



Before You Read

The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls

Meet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

“We can make our lives
sublime,
And, departing, leave
behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.”

—Longfellow



Henry Wadsworth Longfellow left behind the footprints of his poetry. He was a poet for the people—a popular man who always seemed to please his readers. Longfellow wrote poems on a wide variety of subjects, often focusing on noble sentiments that caught the spirit of his time. This sense of nobility, along with his enthusiastic optimism, won him a huge and devoted audience.

Longfellow had great success in making poetry popular in America. His most popular works brought to life stories from the past. They include *Evangeline*, *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, and “Paul Revere’s Ride.”

A professor of European languages and literature at Bowdoin College and then at Harvard College, Longfellow was also a popular figure on campus. He was known as a stylish dresser—a good-looking man with a sense of humor, well liked by his students.

Personal sorrow cast a shadow over Longfellow’s extraordinary public success, however. His first wife died four years after

their marriage. His second wife was killed in a fire, and Longfellow was badly burned when he tried to save her. Late in life, Longfellow took refuge from his grief by translating *The Divine Comedy*, an epic poem by the fourteenth-century Italian poet Dante.

When Longfellow turned seventy-five, people in the United States celebrated the popular poet’s birthday as if it were a national holiday. When he died, statues were dedicated in his honor across the country.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was born in 1807 and died in 1882.

Reading Focus

Imagine you are having a hectic day. Suddenly you have the chance to sit by the sea, by a mountain, or in a forest for an hour. How do you think that would make you feel?

Discuss With a group of classmates, discuss how sitting in a natural setting like the seashore might make you feel on such a day.

Setting a Purpose Read to notice the role of the sea in the poem.

Building Background

The Time and Place

Cambridge, Massachusetts, was a country town when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and his friends Oliver Wendell Holmes and James Russell Lowell lived there as young men in the 1830s. The three young men gathered informally with other writers to exchange ideas and conversation, encouraging one another and fostering a great flowering of ideas and literature.

The Ebb and Flow of Fame

As a poet, Longfellow encouraged positive values. He reached out to readers of all ages and backgrounds with easy, satisfying rhythms and rich yet simple imagery. However, by the twentieth century, Longfellow’s poetry had fallen out of favor. Many readers complained that his work was too sentimental, moralizing, or unrealistic. Nevertheless, Longfellow’s best poems still have the power to stir the feelings and imaginations of their readers.





Time and Tide, c. 1873. Alfred Thompson Bricher. Oil on canvas, 20¼ x 50 in. Dallas Museum of Art.

The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls

Henry Wadsworth
Longfellow

The tide rises, the tide falls,
The twilight darkens, the curlew² calls;
Along the sea-sands damp and brown
The traveler hastens toward the town,
5 And the tide rises, the tide falls.

Darkness settles on roofs and walls,
But the sea, the sea in the darkness calls;
The little waves, with their soft, white hands,
Efface⁹ the footprints in the sands,
10 And the tide rises, the tide falls.

The morning breaks; the steeds in their stalls
Stamp and neigh, as the hostler¹² calls;
The day returns, but nevermore
Returns the traveler to the shore,
15 And the tide rises, the tide falls.

² A *curlew* is a small, long-legged shore bird.

⁹ *Efface* means "wipe out" or "erase."

¹² A *hostler* is a person who cares for horses, especially at an inn.



Responding to Literature

Personal Response

Write three words that describe the reactions that this poem inspires in you. In your journal, explain why you have chosen each word.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What events occur in the first stanza? Which one of them stands out from the rest? In what ways is it different?
2. Refer to lines 8–10. What evidence does the traveler leave behind? What happens to the evidence? What comment do you think the speaker is making by describing what happens to that evidence?
3. Summarize lines 13–15. What do these lines suggest to you about an individual's place in nature?

Evaluate and Connect

4. Do you think the poet's use of **consonance** (see **Literary Terms Handbook** page R4) is effective in helping him convey the mood, or feeling, of the poem? Explain.
5. Think about your response to the Reading Focus on page 235. Compare your response to the feelings evoked by the sea and the tide in this poem.
6. In what ways would you like to leave footprints in "the sands of time," or make your mark on the world? How might you kindle the spirit of humanity?

Literary Criticism

"The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls," argues Steven Allaback, "is a good example of Longfellow's view of life as a somewhat sad but purposeful journey which is being taken in conjunction with certain orderly processes." Do you agree that Longfellow portrays life as sad but purposeful in the poem? Explain your answer in a paragraph, using details from the poem for support.

Literary ELEMENTS

Rhythm

Rhythm is the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables in a poem. Many poems have a regular rhythm. In other words, patterns of stressed syllables repeat line after line. The rhythm of "The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls" is not regular. It varies. Read the first two lines aloud to a partner. How would you describe the rhythm of these lines?

The tide rises, the tide falls,
The twilight darkens, the curlew
calls.

Read the next two lines aloud with your partner. What contrast do you see between the rhythm and content of the first two lines and the rhythm and content of the second two lines?

- See **Literary Terms Handbook**, p. R13.

Extending Your Response

Performing

Rhythms of the World If you look around, you'll notice many rhythms in the world. The tides rise and fall. City traffic stops and goes. With a group, choose some rhythms from life and express them through movement. You might create original dance movements, mime, or styles of walking to match the rhythms you choose. Begin with a rhythmic exploration of the tides. Then go on to other rhythms. Perform for a group of younger children.

Writing About Literature

Interview Longfellow Imagine that you are interviewing Henry Wadsworth Longfellow for your school newspaper. Prepare a series of questions about the meaning and elements of "The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls." Then, using your own knowledge of the poet and the poem, write answers to the questions from Longfellow's point of view.

 **Save your work for your portfolio.**