

Poetry Explication

“The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus

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## **Introduction**

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”. This phrase is ubiquitous the world over representing the dream of America, the land of opportunity, a place where anyone can make a comfortable living for themselves through their own hard work and determination. Of course, this vision of the United States is misleadingly idealistic as historically the U.S has been a place where those with power and wealth are not keen on sharing their success. Of course at the base of Ellis Island, the gateway to this so-called promised land rests a plaque with these words. At the gate of the New World stands the New Colossus and at her feet the poem that defines her and the land she guides newcomers towards.

## **Meat**

In 1883, in a fundraising effort to help with the construction Statue of Liberty Emma Lazarus contributed a poem entitled *The New Colossus*. Lazarus' work is a romanticized look at the values of the American cultural mosaic. To begin Lazarus contrast's the old world with the New through her use of anti-simile in the line “Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame” brazen meaning two things, bronze, but also audacious and flashy. “With conquering limbs astride from land to land” this old world statue, the Colossus of Rhodes to Lazarus signifies the tradition of Europe, power, war, and expansion as opposed to the inclusive, humble, and welcoming United States.

“Lazarus intends her “New Colossus” to be opposed against the ancient Colossus of Rhodes, pagan statue of the sun god. This figure is masculine, conquering, and pompous against the Statue’s giant modesty; it is Greek. But for Lazarus [...] the opposing counterpart for Greek Hellenism is Hebraism.” (Wolosky. 1996).

Professor Shira Wolosky offers a Jewish lense of looking at Lazarus’ poem as Lazarus herself was Jewish and includes allusions of old Hebrew stories that influenced her,

“The biblical subtexture, out of the Hebrew that Lazarus had just begun to study in the 1880s, is framed by other Judaic associations. The concluding image of the “lamp” is repeatedly identified in Jewish consciousness in such other Lazarus poems as *The Choice*, *Gifts*, *The Feast of Lights*, and *In Exile*. [...] The images for the statue uncannily recast the biblical text of Deborah, who is not Mother of Exiles, but Mother of Israel.” (Wolosky. 1996).

This look into the Poet’s Jewish heritage and how it shapes the poem is especially important when compared with other culture’s influences such as the structure of *The New Colossus* being an Italian Sonnet. In the 1880s the U.S was seeing a surge in Italian immigrants, “[T]he poem is pluralistic in its roots. It is an Italian sonnet composed by a Jewish-American woman, contrasting an ancient Greek statue with a statue built in modern France. At the time of its writing in 1883, European immigrants—including Italians, Greeks, and Russian-Jewish refugees—were arriving en masse in America.” (Allen. 2020) Incorporating a piece of Italian culture along with Jewish elements reflects America’s unique cultural hybridization.

## **Conclusion**

Despite Lazarus’ idealized depiction of the United State’s and Lady Liberty as beacons of hope for all downtrodden people of the world in practice the U.S has not always lived up to this

standard. “between the 1920s and 1960s, [immigration] restrictionists refashioned the Statue of Liberty into a militant warrior-goddess guarding America’s beleaguered gates. In 2017, presidential efforts to shut America’s door on Muslim refugees, undocumented Mexican immigrants, and other groups stirred fresh disputes over the Statue’s symbolism.” (Allen. 2020)

The U.S has had a vocal nativist movement in it that has persisted since the country’s founding. Sentiments of isolationism and bigotry existed when Jew’s sought refuge from Nazi Germany, and today when Central American families travel hundreds of miles to be turned away or locked away in detention camps. Although *The New Colossus* is not a piece of legislation that must be abided by it is a piece of American mythos that shapes and defines what this country should strive to be, like the Declaration of Independence and the National Anthem. It should be a source of national pride and ideal we all should pursue, to show warmth and kindness to those in need.

## **Bibliography**

### **Poem**

Lazarus. Emma “*The New Colossus*” The New York Times. 1903.

[https://poets.org/poem/new-colossus?gclid=CjwKCAjwr7X4BRA4EiwAUXjbt1cev9mWNR\\_f8Joy5E2Xa0Hfqs31CvDzezFa5tIOOW4VQKKI01gMPxoCOLkQAvD\\_BwE](https://poets.org/poem/new-colossus?gclid=CjwKCAjwr7X4BRA4EiwAUXjbt1cev9mWNR_f8Joy5E2Xa0Hfqs31CvDzezFa5tIOOW4VQKKI01gMPxoCOLkQAvD_BwE). Accessed 7/14/2020

“Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame, (a) inverse simile.  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land; (b)

Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand (b)  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame (a)  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name (a)  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand (b)  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command (b)  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame. (a)  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!"  
(c)  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor, (d)  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, (c)  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. (d)  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, (c)  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" (d)

"[T]he poem is pluralistic in its roots. It is an Italian sonnet composed by a Jewish-American woman, contrasting an ancient Greek statue with a statue built in modern France. At the time of its writing in 1883, European immigrants—including Italians, Greeks, and Russian-Jewish refugees—were arriving en masse in America." (Allen. 2020)

"Lazarus stressed a different aspect of freedom: not the courage to fight the enemy but the willingness to accept the stranger. The poem's early audiences sensed the power of the reinterpretation." (Allen. 2020)

"Read generously, the poem was an audacious reimagining not only of the statue but of America's role on the world stage. If it lacks the irony and internal conflict we now expect from modern literature, that's because it was a conscious act of political mythmaking." (Allen. 2020)

"between the 1920s and 1960s, "[immigration] restrictionists refashioned the Statue of Liberty into a militant warrior-goddess guarding America's beleaguered gates." In 2017, presidential efforts to shut America's door on Muslim refugees, undocumented Mexican immigrants, and other groups stirred fresh disputes over the Statue's symbolism." (Allen. 2020)

"Lazarus's description of immigrants as "wretched refuse" may not be intentionally condescending ("wretched" is supposed to connote pity rather than judgment; "refuse" ostensibly means "exiled people," not "trash"), but it has raised many eyebrows over the years." (Allen. 2020)

“Liberty’s “lamp” in Daniel Deronda, in which the proto-Zionist character Mordecai proclaims: “[W]hat is needed is the seed of fire. The heritage of Israel is beating in the pulses of millions” (Allen 2020) Lazarus’ Jewish roots coming through. Americanizing this Jewish symbol.

“Mighty/ woman imprisoned/ lightning Mother/ of Exiles, lid eyes/ command cries/ with silent lips: each oxymoron of feminized modest power acts as bridge, like the Statue herself, by which the alien is made native, the outcast made essential, the weak made strong. The poet, too is, projected as both welcoming hostess and guest-refugee.” (Wolosky. 1996).

“Lazarus intends her “New Colossus” to be opposed against the ancient Colossus of Rhodes, pagan statue of the sun god. This figure is masculine, conquering, and pompous against the Statue’s giant modesty; it is Greek. But for Lazarus [...] the opposing counterpart for Greek Hellenism is Hebraism.” (Wolosky. 1996).

“In contrast against Greek-Europe, America itself emerges as Hebraic site, with its history a mode of Jewish History. As Jew, Lazarus would in fact have found particular entry into the Puritan rhetoric of typology that identified America as the New Israel and Promised Land” (Wolosky. 1996)

## Sources

Allen, A. (2020). Emma Lazarus: "The New Colossus" by Austin Allen. Poetry Foundation.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/144956/emma-lazarus-the-new-colossus>.

An examination of the mixed roots and civic meanings of Lazarus’ poem that has become synonymous with the American ideals of freedom, inclusiveness, tolerance, and, of course, liberty. A look into history and meaning behind Emma Lazarus and her poem. Despite these hopeful American ideals, there has always been a sizable portion of Americans who oppose it through xenophobia, bigotry, and classism. Also looking at the connotative message through the use of diction “wretched refuse” and the meaning behind it. I want to use this source to argue the new meaning the poem and the Statue of Liberty take in the 21st century with yet another rise of nativism and white nationalism.

Wolosky, S. (1996). An American-Jewish Typology: Emma Lazarus and the Figure of Christ.

jstor.org.

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/20689446?casa\\_token=a1UU--NRGRwAAAAA%3APwL4kZeoJkpBr](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20689446?casa_token=a1UU--NRGRwAAAAA%3APwL4kZeoJkpBr)

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Wolosky's paper on *The New Colossus* takes a Jewish Feminist Lense of the poem and how significant that is to represent the gateway of a country that is patriarchal and puritan in values. This represents the ever changing nature and identity of the U.S, but it cannot be deemphasized that these changes do not come without back lash from those white, puritanical men, who want to maintain their status quo in *their* country. Looking at the intersections of Lazarus as an individual will offer greater insight into her poem and the meaning it lends to the Statue of Liberty it was written for, and what the statue represents.

### **Video Imagery**

Ellis Island - History of Immigration to the United States (June 20th, 2013)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8X4CypTaOOs>

Arrival of immigrants, Ellis Island (June, 3rd, 2010) Library of Congress

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzHeOH7h52c>

Statue of Liberty & Ellis Island - 2 minute HD tour ( October 14th, 2009) FinelyHoliday

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42yO2FUWL6A>

The Statue of Liberty 1922 (April 13th, 2014) British Pathe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArRlnTmSkill&t=25s>