# A Psalm of Life

## POEM TEXT

*What The Heart Of The Young Man Said To The Psalmist.*

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

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.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
  Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
  Find us farther than to-day.

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

In the world's broad field of battle,
  In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
  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!

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

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

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

## SUMMARY

The subtitle frames the poem as a dramatic monologue spoken by a young man's heart to a composer of Biblical psalms.

First, the speaker begs the psalmist not to sing to him in numerous, sorrowful ways about how life is empty and unreal. In the speaker's opinion, the soul that passively experiences life is essentially dead. Moreover, one shouldn't assume that life is merely how it seems from a certain Christian perspective—that it's just a precursor to eternal life after death.

Life, the speaker demands, is very much real and full of meaning. Life, the speaker adds, is sincere and intense. The meaning of life is not simply death. The Christian saying of "dust to dust," which states that humans come from the earth—or "dust"—and return to dust upon death, only refers to the body and not the soul—so the soul should be full of life.

It is not indulgence or misery that should be humanity's destiny or goal. Rather, the speaker declares, humans should act in such a manner that creates progress day by day.

Acts and products of human creativity last a long time; however, time passes quickly. While human hearts may be strong and courageous, nevertheless they beat like quieted drums within bodies. Ultimately, with each beat, they bring humans closer to their death. Therefore, the songs these hearts produce are like funeral marches.

The speaker then compares the world to a great battlefield. Life, he adds, is like a temporary camp without shelter. Therefore, the speaker commands, don't be like silent cattle who are herded about. Rather, be a hero amidst the conflict of life.

Don't place any certainty, the speaker advises, in the future, no matter how positive the future may seem. Additionally, don't dwell on the past. Rather, the speaker suggests, one should live in the present, wholeheartedly and in plain view of God who watches approvingly above in Heaven.

The way that great men have lived their lives inspires and reminds other individuals to consciously live in a godly and spiritual manner. Moreover, the speaker adds, when these individuals die, they will leave traces of their lives behind.

These remnants and memories of godly and spiritual lives can go on to inspire others who might also be progressing over the great ocean of life. These other individuals might feel miserable, abandoned, and lost in this ocean. However, upon seeing examples of godly and spiritual lives, they will be inspired and saved.

Therefore, all of humanity, the speaker advises, should seize the day. Moreover, they must live life wholeheartedly and fearlessly. While making progress and seeking improvement, humans will learn to struggle and apply themselves, as well as have patience.

## THEMES

### LIVING IN THE PRESENT

In "A Psalm of Life," the subtitle—*What The Heart Of The Young Man Said To The Psalmist*—frames the poem as a dramatic monologue. The speaker of the poem is the "Heart of the Young Man," while his audience is a "Psalmist," a writer of biblical psalms. The speaker of the poem argues against some of the Psalmist's religious views, particularly that earthly life is an empty precursor to eternal life in heaven. Rather, the speaker advises, one should seize the day and live in the present—neither dwelling on the past, nor taking the future for granted, nor worrying too much about death. Indeed, the poem radically suggests that living with such a spirit of *carpe diem*, or "seizing the day," is just as godly as the kind of life that the Psalmist promotes.

The speaker opposes the Psalmist's idea of earthly life as being less important than eternal life after death. The speaker immediately asks the Psalmist not to preach that "Life is but an empty dream." The speaker, therefore, does not view life as "empty," but rather as full of meaning. Additionally, the speaker does not believe that one should experience life passively, as one does in a "dream" or while "slumber[ing]." Indeed, living life in such a way actively damages the "soul" by causing it to be "dead"—i.e. numb and lifeless. Thus, death is not the "goal" of this life. Rather, the goal of this life, the speaker implies, should be *life itself* and the experience of living. The "soul," the speaker argues, experiences this earthly life as much as it will experience the afterlife. Therefore, this life is as valuable an experience as the heaven that the Psalmist so champions.

Consequently, the speaker advises another way of living as an alternative to the Psalmist's short-sighted views. The speaker first establishes that he is not advocating a life of debauchery or penitence. Rather, the speaker takes a more measured view that everyone should "act" in a way that creates progress day by day. The speaker does not preach specific acts or define this progress. Rather, he leaves it open for anyone to be able to accomplish in their own particular manner.

"Time," and thus life, "is fleeting," the speaker declares. Therefore, one should seize the day by not acting like "dumb, driven cattle," but rather as a "hero." The "cattle" are defined by the fact that they are not only animals who cannot speak ("dumb"), but also followers ("driven"). Thus, the speaker indirectly criticizes thus who blindly follow religious texts, such as psalms written by the Psalmist, without independent reflection of their own. Being a "hero" thus not only requires seizing the day, but also independent reflection.

Fully experiencing and living this earthly life is just as spiritual and godly as—if not more godly than—what the Psalmist advocates. If one "act[s] in the living Present," the speaker declares, then one is acting with a "Heart within, and God o'erheard." Therefore, the speaker implies that living in the moment allows humans to fully make use of their hearts, which are given to them by God. Moreover, living with such a carpe diem spirit has full approval of God who is watching "o'erhead."

Individuals, the speaker announces, have all the agency to "make [their] lives sublime." The adjective "sublime" is used to describe greatness and transcendence, and traditionally it often has religious connotations. Therefore, the speaker suggests, individuals have the agency to shape their lives in a transcendent and godly manner. Living in this way can set an example for others who are "forlorn" and "shipwrecked" to "take heart again." Thus, this kind of life can inspire, redeem, and save others; just like the kind of life the Psalmist would encourage.

Living as if life is empty creates a life without soul. On the other hand, living life to the fullest nourishes the soul. Therefore, seizing the day is a more spiritual and soulful act than the one the Psalmist preaches.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-37

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINE 1

*What The Heart Of The Young Man Said To The Psalmist.*

The subtitle of "A Psalm of Life" immediately sets up the poem as a dramatic monologue. A dramatic monologue often takes the form of an argument, in which a speaker tries to persuade an audience of a particular point of view. The speaker of the poem is "The Heart Of The Young Man," while his audience is "The Psalmist," a composer of Biblical psalms. Immediately, the poem establishes a contrast between the secular "Heart of The Young Man" and the more religious "Psalmist."

Furthermore, what is most striking about the subtitle is that while the audience is a human figure ("The Psalmist"), the

speaker is not. Longfellow could have easily established the speaker as the "Young Man." A young man might represent youthful passion in contrast to an elderly man who represents a more tempered wisdom. However, the speaker of the poem is the young man's personified "Heart."

Symbolically, the heart often represents emotion and passion, in contrast to the mind, which represents logic and rationality. Therefore—since both a "Young Man" and a "Heart" each represent emotion and passion—the "Heart of the Young Man" is an intensification of this symbolism. Thus, the poem's subtitle prepares readers not only for the figures involved in this dramatic monologue, but also their potential perspectives and arguments.

## LINES 2-5

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

The first two lines immediately establish the speaker's opposition to the Psalmist's perspective. The speaker begs the Psalmist not to tell him "in mournful numbers, / Life is but an empty dream." Here, "mournful numbers" refers to the Psalmist's music, and it also captures how that music probably lists the numerous ways that life is supposedly "empty." In the speaker's opinion, life is not empty, but rather full of meaning.

Moreover, life is not a product of the imagination (a "dream"), but is as real as can be. Additionally, a "soul" that "slumbers," or passively experiences life, is essentially "dead" according to the speaker. By personifying the "soul" as a living figure that can sleep and die, the speaker makes the soul more vivid and emphasizes the reality of its existence.

The speaker's perspective contrasts with Christian ideas of the lesser importance of this life in comparison with the afterlife. This idea is taken at face value by the speaker's addressee, the Psalmist, who is a composer of Biblical prayers and songs. Therefore, according to the speaker's unorthodox perspective, "things are not what they seem." Thus, he challenges the Psalmist to reflect on established ideas regarding mortal life.

"A Psalm of Life" is composed of nine quatrains (four-line stanzas) that rhyme ABAB. For the most part, these lines are in trochaic tetrameter, or four stresses per line. A trochee is a poetic foot that follows a stressed-unstressed pattern. The falling rhythm of trochaic meter is less common in natural speech than the rising rhythm of iambic meter (unstressed-stressed). Trochaic meter sounds more forceful and assertive to the ear. This suits the speaker's perspective, which opposes the established authority of religious figures ("The Psalmist"). In this way, the speaker advances a subversive argument that is matched by his inside-out meter.

## LINES 6-9

*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.*

Line 6 sums up the speaker's argument in the previous stanza. "Life is real!" the speaker exclaims decisively. Therefore, life is not simply a meaningless dream in comparison to eternal life. Moreover, life is "earnest," it is heartfelt and demands attention. Therefore, the purpose or "goal" of life is not simply death. By personifying "Life" as something with a "goal," the speaker emphasizes its vividness and reality.

The first and third lines of each quatrain of "A Psalm of Life" are written, for the most part, in trochaic tetrameter—four stresses in a line following a stressed-unstressed pattern. The second and fourth lines, however, are written in a variation of this meter called catalectic trochaic tetrameter. *Catalectic* just means that the line's final foot consists of a single stressed syllable, as in line 9:

> Was not | spoken | of the | soul.

As a result, each stanza ends on a powerful stressed syllable, rather than an unstressed one.

Additionally, line 6 is metrically compressed, creating additional emphasis:

> Life is | real! | Life is | earnest!

Here, the back-to-back stresses capture the energy of the speaker's claim. This line is basically a thesis statement for the poem, so it makes sense the speaker wants to draw extra attention to it.

In line 8, the speaker makes a Biblical allusion to Genesis 3:19:

> In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

This line also suggests Ecclesiastes 3:20:

> All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

A similar sentiment is also found in the funeral service in the Book of Common Prayer: "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." All these sayings refer to the idea that humans are made from "dust" (or dirt) and return to "dust" upon death. This concept affirms that human life on earth is temporary.

However, the speaker declares, this saying only applies to the physical body and not the "soul." The soul is not some dusty old

thing, but is full of life. Just because the body will die, that doesn't mean people shouldn't nourish their souls during their time on earth. Additionally, the assonance in the long /o/ sounds in "spoken" and "soul" slow down the reading of the words, thereby lengthening the line. This effect mirrors the eternal life of the soul. Therefore, experiencing and treasuring this life will enrich the soul, which will continue to exist in the afterlife long after the body turns to "dust."

## LINES 10-13

*Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,*
*Is our destined end or way;*
*But to act, that each to-morrow*
*Find us farther than to-day.*

In the third stanza, the speaker anticipates some of the arguments that will be made by his audience and responds accordingly to them. The speaker understands that his addressee, the Psalmist, might accuse him of using these arguments as an excuse to indulge in emotional excess. Therefore, the speaker declares right away that neither "enjoyment" nor "sorrow" is "our destined end or way." In other words, life isn't about pursuing emotional extremes. The harsh, staccato consonance of /t/ sounds in "not" and "enjoyment" reflect the speaker's sharp denial of both "enjoyment" and "sorrow."

Thus, in the next two lines, the speaker reiterates that the goal is to "act" in such a way that each day "Find us farther" and creates progress. Unlike, for example, a religious authority figure, the speaker does not preach specific actions to create this progress. Rather, the speaker leaves this open to interpretation by his audience. Moreover, the speaker does not set himself above or apart from his audience. He isn't an authority figure. Rather, the speaker uses "our" and "us" to include himself among his audience. He believes that humans can work to create a better and more fulfilling earthly life for themselves.

Therefore, the speaker applies his argument to his own life as well. He does not wish to present himself as some eminent authority figure. Rather, he acknowledges that personal progress can always be made, and he intends to follow through with creating progress in his own life as well.

## LINES 14-17

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

In line 14, the speaker sets up a contrast between "Art" and "Time." "Art," which represents human imagination and creativity, can last for a "long" while. "Time," however, is "fleeting" and passes quickly. In other words, art outlasts many other things that fade with time.

One thing that fades quickly is human life. Humans die even if their "hearts" are strong and courageous. The speaker uses a simile to compare these hearts to "muffled drums." Hearts, like drums, "beat[]" away. However, hearts are not just drums, but "muffled drums." These hearts are "muffled" because they're housed within the human body—thus, the sound of their beating is "muffled" or quieted. The fact that they are muffled also implies, however, a kind of weakness in the hearts. Indeed, in the next line, the speaker points out that each beat of the heart brings it, and thus the entire human individual, closer to the "grave," or death. Therefore, the music that the "beating" creates is not joyful tunes, but rather "Funeral marches."

The fourth stanza thus is a *memento mori*, or a reminder of death and mortality. Although "the grave," or death, "is not [the] goal" of life, nevertheless death defines life. Therefore, the speaker seems to imply, one must take advantage of life while it is still available. In keeping with the stanza's depiction of resoluteness in the face of death, it employs martial diction, or words associated with the military, such as "brave," "drums," and "marches." In this way, the speaker seems to urge the reader to adopt an attitude similar to that of a soldier: one should confront life, rather than turn away from it in fear.

Also recall that the speaker himself is supposed to be a personified heart, "The Heart Of The Young Man." So, when the speaker mentions "our hearts" in this stanza, it's important to take notice. Starting out as a symbol for passion, the heart now becomes a symbol for mortality. The physical heart is, after all, a part of the body that "to dust return[s]"—that dies. By reimagining the heart's symbolism in this stanza, the speaker emphasizes the role that death plays in humans' attitudes towards life. Knowledge of death can lead either to pessimism, or—as the speaker will suggest—to a vigorous enthusiasm for life's struggles.

## LINES 18-21

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

The speaker continues the martial imagery of the "drums" and "marches" of stanza 4 into stanza 5. The speaker also develops the oppositions from previous stanzas as well, such as life vs. death, soul vs. body, and art vs. time. In this stanza, the speaker metaphorically conceives of the world as a "broad field of battle." Humans are therefore participants and soldiers in this world of conflict. Moreover, this battlefield is not one that assures humans of their victory, but is a "broad" and never-ending field.

In the next line, the speaker develops upon this extended metaphor. "Life," which humans experience in this world, is a "bivouac," a temporary camp without shelter. Life is "temporary," as explained in the previous stanza, and defined by

death. Life can provide no permanent shelter or certainties. Therefore, the speaker commands in the next line, do not be like "dumb, driven cattle," but rather a "hero" amidst all the conflict of the world.

Cattle are "dumb," meaning they are incapable of human speech. Moreover, they are "driven," since they follow a herder. Thus, the speaker implores his audience to take control of their own agency, to reflect independently rather than follow established religious teachings. In doing so, the speaker suggests, individuals will thus be transformed into "hero[es]," noble and inspirational figures. Heroes often represent victory. Therefore, by transforming into a hero, one can achieve a kind of victory in the conflict of life.

This stanza continues the poem's rhyme scheme of ABAB and its trochaic tetrameter. In line 18, however, it employs a suggestive variation in the meter:

In the world's broad field of battle

Here, the speaker rearranges the stresses so there are three stresses in a row. This tripling of stress captures the immensity of "the world's broad field of battle"—that is, the whole world of human struggle in the present moment. Additionally, these powerful stresses help bring out the /b/ alliteration of "broad field of battle," which continues in the phrase "bivouac of Life," and then in the repeated "Be" in lines 20 and 21.

As a whole, then, this stanza uses a self-consciously inspirational way of speaking—almost as if it's a speech given to an army before heading into battle.

## LINES 22-25

*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!*

In the first two lines of stanza 6, the speaker gives the audience advice regarding the "Future" and the "Past." Individuals, the speaker advises, should not keep any faith in the future, no matter how "pleasant" or positive it may seem. The future is out of people's control, and individuals can't rely on things turning out a certain way. In the same vein, the speaker declares, one should not dwell on the past. Rather, one should "Let the dead Past bury its dead" and move on from the past.

The speaker's use of personification in describing the "Past" creates a contradiction. On one hand, the speaker brings the past to life as a figure that is able to "bury its dead." On the other hand, the speaker describes the past as "the dead Past." Moreover, the repetition of "dead" in line 23, first as an adjective and then as a noun (an instance of the device polyptoton) stresses the "dead" quality of the past. This contradiction emphasizes the fact that though the past may still feel alive to people with strong memories, it is ultimately dead—and therefore unable to be affected or changed. The possessive "its" highlights the fact that the past belongs to the "Past." According to this argument, people have to let go of things like regret and nostalgia.

Rather, the speaker declares, it is the "Present" that should concern his audience. More specifically, one should live in the present. In doing so, one will live wholeheartedly before "God" who watches from "o'erhead." This suggests that the speaker believes God will approve of this lifestyle. Therefore, the speaker's argument implies that living in the present is not only better for the heart and soul, but is also a Godly and spiritual way of life.

The phrase "Heart within, and God o'erhead" adds several new layers to the heart's symbolism within the poem. It touches on the fact that the speaker of this poem is the personified "Heart Of The Young Man," and also recalls the poem's earlier simile comparing the heart to a drum beating a "funeral march." Now, however, the heart becomes a symbol of the ability to "act in the living Present." Just as God will watch approvingly from overhead if one embraces life, so too will one's heart beat approvingly inside one's body.

## LINES 26-29

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

In stanza 7, the speaker points to other "great men" who have lived in the manner he recommends. Indeed, they are "great" because they live in such a heroic manner. Their "Lives [...] remind us," the speaker adds, that "We can make our lives sublime." Thus, these "great men" can inspire others to do the same, just as any biblical figures the Psalmist might use as examples.

Additionally, the adjective "sublime" speaks to the power of such a lifestyle. *Sublime* is a term for something so great it exceeds all forms of comprehending it. For instance, the Psalmist might suggest that God is sublime, since humans can never fully wrap their minds around God. Thus, the word "sublime" is often used to suggest the awe and bliss that faithful Christians should feel when contemplating God.

However, rather than relating the word "sublime" to God, the speaker applies it to human lives. Certain "great" people, the speaker suggests, have lived lives so impressive that they defy understanding. Such people inspire others to try to achieve as much as possible. A truly godly life, the speaker seems to say, can be achieved by seizing the day and living in the present.

In doing so, the speaker goes on to say, individuals can "leave behind" a legacy upon their death. The speaker uses the imagery of "Footprints on the sands of time" to describe this legacy. Normally, "Footprints on the sands" are temporary,

easily washed away by the tide. But this isn't regular sand, it's "the sands of time," suggesting something much more eternal and fundamental. Thus, while these "Footprints" have an ephemeral quality, they are also powerful enough to affect the fabric of time. In other words, great people leave their mark on history and inspire those who come after. A life lived in the present can go beyond the limits of a mortal life and have a great effect on others who come after. Such a life is powerful indeed.

### LINES 30-33

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

In stanza 8, the speaker continues his metaphor of comparing one's legacy to "Footprints." Indeed, he builds on this extended metaphor with other oceanic imagery. These footprints, the speaker goes on to say, will "perhaps" inspire "another" who might be "Sailing o'er" the great oceanic expanse of life. More specifically, this other person who is "Sailing" is not simply enjoying a boat ride across the ocean—rather, they are "forlorn and shipwrecked" on the sea. In other words, even people who are on the path to greatness can run into trouble and feel "shipwrecked," losing hope.

Like an ocean, life can be blissfully serene, or it can be choppy and dangerous. The speaker imagines a sailor, floating in a shipwreck, who suddenly sees footprints in the sand of a nearby island. These footprints give him hope, because he realizes that others have survived these seas and that life is still near. This metaphor suggests that a "forlorn and shipwrecked brother" may, upon being inspired by the legacy others, "take heart again." In other words, whatever difficulties people run into in life, they can be reassured knowing that others have surmounted similar difficulties. Therefore, they will gain inspiration to save themselves from their "shipwrecked" state. Additionally, they will be able to reclaim their "heart" again and live in a wholehearted manner.

Therefore, the speaker and his audience can be inspired by other "great men" to live in the present. In turn, the speaker and his audience can inspire others to do the same. Thus, living in the present is a generous and kind way of living, not only to oneself, but also to others. It is a spiritual, heroic, and inspirational lifestyle that can lead one to the "sublime"—perhaps even more so, the speaker seems to suggest, than the lifestyle the Psalmist preaches.

### LINES 34-37

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

In the last stanza, the speaker rouses his audience into action, calling for them to "be up and doing" and seize the day. Through the use of the word "us," the speaker again includes himself in his directive, making it clear that he will attempt to do as he preaches. Living in the present, the speaker claims, requires courage in the form of "a heart for any fate." The speaker makes no promises regarding the ultimate "fate" of those who live according to his advice. He can only assure his audience of the godliness, heroism, and wholeheartedness of living in the present.

Moreover, one should always be "achieving" and "pursuing." These actions imply that people have goals and purposes, suggesting that living in the present provides a purpose to life. "[A]chieving" and "pursuing" also imply that one is always attempting to improve oneself. Furthermore, by using the present participle of these verbs (their "-ing" form), the speaker makes it clear that his focus is on the actions and the journey, rather than the end result.

Indeed, the repetition, specifically anaphora, of "still" emphasizes the constancy required in applying oneself to living in the present and making progress everyday. Simply by living in the present, one will acquire the abilities "to labor and to wait." Therefore, seizing the day will provide not only a sense of purpose, but also the godly virtues of working hard and having patience.

Formally, the poem ends as it began, with an ABAB rhyme scheme and in a quatrain of trochaic tetrameter. Again, the odd numbered lines are catalectic, meaning each ends on a foot of a single stress. The final two lines of the poem play up this subtle difference to great effect:

Still a- | chieving, | still pur- | suing,
Learn to | labor | and to | wait.

Here, "pursuing" stretches out into an unstressed syllable, suggesting the never-ending struggle of life. Meanwhile, "wait" ends the poem on a note of simplicity and quiet. As the speaker has argued all along, embracing life means acknowledging that not all good things will come at once. Sometimes, alert waiting is as important as "pursuing."

## SYMBOLS

### THE HEART

A heart is traditionally a symbol of human emotions. Often, it stands in contrast to the mind, which is a representation of logic and rationality. In "A Psalm of Life," hearts symbolize the great passions of human beings, including courage, sincerity, and earnestness.

Hearts are explicitly mentioned four times throughout the

poem. In line 15-17, the speaker acknowledges the mortality of hearts which are "beating / Funeral marches to the grave." Nevertheless, in all these instances, the speaker is clear that living in the present requires living *with* "heart." Living with "heart," or living wholeheartedly with a spirit of courage, sincerity, and earnestness, can inspire others to "take heart again." Thus, living with heart enriches the soul and brings individuals closer to a state of the "sublime," and, consequently, closer to a state of grace.

Additionally, the speaker of the poem is described as "The Heart of the Young Man." Here, the young man can be taken as symbolizing vitality and passion. By combining this symbolism with that of a heart, then, the poem ramps up its symbolic intensity from the get-go: affirming that this will be a poem about life, passion, and earnestness.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Heart"
- **Line 15:** "hearts"
- **Line 25:** "Heart"
- **Line 33:** "heart"
- **Line 35:** "heart"

## FOOTPRINTS

Footprints are traces left behind by those who have passed over a particular place. Footprints are usually ephemeral, particular footprints left in the "sands." These footprints in the sands will soon be washed away by the tide or swept away by the wind. In "A Psalm of Life," footprints symbolize the legacy the individuals leave behind after they die.

While footprints may be ephemeral, the footprints in the poem are pressed into the "sands of time" itself—that is, human history. Thus, great people are able to affect the fabric of time, and so contain a kind of power. In other words, people who live great lives leave a lasting mark on history.

Moreover, these footprints can inspire others who are "forlorn and shipwrecked" in life. Those who are "shipwrecked" in the ocean can see footprints on the sand and "take heart again" at the sight of others who have survived and made it to land. Therefore, living in the present has the power to leave behind an inspirational legacy that can affect many others to come.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 29:** "Footprints"
- **Line 30:** "Footprints"

## FIELD OF BATTLE

A battlefield is a site of conflict. As such, it presents a constant threat and tests the courage of those who are present. In "A Psalm of Life," the world and life itself are compared to a "field of battle." Therefore, human individuals exist within the conflict of a battlefield, which symbolizes the challenges of life and the bravery required to overcome them.

In line 20, the speaker acknowledges that individuals can go through this battlefield like "dumb, driven cattle." These individuals who are like "cattle" never face the conflict of life head-on. Rather, they experience the conflict passively, and therefore, the speaker implies, uncourageously. In contrast, individuals can become "a hero in the strife." A "hero" is an inspirational figure who has great courage and vision. In order to live as a hero amidst the battlefield of the world, an individual must live in the present. Only then can individuals truly live and experience the world.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 18-19:** "In the world's broad field of battle, / In the bivouac of Life,"

# POETIC DEVICES

## PERSONIFICATION

Personification occurs in five instances in "A Psalm of Life." In each case, Longfellow uses personification to enhance the imagery of the language and emphasize the depth of emotions in particular lines.

The subtitle of the poem sets up the speaker as the personified "Heart Of The Young Man" in order to stress the passion of the dramatic monologue that will follow. As an archetype, a "Young Man" is a passionate, heroic figure. Therefore, by additionally personifying a "Heart," typically a symbol of strong emotion, the poem doubly stresses the passions of the speaker.

In line 4, the "soul" is also personified as a figure that can live and die: "For the soul is dead that slumbers." Specifically, a sleeping soul is a "dead" one, numb to the experiences of life. Therefore, an individual can gravely harm their soul by passively experiencing, or "slumber[ing]," through life. Consequently, by personifying the soul as a figure that can be harmed or even killed, the speaker heightens the danger of not living in the present.

In line 6 and 7, the speaker also personifies "Life" as a figure with "goal[s]." The "grave," the speaker makes clear, is not a "goal" of life. Rather, life has other goals and deserves the full attention of those who can experience it. One must, the speaker suggests, live life fully in the present. Personification, therefore, stresses the importance and reality of "Life."

In line 15, the speaker again personifies "hearts," now as individuals that are "stout and brave." This further develops the personification of the "Heart Of The Young Man" in the

subtitle. By providing hearts with positive character traits of strength and courage, the speaker treats hearts as heroic figures. This personification emphasizes the importance of hearts in individual lives and, particularly, of living with sincerity and emotional depth. At the same time, though, the reader reminded is reminded that hearts "are beating / Funeral marches to the grave." Eventually, all hearts stop beating. Death plays an important role in human attitudes towards life.

In line 23, the "Past" is personified and figuratively brought to life as a figure that is able to "bury its dead." At the same time, the "Past" is described as a "dead Past." Through personification, the speaker acknowledges the powerful presence of the "Past" as similar to a living figure. However, simultaneously, the speaker makes clear the necessity for his audience to let go of the past and move on. As in the previous instances, personification enhances the vivid imagery of the lines while heightening the emotions behind them.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "The Heart Of The Young Man Said"
- **Line 4:** "the soul is dead that slumbers"
- **Line 6:** "Life is real! Life is earnest!"
- **Line 7:** "And the grave is not its goal"
- **Line 15:** "And our hearts, though stout and brave,"
- **Lines 16-17:** "are beating / Funeral marches to the grave."
- **Line 23:** "Let the dead Past bury its dead!"

## SIMILE

Similes occur two times in "A Psalm of Life." In both cases, Longfellow uses it to enhance the imagery and emphasize the importance of certain ideas.

In line 15-17, the speaker compares "our hearts" to "muffled drums." The comparison to "muffled drums" highlights the physical qualities of hearts; human hearts beat like drums and are encased within bodies, and are therefore muffled. Moreover, these drums "are beating / Funeral marches to the grave." This language suggests that hearts remind people of their mortality, because all hearts must eventually stop. This simile, therefore, not only highlights the imagery of these beating hearts, but also allows the speaker to emphasize human mortality. The mortality of human hearts, and thus human life, creates a sense of urgency in the speaker's directive to live in the present.

In line 20, the speaker continues to stress the importance of living in the present. If individuals do not live in the present, the speaker declares, then those individuals are "like dumb, driven cattle." In other words, people who don't embrace life are deprived of a voice and their individuality is erased—they are like cattle herded by other people. This simile therefore highlights the urgency and necessity of seizing every moment.

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 15-17:** "And our hearts, though stout and brave, / Still, like muffled drums, are beating / Funeral marches to the grave."
- **Line 20:** "Be not like dumb, driven cattle!"

## METAPHOR

Metaphor occurs throughout "A Psalm of Life." In each case, the speaker uses metaphor to enhance the imagery of the lines. The speaker also uses metaphor to emphasize the figurative nature of his images and ideas, and thus the fact that they are open to interpretation.

In line 3, the speaker denies the Psalmist's idea that "Life is but an empty dream." The metaphor comparing "Life" to an "empty dream" highlights the complexity of the Psalmist's idea of life. The Psalmist believes that life is "empty," and therefore meaningless. Moreover, the Psalmist believes that life is a "dream" and less real than the eternal afterlife. Yet, of course, this is only one way of looking at things—it's not necessarily the truth. Thus the speaker, in denying the Psalmist's metaphor, asks his audience to consider that "things are not what they seem."

In line 8, the speaker says:

> Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
> Was not spoken of the soul

Here, the speaker makes an allusion to Genesis 3:19, which reads:

> In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

This Biblical allusion refers to the concept that humans are made from the earth, or "dust," when they are born, and return to the earth upon death. Here, then, the speaker provides a twist on the usual formula of a metaphor, by saying the soul is *not* like dust. The soul, the speaker seems to suggest, is intangible and therefore not made of "dust." Moreover, the soul lives on in the eternal afterlife after the body dies. This doesn't mean that people should just wait to die and ascend to heaven, but rather that they should nurture their souls. Furthermore, the invincibility of the soul can be a source of inspiration in times of trouble.

The next metaphor occurs at the start of stanza five:

> In the world's broad field of battle,
> In the bivouac of Life

First, the speaker compares the all of human life in the present

moment to a "broad field of battles." This comparison picks up on previous diction associated with the military. It suggests that life is full of struggle and danger, requiring a great deal of courage to survive. Then, the speaker compares life to a "bivouac," or open-air camping ground, particularly those set up by armies. Again, this emphasizes that life isn't necessarily easy or accommodating—people have to figure things out as they go along, and they won't always have a sense of being at home.

Finally, lines 28-33 employ a lengthy metaphor. It begins by suggesting that people who live great lives leave "Footprints on the sands of time." This metaphor makes several comparisons. First, it compares one's life to a set of footprints. Secondly, it employs the traditional metaphor of "the sands of time," which imagines time as a vast landscape of sand, as in a desert or on a beach. Normally, footprints in the sand are swept away by wind or water—but in the sands of time, these footprints are much more permanent, even eternal. All together, lines 28-29 suggest that people who live in the present leave a mark on the world that lasts long after they are gone.

Next, lines 30-33 imagine life as an ocean, or "solemn main." Here, the speaker compares the difficulties of life to being "forlorn and shipwrecked" in this ocean. However, the "Footprints on the sands of time" are still visible from this ocean, like an island in the distance. When a "shipwrecked brother" sees these footprints, he "shall take heart again," finding encouragement in the fact that people before him have survived these seas and led a meaningful life. This is a long, involved metaphor, but its meaning is simple enough: everyone who lives bravely and embraces life goes down in history as an example for other people, and in times of despair such bravery becomes a beacon of hope.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "Life is but an empty dream!"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Dust thou art, to dust returnest, / Was not spoken of the soul."
- **Lines 18-19:** "In the world's broad field of battle, / In the bivouac of Life,"
- **Lines 28-33:** "And, departing, leave behind us / Footprints on the sands of time; / Footprints, that perhaps another, / Sailing o'er life's solemn main, / A forlorn and shipwrecked brother, / Seeing, shall take heart again."

## REPETITION

Repetition occurs frequently throughout "A Psalm of Life." Much of this is specifically anaphora, which is discussed in its own entry in this guide. Broadly speaking, Longfellow uses repetition to emphasize the importance of certain phrases and persuade the audience of the speaker's beliefs. Repetition also serves to highlight the speaker's passion and resolution, and create a rhythm within and across lines.

In line 10, for example, the speaker announces that the goal of life is "Not enjoyment, and not sorrow." The repetition of "not" (an instance of diacope) emphasizes the speaker's denial of these extremes; his argument is not an excuse for an excess of either pleasure or misery. Rather, the speaker's goal is something more temperate—that is, incremental progress.

In the next stanza, the speaker says, "Art is long, and Time is fleeting." Here, the diacope of "is" creates parallel phrases, which juxtapose the fact that great art lasts for a long time with the fact that so many other things, including humans themselves, must pass away quickly.

In line 23, the speaker employs a special form of repetition called polyptoton, in which the same root word is repeated in different forms. "Let the dead Past bury its dead," says the speaker. Here, dead is used first as an adjective and then as a noun. This specific kind of repetition captures the deadness of the past—everything it contains is lost, totally inaccessible to mortal humans.

Repetition can also carry ideas and images over from one line or stanza to the next. In lines 26-27, for example, the speaker states that "Lives of great men" can inspire his audience to make their "lives sublime." The repetition here (diacope again) connects "great men" to the speaker's audience, making it clear that lots of people can become "great men."

Similarly, the mention of "Footprints" at the end of stanza 7 and the beginning of stanza 8 links the two stanzas together and highlights the imagery of the lines. The "Footprints," or legacy, that one leaves behind can linger long after one is gone, inspiring another person. Thus, the "Footprints" at the end of one stanza reappear in another to inspire others to "take heart again."Repetition, therefore, functions in nuanced ways to highlight the content and imagery of the poem.

**Where Repetition appears in the poem:**

- **Line 6:** "Life is real! Life is earnest!"
- **Line 8:** "Dust," "dust"
- **Line 10:** "Not," "not"
- **Line 14:** "Art is long, and Time is fleeting,"
- **Line 18:** "In the," "of"
- **Line 19:** "In the," "of"
- **Line 20:** "Be," "!"
- **Line 21:** "Be," "!"
- **Line 22:** "!"
- **Line 23:** "dead," "dead!"
- **Line 24:** "Act,— act," "!"
- **Line 25:** "!"
- **Line 26:** "Lives"
- **Line 27:** "lives"
- **Line 29:** "Footprints"
- **Line 30:** "Footprints"
- **Line 36:** "Still achieving, still pursuing,"

## CAESURA

Caesura occurs in every stanza in "A Psalm of Life." Longfellow uses caesura to break down complex ideas, emphasize certain words by setting them apart, and create variation in the rhythm of the poem.

In line 6, for example, the caesura, marked by an exclamation mark, emphasizes the importance of the phrases "Life is real! Life is earnest!" Each phrase, the caesura indicates, should be carefully considered on its own. The first phrase asserting the reality of life directly opposes the Psalmist's belief that life is only a "dream." The second phrase declaring that "Life is earnest" asserts the sincerity and meaningfulness of life. This concept opposes the Psalmist's belief that life is "empty" Thus, the caesura in line 6 breaks down the speaker's opposition to the Psalmist's claim. The caesura helps clarify, reiterate, and emphasize the speaker's beliefs regarding the importance of life.

Caesura can also reflect the meaning of the lines. In line 20, for example, the speaker directs his audience not to be "like dumb, driven cattle." The pause between "dumb" and "driven" slows down the rhythm of the line, mimicking the slowness of the movements of a herd of cattle. This slowness of movement can be interpreted as a lack of action or a kind of "slumber[ing]," or sleepiness, on the part of the cattle. This lack of action is set in direct contrast to the action of one who lives in the present. Indeed, in the following line, the speaker directs his audience "Be a hero in the strife." The lack of caesura in this line reflects the swift and unceasing action of a "hero" who lives in the present.

The importance of life and living in the present is further emphasized in line 24 when the speaker directs his audience to "Act,— act in the living Present!" The caesura is marked by the unusual combination of a comma and em dash. This combination highlights the significance and length of the pauses between the repetition of the word "act." The pause sets each repetition of "act" apart and therefore highlights the importance of the concept. It is imperative, the speaker seems to say with his use of caesuras, to "act" and live in the present.

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "not, in"
- **Line 6:** "real! Life"
- **Line 8:** "art, to"
- **Line 10:** "enjoyment, and"
- **Line 12:** "act, that"
- **Line 14:** "long, and"
- **Line 16:** "Still, like," "drums, are"
- **Line 20:** "dumb, driven"
- **Line 22:** "Future, howe'er"
- **Line 24:** "Act,— act"
- **Line 25:** "within, and"
- **Line 28:** "And, departing, leave"
- **Line 30:** "Footprints, that"
- **Line 33:** "Seeing, shall"
- **Line 34:** "us, then, be"
- **Line 36:** "achieving, still"

## ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs several times throughout "A Psalm of Life." Longfellow uses enjambment to emphasize particular words that might not otherwise be emphasized, as well as to generate a sense of anticipation.

At the end of lines 12 and 17, the enjambment creates a sense of anticipation in the reading experience of the lines. In line 12, the speaker first establishes that humanity's goal should be to "act." The speaker, however, does not specify the particularities of acting in line 12. Rather, the enjambment delays the reader's full understanding of the speaker's sentence until the next line, when the speaker reveals that he wants his audience to act not in order to go to Heaven, but rather to create progress day-by-day. This delay creates anticipation in the reader and uses that anticipation to highlight the importance of the speaker's ideas.

The enjambment at the end of line 17 also creates a sense of anticipation and surprise. The speaker states that human hearts "are beating" in line 16 without specifying the particularities of the music the hearts create. In the next line, however, the speaker reveals that the hearts "are beating / Funeral marches." This surprising and unexpected image draws readers' attention to the mortality of human life. Therefore, the speaker stresses the urgency of acting in the present, as human life is finite and limited.

In stanza 7, enjambment at the ends of lines 26 and 28 emphasizes the fact that the speaker considers himself the same type of person as his audience or readership. That is, words like "us" and "We," which enjambment draws attention to, make it clear that the speaker is not preaching from a higher position like a Psalmist might. Rather, as a fellow human, the speaker intends to improve himself and practice what he preaches. Therefore, he too hopes to achieve a "sublime" life by living in the present.

Additionally, the enjambment at the end of line 28 sets apart and highlights the imagery of "Footprints." These footprints symbolize the legacy one can leave behind to inspire others if one lives in the present. The enjambment therefore highlights the importance of this legacy and the hope it can offer to other humans.

Finally, the penultimate stanza has three instances of enjambment in a row, lines 30 to 33—instances that might be overlooked, since they have punctuation. However, these lines are still enjambed, because each line requires the next in order to make sense. This enjambment helps the speaker unravel the

long metaphor he has crafted here, further describing how others' "Footprints" can offer a source of inspiration. The entanglement of these lines captures how human lives are also entangled, how a "shipwrecked brother" can "take heart again" by looking to the lives of those who came before him.

Throughout "A Psalm of Life," then, enjambment creates surprise and anticipation, as well as emphasis on particular ideas and images.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 12-13:** "to-morrow / Find"
- **Lines 16-17:** "beating / Funeral"
- **Lines 26-27:** "us / We"
- **Lines 28-29:** "us / Footprints"
- **Lines 30-31:** "another, / Sailing"
- **Lines 31-32:** "main, / A"
- **Lines 32-33:** "brother, / Seeing,"

## ALLITERATION

Alliteration occurs frequently throughout "A Psalm of Life." Longfellow uses alliteration to enhance the beauty of the language, emphasize particular phrases and words, and mimic the ideas and actions being described in the lines.

In stanza 1, for instance, the alliteration of the soft /m/ and /n/ sounds in the first line creates a dreamy and soothing atmosphere: "Tell me not, in mournful numbers." Line 4 continues this dreaminess with the alliteration of soft /s/ sounds in "soul," "slumbers," and "seem" mirroring the content of the line, which describes a sleeping soul. These soothing sounds are interrupted by the alliteration that follows in stanza two, which firmly asserts the reality and meaningfulness of life. Here, the harder /g/ sounds in "grave" and "goal" contrast sharply with the softer alliteration of stanza one.

Alliteration can also emphasize certain phrases by slowing down the reading experience of the line. In line 20, alliteration, used in conjunction with caesura, stresses the "dumb" and "driven" nature of the "cattle." If one passively experiences life, the speaker suggests, one becomes a creature less than human, unable to speak for oneself or have any agency. The slow, plodding /d/ sounds of "dumb" and "driven" reflect the imagery of these "cattle."

Alliteration can also speed up the reading of particular lines. In line 31, for example, the alliteration of the slippery /s/ sounds in "Sailing" and "solemn" make the line move quickly. This swiftness mirrors the imagery of the line, which describes individuals sailing across the ocean.

Throughout "A Psalm of Life," then, alliteration creates a musicality and emphasis that contributes to and enhances the reading experience of the poem.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Said," "Psalmist"
- **Line 2:** "me," "not," "mournful," "numbers"
- **Line 4:** "soul," "slumbers"
- **Line 5:** "things," "they," "seem."
- **Line 6:** "Life," "Life"
- **Line 7:** "grave," "goal"
- **Line 8:** "Dust," "dust"
- **Line 9:** "spoken," "soul"
- **Line 12:** "to," "to-morrow"
- **Line 13:** "Find," "farther," "to-day"
- **Line 15:** "stout," "brave"
- **Line 16:** "Still," "muffled," "beating"
- **Line 17:** "marches"
- **Line 18:** "broad," "battle"
- **Line 19:** "bivouac," "Life"
- **Line 20:** "Be," "like," "dumb," "driven"
- **Line 21:** "Be"
- **Line 22:** "pleasant"
- **Line 23:** "dead," "Past," "dead"
- **Line 24:** "Act," "act," "Present"
- **Line 26:** "Lives," "men"
- **Line 27:** "make," "lives"
- **Line 28:** "leave"
- **Line 31:** "Sailing," "solemn"
- **Line 32:** "shipwrecked"
- **Line 33:** "shall"
- **Line 34:** "us," "up"
- **Line 35:** "for," "fate"
- **Line 36:** "Still," "still"
- **Line 37:** "Learn," "labor"

## CONSONANCE

Consonance appears very often throughout "A Psalm of Life." In each case, Longfellow uses consonance to highlight the musicality of the lines, emphasize particular phrases and ideas, and create an experience that reflects the content of the lines.

In stanza 6, the speaker directs his audience not to dwell on the future or past, but rather live in the present. In these lines, the speaker is passionate and urgent, and the harsh, staccato /t/ sounds in lines 22-24 create an emphasis on each of the words:

> Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
> Let the dead Past bury its dead!
> Act,— act in the living Present!

The consonance, therefore, stresses the importance of the speaker's words. Moreover, the repetition of the hard /d/ sound in line 25 in "and," "God," and "o'erhead" slows down the reading experience of the line and emphasizes the speaker's directives.

Consonance can also mirror the content of the lines. In line 29,

the consonance of soft, hissing /s/ sounds in "Footprints" and "sands" mimics the sound of walking across sand. Similarly, in line 36, the sweeping /s/ sounds in "still," and "pursuing" speed up the reading of the lines and create an impression of swiftness. The sounds mirror the image of an individual "pursuing" or chasing their goal of living in the present.

Therefore, consonance functions in much the same way as assonance does in the poem, enriching the reading experience and beauty of the lines.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Said," "Psalmist"
- **Line 2:** "Tell," "me," "not," "mournful," "numbers"
- **Line 3:** "Life," "an," "empty," "dream"
- **Line 4:** "soul," "slumbers"
- **Line 5:** "things," "not," "what," "they," "seem"
- **Line 6:** "Life," "Life," "earnest"
- **Line 7:** "grave," "not," "goal"
- **Line 8:** "Dust," "art," "to," "dust," "returnest"
- **Line 9:** "spoken," "soul"
- **Line 10:** "Not," "enjoyment," "and," "not," "sorrow"
- **Line 11:** "destined," "end"
- **Line 12:** "But," "to," "act," "that," "to-morrow"
- **Line 13:** "Find," "farther," "to-day"
- **Line 14:** "Art," "long," "Time," "fleeting"
- **Line 15:** "our," "hearts," "stout," "brave"
- **Line 16:** "Still," "like," "muffled," "drums," "are," "beating"
- **Line 17:** "Funeral," "marches," "grave"
- **Line 18:** "world's," "broad," "field," "of," "battle"
- **Line 19:** "bivouac," "of," "Life"
- **Line 20:** "Be," "like," "dumb," "driven," "cattle"
- **Line 21:** "Be," "hero," "strife"
- **Line 22:** "Trust," "Future," "howe'er," "pleasant"
- **Line 23:** "Let," "dead," "Past," "its," "dead"
- **Line 24:** "Act," "act," "Present"
- **Line 25:** "Heart," "within," "and," "God," "o'erhead"
- **Line 26:** "Lives," "great," "men," "all," "remind"
- **Line 27:** "make," "lives," "sublime"
- **Line 28:** "And," "leave," "behind," "us"
- **Line 29:** "Footprints," "sands," "time"
- **Line 30:** "Footprints," "that," "perhaps," "another"
- **Line 31:** "Sailing," "o'er," "life's," "solemn," "main"
- **Line 32:** "forlorn," "shipwrecked," "brother"
- **Line 33:** "shall," "take," "heart"
- **Line 34:** "then," "an"
- **Line 35:** "heart," "fate"
- **Line 36:** "Still," "still," "pursuing"
- **Line 37:** "Learn," "to," "labor," "to," "wait"

## ASSONANCE

Like consonance, assonance also appears with great frequency in "A Psalm of Life." In each case, Longfellow uses assonance to place emphasis on certain words and images, and to create a reading experience that resonates with the content of the lines. Assonance also intensifies the musicality and rhythm of the poem.

In line 9, for example, the assonance of the long /o/ sounds in "spoken" and "soul" slows down the reading of the words and draw out the experience of the line. In this line, the speaker makes clear that the soul lives on after the human body returns to "dust." Therefore, the lengthening of the sounds mirrors the lasting nature of the soul that the speaker highlights.

Assonance can also enhance the rhythm and musicality within a line. In line 12, the /oo/ sounds are assonant in "to" and "to-morrow," creating a pleasing internal rhythm. The assonance in the words also links the phrase "to act" with "to-morrow," thereby creating an association between acting in the present and the results that will appear the following day. This reinforces the idea that one must live in the present consistently every single day.

Assonance also places additional emphasis on words and highlights their importance by slowing down the reading experience of the line. In the last line of the poem, there is an assonant long /a/ sound in "labor" and "wait." This draws out each of the words and stresses their significance. "Labor[ing]" and "wait[ing]" emphasize the importance of making progress, having patience, and being aware of one's own mortality. These are all qualities needed, the speaker seems to say, to make one's life more "sublime."

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "Tell," "me," "mournful," "numbers"
- **Line 3:** "but," "empty," "dream"
- **Line 4:** "For," "dead," "slumbers"
- **Line 5:** "seem"
- **Line 6:** "Life," "is," "Life," "is," "earnest"
- **Line 7:** "is," "its," "goal"
- **Line 8:** "Dust," "dust," "returnest"
- **Line 9:** "spoken," "soul"
- **Line 10:** "Not," "not," "sorrow"
- **Line 11:** "destined," "end"
- **Line 12:** "to," "to-morrow"
- **Line 13:** "to-day"
- **Line 14:** "Art," "fleeting"
- **Line 15:** "our," "hearts," "stout," "brave"
- **Line 16:** "muffled," "drums," "beating"
- **Line 17:** "grave"
- **Line 18:** "battle"
- **Line 19:** "bivouac," "Life"
- **Line 20:** "like," "driven," "cattle"
- **Line 21:** "Be," "hero," "strife"
- **Line 22:** "howe'er," "pleasant"
- **Line 23:** "Let," "dead," "bury," "dead"

- **Line 24:** “Act,” “act,” “in,” “living,” “Present”
- **Line 25:** “within,” “o’erhead”
- **Line 26:** “Lives,” “remind,” “us”
- **Line 27:** “lives,” “sublime”
- **Line 28:** “behind,” “us”
- **Line 29:** “ time”
- **Line 30:** “that,” “perhaps,” “another”
- **Line 31:** “Sailing,” “o’er,” “main”
- **Line 32:** “forlorn,” “shipwrecked,” “brother”
- **Line 33:** “again”
- **Line 34:** “Let,” “us,” “then,” “up,” “doing”
- **Line 35:** “fate”
- **Line 36:** “Still,” “achieving,” “still,” “pursuing”
- **Line 37:** “labor,” “wait”

## ALLUSION

The phrase "Dust though art, to dust returnest" in line 8 is a biblical allusion. It refers to Genesis 3:19:

> In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

It all suggests Ecclesiastes 3:20:

> All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

Finally, this allusion also calls to mind a famous phrase in the funeral rites of the book of Common Prayer:

> earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

These Christian proverbs refer to the concept that humans are made from the earth—or "dust"—when they are born, and that they return to the earth upon death. Indeed, the speaker's use of elevated, archaic word choice such as "thou," "art," and "returnest" highlights the elevated and age-old source from which this allusion was taken.

The speaker uses these proverbs to explain how his views of religion differ from that of the Psalmist. The Psalmist, the speaker seems to imply, would cite these passages as evidence that mortal life is only a precursor to the afterlife. Human bodies, the Psalmist might say, are only "dust," and humans' purpose is to look forward to the time when they no longer have these bodies. However, the speaker would argue that the body may be "dust," but the soul isn't, and the soul is alive *now*. Therefore, we should embrace the present and nurture our souls while we can, since we'll be stuck with our souls forever.

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Line 8:** “Dust thou art, to dust returnest,”

## ANAPHORA

Anaphora is one of the many types of repetition present in the poem, which Longfellow uses to emphasize various phrases, underscore the speaker's passion, and imbue the poem with a strong sense of rhythm.

In line 6, for example, the speaker declares the importance of life by claiming that "Life is real! Life is earnest!" The phrase "Life is" is repeated twice, highlighting the significance of "Life" itself. In addition, both of these phrases end in an exclamation mark. The repetition of the exclamation mark highlights once again the strength and earnestness of the speaker's beliefs. All in all, these repeated sentences are also instances of parallelism—that is, they're constructed in a way that repeats their grammatical structure, which drives home their message.

The use of anaphora and the repetition of exclamation marks in stanza 5 once again emphasizes the passion of the speaker's beliefs. First, the speaker uses anaphora in lines 18-19 to highlight the imagery of the "world" as a battlefield and "Life" as a temporary camp:

> In the world’s broad field of battle,
> In the bivouac of Life,

Again, these lines also follow a parallel grammatical structure. This creates a powerful, incantatory rhythm, almost like a mantra.

Later, after establishing this imagery of conflict in his audience's minds, the speaker goes on to use anaphora again to emphasize how one should navigate this conflict. One should, the speaker advises:

> Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
> Be a hero in the strife!

The anaphora and exclamation marks in these lines stress the importance and urgency of the speaker's directives. Noticeably, the exclamation marks continue all the way through the next stanza, emphasizing that urgency for another four lines.

Finally, in the last stanza the speaker once again employs anaphora and parallelism: "Still achieving, still pursuing." Not only does the line repeat the word "still," but each phrase is structured the same way, emphasizing the ongoing nature of humankind's pursuit of progress.

**Where Anaphora appears in the poem:**

- **Line 6:** “Life is,” “Life is”
- **Line 18:** “In the”

- **Line 19:** "In the"
- **Line 20:** "Be"
- **Line 21:** "Be"
- **Line 36:** "Still," "still"

## VOCABULARY

**Psalmist** (Line 1) - One who writes or composes psalms—Biblical songs and prayers.

**Mournful Numbers** (Line 2) - *Numbers* is an old poetic way of referring to music, and *mournful* means "sorrowful." The speaker is asking the Psalmist not to write sad songs about the emptiness of life. Additionally, "numbers" can also be taken as suggesting that these songs tend to have long lists detailing the numerous ways that life is empty.

**Slumbers** (Line 4) - Sleeps. Here, the speaker states that the soul that sleeps, or passively experiences life, is essentially dead.

**Thou** (Line 8) - An archaic form of "you." The speaker here makes a reference to the Christian saying "dust to dust." This phrase refers to the fact that humans are made from the earth or "dust," and will return to the earth upon death.

**Art** (Line 8) - An archaic form of "are." In other words, "you are dust"—each person is made of dust. The speaker then declares that this Biblical imagery refers to the body, not the soul.

**Returnest** (Line 8) - An archaic form of "return." Here, the speaker is making a reference to the Biblical saying that humans are made from dust and will return to dust upon their deaths—i.e. they'll be buried and decompose.

**Stout** (Line 15) - Strong. In this poem, the speaker declares that human hearts are strong and "brave," but still mortal.

**Muffled** (Line 16) - Muted; quieted. The speaker compares human hearts to "muffled drums." The sound of these "drums" are muted or quieted as they beat within human bodies.

**Bivouac** (Line 19) - A temporary camp without shelter, such as one used by soldiers. Here, the speaker compares "Life" to a "bivouac" as life is indeed temporary. Moreover, this life cannot provide any real shelter as it is full of uncertainty and conflict.

**Dumb** (Line 20) - Unable to achieve human speech. Thus, the cattle are "dumb" as they are unable to speak human words.

**Howe'er** (Line 22) - An archaic contraction of "however." The contraction condenses the word to two syllables in order to fit the poem's meter. It can be pronounced "how-air." Here, the speaker declares that humans should not have faith in the "Future," however "pleasant" it may seem.

**O'erhead** (Line 25) - An archaic contraction of "overhead." This shortens the word to two syllables in order to fit the meter. It can be pronounced "or-head." God watches approvingly overhead, the speaker declares, if one lives wholeheartedly in the present.

**O'er** (Line 31) - An archaic contraction of "over," again to fit the meter. It can be pronounced "or." Here, the speaker describes another individual sailing over the great sea of life.

**Main** (Line 31) - The open ocean. Here, the speaker envisions life as a great expanse of ocean.

**Forlorn** (Line 32) - Miserable, abandoned, and lonely. In the poem, the speaker uses it to describe "shipwrecked brothers," or those who have run into great challenges in life.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"A Psalm of Life" is composed of a subtitle and nine quatrains, or four-line stanzas.

The subtitle provides much context for the poem and sets up the quatrains that follow as a dramatic monologue. The subtitle specifies the speaker of the poem as "The Heart Of The Young Man." The subtitle also establishes the speaker's audience, or addressee, as "The Psalmist." Therefore, as a dramatic monologue, the poem is constructed as the speaker's argument intended to persuade the Psalmist that life is not empty.

In "A Psalm of Life," the nine quatrains function very much like a persuasive argument. The quatrains establish the speaker's opposition to the Psalmist's opinion, frame his own argument, provide justification for that argument, elaborate on it, and end on a call to live in the present. The quatrains provide an easily digestible form for this argument.

Furthermore, quatrains in tetrameter, such as these, are often associated with songs—from folk songs to hymns. So, as the speaker provides a rebuttal to the Psalmist, who writes songs for church, this rebuttal also takes the form of a song. After all, the poem is called "A Psalm for Life." It's as if the speaker has written his own psalm that preaches what *he* believes in: life, courage, and heart.

Finally, rhyming quatrains—as in hymns and folk songs—are a very accessible form for readers, employing quick sentences and often easily memorized phrases. In comparison to something like blank verse, one of the most prestigious forms in English poetry, rhymed quatrains are much more infectious and clear. This gives the poem the feeling that it's directed to a wide audience. The speaker isn't some elevated authority figure, he's one of the people.

### METER

"A Psalm of Life" is composed of nine quatrains written in trochaic tetrameter, a pattern consisting of four feet of stressed-unstressed syllables.

Take, for example, the first line of stanza 1:

Tell me | not, in | mournful | numbers

This straightforward use of trochaic tetrameter starts off the poem on a strong note. By leading with stressed syllables, the meter emphasizes the speaker's vigorous argument for living in the present. The powerful pulse of the meter captures the vitality the speaker is talking about.

In each stanza, the second and fourth lines are written in a variation of the meter called catalectic trochaic tetrameter, which just means that there is no unstressed syllable in the last foot. The second line of stanza 1 exemplifies this meter:

Life is | but an | empty | dream!

This adds variation to the poem's music. Longfellow was a poet who put a lot of thought into what meter he used, searching for the most melodious and appropriate effects. Here, the final stressed syllable contrasts with the previous line's unstressed syllable. Whereas an unstressed syllable seems to float out in space, a stressed syllable ends on a note of certainty, emphasizing how sure of his philosophy the speaker is.

Line 6 is one line that breaks the poem's meter. As the first line of stanza 2, line 6 should be written in trochaic tetrameter. It is, however, composed of seven syllables with the following stress pattern:

Life is real! | Life is | earnest!

The break from previously established patterns adds emphasis to this line. Here, the speaker declares his belief in the reality and meaning of mortal life. This belief stands in contrast to the Psalmist's belief in the greater importance of the afterlife. As the Psalmist is a respected religious authority figure, his beliefs are taken at face value by society. Therefore, line 6 not only breaks from previously established metrical patterns, but also breaks from previously established beliefs in society.

Similarly, the choice of trochaic meter also reflects the content of the poem. The falling rhythm of trochaic meter is less common in everyday speech than iambs, which follow the opposite pattern (unstressed-stressed). Therefore, the poem goes against more established rhythms. Similarly, the speaker's argument for living in the present goes against the established authority and beliefs of the Psalmist and society.

### RHYME SCHEME

In "A Psalm of Life," the rhyme scheme of each quatrain is the same; the first line rhymes with the third line, while the second line rhymes with the fourth. Therefore, the rhyme scheme of the poem is as follows:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GHGH IJIJ KLKL MNMN OPOP QRQR

This is a very intuitive and noticeable pattern. It makes the poem very musical, as if the speaker is writing a song in contrast with the Psalmists "mournful numbers," or sorrowful songs about the emptiness of life. In fact, this poem is called "A Psalm of Life," suggesting that it's supposed to be a psalm, or religious song—one that explains the virtues of living in the present. The simple rhyme helps emphasize that this is a poem meant for a broad audience, just like a church hymn.

Additionally, each stanza employs one "feminine" rhyme and one "masculine" rhyme. A so-called feminine rhyme ends on an unstressed syllable, so the final *two* syllables of the word have to rhyme. For instance, "fleeting" and "beating" in lines 14 and 16 are a feminine rhyme. Meanwhile, "brave" and "grave" in lines 15 and 17 are a masculine rhyme, because they end on stressed syllables. This alternating pattern increases the musicality of the poem. It also adds a note of finality and determination to the end of each stanza, as these lines end on a stressed rhyme.

Furthermore, none of the quatrains share rhymes with the other quatrains—rhymes don't carry over from one quatrain to the next. Therefore, each rhyme scheme is fully contained within each quatrain, not connected to either past or future quatrains. This is consistent with the speaker's advice to not dwell on the future or the past, but rather to live fully in the present.

## SPEAKER

The subtitle of "A Psalm of Life" sets up the speaker of the poem as "The Heart Of The Young Man." Therefore, surprisingly enough, the speaker is not a human figure, but rather his personified heart.

In the poem, the heart symbolizes passion and enthusiasm for life. However, even if Longfellow had simply chosen the "Young Man" as the poem's speaker, the poem would have already emphasized the earnest passions of the "Young Man" in comparison to the devout restraint of the "Psalmist." Consequently, Longfellow's choice of the "Heart Of The Young Man" as the speaker doubly emphasizes the passionate emotions of the speaker's point of view.

In the first two lines, the speaker makes clear that he opposes the Psalmist's conception of life as an "empty dream." Indeed, the speaker believes in the exact opposite—that life is "real" and full of meaning. The speaker's frequent use of exclamation marks captures the speaker's earnestness and belief in his own argument.

For the speaker, living in the present is not merely a suggestion, but an urgent directive in order to keep the soul alive. The speaker doesn't act like an authority figure preaching to his audience—as the Psalmist might—but rather includes himself among his audience with the use of words like "our," "us," and

"we."

Throughout the poem, the speaker emphasizes his belief in the value of living in the present and in the benefits of this lifestyle for others as well. Indeed, at the end of the poem, the speaker reiterates his directive to live in the present, framing it as a rousing and passionate call to action.

## SETTING

The setting of "A Psalm of Life" is the earth, more specifically the word of human affairs. In particular, the poem excludes the afterlife in any form—whether Heaven or Hell. The poem, after all, is concerned with living in the present, in the mortal world.

The poem goes on to describe this world as one of "battle" and conflict. Life, the poem suggests, is only a "bivouac"and thus a temporary camp without permanent shelter. Nevertheless, its impermanence and conflict does not make it less important or worse than the afterlife. Rather, these features add a sense of urgency to the necessity of living in the present and seizing every moment.

The poem also metaphorically describes life as a "solemn main," an expansive ocean that people have often been shipwrecked on. This description, along with imagery of "Footprints on the sands of time," emphasizes how most of the poem's setting is figurative, rather than literal. The images that the speaker conjures up could metaphorically apply to any human life, anywhere in time or space.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Longfellow first published "A Psalm of Life" in 1838 in the New York literary magazine *The Knickerbocker*. The following year Longfellow included "A Psalm of Life" in his first collection of poetry, titled *Voices of the Night*. This debut book, which had a mix of translations and original work, was well received by the public, eventually going on to have multiple printings. Of the original poems in the book, "A Psalm of Life" acquired particular renown.

During this time, Longfellow was heavily influenced by the writings of German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who also firmly believed in living in the present. Longfellow lectured on Goethe as a professor, and also translated him. Longfellow openly admitted the influence of Goethe on his own writings and on "A Psalm of Life" in particular.

Considered one of the greatest American Romantic writers, Longfellow's work highlights characteristics of that artistic movement. "A Psalm of Life," for example is, like other Romantic works, a celebration of the individual and an expression of strong emotions. After all, in the poem, all individuals have the power to leave behind influential legacies and achieve the "sublime." The sublime—the quality of things that are so great or immense they defy human comprehension—was an important idea for the Romantics. They stressed the individual's ability to encounter and express such great things.

Moreover, the sincere passions and frequent exclamations throughout the poem define the speaker's argument and tone in a distinctly Romantic way. Like other Romantic writers such as William Wordsworth or Ralph Waldo Emerson, Longfellow was deeply interested in exploring and championing the feelings of individual life.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The United States went through a period of moral reform in the first half of the 19th century. Issues such as prohibition, slavery, women's rights, and labor conditions were frequently debated in both the private and public sphere. Individuals everywhere were concerned with how to create an ideal, more moral society. Naturally, these ideas of morality were often intertwined with religious beliefs as well.

As such, Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life" joins in that conversation about morality. What is, the poem asks, the best way to live a life? For the speaker, the answer is not to dwell on the past, future, or afterlife, but rather live fully in the present. Living in the present is not simply a better, or more moral, way of living; rather, it is more "sublime," and thus more godly. In this way, Longfellow's poem demonstrates how Romantic ideas about individualism can still be suited to Christian values.

Although "A Psalm of Life" emerges from the concerns of its time, it refrains from referring to specific events or places from contemporary life. The speaker in the poem does not specify or preach particular actions for his readers to take. So, although the poem urges the reader to live in the present, it reads as if it could be spoken from any time or place in human history. This gives the poem the feeling of universality. The speaker leaves the specifics of living in the present up to his audience to define, and leaves plenty of room for future generations to apply the poem to their lives as well.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Biography of Longfellow — A detailed biography of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, along with more poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/henry-wadsworth-longfellow)
- Longfellow at the Maine Historical Society — A valuable resource from the Maine Historical Society, including a full database of Longfellow's poems and biographical information. (https://www.hwlongfellow.org/)

- "A Psalm of Life" Music Video — Listen to and watch a music video interpretation of the poem by the Annie Moses Band. (https://youtu.be/ijZ2CeJniiI)
- "A Psalm of Life" Read Aloud — Listen to a reading of the entire poem. (https://youtu.be/PBZj9oQyd3c)
- "Labour and Wait" Art Exhibit — Read about the art exhibition "Labour and Wait," inspired by "A Psalm of Life." (https://www.sbma.net/exhibitions/labourandwait2013)
- "A Psalm of Life" Song Adaptation — Listen to the entire poem sung to music. (https://youtu.be/EOWuUMPeyx0)
- Leslie Odom Jr.'s Music Album "Mr." and "A Psalm of Life" — Read about a singer—and the original Burr in the musical Hamilton—whose new album titled "Mr." includes a track that incorporates "A Psalm of Life." (https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/hamilton-s-leslie-odom-jr-releases-first-album-original-songs-n1095431)

## HOW TO CITE

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