

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Decoration Day

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

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This poem by America's Maine-born and favorite "Fireside Poet," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1805–82), was one of his last, appearing first in the Atlantic in June 1882, several weeks after his death. Like Mary B. C. Slade's "Soldier's Memorial Day," it speaks of decorating the graves of fallen soldiers. But it does so less floridly, and to different effect.

What is the mood and tone of this poem? Why according to this poem is Decoration Day important to the dead? What is the danger to which the rest of the dead is still subject? How well can the thoughts of men—expressed in poems like this—keep them from this danger? In the previous selection, the song invokes the brothers "looking down from the hills of God" to see our "changeless love." Is there any reference to an afterlife in this poem? Is there a kind of afterlife in memory?

Sleep, comrades, sleep and rest
On this Field of the Grounded Arms,
Where foes no more molest,
Nor sentry's shot alarms!

Ye have slept on the ground before,
And started to your feet
At the cannon's sudden roar,
Or the drum's redoubling beat.

But in this camp of Death
No sound your slumber breaks;
Here is no fevered breath,
No wound that bleeds and aches.

All is repose and peace,
Untrampled lies the sod;
The shouts of battle cease,
It is the Truce of God!

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Rest, comrades, rest and sleep!
The thoughts of men shall be
As sentinels to keep
Your rest from danger free.

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Your silent tents of green
We deck with fragrant flowers;
Yours has the suffering been,
The memory shall be ours.