

Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/emma-lazarus-new-colossus>.

Introduction

Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus"—otherwise known as "The Statue of Liberty Sonnet"—is this nineteenth-century Jewish American poet's most famous achievement. Most of us are familiar with the lines, "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." However, there is much more to this well-crafted poem which offers a powerful vision of America as a diasporic refuge—a timely image in light of current conversations about immigration, refugees, and global migration.

Subjects

Immigration, New York, Poetry, Social Commentary, Women Writers

Reading and Background:

- A [short biography](#) of Emma Lazarus can be found on the website of the Jewish Women's Archive. Those interested in learning more about Lazarus and her contribution to Jewish American history can read Esther Schor's wonderful portrait, [Emma Lazarus](#) (2006).
- A selection of Lazarus's poetry and essays is available in [Emma Lazarus: Selected Poems and Writings](#) edited by Gregory Eiselein (2002).
- The Statue of Liberty, upon which Lazarus's sonnet is inscribed, has a fascinating history well worth considering. To start, look at David Glassberg's 2003 article, "[Rethinking the Statue of Liberty: Old Meanings, New Contexts](#)". Rachel Gross's 2017 article "[Is the Statue of Liberty a Jewish Woman?](#)" reflects on how Jews have celebrated the statue as their own.
- It is important for students to appreciate Lazarus's poem not only for what it says, but for how it says it. "The New Colossus" is a [Petrarchean sonnet](#), and much of its strength comes from this structure. Shira Wolosky's chapter on the sonnet in her book, [The Art of Poetry: How to Read a Poem](#) (2008) is a wonderful resource.
- Teachers may also want to check out PBS's [Destination America](#) and the Statue of Liberty – Ellis Island Foundation's [immigration timeline](#) which are great sources for images and information about immigration.
- There is an [interactive version](#) of "The New Colossus" on Nextbook Press, annotated by Esther Schor.

Resources

1: Poem, "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus, 1883.

This is a classic Petrarchan sonnet; it is comprised of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter verse, with a clear rhyme scheme: abba abba cdcdcd. Working within this tight and tidy frame, Lazarus powerfully sets America, as a country fiercely committed to welcoming immigrants, apart from Europe, represented here as an imperial force.

Suggested Activities: Ask students to consider how Lazarus's poem adds to or changes their understanding of the Statue of Liberty as an American symbol. Ask those who had previously heard only an excerpt of the poem to consider how the rest of the poem affects their understanding of that famous line. For a more in-depth project, have students go out into their communities (or online) and find another public monument with an inscription. Ask them to research both the monument and the inscription and to consider how the two work together to create a meaningful symbol.

Or, ask students to write a poem or short prose piece that might be posted today at JFK airport or some other prominent port of entry for immigrants and refugees. Ask students to consider: What should be said about America in such a location? How should it be said?



Source: Lazarus, Emma, and Josephine Lazarus. *The Poems of Emma Lazarus*. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1888), 202-203.

2: "The Colossus of Rhodes," engraving by Maarten van Heemskerck, 16th century.

The Colossus of Rhodes was a giant statue of the Greek sun god Helios. Constructed to celebrate a military victory, the statue was probably over 100 feet high—the approximate height of the Statue of Liberty. An earthquake in 226 BC destroyed the statue 54 years after it was completed.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to look at this image of the Colossus of Rhodes. How is it similar to the Statue of Liberty? How is it different? Think about what work the title of Lazarus's poem is doing. What does it add to students' interpretation of the poem? How does it connect Lazarus's present (and ours) with the ancient past? Have students brainstorm a list of other possible titles for the poem and "try them on" to see how they change its meaning and tone.

Source: Galle, Phillips, after Maarten van Heemskerck. *Colossus of Rhodes*. 1572. Engraving.

3: "Deborah," engraving by Gustave Doré, 1866, and biblical source sheet.

One of the dominant images in "The New Colossus" is "A mighty woman with a torch." This image reaches back to Deborah, the biblical hero whose story can be found in the book of Judges. Nineteenth-century American Jewry often turned to the biblical figure of Deborah as an ideal image of maternal power. But Lazarus offers a different interpretation by representing Deborah not so much as a domestic goddess, but as a powerful public figure.

Suggested Activity: Read the source sheet and examine the image with students and ask: How do these excerpts about and this image of Deborah influence your understanding of the Statue of Liberty and your interpretation of Lazarus's poem?

Sources: Doré, Gustave. 1866. *The Holy Bible: with illustrations by Gustave Doré*. London: Cassell, Petter, and Galpin.

Judges 4:4, trans. Jewish Publication Society, 1917. Rashi on Judges 4:4, Metzudat David on Judges 4:4. Source sheet compiled by Alexis Aaeng using sefaria.org, 2017.

4: Political cartoons depicting the Statue of Liberty

"The New Colossus" has been quoted and misquoted countless times in American popular culture, often to make a political statement. These cartoons highlight some of the many ways in which the poem's most famous line has been reinterpreted.

Suggested Activities: Study these cartoons with students. Ask them which they think is strongest in making its point and why. Reveal the title of each cartoon, and ask if the title changes or adds to their interpretation of the image. Discuss: Why is this excerpt of Lazarus's poem quoted and reinterpreted so frequently? What makes it work so well?

Have students draw their own cartoon using an image of the Statue of Liberty and their own version of the excerpt from Lazarus. Their cartoons can comment on a wide variety of contemporary American issues, not only on the issue of immigration.

Sources: Zanetti, Paul. "The Fanatical Boston Bombers." April 21, 2013.; Blackwell, Douglas. "Give them (not me) your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free," December 13, 2015.; Greenberg, Steven. "Give me your tired..." in *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, May 8, 1989.

5: Song excerpt, Lou Reed, "Dirty Blvd.," 1989.

The influential singer-songwriter Lou Reed, front man for The Velvet Underground, riffs on "The New Colossus" in his 1989 critique of wealth and poverty.

Suggested Activity: Play the clip for students. Discuss: In this clip, does Lou Reed change the meaning of the poem's message? How is it similar or different to the way that the political cartoonists interpreted the poem?

Have students write their own poem or song that is inspired by "The New Colossus." It can comment on a wide range of contemporary issues, or it can be a parody of the original message.

Source: Reed, Lou. *New York*. Sire Records, 1989.

