

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Fourth of July Ode

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Would the attainment of equal rights for women and minorities, and also the alleviation of poverty and undeserved misfortune, be sufficient to perfect the union and to realize King’s “American Dream” of freedom for all? Would the elimination of these and other external evils be sufficient to secure a healthy self-governing republic of ordered liberty, one in which the people rule wisely and well? This “Fourth of July Ode” (1876) by James Russell Lowell (1819–91), Fireside Poet, literary and social critic, Harvard professor, abolitionist, and diplomat, suggests that more would be necessary.

What kind of freedom is Lowell talking about? According to the poem, from what is this freedom liberating? And for what is it desirable? What, if any, is the connection between liberation from tyrannical rule—the liberty “Our fathers fought for”—and the internal freedom from various appetites or fears that, arguably, shackle hearts and minds? How do we get such inner freedom: how do we “ourselves . . . set us free”? Is it possible that our currently secure liberty to pursue happiness as we see fit might actually contribute to our self-enslavement? Is self-restraint and imposed order necessary for true freedom?

I.
Our fathers fought for liberty,
They struggled long and well,
History of their deeds can tell—
But did they leave us free?

II.
Are we free from vanity,
Free from pride, and free from self,
Free from love of power and pelf,
From everything that’s beggarly?

III.
Are we free from stubborn will,
From low hate and malice small,

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From opinion's tyrant thrall?
Are none of us our own slaves still?

IV.

Are we free to speak our thought,
To be happy, and be poor,
Free to enter Heaven's door,
To live and labor as we ought?

V.

Are we then made free at last
From the fear of what men say,
Free to reverence To-day,
Free from the slavery of the Past?

VI.

Our fathers fought for liberty,
They struggled long and well,
History of their deeds can tell—
But *ourselves* must set us free.

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