

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Ode

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Independence achieved and the Constitution adopted, the United States was launched on the world stage with aspirations and high hopes for a more perfect union, one that would make secure for all its citizens the unalienable rights spoken of in the Declaration of Independence. From the start, reaching that goal has proved to be an unending challenge, to begin with, because the existence of slavery cruelly denied even basic freedom to millions of African Americans. Many writers throughout our history have called attention to the gap between our national ideals and our practices, summoning us to close it. Early among them was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82), essayist, poet, lecturer, and leader of the Transcendentalist movement, who was known especially for his celebration of freedom and individuality. Emerson was an opponent of slavery and an abolitionist, lecturing and writing on the subject in the years preceding the Civil War. This poem about freedom, apparently addressed to the United States, was sung in the town hall of Emerson’s native Concord, Massachusetts on July 4, 1857.

What is the main theme and concern of the poem? What, according to verses 1 and 10, is the relation between the rising of the sun and the human desire for freedom? According to verses 5, 6, and 7, what is the mission or charge to the United States? How is our national task related to the divine plan, mentioned in verses 3 and 10? What, according to the poem, would make for a more perfect union, then and now?

O tenderly the haughty day
Fills his blue urn with fire;
One morn is in the mighty heaven,
And one in our desire.

The cannon booms from town to town,
Our pulses beat not less,
The joy-bells chime their tidings down,
Which children’s voices bless.

For He that flung the broad blue fold
O’er-mantling land and sea,

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One third part of the sky unrolled
For the banner of the free.

The men are ripe of Saxon kind
To build an equal state,—
To take the statute from the mind
And make of duty fate.

United States! the ages plead,—
Present and past in under-song,—
Go put your creed into your deed,
Nor speak with double tongue.

For sea and land don't understand,
Nor skies without a frown
See rights for which the one hand fights
By the other cloven down.

Be just at home; then write your scroll
Of honor o'er the sea,
And bid the broad Atlantic roll,
A ferry of the free.

And henceforth there shall be no chain,
Save underneath the sea
The wires shall murmur through the main
Sweet songs of liberty.

The conscious stars accord above,
The waters wild below,
And under, through the cable wove,
Her fiery errands go.

For He that worketh high and wise,
Nor pauses in his plan,
Will take the sun out of the skies
Ere freedom out of man.