
UNIT 29 HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

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29.0 OBJECTIVES

After having read this unit you will be able to:

- Know and tell about H.W. Longfellow as a poet
- Appreciate ‘A Psalm of Life’ and
- From ‘The Song of Hiawatha’

29.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit we have discussed H.W. Longfellow’s life and his poetic career in brief so that his poems which are prescribed here may be analyzed, understood and enjoyed properly.

The first poem ‘A Psalm of Life’ is a religious lyric and didactic in tone. There are eight stanzas, each containing four lines and the first line rhymes with the third and the second with the fourth line. The poem has been critically analyzed to make the message of the poet clear.

The second poem ‘Hiawatha’s Childhood’ is from Longfellow’s ‘The Song of Hiawatha’, a long episodic poem arranged in twenty-three cantos. It tells of the triumphs and sorrows of Hiawatha of the Ojibway, a tribe of Indians living along the Lake Superior shoreline in what is now Michigan. Here only a small portion of second Canto entitled ‘Hiawatha’s Childhood’ has been discussed and analysed. However, a brief detail of the plot and major characters is given below for your attentive reading which will help in understanding the prescribed extract in more effective manner.

‘The Song of Hiawatha’ is a long poem arranged in twenty-three cantos. It tells of the triumphs and sorrows of Hiawatha of the Ojibway, a tribe of Indians living

along the Lake Superior shoreline in what is now Michigan. Hiawatha's coming is foretold by Gitche Manito, the mighty spirit who gathers his people together and tells them a peacekeeper will be born who will bring wisdom to the warring tribes and stop their fighting.

Hiawatha is born to the virgin Wenonah, who is made pregnant by the west-wind god, Mudjekeewis. But when Mudjekeewis abandons her, Wenonah dies and young Hiawatha is brought up by his grandmother, Nokomis. Nokomis and the animals of the woods educate Hiawatha, who grows up to be a great hunter. One day, Nokomis tells Hiawatha of his father and how his mother died. Angered, Hiawatha seeks revenge, but is unable to kill his father, who is an immortal god. Mudjekeewis is nonetheless both impressed by and proud of his son, and tells Hiawatha to return to his people and become a great leader, promising that when it is time for Hiawatha to die, he will become the ruler of the northwest wind.

Hiawatha goes on to perform many great deeds: he wrestles and kills the Corn Spirit, Mondamin, and is rewarded with the gift of corn, which he presents to his hungry people; he defeats the King of Fishes, Nahma, with the help of some seagulls, and receives the fish's oil as a trophy; and he defeats the magician Pearl-Feather, who had brought disease to the people, and takes his shirt of wampum, a symbol of wealth and strength, as a reward. Hiawatha's thoughts then turn to Minnehaha, the young maid whom he first saw in the land of the Dakotahs. Against Nokomis's advice, Hiawatha goes to Minnehaha's family and requests her hand in marriage, proposing that their union would unify the Dakotah and Ojibway tribes. Minnehaha consents to be his wife.

Hiawatha teaches his people the virtues of kindness, wisdom, and strength. He also shows them the art of picture writing, so that their ancestors' histories can be recorded and not forgotten. When his friend Chibiabos the singer drowns, Hiawatha becomes sick with grief, but is healed by the priests and medicine men; afterwards, Hiawatha is able to go forth and instruct people in the art of healing.

Hiawatha's final episodic adventure tells of the coming of the white people to the Ojibways. However, rather than fearing and fighting the white priest who soon arrives, Hiawatha welcomes him as a sign of things to come and is not troubled by the visions he has had of the native tribes being scattered to the West. He welcomes the change, bidding his people farewell as he departs to the land of the northwest-wind that his father has promised him.

29.2 HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was born on February 27, 1807 in Portland, to Stephen and Zillah Wadsworth Longfellow. His ancestors had come to America in 1676 from Yorkshire, England and settled there. His father was a famous lawyer while his mother's father was a general in the Revolutionary War. At the time of his birth, the Longfellows were staying with Stephen's sister in a three-story, Federal style house on the corner of Fore and Hancock Streets while her husband, Captain Samuel Stephenson, was at sea. Several months later they moved into Zillah's father's house on Congress Street. Longfellow spent his childhood there, and returned to the Congress Street home where he spent most of his life.

Longfellow was the second child in what was soon to be a family of eight children. The children remembered the order of their births with a rhyme. All

who knew him found Henry to have a “lively imagination” as well as a thirst for learning. At three he was already well on his way to learning the alphabet. When he was five, his parents sent him to the Portland Academy, a private institution where his elder brother, Stephen, was also enrolled. As was the custom for the time, the two brothers focused most of their studies on languages and literature. Always a writer at heart, when Henry was not in school he and his childhood friend, William Browne, planned elaborate writing projects.

He did not take much interest in schoolwork as his brother Samuel wrote, “In truth he was a very lively and merry boy, though of refined and quiet tastes. He did not like the ‘rough and tumble’ to which some of his schoolmates were given. But he joined in the ball games, kite-flying, swimming in summer; snowballing, coasting, and skating in winter.” He also enjoyed visiting his paternal grandparents at their farm in Gorham, and his maternal grandparents at their farm in Hiram.

Longfellow was very young when the War of 1812 devastated Portland’s economy, but the war affected him in ways both immediate and long lasting. In 1814 he wrote to his father, who was in the state Legislature in Boston, asking for a Bible for his sister and a drum for himself. Stephen Longfellow found his son “a very pretty drum, with an eagle painted on it” that cost two dollars. However, he was not able to ship it, as “They do not let any vessels go from Boston to Portland now.” Many years later, in his poem “My Lost Youth” (1858), Longfellow recalls a battle that took place off the coast of Maine in 1813 between the British ship *Boxer* and the American *Enterprise*. Although the Americans were the victors, the young captains of both ships died and were buried in Portland’s Eastern Cemetery, just up the street from Longfellow’s house.

At 13 Longfellow published his first poem in the “Portland Gazette,” signing it simply “HENRY.” The poem, “The Battle of Lovell’s Pond,” was a heroic tale of battle between colonists and Indians; it appeared on the front page of the “Gazette.” There was no praise forthcoming, for no one in the family (except his sister Anne with whom he had shared his secret) realized that their Henry had written the poem. Later that evening while at a friend’s house, he overheard the father say to another friend how terrible the poem was. Young Henry was devastated but it did not put a stop to his literary aspirations.

He was a bright child and was drawn to writing and sounds of words even during his schooling at Portland Academy. He graduated from Bowdoin College in 1825 and was immediately recommended to join the chair of modern languages. This proved an adventurous beginning of his highly successful career and he travelled in the year to come including Spain, Italy, France, Germany and England. He became a popular teacher and was known in almost every country of Europe and America. Due to his distinguished career and hardworking nature, he was appointed as Professor of modern languages at Harvard University in 1834 and was later associated with the University of Cambridge. He resigned from Harvard in 1854 in order to embrace writing as his full time career.

Longfellow enjoyed very happy family life though it was not without a tragedy. His romantic spirit was always the flavor of his handsome personality; he was rightly tempted by the beauty of Mary Store Potter (his school classmate) when he saw her at church after his return to Portland in 1829 and married her. But their happy married life came to an abrupt end when she died in 1834 during their Europe tour. The lonely Longfellow once again devoted himself to his scholarly

work and rented the Craigie House situated on the Charles River. Later on, the house passed on into the possessions of Nathan Appleton who gifted it to him when he married his daughter Francis Appleton in 1843. For seventeen years, Longfellow led a happy family life with five children but tragedy knocked him out again when Francis died of severe burns she received while she was sealing her children's curls with matches and wax in 1861. Longfellow's great success as a poet was tarnished by the death of his wife Fanny in a fire at Craigie House in 1861. His last years, however, were serene. He received honorary degrees from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in 1869. Between 1867 and 1869, he translated Dante's *Da Divina Commedia* (c. 1320, *The Divine Comedy*, 1802), although he did not write many new or important poems. He died in Cambridge in 1882.

He was the first American writer to be honoured in the poets' corner of Westminster Abbey in London. His best known poems are "A Psalm of Life" (1838), "Voices of the Night" (1839) "Excelsior" (1841 "The Wreck of the Hesperus" (1842), "Evangeline" (1847), "The Song of Hiawatha" (1855), "The Courtship of Miles Standish" (1858), "The Sermon of St. Francis" (1858), "The Children's Hour" (1860), "Paul Revere's Ride" (1860), "The Saga of King Olaf" (1863), *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863) and "Christmas Bells" (1864).

Self-check Exercise I

a) When and where was H.W. Longfellow born? Who were his parents?

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b) How many children were in the family Longfellow spent his childhood?

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c) Which poem did the poet write when he was only 13 years?

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d) What sort of boy Henry was when he was in school?
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e) Who was his school classmate? when did he marry her?
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f) Name any four poems composed by H.W. Longfellow.
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29.3 A PSALM OF LIFE

29.3.1 Background of the Poem

‘A Psalm of Life’, a religious lyric, was published in October of 1838. It is contained in Longfellow’s first volume of poems entitled “Voices of the Night” (1839). A ‘psalm’ is a sacred song, an invocation to mankind to follow the path of righteousness. The poet encourages his readers not to waste their time because life is very short and is going to end soon. The poem highlights the views of the poet about how to live a meaningful life as there is only one life and, therefore, we should make a good use of it. In this didactic poem, the poet presents a noble idea before the youth of the nation.

29.3.2 Text

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.**

Glossary:

Numbers	:	verse
Real	:	meaningful
Earnest	:	sincere
Grave	:	death
Goal	:	aim
Dust	:	useless
Thou	:	you
Enjoyment	:	pleasure
Sorrow	:	grief
Destined	:	fated
Aim	:	target
Broad	:	vast

Bivouac	:	Temporary encampment of any army
Dumb	:	speechless
Strife	:	struggle
Achieving	:	obtaining
Pursuing	:	keeping busy in work
To wait	:	have patience

29.3.3 Analysis

The poem consists of nine stanzas, each containing four lines. The poet begins the poem by asking us not to tell him in sorrowful verses that life is an empty, meaningless dream. According to Longfellow, a person who spends his life in sleeping is already dead. Such a worthless life misguides other human beings as well. In fact, irresponsibility does not represent the true human nature.

The second stanza begins with two phrases, 'Life is real! Life is earnest!' The poet uses an encouraging tone to say that life is real and serious. Life should not be treated lightly. Moreover, the poet says that death is not the ultimate goal; life does not end with death. "Dust thou art, to dust returnest" is not applicable to the soul, this is applicable only to the body.

The third stanza is about the way of living. The poet tells us that our way of living should be based on enjoyment, not on mourning. The aim of life is to act wisely each day so that we can make a better future.

The stanza four is about the work assigned to us and about the time which is flying. "Art is long, and Time is fleeting" means that the work given to us is too vast and time-consuming. The poet encourages that under such situations, our hearts still remain stout and brave and are beating funeral marches to the grave, like the drums covered with cloth. The message that the poet wants to convey through this stanza is that one should not lose courage under any circumstance.

In the fifth stanza, the poet compares the world to a battlefield as well as a temporary camp for troops. The humans are compared with troops. He asks all the people to live and fight their battles within the given period of time. The poet asks us not to be like the dumb cattle which are driven by others because of their lack of direction and determination.

The poet asks us not to trust on the future even if it seems pleasant in the sixth stanza. The past incidents must be forgotten away. The aim in life should be to act courageously at present and not to lose faith in God.

Lives of great men remind us that we can make our own lives noble and elevated that is we can reach great heights. Finally when we die, we can leave behind us our footprints (noble deeds) for others to follow our path.

The noble deeds which we leave behind should be such that an unhappy and shipwrecked man, sailing over the sea of life, would be confident and take courage, following our example.

In the final stanza of the poem the poet asks us to begin at once with courage without thinking about the consequences of the actions. He asks us to achieve our aim and learn to work hard and wait patiently for rewards.

Comments

The poem opens on an optimistic note and it inspires us to act and shun the myth that life is nothing more than an empty dream. The poet appeals to accept life as the real battlefield to achieve our goals before meeting its ultimate end—death. The mission of life should not be lost either in a lot of enjoyment or even in the heavy clouds of pain because the road of life leads us beyond the limits of pain and pleasure. Every new day should bring a new success and should add glory to our life. In such a fast life, a man has to travel very fast and he should be dynamic enough to face the odds of life bravely and boldly. It is no use sitting idle in the battlefield and to be led anywhere like a lost cattle. He should set ‘the direction’ in a well-defined manner to become a hero at last. He should not live on the glory of the past and should not rely on the dreamy hopes of future. He should carve out his ‘present’ worth living with dedication and hard work. Even the lives of great heroes give us the same message and remind weak and lost people to put up a brave front against all unfavourable circumstances. They should be prepared to face any misfortune so that they could pursue their goals upto the last breathe of life with courage and patience. Thus, the poet gives a message of hope and victory on account of hard work and devotion. The poet says that life is not an empty dream. It is real and eventful. Life is full of ups and downs. We should work hard to achieve our aim of life. We should not care for any remuneration. Work is its own reward.

Self-check Exercise II

Answer the following questions given below:

a) Do you think life is an empty dream? What’s the poet’s opinion about it?

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b) What is the significance of great men’s lives ?

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c) Explain the meaning in the line “footprints on the sands of time”.

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d) Who are referred to as 'dumb driven cattle' in the poem?

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e) What does the poet mean by saying 'Life is real, life is earnest'?

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f) What should be the real aim of life?

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g) How should we behave on the battlefield of life?

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h) Which words in the fourth stanza rhyme?

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29.4 FROM THE SONG OF HIAWATHA: HIAWATHA'S CHILDHOOD

29.4.1 Background of the Poem

Set along the Southern shores of Lake Superior in the years before the arrival of European colonists, a time and place completely unfamiliar to Longfellow, *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) draws largely on the stories of native tribes recorded and compiled by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft in his *Algonic Researches* (1836). Longfellow also gained from the travel accounts of George Caitlin, who wished to record the ways of Indian life before they disappeared, and the work of John Heckewelder, a missionary whose writings about the Delaware and Huron tribes inspired James Fenimore Cooper. The name 'Hiawatha' is actually derived from a historical Indian chief who helped form the Iroquois Confederacy; but other than sharing the same name, Longfellow's Hiawatha is unrelated. Instead, he is patterned after a legendary figure known among the Iroquois as Tarenyawago, and among the Algonquin as Manabazho. Utilizing both tribal legend and imaginative storytelling, Longfellow used trochaic tetrameter, after the Finnish's *Kalevala*, and created an epic poem.

29.4.2 The Text

HIAWATHA'S CHILDHOOD

Downward through the evening twilight,
 In the days that are forgotten,
 In the **unremembered** ages,
 From the full moon fell Nokomis,
 Fell the beautiful Nokomis,
 She a wife, but not a mother.
 She was **sporting** with her women,
 Swinging in a swing of grape-vines,
 When her rival, the rejected,
 Full of jealousy and hatred,
 Cut the leafy swing **asunder**,
 Cut in twain the twisted grape-vines,
 And Nokomis fell **affrighted**

Downward through the evening twilight,
 On the Muskoday, the meadow,
 On the **prairie** full of blossoms.
 "See! a star falls!" said the people;
 "From the sky a star is falling!"
 There among the ferns and mosses,
 There among the prairie lilies,
 On the Muskoday, the **meadow**,
 In the moonlight and the starlight,
 Fair Nokomis bore a daughter.
 And she called her name Wenonah,
 As the first-born of her daughters.
 And the daughter of Nokomis
 Grew up like the prairie lilies,
 Grew a tall and **slender** maiden,
 With the beauty of the moonlight,
 With the beauty of the starlight.

And Nokomis warned her often,
Saying oft, and oft repeating,
"Oh, beware of Mudjekeewis,
Of the West-Wind, Mudjekeewis;
Listen not to what he tells you;
Lie not down upon the meadow,
Stoop not down among the lilies,
Lest the West-Wind come and harm you!"

But she heeded not the warning,
Heeded not those words of wisdom,
And the West-Wind came at evening,
Walking lightly o'er the prairie,
Whispering to the leaves and blossoms,
Bending low the flowers and grasses,
Found the beautiful Wenonah,
Lying there among the lilies,
Wooped her with his words of sweetness,
Wooped her with his soft caresses,
Till she bore a son in sorrow,
Bore a son of love and sorrow.
Thus was born my Hiawatha,
Thus was born the child of wonder;
But the daughter of Nokomis,
Hiawatha's gentle mother,
In her **anguish** died deserted.

Glossary:

Unremembered	: forgotten
Sporting	: entertaining, enjoying
Asunder	: to put things apart
Affrighted	: feeling of fear
Prairie	: wide area of flat land without trees
Meadow	: field with grass and often wild flowers
Slender	: thin and delicate
Stoop	: to bend the top half of the body forward and down
Heeded	: paying attention
Wooped	: to win somebody's heart by persuasion
Anguish	: extreme unhappiness caused by physical or mental suffering

29.4.3 Analysis

Nokomis was the daughter of the Moon. She was a wife, but had not yet given birth to her child. One day a jealous rival cut the grapevine on which she was swinging. Nokomis fell from the full moon, plunged downward, and landed on the prairie. People thought it was a meteor.

On the prairie, she gave birth to a daughter named Wenonah. As she grew, she developed into a beautiful maiden. Nokomis warned Wenonah to beware of Mudjekeewis, the West Wind. He told her not to lie down on the prairie, lest she

suffer harm. Wenonah did not heed her mother's warning. Mudjekeewis saw her lying among the lilies. He wooed her with sweet words and soft caresses, till she bore a son in sorrow. Wenonah died, deserted by the West Wind.

Nokomis took care of Hiawatha, Wenonah's child, in her wigwam, which was situated on the shores of Gitche Gumeo (Lake Superior). She taught him many things, showing him Ishkoodah, the comet, and the death-dance of the spirits, which we know as the Aurora Borealis, and the pathway of the ghosts, which we call the Milky Way.

Hiawatha was an inquisitive child. He asked Nokomis why there were spots on the moon. Nokomis replied that it was the body of a woman who had been thrown up there by her angry grandson. Hiawatha noticed a rainbow and wondered what it was. Nokomis said that they were flowers. She said that when the lilies on the prairie fade and perish, they blossom in the heavens above. As Hiawatha matured, he learnt the languages of all the birds and other animals. He became thoroughly acquainted with them and learnt all their secrets.

Self-check Questions

a) Who was Nokomis?

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b) Who was Hiawatha's mother? How did she die?

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c) Who was Hiawatha brought up by?

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d) What type of child Hiawatha was?

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e) What did Hiawatha learn during his childhood from Nokomis?

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29.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have read about H.W. Longfellow as a man and poet .We also gone through his two pieces of poetry namely *A Psalm of Life* and *Hiawatha's Childhood*. Now you should be able to examine, appreciate and discuss Longfellow's poetry in general and the two poems in particular. We hope you will read some more poems of H.W. Longfellow.

29.6 SUGGESTED READING

'The Song of Hiawatha' (1855)

29.7 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I

- a) See first paragraph of 29.2
- b) See the second paragraph of 29.2
- c) 'Portland Gazette'
- d) See third paragraph of 29.2
- e) Mary Store Potter was his school classmate. He married her in 1829.
- f) See last paragraph of 29.2

Self-check Exercise II

- a) See first paragraph of 29.3.2
- b) See eighth paragraph of 29.3.2
- c) Noble deeds being done by great men and women.
- d) See fifth paragraph of 29.3.2
- e) See second paragraph of 29.3.2
- f) 'Fleeting' rhymes with 'beating' and 'brave' with 'grave'

Self-check Exercise III

- a) See first paragraph of 29.4.2
- b) Wenonah was Hiawatha's mother and she died while giving birth to him.
- c) Hiawatha was brought up by Nokomis, his grandmother.
- d) Hiawatha was an inquisitive child.
- e) See the last paragraph of 29.4.2