

Classic Poetry Series

Julia Ward Howe
- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Julia Ward Howe(1819 - 1910)

As a writer, poet, reformer and lecturer, Howe worked throughout her life for justice. In 1861, she authored The Battle Hymn as an inspiration to Union soldiers fighting against slavery. Howe's work is now the national anthem for freedom.

Of even greater importance to her, she founded, with Lucy Stone and others, the New England Women's Club, which later became the American Woman Suffrage Association. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, Howe lectured and wrote on women's rights. She fought not only for the right to vote, but also struggled to liberate women from the confinement of the traditional "woman's place" in stifling marriages like her own, where none of her ideas were valued or accepted. She also worked for world peace, founding, in 1891, the American Friends of Russian Freedom, and serving as president, in 1894, of the United Friends of Armenia.

In 1907, Howe became the first woman elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has also received three honorary doctorates of letters degrees. The citation for her LL.D. degree from Smith College best explains her importance: "Poet and patriot, lover of letters and learning; advocate for over half a century in print and living speech of great causes of human liberty; [and] sincere friend of all that makes for the elevation and enrichment of women."

Battle Hymn Of The Republic

. Howe's Final version

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fatal lightning of his terrible swift sword:

His Truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps;
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps.

His Day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel, writ in burnished rows of steel:
'As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Since God is marching on.'

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment-seat:
Oh! be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!

Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.

2. Howe's First Manuscript Version

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.
He is trampling out the wine press, where the grapes of wrath are stored,
He hath loosed the fateful lightnings of his terrible swift sword,

His truth is marching on.

I have seen him in the watchfires of an hundred circling camps
They have builded him an altar in the evening dews and damps,
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps,

His day is marching on.

I have read a burning Gospel writ in fiery rows of steel,
As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal
Let the hero born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Our God is marching on.

He has sounded out the trumpet that shall never call retreat,
He has waked the earth's dull sorrow with a high ecstatic beat,
Oh! be swift my soul to answer him, be jubilant my feet

Our God is marching on.

In the whiteness of the lilies he was born across the sea
With a glory in his bosom that shines out on you and me,
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
Our God is marching on.

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave
He is wisdom to the mighty, he is succour to the brave
So the world shall be his footstool, and the soul of Time his slave
Our God is marching on.

Julia Ward Howe

Coquette Et Froide

What is thy thought of me?
What is thy feeling?
Lov'st thou the veil of sense,
Or its revealing?
Leav'st thou the maiden rose
Drooping and blushing,
Or rend'st its bosom with
Kissing and crushing?
I would be beautiful
That thou should'st woo me,
Gentle, delightful, but
To draw thee to me.
Yet should thy longing eye
Ever caress me,
And quickened Fantasy
Only, possess me,
Thus thy heart's highest need
Long would I cherish,
Lest its more trivial wish
Pall, and then perish.

Would that Love's fond pursuit
Were crown'd never,
Or that his virgin kiss
Lasted for ever!

Julia Ward Howe

Limitations Of Benevolence

'The beggar boy is none of mine,'
The reverend doctor strangely said;
'I do not walk the streets to pour
Chance benedictions on his head.

'And heaven I thank who made me so.
That toying with my own dear child,
I think not on _his_ shivering limbs,
His manners vagabond and wild.'

Good friend, unsay that graceless word!
I am a mother crowned with joy,
And yet I feel a bosom pang
To pass the little starveling boy.

His aching flesh, his fevered eyes
His piteous stomach, craving meat;
His features, nipt of tenderness,
And most, his little frozen feet.

Oft, by my fireside's ruddy glow,
I think, how in some noisome den,
Bred up with curses and with blows,
He lives unblest of gods or men.

I cannot snatch him from his fate,
The tribute of my doubting mind
Drops, torch-like, in the abyss of ill,
That skirts the ways of humankind.

But, as my heart's desire would leap
To help him, recognized of none,
I thank the God who left him this,
For many a precious right foregone.

My mother, whom I scarcely knew,
Bequeathed this bond of love to me;
The heart parental thrills for all
The children of humanity.

Julia Ward Howe

Mother Mind

I never made a poem, dear friend-
I never sat me down, and said,
This cunning brain and patient hand
Shall fashion something to be read.
Men often came to me, and prayed
I should indite a fitting verse
For fast, or festival, or in
Some stately pageant to rehearse.
(As if, than Balaam more endowed,
I of myself could bless or curse.)

Reluctantly I bade them go,
Ungladdened by my poet-mite;
My heart is not so churlish but
Its loves to minister delight.

But not a word I breathe is mine
To sing, in praise of man or God;
My Master calls, at noon or night,
I know his whisper and his nod.

Yet all my thoughts to rhythms run,
To rhyme, my wisdom and my wit?
True, I consume my life in verse,
But wouldst thou know how that is writ?

'T is thus- through weary length of days,
I bear a thought within my breast
That greatens from my growth of soul,
And waits, and will not be expressed.

It greatens, till its hour has come,
Not without pain, it sees the light;
'Twixt smiles and tears I view it o'er,
And dare not deem it perfect, quite.

These children of my soul I keep
Where scarce a mortal man may see,
Yet not unconsecrate, dear friend,

Baptismal rites they claim of thee.

Julia Ward Howe

Mother's Day Proclamation

Arise then...women of this day!
Arise, all women who have hearts!
Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!
Say firmly:
"We will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies,
Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage,
For caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.
We, the women of one country,
Will be too tender of those of another country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."

From the voice of a devastated Earth a voice goes up with
Our own. It says: "Disarm! Disarm!
The sword of murder is not the balance of justice."
Blood does not wipe our dishonor,
Nor violence indicate possession.
As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil
At the summons of war,
Let women now leave all that may be left of home
For a great and earnest day of counsel.
Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.
Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means
Whereby the great human family can live in peace...
Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar,
But of God -
In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask
That a general congress of women without limit of nationality,
May be appointed and held at someplace deemed most convenient
And the earliest period consistent with its objects,
To promote the alliance of the different nationalities,
The amicable settlement of international questions,
The great and general interests of peace.

Julia Ward Howe

My Last Dance

The shell of objects inwardly consumed
Will stand, till some convulsive wind awakes;
Such sense hath Fire to waste the heart of things,
Nature, such love to hold the form she makes.
Thus, wasted joys will show their early bloom,
Yet crumble at the breath of a caress;
The golden fruitage hides the scathèd bough,
Snatch it, thou scatterest wide its emptiness.
For pleasure bidden, I went forth last night
To where, thick hung, the festal torches gleamed;
Here were the flowers, the music, as of old,
Almost the very olden time it seemed.
For one with cheek unfaded, (though he brings
My buried brothers to me, in his look,)
Said, `Will you dance?' At the accustomed words
I gave my hand, the old position took.
Sound, gladsome measure! at whose bidding once
I felt the flush of pleasure to my brow,
While my soul shook the burthen of the flesh,
And in its young pride said, `Lie lightly thou!'

Then, like a gallant swimmer, flinging high
My breast against the golden waves of sound,
I rode the madd'ning tumult of the dance,
Mocking fatigue, that never could be found.

Chide not,- it was not vanity, nor sense,
(The brutish scorn such vaporous delight,)
But Nature, cadencing her joy of strength
To the harmonious limits of her right.

She gave her impulse to the dancing Hours,
To winds that sweep, to stars that noiseless turn;
She marked the measure rapid hearts must keep
Devised each pace that glancing feet should learn.

And sure, that prodigal o'erflow of life,
Unvow'd as yet to family or state,
Sweet sounds, white garments, flowery coronals

Make holy, in the pageant of our fate.

Sound, measure! but to stir my heart no more-
For, as I moved to join the dizzy race,
My youth fell from me; all its blooms were gone,
And others showed them, smiling, in my face.

Faintly I met the shock of circling forms
Linked each to other, Fashion's galley-slaves,
Dream-wondering, like an unaccustomed ghost
That starts, surprised, to stumble over graves.

For graves were 'neath my feet, whose placid masks
Smiled out upon my folly mournfully,
While all the host of the departed said,
'Tread lightly- thou art ashes, even as we.'

Julia Ward Howe

Our Orders

WEAVE no more silks, ye Lyons looms,
To deck our girls for gay delights!
The crimson flower of battle blooms,
And solemn marches fill the night.

Weave but the flag whose bars to-day
Drooped heavy o'er our early dead,
And homely garments, coarse and gray,
For orphans that must earn their bread!

Keep back your tunes, ye viols sweet,
That poured delight from other lands!
Rouse there the dancer's restless feet:
The trumpet leads our warrior bands.

And ye that wage the war of words
With mystic fame and subtle power,
Go, chatter to the idle birds,
Or teach the lesson of the hour!

Ye Sibyl Arts, in one stern knot
Be all your offices combined!
Stand close, while Courage draws the lot,
The destiny of human kind.

And if that destiny could fail,
The sun should darken in the sky,
The eternal bloom of Nature pale,
And God, and Truth, and Freedom die!

Julia Ward Howe

Robert E. Lee

A gallant foeman in the fight,
A brother when the fight was o'er,
The hand that led the host with might
The blessed torch of learning bore.

No shriek of shells nor roll of drums,
No challenge fierce, resounding far,
When reconciling Wisdom comes
To heal the cruel wounds of war.

Thought may the minds of men divide,
Love makes the heart of nations one,
And so, the soldier grave beside,
We honor thee, Virginia's son.

Julia Ward Howe

The Bee's Song

Do not tie my wings,
Says the honey-bee;
Do not bind my wings,
Leave them glad and free.
If I fly abroad,
If I keep afar,
Humming all the day,
Where wild blossoms are,
'Tis to bring you sweets,
Rich as summer joy,
Clear--as gold and glass;
The divinest toy
That the god's have left,
Is the pretty hive,
Where a maiden reigns,
And the busy thrive.

If you bar my way,
Your delight is gone,
No more honey-gems;
From the heather borne;
No more tiny thefts,
From your neighbor's rose,
Who were glad to guess
Where its sweetness goes.

Let the man of arts
Ply his plane and glass;
Let the vapors rise,
Let the liquor pass;
Let the dusky slave
Till the southern fields;
Not the task of both
Such a treasure yields;
Honey, Pan ordained,
Food for gods and men,
Only in my way
Shall you store again.

Leave me to my will
While the bright days glow,
While the sleepy flowers
Quicken as I go.
When the pretty ones
Look to me no more,
Dead, beneath your feet,
Crushed and dabbled o'er;
In my narrow cell
I will fold my wing;
Sink in dark and chill,
A forgotten thing.

Can you read the song
Of the suppliant bee?
'Tis a poet's soul,
Asking liberty.

Julia Ward Howe

The Dead Christ

Take the dead Christ to my chamber,
The Christ I brought from Rome;
Over all the tossing ocean,
He has reached his western home;
Bear him as in procession,
And lay him solemnly
Where, through weary night and morning,
He shall bear me company.

The name I bear is other
Than that I bore by birth,
And I've given life to children
Who'll grow and dwell on earth;
But the time comes swiftly towards me
(Nor do I bid it stay),
When the dead Christ will be more to me
Than all I hold to-day.

Lay the dead Christ beside me,
Oh, press him on my heart,
I would hold him long and painfully
Till the weary tears should start;
Till the divine contagion
Heal me of self and sin,
And the cold weight press wholly down
The pulse that chokes within.

Reproof and frost, they fret me,
Towards the free, the sunny lands,
From the chaos of existence
I stretch these feeble hands;
And, penitential, kneeling,
Pray God would not be wroth,
Who gave not the strength of feeling,
And strength of labor both.

Thou'rt but a wooden carving,
Defaced of worms, and old;
Yet more to me thou couldst not be

Wert thou all wrapt in gold,
Like the gem-bedizened baby
Which, at the Twelfth-day noon,
They show from the Ara Coeli's steps,
To a merry dancing tune.

I ask of thee no wonders,
No changing white or red;
I dream not thou art living,
I love and prize thee dead.
That salutary deadness
I seek, through want and pain,
From which God's own high power can bid
Our virtue rise again.

Julia Ward Howe

The Flag

There's a flag hangs over my threshold, whose folds are more dear to me
Than the blood that thrills in my bosom its earnest of liberty;
And dear are the stars it harbors in its sunny field of blue
As the hope of a further heaven that lights all our dim lives through.

But now should my guests be merry, the house is in holiday guise,
Looking out, through its burnished windows like a score of welcoming eyes.
Come hither, my brothers who wander in saintliness and in sin!
Come hither, ye pilgrims of Nature! my heart doth invite you in.

My win is not of the choicest, yet bears it an honest brand;
And the bread that I bid you lighten I break with no sparing hand;
But pause, ere you pass to taste it, one act must accomplished be:
Salute the flag in its virtue, before ye sit down with me.

The flag of our stately battles, not struggles of wrath and greed:
Its stripes were a holy lesson, its spangles a deathless creed;
'Twas red with the blood of freemen, and white with the fear of the foe,
And the stars that fight in their courses 'gainst tyrants its symbols know.

Come hither, thou son of my mother! we were reared in the selfsame arms;
Thou hast many a pleasant gesture, thy mind hath its fights and charms,
But my heart is as stern to question as mine eyes are of sorrows full:
Salute the flag in its virtue, or pass on where others rule.

Thou lord of a thousand acres, with heaps of uncounted gold,
The steeds of thy stall are haughty, thy lackeys cunning and bold:
I envy no jot of thy splendor, I rail at thy follies none:
Salute the flag in its virtue, or leave my poor house alone.

Fair lady with silken trappings, high waving thy stainless plume,
We welcome thee to our numbers, a flower of costliest bloom:
Let a hundred maids live widowed to furnish thy bridal bed;
But pause where the flag doth question, and bend thy triumphant head.

Take down now your flaunting banner, for a scout comes breathless and pale,
With the terror death upon him; of failure is all his tale:
'They have fled while the flag waved o'er them! they have turned to the foe their
back!

They are scattered, pursued, and slaughtered! the fields are all rout and wrack!

Pass hence, then, the friends I gathered, a goodly company!

All ye that have manhood in you, go, perish for Liberty!

But I and the babes God gave me will wait with uplifted hearts,

With the firm smile ready to kindle, and the will to perform our parts.

When the last true heart lies bloodless, when the fierce and the false have won,

I'll press in turn to my bosom each daughter and either son;

Bid them loose the flag from its bearings, and we'll lay us down to rest

With the glory of home about us, and its freedom locked in our breast.

Julia Ward Howe

Tribute To Oliver Wendell Holmes

Thou metamorphic god!
Who mak'st the straight Olympus thy abode,
Hermes to subtle laughter moving,
Apollo with serener loving,
Thou demi-god also!
Who dost all the powers of healing know;
Thou hero who dost wield
The golden sword and shield,--
Shield of a comprehensive mind,
And sword to wound the foes of human kind;

Thou man of noble mould!
Whose metal grows not cold
Beneath the hammer of the hurrying years;
A fiery breath doth blow
Across its fervid glow,
And still its resonance delights our ears;

Loved of thy brilliant mates,
Relinquished to the fates,
Whose spirit music used to chime with thine,
Transfigured in our sight,
Not quenched in death's dark night,
They hold thee in companionship divine.

O autocratic muse!
Soul-rainbow of all hues,
Packed full of service are thy bygone years;
Thy winged steed doth fly
Across the starry sky,
Bearing the lowly burthens of thy tears.

I try this little leap,
Wishing that from the deep,
I might some pearl of song adventurous bring.
Despairing, here I stop,
And my poor offering drop,--
Why stammer I when thou art here to sing?

