



Ichabod

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On March 7, 1850, New Hampshire senator Webster gave a noted speech in which he supported the political settlement known as the Missouri Compromise, by which new slave states could enter the Union. Whittier had been a supporter of Webster since the early 1830's and was thunderstruck by his move, as were many abolitionists. In the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, James Russell Lowell demanded rhetorically "Shall not the Recording Angel write *Ichabod* (inglorious one) after the name of this man in the great book of Doom?" Whittier adopted the biblical name as the title for his political denunciation of Webster but expressed his sorrow and anger in other biblical terms. "So fallen! so lost!" the poem opens, "the light withdrawn." Webster is the fallen angel of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), his "bright soul driven, . . . From hope and heaven!" He has lost honor and his followers' love, but Whittier counsels not "passion's stormy rage," "not scorn and wrath" but "pitying tears" and a "long lament" as the nation's response. The disillusioned poet calls his fellows to treat Webster—who is never named—as one who is dead and to "pay the reverence of old days/ To his dead fame. . . ." He ends by referencing the drunken Noah in Genesis, whose sons approached his shameful nakedness walking "backward, with averted gaze" to cover the patriarch's folly. By mentioning neither Webster nor his speech, Whittier universalizes his sense of betrayal in what many consider a classic American poetic political denunciation, also known as a philippic.

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