



## PREPARING to Read

### Stanzas on Freedom

Poetry by JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

### Free Labor

Poetry by FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER

#### Connect to Your Life

**Standing for Justice** Name a current social or political situation you think should be protested. How would you attempt to generate public interest in solving this problem? With a group of classmates, brainstorm ten ways to publicize issues, adding to the list shown here. Then rate the effectiveness of the methods you listed on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most effective.



### Build Background

**Demand for Change** These two poems were written before the Civil War to protest slavery. In the United States, public opposition to slavery began in the 1680s when Quakers criticized slavery on religious grounds. Although the antislavery movement grew steadily in the 1700s, it gained momentum in the decades prior to the Civil War. By 1840, there were more than 2,000 antislavery societies and at least a dozen abolitionist newspapers. At the height of the movement, abolitionists in the North not only gave public lectures that denounced slavery but also published antislavery almanacs, magazines, and pamphlets. These publications often featured antislavery poems. In 1843, poet James Russell Lowell, a lifelong abolitionist, published “Stanzas on Freedom.” Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, an antislavery lecturer and the most popular African-American poet of her time, published “Free Labor” in 1857.

### Focus Your Reading

**LITERARY ANALYSIS SYMBOL** A symbol is a person, place, object, or activity that has a concrete meaning but also stands for something beyond itself. Familiar symbols include a heart (symbolizing love), a dove (symbolizing peace), and a handshake (symbolizing friendship). The symbols in a poem are usually more original and complex; interpreting them is essential to understanding and enjoying the work. Look for words used as symbols in “Stanzas on Freedom” and “Free Labor.”

#### ACTIVE READING STRATEGIES FOR READING PROTEST POETRY

These works are examples of **protest poetry**, written less to express personal feelings than to persuade readers to support certain cause. You might approach these poems as you approached the political speeches, letters, and essays in the second part of Unit Two, “The Right to Be Free.”

- **First reading** Get a sense of the general ideas and overall feeling of each poem.
- **Second reading** Be more analytical. Determine the intended audience.
- **Third reading** Analyze what the poet wants readers to feel. Pay attention to your emotional reactions and the symbols, images, or devices that trigger them.

**READER'S NOTEBOOK** Begin to take notes as you first read the poem, and add to your notes as you read a second and a third time.

# Stanzas on Freedom

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL



Men! whose boast it is that ye  
Come of fathers brave and free,  
If there breathe on earth a slave,  
Are ye truly free and brave?

5 If ye do not feel the chain,  
When it works a brother's pain,  
Are ye not base<sup>1</sup> slaves indeed,  
Slaves unworthy to be freed?

Women! who shall one day bear  
0 Sons to breathe New England air,  
If ye hear, without a blush,  
Deeds to make the roused blood rush  
Like red lava through your veins,  
For your sisters now in chains,—  
5 Answer! are ye fit to be  
Mothers of the brave and free?

Is true Freedom but to break  
Fetters<sup>2</sup> for our own dear sake,  
And, with leathern hearts, forget  
20 That we owe mankind a debt?  
No! true freedom is to share  
All the chains our brothers wear,  
And, with heart and hand, to be  
Earnest to make others free!

25 They are slaves who fear to speak  
For the fallen and the weak;  
They are slaves who will not choose  
Hatred, scoffing, and abuse,  
Rather than in silence shrink  
30 From the truth they needs must think;  
They are slaves who dare not be  
In the right with two or three.

1. base: having little or no honor, courage, or decency; low or inferior.

2. fetters: chains or other bonds.

## Thinking Through the Literature

1. **Comprehension Check** What does Lowell call those who are afraid to speak?

2. Judging from this poem, how do you think Lowell would define *freedom* and *slavery*?

THINK ABOUT

- his view of the “free” men and women he addresses in the first and second stanzas
- his definition of “true freedom” in the third stanza
- whom he describes as slaves in the last stanza

3. **ACTIVE READING** **PROTEST POETRY** What kind of people do you believe Lowell is speaking to in this poem, and what does he want them to do?

4. Think again about the way Lowell uses the term *slaves* in the last stanza. Who in present-day America might Lowell view as slaves in this sense?

# Free Labor

FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER

I wear an easy garment,  
O'er it no toiling slave  
Wept tears of hopeless anguish,  
In his passage to the grave.

5 And from its ample folds  
Shall rise no cry to God,  
Upon its warp and woof<sup>1</sup> shall be  
No stain of tears and blood.

10 Oh, lightly shall it press my form,  
Unladen<sup>2</sup> with a sigh,  
I shall not 'mid its rustling hear,  
Some sad despairing cry.

This fabric is too light to bear  
The weight of bondsmen's<sup>3</sup> tears,  
15 I shall not in its texture trace  
The agony of years.

20 Too light to bear a smother'd sigh,  
From some lorn<sup>4</sup> woman's heart,  
Whose only wreath of household love  
Is rudely torn apart.

Then lightly shall it press my form,  
Unburden'd by a sigh;  
And from its seams and folds shall rise,  
No voice to pierce the sky,

25 And witness at the throne of God,  
In language deep and strong,  
That I have nerv'd<sup>5</sup> Oppression's hand,  
For deeds of guilt and wrong.

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1. warp and woof: In weaving cloth, the lengthwise threads ("warp") pass over and under the crosswise threads ("woof").

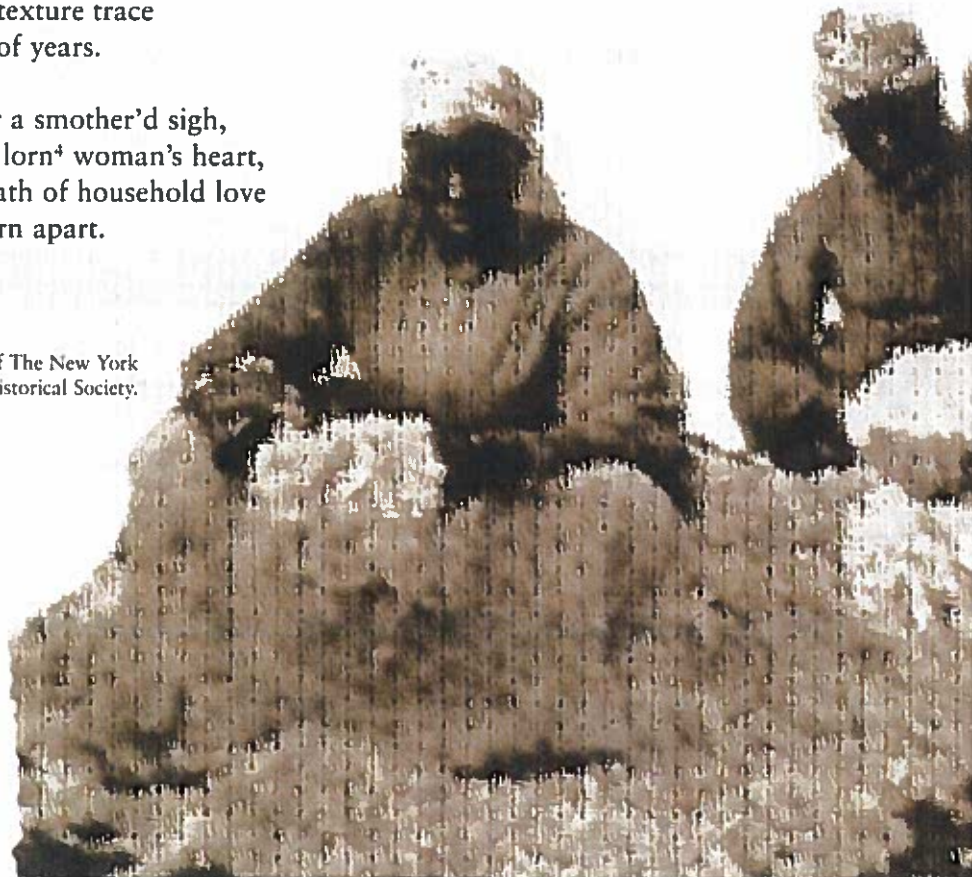
2. unladen: unburdened.

3. bondsmen's: slaves'.

4. lorn: forlorn; lonely and unhappy.

5. nerv'd: strengthened.

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## Connect to the Literature

### 1. What Do You Think?

Describe the images that the poem "Free Labor" creates in your mind.

### Comprehension Check

- What kind of garment won't the speaker wear?
- Whose voice would rise from this garment, and what would it say to God?

## Think Critically

2. **ACTIVE READING PROTEST POETRY** In your own words, explain how "Free Labor" protests slavery.

THINK ABOUT

- what the **title** might mean
- what makes the speaker's garment "easy" and "light"
- what it means to "have nerv'd Oppression's hand"
- what specific action the poet might want her audience to take

3. What kind of person might the speaker in this poem be? What would you guess about the speaker's past?
4. Which do you think are the most effective lines in this poem? Explain your choice.

## Extend Interpretations

5. **Comparing Texts** If both "Stanzas on Freedom" and "Free Labor" had been read widely before the Civil War, which one do you think would be more likely to stir people to take a stand against slavery? Why?
6. **Connect to Life** What examples of art today do you think are comparable to the antislavery poems of the 19th century?

## Literary Analysis

**SYMBOL** As you know, a **symbol** has a concrete meaning in itself while also standing for something else, such as an idea or a feeling. In the story "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," for example, the blooming and fading rose symbolizes human life. What do you think the chains in "Stanzas on Freedom" symbolize? In "Free Labor," what might the garment stand for?

**Cooperative Learning Activity** Work as a small group to paraphrase each of these poems as a short speech. Instead of using symbols, spell out what Lowell and Harper mean in literal terms. Read the speeches aloud to the class. Are they as effective as the poems? What are some advantages of using symbols to express ideas?

Symbol	Ideas
Chains	
Garment	



## Writing Options

**1. New Stanza** The first and second stanzas of “Stanzas on Freedom” begin “Men!” and “Women!” Imagine that the next stanza begins “Youths!” Complete such a stanza, writing what you believe would reflect a teenager’s situation in those times. Read your stanza to classmates.

**2. Protest Poem** Write a protest poem to influence people to take a stand on some contemporary issue, perhaps the one you named in the Connect to Your Life activity on page 574.

## Activities & Explorations

**Political Poster** Create a poster to persuade people in the 1850s to take a stand against slavery. As an alternative, create a poster urging people today to take a stand against a modern injustice.  
~ ART



### James Russell Lowell

1819–1891

#### Other Works

*Poems*

*A Fable for Critics*  
*My Study Windows*  
*Under the Willows*

**Literary Activist** James Russell Lowell, a member of a prominent Massachusetts family, had achieved fame for his poetry and essays by the time he was 30. A well-known abolitionist, he wrote editorials for the antislavery newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, and also contributed to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and other periodicals. In addition to “Stanzas on Freedom,” Lowell also wrote other antislavery poems, including “On the Capture of Fugitive Slaves Near Washington,” and dealt with this subject in *The Biglow Papers*, a collection of poetic letters attributed to the fictional Hosea Biglow.

**Tragedy and Achievement** While Lowell’s literary reputation grew, his life took a tragic turn when his wife and three of his four children died within six years of one another. In 1856 he became professor of modern languages at Harvard, succeeding Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in that post. A year later, he accepted the editorship of the newly founded magazine *Atlantic Monthly*, and he remarried. In 1877 Lowell was appointed U.S. Minister to Spain and took a similar post in England three years later. After the death of his second wife in 1885, Lowell returned home, where he remained for the rest of his life.

### Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

1825–1911

#### Other Works

*“The Slave Mother”*  
*Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*  
*Iola Leroy*



**A Gifted Orphan** Later known as the “Bronze Muse,” poet, novelist, lecturer, and social reformer Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was born free in the slave city of Baltimore, Maryland. Orphaned at the age of three, she was raised by her aunt and uncle and attended her uncle’s private school until she was 13. Harper then began working as a housekeeper. Because the family for whom she worked owned a bookstore, Harper was able to read books in her spare time. When she was fourteen, she began to write poems and essays.

**On Freedom’s Road** In 1850, Harper moved to Ohio and became a teacher, but she soon decided to devote herself to the abolitionist cause. She traveled throughout the North and the Midwest giving lectures on the evils of slavery. Harper, who combined her artistic and political lives by reciting her poems during her speeches, wrote to a friend: “You would be amused to hear some of the remarks which my lectures call forth. ‘She is a man,’ again ‘She is not colored, she is white. She is painted.’” After marrying in 1860, Harper settled on a farm in Ohio. Following her husband’s death in 1864, she began lecturing on the topic of equal rights for the newly freed.