**7th Form National Poetry Recitation Contest**

**Title of speech**: I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race

**Writer**: William Saroyan

**Link to audio recording of the speech**: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhE1VTAjNvs>

“I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race: this small tribe of unimportant people whose history is ended, whose wars have all been fought and lost, whose structures have crumbled, whose literature is unread, whose music is unheard, whose prayers are no longer uttered. Go ahead, destroy this race. Let us say that it is again 1915, there is war in the world. Destroy Armenia. See if you can do it. Send them from their homes into the desert. Let them have neither bread nor water. Burn their houses and their churches. See if they will not live again. See if they will not laugh again. See if you can stop them from mocking the big ideas of the world. ... Go ahead, try to destroy them. For when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a new Armenia.”

\*Spoken by William Saroyan in the 1991 documentary, “William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer.”

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**About the Writer:** [**http://williamsaroyanfoundation.org/biography**](http://williamsaroyanfoundation.org/biography)

William Saroyan was born in Fresno, California on the last day of August 1908. As he grew up there, an American boy also becoming part of the exiled Armenian tribe, he assimilated the raw material for many of his later stories.

William Saroyan had an undistinguished academic career. When he was twelve years old, little Saroyan read, by chance, the Guy de Maupassant story “The Bell,” and the secret ambition to be a writer started to form. He became, then, a frequent visitor to Fresno’s public library and he learned to touch-type at the Technical School. While still at school he had sold newspapers in his spare time to earn money badly needed by his family, who were living in what he describes, in *My Name is Aram*, as “the most amazing and comical poverty in the world.”

With the coming of the Great Depression he was more committed to writing than ever, and gave up all pretense of following seriously another career. Occasional winnings from gambling supplemented the scant living he earned at this time by working on Saturday market stalls selling vegetables.

By October 1934 Random House was ready to publish The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze and Other Stories. Surprisingly, for a collection of short stories, the book was a best-seller. William Saroyan—or Saroyan, as he now became known—had arrived on the literary scene with a bang.

More collections of short stories (*Inhale and Exhale*; *Three Times Three*; *Little Children*; *Love, Here is My Hat*; *The Trouble with Tigers*; *Peace, It’s Wonderful*) followed against the continuing background of the Depression. Written in a variety of styles and moods, though with the Saroyan voice always clearly in evidence, these early stories established his reputation as a writer with staying power and provided the foundation for the rest of his career. His most successful early collection was *My Name is Aram* (1940), a book presenting in a poetical light the Armenians of his hometown in the days on his boyhood. Having known such conditions himself from an early age he did not see the situation as greatly abnormal, and this, in combination with youthful exuberance and a strong poetic streak always present in his work, helped lift his stories of the Depression well above the level of mere realism or mere criticism of wealth and privilege.

Saroyan’s career as a playwright began in earnest with *My Heart’s in the Highlands* in 1939, a play adapted from one of his best short stories “The Man with the Heart in the Highlands.” The play was well received, most importantly by George Jean Nathan, and was swiftly followed by his great theatrical success, *The Time of Your Life*. This American classic earned for the new playwright the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize (it was the first play to win both), though the latter he declined because of his strong feelings about commerce patronizing the arts.

Late in 1941 he took time off from his theatrical activities to write a film scenario in Hollywood, *The Human Comedy*. The film, starring Mickey Rooney, was a hit, but was hardly to Saroyan’s liking. He turned the script into a novel, which became his most successful book—and ironically the one he was, later on, least happy with because of the patriotic note he had introduced towards the end.

William Saroyan once said that to write was for him simply to stay alive in an interesting way.

In a generous tribute The New York Times, accounting for his genius, described him as “an orphan hurt by a sense of rejection, craving love, and bursting with talent.” The *Times* in London felt that his reputation might come to rest on his later experiments with autobiography. And *Time* magazine (an old enemy) said that “the ease and charm of many of his stories will continue to inspire young writers. It is a legacy beyond criticism.”

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**About the speech**

This speech, made by Saroyan in a TV documentary towards the end of his life, is about how Armenians are resilient and unstoppable.

**Discussion Guide:**

How do Saroyan’s words make you feel?

Can you think of a time apart from 1915 when Armenians have been weakened or destroyed? What happened? How did Armenians find a way to make themselves strong again?

What do you see happening when two Armenians meet? What do they do?