



America the Beautiful

Katharine Lee Bates (1895, 1911)

Katharine Lee Bates, a white New Englander, was a poet and a professor of English literature at Wellesley College, a pioneering institution of higher education for women. Although she also published anti-imperialist and anti-war poetry (under the pseudonym James Lincoln), Bates's most famous work is the poem that became the patriotic anthem "America the Beautiful." She drafted the poem in 1893 during a visit to Colorado; it was first published in 1895 in a Congregational periodical. The poem soon became popular as a song, prompting Bates to revise it.

As can be seen in the side-by-side comparison below, the poem's plea for national reform is stronger in the first published version of 1895 than in the final version, reproduced here from a 1911 collection of Bates's poetry. (Still, white American socialist Upton Sinclair was moved to include the final version, with Bates's approval, in an anthology of "social protest" literature that he published in 1915.) Present-day readers may be inclined to interpret the closing line of the 1895 version as racial, but that was likely not Bates's intention. Whether her imagery has unintended racial implications is a different question.

1895 version

O beautiful for halcyon skies,
for amber waves of grain,
for purple mountain majesties
above the enameled plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
till souls wax fair as earth and air
and music-hearted sea!

O beautiful for pilgrim feet,
whose stern, impassioned stress
a thoroughfare for freedom beat
across the wilderness!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
till paths be wrought through wilds of thought
by pilgrim foot and knee!

O beautiful for glory-tale
of liberating strife,
when once and twice, for man's avail,
men lavished precious life!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
till selfish gain no longer stain
the banner of the free!

1911 version

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, 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!

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!

1895 version (*cont.*)

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
 till nobler men keep once again
 thy whiter jubilee!

1911 version (*cont.*)

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!

Sources:

Katharine Lee Bates, “America,” *Congregationalist*, July 4, 1895, 17. Digital scan available via ProQuest, American Periodicals Series II. Public domain in the United States because published in the United States before 1923.

Katharine Lee Bates, *America the Beautiful and Other Poems* (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Co., 1911), 3-4, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t7br8nv10>. Public domain.

See also: Katharine Lee Bates, “America the Beautiful,” in *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest*, ed. Upton Sinclair (New York City: Upton Sinclair, 1915), 633-634, <https://archive.org/details/cryforjusticea00sinc>. Free eBook from the Internet Archive.

Edited and formatted as parallel columns by John-Charles Duffy. Indenting of lines in the source publications omitted. Capital letters at the beginning of lines converted to lowercase for readability. Comma usage emended, most notably the insertion of commas around the phrase *beyond the years* to clarify the sentence structure. The lowercasing of *pilgrim* and *patriot* replicates the usage of both source publications. The lowercasing of *his*, referring to God, in the 1895 version, but the capitalizing of that same pronoun in the 1911 version, replicates the sources.

This edited, parallel-column presentation of the two versions of Bates’s poem is intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite one or more of the source publications listed above.



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