

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Columbus

NANCY BYRD TURNER

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In this 1919 poem, from Youth's Companion, which she edited, the American poet Nancy Byrd Turner (1880–1971) celebrates the character of Columbus. For which virtues especially does she honor him? She emphasizes his dream and his prayer. What sort of a man lives and “pledges his soul” according to his dreams and prayers? Is having dreams and offering prayers sufficient for realizing their fulfillment? What other Columbian virtues would be needed? How does Turner's portrait compare with that of Adams or Whitman?

Back and forth in his narrow room
The weaver's son at his weaving went;
And ever the strands upon the loom
In a curious pattern met and blent:
Shores of a strange new continent
Limned by the threads his hand had drawn,—
Till his life was shaken with discontent:
He had dreamed a dream, and he must be gone!

The people jeered in the market place
At the moody fellow they chanced to meet;
The dark queen listened with laughing face
To the stumbling story he must repeat;
The wise men scoffed in the staring street,
“A fool will perish in folly's way”;
But they could not hinder his eager feet:
He had seen a star, and he would not stay!

The seas ran cold on his urging prows,
The sky line drowned in the dripping west;
His sailors muttered with sullen brows,
And cursed the dream in the dreamer's breast.
The wind came smiting at death's behest,
But he would not shorten one dipping sail;
His heart was sworn in a single quest:

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He had prayed a prayer, and it must prevail!

Then, on the dark his flaming star,

Proof of his prayer in the thundering gale,

Land of the dream that he dreamed afar!

He had pledged his soul, and he did not fail!

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