

# UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

---

Volume 2  
Number 2 *Forum Theme: Masculinities:  
Violences, Variations, and Visions*

---

Article 8

9-2006

## A Review by Thomas Hockey of Lincoln's Melancholy, by Joshua Wolf Shenk

Thomas Hockey  
*University of Northern Iowa*, [thomas.hockey@uni.edu](mailto:thomas.hockey@uni.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas>

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

Copyright ©2006 Thomas Hockey

---

### Recommended Citation

Hockey, Thomas (2006) "A Review by Thomas Hockey of Lincoln's Melancholy, by Joshua Wolf Shenk," *UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*. Vol. 2: No. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas/vol2/iss2/8>

This Reviews and Responses is brought to you for free and open access by UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

**Offensive Materials Statement:** Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.



# UNIVERSITAS

**Joshua Wolf Shenk, *Lincoln's Melancholy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005**

Reviewed by Thomas Hockey

Students do not always approach professors' offices for help with their homework. Or with questions about the upcoming test. Sometimes their visits are more confessional, with the goal being atonement for the "sins" of poor academic performance. One thing that I found striking in the just-completed school year was the number of young people who self-divulged their mental illness, or treatment for mental disorders. While such a revelation was a rare, every-year-or-two phenomenon for much of my teaching career, in 2005/2006 its frequency jumped tenfold.

Mental problems are finally something we *talk* about. Apologetically. With unnecessary embarrassment. In hushed tones of confidence. But we are starting to talk about them. And write about them.

The year 2005/2006 also saw the publication of *Lincoln's Melancholy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin). It is an examination of an American icon's experience with depression. The author acknowledges and tries to avoid the psycho-history applied to prominent figures twenty years ago—when we learned all about Thomas Jefferson's sex life and so on. Instead, Joshua Wolf Shenk details Abraham Lincoln's episodes of depression, its evolution, and his reaction to it, aptly summarized in the book's subtitle: *How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness*. It is not a biography of Lincoln. (We have plenty of those.) It is a biography of one man's "disease"—a famous man who could be "any man."

When students tell me that they are suffering from depression, they probably do not know that I was diagnosed with depression more than ten years ago. This is a fact about myself that I neither advertise nor hide. It is just part of being me. Happily, this monopolar disorder is readily treatable with medication. Those medications did not exist at the time of my dysthymia's onset, likely when I was the age of my present students. This is a typical age for first depressive episodes. Such was the case for Lincoln.

However, in Lincoln's time, there was no "depression." There was "melancholy," a word that has since slipped from our modern vocabulary. Melancholy was not so much a disease as a disposition. The nineteenth century was not medically too distant from Galen and his philosophy of bodily humors. Melancholy was supposedly a manifestation of the body's balance of these humors. This character may have been with us since birth. Just as (in the nineteenth century) a prince might be born a prince and not a pauper, and a man might grow tall or remain short, so was a person melancholic (or some other stereotype). One questioned that fact as little as one questioned one's adult height or economic status in the Age of Lincoln.

Joshua Shenk points out that melancholy carried different baggage than does depression today. While most contemporaries recognized Lincoln's melancholic personality, the sum of its traits was value neutral. A melancholic person might seem downbeat or distracted, but at the same time he might seem learned, creative, or wise. An entire set of both useful and less-than-useful characteristics were tied up in that one word: melancholy.

This is not to say that Lincoln did not seek professional relief to alleviate the symptoms of melancholy. However, these harsh and unconventional treatments were on the medical fringe.

In Lincoln's case, they were also a failure. Only after Freud would mental disease become the (step)child of the medical establishment.

Shenk is not a scholar, but does a scholarly job in deconstructing the sources on Lincoln, extracting Lincoln's melancholy, as it lurks like a literary character hidden in the shadows of documentation. The standard story of Lincoln is a wave with peaks and troughs: The man splits rails, debates Douglas, and wins the Civil War before he is shot dead. Yet it is the troughs—the gaps in the tale—where we find the melancholy. However, Lincoln did not do anything “famous” while he was incapacitated by depression, and our political history dotes on the acts of fame, not the interludes between them.

On the other hand, Shenk is a very good writer who gives structure to a story that has no real plot. Shenk never identifies himself as a dysthymic; nevertheless his words *naïl* this disease, which, as much or more than any other human experience, defies written description.

Just as interesting as the narrative of *Lincoln's Melancholy*, is the saga of the historiography behind it. “My” Abraham Lincoln was the silhouette on the penny that pitched February clearance sales. My Abraham Lincoln did his homework on a slate—“What's a slate?” the second-grader in me asked. My Abraham Lincoln exhibited no character other than saintliness and was a complete bore to any pubescent school kid.

Lincoln's contemporaries saw him in an entirely different light. “Lincoln's melancholy” was the regular stuff of gossip, newspaper articles, reminiscences, and legend. People who were lucky enough to have seen photographs of Lincoln—photography being a newly invented technology—looked at them, and saw what we have taught ourselves to ignore in each and every example: his profound sadness.

It was only in the last (modern!) century that the possibility that there might be something “wrong” with our poster-boy President caused any historical concern. It was then, after eyewitnesses had died and melancholy had become anachronistic, that Lincoln's lifelong fight for mental wellbeing was expunged.

Instead, we were presented with an orthodox Lincoln who was the very opposite of melancholy. The genius of his rhetorical skill was predicated on using humor to favorably predispose an audience. We remember Lincoln's jokes, forgetting that mirth is a common tool for fending off depression. Most everyone knows a Lincoln anecdote. But did you know he could also write this?

*My childhood's home I see again,  
And gladden with the view;  
And still, as memory crowds my brain,  
There's sadness in it too.*

*O Memory! Thou midway world  
'Twixt earth and paradise,  
Where things decayed and loved ones lost  
In dreamy shadows rise.*

*I hear the loved survivors tell  
How naught from death could save,  
Till every sound appears a knell,  
And every spot a grave.*

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

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

*And now away to seek some scene  
Less painful than the last—  
With less of horror mingled in  
The present and the past*

*The very spot where grew the bread  
That formed my bones, I see  
How strange, old field, on thee to tread  
And feel I'm part of thee.<sup>1\*</sup>*

I did not.

More recently, historians have ventured that Lincoln did “what Lincoln did” despite mental distress. Shenk takes the next, controversial step: Lincoln may have been the Lincoln we remember just as much *because* of his depression as in spite of it. We are the sum of our parts. All of them.

I do not believe that my students are any more depressed today than they were a decade ago. They may be recognizing it more readily in 2006—a step forward, I can say from experience.

Abraham Lincoln knew his depression intimately. He never cured it. He never understood it. Yet he did great things with it.

It is tempting to write at this point something like “Author Shenk shows us that if Lincoln could overcome the debilitation of mental disorder . . . “ Yet I cannot make myself complete the sentence. Readers of *Lincoln's Melancholy* will close the last page having no doubt that Lincoln would have traded everything—immortality in granite, the freed slaves, Gettysburg on the back of an envelope—to be rid of this particular burden. And that is what, for me, makes this book more “real” than much of what passes for whiggish American history. Real history is contingent—just like everything my students will and will not do in their lives, thereafter the moment they quietly slip out of my office.

*Thomas Hockey is a Professor of Astronomy at the University of Northern Iowa*

---

\* Quoted from Basler, Roy P., ed. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. 9 vols. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953.