

# The Power of a Poem

One of the first poems I ever wrote was about a man named Dave who lived in a great big cave. He had lots of hair; he looked like a bear. Finally he realized he needed a shave. Although that poem rhymed, its message had no power.

Years later I wrote about saffron suns and stardust trails. The words were more poetic, but the poems still lacked power. It wasn't until a few years ago that I began to understand what makes a poem powerful.

Powerful poems start with powerful imagery. Sure, we can see Dave in his cave, but that image reveals little. Of course, it would have helped if I had picked a more meaningful subject—like David in the cave with Saul. Now *that* has potential. And by using concrete imagery along with figurative language, I could have started on the path to a powerful poem.

Concrete imagery and figurative language give a poem power by stirring the imagination. In prose we might say, “The church is a peaceful place.” In poetry we might say, “The church is a tranquil river.” Can you visualize a peaceful place? Maybe. But a tranquil river is both concrete and metaphorical.

Words form pictures in our minds; this is a powerful force. And it's not just visual. Author Joseph Conrad put it

this way: “My task, which I am trying to achieve, is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything.”

Good poets know how important this is, and they strive to create realistic worlds for their readers. The Christian poet must do this in a God-glorifying way. Do you know what it’s like to be a cherished lamb in a lush pasture? You do if you’ve read Psalm 23. The psalmist could have simply stated, “God takes care of me.” We would have believed him, but we would have missed out on a stirring experience.

A second quality that makes a poem powerful is the emotions it stirs. My poem about Dave in his cave lacked the power to stir anybody’s emotions, including Dave’s. But years later I read a poem that *did* stir my emotions.

I had almost given up on poetry, concluding that it was all either insipid or incomprehensible. I believed there was no power in a poem. But then I came upon Longfellow’s “A Psalm of Life.” Finally, a poem that stirred my heart—a poem with power. After reading that, I knew poems could touch the heart. Why, poems could escape the darkness of Dave’s cave, soar past the saffron sun, even transcend that stardust trail!

Since “A Psalm of Life” I’ve encountered many powerful poems. Some made me sad; some made me smile. But the most powerful poems made me heed their message.

The message *is* the most powerful part of a poem, but we should never expect that a poem will be read simply because it contains a good message. It won’t work. A poem must do many jobs before someone will bother to read and heed its message. The poet John Keats said it this way: “Poetry should surprise by a fine excess, and not by singularity; it

should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance.”

If you can do that, then your message stands a good chance of reaching the reader. If you think you can't, don't despair. We often need to write poor poetry before we write good poetry. That also goes for reading. I slogged through many powerless poems before discovering “A Psalm of Life.” And lines like Longfellow's were worth waiting for:

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

And I found other powerful poems. One told the story of a woman who made immoral choices; her life ended in tragedy. The message inspires the reader to consider where sin could take him. The poet had taken the time to paint a world, to use rhythm and rhyme to stir the heart. Then the message could influence the will to respond in a godly way. That should be our goal—to inspire holy living.

Dave in his cave could never do that. Neither could the mere mention of a sparkling sun or a starlit sky. There must be a powerful message expressed in a powerful way. This will stir us; this will spur us on to holy living. And that makes all the difference in the world.

# *A Psalm of Life*



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 tomorrow  
Find us farther than today.

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.

*—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*