Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



France: An Ode

by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.5

Coleridge wrote "France: An Ode" in 1798, after French armies invaded Switzerland, and later printed it with "Fears in Solitude" and "Frost at Midnight." The poem has five numbered stanzas (105 lines) in an irregular rhyme scheme. In it Coleridge looks back on his early support for the French Revolution, admits that France has betrayed its own ideals of freedom, and decides that true liberty lives in nature and in the individual spirit rather than in any government. The numerals I–V in the printed poem are stanza labels, not numbered lines.

THE POEM

I

Ye Clouds! that far above me float and pause,
Whose pathless march no mortal may controul!
Ye Ocean-Waves! that, wheresoe'er ye roll,
Yield homage only to eternal laws!
Ye Woods! that listen to the night-birds singing,
Midway the smooth and perilous slope reclined,
Save when your own imperious branches swinging,
Have made a solemn music of the wind!
Where, like a man beloved of God,
Through glooms, which never woodman trod,
How oft, pursuing fancies holy,
My moonlight way o'er flowering weeds I wound,
Inspired, beyond the guess of folly,
By each rude shape and wild unconquerable sound!
O ye loud Waves! and O ye Forests high!
And O ye Clouds that far above me soared!
Thou rising Sun! thou blue rejoicing Sky!
Yea, every thing that is and will be free!
Bear witness for me, wheresoe'er ye be,
With what deep worship I have still adored
The spirit of divinest Liberty.

II

When France in wrath her giant-limbs upreared,
And with that oath, which smote air, earth, and sea,
Stamped her strong foot and said she would be free,
Bear witness for me, how I hoped and feared!
With what a joy my lofty gratulation
Unawed I sang, amid a slavish band:
And when to whelm the disenchanted nation,
Like fiends embattled by a wizard's wand,
The Monarchs marched in evil day,
And Britain joined the dire array;
Though dear her shores and circling ocean,
Though many friendships, many youthful loves
Had swoln the patriot emotion
And flung a magic light o'er all her hills and groves;
Yet still my voice, unaltered, sang defeat
To all that braved the tyrant-quelling lance,
And shame too long delayed and vain retreat!
For ne'er, O Liberty! with partial aim
I dimmed thy light or damped thy holy flame;
But blessed the paeans of delivered France,
And hung my head and wept at Britain's name.

III

'And what,' I said, 'though Blasphemy's loud scream
With that sweet music of deliverance strove!
Though all the fierce and drunken passions wove
A dance more wild than e'er was maniac's dream!
Ye storms, that round the dawning East assembled,
The Sun was rising, though ye hid his light!'
And when, to soothe my soul, that hoped and trembled,
The dissonance ceased, and all seemed calm and bright;
When France her front deep-scarr'd and gory
Concealed with clustering wreaths of glory;
When, insupportably advancing,
Her arm made mockery of the warrior's ramp;
While timid looks of fury glancing,
Domestic treason, crushed beneath her fatal stamp,
Writhed like a wounded dragon in his gore;
Then I reproached my fears that would not flee;
'And soon,' I said, 'shall Wisdom teach her lore
In the low huts of them that toil and groan!
And, conquering by her happiness alone,
Shall France compel the nations to be free,
Till Love and Joy look round, and call the Earth their own.'

IV

Forgive me, Freedom! O forgive those dreams!
I hear thy voice, I hear thy loud lament,
From bleak Helvetia's icy caverns sent--
I hear thy groans upon her blood-stained streams!
Heroes, that for your peaceful country perished,
And ye that, fleeing, spot your mountain-snows
With bleeding wounds; forgive me, that I cherished
One thought that ever blessed your cruel foes!
To scatter rage, and traitorous guilt,
Where Peace her jealous home had built;
A patriot-race to disinherit
Of all that made their stormy wilds so dear;
And with inexpiable spirit
To taint the bloodless freedom of the mountaineer--
O France, that mockest Heaven, adulterous, blind,
And patriot only in pernicious toils!
Are these thy boasts, Champion of human kind?
To mix with Kings in the low lust of sway,
Yell in the hunt, and share the murderous prey;
To insult the shrine of Liberty with spoils
From freemen torn; to tempt and to betray?

V

The Sensual and the Dark rebel in vain,
Slaves by their own compulsion! In mad game
They burst their manacles and wear the name
Of Freedom, graven on a heavier chain!
O Liberty! with profitless endeavour
Have I pursued thee, many a weary hour;
But thou nor swell'st the victor's strain, nor ever
Didst breathe thy soul in forms of human power.
Alike from all, howe'er they praise thee,
(Nor prayer, nor boastful name delays thee)
Alike from Priestcraft's harpy minions,
And factious Blasphemy's obscener slaves,
Thou speedest on thy subtle pinions,
The guide of homeless winds, and playmate of the waves!
And there I felt thee!--on that sea-cliff's verge,
Whose pines, scarce travelled by the breeze above,
Had made one murmur with the distant surge!
Yes, while I stood and gazed, my temples bare,
And shot my being through earth, sea, and air,
Possessing all things with intensest love,
O Liberty! my spirit felt thee there.

VOCABULARY

controul — control (Coleridge's old spelling)

gratulation — expression of joy or congratulation

whelm — to overwhelm, engulf

paeans — songs of joy or triumph

inexpiable — impossible to atone for or forgive

Helvetia — the old name for Switzerland

manacles — handcuffs, chains

harpy — a greedy, cruel monster of myth, here used for greedy priests

priestcraft — manipulation of religion by the clergy for power

pinions — wings

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the first stanza the speaker calls on “Clouds,” “Ocean-Waves,” “Woods,” and the “rising Sun” to “bear witness.” What is he asking them to witness, and why does he choose natural things rather than people?

2. In the second stanza, how does the speaker describe his reaction when France “in wrath her giant-limbs upreared” and then Britain “joined the dire array” against her? What does he refuse to do, even though he loves his own “shores and circling ocean”?

3. The third stanza has the speaker answering his own doubts about the Revolution. What excuses does he give for the “drunken passions” and the violence, and what future does he still hope for (“Shall France compel the nations to be free”)?

4. In the fourth stanza the speaker says “Forgive me, Freedom! O forgive those dreams!” What has France done that changes his mind, and how does he describe France now (“O France, that mockest Heaven, adulterous, blind”)?

5. The final stanza says liberty is not found in “forms of human power.” Where does the speaker finally say he “felt” Liberty, and what does that last image suggest about where freedom lives?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short response about a cause, team, or person you once believed in without question, and what changed your mind. Like Coleridge, state your early hope, describe the moment of disillusion, and end with something you still trust.

France: An Ode — Answer Key

1. He asks them to "Bear witness for me, wheresoe'er ye be, / With what deep worship I have still adored / The spirit of divinest Liberty." He calls on everything "that is and will be free," including "Clouds" whose "pathless march no mortal may controul," "Ocean-Waves" that "Yield homage only to eternal laws!" Nature is the one place he sees uncontrolled freedom.

2. He says "With what a joy my lofty gratulation / Unawed I sang, amid a slavish band." When "the Monarchs marched in evil day, / And Britain joined the dire array," he did not change his song: "Yet still my voice, unaltered, sang defeat / To all that braved the tyrant-quelling lance," and he "hung my head and wept at Britain's name." He does not turn on France despite his love for his own country.

3. He argues "though Blasphemy's loud scream / With that sweet music of deliverance strove" and "all the fierce and drunken passions wove / A dance more wild than e'er was maniac's dream," "The Sun was rising, though ye hid his light!" He hopes "Wisdom teach her lore / In the low huts of them that toil and groan," and "Shall France compel the nations to be free, / Till Love and Joy look round, and call the Earth their own."

4. He cries "I hear thy groans upon her blood-stained streams!" in "bleak Helvetia's icy caverns," where France crushed "A patriot-race" and the "bloodless freedom of the mountaineer." He now calls her "O France, that mockest Heaven, adulterous, blind, / And patriot only in pernicious toils!" and asks "Are these thy boasts, Champion of human kind?" She now joins "Kings in the low lust of sway" and shares "the murderous prey."

5. He says "The Sensual and the Dark rebel in vain, / Slaves by their own compulsion," who "wear the name / Of Freedom, graven on a heavier chain!" He felt Liberty "on that sea-cliff's verge, / Whose pines, scarce travelled by the breeze above, / Had made one murmur with the distant surge," while he stood "my temples bare, / And shot my being through earth, sea, and air." The closing line "O Liberty! my spirit felt thee there" suggests freedom is an inner experience met in wild nature, not something a nation can deliver.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/france-an-ode-samuel-taylor-coleridge/