

KATHARINE LEE BATES

Lesbian Educator and Poet

(1859 - 1929)



Katharine Lee Bates attended Wellesley College where she eventually became head of the English Department. In 1890 she met Katharine Coman, a fellow Wellesley professor and began a relationship that lasted until Coman's death 25 years later. After her beloved's passing, Bates wrote *Yellow Clover: A Book of Remembrance* in which almost all the poems refer to their relationship. Previously Bates had penned poetry, textbooks, children's fiction, and several travel books. A poem in her book *Sunshine and Other Verses for Children* (1889) introduced the character of Mrs. Santa Claus into popular culture. While teaching at Colorado College in the summer of 1893, Ms. Bates hiked to the top of Pikes Peak. Later she recalled "...when I saw the view, I felt great joy. All the wonder of America seemed displayed there, with the sea-like expanse." Inspired by that majestic mountain's view of the "purple" Rockies and nearby "fruited plains," she captured the moment in her notebook and eventually converted it into verse. The July 4th, 1895 edition of *The Congregationalist* featured her poem 'America'. In 1910 it was set to the music of Samuel A. Ward and formally published as 'American the Beautiful'. Its popularity incited massive petition drives to make it the national anthem of the US. One of the most beloved patriotic songs ever written, 'American the Beautiful' is likely to be found in the back of every church hymnal in United States. Katharine Lee Bates died in Wellesley, Massachusetts in 1929 at the age of 69. Elementary Schools in both Massachusetts and Colorado bear her name. She was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1970.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate Prior Experience: Have you ever heard the patriotic hymn "America the Beautiful"? Did you know it had first been a poem by Katharine Lee Bates called "America"?
2. Read the biographical information: <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/katharine-lee-bates>
3. Group Discussion: Compare "America the Beautiful" to "The Star-Spangled Banner." Which do you think makes a better national anthem? Explain why.
4. Extend Knowledge: Read every verse of "America the Beautiful" and look up any terms you do not understand: <https://genius.com/Katharine-lee-bates-america-the-beautiful-lyrics>

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. In 1893 Katharine Lee Bates and Katharine Coman visited the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, then rode a train through the Great Plains to Colorado, where they later visited Pikes Peak. Can you find references to these locations in Bates's song?
2. Explore some of the other [LGBTQ poets on the Legacy Project website](#). Explore their resource links to find and read some of their work. Pick any 3 who interest you and write a paper about any similarities you detect among them.
3. Bates's partner, Katharine Coman, was an accomplished economist. Review some of the details of her life and work at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katharine_Coman, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/naming-project/people/coman/>, and, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/coman-katharine>. Compare the ways Coman's and Bates's relationship is described on each website. Why do you think the language differs?
4. Check out the current view from atop Pikes Peak. Does it inspire you the way it did Katharine Lee Bates? <https://coloradosprings.gov/pikespeakcameras>

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Katharine Lee Bates and Katharine Coman lived together in what was called a "Boston Marriage." What is a "Boston Marriage," and why do you think they were important for women a century ago?
2. Read poems from *Yellow Clover*. <https://archive.org/details/yellowcloverabo00bategoog/page/n45/mode/2up> How did Katharine Lee Bates feel about the loss of her partner?
3. Wellesley College, where Bates and Coman both taught, has been a women's college since it was founded in 1836. Do you think its students benefit from an all-woman learning environment? If so, why? If not, why not?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. "The Professors Katharine" (as they were known at Wellesley) supported the Settlement House Movement, which sought to provide much-needed resources in low-income communities like educational, health, and recreational programs. Read about Jane Addams, who brought that Movement to America, at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/jane-addams>. Do you think this concept would work in neighborhoods today?
2. Because "The Star-Spangled Banner" was written by Francis Scott Key – a slaveowner and anti-abolitionist – some people have suggested making "America the Beautiful" the new national anthem. Would you support this change? Write an essay explaining why or why not.
3. Conduct a poll of your friends and family to ask whether it is reasonable to consider the personal life of a historical figure like Katherine Lee Bates when evaluating their work and achievements. Analyze the results based on factors like the age, identity, or orientation of each person you surveyed and discuss what you learned with your class. (TIP: The more people you talk to, the more informative the results will be.)