

**WEBSTER CENTENNIAL: A  
DISCOURSE DELIVERED ON THE  
HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF  
THE BIRTH OF DANIEL WEBSTER,  
JANUARY 18, 1882**

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**HENRY N. HUDSON**

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TO THE

**Marshfield Club,**

OF BOSTON, AN ASSOCIATION UNIT AND HELD TOGETHER  
IN MEMORY AND REVERENCE OF

DANIEL WEBSTER,

THE FOLLOWING DISCOURSE IS RESPECTFULLY  
INSCRIBED BY THE

AUTHOR.

CAMBRIDGE, Jan. 18, 1882.

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## WEBSTER CENTENNIAL.

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: One hundred years ago to-day, a very quiet but vastly fruitful event took place up in New Hampshire: it was the birth of Daniel Webster. The City of Boston and the State of Massachusetts had this great man in the councils of the Nation nearly twenty-eight years; and I think I may safely say that, from his presence and services there, they have reaped more of honour and of solid benefit than from all the other men they have had in that place during the last two generations put together. Such being the case, I had hoped that Boston would remember her illustrious citizen, her peerless statesman, and make some fitting commemoration of the day. She has not seen fit to do so; and this is one reason why I have undertaken to do what I can, to manifest a becoming respect for the hundredth anniversary of Daniel Webster's birth. I fear, indeed, that Boston has not yet fully recovered from that old disease under which she turned away from her greatest and loveliest man, this too in his gray-haired age, and even "struck him with her tongue, most serpent-like, upon the very heart." In earlier days, she seems indeed to have understood and appreciated Webster pretty well; yet I was much taken, some years ago, with a remark made to me by the late Judge Redfield, that "Boston never could get water enough together to float him."



The theme I am to speak upon is one that lies very near my heart, this too both as an American and as a man; and I propose to utter my thoughts with considerable plainness and freedom. For, in truth, I have no popularity to lose, and do not care to make any; that being a thing I have no use for, nor should know what to do with, if I had it.

As Americans, we have a right to be proud, we ought to be proud, it will do us good to be proud, of Daniel Webster. He is the one imperial intellect of our nation; altogether the greatest and most catholic mind this country has produced. In fact, he is not so properly one man as a multitude of men, rather say, a multitudinous man; the varied powers, that are commonly dispersed among other men, being massed and consolidated in him. He stands second to none of our lawyers; and his arguments in the Supreme Court of the United States probably did more than those of any other one man, except Chief Justice Marshall, towards establishing the principles and the practice of our national Constitution.

But Webster is something more than our greatest man: he is one of the world's great men. Sage and venerable Harvard, on mature consideration no doubt, has spoken him for one of the seven great orators of the world. At the theatre end of her superb Memorial Hall, which has the form of a semicircular polygon, in as many gables or niches rising above the cornice, the seven heads, of gigantic size, stand forth to public view. First, of course, is Demosthenes the Greek; second, also of course, Cicero the Roman; third, Saint John Chrysostom, an Asiatic Greek, born about the middle of the fourth century; fourth, Jaques Benigne Bossuet, the great French divine and author, contemporary with Louis the Fourteenth; fifth, William Pitt the elder, Earl of Chatham, an Englishman; sixth, Edmund Burke, an Irish-

man, probably the greatest genius of them all, though not the greatest orator ; seventh, Daniel Webster. How authentic the likenesses may be, I cannot say, except in the case of Webster : here the likeness is true ; and, to my sense, Webster's head is the finest of the seven, unless that of Bossuet may be set down as its peer.

In the world's volume of illustrious statesmen also, Webster's name may justly hold up its head among the highest ; very few men having, in this capacity, done so much for the political order and welfare of mankind. As an author, again, he stands very near, if not in, the foremost rank of English classics ; some of his speeches, like those of Burke, holding much the same relative place in what may be termed, deliberative and argumentative discourse, as *Paradise Lost* holds in epic poetry, Wordsworth's *Ode on Immortality* and his *Ode to Duty* in lyrical poetry, and Shakespeare's four great tragedies in the sphere of dramatic art. But what, in this regard, should make Webster especially dear and venerable to us is, that he stands unquestionably at the head of our American classics, and is perhaps the only one of our authors that will live and be studied in future times : I hope indeed that Bryant will so live also, and two or three others, but am far from sure of it. For he must be a mighty tall man, I can tell you, whose head touches the classic summit.

It seems to me that a great deal too much stress is apt to be laid nowadays, at least among us, on the matter of style : for a good style is not to be reached by making it a paramount aim : in that case the style becomes too self-conscious, thinks quite too much of itself ; whereas the proper virtue of style lies in its being kept altogether subordinate to something else. And so the prime secret of a good style in writing is, that words be used purely in their representative

character, or as standing for things, and not at all for their own sake. This it is that so highly distinguishes Webster's style,—the best yet written on this continent. His language is so transparent, that in reading him one seldom thinks of it, and can hardly see it. In fact, the proper character of his style is perfect, consummate manliness; in which quality I make bold to affirm that he has no superior in the whole range of English prose authorship: even Burke's style, though richer and more varied, is hardly equal to his in this supreme quality. And Webster, in his *Autobiography*, touches the secret of this. "While in college," says he, "I delivered two or three occasional addresses, which were published. I trust they are forgotten: they were in very bad taste. I had not then learned that all true power in writing is in the idea, not in the style; an error into which the *Ars rhetorica*, as it is usually taught, might easily lead stronger heads than mine."

But Webster was not only a great lawyer, a great orator, a great statesman, a great author, a mighty discourses: he was emphatically a great man,—great in intellect, great in eloquence, great in soul, great in character, and in all the proper correspondences of greatness. Mr. Whipple, in the admirable essay prefixed to his selection of Webster's speeches, aptly and felicitously applies to him the phrase, "colossal manhood." I really do not know of any other single phrase that fits the subject so well. Those who often heard Webster in familiar conversation, if any such survive, will probably tell us they never heard any one else who approached him in that respect. On such occasions he not seldom had the Bible for his theme; and those who listened to his talk thereon could hardly choose but believe that either the Bible was inspired or else the speaker was.