

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Emancipation Group

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–92) was a prominent poet and advocate for the abolitionist cause. His poems first appeared in the Newburyport Free Press, edited by the prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison (1805–79). Whittier wrote this poem for the December 9, 1879 unveiling of a duplicate of the Emancipation Group Memorial (also commonly known as the Emancipation Memorial or the Freedman's Memorial/Monument) in Park Square, Boston. The Memorial, originally designed and sculpted by Thomas Ball, depicts a freed slave, his shackles newly broken, kneeling under Abraham Lincoln's protective hand.

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In the first stanza, how can a hand “unchain[] a race?” What images does the poet use to describe Lincoln? What, according to Whittier, moved Lincoln to emancipate the slaves (stanzas 3 to 4)? Who or what inspired him to say “Let man be free!” What is Lincoln's sacrifice, and why is it necessary, according to the poet (stanzas 5 and 6)? What is the statue's message, and how is Lincoln's sacrifice related (stanza 7)? Do you agree with the poet's assertion “That truth is stronger than a lie, / And righteousness than wrong”?

Amidst thy sacred effigies
Of old renown give place,
O city, Freedom-loved! to his
Whose hand unchained a race.

Take the worn frame, that rested not
Save in a martyr's grave;
The care-lined face, that none forgot,
Bent to the kneeling slave.

Let man be free! The mighty word
He spake was not his own;
An impulse from the Highest stirred
These chiselled lips alone.

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The cloudy sign, the fiery guide,
Along his pathway ran,

And Nature, through his voice, denied
The ownership of man.

We rest in peace where these sad eyes
Saw peril, strife, and pain;
His was the nation's sacrifice,
And ours the priceless gain.

O symbol of God's will on earth
As it is done above!
Bear witness to the cost and worth
Of justice and of love.

Stand in thy place and testify
To coming ages long,
That truth is stronger than a lie,
And righteousness than wrong.

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