



The Power of Music and Poetry

BACKGROUND

Shaking the World

*Not for thyself, but for the slave
Thy words of thunder shook the world;
No selfish griefs or hatred gave
The strength wherewith thy bolts were hurled....*

*Wherever wrong shall right deny
Or suffering spirits urge their plea,
Be thine a voice to smite the lie,
A hand to set the captive free!*

—poem written in 1879 by John Greenleaf Whittier as a tribute to William Lloyd Garrison

Music and poetry played a central role in the antislavery movement—at meetings, fairs, conferences, and special events. Susan Paul’s Juvenile Choir, featuring gifted students from one of Boston’s segregated primary schools, performed regularly at New England Anti-Slavery Society meetings. According to an eyewitness, the choir’s performance of songs about freedom, the legacies of bondage, and the evils of colonization delivered a highly effective political message.

William Lloyd Garrison, an enthusiastic poet, frequently shared his sonnets and song lyrics with readers of *The Liberator*. In addition to publishing his own works, Garrison actively supported other noted writers, such as Charlotte Forten, Walt Whitman, and James Russell Lowell.

“I AM AN ABOLITIONIST” SONG

In Focus

1. What is “the monster” that Garrison refers to in these lyrics? What action does he pledge to take against this monster?
2. Based on these lyrics, what can you conclude about the traits and values of abolitionists? Make a list on the board.

Activities and Investigations

1. Extend the message. Working with a partner, come up with one or more additional verses that could be incorporated into “I Am An Abolitionist.” Be sure to follow the rhythm and rhyme scheme that Garrison established in his verses.
2. What role has music played in 20th- and 21st-century social activism? Choose a song from the past (for example, “We Shall Overcome,” which was sung during the civil rights movement) or one from a contemporary social movement. Find and listen to a recording of the song. If possible, transcribe (or find) and analyze the lyrics. What is this song’s message? What mood does it create? Is it intended to spark action? What do you think makes this song effective?

I AM AN ABOLITIONIST

Air—Auld Lang Syne

I am an Abolitionist!
I glory in the name;
Though now by slavery’s minions hissed,
And covered o’er with shame:
It is a spell of light and power—
The watchword of the free;
Who spurns it in the trial-hour,
A craven soul is he!

I am an Abolitionist!
Then urge me not to pause!
For joyfully do I enlist
In Freedom’s sacred cause:
A nobler strife the world ne’er saw,
Th’ enslaved to disenfranch,
I am a soldier for the war,
Whatever may befall!

I am an Abolitionist!
Oppression’s deadly foe!
In God’s great strength I will resist,
And lay the monster low;
In God’s great name do I demand,
To all be freedom given,
That peace and joy may fill the land,
And songs go up to heaven!

I am an Abolitionist!
No threats shall awe my soul,
No perils cause me to desist,
No bribes my acts control;
A freeman will I live and die,
In sunshine and in shade,
And raise my voice for liberty,
Of nought on earth afraid.

Wm. Lloyd Garrison

[also sung at 1851 *Liberator* Soiree, *Liberator* Feb. 7, 1851, p. 23]

This song, written by William Lloyd Garrison, was sung to the tune of “Auld Lang Syne”

[ENLARGE]

"Yet o'er the blackness of the storm"

Yet o'er the blackness of the storm,
 A bow of promise bends on high,
 And gleams of sunshine, soft and warm,
 Break through our clouded skies.

East, West and North, the shout is heard,
 Of freemen rising for the right;
 Each valley has its rallying word,
 Each hill its signal light.

Speed on the light to those who dwell
 In Slavery's land of woe and sin,
 And through the blackness of that hell,
 Let heaven's own light break in.

And all who now are bound beneath
 Our banner's shade, our eagle's wing,
 From Slavery's night of moral death,
 To light and life shall spring;

Broken the bondman's chain—and gone
 The master's guilt, and hate, and fear,
 And unto both alike shall dawn
 A NEW AND HAPPY YEAR.

John Greenleaf Whittier

"The New Year," poem by John Greenleaf Whittier, 1855
[ENLARGE]

WHITTIER'S POETRY

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892) wrote numerous poems honoring his friend William Lloyd Garrison and celebrating the bravery of abolitionists. "The New Year," a poem which appeared in the January 5, 1855, issue of *The Liberator*, is an optimistic work envisioning the end of slavery.

In Focus

1. What is the subject of Whittier's poem? How does he use nature imagery to underscore his message?
2. In what year was this poem written? At that time, how did the realities of the American political scene compare to the ideas expressed in Whittier's poem?
3. Who do you think the audience was for this kind of poem? What was Whittier's purpose in writing this work?
4. Reread the last verse. Were you surprised to see an abolitionist write about the end of the "master's guilt, and hate, and fear"? Discuss.

Activities and Investigations

1. Whittier was a member of the Quaker religion; in fact, he has been called "the Quaker poet." Find out more about the central beliefs of Quakerism. In what ways are these principles evident in "The New Year"? Point to specific lines and themes in the text.
2. Choose a social or political issue of interest to you and write a poem that expresses your thoughts on this subject. Then reflect: What are the benefits and drawbacks of commenting on social issues through poetry as opposed to using prose?

THE LIBERATOR BANNER

In Focus

1. Look closely at *The Liberator* banner. Whose words are quoted on this banner? Where were these words first uttered? What clues on the banner indicate the source of the quotation?
2. What function do you think this banner served? Why do you think this particular quotation was selected to be displayed on the banner?

Activities and Investigations

Working in small teams, choose a cause. It can be a local, national, or international issue. Design a banner that you could use to promote your cause. What colors, slogan, or artwork will you use? What other kinds of formats might you also use (e.g., bumper sticker, button, poster, etc.)? After sharing the designs with the class, create a bulletin board display.



This banner was displayed at many of the official New England Anti-Slavery Society events. [ENLARGE]