

The House Top by Herman Melville

In this poem, Herman Melville describes the 1863 New York City Draft Riot.

1. Underline phrases that Herman Melville uses to describe the rioters.
2. What is Melville's view of the rioters?
3. What is Melville's view of what happened at the end of the riots?
4. Do you agree with Melville? Explain.

No sleep. The sultriness pervades the air
And binds the brain -a dense oppression, such
As tawny tigers feel in matted shades,
Vexing their blood and making apt for ravage.
Beneath the stars the roofty desert spreads
Vacant as Libya. All is hushed near by.
Yet fitfully from far breaks a mixed surf
Of muffled sound, the atheist roar of riot.
Yonder, where parching Sirius set in drought
Balefully glares red Arson -there -and there.
The town is taken by its rats -ship-rats
And rats of the wharves. All civil charms
And priestly spells which late held hearts in awe -
Fear-bound, subjected to a better sway
Than sway of self; these like a dream dissolve,
And man rebounds whole aeons back in nature.
Hail to the low dull rumble, dull and dead,
And ponderous drag that shakes the wall.
Wise Draco comes, deep in the midnight roll
Of black artillery; he comes, though late;
In code corroborating Calvin's creed
And cynic tyrannies of honest kings;
He comes, nor parleys; and the town, redeemed,
Gives thanks devout; nor, being thankful, heeds
The grimy slur on the Republic's faith implied,
Which holds that Man is naturally good,
And -more -is Nature's Roman, never to be scourged.