

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Pioneers! O Pioneers!

WALT WHITMAN

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The Columbian spirits of exploration, adventure, and enterprise in pursuit of gain have continued to play major roles in America's development and material progress, most especially in the 19th century: the conquest of the prairie, the settling of the West, the taming of the wilderness, the gold rush, and the mastery of nature through science, industry, and technology. In this famous poem from the 1865 edition of his oft-revised Leaves of Grass (first edition, 1855), American poet Walt Whitman (1819–92) offers an exuberant celebration of the people who pushed westward to create a transcontinental nation. Much of Whitman's poetry discusses what it means to be an American and lauds the American ideals of democracy, freedom, and progress.

How does Whitman characterize the life and deeds of the pioneers of America? Do you share his enthusiasm for them? What exactly is a pioneer? How do they and their westward migration compare with the great European explorers—Columbus and others like him—who sailed west to the New World? Is there a difference between the pioneers and other adventurers and explorers? What, according to Whitman, is the relation between America and the old world (Europe)? What does Whitman mean by saying (in verse 2) of the pioneers, “all the rest on us depend”? What does he mean (in verse 4) by “the task eternal . . . the burden . . . the lesson”? Why does Whitman say (verse 15) “All the pulses of the world, / Falling in, they beat for us”? What, according to the poem, is the goal of the pioneers? Do you, like Whitman, affirm its rightness and goodness?

Come, my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready;
Have you your pistols? have you your sharp edged axes? Pioneers! O pioneers!

For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,
We, the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend, Pioneers! O pioneers!

O you youths, western youths,
So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship,
Plain I see you, western youths, see you tramping with the foremost, Pioneers! O pioneers!

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Have the elder races halted?
Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied, over there beyond the seas?
We take up the task eternal, and the burden, and the lesson, Pioneers! O pioneers!

All the past we leave behind;
We debouch* upon a newer, mightier world, varied world,
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the march, Pioneers! O pioneers!

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We detachments steady throwing,
Down the edges, through the passes, up the mountains steep,
Conquering, holding, daring, venturing, as we go, the unknown ways, Pioneers! O pioneers!

We primeval forests felling,
We the rivers stemming, vexing we, and piercing deep the mines within;
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving, Pioneers! O pioneers!

Colorado men are we,
From the peaks gigantic, from the great sierras and the high plateaus,
From the mine and from the gully, from the hunting trail we come, Pioneers! O pioneers!

From Nebraska, from Arkansas,
Central inland race are we, from Missouri, with the continental blood intervein'd;
All the hands of comrades clasping, all the Southern, all the Northern, Pioneers! O pioneers!

O resistless, restless race!
O beloved race in all! O my breast aches with tender love for all!
O I mourn and yet exult—I am rapt with love for all, Pioneers! O pioneers!

Raise the mighty mother mistress,
Waving high the delicate mistress, over all the starry mistress, (bend your heads all,)
Raise the fang'd and warlike mistress, stern, impassive, weapon'd mistress, Pioneers! O pioneers!

* *Emerge from a narrow or confined space into a wide, open area.*

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See, my children, resolute children,
By those swarms upon our rear, we must never yield or falter,
Ages back in ghostly millions, frowning there behind us urging, Pioneers! O pioneers!

On and on, the compact ranks,
With accessions ever waiting, with the places of the dead quickly fill'd,
Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet and never stopping, Pioneers! O pioneers!

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O to die advancing on!
Are there some of us to droop and die? has the hour come?
Then upon the march we fittest die, soon and sure the gap is fill'd, Pioneers! O pioneers!

All the pulses of the world,
Falling in, they beat for us, with the western movement beat;
Holding single or together, steady moving, to the front, all for us, Pioneers! O pioneers!

Life's involv'd and varied pageants,
All the forms and shows, all the workmen at their work,
All the seamen and the landsmen, all the masters with their slaves, Pioneers! O pioneers!

All the hapless silent lovers,
All the prisoners in the prisons, all the righteous and the wicked,
All the joyous, all the sorrowing, all the living, all the dying, Pioneers! O pioneers!

I too with my soul and body,
We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way,
Through these shores, amid the shadows, with the apparitions pressing, Pioneers! O pioneers!

Lo! the darting bowling orb!
Lo! the brother orbs around! all the clustering suns and planets,
All the dazzling days, all the mystic nights with dreams, Pioneers! O pioneers!

These are of us, they are with us,
All for primal needed work, while the followers there in embryo wait behind,
We to-day's procession heading, we the route for travel clearing, Pioneers! O pioneers!

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O you daughters of the west!
O you young and elder daughters! O you mothers and you wives!
Never must you be divided, in our ranks you move united, Pioneers! O pioneers!

Minstrels latent on the prairies!
(Shrouded bards of other lands! you may sleep—you have done your work;)
Soon I hear you coming warbling, soon you rise and tramp amid us, Pioneers! O pioneers!

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Not for delectations sweet;
Not the cushion and the slipper, not the peaceful and the studious;
Not the riches safe and palling, not for us the tame enjoyment, Pioneers! O pioneers!

Do the feasters gluttonous feast?
Do the corpulent sleepers sleep? have they lock'd and bolted doors?
Still be ours the diet hard, and the blanket on the ground, Pioneers! O pioneers!

Has the night descended?
Was the road of late so toilsome? did we stop discouraged, nodding on our way?
Yet a passing hour I yield you, in your tracks to pause oblivious, Pioneers! O pioneers!

Till with sound of trumpet,
Far, far off the day-break call—hark! how loud and clear I hear it wind;
Swift! to the head of the army!—swift! spring to your places, Pioneers! O pioneers!