

America the Beautiful – Katherine Lee Bates

- (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

Katherine Lee Bates (1859-1929) 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

Discussion/thought Questions

- 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 does the music to the words “America, America” reinforce in each stanza?
- How can the physical and moral beauty of your environment help inspire you to better your community?