

FIFTY YEARS (1863-1913)

By James Weldon Johnson

On the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.

O brothers mine, to-day we stand
Where half a century sweeps our ken,
Since God, through Lincoln's ready hand,
Struck off our bonds and made us men.

Just fifty years—a winter's day—
As runs the history of a race;
Yet, as we look back o'er the way,
How distant seems our starting place!

Look farther back! Three centuries!
To where a naked, shivering score,
Snatched from their haunts across the seas,
Stood, wild-eyed, on Virginia's shore.

This land is ours by right of birth,
This land is ours by right of toil;
We helped to turn its virgin earth,
Our sweat is in its fruitful soil.

Where once the tangled forest stood,—

Where flourished once rank weed and thorn,—
Behold the path-traced, peaceful wood,
The cotton white, the yellow corn.

To gain these fruits that have been earned,
To hold these fields that have been won,
Our arms have strained, our backs have burned,
Bent bare beneath a ruthless sun.

That Banner which is now the type
Of victory on field and flood—
Remember, its first crimson stripe
Was dyed by Attucks' willing blood.

And never yet has come the cry—
When that fair flag has been assailed—
For men to do, for men to die,
That we have faltered or have failed

We've helped to bear it, rent and torn,
Through many a hot-breath'd battle breeze
Held in our hands, it has been borne
And planted far across the seas.

And never yet,—O haughty Land,
Let us, at least, for this be praised—

Has one black, treason-guided hand
Ever against that flag been raised.

Then should we speak but servile words,
Or shall we hang our heads in shame?
Stand back of new-come foreign hordes,
And fear our heritage to claim?

No! stand erect and without fear,
And for our foes let this suffice—
We've bought a rightful sonship here,
And we have more than paid the price.

And yet, my brothers, well I know
The tethered feet, the pinioned wings,
The spirit bowed beneath the blow,
The heart grown faint from wounds and stings;

The staggering force of brutish might,
That strikes and leaves us stunned and dazed;
The long, vain waiting through the night
To hear some voice for justice raised.

Full well I know the hour when hope
Sinks dead, and 'round us everywhere

Hangs stifling darkness, and we grope
With hands uplifted in despair.

Courage! Look out, beyond, and see
The far horizon's beckoning span!
Faith in your God-known destiny!
We are a part of some great plan.

Because the tongues of Garrison
And Phillips now are cold in death,
Think you their work can be undone?
Or quenched the fires lit by their breath?

Think you that John Brown's spirit stops?
That Lovejoy was but idly slain?
Or do you think those precious drops
From Lincoln's heart were shed in vain?

That for which millions prayed and sighed,
That for which tens of thousands fought,
For which so many freely died,
God cannot let it come to naught.

Paired Text Questions

Part 1: Use the article "At the Closed Gate of Justice" to answer the following questions:

1. In this poem, the speaker mentions three things that being "a Negro in a day like this" demands. What are those three things?
2. Read the last stanza of the poem. Why is the speaker's "glorious goal unwon"? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
3. Describe the overall tone of this poem. Support your answer with evidence from the text.

Part 2: Use the article "Fifty Years (1863-1913)" to answer the following questions:

4. In this poem, the speaker lists a number of things about African Americans' experience in society that he or she knows well. What are three things the speaker of the poem knows?
5. Read these two stanzas from the poem:
"Full well I know the hour when hope/Sinks dead, and 'round us everywhere/Hangs stifling darkness, and we grope/
With hands uplifted in despair./Courage! Look out, beyond, and see/The far horizon's beckoning span!/Faith in your
God-known destiny!/We are part of some great plan."
In these lines, what message is the speaker sending about hope?
6. Describe the overall tone of this poem. Support your answer with evidence from the text.

Part 3: Use the articles "At the Closed Gate of Justice" & "Fifty Years (1863-1913)" to answer the following questions:

7. What important idea do both of these poems address? Support your answer with evidence from both poems.
8. Contrast the tones of the two poems. Support your answer with evidence from the text of each.

