

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Lincoln

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

One of the first African American writers to come to prominence, poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906) was the son of two escaped slaves from Kentucky. His father escaped from bondage and served in the 55th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment and the 5th Massachusetts Colored Cavalry Regiment during the Civil War. In 1913, Dunbar first published this tribute to Abraham Lincoln.

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What is the “mighty wound” suffered by the nation (lines 1 through 4)? What event compels Lincoln to come forward (lines 5 to 9)? Why does Dunbar compare Lincoln to a poet, a “Mighty Homer of the lyre of war?” For what qualities and deeds does Dunbar celebrate Lincoln?

Hurt was the nation with a mighty wound,
And all her ways were filled with clam'rous sound.
Wailed loud the South with unremitting grief,
And wept the North that could not find relief.
Then madness joined its harshest tone to strife:
A minor note swelled in the song of life.
'Till, stirring with the love that filled his breast,
But still, unflinching at the right's behest,
Grave Lincoln came, strong handed, from afar,
The mighty Homer of the lyre of war.
'Twas he who bade the raging tempest cease,
Wrenched from his harp the harmony of peace,
Muted the strings, that made the discord,—Wrong,
And gave his spirit up in thund'rous song.
Oh mighty Master of the mighty lyre,
Earth heard and trembled at thy strains of fire:
Earth learned of thee what Heav'n already knew,
And wrote thee down among her treasured few.