



## **UNITY AND DIVISION: THE PURSUIT OF DEMOCRATIC IDEALS IN WALT WHITMAN'S CIVIL WAR POETICS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the intricate relationship between unity and division in Walt Whitman's poetic engagement with the Civil War, particularly through his work *Drum-Taps*. Whitman's poetry serves as a lens to examine the evolving American democratic ideals amid the tumult of war. While deeply invested in the themes of freedom, equality, and democracy, Whitman's works also reflect the complexities and contradictions inherent in these ideals when faced with the reality of a nation at war with itself. Through an analysis of *Drum-Taps*, this study delves into Whitman's portrayal of the democratic spirit, the impact of the Civil War on national identity, and the poet's role as a mediator between individual and collective experiences of war.

**Keywords:** Walt Whitman, Civil War, Democracy, Unity and Division, *Drum-Taps*, National Identity, Freedom, Equality, Poetic Mediation,

### **Introduction**

*“Over the carnage rose prophetic a voice,*

*Be not disheartened, affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet, Those who love each other shall become invincible,*

*They shall yet make Columbia victorious*

(Over the Carnage Rose a Prophetic Voice”

(Walt Whitman.1986:315).

In the early 17th and 18th centuries, the United States was still in its clumsy early years, hardly a nation. The newly "united" unified States had not yet developed a distinct character or identity. British Victorianism, which advocated stringent moral standards and frowned upon mention of sexuality, had a significant impact on the prevalent views on sexuality during that era. But new American writers were breaking through, and their voices would be distinct from those of other English-language writers. They sought to provide a fresh perspective on America on the global stage.

For many, Walt Whitman is the quintessential American poet. He praised the young nation in his poems and adored America and all things uniquely American. The man and his art go hand in hand; his poetry was a celebration of the person as well. It lacked the distinctively American flavour that is characteristic of democracies, in which Whitman also had firm faith. A major inspiration for Whitman's poetry came from democratic ideals. By addressing the "inherent conflict between the individual and the universe...at the level of the transpersonal self, where the individual being himself is also the self of all," Whitman poetically and democratically overcomes this contradiction. Each person is fundamentally integrated with the cosmos (V.K. Chari.1967:127).

In this chapter, we trace the causes of Whitman's democratic principles' downfall, beginning with the effects of the Civil War. Whitman seemed dissatisfied. He bemoans democratic democracy's shortcomings. He mainly believes in his democracy's principles and its capacity to produce people whose love would build the perfect democratic society via brotherly love. Whitman sought to mediate the conflict with *Drum-Taps* in the hopes that the publication of his war memoirs—and, by implication, the Civil War as a whole—would bring the nation back together. A new democratic society that broke away from corrupt antebellum America would be embraced by its population. Additionally, it included the ideals embodied by the troops in Whitman's poetry.

*Leaves of Grass* is basically an ongoing poem, with each new edition symbolising a distinct era in the poet's and the nation's existence. The poetry of Walt Whitman written during the Civil War is a prime example of this. They were



first published in 1865 as *Drum-Taps*, a standalone book. But it was incorporated into *Leaves of Grass* later on, and its significance in the novel increased as Whitman began to understand the historical relevance of the conflict. He would later assert that the four-year conflict is central to *Leaves of Grass*; I was a part of it, and it becomes crucial to the remainder of the story in *Drum-Taps*.

*"I consider the war of attempted secession, 1860–65, not as a struggle of two distinct and separate peoples, but a conflict (often happening and very fierce) between the passions and paradoxes of one and the same identity – perhaps the only terms on which that identity could really become fused, homogeneous and lasting"* (Walt Whitman.1964: 426–7).

An enduring conundrum inside the US itself—the constitution of sovereign states under a federal system—extended to the individual and national poles. For half of his life, Whitman debated the political standing of the accumulation, and one of his favourite titles for the country was "these States," which highlights both the variety of national identities and its augmentative character. The United States' internal consistency was called into doubt even before Whitman started writing, when the American democratic system was put to the test during the Civil War.

His bravery in posing as an optimist is all the more remarkable given that he lived in a country that was acutely aware of its own identity crisis due to its impending breakup. He shows his stronger conviction in the notion of the States by writing in the modifications to the note book, "the nation one and indivisible, whatever happens." This statement highlights the reality that the nation's fundamental identity had not yet been attained. As the war dragged on, the gap between the "one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all" and the generations of Americans who had never known freedom widened, making the political result and the continuation of the nation largely irrelevant.

According to Whitman, the real United States of America was born out of the Union fight, and his poetry also sprang to life at this time. The statement "his book and the war are one" (Walt Whitman.1986:05) is his official statement. "*Leaves of Grass*"—not *Drum-Taps*—is what he means. The diversity of humanity he sees on the battlefield and in the hospitals is borne out by his optimistic assessments of the struggle; the very troops he mourns provide him faith in the nation's character, which he believes will be rejuvenated after the war ends.

The Civil War, in his politically charged and personally charged perspective, brought about the democratisation of America that he had hoped his poetry would bring about. "Many of the societal problems that his earlier poems sought to address were swept away by it. He loved to use the metaphor of a thunderstorm—clearing the air—to describe the battle. It seemed to have eliminated many of the prewar issues plaguing North, particularly Manhattan. Secession vs. Union became the muddled, ever-changing subject of states' rights vs. national authority. It galvanised the majority of Northerners to support the unity dream he had held dear for so long. It united almost every American, regardless of their political leanings, in a shared sacrifice and heroic deed" (Reynolds David S.1996:413–1414).

For Whitman, the nation's identity is inseparable from his own poetic self-understanding. As expressed in his prose book *Democratic Vistas*, a wonderfully harsh, resoundingly harsh condemnation of the United States under Reconstruction, the poet has a duty to play in correcting the provisional identity of the States that persists after the war. An essential legal point critical to comprehending the Civil War was that the United States Constitution and foundational papers, or the "compact," according to Whitman, were not only words but also their interpretation.

In *Democratic Vistas*, he argues, among other things, that following the rules is not enough; what really matters is how the laws reflect the values of a country. He thinks the poet encapsulates the country and its rules the best. Above and beyond politics, poetics is vital to a nation's fate because it provides the essential spirit that cannot be legislated. As a result, the nation's greatest hope is the poet, the unrecognised non-legislator. As pointed out by Richard Rorty:

*"Whitman thought that we Americans have the most poetical nature because we are the first thoroughgoing experiment in national self-creation: the first nation-state with nobody but itself to please – not even God"* (Richard Rorty.1998: 22).

Particularly in the context of the Civil War's fight for equality, it became clear that America's self-presentation and its international reputation do not always line up with reality. Whitman acknowledges this whitewashing via his emphasis on 'spirit' and the interpretation of the rules, but he also acknowledges the positive and negative powers of that belief. Despite having the necessary infrastructure, the United States was never a free country while Whitman lived.

Since "liberty" according to Whitman is the ability to make one's own decisions, it is not really lost but given up at the outset of hostilities. As a result of blindly obeying the commands of his supposed superiors, the soldier gives up whatever "liberty" he formerly had to choose his own course of action. He loses his independence and becomes an anonymous soldier who gives his life for a cause he believes in. War, however, is not a more important cause than



an individual's own life, according to Whitman. To witness what I saw so much of, knocks one utterly out of conception of war - nevertheless for all that I am not sure but I go in for fighting on - the option is hard on either side, but to give in, the worst" (Whitman, writing in a letter about his experience in the Civil War). A passage from John Harmon Mc Elroy's 1999:30–31. The term "choice" is crucial, even when Whitman seems to be supporting war. One may choose to go to war or not. Whitman thinks it's terrible to give in while the fighting is going on, but it's even worse to decide to fight from the start. The 'liberty' to fight or not fight is always an option for the country and its warriors. The irony is that soldiers exercise their freedom of choice in choosing to fight, yet in doing so, they sacrifice this exact freedom.

In Whitman's view, the military forces run counter to his democratic ideal of universal suffrage, which guarantees equality for all people regardless of their gender, race, or socioeconomic status. In Whitman's view, there is no such thing as a lower-class citizen and any institution, like the military, that would establish hierarchies is anti-democratic. He uses this style of writing to make it impossible to tell persons from different socioeconomic backgrounds apart under different circumstances. In his essay titled "Democracy," Folsom states that Whitman attempted to create poetry that embodied the ideals of openness, nondiscrimination, and absorption, as outlined in his vision of a democratic society (Folsom.1998:171). For Whitman, the essence of democracy lies in the common man's and the individual's power to override any central authority. Whitman states, "with one man or woman—I even pick out the lowest" in his poem "Says."

*"With him or her I now illustrate the whole law;*

*I say that every right, in politics or what-not, shall be eligible to that one  
man or woman, on the same terms as any*

*(Says, Walt Whitman.1986:24-26)."*

Any lawmaker has the same inherent entitlement to power as any ordinary citizen.

*"The common man, even [...] the lowest, has equal power. He or she has a voice in the whole law without exception to any one part of the politics or what-not. All common men and women have 'every right' to be heard just as much as anyone else. Everyone is on the same terms, no matter how much money he or she has or how powerful he or she is seen in society"* (Walt Whitman.1964:262).

According to Whitman, democracy is a level playing field. No one wrote more forcefully, imaginatively, and paradoxically about American slavery than Walt Whitman, although slavery was the most pressing problem confronting the US in the middle of the 1800s. Marcus Wood, editor of the 700-page anthology *The Poetry of Slavery: An Anglo-American Anthology (1764–1865)*, which featured works by Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Wheatley, Dickinson, and Melville, says simply: "Whitman's poetry is the most important writing in this book" (Markus Wood, 2003: 626). This collection of essays from Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* contains some of his most famous writings on Black Americans, whether they be slaves or citizens of a democratic nation.

In *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855, Whitman conveys a profound, altruistic sympathy for African-Americans. It was not for the sake of Black people that he fought against slavery's expansion; rather, it was to protect the economic prospects and dignity of white labourers, whom he believed would be diminished by the existence of slaves. Despite his admiration for Black people and their inherent worth, Whitman never fought for their full participation in American democracy. "Who believes that the Whites and Blacks can ever amalgamate in America?" he reportedly questioned in an essay from 1858. According to experts, Whitney (1932: 90). This article argues that Whitman's views on slavery and Black people were astonishingly constant throughout all of his literary genres and throughout his career, rather than being mysterious or conflicting.

In his Free Soil journalism from the 1840s, Whitman supports the freedom of white male labourers above the prospect of slavery in the new territories, seeing them as symbols and aspirations of American democracy. Whitman doesn't show any real interest in or knowledge of the plight of Black slaves until *Leaves of Grass* (1855), and he never truly questions the South's continued practice of slavery. It was not slavery itself that Whitman condemned, but rather its expansion. Whitman's powerful and compassionate depiction of African-Americans in 1855 stemmed from an unprecedented convergence of events: a radicalised North following the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act (which also precipitated "Bleeding Kansas," a mini-civil war that broke out in Kansas in 1856), and a comparatively calm South. The future state of Kansas was inundated by Northerners and Southerners in 1854 and 1855, each with a firm belief in the right to own slaves. as well as the contentious implementation of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 (also known as the Fugitive Slave Act)—a law approved by the US Congress on September 18, 1850, as a component of the Compromise of 1850—among free-soilers from the North and slaveholders from the South. This heightened



Northern concerns about a "slave power conspiracy" and was among the most contentious parts of the 1850 settlement. It mandated the return of all fugitive slaves to their owners. In honour of the canines used to apprehend fugitive slaves, abolitionists gave it the moniker "Bloodhound Law."

The remarkable growth of Whitman as a democratic poet, as seen in his writings from 1853-55. At its most extreme, Whitman's poetry on slavery aimed to unite whites from the North and the South via a poetics of union. Poetry by Walt Whitman advocates for the emancipation of slaves, particularly runaway slaves, but it also foretells a day when whites and blacks would live in segregation. After 1855, Whitman removes all references to Black people from his *Leaves in the hopes* that they will "filter through in time or gradually eliminate and disappear" (Kenneth Price 1985: 205). Whitman was unable to break free of the oppressive hold of racism in antebellum America, despite the self-emancipatory nature of his poetry.

The concept of a white-only America was deeply ingrained in the public mind when Whitman first wrote on slavery in the 1840s. Joseph Ellis, a historian, claims that not a single founder "contemplated, much less endorsed, a biracial American society" (Joseph Ellis 2002: 101) throughout the revolutionary period. Thomas Jefferson's view that "the real distinctions that nature has made between Blacks and whites prohibited racial integration" (Thomas Jefferson 1964:132) persisted among whites in the North and South throughout the nineteenth century. Throughout his life, Whitman fought for white workers' rights and an ideology of white nationalism. Whitman considered the legality of slavery in the newly acquired regions to be the most critical problem, rather than the institution's continued existence in the South.

Love and devotion, according to Whitman, are the bandages that may mend a nation's broken spirit. In order to show how the United States may rise beyond its momentary divisions, he used the country's varied terrain. Sweet rightly points out that in order to achieve a united nationalism, it is necessary to "subject the diversity of the landscape to a totalizing image..." "The naturalness of the complex harmony of the Union of States came to be symbolised by the complex harmony of the American landscape" (Sweet Timothy.1994:106). Whitman hopes that by listing all 50 states in the United States, he may bring about this kind of unity.

Importantly, Walt Whitman addressed the American Civil War in his writings. Walt Whitman, who had hoped that the democratic principles he had seeded in *Leaves of Grass* would bear fruit, continues the process of uniting the country in *Drum-Taps*. In this new poetry collection, the author takes up the cause of reconciliation in the midst of a country at war by bringing attention to the agony of a brotherly conflict and the universality of human suffering. After the war ended, Whitman served as a teacher to his country, which had a chance to start over, correct its mistakes, and become a more equitable and democratic society.

Whitman famously said, "My book and war are one." He may have also implied that his book and the United States are one. "The work of a writer who so vehemently sought to define national identity and to enrich an inclusive democratic society has been advanced, refined, defended, and at times rejected by minority writers who have responded to Whitman" (Folsom & Kenneth Price.2004:20).

Not sacrificing his democratic principles, he joined many others in poetry in cheering the war. War, in his opinion, was the only way to abolish slavery and bring about peace. He devoted himself wholeheartedly to President Abraham Lincoln. Verse poems praising the war were written by several American writers, both Northern and Southern. Like Whitman's "Beat! Beat! Drums!" everyone appeared to write a stirring recruitment song.

*"Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!*

*Through the windows-through doors-burst like a ruthless force,Into the solemn church and scatter the congregation.  
Into the school where the scholar is studying;*

*Leave not the bridegroom quiet-no happiness must he have now withhis bride,*

*(Beat! Beat! Drums! Walt Whitman.1986:283)"*

"*Beat! Beat! Drums!*" stands as a powerful poetry inside *Drum-Taps*. Whitman writes this poem to convey his intense feelings after the failed engagement of Bull Run in neighbouring Virginia. The poet's patriotic tone, which implies a favourable attitude towards the war, is dramatically reinforced by the repetition of beat and blow in this section. Whitman's demand for every soldier to join the Union in the next fight is also reflected in the recruitment poem. To him, the Civil War was necessary to cleanse the country of corrupt politicians and maintain the union, thus he wholeheartedly supported it. Works by Theodore Tilton, Whitman, Alice Cary, John Pierpont, and others include "The Great Bell Rolland," "Following the Drum," "Progress!" The poems "Northmen Come Out!" by Charles Godfrey Lealand and "Our Country is Calling" by Fredrick Henry Hedges are examples of the usual Northern style.



To get a feel for the entire, read this stanza from Hedges's poem.

*“Our country is calling! we come! For freedom and Union we rally;*

*Our heart best echoes the beating drum, Our thoughts with the trumpets tally, Each bosoms pant for the doomful day,  
When the rebels shall meet us in battle array*

(Henry Hedges Quoted in Frank Moore.1864:23-24)”

In addition, after the conflict ends, a new age of unbreakable national unity will emerge, regardless of where in the world people live. There was a "spirit of heroic self-sacrifice" and "a common action" among Americans throughout the war, according to Reynolds (Reynolds David S.1996:414). From a Unionist's point of view, this poem is an unwavering defender of the cause. Nevertheless, whether seen from the perspective of an abolitionist or in relation to the slavery issue, this poem reveals a national comprehension that is characterised only by the existence of white people.

A collection of states and national landscapes portrays all residents of the Union as Sons of the Mother of All, but it must be realised that this inclusion extends exclusively to white Americans. In the poem's second line, liberation is portrayed as a tragic fight that needlessly led to national fratricide, rather than a noble cause. The manacle, a symbol of chattel slavery, is used by Whitman to illustrate an unneeded disagreement that the country would triumph over via white fraternal love. In his last aside, Whitman criticises the emancipation proclamation and abolitionists alike. In this passage, Whitman disregards the role of the executive branch and Congress in bringing the country together. No amount of liberation armies or constitutional changes will restore a nation's broken soul. Reuniting the country can only be achieved through democracy, brotherly love, and devotion.

The fundamental principle of democracy, according to Whitman's advocacy of nationalism, is that a patriot would always vote for the democratic candidate. Therefore, he had unrestricted power to unite whites and blacks. So, it's a huge deal that he rejected the idea of a national bond between whites and blacks in Drum-Taps. Walt Whitman's lyrical stance towards the slave changed from empathetic to resentful as the war broke out and slavery became the topic that would divide America. The decision by Whitman to mostly leave out the slave in his war poetry highlights the newly freed people's otherness and signifies their exclusion from the national fraternal love that is mentioned in his poetry.

Ethiopia After the contentious Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice, Saluting the Colours picks up where it left off. The poem does a great job of integrating the slave and her voice, yet the message nevertheless emphasises how the slave is fundamentally different from the nation:

*“Who are you dusky woman, so ancient hardly human, With your wooly-white and turban'd head, and bare bony feet?*

*Why rising by the roadside here, do you the colors greet?(Tis while our army lines Carolina's sands and pines,  
Forth from thy hovel door thou Ethiopia com'st to me,*

*As under doughty Sherman I march toward the sea.) Me master years a hundred since from my parents sunder'd,  
A little child, they caught me as the savage beast is caught, Then hither me across the sea the cruel slaver brought.*

*No further does she say, but lingering all the day,*

*Her high-borne turban'd head she wags, and rolls her darkling eye, And courtesies to the regiments, the guidons moving by.*

*What is it fateful woman, so bleary, hardly human?*

*Why wag your head with turban bound, yellow, red and green?*

*Are the things so strange and marvelous you see or have seen?*

(Ethiopia Saluting the Colors Walt Whitman.1986:318)”

A patriotic bond between the soldier and the slave-woman is hinted at in the poem. His forces, not hers, are advancing across Carolina. His country's flag, not hers, is flying. She is uniquely identifiable as a member of her nationality by her clothing and name. The anecdote she tells is really short, hard to make out, and doesn't tell us anything. Actually, she's not very human. Black intellectuals greatly liked it before World War II, despite the fact that it depicts an elderly slave lady in a way that is often seen as racist and stereotypical. Notable Black composer Harry T. Burleigh arranged it musically as a military hymn during the First World War. Black authors have bemoaned the fact that Whitman's controversial poetry style has restricted his reach. According to Donald Kummings and J.R. Le Masters



(1998:29).

Despite the poem's acceptance by African-American poet Langston Hughes, Whitman's ambivalence is hinted at by his sympathetic identifications with slaves in *Leaves of Grass* and other poems in *Drum-Taps*, such as *Ethiopia Saluting the Colours*. When it comes to the matter of prisoner exchange, Whitman's racism becomes more apparent when he criticises Secretary of War Edwin Stanton for insisting that Black prisoners be treated equally to white men in these exchanges (Morris Roy Jr.2000:192). Because Whitman is so bent on having his brother George freed from Confederate jail, he is prepared to disregard the rights of African Americans, seeing them as nothing more than roadblocks.

In his moving and inspiring poem "A Man's Body at Auction," the poet proclaims his faith in "universal fraternity, within their runs blood/the same old blood!" and makes a plea to ordinary people. Yes, the same crimson blood!"You dim-descended, Black, divine-soul's African large, fine headed, nobly-form'd, superbly destined, on equal terms with me!" (Walt Whitman.1959:74). If this bold statement is merely Whitman's strong reaction to slavery, then in "Salut au Monde!" he represents his ideal world vision in which people of all nations, cultures, classes, religions, and races are welcomed. Walt Whitman (1959:105). For the African-American poet Langston Hughes, the message rings out clearly.

The renowned quote, recorded by Whitman's Camden student Horace Traubel during one of their regular nighttime conversations on 8th September, 1888, is one of the most compelling pieces of evidence used to support the internationalisation of the usual racial biases of the nineteenth century American whites. A quotation from Whitman that reads "the American white and the Southern Black will mix but not ally" is found in Traubel Horace (1961:283). Now, a century and a half later, we can look at Whitman's contradictory views on race and America's democratic system with more clarity, thanks to our improved understanding of his work.

The central issue of the poem suggests the assertion that national unity, not liberation, is the true goal of the struggle. Slavery has no business being associated with the Union cause. When one considers Whitman's past reflections about African-Americans in the United States, one may find this to be less shocking: "Who believes that Whites and Blacks can ever amalgamate in America? " Who wants it to happen, anyway? The forces of nature have formed an impenetrable barrier. Also, don't White people own America? Plus, wouldn't you agree that it's better that way? (Roy Jr. Morris, 2000:80).

Despite his apparent generosity, Whitman's opinion in the intrinsic natural inequalities between Blacks and whites marred his artistic decision to give the slave lady a voice. At first glance, her story-telling abilities could give the impression that she is powerful. But Whitman's decision to "colour that voice" as an almost separate language with inverted sentence patterns emphasises how the slave and the soldier have no inherent similarities. Another sign of the gap that separates the slave, the soldier, and the country is the slave's voice; this chasm, in Whitman's view, is appropriately there.

For contemporary readers, Whitman's treatment of slavery in *Drum-Taps* may not be progressive enough. Reynolds is correct in pointing out that Whitman has been the target of criticism from contemporary writers. Many are disappointed that he did not pursue a career in social activism. As D.H. Lawrence pointed out, having compassion for slaves is one thing, but actively working to free them is another else. "Whitman never took on the causes of those much oppressed peoples he ostensibly championed," Henry Miller said of Whitman (Reynolds David S.1996:144).

During the conflict, Whitman had a lyrical vision of America in which slaves did not exist. Slaves brought the source of the sectional struggle to light, which threatened Whitman's lyrical creation of national unity. The country's slave population will not be included in the love that will ultimately bring the nation together and heal its scars. In fact, the needless national bloodletting began with emancipation, not because it gave the fight a greater purpose. To those who know Whitman as a leading democratic orator in the country, the fact that slavery is a minor concern comes as a surprise.

In his poetry, Whitman creates a utopian society where this equality is clearly seen. No stratification by class, no hierarchical structure, and no caste system exist. According to Whitman, every man is born free and equal. "The call of the slave is one with the master's call and the master salutes the slave" (Walt Whitman.1986:188) is what he writes in his poem *The Sleepers*. Slaves and masters were on opposing ends of the social spectrum in 1855, when the book was published. In Whitman's idealised vision of a fully democratic society, however, this stratification does not exist. There is no hierarchy between master and slave. In this system, a slave's cry is taken for a master's command. Slavery is a kind of subjugation; when a master salutes a slave, he shows respect and brings himself down to the slave's level. Slavery maintains its inherent equality between master and slave, regardless of rank. When Whitman puts himself



on par with his readers, he is extending the notion of equality to himself.

The ideal democracy that Whitman envisions lays bare the real hierarchy of power. Whitman cites the slave-master and president-citizen power structures as examples of other power-based negative interactions, such as the chief-officer-soldier dynamic. The military established clear hierarchies based on rank, position, and authority. Both the Road Unknown and Whitman's poem A March in the Ranks Hard Prest illustrate this point of view. As Walt Whitman puts it, "Ever in darkness marching, on in the ranks" (1986:306). To undermine the idea of equality among the chief, officer, and soldier, everyone is given a rank and a title. Above the level of soldier is the position of officer. The officer is seen as subordinate to the chief.

A poem titled "The Sleepers" By designating one guy as leader and the rest as officers and soldiers, Whitman establishes the hierarchy. To highlight the breakdown of status between the chief, officers, and troops now that the battle is finished, Whitman uses the image of a retired chief in a pub. According to what he wrote,

*"The same at last and at last when peace is declared,*

*He stands in the room of the old tavern....the well beloved soldiers all pass through*

*The officers speechless and slow draw near in their turns,*

*The chief encircles their necks with his arm and kisses them on the cheek,*

*He kisses lightly the wet cheeks one after another....he shakes hands and bids goodbye to the army*

*(The Sleepers, Walt Whitman.1986: 305-306)"*

The chief is not considered equal to his commanders and men until the conflict is proclaimed finished and peace is declared. At long last, they're "the same." The troops are no longer just names on a roster. These troops are now adored by the public. Like they're trying to avoid drawing attention to the delicate subject of the ranks collapsing, these soldiers are sluggish and mute. The chief, the troops, and the commanders all need to learn to treat each other with respect again after the conflict created a schism in their ranks. When the commander puts his arm over the shoulders of his troops and kisses them on the cheek, it is an honour to be humbled. Even though he is supposed to be a great hero, he sits at a bar and embraces and kisses the troops, who were always seen as below him. Kissing the cheeks of those who were formerly under him is a sign of humility on his part. Since they are unable to control their emotions, the troops' choice to battle has brought tears on their cheeks. They bid farewell to the army, but the power structures inside it will always be there.

The dynamism and expansion of the early American nation are mirrored in Whitman's poetry. The United States of America seemed to have endless potential and development throughout the nineteenth century, when it saw great expansion. However, the United States' limitless potential was jeopardised by sectionalism and the brutality of the Civil War. The vast number of casualties in the Civil War and the subsequent increase in the population prompted Whitman to reflect on the natural progression of human life: birth, maturation, reproduction, and death. Poems like "When Lilacs Last" and "Bloom in the Dooryard" depict death as an inevitable aspect of living. When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd's narrator learns that flowers wither and die throughout the winter, only to re-bloom in the spring, he makes a solemn pledge to grieve for his companions who die each year at the same time as fresh buds begin to sprout. Linking death to life, as Whitman did by describing the natural life cycle, helped put the horrific wounds and anguish he saw in the Civil War into perspective.

Among Whitman's early works, the themes of personal and political emancipation stand out. As an obverse symbol of Liberty—a man in need of emancipation via democratic solidarity—he used the prisoner in the 1855 Preface. He asserts that the poet will triumph and liberate the captives:

*"Poets [...] are the voice and exposition of liberty [...] Liberty relies on itself, invites no one, promises nothing, sits in calmness and light, is positive and composed, and knows no discouragement. The battle rages with many a loud alarm and frequent advance and retreat . . . .*

*the enemy triumphs . . . . the prison, the handcuffs, the iron necklace and anklet, the scaffold, garrote and lead balls do their work the cause is asleep the strong throats are choked with their own blood*

*. . . . the young men drop their eyelashes toward the ground when they pass each other . . . . and is liberty gone out of that place? No never (Walt Whitman.1982.262)"*

Indeed, Whitman's loyalty to the Union was unfaltering; his poetry about death focuses less on advancing Northern Union doctrine and more on elucidating the new reality of death for American families and troops. "Whitman viewed death as an eternal and benign mystery that he was destined to interpret for himself and to translate for his readers...he



felt duty bound to prevent the American public from becoming indifferent to the war's casualties" (Aspiz Harold.2004: 171), according to Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death (2004), authored by Harold Aspiz.

As a distinguishing feature of the Civil War, Whitman saw the force of death. His life experiences demonstrate his resilience in the face of adversity. There is no item so nasty that bright light will not turn lovely; this is a fundamental tenet of transcendentalism, which holds that people have free will to choose how they respond to adversity. "The dead have their own beauty," Ralph Emerson said (1922:9). Death is at the heart of his works, which express the utter breakdown of antebellum societal conceptions of death, which held that the deceased should die at home, be identified, surrounded by loved ones, and get proper final rites and burial. In addition, the poems record how the country dealt with the unprecedented number and kind of casualties sustained during the war by creating new rituals for coping with death, such as holding vigils for fallen comrades, reading letters and photographs of loved ones, and relying on medical professionals who served as surrogate families to those who were dying.

Death on the battlefield, in all its brutality and pervasiveness, was what brought the fractured country together, as both Whitman and Melville were to realise. "The nation was a survivor, too, transformed by its encounter with death, obligated by the sacrifices of its dead," Faust elaborates. A new feeling of national destiny was required by the war's enormous human cost; by the century's close, the Dead had become the means by which the country came together in a memorialization endeavour (Faust.2008:268-9). Death was something that every citizen of the country had to deal with. Therefore, Whitman and Melville believed that death would bring about a time of national unity in sorrow and the democratisation of loss, which would unite the country like a bereaved family.

Initially, the Civil War was greeted by Whitman and many of his contemporaries as a means of purging all the social ills of antebellum America. Therefore, the poet believed that "the conflict would provoke a violent -but necessary- catharsis, enabling the purification of the nation and its emergence as a powerful, truly democratic, and reunited country." He preferred fighting to disunification and refused to portray the war as "North against South" (Betsy Erkkila.1989:208). Instead, he framed it as a "struggle going on within one identity" (quoted in Peter Coviello.2006) and the only way for the two sides to come together again.

Still, after first seeing what he called the "real war" in 1862, Whitman's views on the conflict evolved during the 1860s (Specimen Days.1995:80) "The most profound lesson of my life... it has given me my most fervent view of the true ensemble and extent of these States" (Lowenfels Walter.1989:5) was Whitman's assertion that his time in Washington had provided him with.

Drum-Taps is more than just a collection of poems about the Civil War; it is Whitman's take on the conflict as a whole. The poet draws on his own experiences and perspectives to paint a partial picture of the conflict, which reflects the human and egocentric nature of the conflict—a dimension that, in Whitman's view, could never be adequately captured in writing.

Democracy will never be able to demonstrate its worth until it creates and flourishes its own art, poetry, schools, and religion, replacing all that now exists or has been created (Walt Whitman.1964:262). That is precisely what Walt Whitman accomplished during his lengthy life; his writings and poems transformed American philosophy. For Americans, his speeches were a lynchpin of optimism both during and after the Civil War. The ordinary man found hope in his healing hands, and he presented visions of a democratic nation unburdened by division and violence. Famous poets of the 20th century who wrote in a similarly democratic style continue to use his voice in their poetry.

## **Conclusion**

*Drum-Taps* is a poem that encapsulates Walt Whitman's Civil War poetics, which reflect a strong engagement with the democratic ideals of freedom, equality, and togetherness in the face of the harsh reality of division and battle. The work of Whitman not only provides a history of the turbulent time of the Civil War, but it also provides a visionary view on the power of poetry to heal and unite a society that is divided. Whitman navigates the tensions of individualism and collectivity, grieving and joy, conflict and reconciliation, and so on via the lyrical style he uses. As a tribute to the continuing force of democratic ideals and the crucial role that the poet plays in imagining a society that is unified and fair, *Drum-Taps* serves as a testament. Whitman's poetry continues to be an important addition to American literary and democratic philosophy. It reflects the complications of trying to achieve a more perfect union throughout times of national crises.





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