

# LINCOLN LORE

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## A CONTRIBUTION TO LINCOLN'S MELANCHOLY

Evidence now available which reveals how Lincoln's early life was a series of tragedies allows one to conclude that even as a lad he had his melancholy as well as his mirthful periods.

A visit which Abraham Lincoln made in 1844 to his old home in Indiana, where he had lived from the time he was seven until he became of age, so impressed him that he was moved to put his reminiscences in verse.

Three poems were inspired by this visit, one the account of a bear hunt in which Lincoln clearly reveals a happy experience of his youth. The opening stanza follows:

A wild-bear chase, didst never see?  
Then hast thou lived in vain—  
Thy richest bump of glorious glee  
Lies desert in thy brain.

The more gloomy aspects of the visit are portrayed in another poem of several verses which concludes with the following four lines:

I range the fields with pensive tread,  
And pace the hollow rooms,  
And feel (companion of the dead)  
I'm living in the tombs.

Another poem, however, which is seldom seen in print, presents one of the most interesting studies of an early influence in his life which may have contributed very much to his melancholy spirit.

Lincoln wrote a letter to a friend which explains the urge to compose the lines which refer to an insane man he knew as a boy. It will be observed by reading this letter that the boy was a schoolmate of Lincoln and but three years older than he. This would make Lincoln but sixteen years old when his associate became violently insane.

The description of how Lincoln heard the moans of the insane boy in the night and would even arise early in the morning before daylight, apparently unknown to his parents, to listen to the mournful song of the stricken playmate, is an incident which child psychologists who would study the origin of Lincoln's melancholy spirit cannot ignore.

The letter explaining the circumstances which caused the writing of the poem, and the poem itself, are presented:

Springfield, September 6, 1846.

Friend Johnston: You remember when I wrote you from Tremont last spring, sending you a little canto of what I called poetry, I promised to bore you with another some time. I now fulfill the promise. The subject of the present one is an insane man; his name is Matthew Gentry. He is three years older than I, and when we were boys we went to school together. He was rather a bright lad, and the son of the rich man of a very poor neighborhood. At the age of nineteen he unaccountably became furiously mad, from which condition he gradually settled down into harmless insanity. When, as I told you

in my other letter, I visited my old home in the fall of 1844, I found him still lingering in this wretched condition. In my poetizing mood, I could not forget the impression his case made upon me. Here is the result.

But here's an object more of dread  
Than aught the grave contains—  
The human form with reason fled.  
While wretched life remains.

When terror spread, and neighbors ran  
Your dangerous strength to bind,  
And soon, a howling, crazy man,  
Your limbs were fast confined:

How then you strove and shrieked aloud,  
Your bones and sinews bared;  
And fiendish on the gazing crowd  
With burning eyeballs glared;

And begged and swore, and wept and prayed,  
With maniac laughter joined;  
How fearful were these signs displayed  
By pangs that killed the mind!

And when at length the drear and long  
Time soothed thy fiercer woes,  
How plaintively thy mournful song  
Upon the still night rose!

I've heard it oft as if I dreamed,  
Far distant, sweet and lone,  
The funeral dirge it ever seemed  
Of reason dead and gone.

To drink its strains I've stole away,  
All stealthily and still,  
Ere yet the rising god of day  
Had streaked the eastern hill.

Air held her breath; trees with the spell  
Seemed sorrowing angels round,  
Whose swelling tears in dewdrops fell  
Upon the listening ground.

But this is past, and naught remains  
That raised thee o'er the brute;  
Thy piercing shrieks and soothing strain  
Are like, forever mute.

Now fare thee well! More thou the cause  
Than subject now of woe.  
All mental pangs by time's kind laws  
Hast lost the power to know.

O death! Thou awe-inspiring prince  
That keepst the world in fear,  
Why dost thou tear more blest ones hence,  
And leave him lingering here?

If I should ever send another, the subject would be a "Bear Hunt".

Yours as ever,  
A. Lincoln.