
H.W. LONGFELLOW'S 'A PSALM OF LIFE': A TONIC FOR MANKIND

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Abstract: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) was one of America's best-loved and most popular poets. The simple themes, the spirit of joy, optimism and faith in the goodness of life are the qualities of his poetry. Longfellow often used didacticism in his poetry, particularly focussed on making the lives of people meaningful.

H. W. Longfellow's poem 'A Psalm of Life' (1838) is an appeal to mankind to follow the path of righteousness. The poem is a blow to the pessimistic attitude of the modern world. The poet encourages us not to waste life as it is very short. The life is real and it should be taken seriously. The aim of life is to act wisely each day so that we can make a better future. The lives of great men remind us that we can make our lives noble and elevated. We also can leave behind us our footprints for others to follow our path. The poet asks us to begin at once with courage to achieve our aim, learn to work hard and wait patiently for rewards.

Key words: Optimism, didacticism, life real, act wisely, better future, footprints, work hard, rewards.

Introduction: H.W. Longfellow's poems were popular throughout the English speaking world and they are widely translated, making him the most famous American poet of the day. He reminded Americans of their roots and in the process became an American icon himself. His poems are read and recited not only in parlours and schoolrooms but also at civic ceremonies. Schools, geographical locations and products were named after him. He is quoted by merchants and manufactures and their products, by journalists in their articles and preachers in their sermons and by ordinary men and women in their daily lives. Some of his lines and phrases like 'footprints on the sands of time' are so well that they have entered the American language.

Longfellow used didactic purpose while writing his poems. Much of his poetry imparts cultural and moral values. He focused on promoting life more valuable than material pursuits. In fact, Longfellow rarely wrote on current subjects and seemed detached from contemporary American concerns. He was more a philosopher than a poet. Many of his poems helped to shape the America character. As there is a mixture of philosopher, preacher and teacher in him, he became universal poet of young men and women.

Theme of the poem: Longfellow's 'A Psalm of life' was published in October, 1838. 'A Psalm' means a song, poem or prayer that praises God. The title of the poem is 'A Psalm of Life' and it aims at singing the praise of life. The poet sings a sacred song, an invocation to mankind to follow the righteousness. The Poem is an attack on the pessimistic attitude of taking life highly. The poet appeals the readers not to tell him sorrowful verses that life is an empty, meaningless dream. Here the poet begins-

*Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!*

According to Longfellow, a person who spends his life sleeping is already dead. Such a worthless life misguides other human beings. The poet uses an encouraging tone by saying that the life is real and it should be taken seriously. Death is not the ultimate goal of life-

*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.*

The poet reminds the reader that 'Dust thou art, to dust returnest' was said of the body which will eventually decay and die but the soul is immortal. The poet teaches us the way of living. He tells us that the life should not be based on only enjoyment or only sorrow. But the aim of life is to act wisely each day so that we can make a better future.

The poet makes us conscious that we have to do so many things in this short life and the time is passing with a fast speed. While fighting with the challenges we should not lose courage under any circumstances. The poet compares the world to a battlefield. We are living here just as soldiers in temporary camp. The poet asks us not to be like dumb cattle which are driven by others. He appeals the readers not to trust on the future even if it seems pleasant and the past incidents must be forgotten. The aim of life should be to act courageously at present and not to lose faith in God. Like an existential philosopher he writes-

*Trust no future, however pleasant!
Let the dead past bury its dead!
Act, - act in the living present!
Heart within and God overhead!*

Lives of great people remind us that we can also make our lives noble and inspiring. Finally when we will die, we can leave behind us our footprints for others to follow our path in the future-

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

The poet asks us to wake up, be active and do hard work to achieve our aim. But, he warns us that after working hard, wait patiently for rewards. He assures us that our hard work will surely be rewarded.

Conclusion: 'A Psalm of Life' is just like an evergreen sermon, a tonic to humankind. Human beings

should pay attention to the significant message that the life is real, enjoy it. But how? Material things make the life really successful and meaningful. There are some people who sigh too much and always complaining. Even there are some others who want to reject or end the life. This poem is like a tonic to rejuvenate them and make them believe that life is a golden opportunity for human beings to fill and fulfill our dreams. So, do our best and the God will do the rest!

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Vishnu Surve/ Associate Professor/ Department of English/
Shankarrao Mohite Mahavidyala/ Akulj/ Dist. Solapur-413101 (M.S.) / survevishnu@gmail.com