

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## Martyr

HERMAN MELVILLE

Novelist and poet Herman Melville (1819–91) published this poem a year after Lincoln's assassination. Melville included the poem in a collection on the Civil War, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, and introduced it as "indicative of the Passion of the People on the 15th of April, 1865."

Page | 1

*How does this poem differ from the other poetic tributes to Lincoln? Who is the "they" that "killed him in his pity," and what "Passion of the People" do they unleash? Throughout the poem, Lincoln is identified with Christ, but does his martyrdom bring salvation? Who is the "Avenger"? How does Melville predict the Avenger will respond to Lincoln's assassination?*

Good Friday was the day  
Of the prodigy and crime,  
When they killed him in his pity,  
When they killed him in his prime  
Of clemency and calm—  
When with yearning he was filled  
To redeem the evil-willed,  
And, though conqueror, be kind;  
But they killed him in his kindness,  
In their madness, in their blindness,  
And they killed him from behind.

There is sobbing of the strong,  
And a pall upon the land;  
But the People in their weeping  
Bare the iron hand:  
Beware the People weeping  
When they bare the iron hand.

He lieth in his blood—  
The father in his face;  
They have killed him, the Forgiver—  
The Avenger takes his place,  
The Avenger wisely stern,  
Who in righteousness shall do  
What the heavens call him to,  
And the parricides remand;  
For they killed him in his kindness  
In their madness and their blindness,  
And his blood is on their hand.

There is sobbing of the strong,  
And a pall upon the land;  
But the People in their weeping  
Bare the iron hand:  
Beware the People weeping  
When they bare the iron hand.