

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. **A**

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

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout³ and brave,
15 Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac⁴ of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
20 Be a hero in the strife!

A STANZA AND RHYME SCHEME

Review the rhyme scheme
of the first two stanzas.
How does the rhyme
scheme contribute to the
poem's **tone**, or attitude?
Explain.

1. **Psalmist** (să' mīst): the author of the poems in the biblical Book of Psalms, many of which comment on the fleeting nature of life. King David of Israel is regarded as the author of most of the psalms.

2. **numbers**: metrical feet or lines; verses.

3. **stout**: strong.

4. **bivouac** (bī'vō-ak'): a temporary encampment of troops.



The Calm After the Storm (1866), Edward Moran. Oil on canvas. Private collection. © SuperStock, Inc./SuperStock.

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,
 And, departing, leave behind us
 Footprints on the sands of time; **B**

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.

5. main: open ocean.

ANALYZE VISUALS

How might the title of this painting (*The Calm After the Storm*) connect to the theme of this poem?

B TRADITIONAL POETRY

Note the word emphasized by the end rhyme in lines 25 and 27. What might be the significance of this word?