

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Master

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

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Edwin Arlington Robinson's 1909 tribute to Abraham Lincoln, "The Master," takes up the theme of national memory. In the poem, Robinson, a lover of irony, recalls the ridicule Lincoln once endured in light of Americans' newfound appreciation for their 16th president after his successful prosecution of the Civil War and tragic assassination.

One of the most prolific poets of the last century, Robinson (1869–1935) was born in Head Tide, Maine. Robinson's father wanted him to become a businessman or a scientist. In 1891, Robinson left Maine to study at Harvard University, where his desire to write was only strengthened. Several of his initial poems were published in the Harvard Advocate. For the most part, however, the literary community in Boston did not accept his work, and after many rejections, Robinson eventually paid a press to publish his first collection of poems, The Torrent and The Night Before, in 1896 (later republished as The Children of the Night). Robinson, requiring a more substantial and dependable salary, took a job in the New York subway system. Later, after President Theodore Roosevelt gave Robinson's 1902 collection, Captain Craig and Other Poems, a positive review, he received a job offer in the New York Customs Office, courtesy of the president. Over the next several decades, Robinson had great success, beginning in 1916 when he completed The Man against the Sky. In the 1920s, he received the Pulitzer Prize three separate times, in 1922, 1925, and 1928. He died in 1935 in the midst of completing yet another one of his works.

Who is speaking in the poem? How does the speaker(s) describe Lincoln? What kind of leader was he? Why did "we" initially "sneer" at and "revile" him? What did "we" learn about Lincoln that caused us to change our opinion of him? Might Lincoln's own qualities have contributed to our misunderstanding of him? If yes, how so? Do "we" have a clearer understanding of Lincoln than before?

A flying word from here and there
Has sown the name at which we sneered,
But soon the name was everywhere,
To be reviled and then revered:
A presence to be loved and feared,

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We cannot hide it, or deny
That we, the gentlemen who jeered,
May be forgotten by and by.

He came when days were perilous
And hearts of men were sore beguiled;
And having made his note of us,
He pondered and was reconciled.
Was ever master yet so mild
As he, and so untamable?
We doubted, even when he smiled,
Not knowing what he knew so well.

He knew that undeceiving fate
Would shame us whom he served unsought;
He knew that he must wince and wait—
The jest of those for whom he fought;
He knew devoutly what he thought
Of us and of our ridicule;
He knew that we must all be taught
Like little children in a school.

We gave a glamour to the task
That he encountered and saw through,
But little of us did he ask,
And little did we ever do.
And what appears if we review
The season when we railed and chaffed?
It is the face of one who knew
That we were learning while we laughed.

The face that in our vision feels
Again the venom that we flung,
Transfigured to the world reveals
The vigilance to which we clung.
Shrewd, hallowed, harassed, and among
The mysteries that are untold,

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The face we see was never young,
Nor could it ever have been old.

For he, to whom we had applied
Our shopman's test of age and worth,
Was elemental when he died,
As he was ancient at his birth:
The saddest among kings of earth,
Bowed with a galling crown, this man
Met rancor with a cryptic mirth,
Laconic—and Olympian.

The love, the grandeur, and the fame
Are bounded by the world alone;
The calm, the smoldering, and the flame
Of awful patience were his own:
With him they are forever flown
Past all our fond self-shadowings,
Wherewith we cumber the Unknown
As with inept Icarian wings.

For we were not as other men:
'Twas ours to soar and his to see.
But we are coming down again,
And we shall come down pleasantly;
Nor shall we longer disagree
On what it is to be sublime,
But flourish in our perigee
And have one Titan at a time.

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