



Text

*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!*

History

Immigration has long sparked controversy in America. While 19th century Americans welcomed those who, like them, were Northern European farmers or artisans, they opposed admitting impoverished Southern Europeans, like Italians, and equally impoverished Eastern European Jews. This xenophobic period also saw the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the end of Reconstruction, the rise of Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan, and the persecution of Native Americans across the continent.



Written in 1883, “The New Colossus” asserts that America will be different from ancient empires, that it will welcome even the poorest newcomers: “your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” That, however, was not the message that the French builders of the Statue of Liberty intended. Rather, they saw it as a celebration of the Union victory in the Civil War and gave it to America to mark a common commitment to individual liberty.

Lazarus thus, with a mere 14 lines of poetry, subverts the original intent of the Statue of Liberty. Perhaps due to her family’s origins among the first Jewish immigrants to North America in 1654, or her work helping more recent Eastern European Jewish immigrants, she transformed this massive civic project into a symbol of open-armed welcome to immigrants arriving from across the Atlantic.

Values to Appreciate in the Text

- Shared humanity
- Freedom
- Opportunity

Questions for Pondering

- What does the Statue of Liberty mean to you?
- From where did your family come before North America?
- How do you react to Lazarus’s description of “huddled masses” and “wretched refuse”?
- How does your family’s immigration story influence your interpretation of the poem?
- How does immigration or the Statue of Liberty fit into your understanding of the American narrative? ...and our Christian history and values?