



AMERICAN POEMS

A Companion to the Book
What So Proudly We Hail

Amy A. Kass

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Tell All the Truth But Tell It Slant

EMILY DICKINSON

Emily Dickinson (1830–86) once defined poetry this way: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.” Dickinson’s elliptical poem #1129, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” (1868), often affects readers the same way. With its paradoxical first lines, it is widely considered to be a key statement of Dickinson’s own approach to writing poetry.

Dickinson (1830–86) came from a prominent family in Amherst, Massachusetts. Her father was a Yale-educated lawyer who also served as a state legislator and a one-term congressman. Dickinson spent seven years at Amherst Academy, enjoying many unique educational opportunities because of the school’s connection to nearby Amherst College. She took classes in English, classical literature, botany, geology, history, philosophy, and arithmetic. After finishing at Amherst Academy, she enrolled at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, but left after just one year. For the remainder of her life, Dickinson stayed secluded at her house in Amherst, never marrying or having children. Her many poems were not published during her life, and some were never completed. It was only after her death that her work became revered by literary critics and the general public.

What does it mean to tell something slant? As you read the poem, consider the repeated images of light, seeing, and blindness. What do these images suggest about the nature of truth? Does the poet have any particular truth(s) in mind? What truths are best approached indirectly? Can one tell “all the truth” while telling it “slant”?

Tell all the truth but tell it slant—
Success in circuit lies,
Too bright for our infirm delight
The truth’s superb surprise;

As lightning to the children eased
With explanation kind,
The truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—

I Hear America Singing

WALT WHITMAN

Born on Long Island, New York, famed American poet Walt Whitman (1819–92) worked at various times as a journalist, a teacher, a government clerk, and, during the Civil War, a volunteer nurse in Washington, DC. In his late 20s, Whitman became determined to establish himself as a great poet, and in 1855, self-published his first collection of poems, Leaves of Grass—a work he would continue to edit and revise until his death. This version of “I Hear America Singing,” in which Whitman explores both the individual and collective nature of work, is taken from the 1867 edition of Leaves of Grass; an earlier version appeared in the 1860 edition.¹

What, according to the poem, is the relation between working and singing? In what sense do we “sing” in our work? To what extent does our work express our individual identity: “Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else”? What does it mean to suggest that the singing of America comprises the various songs/works of its distinctive individuals? Does America have, in addition, a common “song” or work?

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand
singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter’s song, the ploughboy’s on his way in the morning, or
at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of
the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows,
robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

¹ This poem can also be found in our ebook, “The Meaning of Labor Day”: www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-american-calendar/the-meaning-of-labor-day.

I, Too, Sing America

LANGSTON HUGHES

Langston Hughes (1902–67) was a celebrated African American poet and short story writer. Born in Joplin, Missouri, he moved often in his youth before settling in Cleveland, Ohio where he attended high school. He began writing as a teenager and first published his poetry in his school newspaper. He attended Columbia University but left before graduating, instead immersing himself in the Harlem Renaissance, a blossoming of African American art, writing, and thought in the 1920s and 1930s centered in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. Hughes' writing helped to develop the jazz style of poetry, drawing on the improvisation and lyricism of the music, and much of his poetry explored themes of racial and social inequality.

As you read “I, Too, Sing America” (1945), consider the following questions: To whom is he responding that he “too” sings America? Who else sings America? How does the beginning of the poem—“I, too, sing America”—relate to its ending—“I, too, am America”—? (emphasis added)? Whose “darker brother” is he? Why does he think that things will change? On what hope does he draw?

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Read the entire poem at the Poetry Foundation: www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15615.

Mending Wall

ROBERT FROST

In declaring that “I, Too, Sing America,” Langston Hughes raises the question of how we as Americans should relate to one another. (In the poem, Hughes likens America to a kind of family, where he is the “darker brother,” at the moment outcast but eventually included: “Besides, They’ll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed.”) In this selection, Robert Frost also raises questions about neighborliness and inclusion, but in quite a different way than Hughes.

Frost (1874–1963) was born in San Francisco in 1874 and moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts as a child. He attended Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, but left without graduating to help support his family by working odd jobs. Frost returned to poetry in 1894 when he sold his first poem, “My Butterfly.” He married a year later and moved to a farm in Derry, New Hampshire. Inspired by his surroundings, Frost began using the imagery and themes of life in rural New England to explore philosophical questions in his poems. Frost and his family relocated to England in 1912 where he published his first two books. Frost returned to New Hampshire at the outbreak of World War I and embarked on a nearly 40-year collegiate teaching career. In 1924, Frost won his first Pulitzer Prize for his volume of poems, New Hampshire, and he would go on to win the award three more times over the next two decades. Frost served as the Poet Laureate for the United States from 1958 to 1959.

First published in 1915 as part of Frost’s second collection of poetry, North of Boston, the poem, written in blank verse, describes how two neighbors come together each spring to fix a stone wall that divides their property. The speaker in the poem wonders if the wall is actually necessary—“He is all pine and I am apple orchard. / My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines”—but his neighbor only responds “Good fences make good neighbors.” And so Frost paints a portrait of the two men, one who questions the yearly repair of the wall (but who continues to participate in the activity), and the other who is driven by tradition to build up the wall.

As you read “Mending Wall,” consider these questions: Why do the two men repair the wall each year? Do they have different reasons for doing so? What are ways that fences do make good neighbors? What are ways they do not? What responsibilities do we have toward our neighbors? And what does Frost’s poem tell us about neighborliness? Do good fences make good neighbors?

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,

To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

Caged Bird

MAYA ANGELOU

Maya Angelou (b. 1928–) was born in St. Louis, Missouri as Marguerite Johnson. When she was eight years old, she was raped by her mother’s boyfriend, who was killed soon after his release from jail—probably by members of Angelou’s family. As a result, she became mute for almost five years, believing that her voice had killed the man. During the 1950s and 1960s, she participated in the Civil Rights Movement, serving as a coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1969, she published her autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, and wrote several books of poetry in the 1980s and 1990s, including Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing? (1983), I Shall Not Be Moved (1990), and A Brave and Startling Truth (1995).

In the poem “Caged Bird,” published first in Shaker, Why Don’t you Sing?, Angelou draws from, and responds to, Paul Laurence Dunbar’s 1899 poem “Sympathy.” In that poem Dunbar writes:

I know what the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flights—
I know why the caged bird sings!

In the final stanza of Angelou’s poem, she concludes:

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

What is the difference between the free bird (stanzas 1 and 4) and the caged bird (stanzas 2–5)? Why is the caged bird’s song a “fearful trill” (stanza 3)? With clipped wings and tied feet, why does the caged bird “open his throat to sing”? Who is the caged bird? Can you relate the bird to the struggle for civil rights in America?

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends

and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

Read the entire poem at the Poetry Foundation: www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/178948.

American Sonnet

BILLY COLLINS

A native of New York City, Billy Collins (b. 1941–) attended the College of the Holy Cross and then earned his PhD in English from the University of California-Riverside. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, he published many works of poetry, including Questions About Angels, a 1990 National Poetry Series winner—and it is from this work that “American Sonnet” is drawn. In 1994, Poetry magazine selected Collins as “Poet of the Year,” and in 2001 he was named Poet Laureate, a position he held until 2003. From 2004 to 2006, he also served as the Poet Laureate for the State of New York. Collins currently teaches English at Lehman College (CUNY), where he joined the faculty in 1968.

In this poem, Collins compares the traditional Italian or English sonnet to a postcard, which he describes as “a poem on vacation, / that forces us to sing our songs in little rooms / or pour our sentiments into measuring cups.” How is the postcard like a sonnet? How is it not? Consider, too, Collins’ own poem: is it a sonnet as its title claims? How does it follow, and break from, the genre’s conventions? Collins writes that “We do not speak like Petrarch or wear a hat like Spenser;” are the old poetic forms, such as the sonnet, no longer appropriate to the American experience? Why or why not? How is Collins’ American song (and those of the postcard writers he describes) different from, or similar to, the American songs in Walt Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing” or in Maya Angelou’s “Caged Bird”?

We do not speak like Petrarch or wear a hat like Spenser
and it is not fourteen lines
like furrows in a small, carefully plowed field

but the picture postcard, a poem on vacation,
that forces us to sing our songs in little rooms
or pour our sentiments into measuring cups.

Read the entire poem at Poetry365: <http://poetry365.tumblr.com/post/62623649/american-sonnet-billy-collins>.

American Names

STEPHEN VINCENT BENÈT

Born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Stephen Vincent Benèt (1898–1943) was a prolific poet who authored nearly a dozen books in the course of his career. Despite a bout of scarlet fever at the age of three that permanently affected his eyesight and overall health, Benèt loved to read and write. The poetry he wrote as a young teenager quickly caught the attention of others. By 1915, he had already published his first poetry collection, Five Men and Pompey. Benèt attended Yale University, where he excelled in his studies and became editor of the student literary magazine. He continued to write poetry after leaving Yale, with two of his works—John Brown’s Body (1928) and Western Star (published posthumously in 1943)—winning Pulitzer Prizes. He also wrote short stories, the best known of which include “The Devil and Daniel Webster” (1936), “By the Waters of Babylon,” (1937), and “The King of Cats” (1937). In 1943, at the age of 44, he suffered a heart attack while in New York City and died.

“American Names,” first published in Ballads and Poems, 1915–1930, celebrates American place-names as poems in and of themselves. The poem also examines the differences between “the sharp names that never get fat” of American towns and the “silver spoons” of European cities. As you read the poem, look up any names with which you are unfamiliar. Additionally, reading the poem aloud will help you to maximize the difference in sounds between the American names and the European ones. How do the sounds of the names differ? What emotions do they evoke? What are the reasons Benèt lists for remembering—and loving—American names?

I have fallen in love with American names,
The sharp names that never get fat,
The snakeskin-titles of mining-claims,
The plumed war-bonnet of Medicine Hat,
Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat.

Seine and Piave are silver spoons,
But the spoonbowl-metal is thin and worn,
There are English counties like hunting-tunes
Played on the keys of a postboy’s horn,
But I will remember where I was born.

I will remember Carquinez Straits,
Little French Lick and Lundy’s Lane,
The Yankee ships and the Yankee dates
And the bullet-towns of Calamity Jane.
I will remember Skunktown Plain.

I will fall in love with a Salem tree
And a rawhide quirt from Santa Cruz,

I will get me a bottle of Boston sea
And a blue-gum nigger to sing me blues.
I am tired of loving a foreign muse.

Rue des Martyrs and Bleeding-Heart-Yard,
Senlis, Pisa, and Blindman's Oast,
It is a magic ghost you guard
But I am sick for a newer ghost,
Harrisburg, Spartanburg, Painted Post.

Henry and John were never so
And Henry and John were always right?
Granted, but when it was time to go
And the tea and the laurels had stood all night,
Did they never watch for Nantucket Light?

I shall not rest quiet in Montparnasse.
I shall not lie easy at Winchelsea.
You may bury my body in Sussex grass,
You may bury my tongue at Champmedy.
I shall not be there. I shall rise and pass.
Bury my heart at Wounded Knee.

Chicago

CARL SANDBURG

First appearing in Poetry in 1914, Carl Sandburg's poem "Chicago"—the first of nine poems he wrote about the city in his 1916 collection Chicago Poems—describes the "City of the Big Shoulders" that Sandburg loves, despite its imperfections. Sandburg had moved to the city in 1912, just two years before writing the poem. The poem is an early example of social realism, a form of art that became popular in the 1920s and 30s with paintings such as Grant Wood's American Gothic (1930) and photographs such as Dorothea Lange's Migrant Mother (1936).

Best known for his poems and biographies, Sandburg (1878–1960) grew up in a middle-class family in Galesburg, Illinois. Dropping out of school after the eighth grade, he took many odd jobs until enlisting in the military during the Spanish-American War. After the war, he developed his writing skills at Lombard College (which he left before graduating) and while working as a journalist at the Chicago Daily News. The author of nearly 50 books of poetry, history, folklore, and stories for children, Sandburg won the Pulitzer Prize three times: in 1919 for Corn Huskers, a book of poetry; in 1940 for Abraham Lincoln: The War Years, a biography of Lincoln; and in 1951 for his collection Complete Poems.

As you read Sandburg's "Chicago," pay attention to the way that the poet personifies the city. In what ways are cities like the people who inhabit and form them? In what ways are they different or separate? Thinking of your own city, what personal characteristics would you say it exhibits? How does Sandburg's acknowledgment that things are not perfect in Chicago make his admiration for the city more palpable?

Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your painted women under the
gas lamps luring the farm boys.
And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill and go
free to kill again.
And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of women and children I have seen
the marks of wanton hunger.
And having answered so I turn once more to those who sneer at this my city, and I give them
back the sneer and say to them:
Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and
strong and cunning.
Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job, here is a tall bold slugger set vivid
against the little soft cities;
Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted against the wilderness,

Bareheaded,
Shoveling,
Wrecking,
Planning,
Building, breaking, rebuilding,
Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white teeth,
Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man laughs,
Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a battle,
Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the pulse, and under his ribs the heart of the people,
Laughing!
Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-naked, sweating, proud to be Hog
Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler to the
Nation.

Becoming a Redwood

DANA GIOIA

In the last selection, Carl Sandburg described the “Stormy, husky, brawling, / City of the Big Shoulders” city of Chicago. With this selection, we look at another part of America: the redwood forests that inhabit northern California, seemingly from time eternal.

Originally from Los Angeles, Dana Gioia (b. 1950–) is an award-winning poet and former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. After graduating from Harvard University with a master’s in comparative literature (1975) and from the Stanford Business School with a master’s of business administration (1977), Gioia spent 15 years working at General Foods Corporation, where he became vice president of marketing and was instrumental in increasing the sales of Jell-O. During this time, however, he regularly wrote poetry, publishing often in the Hudson Review, Poetry, and the New Yorker. In 1992, following the publication of his poetry collection The Gods of Winter (which won the 1992 Poets’ Prize), he retired from the corporate world to focus on writing full time. In 2002, President George W. Bush appointed him as the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, a position he left in 2009 after serving for two terms. He is currently the Judge Widney Professor of Poetry and Public Culture at the University of Southern California.

In “Becoming a Redwood,” originally published in The Gods of Winter, Gioia imagines the rooted life lived by California redwood trees. He writes: “Unimaginable the redwoods on the far hill, / rooted for centuries, the living wood grown tall / and thickened with a hundred thousand days of light.” Why do you think he titled the poem “Becoming a Redwood” (emphasis added)? Have you had the experience of “stand[ing] in a field long enough” that the sounds of the crickets and the toads (“who claims that change is possible”) start up again? What do we learn from such experiences? How does this compare to the busyness and loudness that Sandburg writes about in “Chicago”?

Stand in a field long enough, and the sounds
start up again. The crickets, the invisible
toad who claims that change is possible,

And all the other life too small to name.
First one, then another, until innumerable
they merge into the single voice of a summer hill.

Read the entire poem at the Poetry Foundation: www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175695.

The Red Wheelbarrow

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

First published in 1923, “The Red Wheelbarrow” is one of those poems that most students encounter at some point in their educational career, and it’s worth returning to thereafter. At eight lines and just 16 words long, the poem is short and seemingly simple, and yet through its carefully arranged sounds and striking imagery, lends itself to endless interpretation.

William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), the poem’s author, was born in Rutherford, New Jersey and began writing poetry while a student at Horace Mann High School. Wishing to pursue both his love for writing and his desire to become a doctor, he attended the University of Pennsylvania to study medicine, and there became friends with Ezra Pound, another emerging American poet. After returning to Rutherford to practice medicine, Williams began publishing his writing and short poems—often written on his prescription pads—in magazines and journals. Like Robert Frost, Williams believed in creating a distinctly American form of poetry that drew on the regular speech patterns and everyday experiences of its people. His poems are often considered to be part of the “Imagist” movement, characterized by his maxim of “no ideas but in things”—that is, one must use the things of this world in order to discuss the abstraction of ideas.

“The Red Wheelbarrow” fits firmly within this conception. Read the poem a few times aloud, taking care to note the stressed and un-stressed syllables of the words in the poem and how they work together to create an overall emotion, perhaps not found simply in the words themselves. Imagine the narrator of the poem—what kind of person might he be? Where do you think he’s telling his story, and to whom? What picture does the poem create? Can you imagine the scene in your mind? What sorts of things depend upon the red wheelbarrow? What larger pictures or abstractions might we also see from the picture that Williams paints?

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Sestina

ELIZABETH BISHOP

A sestina is a structured poem consisting of six stanzas of six lines each, followed by a final three-line stanza, for a total of 39 lines in the poem. The end-words of the first stanza are used, in a set pattern, to end lines in the remaining five stanzas. For example, if the first line of the poem ends in the word “peace,” “peace” will be used to end the second line of the second stanza. In this 1956 poem, Elizabeth Bishop (1911–79) uses the fixed form of the sestina to discuss the fixed form of seasons, as described by the almanac.

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, Bishop spent much of her youth living in Nova Scotia with her grandparents after her father died and her mother was committed to a mental institution. She returned to the United States to attend high school and, later, Vassar College, where she and a group of friends started the literary journal Con Spirito. After graduating, she traveled extensively in Europe and northern Africa. In 1938, she published her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of poetry North and South, and in 1970 she received a National Book Award in Poetry for The Complete Poems.

In “Sestina,” Bishop tells of a grandmother and child having tea. As you read the poem, pay attention to how Bishop uses the same words in each stanza, yet evokes slightly different meanings with each repetition. What different roles, for example, does the almanac play throughout the poem? What about the tears? What does the poem say about the seasons of life? How does Bishop use the structure of the poem to tell her story?

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

Read the entire poem at Poem Hunter: www.poemhunter.com/poem/sestina/.

The Man Born to Farming

WENDELL BERRY

Born in 1934, Wendell Berry grew up working on his family's farm in Newcastle, Kentucky and attended the University of Kentucky. After serving as a creative writing fellow in the Wallace Stegner writing program at Stanford University, he became a professor of writing and literature at New York University. He soon returned home to Kentucky, however, teaching at the University of Kentucky, buying a farm near Port Royal, and pursuing a long career of writing. He is the author of more than 30 books, comprised of novels such as Nathan Coulter (1960) and The Memory of Old Jack (1974), nonfiction and essays such as The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture (1977) and Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community (1992), and collections of poetry such as The Broken Ground (1964) and The Mad Farmer Poems (2008), among many others. Today, he continues to live on the farm he bought in 1965.

In this poem, Berry describes the farmer, whose life is divided into the same seasons as the crops he grows. "He enters into death yearly," Berry writes, "and comes back rejoicing." As you read the poem, pay attention to the imagery Berry uses: he describes the soil as a "divine drug," and he likens the farmer's thought to "pass[ing] along the row ends like a mole" and his sentences to "a vine clinging in the sunlight." How do these descriptions give a voice and overall feeling to the poem? In what ways is the farmer's life changed or affected by his farming? What is his relationship to nature? Does the poem provide a critique of modern city life?

The Grower of Trees, the gardener, the man born to farming,
whose hands reach into the ground and sprout
to him the soil is a divine drug. He enters into death
yearly, and comes back rejoicing. . . .

Read the entire poem at On Being: www.onbeing.org/program/poetry-creatures/feature/man-born-farming/1419.

America, the Beautiful

KATHARINE LEE BATES

Like “The Man Born to Farming,” Katharine Lee Bates’ “Pikes Peak” (better known as the song “America, the Beautiful”) evokes pastoral pride. The poem was inspired by the sights Bates (1859–1929) had seen on a train ride to and from Colorado Springs, especially by the vista she beheld from the top of Pikes Peak.

As she explained, “Near the top we had to leave the wagon and go the rest of the way on mules. I was very tired. But when I saw the view, I felt great joy. All the wonder of America seemed displayed there, with the sea-like expanse.” Bates’ poem, published on July 4, 1895, was eventually combined with music written by church organist and choir-master Samuel A. Ward (1847–1903), becoming popular around 1910.

Like the other patriotic songs, “America the Beautiful” is mostly known by its first stanza, which begins by celebrating America’s natural gifts and ends with a plea (or is it a prayer?) for brotherhood. What do the other stanzas celebrate, and what do they call for? How would you summarize the teaching and ideals of this poem? How does singing this song make you feel?

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

O beautiful for pilgrim feet
Whose stern impassion’d stress
A thoroughfare of freedom beat
Across the wilderness.
America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law.

O beautiful for heroes prov’d
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved
And mercy more than life.
America! America!
May God thy gold refine
Till all success be nobleness

And ev'ry gain divine.

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears.
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea.

Concord Hymn

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

On April 19, 1775, the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the first military engagements of the Revolutionary War, were fought. These battles would inspire Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous poem, "Concord Hymn," which he wrote for the July 4, 1837 dedication of a memorial obelisk commemorating the fight at Concord.

On April 14, British General Thomas Gage received orders to destroy a suspected weapons cache that the rebellious colonists had in Concord, a village 20 miles north of Boston. Following these orders, Gage sent troops toward Concord early on the 19th, but the colonists had already been alerted. Paul Revere famously rode into the countryside to warn residents of the British troop movement, and the militia at Lexington gathered on the town green. British regulars who had been sent out ahead of the main contingent were the first to encounter the colonists whose commander, John Parker, ordered his men to disperse to avoid a confrontation. His orders were either misheard or ignored as shortly thereafter, a shot rang out, and the British troops began to fire their guns, killing eight militiamen.

The British then moved to Concord, the site of the suspected weapons stockpile. Once in Concord, the British were unable to defeat the colonists. Outnumbered and outmaneuvered, the Redcoats quickly retreated south, back to Boston. Today, each April, Massachusetts celebrates the Battles of Lexington and Concord on Patriot's Day.

Emerson (1803–82), a native of Boston, had personal ties to the Battle of Concord: his grandfather, William Emerson, was a chaplain and had helped organize the Minutemen, while his family watched much of the battle from their home—the Old Manse—which overlooked the spot where the North Bridge stood over the Concord River and the Minutemen faced down regulars of the British Army. At the July 4th ceremony, his poem was sung by a choir to the tune of the familiar hymn "Old Hundredth."

Why is this poem called a hymn? Compare the first two stanzas, picturing the changes to the battlefield described by the poet. What has happened to the battlefield since the "shot heard around the world"? Why is the dedication of the monument (the "votive stone" in the third stanza) necessary? How can memory "redeem" the Minutemen's deeds at Concord? Is erecting a memorial enough to preserve that memory? What is the "Spirit" that moved the Minutemen at Concord? What is the speaker asking the Spirit to do? How is national memory created?

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard round the world.

The foe long since in silence slept;
Alike the conqueror silent sleeps;

And Time the ruined bridge has swept
Down the dark stream which seaward creeps.

On this green bank, by this soft stream,
We set to-day a votive stone;
That memory may their deed redeem,
When, like our sires, our sons are gone.

Spirit, that made those heroes dare,
To die, and leave their children free,
Bid Time and Nature gently spare
The shaft we raise to them and thee.

Paul Revere's Ride

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

On April 18, 1775, Paul Revere, a Boston silversmith, was asked by Joseph Warren to ride to Lexington, Massachusetts to warn Samuel Adams and John Hancock that the British troops were marching to arrest them. After crossing the Charles River by rowboat, he rode to Lexington, alerting patriots along the way. Revere got word to Adams and Hancock, but was captured by a British Army patrol on his way to Concord. Revere was soon freed, and continued to aid the American cause.

"Paul Revere's Ride" (1860), one of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's best known poems, was published just days before the start of the Civil War. It was first printed (with six lines missing) in the Boston Transcript on December 18, 1860. (The complete version later appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in January 1861.) The poem took a Revolutionary War figure largely forgotten by 1860 and turned him into a national hero. Although historians debate the extent to which Longfellow's poem accurately depicts Paul Revere's role in the Revolution, both the poem and its subject continue to be widely celebrated today.

*Longfellow (1807–82) was a celebrated American poet of the 19th century. Born in Portland, Maine to a well-to-do family, he began writing poetry at an early age: his first poem, "The Battle of Lovell's Pond," was published in the Portland Gazette when he was 13. After attending Bowdoin College (where he became good friends with Nathaniel Hawthorne) and studying in Europe, Longfellow taught first at Bowdoin and later at Harvard College, where he oversaw the university's modern language program. Longfellow won critical renown for his first poetry collections *Voices in the Night* (1839) and *Ballads and Poems* (1841). In 1842, at the urging of his friend Charles Sumner, he directed his poetic talents to the abolitionist cause and published *Poems on Slavery*. In 1884, he was honored with a bust in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey, the first time an American had been accorded that tribute.*

Why does Longfellow address his poem to "my children"? Why should they remember Revere and his midnight ride in particular, given that there were other riders that night? Compare Longfellow's account with the true story of the ride. Why might Longfellow have changed certain details or events? Consider the repeated imagery of rest, death, and awakening throughout the poem. Who or what is being awakened in each instance? Note the shift from past tense in the earlier stanzas to the future tense (shall echo, will waken) in the final stanza. Who is Longfellow now addressing? What is the "word that shall echo forevermore"? What is the "midnight message of Paul Revere"?

Listen my children and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.

He said to his friend, "If the British march
By land or sea from the town to-night,
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch
Of the North Church tower as a signal light,—
One if by land, and two if by sea;
And I on the opposite shore will be,
Ready to ride and spread the alarm
Through every Middlesex village and farm,
For the country folk to be up and to arm."

Then he said "Good-night!" and with muffled oar
Silently rowed to the Charlestown shore,
Just as the moon rose over the bay,
Where swinging wide at her moorings lay
The Somerset, British man-of-war;
A phantom ship, with each mast and spar
Across the moon like a prison bar,
And a huge black hulk, that was magnified
By its own reflection in the tide.

Meanwhile, his friend through alley and street
Wanders and watches, with eager ears,
Till in the silence around him he hears
The muster of men at the barrack door,
The sound of arms, and the tramp of feet,
And the measured tread of the grenadiers,
Marching down to their boats on the shore.

Then he climbed the tower of the Old North Church,
By the wooden stairs, with stealthy tread,
To the belfry chamber overhead,
And startled the pigeons from their perch
On the sombre rafters, that round him made
Masses and moving shapes of shade,—
By the trembling ladder, steep and tall,
To the highest window in the wall,
Where he paused to listen and look down
A moment on the roofs of the town
And the moonlight flowing over all.

Beneath, in the churchyard, lay the dead,
In their night encampment on the hill,
Wrapped in silence so deep and still
That he could hear, like a sentinel's tread,
The watchful night-wind, as it went
Creeping along from tent to tent,

And seeming to whisper, "All is well!"
A moment only he feels the spell
Of the place and the hour, and the secret dread
Of the lonely belfry and the dead;
For suddenly all his thoughts are bent
On a shadowy something far away,
Where the river widens to meet the bay,—
A line of black that bends and floats
On the rising tide, like a bridge of boats.

Meanwhile, impatient to mount and ride,
Booted and spurred, with a heavy stride,
On the opposite shore walked Paul Revere.
Now he patted his horse's side,
Now he gazed at the landscape far and near,
Then, impetuous, stamped the earth,
And turned and tightened his saddle girth;
But mostly he watched with eager search
The belfry tower of the Old North Church,
As it rose above the graves on the hill,
Lonely and spectral and sombre and still.
And lo! as he looks, on the belfry's height
A glimmer, and then a gleam of light!
He springs to the saddle, the bridle he turns,
But lingers and gazes, till full on his sight
A second lamp in the belfry burns.

A hurry of hoofs in a village street,
A shape in the moonlight, a bulk in the dark,
And beneath, from the pebbles, in passing, a spark
Struck out by a steed flying fearless and fleet;
That was all! And yet, through the gloom and the light,
The fate of a nation was riding that night;
And the spark struck out by that steed, in his flight,
Kindled the land into flame with its heat.
He has left the village and mounted the steep,
And beneath him, tranquil and broad and deep,
Is the Mystic, meeting the ocean tides;
And under the alders that skirt its edge,
Now soft on the sand, now loud on the ledge,
Is heard the tramp of his steed as he rides.

It was twelve by the village clock
When he crossed the bridge into Medford town.
He heard the crowing of the cock,
And the barking of the farmer's dog,

And felt the damp of the river fog,
That rises after the sun goes down.

It was one by the village clock,
When he galloped into Lexington.
He saw the gilded weathercock
Swim in the moonlight as he passed,
And the meeting-house windows, black and bare,
Gaze at him with a spectral glare,
As if they already stood aghast
At the bloody work they would look upon.

It was two by the village clock,
When he came to the bridge in Concord town.
He heard the bleating of the flock,
And the twitter of birds among the trees,
And felt the breath of the morning breeze
Blowing over the meadows brown.
And one was safe and asleep in his bed
Who at the bridge would be first to fall,
Who that day would be lying dead,
Pierced by a British musket ball.

You know the rest. In the books you have read
How the British Regulars fired and fled,—
How the farmers gave them ball for ball,
From behind each fence and farmyard wall,
Chasing the redcoats down the lane,
Then crossing the fields to emerge again
Under the trees at the turn of the road,
And only pausing to fire and load.

So through the night rode Paul Revere;
And so through the night went his cry of alarm
To every Middlesex village and farm,—
A cry of defiance, and not of fear,
A voice in the darkness, a knock at the door,
And a word that shall echo for evermore!
For, borne on the night-wind of the Past,
Through all our history, to the last,
In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
The people will waken and listen to hear
The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,
And the midnight message of Paul Revere.

The Vow of Washington

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

On April 30, 1789, George Washington, standing on the balcony of Federal Hall on Wall Street in New York, took his oath of office as the first President of the United States. This poem, composed by John Greenleaf Whittier, was read on April 30, 1889, at the centennial celebration of Washington's first taking of the oath of presidential office.

Whittier (1807–92) was an American poet and ardent abolitionist. Raised in a devout Quaker family in Haverhill, Massachusetts, Whittier published his first poem in 1826 in William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper, the Newburyport Free Press, and quickly established himself in abolitionist circles. Though he published his first collection of short stories in 1831, it was not until his first volume of poetry, Snow-Bound, appeared in 1866 that Whittier achieved widespread fame. After the Civil War, Whittier moved away from social advocacy and his later poetry focused on nature, religion, and rural life.

How does Whittier describe the scene and national mood? What was the vow of Washington, and why did "freedom's great experiment" succeed? How does the poet deal with the Civil War in relation to Washington's vow? Why is Washington's name "our Union-bond" and why should we "take on our lips the old Centennial vow"?

The sword was sheathed: in April's sun
Lay green the fields by Freedom won;
And severed sections, weary of debates,
Joined hands at last and were United States.

O City sitting by the Sea!
How proud the day that dawned on thee,
When the new era, long desired, began,
And, in its need, the hour had found the man!

One thought the cannon salvos spoke,
The resonant bell-tower's vibrant stroke,
The voiceful streets, the plaudit-echoing halls,
And prayer and hymn borne heavenward from St. Paul's!

How felt the land in every part
The strong throb of a nation's heart,
As its great leader gave, with reverent awe,
His pledge to Union, Liberty, and Law!

That pledge the heavens above him heard,
That vow the sleep of centuries stirred;
In world-wide wonder listening peoples bent

Their gaze on Freedom's great experiment.

Could it succeed? Of honor sold
And hopes deceived all history told.
Above the wrecks that strewed the mournful past,
Was the long dream of ages true at last?

Thank God! the people's choice was just,
The one man equal to his trust,
Wise beyond lore, and without weakness good,
Calm in the strength of flawless rectitude!

His rule of justice, order, peace,
Made possible the world's release;
Taught prince and serf that power is but a trust,
And rule, alone, which serves the ruled, is just;

That Freedom generous is, but strong
In hate of fraud and selfish wrong,
Pretence that turns her holy truths to lies,
And lawless license masking in her guise.

Land of his love! with one glad voice
Let thy great sisterhood rejoice;
A century's suns o'er thee have risen and set,
And, God be praised, we are one nation yet.

And still we trust the years to be
Shall prove his hope was destiny,
Leaving our flag, with all its added stars,
Unrent by faction and unstained by wars.

Lo! where with patient toil he nursed
And trained the new-set plant at first,
The widening branches of a stately tree
Stretch from the sunrise to the sunset sea.

And in its broad and sheltering shade,
Sitting with none to make afraid,
Were we now silent, through each mighty limb,
The winds of heaven would sing the praise of him.

Our first and best!—his ashes lie
Beneath his own Virginian sky.
Forgive, forget, O true and just and brave,
The storm that swept above thy sacred grave.

For, ever in the awful strife
And dark hours of the nation's life,
Through the fierce tumult pierced his warning word,
Their father's voice his erring children heard.

The change for which he prayed and sought
In that sharp agony was wrought;
No partial interest draws its alien line
'Twixt North and South, the cypress and the pine!

One people now, all doubt beyond,
His name shall be our Union-bond;
We lift our hands to Heaven, and here and now.
Take on our lips the old Centennial vow.

For rule and trust must needs be ours;
Chooser and chosen both are powers
Equal in service as in rights; the claim
Of Duty rests on each and all the same.

Then let the sovereign millions, where
Our banner floats in sun and air,
From the warm palm-lands to Alaska's cold,
Repeat with us the pledge a century old!

Old Ironsides

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES SR.

The USS Constitution was one of the original six frigates of the United States Navy, commissioned by the Naval Act of 1794. It was given the nickname of “Old Ironsides” after its victorious naval battle with the HMS Guerriere during the War of 1812.

In September 1830, the Boston Daily Advertiser announced that the Navy planned to dismantle the historic warship. Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., a prominent Cambridge physician and author, read about the ship’s fate, and immediately wrote the poem “Old Ironsides” to protest its scrapping. The poem was published in the Advertiser the very next day, and was soon reprinted by papers in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. Holmes’ poem, and the resulting public outcry, saved the ship from destruction, and it is now the oldest commissioned ship in the world still afloat.

What reasons does Holmes give for preserving the ship? Why is the USS Constitution, in particular, deserving of special honors? Does she hold a unique place in American memory? (Note that the five other frigates of the original six were broken up.) Why does Holmes argue that it would be better to sink the ship than allow it to be scrapped? In what ways would this be a more fitting demise? Why do you think this poem was successful in arousing public sentiment against the ship’s dismantling? Do you think the USS Constitution deserved saving? Why or why not?

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!
Long has it waved on high,
And many an eye has danced to see
That banner in the sky;
Beneath it rung the battle shout,
And burst the cannon’s roar;—
The meteor of the ocean air
Shall sweep the clouds no more.

Her deck, once red with heroes’ blood,
Where knelt the vanquished foe,
When winds were hurrying o’er the flood,
And waves were white below,
No more shall feel the victor’s tread,
Or know the conquered knee;—
The harpies of the shore shall pluck
The eagle of the sea!

Oh, better that her shattered bulk
Should sink beneath the wave;
Her thunders shook the mighty deep,

And there should be her grave;
Nail to the mast her holy flag,
Set every threadbare sail,
And give her to the god of storms,
The lightning and the gale!

The Star-Spangled Banner

FRANCIS SCOTT KEY

Did you know that our national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” was first published as a poem titled the “Defence of Fort McHenry”? Francis Scott Key (1779–1843), Washington lawyer and amateur poet, was inspired to pen the poem by the unlikely success of American troops resisting the British attack on Baltimore’s Fort McHenry on September 13, 1814, two days after the burning of the capital.

Nearly all American school-children are taught the words of Key’s first stanza, and for the rest of their lives they hear it sung on patriotic holidays and at sporting events. Rarely, however, do we attend to the words. Many whose hearts are stirred by hearing the anthem sung probably could not tell you what it literally means or what Key intended to convey.

What is the meaning of the poem’s opening question: “O! say can you see by the dawn’s early light / What so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming”? How does it differ from the question that concludes the first stanza: “O! say does that star-spangled banner yet wave / O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?” Why, according to the song, is the waving banner important? Why sing a song about a flag? The last stanza turns from the present war to the future. For what does it call? What relation does the song suggest between the flag and the motto “In God is our trust”? How does singing the song make you feel? Does thinking about the anthem’s words alter those feelings?

O! say can you see by the dawn’s early light
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming;
Whose broad stripes and bright stars thro’ the perilous fight,
O’er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?
And the rockets’ red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.
O! say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

On the shore, dimly seen through the mists of the deep,
Where the foe’s haughty host in dread silence reposes,
What is that which the breeze, o’er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the morning’s first beam,
In full glory reflected now shines in the stream:
’Tis the star-spangled banner! O! long may it wave
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle’s confusion
A home and a country should leave us no more!
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps’ pollution.

No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave:
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

O! thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand
Between their loved home and the war's desolation!
Blest with vict'ry and peace, may the heav'n rescued land
Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation.
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto: "In God is our trust."
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

The Battle Hymn of the Republic

WORDS BY JULIA WARD HOWE

“The Battle Hymn of the Republic” was written in 1861 as an abolitionist song by Julia Ward Howe (1819–1910), a prominent American abolitionist and social activist. While witnessing a review of Union troops in Washington, D.C., Howe heard the Union army marching song “John Brown’s Body” set to a tune written by William Steffe (1830–90). The stirring tune inspired her to write new lyrics: this poem came to her in the middle of the night and she scrawled the verses in the dark, using an old stump of a pen. It became a popular Union song during the rest of the Civil War and after.

The song is called a hymn: is there a difference between a hymn and an anthem? What is a battle hymn? The song seems to offer an interpretation of the Civil War: what is its teaching? Other songs collected here also make reference to God and speak of His relation to our national affairs: how does this one differ from the others? The second-to-last line of stanza five originally read, “As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free”: what do you make of the substitution of “live” for “die”? How can what was a partisan Union song become a song of the entire nation? How does singing this song make you feel?

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

(Chorus)

Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Glory, glory Hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps,
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps:
His day is marching on.

(Chorus)

Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Glory, glory Hallelujah!
His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:
“As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,

Since God is marching on."

(Chorus)

Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Since God is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat:
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.

(Chorus)

Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:
As he died to make men holy, let us die² to make men free,
While God is marching on.

(Chorus)

Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Glory, glory Hallelujah!
While God is marching on.

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,
He is wisdom to the mighty, He is succour³ to the brave;
So the world shall be His footstool, and the soul of Time⁴ His slave,
Our God is marching on.

(Chorus)

Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Glory, glory Hallelujah!
Our God is marching on.

² In today's version, "live" is usually substituted for the original "die."

³ In today's version, "honor" is usually substituted for the original "succour."

⁴ In today's version, "wrong" is usually substituted for the original "Time."

The Master

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

Edwin Arlington Robinson's 1909 tribute to Abraham Lincoln, "The Master," takes up the theme of national memory. In the poem, Robinson, a lover of irony, recalls the ridicule Lincoln once endured in light of Americans' newfound appreciation for their 16th president after his successful prosecution of the Civil War and tragic assassination.

One of the most prolific poets of the last century, Robinson (1869–1935) was born in Head Tide, Maine. Robinson's father wanted him to become a businessman or a scientist. In 1891, Robinson left Maine to study at Harvard University, where his desire to write was only strengthened. Several of his initial poems were published in the Harvard Advocate. For the most part, however, the literary community in Boston did not accept his work, and after many rejections, Robinson eventually paid a press to publish his first collection of poems, The Torrent and The Night Before, in 1896 (later republished as The Children of the Night). Robinson, requiring a more substantial and dependable salary, took a job in the New York subway system. Later, after President Theodore Roosevelt gave Robinson's 1902 collection, Captain Craig and Other Poems, a positive review, he received a job offer in the New York Customs Office, courtesy of the president. Over the next several decades, Robinson had great success, beginning in 1916 when he completed The Man against the Sky. In the 1920s, he received the Pulitzer Prize three separate times, in 1922, 1925, and 1928. He died in 1935 in the midst of completing yet another one of his works.

Who is speaking in the poem? How does the speaker(s) describe Lincoln? What kind of leader was he? Why did "we" initially "sneer" at and "revile" him? What did "we" learn about Lincoln that caused us to change our opinion of him? Might Lincoln's own qualities have contributed to our misunderstanding of him? If yes, how so? Do "we" have a clearer understanding of Lincoln than before?

A flying word from here and there
Has sown the name at which we sneered,
But soon the name was everywhere,
To be reviled and then revered:
A presence to be loved and feared,
We cannot hide it, or deny
That we, the gentlemen who jeered,
May be forgotten by and by.

He came when days were perilous
And hearts of men were sore beguiled;
And having made his note of us,
He pondered and was reconciled.
Was ever master yet so mild
As he, and so untamable?

We doubted, even when he smiled,
Not knowing what he knew so well.

He knew that undeceiving fate
Would shame us whom he served unsought;
He knew that he must wince and wait—
The jest of those for whom he fought;
He knew devoutly what he thought
Of us and of our ridicule;
He knew that we must all be taught
Like little children in a school.

We gave a glamour to the task
That he encountered and saw through,
But little of us did he ask,
And little did we ever do.
And what appears if we review
The season when we railed and chaffed?
It is the face of one who knew
That we were learning while we laughed.

The face that in our vision feels
Again the venom that we flung,
Transfigured to the world reveals
The vigilance to which we clung.
Shrewd, hallowed, harassed, and among
The mysteries that are untold,
The face we see was never young,
Nor could it ever have been old.

For he, to whom we had applied
Our shopman's test of age and worth,
Was elemental when he died,
As he was ancient at his birth:
The saddest among kings of earth,
Bowed with a galling crown, this man
Met rancor with a cryptic mirth,
Laconic—and Olympian.

The love, the grandeur, and the fame
Are bounded by the world alone;
The calm, the smoldering, and the flame
Of awful patience were his own:
With him they are forever flown
Past all our fond self-shadowings,
Wherewith we cumber the Unknown

As with inept Icarian wings.

For we were not as other men:

'Twas ours to soar and his to see.

But we are coming down again,

And we shall come down pleasantly;

Nor shall we longer disagree

On what it is to be sublime,

But flourish in our perigee

And have one Titan at a time.

Frederick Douglass

ROBERT HAYDEN

Robert Hayden's 1947 sonnet "Frederick Douglass" pays tribute to a contemporary of Abraham Lincoln. Like the last selection, it asks why, and how, great men should be remembered.

Born Asa Bundy Sheffey, poet Robert Hayden (1913–80) grew up in a poor neighborhood in Detroit called Paradise Valley. Unable to play sports because of severe myopia, he spent much of his time reading. After graduating from high school in 1932, Hayden attended Detroit City College on scholarship, but left still needing one credit to complete his degree. He worked as a writer for several years at the Detroit Branch of the WPA Writers project, researching African American history. In 1940, Hayden published his first book of poetry, Heart-Shape in the Dust. Soon after, he began a graduate program in English literature at the University of Maryland, where he studied with W. H. Auden. Despite criticism from other African American writers, Hayden refused to self-identify as a black writer, believing that poetry should not be judged by racial or political criteria. Hayden received the Academy of American Poets Fellowship in 1975 and became the first African American writer to be appointed as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (now known as the Poet Laureate) in 1976.

According to the poem, why, and how, should Frederick Douglass be remembered? What is the ultimate nature of his legacy? Do you agree with the poet that Douglass is better remembered by the lives of future generations than by "statues' rhetoric . . . legends and poems and wreaths of bronze"? Give your reasons. If you do agree, why then do you think Hayden writes a poem paying tribute to Douglass? How can liberty be a "beautiful and terrible thing"? How does it change to the "beautiful, needful thing"?

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,⁵
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians

Read the entire poem at the Poetry Foundation: www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175757.

⁵ Diastole is the period of time when the heart refills with blood after systole (contraction).

The New Colossus

EMMA LAZARUS

Born in New York City, Emma Lazarus (1849–87) was one of the first prominent Jewish American poets. She is most famous for her 1883 sonnet, “The New Colossus,” which describes the hope of immigrants looking for a new life in the United States. In 1902, 15 years after her death, excerpts from the poem were inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, immortalizing Lazarus’ contribution to American literature.

Lazarus was a Sephardic Jew, a descendant of people expelled from Spain centuries before. She grew up in an affluent family, dividing her time between New York City and Newport, Rhode Island. She was educated by private tutors with whom she studied literature, classical and modern languages, and music. As a young woman, she began her poetry career by translating German poems, and later self-published her first collection, Poems and Translations: Written Between the Ages of Fourteen and Sixteen in 1866. Her precocious writings attracted the attention of fellow poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, to whom she dedicated her 1871 book, Admetus and Other Poems. At the height of her career in the 1880s, Lazarus published some of her most well-known works including Songs of a Semite, a collection of poems that explored her Jewish heritage. She also became a tireless advocate for disenfranchised immigrants, who were then coming to America by the thousands.

“The New Colossus” was written to raise funds for the pedestal on which Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi’s Statue of Liberty would stand. Bartholdi had envisioned the statue as a symbol of “liberty enlightening the world;” Lazarus’ poem reimagined the statue as a beacon of hope and a symbol of freedom from Old World oppression.

The first eight lines of the poem compare the Statue of Liberty to the ancient Colossus of Rhodes. How are the two statues different? Why does Lazarus draw the comparison? What does it tell us about the Statue of Liberty (and, by extension, America)? What is the meaning of the statue’s speech? Why does the statue extend a special welcome to the poor and oppressed? Why do you think this poem was successful in raising money for the statue’s pedestal?

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

