Ella Sullivan

ENGL 89H

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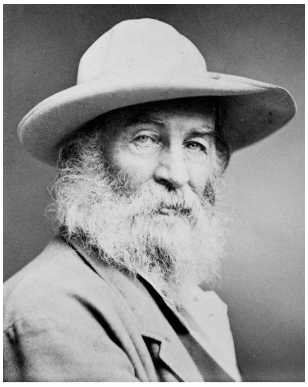
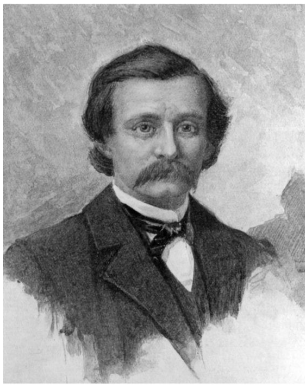
On A Poet Uncelebrated

An Exploration of George Moses Horton and His Civil War Poetry

Born Enslaved



Walt Whitman, c. 1870. Feinberg-Whitman Collection/Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

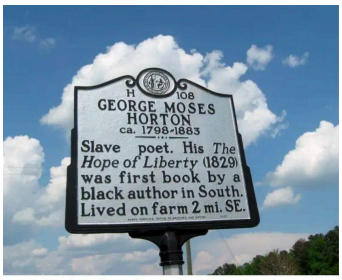


Henry Timrod. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

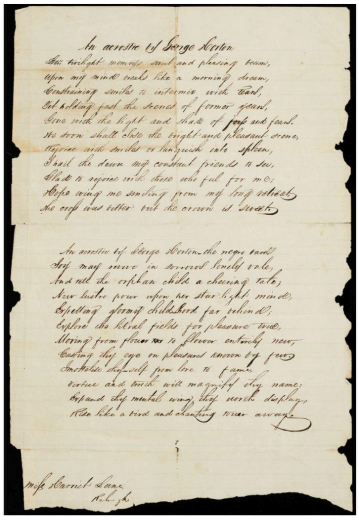
When thinking about Civil War poets, Walt Whitman, "Bard of Democracy," and Henry Timrod, "Poet of the Confederacy," most likely come to mind. However, there is another notable poet of the period far less known. Both Whitman and Timrod write from the perspective of white men, yet the Civil War was fought by, not over, white men. This poet's perspective is one of an enslaved Black man who composed poems in his head before teaching himself to read and write. And although this poet may not be the first published Black person in America, a title held by the enslaved Phillis Wheatley in the North, he is the first Black person to publish a book in the American South. George Moses Horton, "the Black bard of North Carolina," not only overcame the intense hardships and extreme disadvantages the life of a person born into slavery entailed but also went on to write poetry detailing the experiences of an enslaved person in the South, commentating on the Civil War, and pulling from his own lived experiences traveling with the 9th Michigan Cavalry Volunteers. Horton's poetry is an unexplored literary gem waiting to be researched, and Horton deserves to be fully

recognized as one of America's Civil War poets – both due to his unique insight as an enslaved Black man during a time when his rights (or lack thereof) were being fought over and ability to craft beautifully written and highly stylistic poetic compositions.

George Moses Horton was born enslaved in Northampton County, North Carolina, but moved to Chatham County, North Carolina, a few years after his birth when his enslaver, William Horton, Sr., relocated in hopes of more fertile land (*The Poetical Works* 3-4). In Chatham, George Moses Horton worked as a cow-boy for around ten years (*The Poetical Works* 4). Like most enslaved persons of the period, Horton was not taught to read or write; however, he soon became interested in books and slowly taught himself to read (*The Poetical Works* 4). In 1815, ownership of George Moses Horton was transferred from William Horton, Sr. to William's son, James Horton (*The Poetical Works* 13). Under James Horton's enslavement, George Moses Horton began carrying fruit from the Horton plantation to Chapel Hill (*The Poetical Works* 13). Students at the University of North Carolina liked to "prank" slaves bringing goods into Chapel Hill; however, they soon discovered what Horton describes as "a spark of genius" within himself (*The Poetical Works* 14). Horton first addressed the students in prose but soon switched to performing poetry which at first left the students "incredulous" (*The Poetical Works* 14). Horton soon began reciting acrostics for the students which he mentally created while working in the fields; these acrostics cemented Horton's genius for the previously incredulous students (*The Poetical Works* 14). Soon students

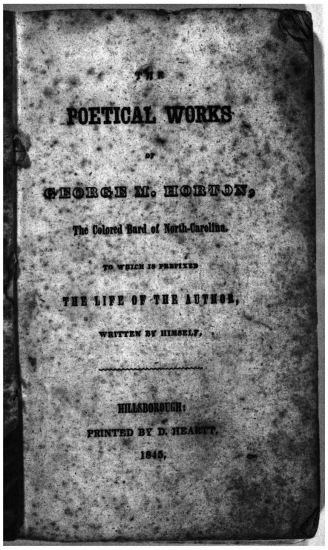


(UNC-Chapel Hill Library)



"An Acrostic by George Horton" for Lucy G. Wright.
(Gillespie and Wright Family Papers, 1735-1990, Wilson Special Collections Library.)

began writing Horton's poetry while he dictated as he still could not write (*The Poetical Works* 14). Students and faculty of the University also gifted books to Horton whose influence can be seen in Horton's poetry when he uses allusions. Slowly, Horton gained recognition across Chapel Hill and later some recognition nationally (*The Poetical Works* 15). Horton notably praised Caroline Hentz, poet and professor's wife, for helping spread his work by sending his work to the North for publication in papers (*The Poetical Works* 17). Soon Hentz and Joseph Gale, publisher of the *Raleigh Register*, devised a plan to purchase Horton's freedom and send him to Liberia, a state founded by the American Colonization Society (Walser 3). Funds were collected from members of the American Colonization Society and Gale published Horton's first book, *The Hope of Liberty*, but funds were insufficient as James Horton was unwilling to sell George Moses Horton (Walser 4). James Horton eventually let George Moses Horton hire his own time for 25 cents a day, a price that doubled to 50 cents upon James Horton's death and George Moses Horton's subsequent change in ownership to James' son, Hall Horton (Walser 4). To offset this increase in price, Horton published *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina: To Which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, Written by Himself* in 1845 (Walser 5). Horton never stopped searching for his freedom while working in Chapel Hill, as indicated by letters in which Horton asks notable society figures to buy his freedom – these letters were given to University President David Swain, yet he never sent them to their intended recipients (Walser 5). Little is known of Horton's activities during the Civil War, but in April 1865, Horton met Will H.S. Banks, a captain of the 9th Michigan Cavalry Volunteers stationed in Chapel Hill (Walser 6). Banks enjoyed Horton's


THE
POETICAL WORKS
OF
GEORGE M. HORTON,
The Colored Bard of North-Carolina.
TO WHICH IS PREFIXED
THE LIFE OF THE AUTHOR,
WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.
HILLSBOROUGH:
PRINTED BY D. HEARTT.
1845.

Title page of *The Poetical Works.* (Portrait Collection, circa 1720-1997. Wilson Special Collections Library.)

poetry and sponsored the publication of Horton's third and final book, *Naked Genius*, working as editor (Walser 6). *Naked Genius* was published in Raleigh by William B. Smith and featured many poems specific to the Civil War (Walser 6). Horton then traveled North with Banks, eventually ending up in Philadelphia, where the history of Horton's life become less clear (Walser 6).

Naked Genius contains 132 poems, of which 42 were previously published in *The Poetical Works*. The book begins with a preface explaining the book's publication and states the book "will be offered to the public as one of the many proofs that God, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, created the Black man for a higher and nobler purpose than to toil his life away under the galling yoke of slavery" (*Naked Genius* 1). Poems within the volume vary in topic; however, the majority of the poems focus on slavery and the Civil War. Horton's poetry on the Civil War is very idiosyncratic when compared with the background of the author. While writing the poems, Horton was enslaved or newly freed, yet he is still able to show an immense amount of compassion towards the Confederates who were fighting to continue his enslavement. A particularly visible example of this is seen in the dedication of the poem, "Like Brothers We Meet," which begins with Horton writing, "Dedicated to the Federal and Late Confederate Soldiers" ("Like Brothers We Meet" 1). The poem goes on to describe soldiers on both sides of the war coming home and accepting each other as brothers, lamenting the deep rift created in the nation due to the Civil War. In addition to

"Allegory of Freedom"
(1863 or after, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art.)

"Like Brothers We Meet," three particularly interesting poems from the collection are "Jefferson in a Tight Place," "Lincoln is Dead," and "The Union of Parties." These three poems all highlight different moments of the Civil War and are spoken not only from the perspective of an enslaved man but also from an American.

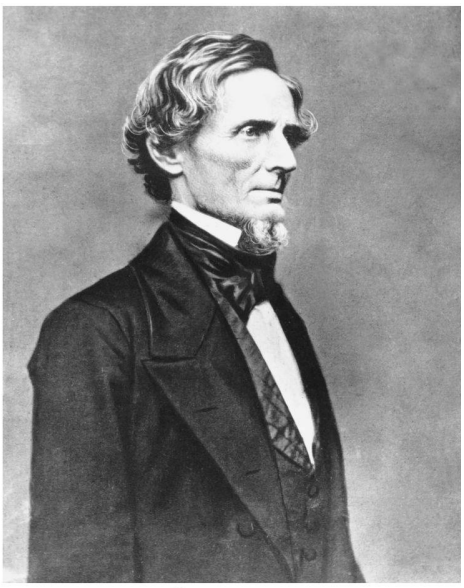
The Ridicule of a Crownless King

> **"Jefferson in a Tight Place."**
>
> **The Fox is Caught.**
>
> The blood hounds, long upon the trail,
> Have rambled faithful hill and dale,
> But mind, such creatures never fail,
> To run the rebel down.
> His fears forbid him long to stop,
> Altho' he gains the mountain top,
> He soon is made his tail to drop,
> And fleets to leave the hounds.
>
> Alas! he speeds from place to place,
> Such is the fox upon the chase;
> To him the mud is no disgrace,
> No lair his cause defends.
> He leaves a law and seeks a dell,

> And where to fly ‘tis hard to tell;
>
> He fears before to meet with hell,
>
> Behind he has no friends.
>
> But who can pity such a fox,
>
> Though buried among the rocks;
>
> He’s a nuisance among the flocks,
>
> And sucks the blood of geese.
>
> He takes advantage of the sheep,
>
> His nature is at night to creep,
>
> And rob the flocks while the herdsmen sleep,
>
> When dogs can have no peace.
>
> But he is now brought to a bay,
>
> However fast he run away,
>
> He knows he has not long to stay,
>
> And assumes a racoon’s dress.
>
> Found in a hole, he veils his face,
>
> And fain would take a lady’s place,
>
> But fails for he has run his race,
>
> And falls into distress.
>
> The fox is captured in his den,

> The martial troops of Michigan,
>
> May hence be known the fleetest men,
>
> For Davis is their prey.
>
> Great Babylon has fallen down,
>
> A King is left without a crown,
>
> Stripped of honors and renown,
>
> The evening ends the day.

"Jefferson in a Tight Place" acts as an extended metaphor, mocking President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, after his capture. Horton mirrors history and rumors of the time within the poem, detailing Davis' failed attempt to evade capture. The main literary device throughout the poem is of course the extended metaphor in which Horton compares Davis to a fox. However, Horton's metrical structure and rhyme scheme also contribute to the "story" aspect of the poem. The stanzas in "Jefferson in a Tight Place" are made up of three lines of iambic tetrameter followed by one line of iambic trimeter repeated an additional time. The rhyme scheme also follows a rigid pattern of AAABCCCB. The use of rhyme and iambic meter makes the poem feel like a song or child's tale. Reducing Davis' story to a child's tale through style and figurative language is an insult in itself; however, the fact that Horton, a formerly enslaved man, is the one mocking Davis, the previous

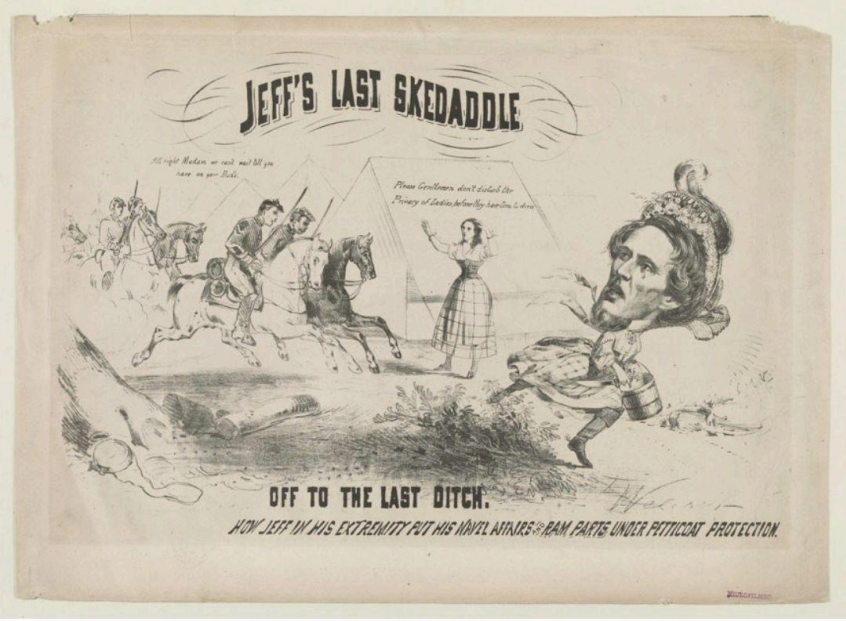


Jefferson Davis.
(National Archives, Washington, D.C.)

President of the Confederacy, with no punishment, is an even bigger blow to those who supported the Confederacy.

Stanzas one through four of “Jefferson in a Tight Place” detail the story of a fox on the run from blood hounds. The poem’s speaker notes that the blood hounds will win in the end, expressing a belief that good (in this case, the Union) will always win, saying “such creatures never fail, / To run the rebel down” (“Jefferson in a Tight Place” 3-4). This belief would have been particularly felt by Horton at the time due to his own rescue by and travel with the 9th Michigan Cavalry Volunteers who took Horton away from enslavement which he had been trying so long to escape from. The speaker then continues describing the fox’s attempt at escape, inserting small jabs at Davis within the description. This is first seen when the speaker says, “To him (the fox / Davis) the mud is no disgrace, / No lair his cause defends” (“Jefferson in a Tight Place” 11-12). In these lines, the speaker insults Davis, saying he finds no shame in fleeing and implies Davis lacks true devotion to the Confederacy since he so easily fled in an attempt to save himself. The speaker then says, “He (the fox / Davis) fears before to meet with hell, / Behind he has no friends,” highlighting the fact Davis is scared of the repercussions of his actions post-defeat and emphasizing how Davis is no longer respected in the Confederacy due to his fearfulness and desertion. In stanza three, Horton attacks Davis’ character. The speaker says the fox “sucks the blood of geese. / He takes advantage of the sheep” (“Jefferson in a Tight Place” 20-21). This metaphorical comparison stresses how Davis’ actions are held deep within and are natural traits. Sucking geese's blood is a gruesome image that shows a negatively connotated animal (the fox) attacking an innocently connotated animal (the geese). This, in addition to the speaker’s use of the phrase “take advantage” in reference to the sheep, alludes to Horton’s feeling that Davis (the fox), attacked and mistreated enslaved people (the geese and sheep).

Stanza four is arguably the most historically interesting in the poem, as Horton discusses Davis' attempt to escape disguised through the metaphor. The historical moment captured in this stanza is the popular rumor of the period that claimed Davis disguised himself in a dress and additional women's garb to evade capture (Fosset). In reality, Davis grabbed his wife's overcoat when fleeing for warmth. This truth, however, was heavily embellished and exaggerated in papers and political cartoons of the time (Fosset). The true scope of this rumor can be seen in stanza four when Horton refers to the incident – highlighting both how far Davis' mockery went and how informed Horton was of political happenings of the period. The speaker describes this moment by saying, "(the fox) assumes a raccoon's dress. / Found in a hole, he veils his face, / And fain would take a lady's place" ("Jefferson in a Tight Place" 28-30). The diction within these lines further denigrates Davis as "veils" acts effeminately and "fain" highlights the pleasure Davis would have taken in truly being able to disguise himself as a woman.



(Library of Congress)

The concluding stanza of "Jefferson in a Tight Place" diverges from the metaphor and explains Davis' escape more historically. The speaker notes that "the fox" was captured by "the

martial troops of Michigan" ("Jefferson in a Tight Place" 34). This line is historically accurate as the 4th Michigan Calvary helped capture Davis in Georgia ("Michigan in the Civil War"). The speaker then discusses the subsequent impacts of the capture saying, "Great Babylon has fallen down, / A King is left without a crown, / Stripped of honors and renown" ("Jefferson in a Tight Place 37-39). Here, Horton created an additional metaphor comparing the Confederacy to Babylon and Davis to a king. This specific reference points to the 539 B.C. fall of Babylon described in the Bible as, "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird" (Revelations 18:2). Within Christianity, Babylon is painted in a negative light many times, most notably in the story of the Tower of Babel. The fall, in turn, freed thousands of Jews who had been held captive in Babylon for over half a century (History.com Editors). Horton compared the American enslavement of Black people to the Biblical descriptions of the Jews' struggles many times in his poetry, so the comparison highlights how the innocent will be freed when evil is defeated. Calling Davis a "king" seems to align most closely with the story of King Nebuchadnezzar II, the Babylonian ruler who originally held Jews captive in Babylonia, furthering the comparison between those enslaved in America and the Jews of the Bible; however, the comparison does not extend to Davis' downfall, as Nebuchadnezzar II died of an illness while still holding great power (History.com Editors). Horton's use of Biblical metaphor contrasts with the poem's main

"The Liberation of the Slaves."
(Engraving by C.H. Jeens after H. Le Jeune, 1847.)

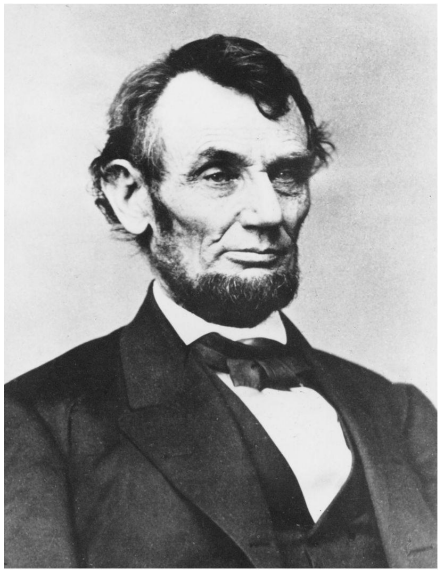
metaphor comparing Davis to a fox but serves the poem in a different way as it condemns Davis' legacy to that of Babylon's legacy in the Bible.

An Ode to the Great Emancipator

> **"Lincoln is Dead."**
>
> He is gone, the strong base of the nation,
> The dove to his covet has fled;
> Ye heroes lament his privation,
> For Lincoln is dead.
>
> He is gone down, the sun of the Union,
> Like Phoebus, that sets in the west;
> The planet of peace and commotion,
> Forever has gone to his rest.
>
> He is gone from a world of commotion,
> No equal succeeds in his stead;
> His wonders extend with the ocean,
> Whose waves murmur, Lincoln is dead.
>
> He is gone and can ne'er be forgotten,
> Whose great deeds eternal shall bloom;

> When gold, pearls and diamonds are rotten,
>
> His deeds will break fresh from the tomb.
>
> He is gone out of glory to glory,
>
> A smile with the tear may be shed;
>
> O, then let us tell the sweet story,
>
> Triumphantly Lincoln is dead.

In “Lincoln is Dead,” Horton mourns the loss of “his emancipator” while also honoring his achievements. The poem reads as a Horatian ode with a very intimate feel as if the speaker is truly acquainted with Lincoln. “Lincoln is Dead” has an ABAB rhyme scheme and is iambic in meter. Overall, the poem’s syllable count from line to line is 10 / 8 / 9 / 8; however, there are two tiny breaks to this pattern in lines four and thirteen. The organization and repetition of the poem align with those of the traditional Horatian ode. Whether Horton knowingly wrote in or knew of this form is unknown. However, the form greatly aids Horton’s appraisal of Lincoln by emphasizing individual attributes and comparisons.



Abraham Lincoln.
(Photograph by Mathew Brady.
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

These comparisons begin when Horton calls Lincoln “the strong base of the nation,” immediately preparing the reader for political commentary (“Lincoln is Dead” 1). Yet the comparisons that follow are much less political in nature. Stanza two compares Lincoln to the sun, setting and rising. The stanza is also infused with Greek mythology saying, “the sun of the

Union, / Like Phoebus, that sets in the west" ("Lincoln is Dead" 5-6). Phoebus is the primary epithet of the Greek god Apollo and translates to "bright" (Augustyn). Due to Phoebus' translation, Apollo is commonly referred to by his epithet in poetry in an attempt to evoke a connection to the sun (Augustyn). In addition to Phoebus' translation, Apollo "was the god of divine distance—the god who made mortals aware of their own guilt and purified them of it, who presided over religious law and the constitutions of cities, and who communicated with mortals his knowledge of the future and the will of his father, Zeus" (Augustyn). By comparing Lincoln to Apollo, Horton painted Lincoln as a valiant and moral leader who purified the country of its sins through emancipation.

Additional comparisons are seen in stanzas two and three when Horton compares Lincoln's death to a planet finally resting and his legacy to the neverending "murmur" of waves in the ocean ("Lincoln is Dead" 7-12). Stanza four's metaphor is much more coded saying "when gold, pearls and diamonds are rotten, / His deeds will break fresh from the tomb" ("Lincoln is Dead" 15-16). When Horton says gold, pearls, and diamonds are rotten, he is alluding to a world that is no longer good. Horton then details how Lincoln's "deeds" will be rediscovered in these bad times, implying that Lincoln's legacy will continually reappear to save the nation. The way Horton words this rediscovery is also of interest as "break fresh from the tomb" is reminiscent of Jesus' resurrection as detailed in John 20:1-18. Horton's arraignment seems to indicate a belief that Lincoln's legacy itself will be strong enough to resurrect itself in times of need, truly showing how deeply Horton respected Lincoln and all that he did.

"Lincoln is Dead" concludes with reverent remembrance as Horton urges America to remember Lincoln's "sweet story" ("Lincoln is Dead 19). The final line of the poem reads "triumphantly Lincoln is dead," connecting to the final line in stanza one that also states that

Lincoln is dead ("Lincoln is Dead" 20). Horton's use of the word "triumphantly" is also noteworthy as the term is not often used in relation to death. However, in this context, "triumphantly" is used for "rejoicing for or celebrating victory" – all of Lincoln's achievements and the victory they hold to people like Horton (Merriam-Webster). It again indicates the true depth of Horton's emotions towards Lincoln.

A Path Forward

> **"The Union of Parties."**
>
> Like rivers in conflux, let parties now blend,
> Who e'ver was a foe, let him not be a friend;
> In one tide of glory, together all mix,
> The system of concord completely to fix;
> Let us all meet together, and all sing together –
> In the Union.
>
> Like the union of heaven, the moon and the sun,
> At times meet together, a short race to run;
> Let us all run together, but not to divide,
> That one in the other may safely confide;
> Let us all come together, and all sing together –
> In the Union.

> Meet the lamb and the dove at the national bar,
>
> No thunder of faction their system shall jar;
>
> Like bright constellation in cluster to shine,
>
> Fill the last crash of nature to flow and refine;
>
> Let us all walk together, and all sing together –
>
> In the Union.
>
> We'll mingle in wedlock, we'll mingle in prayer,
>
> To interdict marriage what moral shall dare;
>
> No longer divided the nation shall be,
>
> Let all go together, by land and by sea;
>
> Let us all go together, and all stick together –
>
> In the Union.
>
> How sweet is the union in heaven we see,
>
> The planets in ether unwavering we see;
>
> In this concentration, harmonious they move,
>
> In wonderful concord, the union of love;
>
> Then we'll all walk together, and all sing together –
>
> In the Union.

This final poem differs from the previous two as it does not focus on an individual political figure but on the nation's path forward. "The Union of Parties" calls the nation together in an

attempt to fix the divisions created during the Civil War. The poem's rhyme scheme is consistently AABBCD, but the poem's metrics are not as concrete. Within each stanza, lines one through four feature 11 to 12 syllables (with no distinguishable pattern), line five features 13 syllables, and line six features four syllables while acting as the poem's refrain.

"The Union of Parties" relies heavily on comparisons. The first words of the poem are evidence of this, saying "like rivers in conflux, let parties now blend" ("The Union of Parties" 1). Here, the speaker indicates hope that the parties – Union and Confederacy – will blend together in the wake of the fighting. This hope is heightened throughout the first stanza as the speaker indicates the Union's win is a win for all saying, "in one tide of glory, together all mix" ("The Union of Parties" 3). Stanza two begins with a simile relating the hope of a post-Civil War union reminiscent of "the union of heaven, the moon and the sun" ("The Union of Parties" 7). This comparison is very imagistic and indicates how the speaker feels when they look towards the sky, a union of heaven, sun, and moon. A successful union is further illustrated in stanza two when the speaker emphasizes the importance of "not to divide" and how both sides need to be able to "safely confide" in one another ("The Union of Parties" 9-10). Stanza three starts with a new metaphor saying, "meet the lamb and the dove at the national bar" ("The Union of Parties" 13). Horton's choice of representational animal is interesting as both lambs and doves are highly connected to Christianity. Within the Christian faith, a lamb represents Jesus as suffering and triumphant while doves act "as a

"The Ghent Altarpiece" or "Adoration of the Mystic Lamb."
(Jan van Eyck, 1432. The Bridgeman Art Library.)

representation of Israel, atoning sacrifice, suffering, a sign from God, fertility and the spirit of God" (Protas, Willette). Although reference to the union of a lamb and dove can hold many different meanings, Horton seems to highlight the dichotomy of a nation trying to bring together sinner and savior, defeated and triumphant. Christian allusions continue into the following stanza where Horton describes how the Union and Confederacy will now "mingle in wedlock" and "mingle in prayer" ("The Union of Parties" 19). Mingling in wedlock aims to emphasize the nation's need to act like a couple or joint unit. Christian marriages are public celebrations of faith and commitment, both attributes a post-Civil War America would need to heal. Mingling in prayer leans into repentance and forgiveness, again, both attributes needed in a post-Civil War America. The final stanza of "The Union of Parties" again emphasizes the speaker's wish for a united America, no longer separated by Union and Confederacy. Diction like "concord," "harmonious," and "the union of love" all indicate this ("The Union of Parties" 27-28). Horton also uses distinct imagery saying, "the planets in ether unwavering we see" ("The Union of Parties" 26). The ability to see planets in the sky indicates an extremely clear day weather-wise, and Horton alludes to a day when America is no longer plagued by the problems of the Civil War.

"The Union of Parties" concludes by saying, "then we all walk together, and all sing together – / In the Union" ("The Union of Parties" 29-30). Like the poem's previous refrains, the final refrain acts as a call to action, a desperate plea for togetherness. Throughout the poem, Horton indicates an extreme level of concern for the country's future. He knew the nation was already headed down a path of division and hoped that something would change that route. Within the poem, Horton pushed past societal boundaries like changing relationships between enslaver and

enslaved to address a larger national issue that could truly divide the country or cause another Civil War.

"Emancipation."
(Thomas Nast, 1863. Library of Congress.)

Died a Poet

Poems like "The Union of Parties," "Lincoln is Dead," and "Jefferson in a Tight Place" all highlight Horton's own observations of the period and deep understanding of relevant political happenings. *Naked Genius* is full of additional poems, like the three examined above that touch on varying topics of the Civil War – from acrostics written to soldiers' sweethearts to reflective poems on the night before a slave is sold to poems on Horton's experiences traveling with the 9th Michigan Cavalry Volunteers. The variety of topics and unique perspectives of Horton's poems

are an opportunity for the expansion of history. Researching previously unheard voices allows for additional truth to come to light. Horton's poetry captures moments those other period poets could not – both due to experience and skin color. George Moses Horton truly is a Civil War poet and deserves to be treated as one alongside Walt Whitman and Henry Timrod. George Moses Horton deserves the recognition his white peers received in history, if not more due to the unimaginable hardships Horton had to hurtle to create the poems he did. Born enslaved, died a poet – George Moses Horton is a crucial part of the American story, a part begging to be explored.

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