

Ralph Waldo Emerson handout



Concord Hymn

This poem commemorates the Battle of Concord, fought on land owned by Emerson's stepgrandfather. Its famous line, "And fired the shot heard round the world," refers to the minutemen's repulsion of the redcoats on April 19, 1775. The last stanza of this poem is a prayer. How does it compare with the concluding prayer of an Edward Taylor poem?

Sung* at the Completion of the Battle Monument, July 4, 1837

Sung: to the tune of
"Old Hundred"

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.

flood: poetic term for
river

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.

5

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

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votive: offered as an
expression of
gratitude
sires: fathers

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.

15

shaft: the monument

Brahma

This poem puzzled many of Emerson's contemporary readers. "If you tell them to say Jehovah instead of Brahma," Emerson told his daughter, "they will not feel any perplexity." The persistent oriental strain in Emerson's work is very much evident in this poem. To the Hindu, Brahma is the supreme soul of the universe, from which all things originate, to which all things return, and in which all things are reconciled. What does Emerson imply in the last stanza concerning the relationship between Jehovah and Brahma?

If the red slayer* think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

slayer: personification
of death

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

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They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin* sings.

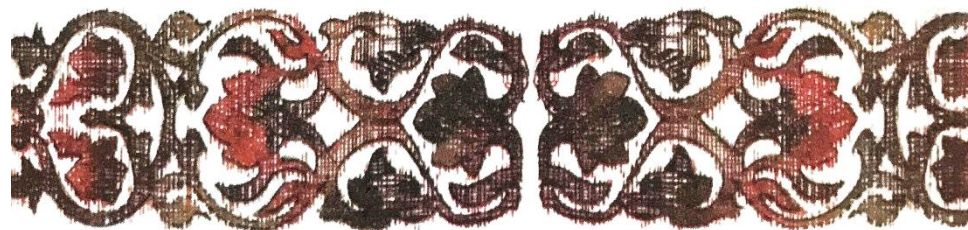
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Brahmin: a member of
the highest caste in
the Hindu religion

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven,*
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

15

sacred Seven: the seven
most revered
saints in Hinduism



Hamatreya

This poem is Emerson's New England version of a section of the Vishnu Purana, a Hindu sacred book. The title of the poem probably derives from "Maitreya," a Hindu god named in Emerson's source, or from a Greek term translated "Earth-Mother." Instead of speaking of great kings who have disappeared with their kingdoms, Emerson speaks here of New England farmers who foolishly believe that they possess the land they farm. This poem compares favorably with Thoreau's treatment of land ownership at the beginning of Chapter 2 of Walden: "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For." Notice that lines 1 and 3 of this poem (1847) anticipate the cataloging technique of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass (1855). Notice also that there are at least two voices in Emerson's poem. Whose are they?

Bulkeley, Hunt, Willard, Hosmer, Meriam, Flint,*
 Possessed the land which rendered to their toil
 Hay, corn, roots, hemp, flax,* apples, wool and wood.
 Each of these landlords walked amidst his farm,
 Saying, "'Tis mine, my children's and my name's.
 How sweet the west wind sounds in my own trees!
 How graceful climb those shadows on my hill!
 I fancy these pure waters and the flags*
 Know me, as does my dog: we sympathize;
 And, I affirm, my actions smack of the soil."

*Bulkeley . . . Flint: the first settlers in the Concord area
 flax: a plant that yields the fiber for making linen*

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flags: a variety of iris, growing in moist places

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fond: foolish

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Where are these men? Asleep beneath their grounds:
 And strangers, fond* as they, their furrows plough.
 Earth laughs in flowers, to see her boastful boys
 Earth-proud, proud of the earth which is not theirs;
 Who steer the plough, but cannot steer their feet
 Clear of the grave.
 They added ridge to valley, brook to pond,
 And sighed for all that bounded their domain;
 "This suits me for a pasture; that's my park;
 We must have clay, lime, gravel, granite-ledge,
 And misty lowland, where to go for peat.
 The land is well,—lies fairly to the south.
 'Tis good, when you have crossed the sea and back,
 To find the sitfast acres where you left them."
 Ah! the hot owner sees not Death, who adds
 Him to his land, a lump of mould the more.
 Hear what the Earth says:

Earth-Song

"Mine and yours;
 Mine, not yours.
 Earth endures;
 Stars abide—
 Shine down in the old sea;
 Old are the shores;
 But where are old men?
 I who have seen much,
 Such have I never seen.

30

35

"The lawyer's deed
 Ran sure,
 In tail,*
 To them, and to their heirs
 Who shall succeed,
 Without fail,
 Forevermore.

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tail: entail: a restricted line of inheritance

"Here is the land,
 Shaggy with wood,
 With its old valley,
 Mound and flood.
 But the heritors?—
 Fled like the flood's foam.
 The lawyer, and the laws,
 And the kingdom,
 Clean swept herefrom.

45

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"They called me theirs,
 Who so controlled me;
 Yet every one
 Wished to stay, and is gone,
 How am I theirs,
 If they cannot hold me,
 But I hold them?"

55

When I heard the Earth-song
 I was no longer brave;
 My avarice* cooled
 Like lust in the chill of the grave.

60

avarice: greed