



PREPARING to Read

A Psalm of Life

Poetry by HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

Connect to Your Life

What Life Is All About Each of the quotations on this page presents a way of looking at life. Which one comes closest to expressing your own philosophy of life?

The life which is unexamined is not worth living.

Plato

To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming, is the only end of life.

Robert Louis Stevenson

Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about.

Oscar Wilde

Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're going to get.

Forrest Gump

Build Background

Uplifting Poetry Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was the most popular and famous member of a group of New England romantic writers known as the Fireside Poets—a group that also included Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, and John Greenleaf Whittier. The name of the group refers to a popular family pastime of the period: reading poetry aloud in front of the fireplace after dinner. Longfellow and his fellow Fireside Poets wrote poems that were morally uplifting and often sentimental.

One summer morning, Longfellow wrote “A Psalm of Life” in the blank spaces of an invitation. After it was published in *Knickerbocker* magazine in October 1838, the poem swept the country and became known around the world. Although widely parodied, even by Longfellow himself, it celebrates an optimistic view of life and reflects the aims of Americans at the time.

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS STANZA AND RHYME SCHEME

A **stanza** is a group of lines that form a unit in a poem. “A Psalm of Life” is written in four-line stanzas. A **rhyme scheme** is the pattern of end rhyme (rhyming of words at the end of lines) in a stanza or an entire poem. Traditional poems, such as “A Psalm of Life,” contain stanzas with a regular rhyme scheme. In addition to having a regular rhyme scheme, much of the poetry written by the Fireside Poets has a regular **meter** (a repeated sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables).

ACTIVE READING STRATEGIES FOR READING TRADITIONAL POETRY

To appreciate the musical qualities of “A Psalm of Life,” try these strategies:

- Read the poem silently to understand the basic meaning.
- Then read the poem aloud, paying attention to its patterns of sound. Notice the pattern of end rhymes in each stanza.
- Tap out the meter, or the rhythm of the poem.



En Mer [At sea] (1898), Max Bohm. Courtesy of Alfred J. Walker Fine Art, Boston.

A
Psalm
of
Life

HENRY
WADSWORTH
LONGFELLOW

*What the Heart of the Young Man
Said to the Psalmist¹*

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,²
Life is but an empty dream!—
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

5 Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

10 Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each tomorrow
Find us farther than today.

1. Psalmist (sā'mĭst): the author of the poems in the biblical Book of Psalms, many of which comment on the fleeting nature of life. Traditionally, most of the psalms have been ascribed to King David of Israel.

2. numbers: metrical feet or lines; verses.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
15 Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac³ of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
20 Be a hero in the strife!

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act—act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

25 Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,⁴
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
30 Sailing o'er life's solemn main,⁵
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
35 Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.

3. bivouac (bīv'ōō-ăk): a temporary encampment of troops.

4. sublime: of high spiritual, moral, or intellectual worth.

5. main: open ocean.

Connect to the Literature

- 1. What Do You Think?**
What are your thoughts about the form or the message of this poem?

Comprehension Check
What, according to the speaker, is "our destined end," or purpose?

Think Critically

2. How does the speaker's view of life compare with your own view?

THINK ABOUT

- what the speaker says life is not
- the command "Act—act in the living Present!" (line 23)
- the last four lines of the poem
- the quotation you chose as closest to your philosophy

3. In your own words, summarize what the speaker says about the value of the lives of great people (lines 25–32). Do you agree with the speaker? Explain.
4. **ACTIVE READING STRATEGIES FOR READING TRADITIONAL POETRY** Read the poem aloud in class, with a different person taking each stanza. If the poem were to be sung, what style of music do you think would fit best with its meter and theme? Explain your choice.

Extend Interpretations

5. **Comparing Texts** How do you think a Puritan writer such as Anne Bradstreet (page 139) or Jonathan Edwards (page 152) might have responded to the ideas presented in "A Psalm of Life"?
6. **What If?** Imagine that Longfellow were a counselor at your school. Based on the message of "A Psalm of Life," do you think he would be a successful counselor or not? Explain your opinion.
7. **Connect to Life** Do you think that Americans today still share the values expressed in "A Psalm of Life"? Point out lines in the poem that you think contemporary Americans might or might not agree with.

Literary Analysis

STANZA AND RHYME SCHEME

You can mark the **rhyme scheme** of a stanza or a poem by using letters (beginning with *a*) to designate the lines, assigning the same letter to lines that end with the same sound. Here is the first stanza of an Anne Bradstreet poem:

In silent night when rest I <u>took</u>	a
For sorrow near I did not <u>look</u>	a
I wakened was with thund'ring <u>noise</u>	b
And piteous shrieks of dreadful <u>voice</u> .	b
That fearful sound of "Fire!" and " <u>Fire!</u> "	c
Let no man know is my <u>desire</u> .	c

Notice that the letters change each time the end rhyme changes. The rhyme scheme of this stanza is *aabbcc*.

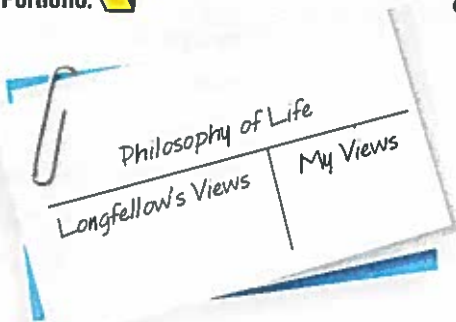
Paired Activity Working with a partner, identify the rhyme scheme used in "A Psalm of Life" by marking it for the first two stanzas. Then look at the poem as a whole. What words or ideas does the rhyme scheme emphasize?

REVIEW A **metaphor** is a figure of speech that compares two things that have something in common. Consider the metaphor in lines 17–18. How is the world like a field of battle? How is life like a bivouac in this battlefield?

Choices & CHALLENGES

Writing Options

1. Personal Response How do you think life should be lived? Think about the quotation you chose and the ideas you discussed in responding to question 2. Then in a personal response to Longfellow, perhaps in the form of a poem, explain your philosophy of life. Place this piece in your Working Portfolio. 📁



2. Longfellow Parody "A Psalm of Life" is among the most parodied poems in the English language. Here is an example by Harriet Fleischman:

*Lives of great men all remind us
As we history's pages turn
That we often leave behind us
Letters which we ought to burn.*

Write a stanza or two of parody in the style of "A Psalm of Life."

Activities & Explorations

1. Photo Collage Find a photograph or an illustration that suggests an idea or theme in "A Psalm of Life." Combine the images found by the class to create a bulletin-board collage. - VIEWING AND REPRESENTING

2. Bumper Sticker Work with a partner to design a bumper sticker that expresses the philosophy of life suggested by the poem. Present your design to the class and explain why it is appropriate. - ART



Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

1807–1882

Other Works

The Courtship of Miles Standish
Evangeline
The Song of Hiawatha
"Paul Revere's Ride"
"The Wreck of the Hesperus"
"The Village Blacksmith"

Aspiring Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the most famous American poet of the 1800s, had a career that spanned more than 50 years. His first poem was published in a Maine newspaper when he was 13. Two years later, he entered Bowdoin College, where, like his classmate Nathaniel Hawthorne, he decided to become a writer. From college, Longfellow wrote his father, "I most eagerly aspire after further eminence in literature." Eventually he was to fulfill his aspirations.

College Professor A brilliant scholar, the 18-year-old Longfellow was offered Bowdoin's first

established professorship in modern languages when he graduated in 1825. Since the field was so new, he had to create his own textbooks. Several years later he accepted a similar position at Harvard, where he remained until 1854, when he resigned to write full time.

Literary Eminence Longfellow's first book of poetry, *Voices of the Night*, was published when he was 32. As his popularity grew, many of his poems became household favorites. A beloved poet and a scholar able to speak and read ten languages, Longfellow was respected all over the world. He was the first American writer to be honored with a bust in the Poets' Corner of London's Westminster Abbey.

Author Activity

Do you recognize any of the other Longfellow works listed? Can you quote lines from them? Discuss what has made Longfellow's poetry so popular.