

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

KATHARINE LEE BATES
1895, 1911

TEXT (1911)

- (1) 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.
- (2) O beautiful for pilgrim feet,
Whose stern, impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness!
America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law!
- (3) O beautiful for heroes proved
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 every gain divine!
- (4) 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!

HISTORY

Katharine Lee Bates wrote “America the Beautiful” in 1893 and then revised it twice, combining the poem with music composed by Samuel Wald in the final version. Bates wrote the poem while traveling across the country and incorporated images from places she visited, including the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition (Chicago World’s Fair) and Pike’s Peak.

Bates was a social worker and advocate for social justice. She was deeply involved in the settlement house movement, through which educated women lived among and tried to improve the lives of poorer people. She was also an avid suffragist.

The period during which the poem was written coincides with the contentious transition from the Gilded Age to the Progressive movement. The former was filled with expansionist pride, while the latter denounced national problems. It was a period of growth and of turmoil for the country.

The poem combines the themes of the country’s grandeur and need for moral improvement through social change. The first and fourth stanzas celebrate America’s physical beauty. The lesser-known second and third stanzas raise questions about national power and success. Bates addresses the challenges of loving an imperfect nation experiencing political corruption and nativism sparked by increasing immigration.

PRE-SESSION QUESTION

What comes to mind when you read each of the four stanzas?



VALUES TO APPRECIATE IN THE TEXT

- Physical beauty
- Brotherhood
- Moral aspiration

INTRODUCTORY ICE-BREAKER

Name one way that our community exhibits either physical beauty or moral aspiration.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Begin with the pre-session question: What comes to your mind when you read each of the four stanzas?
- When people speak today of “mending America’s flaws,” (stanza 2) do you hear a connection with America’s beauty? How does such a connection affect your motivation for mending?
- What does nobleness (stanza 3) mean to you, and how should it affect the ways we use national power?
- What emotions do the music to the words “America, America” reinforce in each stanza?

POSSIBLE GROUP ACTIVITIES

- Listen to Ray Charles’s performance of “America the Beautiful” in 1972 on the Dick Cavett Show at the height of the Vietnam War protests. Charles began with the third stanza, which praises the sacrifices of soldiers. Recall or reconstruct the visions of patriotism that animated soldiers and protesters during that time. Compare and contrast these visions. To what extent or in what ways are these visions applicable today?
- Write a new stanza depicting America today.

RELATED SCRIPTURE

CLOSING REFLECTION QUESTION

How can the physical and moral beauty of your environment help inspire you to better your community?