts the form of a stanza with four lines rhyming “abab, cdcd, efef, ...” with the odd lines in the feminine rhyme and the even ones in the masculine rhyme. For example, in odd lines: numbers/slumbers, fleeting/beating, pleasant/present; in even lines: dream/seem, goal/soul, fate/wait. “The light and strong thymes, appear in rotation, lend pleasure to our ears, aid memorization and achieve a kind of balance [3]”.

As to the rhythm, the poem is mainly in trochaic tetrameter. By applying such a pattern of meter, the poet, on the one hand, discloses the lively nature of the poem to readers, and on the other hand makes the poem violent, emphatic and challenging in expression [4]. This poem is recognized for its melody-like musicality.

### 4.2. Rhetorical Devices

The poet uses several rhetorical devices which make the poem more beautiful.

#### 4.2.1. Alliteration

Alliteration is the use, especially in poetry, of the same sound or sounds, especially consonants, at the beginning of several words that are close together.

Some verse adopts the alliteration. For example, the third, sixth, eighth and seventeenth line have this kind of words: soul and slumbers, grave and goal, spoken and soul, broad and battle. This usage of alliteration makes the poem's rhythm bright and fluent. When we read it, we feel powerful and ambitious, which is in accordance with its theme. It's truly an infectious poem.

#### 4.2.2. Quotation

Quotation is regarded as a phrase or short piece of writing taken from a longer work of literature, poetry, etc. or what someone else has said. It increases the reliability of views.

In this literature work, "Dust thou art, to dust returnest" is quoted from the Bible Ecclesiastes Chapter 3:19 "For dust thou art, and into dust shalt thou be turned again" and Chapter 3:20 "They are both going to the same place-the dust. They both came from it; they will both go back to it".

#### 4.2.3. Simile and Metaphor

Longfellow uses a lot of similes and metaphors to vividly express the life philosophy. Line 15 "our hearts ... like muffled drums" and line 19 "dumb like driven cattle" are two examples of simile. As for metaphor, life is compared to an empty dream; world, battle; life, bivouac; life, sailing. Both simile and metaphor visualize images.

#### 4.2.4. Personification

"Our hearts ... are beating funeral marches to the grave" and "Let the dead Past bury its dead" make abstract philosophy easily understood by using personification, which is the description of an object or an idea as if it had human characteristics.

#### 4.2.5. Parallelism

As the use of matching sentence structure, phrases, or longer parts so as to balance ideas of equal importance, parallelism is frequently used by the author. "Life is real! Life is earnest!", "Not enjoyment, and not sorrow", "Still achieving, still pursuing" and so on use parallelism of sentences to show similar or opposite language items, making the meaning deeper.

#### 4.2.6. Repetition

Repetition can emphasize certain words and strengthen violent passions, such as "Dust thou art, to dust returnest", "let the dead Past bury its dead", "Act—act in the living present".

### 4.3. Cohesion and Coherence

The reason why the poem has an abundant content and clear logic is that it uses many synonyms and antonyms. Synonyms can increase the variety of vocabulary

and the beauty of rhythm, such as “end” and “goal”, “stout” and “brave”, “battle” and “strife”, “tomorrow” and “future”. Antonyms have a sharp contrast of two opposition, such as “dream” and “real”, “life” and “grave”, “enjoyment” and “sorrow”.

#### 4.4. Special Capitalization

Special capitalization of some words can draw readers’ attention. For example, “Time”, “Life”, “Future”, “Past” and “Present” emphasize that we should treasure time and life, living in the present neither in the past nor future.

### 5. Contact with Reality

#### 5.1. Reality of the Poet

I would like to explain reality of Longfellow in two aspects, one is his own personal experience and the other one is his motherland—America’s development.

Individually, as what I have mentioned, the purpose that why Longfellow writes “A Psalm of Life” is to pacify his soul, encourage himself to walk out sorrow and act in the living present. So I think that objects on whom the poet wants to have a didactic impact also include himself. Besides, if we consider contemporary literature tradition, we can also find something valuable. Puritanism is a cultural heritage for Americans. American Romantic authors tend to more moralize, edify and less to entertain than their English and European counterparts. So it’s reasonable for Longfellow to write such a didactic and optimistic poem in that period.

Nationally, America was a new nation with political, economic and cultural independence in 19<sup>th</sup> century. The economic boom brought about a tremendous sense of optimism and hope. So I think the background of America also inspires Longfellow to keep a positive attitude to life and future.

#### 5.2. Reality of Us

The theme of this poem reminds me of the significance of my university life. Since the past passed by and the future is not coming yet, what I can hold tightly just is the living present, not immersed in the memory or illusion about future. Holding tightly means I should make full use of time. As for students, the most important thing is working hard and taking unremitting efforts. On in this way can we compensate for the regret and create our future.

Besides, it also reminds me that though mankind has lived a long time our own individual time on earth is limited and will pass very quickly, with each heartbeat a further step towards the grave. So try, like great men of the past, to make something of ourselves in our short time on earth and leave behind something by which to be remembered.

Learning this poem, I not only know how to appreciate its beauty but also am enlightened and broadened in my mind.

### 6. Conclusion

“A Psalm of Life” is a successful literary work which has a unity of form and spi-

rit. The main contribution of the appreciation relies on that not only tidy structure, clear logic, harmonious meter and strong rhythm in form, but also positive theme, rich implication and persuasive tone in content are discussed. Both the behind meaning and literal beauty of the poem are worthy of our deep appreciation. Keep a devout attitude to read it: our mind needs bread of spirit as our body needs bread.

Regretfully, the limitation of this paper is not linking the target lyric poem to society at that time, thus lacking discussion in terms of social background. More researches can move forward in this direction.

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