

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Song of the Banner at Day-Break

WALT WHITMAN

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In 1865, Walt Whitman (1819–92), already well known for Leaves of Grass (1855), published Drum-Taps, a collection of Civil War poems, several of which—including this one—served as a rallying cry for the Union cause. “The Song of the Banner at Day-Break” comprises a conversation among a Poet (most likely Whitman), a Pennant and a Banner (the Stars and Stripes), a Child, and his Father on the subject of the war and the need to defend the nation’s ideals.

What is the child’s reaction to the flag, and what is his yearning? Why does the father object? What is the teaching of the banner and pennant? What does the poet learn about the meaning of the flag, and how does he learn it? With whom do you identify in this poem? What have you learned from it about the meaning of the flag and the nation over which it flies?

Poet:

O a new song, a free song,
Flapping, flapping, flapping, flapping, by sounds, by voices clearer,
By the wind’s voice and that of the drum,
By the banner’s voice and child’s voice and sea’s voice, and father’s voice,
Low on the ground and high in the air,
On the ground where father and child stand,
In the upward air where their eyes turn,
Where the banner at day-break is flapping.

Words! book-words! what are you?
Words no more, for hearken and see,
My song is there in the open air—and I must sing,
With the banner and pennant a-flapping.

I’ll weave the chord and twine in,
Man’s desire and babe’s desire—I’ll twine them in, I’ll put in life;
I’ll put the bayonet’s flashing point—I’ll let bullets and slugs whizz,
I’ll pour the verse with streams of blood, full of volition, full of joy;

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Then loosen, launch forth, to go and compete,
With the banner and pennant a-flapping.

Banner and Pennant:

Come up here, bard, bard;
Come up here, soul, soul;
Come up here, dear little child,
To fly in the clouds and winds with me, and play with the measureless light.

Child:

Father, what is that in the sky beckoning to me with long finger?
And what does it say to me all the while?

Father:

Nothing, my babe, you see in the sky;
And nothing at all to you it says. But look you, my babe,
Look at these dazzling things in the houses, and see you the money-shops opening;
And see you the vehicles preparing to crawl along the streets with goods:
These! ah these! how valued and toil'd for, these!
How envied by all the earth!

Poet:

Fresh and rosy red, the sun is mounting high;
On floats the sea in distant blue, careering through its channels;
On floats the wind over the breast of the sea, setting in toward land;
The great steady wind from west or west-by-south,
Floating so buoyant, with milk-white foam on the waters.

But I am not the sea, nor the red sun;
I am not the wind, with girlish laughter;
Not the immense wind which strengthens—not the wind which lashes;
Not the spirit that ever lashes its own body to terror and death:
But I am that which unseen comes and sings, sings, sings,
Which babbles in brooks and scoots in showers on the land;
Which the birds know in the woods, mornings and evenings,
And the shore-sands know, and the hissing wave, and that banner and pennant,
Aloft there flapping and flapping.

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Child:

O father it is alive—it is full of people—it has children!

O now it seems to me it is talking to its children!

I hear it—it talks to me—O it is wonderful!

O it stretches—it spreads and runs so fast!—O my father,

It is so broad, it covers the whole sky!

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Father:

Cease, cease, my foolish babe,

What you are saying is sorrowful to me—much it displeases me;

Behold with the rest, again I say—behold not banners and pennants aloft;

But the well-prepared pavements behold—and mark the solid-wall'd houses.

Banner and Pennant:

Speak to the child, O bard, out of Manhattan;

To our children all, or north or south of Manhattan,

Where our factory-engines hum, where our miners delve the ground,

Where our hoarse Niagara rumbles, where our prairie-plows are plowing;

Speak, O bard! point this day, leaving all the rest, to us over all—and yet we know not
why;

For what are we, mere strips of cloth, profiting nothing,

Only flapping in the wind?

Poet:

I hear and see not strips of cloth alone,

I hear the tramp of armies, I hear the challenging sentry;

I hear the jubilant shouts of millions of men—I hear LIBERTY!

I hear the drums beat, and the trumpets blowing;

I myself move abroad, swift-rising, flying then;

I use the wings of the land-bird, and use the wings of the sea-bird, and look down as from
a height,

I do not deny the precious results of peace—I see populous cities with wealth
incalculable;

I see numberless farms—I see the farmers working in their fields or barns;

I see mechanics working—I see buildings everywhere founded, going up, or finish'd;

I see trains of cars swiftly speeding along railroad tracks, drawn by the locomotives;

I see the stores, depots, of Boston, Baltimore, Charleston, New Orleans;

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I see far in the West the immense area of grain—I dwell awhile, hovering;
I pass to the lumber forests of the north, and again to the southern plantation, and again to
California;

Sweeping the whole, I see the countless profit, the busy gatherings, earned wages,
See the identity formed out of thirty-six spacious and haughty States, (and many more to
come;)

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See forts on the shores of harbors—see ships sailing in and out,
Then over all, (aye! aye!) my little and lengthen'd pennant shaped like a sword,
Runs swiftly up, indicating war and defiance—And now the halyards have rais'd it,
Side of my banner broad and blue—side of my starry banner,
Discarding peace over all the sea and land.

Banner and Pennant:

Yet louder, higher, stronger, bard! yet farther, wider cleave!
No longer let our children deem us riches and peace alone;
We can be terror and carnage also, and are so now;
Not now are we any one of these spacious and haughty States, (nor any five, nor ten;)
Nor market nor depot are we, nor money-bank in the city;
But these, and all, and the brown and spreading land, and the mines below, are ours;
And the shores of the sea are ours, and the rivers great and small,
And the fields they moisten are ours, and the crops and the fruits are ours;
Bays and channels and ships sailing in and out, are ours—and we over all,
Over the area spread below, the three millions of square miles—the capitals,
The thirty-five millions of people—O bard! in life and death supreme,
We, even we, from this day flaunt out masterful, high up above,
Not for the present alone, for a thousand years, chanting through you,
This song to the soul of one poor little child.

Child:

O my father, I like not the houses;
They will never to me be anything—nor do I like money;
But to mount up there I would like, O father dear—that banner I like;
That pennant I would be, and must be.

Father:

Child of mine, you fill me with anguish;
To be that pennant would be too fearful;

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Little you know what it is this day, and henceforth forever;
It is to gain nothing, but risk and defy everything,
Forward to stand in front of wars—and O, such wars!—what have you to do with them?
With passions of demons, slaughter, premature death?

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Poet:

Demons and death then I sing;
Put in all, aye all will I—sword-shaped pennant for war, and banner so broad and blue,
And a pleasure new and ecstatic, and the prattled yearning of children,
Blent with the sounds of the peaceful land, and the liquid wash of the sea;
And the icy cool of the far, far north, with rustling cedars and pines;
And the whirr of drums, and the sound of soldiers marching, and the hot sun shining
south;
And the beach-waves combing over the beach on my eastern shore, and my western shore
the same;
And all between those shores, and my ever running Mississippi, with bends and chutes,
And my Illinois fields, and my Kansas fields, and my fields of Missouri;
The CONTINENT—devoting the whole identity, without reserving an atom,
Pour in! whelm that which asks, which sings, with all, and the yield of all.

Banner and Pennant:

Aye all! for ever, for all!
From sea to sea, north and south, east and west,
Fusing and holding, claiming, devouring the whole;
No more with tender lip, nor musical labial sound,
But, out of the night emerging for good, our voice persuasive no more,
Croaking like crows here in the wind.

Poet:

My limbs, my veins dilate;
The blood of the world has fill'd me full—my theme is clear at last:
—Banner so broad, advancing out of the night, I sing you haughty and resolute;
I burst through where I waited long, too long, deafen'd and blinded;
My sight, my hearing and tongue, are come to me, (a little child taught me;)
I hear from above, O pennant of war, your ironical call and demand;
Insensate! insensate! (yet I at any rate chant you,) O banner!

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Not houses of peace are you, nor any nor all their prosperity, (if need be, you shall again
have every one of those houses to destroy them;
You thought not to destroy those valuable houses, standing fast, full of comfort, built
with money;
May they stand fast, then? Not an hour, unless you, above them and all, stand fast;) —O banner!
nor money so precious are you, nor farm produce you, nor the material good
nutriment,
Nor excellent stores, nor landed on wharves from the ships;
Not the superb ships, with sail-power or steam-power, fetching and carrying cargoes,
Nor machinery, vehicles, trade, nor revenues—But you, as henceforth I see you,
Running up out of the night, bringing your cluster of stars, (ever-enlarging stars;) —O banner!
Divider of day-break you, cutting the air, touch'd by the sun, measuring the sky,
(Passionately seen and yearn'd for by one poor little child,
While others remain busy, or smartly talking, forever teaching thrift, thrift;) —O banner!
O you up there! O pennant! where you undulate like a snake, hissing so curious,
Out of reach—an idea only—yet furiously fought for, risking bloody death—loved by
me!
So loved! O you banner leading the day, with stars brought from the night!
Valueless, object of eyes, over all and demanding all—O banner and pennant!
I too leave the rest—great as it is, it is nothing—houses, machines are nothing—I see
them not:
I see but you, O warlike pennant! O banner so broad, with stripes, I sing you only,
Flapping up there in the wind.

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