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# Whitman, elegy, and the nineteenth century culture of death and mourning

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# WHITMAN, ELEGY, AND THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CULTURE OF DEATH AND MOURNING

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by

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ABSTRACT

The most celebrated poet of the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman, has been the subject of scholarly interest since his death in 1892. His frank and often shocking subject matter, as well as his groundbreaking free verse, has been studied through many lenses and in many academic disciplines. Whitman's poems focusing on democracy, the American populace, his sexuality and physicality have been written about in countless books and journals. Scholars have focused on only a few of his well-known elegies, however. In this thesis, I offer close reading and analysis of several of Whitman's elegies and poems about death and mourning through the historic lens of nineteenth century practices of mourning and death. The intersections between the elegist and the mourner, between the living and the dead, the ways these relationships are presented in Whitman's poetry, the nineteenth century culture's frequent occurrence of death, the modernized funerary practices brought about by the Civil War, and the ways in which Whitman's poetry illustrates and illuminates these cultural practices all offer a fresh glimpse at a subject every human must one day wrestle with: death.

For my late parents, Leland & Alfreda Nylander, and my late sister, Nancy Lee Nylander-Krigbaum. I miss you every day.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## NINETEENTH CENTURY DEATH: REACTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS, AND THE RURAL CEMETERY MOVEMENT

Throughout the nineteenth century, there were many changes in the ways that death was viewed and understood in the American culture. Walt Whitman, who transformed the way poetry was experienced within the culture and whose lifetime spanned the century, produced works that serve as a valid marker of the transformation of mourning and melancholy in the nineteenth century. Whitman approaches death as uniquely as he approaches life, sex, and nature in his poetry. As Whitman endeavored to become America's poet of the nineteenth century, his poetic representations strove to shock, elevate, and transform the way Americans read and thought about poetry; his poems about death do no less.

In his elegies, both the well-known ones about Lincoln as well as others of the battlefield and Civil War, Whitman explores the physical and spiritual aspects of the corpse and those left to grieve the departed. Whitman's so-called "deathbed" edition of Leaves of Grass, published in 1892 just prior to his death, is the final edition over which he

had control and is segmented into works of like background including those pertaining to death. In addition to elegies in the "Drum-Taps" and "Memories of President Lincoln" sections of Leaves of Grass, many pieces celebrating the end of life may also be read in the section titled "Songs of Parting." As elegist, Whitman occupies the liminal space between the griever and the grieved; as he navigates through tales of loss, his works demonstrate how the culture of melancholy made its way from the home to the battlefield and even to the very highest seat of American government.

To understand how an elegiac poet, such as Whitman, mediates the space between the mourning and the mourned, an understanding of the culture of melancholy and death rituals of the era is needed. What follows in this chapter, then, will be an examination of how nineteenth century Americans often met the frequent occurrence of death, handled the disposition of the corpse, mourned, and adapted death's customs to changing circumstances throughout the century. The ways in which families, communities, and the nation itself were reconciled to death and the dead are frequently seen in Whitman's poetry.

Throughout the nineteenth century, people's views of death, the meaning ascribed to the corpse, and the representations depicting the end of physical life changed. One of the first indicators of changing attitudes is in the treatment of the body through religious practices. The roots of American culture stem from its puritan beginnings in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, yet by the early nineteenth century, these Calvinist sentiments began to change even those sentiments relating to the role of the corpse, and care for the dead body began to be seen as a Christian duty. According to David Hackett Fischer, "The Puritans had little interest in the physical remains of the dead" and offered little in the way of funerary ritual (qtd. in Laderman 52). Calvinist belief in pre-destination meant that a soul was damned or saved from birth, so the condition of the corruptible body that housed the soul was not as important as the condition of the soul itself. Over time, though, with some Christian faiths demonstrating a firmer belief in a future resurrection of the body, the condition of the corpse took on greater significance.

The Second Great Awakening, a revival of religious fervor that began in the late eighteenth century, hit its

peak between the late 1820s and early 1830s. During this revival period, Protestant church authority attempted to reassert itself, and new ways of thinking changed the manner of worship, doctrinal ideology, as well as the view of death and the corpse. According to Gary Laderman, new philosophies in various Protestant denominations began to form, so that:

> a softer, sentimentalized imagination and religious sensitivity developed near the beginning of the nineteenth century [...] The conservative theological wing of northern Protestantism offered a traditional perspective on the meaning of the corpse by asserting that at a particular moment in time—the return of Jesus Christ—the physical remains of the individual would be miraculously reconstituted and reunited with the previously disembodied soul. (53)

This belief meant that the body was "never inherently without value" (53). If the body were necessary at some future date, care for it in death was essential. From cleansing, dressing, and interring the body to consoling the survivors, death requires specialized protocol and skill. Today, this care is almost exclusively handled by

professionals who are paid to relieve us of the burden of physically handling the remains of our loved ones and who offer us sympathy for a price. This professionalization of death, the creation of an industry whose existence depends upon the sorrow of its clients, began during the early decades of Whitman's life, culminating during the Civil War.

The early nineteenth century experience of death was also less detached and more domestic than we are accustomed to today. From the beginning to mid-century, death typically did not occur in clinical settings attended by strangers; unless by accident, it often occurred at home as the dying lay in bed surrounded by close kin (Faust 10). Burial was generally in the local church or grave yard, places of foreboding familiarity. Until the post-bellum era, then, undertaking was generally not a discrete occupation; it was a task that family members and others in the community fulfilled. The coffin was often fashioned by the local cabinetmaker or other woodworker, the women in the family or community prepared the body for burial, and family and friends usually carried the coffin and its inhabitant to the final resting place.

Shifts in where the dead were laid to rest represents another key change in the practice of mourning during the nineteenth century. The graveyard, if not attached to the church grounds, was traditionally well outside of town away from the business of the living. Cemeteries, then, held no significance for the living. They were not visited unless to conduct the business of the dead, and in many cases, cemeteries were mere dumping grounds on the edge of town. Yet, as the United States grew in population, public graveyards became a concern for both sanitary and moral reasons. City governments found that poorly maintained city and church graveyards were not only aesthetically displeasing but also posed public health risks. Caring for the resting places of the dead became a civic obligation as:

> By the early part of the nineteenth century the church began to lose its close association with the space of death in and around large populated areas. In isolated regions, community members who agreed to care for burial grounds were not always reliable. (Laderman 69)

These problems began to be solved by new ideas that envisioned final resting places as less gothic and forbidding and more in tune with the other spiritual and natural movements of the early nineteenth century. Beginning in the antebellum North, the rural cemetery movement transformed the rituals surrounding death and the ways people related to the dead. Beginning in 1831, as Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge created a beautifully landscaped and tranquil resting place for the dead, representations of death in art, literature, and culture began to change as well.

Now designated a National Historic Landmark, Mount Auburn Cemetery began as a private venture whose "residents" include luminaries from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These well known and affluent citizens believed that the cemetery belonged to the living as well as the dead and that the natural settings allowed for a cultural experience and spiritual edification. According to the National Parks Service's website, these "rural' cemeteries were:

> Planned as serene and spacious grounds where the combination of nature and monuments would be spiritually uplifting, they came to be looked on

> as public parks, places of respite and recreation acclaimed for their beauty and usefulness to society. In the early "rural" cemeteries and in those which followed their pattern, hilly, wooded sites were enhanced by grading, selective thinning of trees, and massing of plant materials which directed views opening onto broad vistas. […] Such settings stirred an appreciation of nature and a sense of the continuity of life.

Mount Auburn Cemetery, in particular, laid the groundwork for the modern aesthetically pleasing cemeteries we are familiar with today. Founded by the Massachusetts Horticulture Society in 1831, Mount Auburn, from its very beginnings, was a partner with nature. Lush landscaping replaced barren dirt plots and artwork in the form of sculpture adorned the new "cities of the dead." As Whitman used Nature in his elegies, the rural cemeteries employed Nature in their very foundations. Cemeteries became inviting park-like spaces in which to spend an afternoon. The well heeled of Boston often invited their visitors on a drive that took them through Mount Auburn as it was one of the area's cultural sights to see.

Another compelling purpose of Mount Auburn was the protection it offered its patrons and their loved ones' remains. Grave robbing and desecration was a real concern. With new strides in medical discoveries, demand for corpses by medical schools made the corpse a commodity, and often heads of surgical schools did not look too deeply into how a body may have come into their midst. Public graveyards were vulnerable to those whose scruples did not preclude them from procuring a newly buried body to sell to the medical schools. Because of this constant threat of grave robbing, the affluent saw these new spaces, like Mount Auburn, as places of protection as well as lasting memorials.

From its beginning, Mount Auburn set out to provide a liminal space between the living and the dead. The cemetery's gated entry provides a marker for the space where the cares of the world of commerce ends and natural beauty opens the way for the slower pace that reflection requires. According to Gary Wills, in his dedication of Mount Auburn, Justice Story of the U.S. Supreme Court noted that "the place of the dead must be made a school for the living"(65). The intimacy between those who died and their survivors was maintained, then, after the actual passing

and ceremonial farewell. Until mid-century, this intimacy, memorialized in places like Mount Auburn, began from the moment of death, which often and ideally occurred in the home.

As religious ideology changed in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and certainly in the heavily Protestant northern states of the U.S., how the corpse was handled and disposed of followed strict protocol. Many historians agree that handling of the deceased was seen as a domestic duty, and women overwhelmingly had the job of "laying out the dead" (Laderman 30). Because people often died in the home, the corpse was laid out "in a designated room of the house, often a front room or parlor," which allowed the community to pay their respects, take a "reflective gaze," and come to terms with the loss to their ranks (31). Once the specified time period had passed, the corpse was carried on its last journey to the grave, stopping at the church or meeting house for the funeral service before being removed from the sight of the community forever.

According to Dan Meinwald, by mid-century, florists and photographers:

> had become part of a funerary industry that did not exist in the beginning of the nineteenth century, but which had attained most of its present-day features by the end. The family, with help from community members, had traditionally clothed and prepared the body for burial, and accommodated visitors. The family also arranged for the construction of a coffin and its transportation, the burial, and the creation and erection of a gravestone. In the rural communities and small cities of the eighteenth century, assistance was near at hand. In the rapidly-emerging urban environment of the nineteenth century, this was no longer the case, and the undertaker gradually assumed (literally undertook) all of the functions connected with the funeral and burial.

As Meinwald notes, prior to the creation of a professional funeral industry, the corpse, before burial, was still attended by family members, friends, and others in the community.

Drew Gilpin Faust writes that "Death customs of the Victorian era centered on domestic scenes and spaces;

hospitals housed the indigent, not respectable citizens" (9). As with most nineteenth century cultural customs, the middle class led the way in how death was experienced. Much of the tradition surrounding the Victorian middle class' handling of death required that witnesses be present at the moment of death. To view the last moments of a person's life was to ensure that the dying had what is known as a "good death," that is, one that assures the person dies at peace with God and others and will see heaven. If the dead were willing to go, presented a peaceful facial expression, and acknowledged his/her salvation at the moment of passing, survivors could be assured of a heavenly reunion someday. The good death, surrounded by loved ones in a domestic space, was the ideal of the nineteenth century; it has been represented in paintings of the era as it offered a sense of continuity to survivors. Death, with its frequency, meant that grief was a common companion, therefore ritual surely gave a feeling of completion to those left to mourn and remember the deceased.

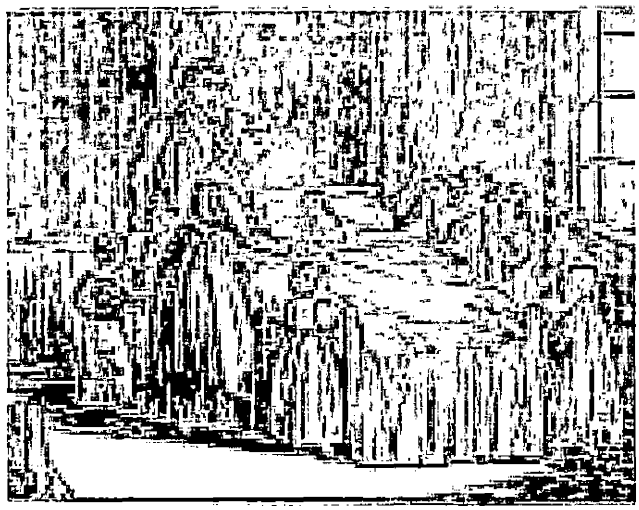


Fig 1 Death of Ann Elizabeth Pierce. Frontispiece engraving from *Memoir of Ann Elizabeth Pierce* (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1833; BR1715.P43 P5). General Collections

Remembering the dead through images became popular in a century known for its technological breakthroughs. Prior to the age of daguerreotypes and photography, people had few options for visual representations of their lost loved ones. Those with means could, and did, commission portraits of the corpse. Some artists, such as William Sydney Mount, supplemented their income by painting those recently deceased, yet this took a toll on them. Often their subjects were children, making the job that much harder. By trying to infuse life into the lifeless, the

artist allowed the bereaved to remember the face of the lost one long after the memory failed. In the age of photography, this practice was accessible to a wider population and presented the corpse in a more realistic condition. Gary Laderman says that the photographer often "represented the corpse in a state of rest or sleep, usually in the home, surrounded by family" (77). This depiction, capturing the "good death" in a photograph, offered solace to family members who could remember what the deceased looked like many years after the death. The posthumous photograph may be the only picture a less affluent family may have had of its children.

As the unknown infant "sleeping" in the photograph below demonstrates, care was taken to create as natural a pose as possible. This form of posthumous photography is making a comeback in the Twenty-First century as a "modern-day incarnation of this 'memento mori' photographic genre (Latin for 'remember your death')" as parents of stillborn children are bringing photographers into the hospital room to take stylized photographs of their babies as a way to "cope with a devastating loss" (Kalb). What began in the 19th century as a way of creating a concrete memory of family members and friends lost to death is even today

demonstrating the power of visual representation to aid in mourning and reconciliation of grief.

Fig.2 Unknown. Associated content http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/266230/postmortem_photography.html?cat=37

Regardless of the century, humans have grieved the deaths of loved ones in myriad ways, some viewed as healthy, some not. In exploring the human psyche and determining what is healthy, Sigmund Freud took on the study of death and grief.

In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud discusses the "work of mourning" and distinguishes between normal grief or mourning and the more complicated grief resulting in melancholia. He says that both may begin with a "loss of a love-object," but the melancholic may lose regard for the self and develop an unnatural fixation on the lost object, internalizing it, thereby overwhelming the ego, so that the goal of facing the reality of the loss is not achieved. Freud notes the similarity between mourning and melancholia by saying that:

> Profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of a loved person, contains the same feeling of pain, loss of interest in the outside world—in so far as it does not recall the dead one—loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love, which would mean replacing the one mourned, the same turning from every active effort that is not connected with thoughts of the dead. (125)

It would seem then that the very proximity of the loved one's visual representation through photography would allow for a greater slip toward melancholia in those predisposed to such tendencies.

Abraham and Mary Lincoln suffered the loss of their son Willie while in the White House, and following her husband's assassination, Mary Lincoln sank into such grief that she was unable to attend her husband's funeral and was later institutionalized. The pre-disposition to melancholia from which Mary Lincoln suffered may have been exacerbated by the fact that Lincoln and his family were photographed extensively because having a photographic record of the deceased's likeness might have made the reconciliation of the death difficult. On the other hand, like the parents who photograph their stillborn children, the bereaved may incorporate the loss of the child into their lives, and the photograph gives them a concrete reminder that the child once lived, even if only for moments. This renewed practice of posthumous photography demonstrates that there may be some therapeutic benefit to revisiting earlier mourning cultural practices.

Photographs would seem to play a large role in the process of grief as a reminder of the person's life and offers the griever tangible evidence of the lost one's previous existence. This would seem to offer consolation for the survivor who may use the likeness as a springboard for creating memories of the deceased and to "re-place" the

lost loved one within the context of past and present. As mentioned earlier, the dichotomy of photography, especially posthumous photography, may make reconciliation of grief difficult, however.

While Freud believes that the work of mourning is to let go of the dead person and move on in life without him/her, Roland Barthes sees in a photograph "the return of the dead" (9). Barthes believes photography works to establish that the "referent" or object of the photograph has existed, was real, at the time the photo was taken and viewing a photograph allows the spectator to see for him/herself that reality better than any painting would. To acknowledge that the object in a photograph "has been," was a "flesh and blood" person at the moment the image was frozen in time, according to Barthes, creates a problem when the photograph is taken posthumously. He writes,

> In Photography, the presence of the thing (at a certain past moment) is never metaphoric; and in the case of animated beings, their life as well, except in the case of photographing corpses; and even so: if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living

> image of a dead thing. For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive… (79)

Barthes goes on to say that "The Photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only for certain *what has been*. This distinction is decisive" (85). If, however, the subject of a particular photograph is no longer living, the beholder may be able to "reanimate" the deceased in the mind. Does this mental reanimation serve to comfort or to disrupt consolation and reconciliation? The Civil War generation was the first to have such representations with which to wrestle. Photographs allowed more common people to be visually remembered than in previous generations when commissioning a portrait was well out of the reach of any but the most affluent.

Prior to battle, thousands of Civil War soldiers on both sides sat for a photograph to send to their families and many carried daguerreotypes of loved ones whom they may never have expected to see again. As evidence of this, Gilpin Faust tells of "a dead Yankee soldier at Gettysburg

[who] was found with an ambrotype of three children 'tightly clasped in his hands'" (11). The ability to capture a moment in time allowed more people to have a tangible reminder of their dead creating a visual record to accompany written and anecdotal information.

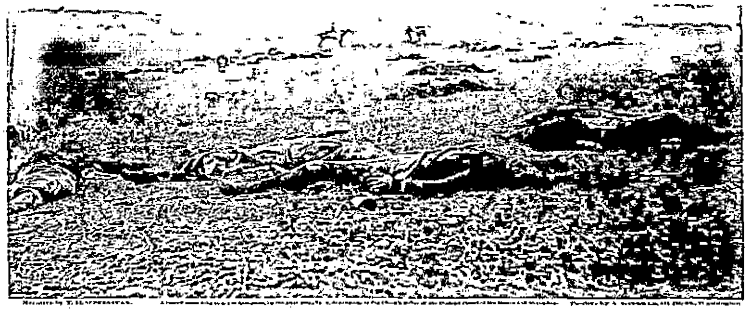
The sentimentality of the era allowed photographers to embellish these depictions of the dead with "floral designs, flying angels, and other sentimental iconography" (Laderman 78). Other forms of art, such as popular music, also presented the corpse as sleeping, or in some cases, merely absent as in "Vacant Chair."

> We will meet, but we shall miss him/ There will be one vacant chair/ We shall linger to caress him/ As we breathe our evening prayer[…]Sleep today, Oh, early fallen/ in thy green and narrow bed…. (Bell)

Elegies, such as this popular Civil War era tune, provided solace for those whose loved ones were no longer near. Much as the photographs, whether made while living or posthumously, act as a promise to remember the dead, elegies allowed the survivors to keep memories alive. These facilitators of memory allowed those living in a century rife with frequent death to keep their loved ones'

representations near. By mid-century, when a bloody war created upheaval and displacement, this became more vital to people coping with death and separation. No longer could survivors be assured that their loved ones died a "good death."

With the advent of the Civil War, another shift in the culture took place as the disposition and treatment of corpses became important for the government, as well as family and friends whose soldiers died on faraway battlefields. Retrieving and identifying the dead was an important, but often impossible, task.



Incidents of the War.

Fig 3 Incidents of the war. A harvest of death, Gettysburg, July, 1863].O'Sullivan, Timothy H., 1840-1882, photographer.

Shallow and mass graves were sometimes dug following battles, but many times bodies lay where they fell long enough for the elements to wreck havoc on identifying marks, papers, or keepsakes. Many civilians left home themselves, journeying to find their sick, wounded, or dead soldiers. Family members searched battlefields looking for a familiar face among the dead. Often people sought their loved ones in military and field hospitals. In late 1862, Walt Whitman, hearing that his brother George had been wounded at Fredericksburg, went to find him in a field hospital. His brother was only slightly wounded, and Whitman was able to stay for two weeks, absorbing camp life, witnessing the brutal aftereffects of battle such as dozens of amputated arms and legs, and keeping a journal of these "sights." This trip provided the impetus for Whitman's future work as a nurse, a poet, and a recorder of history.

Whitman went on to hospital work as a volunteer in Washington City. The men he tended provided much inspiration and offered him firsthand accounts of what it felt like to fall in battle. He held the hands of the dying and became one of the "proxies for those who might have surrounded their deathbeds at home" (Gilpin Faust 11).

Whitman read and wrote many letters on behalf of the soldiers beside whose beds he sat day after day, including letters sent home to apprise survivors of their loved ones' circumstances. Letters home included a specific genre known as the consolation letter. The consolation letter needed to include, not only the sorrowful circumstance of the soldier's death, but often included a description (to the best of the witnesses' ability) of the state of salvation in which the dying left the world. Whitman wrote many a consolation letter to the loved ones of the soldiers whom he attended and this experience, like many others, shows up in later works of poetry. Whitman's elegies, especially those for the soldiers on the battlefield, allow the soldiers to speak through him. Those who otherwise might never have had a historic voice are given a venue to speak through Whitman's works of death. While Whitman's poetry of loss and parting filled the space between the griever and the grieved, other writers of the age used the form to make a point.

Appropriately, an era of mourning, melancholy, and intimacy with death celebrates the end of war with a mock requiem. The following text is from a broadside published

in Boston following the death of President Lincoln and announcing the end of the Confederacy:

*HYMN*

On the Death of an infant, four years of age, *WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE,* (With no expectation of any other beyond it,) in April, 1865.

Tune--OLD HUNDRED,
AS IT SHOULD BE SUNG BY THIRTY MILLIONS.

*In consequence of weak lungs, the Pall Bearer, Grave Digger, Coffin Varnisher and so forth, will not join in chanting the requiem.*

Be thou, oh, treason buried deep!
Go, sleep the everlasting sleep!
Though short on earth has been thy stay,
Go, greet no more the light of day!

Brave Sherman's nail'd thy coffin tight!
And Grant has put you out of sight!
And Sheridan his part did do!
And few the friends who weep for you!

[…]
And now we chant thy requiem!

We put the earth upon thy breast,
And never we'll disturb thy rest;
But men shall know the Union's worth
The more, since thou hast lived on earth!

Now praise the brave who did do well,
Although they did this infant fell,
Praise those no danger e'er could daunt!
Praise Sherman, Sheridan and Grant!

This infant will be kept in state (what state nobody knows) until the 4th of July, 1865 […] when the requiem will be chanted on the Common.

> The chief mourners, owing to indisposition, will not be present. ("Death of an Infant")

The broadside begins with an announcement of President Lincoln's "murder," and offers hope that the "traitor" will soon be found and brought to justice. The "infant" Confederacy is little mourned throughout this hymn that is to be sung or "chanted" to the tune of "Old Hundred." The Confederacy is buried and the victorious Union generals W.T. Sherman, U.S. Grant, and Phil Sheridan are celebrated. An end note tells us that among the "mourners" are Confederate President Jefferson Davis and certain Confederate generals, and that "The grave has already been dug by Robert E. Lee. Johnston is engaged to varnish the coffin and procure a respectable hearse at the Last Ditch." The broadside from the Library of Congress does not credit an author and ends with more humorous stabs at the Confederate leadership.

The genre of the text reflects a people who are familiar with mourning rituals, the elegiac form, and the funerary rites expected. The "death of an infant," an all too real occurrence throughout the century and in the previous four years when so many sons did not return home, would seem shocking to modern sensibilities yet was likely

seen as fitting in the context of the era. Having an intimate familiarity with death, those who survived the previous four years could likely appreciate the irony. While the mock requiem served to celebrate the end of the war, genuine elegies and requiems were being written for the fallen by Whitman and others.

Whitman noted that the Civil War could never, perhaps should never, be fully represented in all of its horror. Death and all the effects it brings to the living, as well, can never be fully expressed in any form. Photographs and song lyrics, portraits and poems offer a mere glimpse of a life either fully lived or cut down too soon and the emptiness left in its wake. Whether it is the soldier who buries his friend and brother-in-arms on the battlefield following a bloody fight such as depicted in *Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night*, or the family struggling to get by awaiting news of an enlisted son's fate as in *Come Up from the Fields, Father*, or the national family mourning the assassination of its patriarch in *O Captain! My Captain!*, Whitman represents the loss and grief felt by those left behind. As elegist, he holds both the hands of the living and the lost, linking the two and offering a

salve to the heart and a language of loss to express the often inexpressible.

## CHAPTER TWO

## DEATH AND POETRY: THE GOOD DEATH COMES TO THE BATTLEFIELD, THE WAR COMES TO THE DOORYARD, AND THE POET COMES TO THE MOURNERS

The American Civil War took more American lives than any war Americans participated in before or since. Writing in Memoranda During the War & Death of Abraham Lincoln, Whitman says, "Future years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background of miner [sic] scenes and interior[…] of the Secession War; and it is best they should not" (5). He goes on to say that the particulars of the war are at risk of being forgotten only ten years later. This then requires a retelling and reinterpretation of the events through art, such as portraiture, poetry, and sculpture.

This chapter will include an examination and close reading of certain Whitman poems that deal with death. Whitman's works that explore death and grief, on the battlefield, in the home, and even at an uncaring city morgue demonstrate how the culture of mourning serves the elegist in his attempt to reconcile an increasingly harsh reality with the "good death." Whitman's soldiers, home

front families, and even a "poor prostitute" present his readers with archetypes who embody in language what nineteenth century Americans were experiencing every day.

Though the events of the Civil War cannot be represented in all their true horror, Whitman did take notes of what he saw, heard, and experienced, thereby allowing future generations to glimpse the terror and sorrow through his prose and poetry. These wartime particulars are described in Memoranda, compiled from notes Whitman wrote to himself on scraps of paper and in little notebooks wherein he recorded both the minutia of daily life and the major events of the war. In a segment titled "*A Glimpse of War's Hell Scenes,*" he describes an especially brutal attack by rebel troops who Whitman says were "Moseby's [sic] mounted guerillas," referring to John Singleton Mosby, known as the "Gray Ghost," who led raids on Union troops and supply trains.

In this incident, wounded men and the cavalry guard who were escorting them came under attack, and Whitman says the Union troops were maimed and mutilated by the rebel troops even after they had surrendered:

> The wounded had all been dragg'd (to give a better chance also for plunder) out of their

> wagons; some had been effectually dispatched, and their bodies lying there lifeless and bloody. Others, not yet dead, but horribly mutilated, were moaning or groaning. (35)

According to Whitman, it was shortly after this when Union troops came upon the scene and captured about seventeen of the rebels and two of their commanders; it was decided that the confederates were marked for death. The next day "the seventeen men were taken to an open ground" and "In a few minutes the seventeen corpses strew'd the hollow square" succumbing to the Union volley of bullets. Scenes like this from stories told to Whitman by the soldiers he tended are still shocking in their brutality, but for an era in which the rules of death and mourning were taking on greater significance, this was truly the stuff of nightmares.

When soldiers fell in battle and died in makeshift camp hospitals, their bodies were sometimes left to the elements or buried hastily, often by people who lived in towns near the battles. Depending upon the region, soldiers' corpses from one side or the other were often treated quite differently. Union soldiers who were unlucky enough to die near a town sympathetic to the southern cause

were often plundered of valuables and then left to rot on the ground where they fell. This scenario was repeated in reverse in regions where Union sympathizers walked the late fields of battle. Behavior during the war impacted the whole culture as this was a war fought in the apple orchards, the corn fields, and the very dooryards of the American people.

During the four long years of privation, destruction, and terror, Victorian era Americans saw their carefully laid plans of behavior radically changed. While the ideal of the "good death," and the protocols involved, needed to be adjusted, and in some cases abandoned altogether, it must have given those grieving a sense of normalcy and continuity to attempt the traditional in non-traditional circumstances. Following the war, Walt Whitman published a book of poetry written during or inspired by the war. This book, titled Drum-Taps, was eventually synthesized into Leaves of Grass. David S. Reynolds, in Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography, says that:

> It has become common recently to interpret Whitman's loving relationships with the wounded soldiers as a sublimation of homosexual desires

that found expression is such poems as "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night," (427)

The relationship between the soldiers is quite intimate, yet continues to defy a definitive, singular interpretation. Read in the context of the era, the poem certainly may represent an attempt to continue the tradition of the "good death" in a less than ideal situation. The poem tells the tale of two soldiers, brothers-in-arms, in battle. One, seemingly the younger, is felled by enemy fire:

When you my son and my comrade dropt at my side that day,
One look I but gave which your dear eyes return'd with a look
I shall never forget,
One touch of your hand to mine O boy, reach'd up as you
lay on the ground,
Then onward I sped in the battle, the even-contested battle,(245)

Whether there was any true familial bond between the two, certainly possible as sons and fathers, brothers and cousins often fought side by side if not always on the same side, there was a kinship between the two perhaps brought about by common experience in war. The elder witnesses his comrade's fall, which is important to the "good death" narrative in many ways as death needs a witness who will be able to testify to the manner and circumstance of the

death. *One look* and *one touch of* [the] *hand* is all that these two are allowed as duty calls the elder to continue to fight in a battle wherein each man is necessary. As the battle is "even-contested," the regiment can spare no time for personal grief, and the soldier knows his duty is to continue in the fight until a time that the present encounter is decided. Noting the place where his friend has "dropt," the soldier knows he will return when he can to fulfill the more personal duty that must be done.

Loyal to his responsibility to orders, the soldier waits until he is "relieved" to come back to care for his friend's corpse where he says he "found you in death so cold dear comrade, found your body son/ of responding kisses, (never on earth again responding,)" (245). It is late at night when at last the soldier is able to keep his unspoken promise to care for his friend in death as he is compelled to do through the honor of friendship, kinship, or comradeship. Though, no doubt, weary from the battle, perhaps wounded himself in some way, he nevertheless takes the time to follow the protocol of "Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours with you/ dearest comrade [...] Vigil of silence, love and death, vigil for you my son and my /soldier" (245). Staying beside the corpse of his

fallen friend, the poem's narrator singlehandedly performs the duties of family, friends, and community members, who in other circumstances, would come to see the body laid out, to remember the life of the deceased, and bid farewell through burial.

As he lays out his friend's body beneath the night sky, he prepares to mourn the loss and to see the hours through until daylight. The moment between the two is intimate, the living sits beside the dead as perhaps the two friends sat beside one another in camp. The hours passed with the corpse are "immortal and mystic," thereby creating the space wherein the living learns from the dead; a liminal space is created that is mystical, bestowing magic that will not be fully understood in this life. As the soldier prepares to pass the night with the corpse, he stands, seemingly, at attention:

> Long there in vigil I stood, dimly around me the battle-
> field spreading,
> Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet there in the fragrant silent night,
> But not a tear fell, not even a long-drawn sigh, long, long I
> gazed, (245)

The soldier stands at attention for his friend as well as the others fallen who surround them, for he notes that the

battlefield is spread out around them. The soldier does not shed a tear for his fallen comrade for he knows that the young soldier rode into battle knowing that he might be killed or wounded and was willing to face the consequences of a soldier's life. As saddened as he is, the soldier is stoic in his grief as he stands at attention, displaying the "manly" control the era requires of its men. Later, as the soldier lies on the grass alongside his comrade, he reflects the softer, domestic role the intimacy requires.

The two words "immortal and mystic" add weight to the moment and create a sacred trust and lesson that the soldier will take with him through the rest of his life. What the soldier perhaps learns from his dead comrade is that life is tenuous in a way that only those who face death daily may understand. Lewis O. Saum says that, prior to the Civil War, most people had experience with death's intimacy and that "the passing of a fellow mortal always had instructive quality. If all went well it could be a privilege to behold the death" (490). Death in war, though, offers different kinds of instruction and intimacy. The death of young men in war requires a level of commitment to the cause in which they died and an expectation that death will occur. Saum goes on to say

that "The acme of privilege came in witnessing a 'triumphant' death" (491). "Triumphant" usually meant assurance of salvation, and in the case of the soldiers in Whitman's poem, there is a sense that, despite the sorrow, the elder believes that the young soldier has died in a state of grace. In those "immortal" moments, the soldier may reflect upon and be instructed by the life and death of his friend, and he may find focus for his own life. Death becomes more real and less abstract in battle, and while the soldier may have lost other friends and comrades, to lose his particular friend is a lesson that death will come for him one day as well. Whitman paints us a picture of the two as his soldier says:

> Then on the earth partially reclining sat by your side leaning
> my chin in my hands,
> Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours with you
> dearest comrade—not a tear, not a word, (245)

The image of this soldier lying alongside of his dead comrade, his chin resting in his palms as he passes the time until dawn gives us a sense of companionship deeper than the traditional stoicism we see of soldiers in war. Even without tears shed, the visual Whitman gives us of tender intimacy between the two hallows this moment for the

reader. However heroic the young soldier's death, the vigil becomes a moment of intimate communion between the living and the lost.

By attempting the traditional observances in a non-traditional setting, Whitman's soldier is fulfilling roles and performing tasks that would be expected of kith and kin, yet these tasks are not performed or fulfilled for a good number of soldiers who are left to rot where they fall or who, at best, are put in a mass or shallow grave where they will be forgotten. Whitman's poem, then, offers a look at what was ideal, but not often accomplished, for the battlefield death.

Nature plays a role in the setting as the cool "night-wind" blows softly, the "starlight" shines down on the two, and the night itself is "fragrant." We are not told from whence the fragrance comes, however. Because the tone of the poem is soft, solemn, and unhurried in these moments, we may think of night blooming plants or the heady scent of earth upon which the two lay, yet we must remember that the battlefield is spread around them, so while the "fragrance" likely comes from the acrid smell of gun powder and the pungent odor of newly dead bodies, as nature does its decomposing work, Whitman's character and language in the

poem will not allow the reader to consider this. He successfully aesthetizes the scene for us so that even as the battlefield is mentioned, we are more aware of the beauty of nature that surrounds them.

Though the moment is exceedingly intimate, we know the two comrades are not alone, that the others who have fallen this day are not far off, for Whitman says, "Long there and then in vigil I stood, dimly around me the battlefield spreading" (245). There are others lying nearby, but Whitman's soldier seems interested only in seeing his friend's corpse through the night; are there others performing similar duties? We don't know, but surely they may not be taking the same time and care. As Whitman, in writing about the fallen soldiers forgotten on the battlefield, noted in his Memoranda During the War from May 1863:

> Of scenes like these, I say, who writes—who e're can write, the story? Of many a score—aye, thousands, North and South, of unwrit heroes, unknown heroisms, incredible, impromptu, first-class desperations—who tells? No history, ever— No poem sings, nor music sounds, those bravest men of all—those deeds. […] Unnamed, unknown,

> remain, and still remain, the bravest soldiers. […]Likely, the typic one of them, (standing, no doubt, for hundreds, thousands,) crawls aside to some bush-clump, or ferny tuft, on receiving his death-shot—there, sheltering a little while, soaking roots, grass, and soil with red blood—[…]Perhaps the burial squads, in truce, a week afterwards, search not the secluded spot—And there, at last, the Bravest Soldier crumbles in the soil of mother earth, unburied and unknown. (27)

Our soldier in "Vigil…" saves his friend from such an ignoble fate. As the night comes to a close, our soldier begins to conclude his vigil, coming to a form of closure by saying:

> Vigil final for you brave boy, (I could not save you, swift was your death,
> I faithfully loved you and cared for you living, I think we shall surely meet again,)
> Till at latest lingering of the night, indeed just as the dawn appear'd,
> My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop'd well his form,
> Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over head and carefully under feet,

And there and then and bathed by the rising sun, my son in
his grave, in his rude dug grave I deposited,
Ending my vigil strange with that, vigil of night and battlefield dim,
[...]
I rose from the chill ground and folded my soldier well in his
blanket,
And buried him where he fell. (245-46)

As he concludes the poem, Whitman gives the reader a sense of finality; the sun rises while he buries the son who never will again. The "chill ground" now is home to the dead while the living goes into the new day. Only hours before, this space where the young soldier lies was a site of battle, and before that a natural scene of trees or a meadow. Now, it has become the most rural of rural cemeteries. Though the vigil is "final" for this particular dead soldier, the one who has cared for him in life and death may have other vigils to stand as he goes to rejoin the fight. We stand vigil with Whitman's soldier throughout the poem, and when the grave is dug, when it contains its precious cargo, we and the soldier are left to face the finality of death.

As the war raged on, families also stood vigil at home, waiting for word about husbands, fathers, and sons who fought on faraway battlefields. Through casualty

lists, newspaper accounts, and the all important letters home, families heard about their loved ones' feats and fates. A particular genre of correspondence, the consolation letter, contained various features that gave the family at home more than just word that their loved one had died. Often, these letters contained elements of the "good death" narrative, such as the circumstance and place of death and also of the witness' belief in the state of the deceased's character and immortal soul by including details of the passing. If a death was not witnessed, others often looked for telling signs in the posture of the body and facial expression to denote salvation, and these details were passed on to the survivors. Gilpin Faust writes that

> Witnesses eagerly reported any evidence of painless death, not just to relieve the minds of loved ones about the suffering a soldier might have had to endure, but more importantly, because an easy death suggested the calmness, resignation, and quick passage the bereaved so eagerly hoped for as they contemplated the fate of their lost kin. (22)

Sometimes soldiers would write to their comrades' families to offer their assurance of the deceased's salvation. "Condolence letters detailed evidence of sanctified behavior that absent relatives had not been able to witness" for themselves (Gilpin Faust 22). When describing the death of a soldier to his family back home, the final words were offered whenever possible, and indeed, according to Gilpin Faust, nearly all consolation letters offer such statements. Walt Whitman, in his role as a volunteer nurse in Washington, often wrote letters home for soldiers, whether in consolation or to just communicate their condition. In *Come Up from the Fields Father*, Whitman tells the story of one such correspondence as a family receives a letter telling about their son and brother who is fighting far from their Ohio farm. As the poem opens, a daughter calls her parents to come hear the letter just arrived from their son.

Come up from the fields father, here's a letter from our Pete,
And come to the front door mother, here's a letter from thy
dear son.
Lo, 'tis autumn,
Lo, where the trees, deeper green, yellower and redder,
Cool and sweeten Ohio's villages with leaves fluttering in the
moderate wind,

Where apples ripe in the orchards hang and grapes on the trellis'd vines,

(Smell you the smell of the grapes on the vines?

Smell you the buckwheat where the bees were lately buzzing?)

Above all, lo the sky so calm, so transparent after the rain, and with wondrous clouds,

Below too, all calm, all vital and beautiful, and the farm prospers well.

Down in the fields all prospers well, (243-4)

Whitman sets the scene for the reader as he describes the season and all the attendant colors, fragrances, and flavors of nature in the fall. We see that all is well at Pete's family home. While he is away at battle, the family carries on with their duties, for it is harvest time. Fulfilling their respective roles, Father is in the fields, and Mother is in the house. The pastoral scene offers a peaceful, pleasant view of what Pete is now missing. Were he home to help the family, he no doubt would be in the fields with his father, performing the expected duties. How much the family loses while one of its most productive members is away, we do not know, but we can surmise that the loss of a son's assistance is certainly felt keenly at harvest time.

As the tale continues, there is a hint that, though everything seems as it should be at home, all is not right with Pete.

But now from the fields come father, come at the daughter's
call,
And come to the entry mother, to the front door come right
away.
Fast as she can, she hurries, something ominous, her steps
trembling,
She does not tarry to smooth her hair nor adjust her cap.
Open the envelope quickly,
O this is not our son's writing, yet his name is sign'd,
O a strange hand writes for our dear son, O stricken mother's
soul!
All swims before her eyes, flashes with black, she catches the
main words only,
Sentences broken, *gunshot wound in the breast, cavalry skirmish,*
*taken to hospital,*
*At present low, but will soon be better.* (244)

As word of her son's injury is conveyed by a stranger's letter, the mother in our poem is every mother who sends her son to battle with a fear of receiving back just such a missive. Though she is one of many who receive such news, Whitman specifies her individually as he says:

Ah now the single figure to me,

Amid all teeming and wealthy Ohio with all its cities and farms,
Sickly white in the face and dull in the head, very faint,
By the jamb of the door leans. (244)

This "single figure," speaks louder than were Whitman to write of the thousands of mothers whose losses mirror hers. This particular woman does the job of our comrades in *Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night*. This lone family is one to whom we can relate as we feel the mother's heartache and the physical effects Whitman describes. The daughter tries to rouse her mother's hope by reminding her that the letter says that their Pete will "soon be better," but in the very next passage, the reader learns what the mother will eventually find out:

Alas poor boy, he will never be better (nor may-be needs to
be better, that brave and simple soul,)
While they stand at home at the door he is dead already,
The only son is dead. (244)

The parenthetical phrase Whitman adds works on more than one level. The boy has given, as Lincoln would say, his "last full measure of devotion," and therefore is as good a boy, as good a soldier, as good an American as it is possible for him to be. It also reflects that, for the boy, life's struggles are at an end. In arguably his best known elegy, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*,

Whitman notes that the dead are at peace and the survivors are the ones whose pain continues. He writes, "They themselves were fully at rest, they suffered not,/The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd," (270) so for the dead the pain is at an end. The elegy is for those who remain, those whose suffering continues beyond the death of their loved ones. Pete is as good as he can be, however according to Whitman:

> But the mother needs to be better,
> She with thin form presently drest in black,
> By day her meals untouch'd, then at night fitfully sleeping,
> often waking,
> In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep
> longing,
> O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life escape
> and withdraw,
> To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son. (244)

This final segment of the poem focuses only on the mother's grief, taken to the extreme of what could be diagnosed as melancholia—that form of mourning that, according to Freud, goes beyond healthy grieving. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud notes the melancholic will take grief to the point where the griever experiences an "abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to

love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of self-regarding feelings…" (125). Whitman demonstrates this melancholia through his description of the mother's inability to eat or sleep and her wish to join her son in death. Does this mother love her lost son more than the thousands of mothers whose sons have been lost? If all mothers whose sons did not return home behaved this way in their grief, the war would have been fought for naught as the country would have ground to a halt without the survivors moving on.

Freud defines mourning as "the reaction to the loss of a loved person or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on." He goes on to say that "although grief involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a morbid condition and hand the mourner over to medical treatment," and that it is assumed that following a period of time, the griever will return to a normal state of being (125). Freud says that there is only one symptom that distinguishes mourning from melancholia and that is that "the fall in self-esteem is absent in grief; but otherwise the features are the same" (125). How does normal, healthy grief and mourning

develop into melancholia? Freud believes that persons who demonstrate a "morbid pathological disposition" are more likely to fall prey to a melancholic state.

Abraham Lincoln was said to possess a melancholy disposition, though this never seemed to interfere with his ability to function normally, nor did it interfere with his single-minded desire to restore the Union, but we do see this sadness of attitude in certain of his letters and commentary about the loss of his son Willie and the lives of thousands of mothers' sons throughout the war. The suffering that the mother in Whitman's poem endures interestingly mirrors that of the First Lady, Mary Todd Lincoln. Though Mrs. Lincoln was eventually able to function following Willie's death, her husband's assassination sent her into the deepest levels of melancholia, and she was never to recover.

The mother in Whitman's poem is seen as grieving apart from her family. Whitman does not show us the daughters' or the husband's grief except for the moment when the letter is read. The mother is the one who wants to "withdraw" from everyone and everything around her. Perhaps if the son had died at home, through illness or accident, the mother might have been able to share her

grief in a healthier fashion as she would have had traditional duties to perform, a body to whom she could bid farewell, and the ability to be with her son at his passing or shortly thereafter. The news of her son's death coming as it did through a stranger's letter, no matter how compassionately scribed, would not have allowed her the satisfaction of knowing that he's truly had a "good death."

Whitman's choice to end the poem with the mother's grief gives us no indication whether the mother eventually comes out of her mourning. We are left to speculate about how life on this farm continues. Does the elder daughter take greater responsibility for her parents' and younger sisters' care? Does the father become disheartened by his wife's continued grief? While we empathize with the mother's grief, we know that for the vast majority of families, life needed to go onward.

Through these two poems of loss, Whitman tells us the stories of individual soldiers and their families and how death was visited, marked, mourned, and survived. The intimacy between the soldiers on the battlefield stands in contrast to the distance felt by families whose members grieved separately. Though the soldier in *Vigil Strange* feels his loss keenly, he is able to move ahead following

the loss perhaps in part because he is able to attend to the final disposition, while the mother in *Come Up* is not.

Whitman contrasts the sorrow illustrated by family and comrades surrounded by rural nature's beauty with the urban outcast in his poem *The City Dead-House*. Published in the 1867 edition of Leaves of Grass, the poem tells the tale of a prostitute's body dumped on the sidewalk outside Washington's city morgue. Whitman is "idly sauntering," trying to get away from the crowds when he sees the body left at the gate, discarded as just so much trash for the garbage collector. Through this sad tale, the poet draws quite a distinction between those who may expect a "good death" and those for whom the "good death" must be perhaps be bestowed to them posthumously.

Whitman writes:

> Her corpse they deposit unclaim'd, it lies on the damp brick pavement,
> The divine woman, her body, I see the body. I look on it alone,
> That house once full of passion and beauty, all else I notice not,
> Nor stillness so cold, nor running water from faucet, nor odors morbific impress me.
> But the house alone—that wonderous house—that delicate fair house—that ruin! (295)

The unknown "they" have left the body of this poor woman who worked and walked the streets to survive at the only place left to those like her—the morgue. We do not know how she died; we can merely speculate that it was drugs or alcohol, disease, exposure, or perhaps even murder, but Whitman does not tell us. He gives us hints in that he acknowledges that the "house," the woman's body, is a "ruin." His de-personification of the woman's body as a house mirrors the only house she is now welcomed into, and yet she is placed outside of the city's morgue, still waiting for someone to take her inside away from the cold, wet street on which she lies.

It is the poet alone who sees her and acknowledges her worth. Whitman says that he alone looks upon her and that he does not notice anything but the hints of her former beauty and her divinity as human. There are no "fragrances" here as in the rural setting of *Vigil Strange*, only odors, and though he says he does not notice them, he does not deny their existence either, thereby using sensory images to paint the scene.

Whitman goes on to write:

> That immortal house more than all the rows of dwellings ever built!

Or white-domed capitol with majestic figure surmounted, or
all the old high-spired cathedrals,
That little house alone more than them all—poor desperate
house!
Fair, fearful, wreck—tenement of a soul—itself a soul, (295)

The metaphor of the house as a "delicate fair…ruin" echoes the separate spheres 'angel of the house' nineteenth century cultural paradigm showing that, clearly, this angel was not following the path to true happiness of her middle class sisters. He sees in her what may have been if circumstances had not reduced this particular woman to her low state. Though a certain class of women were viewed as the moral compasses by which men were to steer their courses, this woman represents the polar opposite and acts as a warning of what may happen to a woman outside of the home and husband's protection.

Whitman compares the prostitute with houses that men have built, e.g. the Capitol building and magnificent churches, and it seems he is saying that this "house" has also been "built" by men through their use and ruin of her, yet he also believes that of all the houses ever built by men, this one is "immortal" and is worth more than all of those built of concrete and steel.

Noting her outcast status, Whitman writes:

Unclaim'd, avoided house—take one breath from my tremulous lips,
Take one tear dropt aside as I go for thought of you,
Dead house of love—house of madness and sin, crumbled, crush'd,
House of life, erewhile talking and laughing—but ah, poor house, dead even then,
Months, years, an echoing, garnish'd house—but dead, dead, dead. (295)

Whitman acknowledges that the woman's soul died within her before, perhaps long before, her physical death. This, then, is perhaps Whitman offering her the good death as he witnesses her earlier spiritual death, creating a "good death" narrative. Unable or unwilling to provide her with laying out or a coffin, he does take a moment to mourn the woman, witness to some goodness she once possessed, offers her dignity in her very undignified circumstance, and moves on. It is Whitman recognizing her humanity, even as he distances and de-personifies the person from the "house" she once inhabited, which will allow the prostitute to be put to rest.

Though Whitman shares an intimate moment with the dead woman, this sad and ugly scene of death differs from the

tender intimacy of the soldiers in *Vigil Strange* and the sorrow of the family in *Come Up*. We do not know this woman in the same way that we know the soldiers or Pete's family; while this poem, like the others, is about people reacting to the death of another, in this case, we feel, not empathy, but pity, as the poet feels pity. We can be assured that when the morgue workers come to fetch the body inside, it will not be treated with the tender care of kin, nor will she be remembered at all as she likely will remain un-named and unknown, buried as a number if she receives a marker at all.

The "good death" was what was hoped for, but not always granted. Many soldiers remained on the field, in shallow graves, forgotten, while families were left to wonder about the fate of their loved ones. While the practice of embalming allowed some soldiers (mostly officers) to have their corpses sent home for burial, many families had to either wait until after the war for repatriation of remains or accept that their loved ones would lie in a grave far from home. When the president, Abraham Lincoln, was assassinated mere days after the war's end, his body was embalmed and sent on a long trek back to Springfield, Illinois. Not even the well-loved George

Washington, who was given many fine farewells after his passing, had the outpouring of grief that Lincoln's death created; the circumstances surrounding his death ensured that it would be overwhelming. The nation never mourned anyone like it mourned Lincoln, and Walt Whitman, whose devotion to Lincoln is well recorded, leaves us many elegiac poems to mark the passing of the 16th president. The following chapter looks at some of those poems within the context of the culture of mourning and Whitman's attempt to aid in the nation's grief and his own reconciliation of Lincoln's death.

## CHAPTER THREE

## THE WAR ENDS AND THE MOURNING BEGINS

Some of Walt Whitman's best known and most beloved work comes in the form of elegies written for Abraham Lincoln, and it is through these poems and the "good death" narrative that we see the nation coming to terms with the loss of the national patriarch. Whitman's Lincoln elegies do much of the same work as his battlefield poetry in that he attempts to fill the liminal space between griever and grieved as well as facilitates reconciliation of the loss. The Lincoln elegies situate the nation's grief within the domestic space of the "good death" and the space of the battlefield thereby mediating the two. As this chapter deals with Lincoln's assassination and Whitman's poetic reaction, a bit of context surrounding the end of the war and the Lincoln presidency seems necessary.

Just as the bloodshed of the previous four years was coming to an end, the nation was not allowed much of a breath before being plunged into further mourning as the first assassination of an American president seemed to put an exclamation point on the war's end. Lincoln, fond as he was of humorous stories, was himself known to have a

melancholy mien and was not immune to the nineteenth century's fascination with death. While in the White House, the Lincolns' son Willie died of what most historians believe to have been typhoid fever, and in preparation for the funeral, the child was embalmed. According to Thomas J. Craughwell, "The little boy looked so lovely that the *Sunday Morning Chronicle* reported, 'The embalmment was a success and gave great satisfaction to all present'" (8). Willie was not buried but placed in a tomb in a Washington cemetery for later burial back in Springfield.

In his recent book, Lincoln's Melancholy, Joshua Wolf Shenk writes that "Lincoln went several times to look at his body in its tomb" (197). While Lincoln was profoundly affected by the death of the favorite son, it was Mrs. Lincoln's grief that mirrored that of the mother in Whitman's poem. Shenk writes that:

> After their boy Willie's death, Lincoln faced an even greater fear—that his wife would go insane. [...]She regularly had what her biographer Ruth Painter Randall describes as "paroxysms of convulsive weeping." In the midst of one, the president led her by the arm to a window and

> pointed across the Anacostia river to the Government Hospital for the Insane. "Mother," he said to her, "do you see that large white building on the hill yonder? Try and control your grief, or it will drive you mad, and we may have to send you there." (181)

Freud talks about the mania that sometimes accompanies melancholia and notes that, while not all patients suffer bouts of mania, "The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energy from all sides," perhaps resulting for Mary in the "paroxysms" she was said to suffer (134). A few years later when her husband was assassinated, Mary Lincoln would begin the descent into such melancholia that her son Robert would have her placed in an institution.

Following his assassination, Lincoln's funeral plans began with care for his body. On Easter Sunday, he was embalmed by the same man who embalmed Willie, Henry P. Cattell, and when Lincoln's body was placed on a special funeral train for the journey back to Springfield, Illinois, Willie's body joined his. Though she seemed debilitated, Mary Lincoln did insist on certain qualifications, such as her husband's remains being

returned to Springfield instead of being buried in the Congressional Cemetery. Also, when Springfield's city fathers wanted to build Lincoln a tomb in town, Mrs. Lincoln insisted he be buried in Oak Ridge cemetery, a rural cemetery built in 1855 and modeled after Mt. Auburn. Craughwell says that on the day Oak Ridge was dedicated, the Lincolns had been in the crowd watching the ceremony and that:

> It was not fashion alone that prompted Mary Lincoln to choose Oak Ridge for her husband's final resting place. Years later Mary would claim that she was fulfilling Lincoln's express wish. (23)

Though she would close herself off into her room at the White House and refuse to attend any of the ceremonies, Mary Lincoln was strong enough to have final say on the care for, embalming, and disposition of her husband's body, fulfilling her domestic role, if not physically laying him out herself, then making plans for it.

By the end of the war, embalming was becoming more common, and the thousands who lined up to see Lincoln's corpse as it made its way across the country could see first-hand the benefits of such preservation. Public

viewing of the deceased was, of necessity, limited by the body's rapid decomposition. Such preservation allowed for presentation of Lincoln's corpse long past the traditional three day period. This allowed more of the national family to take its reflective gaze and come to terms with its loss.

Walt Whitman greatly admired the 16th president. During his time in Washington, whether working as a clerk or tending his "boys" in the hospitals, Whitman often saw the president's carriage pass by. He was not in Washington when Lincoln was assassinated, however. He was home in Brooklyn and wrote that on April 15th, he and his mother read the newspapers as each edition and extra came out. They drank a cup of coffee but took nothing more as a result of the impact of Lincoln's death. In Specimen Days & Collect, Whitman says that in his notes for April 16th, 1865, he wrote of Lincoln that:

> He leaves for America's history and biography, so far, not only its most dramatic reminiscence—he leaves, in my opinion, the greatest, best, most characteristic, artistic, moral personality. (68)

Whitman's deep feelings for the murdered president would reveal themselves in some of his most respected and oft

recited poems. Lincoln elegies like *O Captain! My Captain!* and *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd,* among others, stand alongside the battlefield poems to reflect not only the impact of the war and Lincoln's assassination on the grieving public but also the poet's reaction to these events.

Within days of the president's death, Whitman began writing *Hush'd Be the Camps To-day* for inclusion in his first edition of Drum-Taps, which was being printed. Daniel Mark Epstein writes that:

> On Monday April 17th, the newspapers announced that Lincoln would be buried on Wednesday in the Congressional Cemetery. That day and the next, the poet was in New York writing the poem "Hush'd Be the Camps To-Day," which bears the subcaption "A.L. Buried April 19th, 1865.

In the "deathbed edition" of Leaves of Grass, the subcaption reads "(May 4, 1865.)" reflecting the journey to interment in Springfield. This first of the Lincoln elegies, fittingly begins with the Commander in Chief's men who feel the impact of Lincoln's death, coming as it does after the long sought Union victory. Whitman, in four lines, sets the scene and the time:

Hush'd be the camps to-day,
And soldiers let us drape our war-worn weapons,
And each with musing soul retire to celebrate,
Our dear commander's death. (272)

The war is ended and what should be a scene of joyous relief that their well-used weapons may be put to rest are to be draped in mourning crepe rather than patriotic bunting. Using the term celebrate in its commemorative context, Whitman creates a sense of quiet contemplation as each soldier keeps to himself and stands vigil, not at the deceased's bier, but in their minds. Their vigil for the slain president, just as the soldier in *Vigil Strange*, offers the reflective inward gaze that they cannot offer to the corpse as they bid farewell.

The next stanza reinforces what he later will write about the dead—that they suffer no longer, while the survivors must carry on. Of Lincoln, he says:

No more for him life's stormy conflicts,
Nor victory, nor defeat—no more time's dark events,
Charging like ceaseless clouds across the sky. (272)

Whitman seems to say that it is the soldiers who are the ones to most deeply feel the loss of the president for whom they followed his rallying cry, first for Union, then for "a new birth of freedom." As the instruments though which

Lincoln saved the Union, the soldiers have a special place in mourning his passing:

> But sing poet in our name,
> Sing of the love we bore him—because you, dweller in camps,
> know it truly.
> As they invault the coffin there,
> Sing—as they close the doors of earth upon him—one verse,
> For the heavy hearts of soldiers. (272)

There is a shift in pronouns as the soldiers address the poet, imploring him to say what they cannot, and as the poet addresses the individual soldier ("you, dweller in camps") who knows just how much he and his fellows loved the slain president. "Sing," they beg the poet, for the sad soldiers who served and survived. Whitman keeps the poem in the frame of mourning rather than melancholia as he notes the soldiers' ability to lay the president to rest and move forward, sad yet reconciled to the loss.

Though his triumphant *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd,* is his most critically acclaimed elegy, Whitman's best known, most loved poem in his lifetime was also the poet's least favorite. When Whitman offered his Lincoln lectures over the years, *O Captain! My Captain!* was his most requested poem for recitation. Its sheer accessibility may be one reason why it has been so beloved

by the public. Its sing-song rhythm, rhyme scheme, and obvious metaphors make it easily available to even those for whom poetry is difficult. Epstein writes that "doubtless Whitman had seen the newspaper story that the night before the assassination the president dreamed of a ship about to enter port under full sail," thereby making the ship's captain a natural stand in for the head of state (299). As the poem begins, Whitman demonstrates how much the Union victory means to the survivors:

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done!
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red.
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

Epstein says that, in his notebook, Whitman wrote: "Lincoln's death—black, black, black…" (275). This seems to echo the "O heart! heart! heart!" of the poem, as well as the prostitute in the *City Dead-House* who is "dead, dead, dead." Whitman's use of this trope demonstrates consistency between his poetic and prose aesthetic sensibility. Thrice repeated words will not allow readers

to mistake the intention, and thus the importance, of this replication. In the Lincoln elegy, the triumvirate repetition, like the tolling of a bell sounding the death knell, creates a powerful feeling of finality and acceptance from which there is no turning back. Just as Lincoln's assassination will not sever the Union again, though that would seem to be John Wilkes Booth's hope, death is absolute.

As Whitman likens the struggle to preserve the United States to a ship and Lincoln's steady hand steering the helm of leadership through the fight, we see him noting that the "prize" of Union victory is attained and that the ship is returning to port safe and sound, meaning the nation will soon be cohesive and whole again. However, the captain, who has thus far so nobly steered the course to triumph, will not enjoy the fruits of his labor. The focus shifts in the second stanza to directly address the fallen captain who is implored to:

rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths -for you the shores
a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;

Here Captain! dear father!

This arm beneath your head!

It is some dream that on the deck,

You've fallen cold and dead. (272)

As soldiers returned from battle and ships returned to port, crowds, like those of today, often greeted the soldiers and sailors with cheers, flags waving, and flowers to show their appreciation, but Whitman points to the fallen commander as the one to whom most of the accolades belong. The captain is now addressed as father, the nation's patriarch, Father Abraham, as freed slaves often referred to him in the Old Testament style. And, as Father, Lincoln's loss will be embraced as the nation's loss; the death will be as painful for some as of a family member. The national family that has so recently pitted brother against brother in a devastating fight is now faced with reconciliation without the guiding hand of him who loved both sides.

The final stanza deals with death's physical effects and notes that though the nation is one once more, it has come at a terrible price:

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,

My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,

The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,

From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;

Exult O shores, and ring O bells!

But I with mournful tread,

Walk the deck my captain lies,

Fallen cold and dead. (272)

Though presented in first person, the speaker in the elegy is unlike the bold and controversial "I" of Whitman's earlier *Songs*. In Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography, David S. Reynolds notes that:

> In Whitman's best-known Lincoln poems, "O Captain! My Captain!" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," the silencing of his former poetic self is particularly noticeable. At first, these poems seem to have little in common. [Yet] both poems signaled the passing of Whitman's poetry as it once was. [...] Both poems concentrate on Lincoln and marginalize Whitman [...] changing the poet's role from that of imaginary leader to that of eulogist of its actual leader. (444-5)

This shift in character exhibits Whitman's growing maturity and his liminality within the poems as he is able to at once be the facilitator of consolation and an active

participant in the act of mourning. His earlier "I" may have been too big, too bold, too brash to encompass this middle position. In these elegies, however, we feel both Whitman's personal grief and his compassionate shoulder being offered. The subjugation of the "I," then, makes room for the sad intimacy Whitman is presenting.

Whitman's love for the 16th president is well documented in Whitman's own words and in countless books that explore the relationship between the two who, though they never met personally, are linked through era, ideology, and sentiment. Whitman gave several lectures about Abraham Lincoln in the years following his assassination, and as the war was a defining moment for Lincoln, Lincoln, the war and the soldiers seem, at times, to define Whitman. His Lincoln poems offered to the nation words to express their sorrow and a space in which to face the magnitude of their grief. The great outpouring of grief by the thousands of people who lined up to see the slain president lie in state or to witness the passing of the funeral train is given, through Whitman's elegies, an organized, unified voice with which to express their sorrow.

In his final edition of Leaves of Grass, published just prior to his death, Whitman created a section in the book titled "Memories of President Lincoln," and he positions his grand *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* as the first selection, perhaps giving his greatest poetic triumph its due. Much has been written about the poem; it has been analyzed in myriad ways, and its "good death" narrative is inescapable. The elegy takes the reader on a journey through nature, through grief, and through reconciliation and acceptance of the loss. As he has in so many poems, Whitman begins by setting the scene:

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.
Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love. (264)

Linking the effects of spring, traditionally a time of rebirth and joy, with mourning, Whitman redefines previous associations and equates them now with grief and loss. As sure as spring will return, memories of the loss will also return. The sensory memories built through the sight and scent of the lilacs, the position of stars in the night

sky, and the warmer climate will all combine to create for Whitman a renewed sense of loss. These former objects of beauty now have been formed into new associations that link them with grief and loss. By now linking death with sensory and temporal memories, we see what Freud notes about the dangers of slipping into melancholia when he states that:

> The occasions giving rise to melancholia for the most part extend beyond the clear case of a loss by death, and include all those situations of being wounded, hurt, neglected, out of favor, or disappointed, which can import opposite feelings of love and hate into the relationship or reinforce an already existing ambivalence. This conflict of ambivalence, the origin of which lies now more in actual experience, now more in constitution, must not be neglected among the conditioning factors in melancholia. (132)

The connection between actual loss and other states affecting the griever may exacerbate the mourning into a melancholic state, which involves self-hatred. This would seem to be facilitated by closely associating the loss with recurring states of being, like the return of spring.

The heavy scent of lilac, often used to cover the stench of death, is fitting in its use as it conjures images appropriate to sorrow, and as in *Vigil Strange*, aestheticizes and domesticates the moment with beauty. Bringing the death of the president to the homely dooryard also works to remind us that all are affected by the loss and reinforces the idea that the national family has lost its father.

In the second stanza, Whitman's cries beginning with "O" link Lincoln metaphorically with and identify him as the star in the western sky.

> O powerful western fallen star!
> O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!
> O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!
> O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!
> O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul. (264)

Lincoln, a native of Kentucky and resident of Illinois, is a westerner and will return to the west for his final resting place. It was often euphemistically said that when one died, one "went west," so the metaphor works with Lincoln's death in numerous contexts. The anguish of the poet is obvious through the stanza; the repetition of 'O's

changes the wistful sadness in which the poem begins to a wailing and exclamatory note.

In the fifth and sixth stanzas, Lincoln's funeral journey is documented, and Whitman details not only the natural settings through which the coffin train travels, but the people who line up along the tracks and queue up in "cities draped in black" where the train stops for viewing. All through the states, through the fields where so recently the bodies of slain soldiers lay, through the Union that Lincoln had fought to maintain travels the locomotive with its sorrowful cargo as Whitman offers his "sprig of lilac." This, then, allows us to see the "good death" with its ritual laying out of the corpse, the family's and community's reflective gaze, the trek to the meeting house, and the journey to the grave on a massive scale. The numerous funeral services in each city where the hearse train stops, the pall bearers moving the president's body to each meeting house and ultimately to its grave, all work to create reconciliation for the loss and move the mourners to a place of finality and peace.

It is in the seventh stanza that Whitman creates a greater eulogy for all the recently dead.

(Nor for you alone, for one alone,

Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,
For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you
O sane and sacred death

All over bouquets of roses,
O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,
But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,
Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,
With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
For you and the coffins all of you O death.) (266)

Whitman acknowledges the large numbers of dead the country has so recently suffered, and though Lincoln is the primary subject, Whitman cannot seem to ignore the soldiers whom he, and Lincoln, loved. In the tenth stanza, Whitman asks "And what shall my perfume be for the grave of him I love?" (267). Just as in the battlefield poems, Whitman here creates beauty rather than realism, making an offering of flowers to Death thereby yielding to its power but accepting its finality. Again, this softening, this domestication, of death reveals the ways that Whitman aestheticizes the process of laying a body to rest, with perfume to soften the reality.

Whitman's use of the hermit thrush to sing out the lonely and pensive song of sorrow, through "bleeding

throat" and the use of nature throughout the elegy employ language that creates the rural scenery and feeling of the rural cemeteries. The very "carol" the bird sings generates the sense the rural cemetery is meant to create. The carol begins:

*Come lovely and soothing death,*
*Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,*
*In the day, in the night, to all, to each.*
*Sooner or later, delicate death.* (269)

If the space of the rural cemetery is meant to convey lessons to the living, then the bird's first verse does that. It reminds the reader that death will come to all at some point, whether we are ready for it or not. There is also, as in so many of Whitman's poems about death, a sense that death is not to be feared but to be embraced. Death should be mourned, yes, but not feared, for the hermit thrush goes on to sing:

*Prais'd be the fathomless universe,*
*For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,*
*And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!*
*For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.* (269)

Again, the triple repetition, "praise! praise! praise!" and once more the idea that death is not something to dread when it comes, but to embrace and be embraced by it. This

is not to say that Whitman had a "death wish" or encouraged death, but it is recognition of death's place in the continuity of life. Be grateful, he says, for life and all its joys, but also accept and be grateful for an ending. It seems that for Whitman, the sorrow in death comes from death that arrives seemingly ahead of schedule, when the deceased had so much living yet to do. His own long and fulfilling life is certainly proof of the joie de vivre he maintained, but his poems of death offer us a look at the healthy perspective he maintained. These are lessons the living were meant to learn within those liminal spaces called rural cemeteries.

Whitman, in his "Songs of Parting" section of Leaves of Grass, offers poems written about the war many years after. These poems offer their lessons about accepting death, yet also create touchstones that those mourning their own losses may embrace in their sorrow, reconcile their losses, and move onward. This reconciliation of not only loss, but the war itself, is demonstrated in the poem *Ashes of Soldiers*. Walking the line between masculine warfare and feminine domesticity in mourning practices, he offers liminality within his poems such as *Vigil Strange*. As in that poem, Whitman also intimately embraces the

soldiers of both North and South in the poem *Ashes of Soldiers*. Whitman writes:

Ashes of soldiers South or North,
As I muse retrospective murmuring a chant in thought,
The war resumes, again to my sense your shapes,
And again the advance of the armies.

Noiseless as mists and vapors,
From their graves in the trenches ascending,
From cemeteries all through Virginia and Tennessee,
From every point of the compass out of countless graves,
In wafted clouds, in myriads large, or squads of two or threes
Or single ones they come,
And silently gather round me. (389-390)

Whitman, writing many years after the war has ended, conjures up the memories of the fallen soldiers and resurrects them from wherever they have lain. After the years of failed reconstruction and difficulty, Whitman is sure to tell us that these memories and these war dead are all American soldiers living in his memory and through his verse, the collective memory. What begins as a tale of eerie phantoms rising from their graves becomes a military parade of cavalry and infantry proudly marching by, but Whitman says there are no trumpets or drums sounding as would be expected. No one sees these ghosts but the poet

himself, and he says, "I chant this chant of my silent soul in the name of all dead/ soldiers" (391). After describing with martial pride his "handsome tan-faced horsemen," the tone changes once again to the sort of quiet, sad intimacy we have seen earlier. He writes:

Faces so pale with wondrous eyes, very dear, gather closer yet,
Draw close, but speak not.
Phantoms of countless lost,
Invisible to the rest henceforth become my companions,
Follow me ever—desert me not while I live.

Sweet are the blooming cheeks of the living—sweet are the
musical voices sounding,
But sweet, ah sweet, are the dead with their silent eyes.

Dearest comrades, all is over and long gone,
But love is not over—and what love, O comrades!
Perfume from the battle-fields rising, up from the fœtor arising.

Perfume therefore my chant, O love, immortal love,
Give me to bathe the memories of all dead soldiers,
Shroud them, embalm them, cover them all over with tender
pride.

Perfume all—make all wholesome,
Make these ashes to nourish and blossom,
O love, solve all, fructify all with the last chemistry.

Give me exhaustless, make me a fountain,
That I exhale love from me wherever I go like a moist perennial
dew,
For the ashes of all dead soldiers South or North. (390-1)

Whitman seems to offer these soldiers, once enemies, a posthumous "good death." There is no judgment in his tone; southerners as well as northerners are dear to him. He writes about the common humanity shared by these soldiers, for whether they are buried in cemeteries or mass graves or decomposed under a bush as he had written about earlier, they will all make the earth fertile with what Whitman calls "the last chemistry." This is echoed in *Pensive on Her Dead Gazing* as mothers lay their sons in Mother Earth who is told "I charge you lose/ not my sons, lose not an atom [...] My dead absorb or North or South—my young men's bodies/ absorb, and their precious, precious blood (396.8.9.18.19). The reconciliation that Whitman attempts through these poems for Lincoln, for the soldiers, even many years after their deaths demonstrates Whitman's ability to give the dead their final due, their good death. The love of these "brothers in arms," these American sons, is what remains, Whitman says, and they may rest peacefully

knowing that their deaths will be remembered and commemorated by one poet, at least.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## DEATH IN ALL ITS FINALITY

Death is usually not the first theme that one thinks of when asked to reflect on Walt Whitman's poetry, yet in his cultural biography, David S. Reynolds observes that "More frequently than any writer of his time, Whitman contemplated death in his writings. At moments he seemed to see nothing but death" (239). In a century that was familiar with frequent, often violent, death, and was, at the same time, changing the codes of behavior required of mourning practices, reflecting upon death seems natural. Writing of the English elegy, Peter Sachs says that "the elegy, as a poem of mourning and consolation, has its roots in a dense matrix of rites and ceremonies [...], the literary versions of specific social and psychological practices" (1-2). Elegy as a genre and its effect on the practice of mourning has not had the kind of comprehensive study some deem necessary, for Max Cavitch, discussing the American elegy and genre, notes that "The dynamic relation *between* mourning and genre itself is largely overlooked in twentieth century criticism and theory" (20). Cavitch

wonders about the work the elegist performs and the "transformation of mourning into poetry," asking:

> What price do the living pay for the idealization of the dead? What price do the dead pay for the self-idealizations of the mourner? […] Is the aestheticization of someone's else grief a kind of theft? (111)

By asking these questions in the context of earlier centuries' use of mourning literature, Cavitch insists that the role played by the participants, both living and dead, must be addressed in elegy. Of Whitman's role as elegist, Cavitch says that he:

> extends the efforts of American poets to develop a politically relevant elegiac practice by introducing a radical, eroticized vision of improved relations among the living as well as between the living and the dead. (18)

The place, then, that elegy takes within the American culture necessarily changes with the changing ideologies and cultural norms agreed upon by each succeeding generation. By examining how earlier generations laid the literary and cultural groundwork for mourning, we may see

whether the modern elegy continues that work or has become something else altogether.

John B. Vickery, in discussing The Modern Elegiac Temper, believes that elegies in the last century have become about losses that cover more than death. Vickery states that:

> Seminal events of the modern period—most notably World War I, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the advent of the Holocaust—generated responses that broadened and diffused the function of the elegy. (2)

Poets writing about loss today do not seek to soothe, console, and reconcile so much as to make political statements or offer vent to emotions like anger and frustration. The role of the modern elegy serves different purposes, much as the elegies of the eighteenth and earlier centuries, because of differing cultural practices and sensibilities, yet the elegies of the nineteenth century do provide a link, a stepping stone to our modern era and a way of seeing just what got us to our modern practices surrounding the occurrence of death and grief.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the rise of industry, scientific breakthroughs, cultural revolutions in

thought, and the disruption of civil society by a bloody war all combined to introduce new ways of dealing with, and talking about, death.

The funerary innovations that grew out of the Civil War, the rural cemetery movement, photography, medical advances, and an increasingly urban population created the modern funeral practices we are familiar with today. Though our sensibilities surrounding death comes from an era that continued to professionalize everything from the way the corpse is handled to the ceremonial send offs we are obliged to give, we are less open in our ability to face death today. The professionalization of it has allowed us to deny death in many ways. Pointing to Geoffrey Gorer's argument that death is the new unmentionable subject, John Stephenson writes that:

> Death is banished from our everyday reality in other ways than by simply refusing to talk about it. […] The lack of open observance of mourning and the individualization of grief have aided in banishing references to death from everyday living. No longer are those grieving easily identified. Any display of strong feelings is considered inappropriate […] The relegating of

> death to institutions has removed death from the home and hidden it behind institutional walls. (40-41)

Rarely today do people who are mourning take more than the proscribed three days our society offers to grieve. Though we claim to be more in touch with our emotions and feelings, this does not seem to include those surrounding death. Mourners are expected to be back to work or school quickly and are not encouraged to speak of their grief in public spaces. The nineteenth century offered those in mourning, clearly indicated by appropriate clothing, time and space within which to come to terms with loss. The descent into melancholia notwithstanding, the public acknowledgment of grief and mourners in the earlier era seems healthier than the denial we are used to today.

Elegiac poetry and consolation literature, other than that found in store bought sympathy cards and self-help books, seem outdated and anachronistic in the twenty-first century, yet humans must still give voice to their grief in constructive, comforting ways. As Whitman gave voice to the grieving individual and offered solace to the mourning masses, his poems also offer the mourner an opportunity to return to the comfort of the elegy time and again when

needed to release and reconcile the pain brought about by death and its finality.

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