

WALT WHITMAN AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR:  
FROM WOUND DRESSER TO GOOD GRAY POET

by

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## Abstract

Today, Walt Whitman is considered a famous nineteenth-century American poet. At the outbreak of the American Civil War however, he was underrated and underappreciated by American readers. Three editions of his book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, were not received well by American readers and his future in writing looked bleak. This was despite the fact that Whitman's literary friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote an encouraging review of the first edition, which Whitman included in the second and third iterations. Ironically, Whitman's career made a turn for the better when his brother, George Washington Whitman, was reported to be among the wounded or killed in the Battle of Fredericksburg on December 13, 1862. A dedicated family man, Whitman immediately boarded a train in New York and headed for Falmouth, Virginia, to check on his brother's wellbeing. Whitman visited several makeshift hospitals before coming across Chatham Mansion, the temporary Union Hospital Headquarters. He saw at the base of a tree a pile of human limbs that had been tossed out of a first floor window following amputations. The scene was horrific and he paused to record what he saw in his diary.

This experience forever changed Whitman the man and Whitman the poet and the transformation was evident in his subsequent writing, as Whitman first took on the persona of what I have designated as the Wound Dresser and years after the war the Good Gray Poet. This evolution changed the public perception of Whitman, and it occurred in phases. The initial phase was before the war, his work was considered obscene among American society due to his previous publications. The second transformation in Whitman was initiated by fear of personal loss when his brother was listed among the

wounded and dead at Fredericksburg and the sight of the amputated limbs at Chatham Mansion. Had Whitman been exposed to the war slowly over time, the effect might not have been so profound, but Chatham was an earth shattering event in his life, as he admitted. The third phase was the result of daily exposure for years to the wounded and dying in the hospitals. He developed a personal connection with the men and was determined to stay with them, despite direct orders from hospital doctors that he should return home for his own physical and emotional recovery. His experience in the hospitals had transformed from a middle aged healthy man to a frail and brittle shell, evident in photographs of him during these years. The final phase was marked by the transformation in his writing. It was in this phase that Whitman created the most memorable and remarkable Civil War poetry that is still celebrated today. It was this poetry that caused American's to revere him as the "Good Gray Poet."

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is a culmination of years of a less-than-normal kindred relationship and fascination with Walt Whitman. Therefore, it is only right to dedicate this work to him, his literature and legacy. I only hope that it would make him proud to know that he is still celebrated today for the poet that he truly was, although he was drastically misunderstood for most of his life. Without him and his literary masterpieces, this thesis would have never been written and a Master's student would be frantically searching for not only a topic to investigate, but meaning in life. In turn, this work is also dedicated to those who fought and died in the Civil War. Not only did they change history and make America what it is today, but they changed Whitman forever and granted him a new life calling. That calling spiritually saved him, as he and his poetry have saved so many others in big and small ways.

## Introduction

*Whitman is so hard to grasp, to put in a statement. One cannot get to the bottom of him...he is bottomed in Nature, in democracy, in science, in personality.* – John Burroughs<sup>1</sup>

Today, Walt Whitman is a renowned poet known as the “Good Gray Poet.” He stands among the ranks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, and Emily Dickinson. His famous line, “Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself,” is so well known and quoted so often in movies and other media that many people are unaware to the fact that it first appeared in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* in “Song of Myself.”<sup>2</sup> Whitman paved the way for today’s modern poetry by redefining poetry as Americans knew it in the nineteenth century. He distained classical poetry norms such as rhyming and iambic pentameter, but continued to utilize assonance and alliteration to create a melodic reading of his poems, so they almost sing to those reading them. His poems also used cataloging to a dramatic extent, listing cities, countries, occupations, and ages and variations of citizens, such as transportation workers, bankers, shop keepers, men, and women, for example. Whitman enjoyed writing his poems in the form of a question in order to hold a dialogue with the reader. This level of intimacy can only be understood by reading Whitman. It is, as Burroughs’ quote indicates above, “hard to grasp” but so unique and personal it feels like chatting with a long-lost friend who understands the reader better than the reader understands himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: the Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), VIII.

<sup>2</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1855, 2005), 46.



Contrary to Whitman's legacy today, he was not always famous and revered. Much like Whitman the man and Whitman the poet, his story is beautifully complex and fascinating. Whitman did not begin by writing poetry, but held some mediocre jobs in newspaper offices after quitting school at a young age in order to support his large family. He then moved into teaching and writing for newspapers and did not publish his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* until he was thirty-six. His career from then on consisted of writing and continuing to edit *Leaves* multiple times, and he produced seven editions in his lifetime. *Leaves* was a culmination of prose and grouping of poems that Whitman continued to perfect each time he published a new edition, by adding poems and restructuring the existing poems. The first editions were not well received by readers. Whitman's subject material was risqué, spoke of homosexuality, heterosexuality, procreation, God, death, immortalization, democracy, and slavery. This was a risky move for a poet in the mid-nineteenth century, a time of major political and social turbulence. To say the least, society did not greet Whitman warmly at the beginning of his career because of his sexually charged and free-verse form poetry, but he never gave up. David Haven Blake explains Whitman's late claim to fame in *Walt Whitman and the Culture of America*:

Celebrity came late to Walt Whitman. An old man, half paralyzed by strokes, he could hardly appreciate the attention he attracted during the height of America's Gilded Age. From around the world people wrote the poet asking for his autograph, and on at least one occasion, he used a pile of such requests to light the kindling in his fireplace....With their invasions on both his privacy and his work, such incidents suggest an unexpected conclusion to the kind of fame that Whitman had imagined for himself in the decades before the Civil War.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David Haven Blake, *Walt Whitman and the Culture of America* (New Haven: Yale University, 2006), 21-22.

When the Civil War began, many in the North believed that it would end quickly with little bloodshed and a glorious Union victory. After some displacement, American life would then go on as usual. Whitman was disheartened when the war broke out and became even more so when his brother's name was listed among the dead or wounded following the Battle of Fredericksburg. He immediately made his way to Falmouth, Virginia in the winter of 1862 to find his brother, a trip that marked the beginning of years of voluntary hospital service that transformed Whitman's poetry and the public perception of him. During those years of service he attended to tens of thousands of wounded soldiers in the hospitals, writing letters home to their families and giving them comfort and companionship. Whitman tirelessly went from hospital to hospital until he was physically and emotionally exhausted. The doctors sent him back to his home in New Jersey to recuperate, but Whitman returned to the hospitals and his soldiers. He poured this experience into his post-war poetry and later editions of *Leaves* and in doing so transformed his fate. After the war, it was America that was broken both emotionally and physically, and Whitman's poetry was like a soothing dressing over a tender wound. This is how Whitman's persona as the Wound Dresser was born, a persona which I developed, but also one of his well-known post-war poem. Americans embraced the later editions of *Leaves* and Whitman's Civil War poetry as a means of mourning the death of their family members, neighbors and friends.

This thesis will explore the shifts in Whitman's public persona before, during and after the war and chart his journey from being despised and ridiculed to being known as the Good Gray Poet. There is much scholarship on Whitman, but none that truly explores the simultaneous transformation of his persona and his poetry. There are certainly none

arguing that Whitman's persona before the Good Gray Poet was actually the Wound Dresser. This thesis will argue that "Whitman the Wound Dresser" was a critical step in his evolution to the Good Gray Poet, and it will detail how the transformation of Whitman and his poetry also shaped the history and memory of the war.

# Chapter 1 - Young Walt Whitman: Erotic and Uncensored

## Whitman's Early Life

Walter Whitman was born to a working class Republican and nationalist family on May 31, 1819 in Long Island, New York, roughly fifty miles from Manhattan.<sup>4</sup> It was a year of dark premonitions due to slavery and the economy.<sup>5</sup> Missouri had applied for statehood, and there was a clear divide between those who believed western territories ought to be admitted to the Union as slave states or free states. There was also the Panic of 1819, the first of the depressions that shook American society during the 1800s. These gloomy omens shaped Whitman's writing, perhaps for the better. David S. Reynolds argues in *Walt Whitman's America* that "the whole temper of American society before the Civil War could be summed up in one word: "convulsiveness." *Leaves of Grass* was, in part, his poetic effort to acknowledge these social convulsions while restraining them and redirecting them."<sup>6</sup>

Whitman was named after his father, Walter Whitman Sr. who named three of his other children after men whom he believed to be American heroes: Andrew Jackson Whitman, George Washington Whitman, and Thomas Jefferson Whitman. Whitman Sr. was born near the end of the American Revolution. He was a liberal and knew and respected the writings and ideology of Thomas Paine. Whitman Sr.'s family was originally from England and Whitman's mother, Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, was of

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<sup>4</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Dutch and Welsh descent.<sup>7</sup> They married in 1816 and differences in their backgrounds resulted in tension that was felt by the children. It has also been argued that Whitman Sr. was an alcoholic and was known to be short-tempered. Louisa birthed five boys and two girls. It was Whitman's parent's strong republican beliefs that influenced his writing and nationalist views later in life. He was also influenced by Deism and the Quaker doctrine of "inner light." Whitman's father was not a member of any church, but his mother occasionally went to a small Baptist church nearby their home.<sup>8</sup> This type of loose religious upbringing allowed Whitman to experiment and from his own beliefs, which is evident in his transcendental poetry.

Whitman Sr. had a history of business failures in one venture after another and this is also reflected in a few of Whitman's poems. He respected his father, but did not enjoy a close relationship with him. Like Walt Sr., however, Whitman remained sensitive to America's working class. Reynolds maintains that, "for the young Walt, his father's economic vacillations gave him an early exposure to issues of class and politics that later would flower in his political journalism and, differently, in his poetry." Whitman was also shaped by a deep respect for his ancestry and a love of national history, and this also influenced many of the poems in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman idolized his mother and thought of his family as "tribal."<sup>9</sup> His holistic sense of family shined through later in his poetry. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price argue that she "served throughout his life as his

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<sup>7</sup> Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, "Family Origins" in "Walt Whitman,"

[http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt\\_whitman/index.html#origins](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt_whitman/index.html#origins) accessed June 22, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 28.

emotional touchstone.”<sup>10</sup> He often took on a parental role and as the second eldest, assisted his mother by caring for his brothers and sisters. This paternal role continued throughout his life, as Whitman was constantly caring for his siblings and nurturing his aging mother.

Shortly before Whitman turned three the family moved to Boston.<sup>11</sup> This was the city that truly affected Whitman’s childhood wistfulness and memories, which are hard not to notice in *Leaves*. The blue-collared work force was something that Whitman would reference in numerous poems later in his life. He also spent time a lot of time riding the ferry and found a fondness for transportation workers, some of which he would visit in the hospital because of the high accident rates related to their profession. Some of his fonder memories included visiting his grandparents, Amy Williams Van Velsor and Major Cornelius Van Velsor, on Long Island.<sup>12</sup> One of his more famous poems “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” draws on those memories and illustrate how his dream of becoming a poet came to life there.<sup>13</sup>

Whitman attended public school for about five years. He was an unexceptional student and quit by age eleven to help care for his family, but he continued to self-educate himself by attending public lectures and visiting libraries and museums.<sup>14</sup> He served as an office boy for two years before taking a position as a newspaper apprentice

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<sup>10</sup> Folsom and Price, “Family Origins” in “Walt Whitman,” [http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt\\_whitman/index.html#origins](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt_whitman/index.html#origins) accessed June 22, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Reynolds, *Whitman*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Folsom and Price, “Family Origins” in “Walt Whitman,” [http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt\\_whitman/index.html#origins](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt_whitman/index.html#origins) accessed June 22, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Reynolds, *Whitman*, 5.

for Samuel E. Clements, who edited the Democratic weekly section of the *Long Island Patriot*. When his parents moved back Long Island, Walt, now thirteen, continued working in Brooklyn. He moved on to the *Long Island Star* newspaper to serve as a compositor, but after a fire destroyed the printing district of New York, Whitman went back to Long Island in 1836 and began his short teaching career. He also held some journalism positions while teaching and landed his first major job as editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, a position he held from 1846 to 1848. He used it as an opportunity to voice his strong political opinions on slavery, the Wilmot Proviso and his free-soil ideology.<sup>15</sup> These opinions were not shared by his readers, resulted in his termination and served as a precursor to Whitman's early life as a whole. He was looked down upon for his brash statements and honesty when it came to his political views. He adamantly opposed slavery and the slave trade in the press and damned all persons involved. He was also very vocal about his party views and would write about specific politicians and his opposition or support of them. Professionally, this did not serve him well and he lost a few jobs and many sales of *Leaves of Grass* early on, but the Civil War changed all of this for him.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 8.

## Whitman's Early Writings

Whitman's writing career began with fiction, which he published from 1841 to 1848.<sup>16</sup> He also held an editorial position with the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* from 1846-1848.<sup>17</sup> As a journalist and editor, Whitman wrote on baseball, public parks and transportation, but he also addressed the issues of slavery and the Mexican American War. The *Eagle* under Whitman was a progressive paper for its time.<sup>18</sup> He was fired in 1848 by the publisher, Isaac Van Anden, who was in support of slavery and could not stand for Whitman's free soil ideology. Later in his life, Whitman commented on the matter, "The troubles in the Democratic party broke forth about those times...and I split off with the radicals which led to rows with the boss and 'the party,' and I lost my place." Thomas Brasher contends in *Whitman as Editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, "the best proof of Whitman's possession of political principles is his support of the Wilmot Proviso," which sought to prevent the spread of slavery into territories the U.S. obtained after the Mexican American War.<sup>19</sup> Further evidence of Whitman's political stance is evident in his report on the slave trade in May of 1846,

The "middle passage," is yet going on with all its deadly crime and cruelty. The slave-trade yet exists. Why? The laws are sharp enough—too sharp...But the laws should pry out every man who helps the slave-trade—not merely the sailor on the sea, but the cowardly rich villain, and speculator on the land—and punish him.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Gregory Eiselein, "Whitman's Life and Work, 1819-92," in *A Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed Donald D. Kummings et al. (Malden: John Wiley & Sons Lt, 2009), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas L. Brasher, *Whitman as the editor to the Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 17.

<sup>18</sup> Brasher, *Whitman as editor to the Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Walt Whitman, "Slavers and the Slave Trade," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (March 18, 1846, pg 2), [http://bklyn.newspapers.com/clip/424749/walt\\_whitman\\_editorial\\_on\\_the\\_slave/](http://bklyn.newspapers.com/clip/424749/walt_whitman_editorial_on_the_slave/), accessed February 12, 2016.



This excerpt illuminates that Whitman opposed slavery and the slave trade, and scholars argue that he also supported colonization of freed slaves. Brasher maintains that “Whitman envisioned the Negro as a free man, but it is possible that he did not envision him as a citizen exercising the suffrage and living in social equality with the White American.”<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to his view of slavery, Whitman supported the Mexican American war. Whitman, being the nationalist that he was, believed that Mexico deserved to be conquered by a powerful nation such as the United States. Whitman wrote of the war in June of 1846,

No small and weak power could, (or would wish to,) exist separately in such immediate neighborhood to the United States. We therefore think it every way likely that, unless the present war be summarily drawn to a close, Mexico will be a severed and cut up nation. She deserves this,—or rather her government deserves it, because Mexican rule has been more a libel on liberty than liberty itself.—Most of her provinces, instead of rushing to her rescue, as to aid a beloved parent, will rather exult at her downfall, as at the rout of a tyrannical oppressor!<sup>22</sup>

Brasher asserts that “Whitman served his government, and his party, by consistently supporting the war in his journal in opposition to the other two Brooklyn newspapers and a number in New York.”<sup>23</sup>

By 1850 Whitman did not hold a position with any newspapers, but he submitted poems to them from time to time.<sup>24</sup> Gregory Eiselein argues in “Whitman’s Life and Work, 1819-92” that Whitman’s early works of poetry “are clues to Whitman’s changes

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>22</sup> Walt Whitman, “More stars for the Spangled Banner,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (June 29, 1846, pg 2), [http://bklyn.newspapers.com/clip/424758/walt\\_whitman\\_editorial\\_on\\_the/](http://bklyn.newspapers.com/clip/424758/walt_whitman_editorial_on_the/), accessed February 12, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Brasher, *Whitman as the editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 89.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 14.

as a writer during the early 1850s – the moment in which this intermittently employed journalist, printer and author of conventional short fiction remade himself into “The American bard.”<sup>25</sup> Eiselein’s argument is intriguing, especially because Whitman’s later years were spent trying to reinvent his image once more to become a famous American poet. He noted that “the proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as passionately and he absorbed it.”<sup>26</sup>

The United States in 1855 was in a state of near chaos. Franklin Pierce was president, the violence of Bleeding Kansas had begun, the Kansas Nebraska Bill had just passed, America was on the brink of Civil War and at the age of thirty-six Walt Whitman had just published his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It included twelve untitled poems that Whitman printed himself with the help of friends. The work was 95 pages in length and he printed with his own funds 795 copies with green covers and gold lettering.<sup>27</sup> Though Whitman did not include his name on the cover page, he did include a photograph of himself slouching with his shirt unbuttoned. It appears to have been taken on a hot summer day after he had completed a day of laboring. A reviewer described Whitman’s photograph: “He stands in a careless attitude, without coat or vest, with a rough felt hat on his head, one hand thrust lazily into his pocket and the other resting on his hip.”<sup>28</sup> Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price explain this image well, arguing that,

It is a full-body pose that indicates Whitman's re-calibration of the role of poet as the democratic spokesperson who no longer speaks only from the

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<sup>25</sup> Eiselein, “Whitman’s Life and Work, 1819-92,” 13.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Saunders Schramm, “Whitman’s Lifelong Endeavor: Leaves of Grass at 150,” Walt Whitman Archive, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/about/articles/anc.00007.html>, accessed April 16, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>28</sup> [Anonymous]. “[A curious title].” *Life Illustrated* (28 July 1855): page number unknown, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1855/anc.00175.html> (accessed March 3, 2015).

intellect and with the formality of tradition and education: the new poet pictured in Whitman's book is a poet who speaks from and with the whole body and who writes *outside*, in Nature, not in the library. It was what Whitman called "al fresco" poetry, poetry written outside the walls, the bounds, of convention and tradition.<sup>29</sup>

The investigation of the photos Whitman included in *Leaves* is significant because they offer a time-lapse study of the evolution of his persona. He included a photograph in many of the editions and the types of images changed based on the direction he took that specific edition.

There were a few good reviews, one from well-known Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edward Everett Hale. Whitman even included Emerson's now well-known positive review in printed editions without permission and continued to do so even after being scolded by Emerson. This evidence is crucial in further depicting Whitman's obsession with his persona and public notoriety. Despite the good reviews, negative comments were more common. Rufus Griswold, a nineteenth-century literary critic and a former boss of Whitman's, commented on the first edition in 1855 and speculated "how any man's fancy could have conceived such a mass of stupid filth."<sup>30</sup> Conservative Americans believed that *Leaves* should not be considered poetry. Whitman wrote in free-verse form, without definitive meter, and in a melodic manner, which was unique to the era. His first editions of *Leaves* were very brash, blunt, and at times, defiant. One review touched on Whitman's inclusion of the positive review from Emerson, excerpts of Whitman's poems and noted that,

After poetry like this, and criticism like this [Emerson], it seems strange that we cannot recommend the book to our readers' perusal. But the truth

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<sup>29</sup> Folsom and Price, "Walt Whitman" in the Whitman Archives, [http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt\\_whitman/index.html#firstedition](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt_whitman/index.html#firstedition) (accessed March 4, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> David S. Reynolds, *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

is, that after every five or six pages of matter such as we have quoted, Mr. Whitman suddenly becomes exceedingly intelligible, but exceedingly obscene. If the *Leaves of Grass* should come into anybody's possession, our advice is to throw them instantly behind the fire.<sup>31</sup>

The themes of the first edition were deep and covered topics ranging from love, lust, politics, and religion to sexuality, individualism, life, and death. Through poems like “This Compost,” “Miracles,” and “To Think of Time.” it targeted the nation as a whole with lessons that Whitman believed Americans needed to absorb and practice in their daily lives. The American public did not accept Whitman’s work and the harsh public reviews flagged *Leaves* as an unworthy obscenity that did not belong in the homes of godly Americans. This was due to the explicit language, subjects and imagery in the first edition, as well as Whitman’s free-verse style. For example, one of his more famous works, “Song of Myself,” reads,

Through me forbidden voices,  
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil’d and I remove the veil,  
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur’d.

I do not press my fingers across my mouth,  
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and  
heart,  
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,  
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of  
me is a miracle.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch  
or am touch’d from,  
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,  
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> [Anonymous]. "Leaves of Grass." *The Saturday Review* 1 (15 March 1856):

<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1855/anc.00022.html> (accessed March 3, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 46.

This excerpt also exemplifies Whitman's uncensored nature and transcendental attitude toward sex, religion and nature. As the lengthy poem progresses, the scenes become even more vivid as Whitman mentions God, love, lust and other controversial subjects. The nation had never read poetry that found in *Leaves of Grass*, and they were very uncomfortable with it. The Attorney General of Massachusetts, George Marston, went so far as to publicly suspend its publication because Whitman refused to edit out parts that were judged to be obscene.<sup>33</sup> The *Intelligencer*, a newspaper in Whitman's home state of New York, stated that it was "a mass of bombast, egotism, vulgarity, and nonsense."<sup>34</sup> The *New York Times Daily Tribune* agreed that Whitman's book was "quite out of place amid the decorum of modern society," and people should "prevent his volume from free circulation in scrupulous circles."<sup>35</sup> Another harsh review reinforces this criticism,

"Leaves of Grass" is irreligious, because it springs from a low recognition of the nature of Deity, not, perhaps, so in intent, but really so in its result. To Whitman, all things are alike good—no thing is better than another, and thence there is no ideal, no aspiration, no progress to things better. It is not enough that all things are good, all things are *equally* good, and, therefore, there is no order in creation; no better, no worse—but all is a democratic level from which can come no symmetry, in which there is no head, no subordination, no system, and, of course, no result. With a wonderful vigor of thought and intensity of perception, a power, indeed, not often found, "Leaves of Grass" has no ideality, no concentration, no purpose—it is barbarous, undisciplined, like the poetry of a half-civilized people, and, as a whole, useless, save to those miners of thought who prefer the metal in its unworked state. The preface of the book contains an

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<sup>33</sup> "Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*," *New York Times* (1857-1922), May 22, 1882.

<sup>34</sup> Reynolds, *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*: Edited Afterword David S. Reynolds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1855, 2005), 17.

inestimable wealth of this unworked ore—it is a creed of the material, not denying the ideal, but ignorant of it.<sup>36</sup>

Whitman's poetry in fact, was very structured, but in ways that readers did not recognize or appreciate. Whitman's verse was written to be read musically and melodically, and he followed a specific structure which he devised to successfully carry this out. Whitman used traditional poetic devices such as iambic pentameter and assonance, or the repetition of the sound of a vowel, to do so. The repetitions of sounds found in almost every poem in *Leaves* and these elements may be related to Whitman's love and appreciation for the opera.<sup>37</sup>

I know I am deathless,  
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter's  
Compass,  
I know I shall not pass like a child's carlacue cut with a burnt stick at  
night.

I know I am august,  
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood,<sup>38</sup>

These traditional aspects of the first edition went overlooked by readers and reviewers, confirming that Americans in 1855 did not like Whitman and his message. This continued until the war despite his efforts to appeal aesthetically to the masses.

The first edition also contained many subjects that readers found inappropriate, derogatory and sinful. For example, portions of "The Sleepers" reads,

The myth of heaven indicates the soul,  
The soul is always beautiful, it appears more or it appears less,  
it comes or it lags behind,  
It comes from its embower'd garden and looks pleasantly on

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<sup>36</sup> [Anonymous]. "Studies Among the Leaves." *The Crayon* 3 (January 1856): 30-2.

<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1855/anc.00017.html>, accessed March 3, 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Loving, *Walt Whitman the Song of Himself*, 166.

<sup>38</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 42.

Itself and encloses the world,  
Perfect and clean the genitals previously jetting, and perfect  
And clean the comb cohering,  
The head well-grown proportion'd and plumb, and the bowels  
And joints proportion'd and plumb.<sup>39</sup>

The poem depicts a dream world where people are examined as they sleep. Whitman comfortably discusses heaven, the soul and genitals, a clear example of why the public rejected both *Leaves* and Whitman. Whitman wrote during a time when sex was not a common topic for discussion. Another poem titled "To Think of Time" claims that all things in existence have "eternal souls" and could achieve immortality.<sup>40</sup> These sentiments were very unsettling to Americans who were predominantly Christian and believed that only human souls transcended Heaven, Earth and Hell, not everything in existence. Whitman also mentioned runaway slaves and voiced abolitionist views at which many readers scoffed.<sup>41</sup> These reasons explain the harsh reviews and negative image that Whitman acquired following the first edition.

The first edition of *Leaves* was one of a kind, new age poetry and was far ahead of its era. Although it was a masterpiece, as even Ralph Waldo Emerson confirmed, the everyday American did not accept it as such. Whitman's later editions show minor changes to these poems, but whether it was because he was attempting to fit into an American poetic mold or for his own personal reasons one cannot be exactly sure. One thing is certain, Whitman was sure of himself and his beliefs. Perhaps *Leaves* was what he wanted it to be and not what others expected. To put it simply, Americans just did not know what to make of *Leaves* or Whitman. One reviewer summed it up nicely by

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 362.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 369.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 222.

confirming that the first edition “is like no book ever written.”<sup>42</sup> The form of these early poems was intricately tied to their themes, for instance through longer cataloging, or long lined stanzas where Whitman listed off occupations, states, and so on, which faded somewhat in his post-war poetry. Whitman used the first edition to evolve his form, theme, and messages. In *Walt Whitman’s America* David S. Reynolds argues “many of the themes that had been enacted in the 1855 poems were overtly discussed in the 1860 poems, as though Whitman wanted to get his points across as clearly as possible, without layering or indirection.”<sup>43</sup>

Although the first edition of *Leaves* broke many of the rules of propriety, Whitman remained a traditionalist in the sense that he was a nationalist who believed in preserving the Union despite the political drama unfolding. “This new voice spoke confidently of union at a time of incredible division and tension in the culture, and it spoke with the assurance of one for whom everything, no matter how degraded, could be celebrated as part of itself,” argued Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price in “Walt Whitman.”<sup>44</sup> Whitman was a defender of the Union who believed that unity was imperative and that Americans shared a comradeship that should not be broken.

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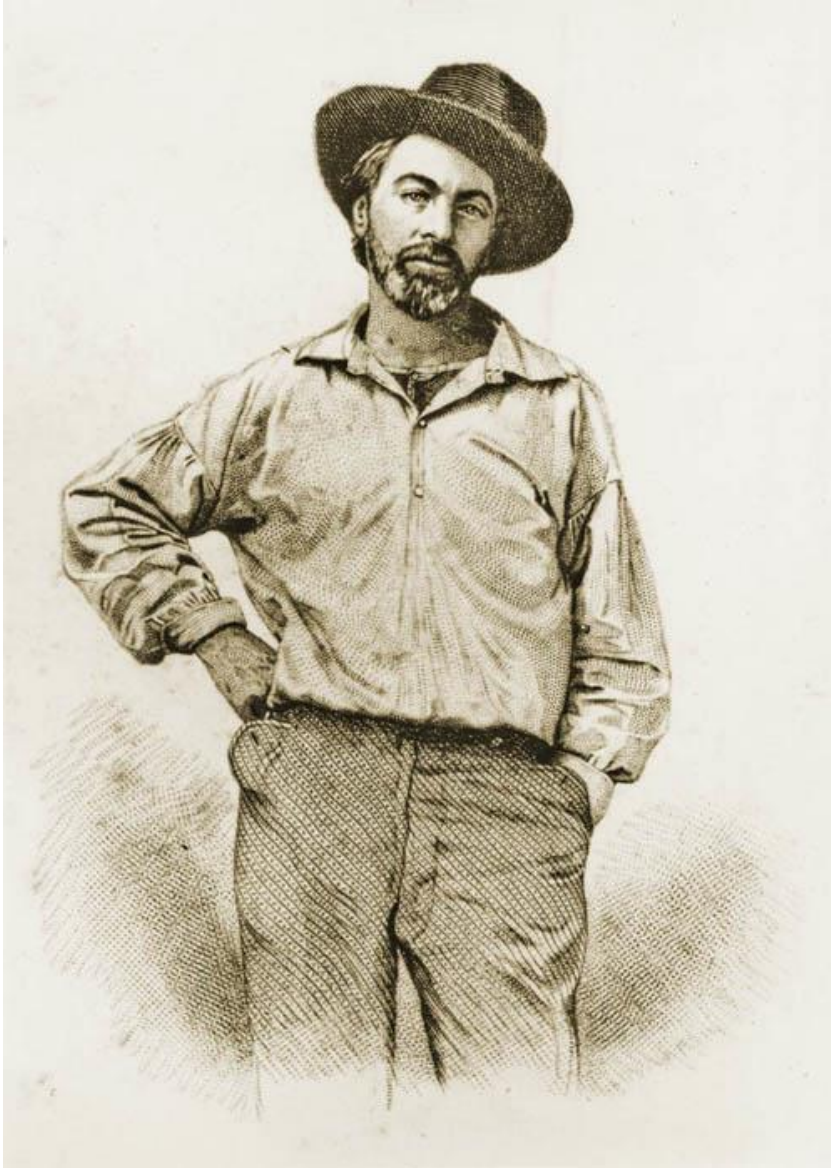
<sup>42</sup> [Anonymous]. “[A curious title].” *Life Illustrated* (28 July 1855): page number unknown.

<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1855/anc.00175.html>, accessed March 4, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 388.

<sup>44</sup> Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, “Walt Whitman” in the Whitman Archives, [http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt\\_whitman/index.html#firstedition](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt_whitman/index.html#firstedition), accessed March 4, 2015.





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**Figure 1-1 Photograph by Samuel Hollyer of Whitman found at the beginning of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, a daguerreotype taken by Gabriel Garrison in July of 1854 in New York.**

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<sup>45</sup> Garrison, Gabriel, photographer, Garrison, Gabriel, photographer, taken July 1854, Bayley Collection, Ohio Wesleyan,

<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/multimedia/image003.html?sort=year&order=ascending&page=1>,

accessed March 3, 2015.

The second edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, published just one year after the first edition in 1856, contained many of the same themes readers saw in 1855, but he wanted to print this edition in a pocket-size version that could be constantly carried around so readers could read it conveniently throughout the day. Whitman wished for *Leaves* to be like a close friend that the reader could turn to when they were unsure about life. Again, there was a photo of Whitman at the beginning of the book in what biographers call his “carpenter” pose.<sup>46</sup> As in the first edition, Whitman excluded his name from the title page. He almost doubled the number of poems in this edition *Leaves* with subjects ranging from love, sexuality, science, to religion and politics. Transcendental beliefs are evident in most of the poems, a reflection of the historical context, within which Whitman composed *Leaves*. His beliefs of transcendentalism were such that the closeness of God was found most in nature and sex and that once death came, human souls were rejuvenated from the atoms of nature and breathed back into the universe. Also evident is Whitman’s interest in increasing his acceptance by renovating his image, by including different portraits of himself, and the appearance of the book. The hardcopy, however, was thick and had a classical appearance in the fact that it had the title gold stamped on the green clothed front and back cover.<sup>47</sup>

In nineteenth-century America, religious experimentation and freedom were becoming more and more acceptable. Reynolds argues in *Walt Whitman's America* that the scientific and religious aspects in the second edition of *Leaves* are present because of

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<sup>46</sup> Harold Aspiz, “Leaves of Grass, 1856 edition” in J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998),

[http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry\\_22.html](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_22.html), accessed March 5, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

these developments.<sup>48</sup> The Second Great Awakening sparked religious fervor and at face value some may believe that the reformatting of the appearance of the book was due to Whitman's religious beliefs because it was more polished than the first edition. Though Whitman respected all forms of organized religion, he believed that science and nature were directly related to spirituality. Therefore, the appearance of *Leaves* can only be explained as Whitman wanting to sell more copies of the second edition and revamp his image to fit into American culture at the time, by having the edition resemble a classical work of literature. Regardless of Whitman's efforts to redesign the book, sales of this edition were the lowest to date because he failed to change the content or form of his poetry.<sup>49</sup>

The second edition does grant readers an early example of Whitman's war poetry with "The Revolution of 1848." It reads,

Yet behind all, lo, a shape,  
Vague as the night, draped interminably, head, front  
and form in scarlet folds,  
Whose face and eyes none may see,  
Out of its robes only this...the red robes, lifted by  
the arm,  
One finger pointed high over the top, like the head of  
a snake appears.  
Meanwhile corpses lie in new-made graves...bloody  
corpses of young men:  
The rope of the gibbet, hangs heavily...the bullets  
of princes are flying...the creatures of power  
laugh aloud.

And all these things bear fruits...and they are good.  
Those corpses of young men,  
Those martyrs that hang from the gibbets...those

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<sup>48</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 235.

<sup>49</sup>Harold Aspiz, "Leaves of Grass, 1856 edition,"

[http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry\\_22.html](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_22.html), accessed March 5, 2015.

hearts pierced by the gray lead,  
Cold and motionless as they seem...live elsewhere  
with unslaughter'd vitality.  
They live in other young men, O Kings,  
They live in brothers again ready to defy you:  
They were purified by death...They were taught and  
exalted.<sup>50</sup>

This text clearly exhibits Whitman's feelings towards veterans, whom he refers to as "martyrs" that are "purified" by dying. These feelings would become more intense in his Civil War poetry when he would argue that soldiers were the purest of human forms and that through death they bequeathed their purity to the soil, air and water to be rejuvenated through new life forms.

Millennialism was also an important movement to the nineteenth-century American society and reform. Some believed that Jesus Christ would bring the millennium if Americans became better Christians and reevaluated their relationship with God. Americans who were committed to this movement reduced their material belongings. Reynolds argues that Whitman was among the Americans who spoke against the relationship of money and religion and turned to science for answers to questions regarding life, death and spirituality.<sup>51</sup> Reynolds further contends that deism is significant in understanding *Leaves*. Aspects of deism especially found throughout Whitman's poetry the first and second editions offer a glimpse into his transcendental beliefs that nature is the gateway to God, as deists believed that only by observing nature could God be known and truly understood.

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<sup>50</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 223-224.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 237.

The second edition of *Leaves* was visually different from the first edition, but the messages of the poems were no different. What was different was Whitman's conscious effort to appeal to the masses with the appearance of the second edition. This was not Whitman "selling out," but rather an attempt to ensure that his message reached as many as possible. Regardless, of his plans or motives, harsh criticism continued with the second edition. In a typical review in *The Long-Islander* argued,

We have read the book, but cannot say with Emerson that we think it "the beginning of a great career," or that we could conscientiously hope for its wide circulation. We believe that all essential knowledge and truth, and all valuable ideas and fancies, may be projected and propagated without special resort to slang and obscenity.—"Walt." Bares himself quite too literally for our taste. His "Leaves of Grass" maybe proper food for any generation of immaculate purists, but the earth and society are not yet ripe enough for the grazing of that class of "critters." The "Come-outers" and "free Lovers" are the only ones at present fitted to do full homage to the genius display in "Leaves of Grass." It will become a "Household Book of Poetry" just about as soon as the other volume of which we read in advertisements, but never see in any households.<sup>52</sup>

Overcoming the bad reviews of the first edition seemed to be harder than Whitman expected. His sexual nature was difficult for readers to accept, and it overshadowed the brilliance of the work. Whitman's private life also came under scrutiny and criticism. Some biographers argue that Whitman was homosexual and others say he was bisexual, but his poetry left readers to decide on their own. Whitman held close his companionships with male friends like Peter Doyle and Harry Stafford.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> [Anonymous]. "Leaves of Grass." *The Long-Islander* 3 (10 December 1858): 2.

<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1856/anc.01072.html> accessed March 5, 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, "Walt Whitman"

[http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt\\_whitman/index.html#gilchrist](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt_whitman/index.html#gilchrist) 3.7.15

The third edition of *Leaves* was published in 1860, Whitman added 146 poems, edited old titles and revised others altogether.<sup>54</sup> The book was 456 pages long and Whitman again changed the visual appearance of the volume. Readers had options of purchasing the book in different shades of bindings, the paper was of good quality, and calligraphic décor was added at the beginning and end of each poem.<sup>55</sup> These changes in the format of *Leaves*, Reynolds contends, were deliberate attempts to invoke images of the Bible.<sup>56</sup> Whitman again included a portrait, which Gregory Eiselein identifies as “an engraving by Stephen Alonzo Schoff from an oil painting portrait by Charles Hine; it depicts Whitman not as a working-class rough as in the 1855 frontispiece but as a well-coiffured and genteel romantic poet wearing a large, loose silk cravat.”<sup>57</sup> Eiselein further contends that in an effort to attain Whitman’s goal of increasing the volume’s appeal to the public, Whitman was methodical in altering the aesthetics of this edition.

This third edition was also the first edition in which Whitman introduced “clusters,” or specific groupings of poems. Eiselein notes that “for the first time he placed some of the poems in distinctive, thematic, titled groupings...the clusters and the carefully-chosen titles in the third edition indicate an increased attentiveness to organization and structure.”<sup>58</sup> This method of organization gave the book even more of a

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<sup>54</sup> Gregory Eiselein, “Leaves of Grass, 1860 edition” in Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia ed. by J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), [http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry\\_23.html](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_23.html), March 6, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 236.

<sup>57</sup> Gregory Eiselein, “Leaves of Grass, 1860 edition” in J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), [http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry\\_23.html](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_23.html), accessed March 6, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 236.

religion feel, because the numbers that took the place of titles and numbered stanzas replicated the Bible outright. Whitman admitted that he saw this edition as “The Great Construction of the New Bible.”<sup>59</sup> There were seven total clusters including “Chants Democratic and Native American,” “Leaves of Grass,” “Enfans d’Adam,” “Calamus,” “Messenger Leaves,” “Thoughts,” “Says,” and “Debris.” The third edition focused deeply on love, democracy and religion.

The “Enfans d’Adam” cluster, for example, was a specific grouping of poems about heterosexual love. The selections delve deeply into sexual desires and activities and celebrate the innocence and religiousness of pure love. To Whitman, everything about love and the human body was sacred and meant to be celebrated. This is evident in his poem, “A Woman Waits for Me,”

It is I, you women, I make my way,  
I am stern, acrid, large, undissuabable, but I love you,  
I do not hurt you any more than is necessary for you,  
I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States,  
    I press with slow rude muscle,  
I brace myself effectually, I listen to no entreaties,  
I brace myself effectually, I listen to not entreaties,  
I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long  
accumulated within me.

Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself,  
In you I wrap a thousand onward years,  
On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved of me and  
    America,  
The drops I distil upon you shall grow fierce and athletic girls,  
    new artists, musicians, and singers  
The babes I beget upon you are to beget babes in their tern,  
I shall demand perfect men and women out of my love-spending...<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Eiselein, “Leaves of Grass, 1860 edition,”

[http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry\\_23.html](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_23.html), accessed March 6, 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 88-89.

This poem is specifically about masculine sexual energy, desires and procreation. It may seem an odd poem to include in a book modelled after the Bible, but Whitman believed these depictions to be just as religious and pure as praying to God or taking communion. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price contend that this cluster in particular, demonstrates that Whitman's "democratic belief in the importance of all the parts of any whole, was central to his vision: the genitals and the arm-pits...just as, in a democracy, the poorest and most despised citizens were as important as the rich and famous."<sup>61</sup>

Contrary to the "Enfans d'Adam," the "Calamus" cluster represents love between males. A passage from "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand" portrays a love scene between two "comrades."

Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,  
With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss or the new husband's  
kiss,  
For I am the new husband and I am the comrade.

Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing,  
Where I may feel the throbs of your heart or rest upon your hip,  
Carry me when you go forth over land or sea;  
For thus merely touching you is enough, is best,  
And thus touching you would I silently sleep and be carried  
eternally.<sup>62</sup>

A deeper analysis of this poem also reveals alternative interpretations of a relationship between two men or the relationship Whitman imagined between *Leaves* and the reader. Much like a diary, *Leaves* contained Whitman's deepest thoughts and feelings and he wanted readers to accept him and his work on every level, as lovers accept one

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<sup>61</sup> Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, "Walt Whitman"

[http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt\\_whitman/index.html#gilchrist](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt_whitman/index.html#gilchrist), accessed March 7, 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 100.



another. *Leaves*, however, was not simply about love and sexuality, but also about the political and social crises convulsing America in 1860.

At the time of the publication of the third edition of *Leaves* the nation was on the brink of civil war. Just a year before a radical abolitionist John Brown had raided Harper's Ferry in Virginia in an effort to free slaves and start a rebellion. These events and tensions influenced Whitman's writing. He held strong beliefs extolling the Union, nationalism and brotherhood, all of which are clearly depicted in the first poem of the third edition of *Leaves*, "Starting from Paumanok." This poem serves as an introduction to the book, but also to Whitman the man. Though Whitman mostly wrote for the reader, "Starting from Paumanok" clearly places his own sentiments within the historical context of the time, and the poem can be seen as Whitman's last plea to a nation headed toward war.

The poem begins with Whitman's childhood memories and his conviction that, "Victory, union, faith, identity, time...This then is life..."<sup>63</sup> It continues, "Successions of men, Americanos, a hundred millions, one generation playing its part and passing on."<sup>64</sup> These lines couple Whitman's fear of war with his certainty that his generation will rise to the call and protect the nation.

Like many Americans, Whitman was distressed to see the turmoil wracking the Union before the outbreak of the war. With the election of Abraham Lincoln, South Carolina seceded in December of 1860. For the Union to dissolve meant life as Americans knew it would also dissolve. Everything America stood for was at the brink of

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<sup>63</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 15.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

destruction in 1860, especially for men like Whitman. As David S. Reynolds argues in *Walt Whitman's America*, "Whitman believed that the United States, cut adrift from its original ideals, desperately needed poets."<sup>65</sup> This is evident in another poem from in the third edition of *Leaves*, "Apostroph," Latin for "emperor," "commander," or "conqueror."<sup>66</sup>

O I believe there is nothing real but American and freedom!  
O to sternly reject all except Democracy!  
O imperator! O who dare confront you and me?  
O to promulgate our own! O to build for that which builds for  
    mankind!  
O feuillage! O North! O the slope drained by the Mexican sea!  
O all, all inseparable—ages, ages ages!  
O a curse on him that would dissever this Union for any  
    reason whatsoever!

The poem warns that any American who believed secession was justified would be the "emperor" responsible for the destruction of the Union. This abrasive and damning poem stands in stark contrast to the melancholy message in "Starting from Paumanok," and similar examples of Whitman's nationalism are found throughout the poems of this chapter. He clearly exalts unity and democracy, and his nationalism is clearly evident in the description of the country he offers to the "comrado." Whitman loved this word and used it regularly. At the close of "Starting from Paumanok," he speaks to the comrado, or brother figure he saw in his fellow Americans, and says they will go forth together holding hands into a triumphant future and he exhorts his brothers, "O to haste firm holding—to haste, haste on with me."<sup>67</sup> Also evident in this poem are nativist beliefs held by Whitman. Reynolds argues Whitman's deprecation of "millions of ignorant

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<sup>65</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 153.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 524.

<sup>67</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 25.

foreigners" reflected the common American Party or "Know Nothing" beliefs of the day.<sup>68</sup>

Whitman's introduction to the third edition, "Starting from Paumanok," portrayed his personal fears and messages to readers. The Union was dissolving, Americans were making enemies of fellow Americans, and immigrants were arriving in America in ever-increasing numbers. "Starting from Paumanok" can be read as his plea for resolution of these difficulties and a reminder to Americans of what they once held dear. Though the poem's initial purpose was an introduction to *Leaves* in 1860, today it serves as a historical narrative to Whitman and America during 1860 along with the other poems in his third edition. The editions to come would also offer snapshots of America throughout the war and the aftermath. Through these presentations Whitman would provide Americans with a mechanism for coping with the devastation and destruction to come. And, in so doing, Whitman would gain the fame and acceptance he had always sought.

Despite the addition of more sexually explicit poetry in the third edition, it sold more copies than the previous two and received mostly positive reviews, especially from female readers.<sup>69</sup> He became a local celebrity in Boston and he was photographed on trips to different cities. He was finally recognized as a superb author, and he had begun to amass the fame and notoriety his work enjoys even today.<sup>70</sup>

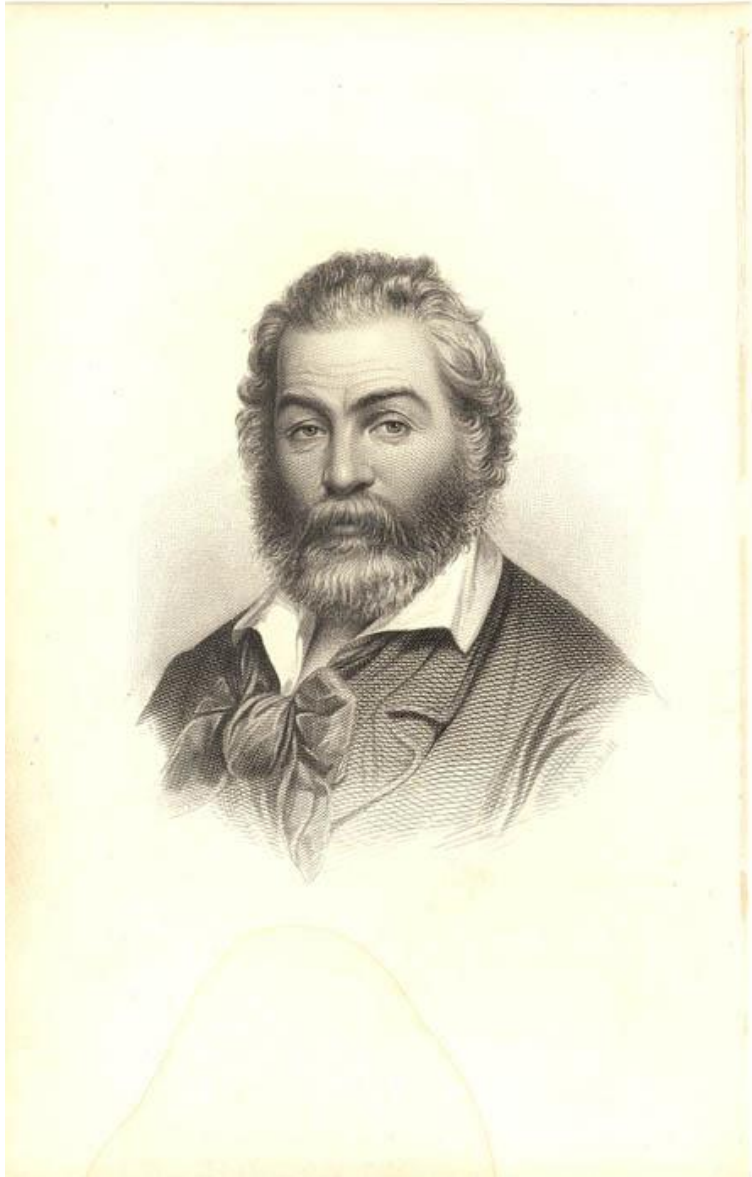
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<sup>68</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 152.

<sup>69</sup> Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, "Walt Whitman"

[http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt\\_whitman/index.html#gilchrist](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt_whitman/index.html#gilchrist), accessed March 7, 2015.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



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**Figure 1-2 Photograph by Stephen Alonzo Schoff of an oil painting of Whitman included in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, painted by Charles W. Hine.**

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<sup>71</sup> Schoff, Stephen Alonzo, painter, Hines, Charles W. painter, Boston, 1860, Library of Congress, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/multimedia/image006.html?sort=year&order=ascending&page=1>, accessed March 7, 2015.

## Chapter 2 - Whitman and the Civil War

Whitman's life at the start of the war is somewhat of a mystery. This is extremely abnormal for a man who wrote about every aspect of his life and beliefs, and the fact that Whitman went silent during such a tempestuous time in American history may have been because he did not feel the wish to speak out about the outbreak or that he had no words to his sorrow that war had come. Whitman's "lost years" span from 1860 to 1862, the period after the last edition of *Leaves* was published until he boarded a train to Fredericksburg to check on the wellbeing of his brother George after the Battle of Fredericksburg. Whitman scholars Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price contend that he "stayed in New York and Brooklyn, writing some extended newspaper pieces about the history of Brooklyn for the *Brooklyn Daily Standard*; these pieces, called "Brooklyniana" and consisting of twenty-five lengthy installments, form a book-length anecdotal history of the city Whitman knew so well but was now about to leave."<sup>72</sup> In his 1865 publication *Drum-Taps*, Whitman included the poem "1861" which conveyed his feelings concerning the war ahead.

AARM'D year! Year of the struggle!  
No dainty rhymes or sentimental love verses for you, terrible year!  
Not you as some pale poetling, seated at a desk, lispng cadenza piano;  
But as a strong man, erect, clothed in blue clothes, advancing, carrying a rifle on  
your  
shoulder,  
With well-gristled body and sunburnt face and hands—with a knife in the belt at  
your  
side,  
As I heard you shouting loud—your sonorous voice ringing across the continent;  
Your masculine voice, O year, as rising amid the great cities,  
Amid the men of Manhattan I saw you, as one of the workmen, the dwellers in

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<sup>72</sup> Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price "Walt Whitman," Walt Whitman Archives,  
[http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt\\_whitman/index.html#civilwar](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt_whitman/index.html#civilwar) accessed October 3, 2015.

Manhattan;  
 Or with large steps crossing the prairies out of Illinois and Indiana,  
 Rapidly crossing the West with springy gait, and descending the Alleghenies;  
 Or down from the great lakes, or in Pennsylvania, or on deck along the Ohio  
 river;  
 Or southward along the Tennessee or Cumberland rivers, or at the Chattanooga on  
 the  
 Mountain top,  
 Saw I your gait and saw I your sinewy limbs, clothed in blue, bearing weapons,  
 robust  
 year;  
 Heard your determin'd voice, launch'd forth again and again;  
 Year that suddenly sang by the mouths of the round-lipp'd cannon,  
 I repeat you, hurrying, crashing, sad, distracted year.<sup>73</sup>

This poem embodies Whitman's personal struggle with the war well. He notes that 1861 was a terrible year, yet he personifies the year as a blue collared Manhattan man. Whitman loved and supported the working class men of the city, so for him to see this year in the body of something he deeply loves is not only paradoxical, but further alludes to the emotional turmoil of the splitting of the nation he loved so deeply. He states that the year is a strong man, well equipped, crossing across the continent like a mad man on a mission. Whitman had, as he called it, "no dainty rhymes or sentimental love verses" for the year. Later Whitman reminisced about the presidential administrations that lead to the coming of the war and the families of the Union to accomplish its objections. In *Collect* he wrote,

History is to record those three Presidentiads, and especially the  
 administrations of Fillmore and Buchanan, as so far our topmost warning  
 and shame. Never were publicly display'd more deform'd, mediocre,  
 snivelling, unreliable, false-hearted men. Never were these States so  
 insulted, and attempted to be betray'd. All the main purposes for which the  
 government was establish'd were openly denied. The perfect equality of  
 slavery with freedom was flauntingly preach'd in the north—nay, the  
 superiority of slavery. The slave trade was proposed to be renew'd.  
 Everywhere frowns and misunderstandings—everywhere exasperations

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<sup>73</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 236.

and humiliations. (The slavery contest is settled—and the war is long over—yet do not those putrid conditions, too many of them, still exist? still result in diseases, fevers, wounds—not of war and army hospitals—but the wounds and diseases of peace?)<sup>74</sup>

In *Specimen Days*, however, he lauds the cause of the war and the great accomplishments of the men who fought to preserve it.<sup>75</sup>

But what can I say of that prompt and splendid wrestling with secession slavery, the arch-enemy personified, the instant he unmistakably show'd his face? The volcanic upheaval of the nation, after that firing on the flag at Charleston, proved for certain something which had been previously in great doubt, and at once substantially settled the question of disunion. In my judgment it will remain as the grandest and most encouraging spectacle yet vouchsafed in any age, old or new, to political progress and democracy. It was not for what came to the surface merely—though that was important—but what it indicated below, which was of eternal importance. Down in the abysses of New World humanity there had form'd and harden'd a primal hard-pan of national Union will, determin'd and in the majority, refusing to be tamper'd with or argued against, confronting all emergencies, and capable at any time of bursting all surface bonds, and breaking out like an earthquake. It is, indeed, the best lesson of the century, or of America, and it is a mighty privilege to have been part of it. (Two great spectacles, immortal proofs of democracy, unequal'd in all the history of the past, are furnish'd by the secession war—one at the beginning, the other at its close. Those are, the general, voluntary, arm'd upheaval, and the peaceful and harmonious disbanding of the armies in the summer of 1865.)<sup>76</sup>

Like all other Americans, Whitman knew many men fighting in the war. His brother George Washington Whitman enlisted in the 13<sup>st</sup> New York State Militia at the outbreak of the Civil War.<sup>77</sup> Once this initial enlistment was over in 1861, George came

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<sup>74</sup> Walt Whitman, "Origins of Attempted Secession" in *Collect* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), Bartleby Books Online <http://www.bartleby.com/229/2003.html> accessed February 12, 2016.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Walt Whitman, "National Uprising and Volunteering" in *Specimen Days* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), Bartleby Books Online <http://www.bartleby.com/229/2003.html> accessed February 12, 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Roy Jr. Morris, *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 41.

home to New York and immediately joined the 51<sup>st</sup> New York Volunteers.<sup>78</sup> Whitman kept in close touch with his brother throughout his service, writing him as often as possible and relaying George's news and updates to their mother Louisa. Whitman's letters to George were filled with news of home, their mother's wellbeing and hopes that George was safe and had all the necessary comforts.

In the winter of 1862 Whitman read in the *New York Tribune* that George had either been wounded or killed in the Battle of Fredericksburg.<sup>79</sup> As historian Roy Morris, Jr. noted in *The Better Angel*, at Fredericksburg "thirteen thousand Union soldiers were killed or wounded in a daylong frontal attack on entrenched Confederate positions on Marye's Heights."<sup>80</sup> Whitman was extremely fearful of his brother's fate, and left for Falmouth as soon as he could. He took with him fifty dollars, notebooks for writing, and a few articles of clothing.<sup>81</sup>

It took Whitman three days to reach the Union hospital at Chatham Mansion. He wrote to his mother Louisa that his travel to Fredericksburg was the "three days of the greatest sufferings I ever experienced in my life."<sup>82</sup> He traveled south with numerous others who were anxiously scrambling to get to the front lines to see what had become of their loved ones. The trains and railway stations were in pure chaos, and Whitman arrived in Fredericksburg without a penny, because his pockets were picked. As traumatic as the journey may have been, it was this trip to the Chatham Mansion hospital at

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<sup>78</sup> Morris, *The Better Angel*, 45.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>82</sup> Walt Whitman, *Wound Dresser; A series of Letters Written From the Hospitals in Washington During the War of the Rebellion* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1898), 47.



Fredericksburg that initiated Whitman's transformation into the person of The Wound Dresser and, later in his life, the Good Gray Poet.

Began my visits among the Camp Hospitals in the Army of the Potomac. Spent a good part of the day in a large brick mansion, on the banks of the Rappahannock, used as a Hospital since the battle—Seems to have receiv'd only the worst cases. Out doors, at the foot of a tree, within ten yards of the front of the house, I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c., a full load for one-horse cart. Several dead bodies lie near, each cover'd with its brown woollen blanket. In the door-yard, towards the river, are fresh graves, mostly of officers, their names on pieces of barrel-staves or broken board, stuck in the dirt...The large mansion is quite crowded...Some of the men were dying. I had nothing to give at that visit, but wrote a few letters to folks home...<sup>83</sup>

Although he almost certainly did not realize it at the time, this was the experience that changed his life forever.

Startled, anxious, emotionally drained and physically exhausted, Whitman gratefully found his brother alive after searching day and night from hospital to hospital. George, now a captain, was among the two hundred that survived out of the fifteen hundred men in the regiment that had originally volunteered.<sup>84</sup> In the letter to his mother, Whitman wrote that George was alive and well, but “one of the first things that met my eyes in camp was a heap of feet, arms, legs, etc., under a tree in front of the hospital.”<sup>85</sup> He wrote that he was saddened that “good men” have had to go without the common comforts of life for a year or more and have had to live with vast numbers of death.<sup>86</sup> Although many “good men” had survived, they would live their lives physically maimed and emotionally scarred. He penned in his diary that any troubles or concerns he had

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<sup>83</sup> Walt Whitman, *Memoranda During the War*, (Bedford: Applewood Books, 1875), 5.

<sup>84</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 410.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*.

before his visit to Fredericksburg paled in comparison to the horrors he saw at the front. Almost offhandedly, Whitman closed the letter by telling his mother “I will stay here for the present, at any rate long enough to see if I can get any employment at anything.”<sup>87</sup> Although he could not have known at the time, he was in fact beginning four long years of arduous service in the hospitals of the Washington, D.C. area, service in which he would do all he could to assist the wounded in any way possible.<sup>88</sup> He documented that service in diaries, letters and poems. His writing during this time period served as a means of coping with the sorrow and tragedy he witnessed, and he did his best to put his feelings in to words. David S. Reynolds argues in that at Chatham Mansion Whitman “discovered a new life mission in Washington, a mission closely tied to the war he said saved him.”<sup>89</sup> Whitman confirmed this when he stated, “the war was the culmination of my entire poetic mission.”<sup>90</sup> The fear of losing a brother to the war and the sight of piled amputated limbs and dying men at Chatham would transform him forever.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>88</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 411.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 413.

## Chapter 3 - Creation of “The Wound Dresser” and the Fourth Edition of *Leaves of Grass*

### Whitman’s Voluntary Work

Whitman had regularly visited hospitals in New York before the Civil War to visit injured transportation workers such as ferryboat operators and stage coach drivers.<sup>91</sup>

Whitman had fond childhood memories of riding the ferries and his created an affection for the blue-collared men who operated them. Folsom and Price argue that Whitman’s hospital work during the war “began with a kind of obligation of friendship to the injured transportation workers, and, as the Civil War began taking its toll, wounded soldiers joined the transportation workers.”<sup>92</sup> Whitman had also once said that he had once dreamt of becoming a doctor, and in his hospital visits he even assisted a few physicians in surgeries. Folsom and Price contend “his fascination with the body, so evident in his poetry, was intricately bound to his attraction to medicine...where he learned to face bodily disfigurements and gained the ability to see beyond wounds and illness to the human personalities that persisted through the pain and humiliation.”<sup>93</sup> These hospital visits prior to the war had prepared Whitman for the next persona of his life as the Wound Dresser.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price “The Beginning of the Civil War” in “Walt Whitman,” Walt Whitman Archive, [http://whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt\\_whitman/index.html#civilwar](http://whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt_whitman/index.html#civilwar) accessed February 12, 2016.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> As stated previously, this is a persona I designated to Whitman.

Following his experience at Chatham, Whitman did not return home until after the war. He chose instead to volunteer in hospitals, visiting 80,000 to 100,000 patients.<sup>95</sup> He characterized this volunteer work as the greatest opportunity of his life.<sup>96</sup> He became a regular fixture in the hospitals, but in spite of his tireless efforts his past reputation as a libertine continued to haunt him. For example, Amanda Akin Stearns, a nurse in a hospital where Whitman volunteered, wrote to a friend on August 10, 1863:

Another noted author, Walt Whitman visits our hospital almost daily. He took a fancy to my fever boy, and would watch him sometimes half the night. He is a poet, and I believe has written some very queer books about "Free Love," etc. He is an odd-looking genius, with a heavy frame, tall, with a turned down Byronic collar, high head with straggling hair, and very pink rims to his eyes. When he stalks down the ward I feel the "pricking of my thumbs," and never speak to him, if not obliged to do so. Though I hear some of the other ladies offer him a cup of tea, which he enjoys with the relish of a little talk with them. With his peculiar interest in our soldier boys he does not appeal to me.<sup>97</sup>

One can imagine that a man like Whitman might seem out of place in a hospital, especially since he was not visiting with family members. Stearns, however, was not aware of Whitman's devotion to the soldiers. Though he did not provide soldiers medical attention, he cared for them as family, and he spent most of his money on stationary, fruit, toiletries, among other common necessities for the men.<sup>98</sup> He wrote home for hundreds who were unable to do so themselves.<sup>99</sup> His inherent sensitivity permitted him

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<sup>95</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 262.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>97</sup> Amanda Akin Stearns, "Letter from Amanda Akin Stearns, August 10, 1863," in *The Lady Nurse of Ward E.* (New York, NY: Baker & Taylor Co., 1909), 312.

<http://solomon.cwld.alexanderstreet.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/cgi-bin/asp/philol/getobject.pl?c.24667:1.cwld.6468.6473>, accessed March 13, 2015.

<sup>98</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 124.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

to recognize the importance of writing letters home to loved ones. He remained in close contact with his brother George and his month, and constantly did so for the wounded as well.

In his book *Memoranda During the War*, Whitman wrote that he filled forty notebooks books with the accounts, memories and poems of his voluntary years, but he only published a small portion of them.<sup>100</sup> Writing about his experiences offered an escape from his daily exposure to the sadness and suffering in the hospitals. The reality of war was difficult to face and Whitman wrote that he volunteered for four years “to visit the sick and wounded of the Army, both on the field and in the Hospitals in and around Washington city.”<sup>101</sup> He admonished his readers that “future years will never know the seething hell and black infernal background...of the Secession War...”<sup>102</sup> He believed all soldiers were brave and noble and wished them to be remembered as such.

During a dark time in American history Whitman wrote of death and nature as if the two were indivisible. In the letters he wrote home for soldiers, the poems that recalled of memories and visions that haunted him, and his daily diary entries Whitman gave every soldier in the war a good death. The good deaths that Whitman depicted were naturalistic, and through his transcendent faith and beliefs, the lost dead were revitalized through the earth to live again. This was the essence of his Wound Dresser persona. His work influenced how Americans came to remember the dead and the war, and though

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<sup>100</sup> Whitman, *Memoranda*, 1.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

Whitman did not do this consciously, he became the voice and poet of the Civil War.<sup>103</sup> Whitman wrote as a witness, and his writing allowed the unknown dead live on in American memory. Whitman's Civil War poetry is unique in the fact that it is organic in language it discusses the carnage and at the same time gentle with surviving loved one's feelings. Whitman believed this was his mission and as the Wound Dresser he saved himself and the nation, mending wounds that time might not have healed on their own. Becoming the Wound Dresser was a stepping stone to Whitman's later fame.

Whitman was altered in part because of his experiences during his voluntary years as a nurse in Union hospitals, but his poetry was affected as well. The differences in Whitman can most easily be understood by viewing him through the lens of his persona as the Wound Dresser. Whitman the man was physically and emotionally altered as the Wound Dresser. His writing changed in form, theme, tone and purpose. As the Wound Dresser, Whitman found his poetic calling and flourished in his new persona. Not only did this character allow Whitman to work through his personal grief caused by his experiences during the war, but also to aid in collectively healing the nation's grief.

The scenes, feelings, and themes they found in the Wound Dresser's poems were those which Americans could not define for themselves. Whitman's fourth edition of *Leaves* also included the same brazenness found in prior editions, but delivered in a different manner. In *A Companion to Walt Whitman*, Luke Mancuso's chapter on the Civil War argues that "Whitman moves from liberal antebellum confidence in confederate harmony among the states, to a more conservative recognition of the ghostly

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<sup>103</sup> Kenneth M. Price, *To Walt Whitman, America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3.

wounds that will always haunt the Union victory.”<sup>104</sup> His depiction of the war as the Wound Dresser delivered candid and vivid images of battles, the wounded, and families left at home in poems like “Come Up From the Fields Father,” “Pensive On Her Dead Gazing,” “A March Down A Road Unknown,” and “The Wound Dresser.” This type of soundness pulled directly at Americans’ heartstrings, because they were able to understand and relate to these poems in indefinable and personal ways.

Though his poems were mostly war related, they still contained the same underlying themes of previous editions, much like Whitman’s brashness. Whitman made religious references in his post-war poetry much like previous works, specifically in “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim.”

A sight in camp in the daybreak gray and dim,  
As from my tent I emerge so early sleepless,  
As slow I walk in the cool fresh air the path near by the  
    hospital tent,  
Three forms I see on stretchers lying, brought out there  
    untended lying,  
Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish woolen blanket,  
Gray and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.

Curious I halt and silent stand,  
Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest the first  
    just lift the blanket;  
Who are you elderly man so gaunt and rim, with well-gray’d  
    hair, and flesh all sunken about the eyes?  
Who are you my dear comrade?

Then to the second I step—and who are you my child and  
    darling?  
Who are you sweet boy with cheeks yet blooming?

Then to the third—a face nor child nor old, very calm, as of  
    beautiful yellow-white ivory;  
Young man I think I know you—I think this face is the face of  
    the Christ himself,

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<sup>104</sup> Luke Mancuso, “Civil War” in *A Companion to Walt Whitman*, 291.

Dead and divine and brothers of all, and here again he lies. .<sup>105</sup>

As evident in this poem, some of Whitman's post-war poems contain more of traditional religious references. The poem describes the faces of three bodies on stretchers; one an older man, one a young boy, and one that resembles Christ.<sup>106</sup> Like many of Whitman's poems, these lines have alternate meanings. This religious symbol references to the divine sacrifice of Christ.<sup>107</sup> It also is a reference to the trinity; or Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. This religious reference might have been Whitman's effort to connect with the majority of traditional Americans through their religious beliefs, but also a way to ensure to them that their loved ones died a holy death and are at peace with God. The poem also represents the age gap between those who served, from the elderly to young boys.

Whitman believed that the soldiers were the purest form of humanity, some have argued Christ-like. This poem exemplifies Whitman's deep love for the men that he saw dying daily on the battlefield and left out in the cold. The theme of death also remained in Whitman's post-war poems, though it was in direct reference to those that died due to the war. Whitman believed death to be inevitable and beautiful, but the deaths of the Civil War were personal to him, as he witnessed them daily in the hospitals. They were personal to all Americans, who knew someone who had died in the war. The soldiers that were lost were also men of common substance, whom Whitman admired most of all. He supported the blue collar workers of America and saw soldiers as the very essence of purity, nobility and bravery. Soldiers to Whitman were everything that was good in the world and believed that they contained, "the majesty and reality of the American

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<sup>105</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 257.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.



common people.”<sup>108</sup> In “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night” Whitman wrote of another war scene where his close comrade lays dead:

Vigil strange I kept on the field one night;  
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,  
Till late in the night reliev'd to the place at last again I made  
    my way,  
Found you in death so cold dear comrade, found your body  
    son of responding kisses, (never again on earth  
    responding,)  
Bared your face in the starlight, curious the scene, cool blew  
    the moderate night-wind,  
Long there and then in vigil I stood, dimly around me the  
    battlefield spreading...  
Passing sweet the hours, immortal and mystic hours with you  
Dearest comrade—not a tear, not a word,  
Vigil of silence, love and death, vigil for you my son and my  
    soldier...<sup>109</sup>

Whitman lies with him for hours and then digs a shallow grave for him and buries him.<sup>110</sup>

The poem is extremely lyrical and vivid, with familiar form that is found in previous edition of *Leaves*, but when used in poems like this, speaks straight to the soul and expresses the love and compassion that Whitman felt for the soldiers. Though, it also expresses his continued beliefs that death is a beautiful, referring to the moment and vigil as “sweet” and “wondrous.” The theme of equality was present in Whitman’s Civil War poetry much like in his early poetry, as he showed equal love and respect to all soldiers despite which army they fought for. David Reynolds argues, “The poem mixes wartime

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<sup>108</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 122.

<sup>109</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 255.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 255.

violence, homoeroticism, and patriotic piety, as a soldier sits up all night with a mortally wounded comrade...whom he says he will meet in heaven.” These vivid scenes of death are also found in Whitman’s poem depicting President Abraham Lincoln’s funeral procession in his elegy, “When Lilacs in the Dooryard Bloom.” These post-war poems transformed a young brash and abrasively outspoken Whitman in the first editions to a brazenly older and wiser Whitman as the Wound Dresser.

Whitman’s new character as the Wound Dresser can be defined literally and metaphorically. After the war, Whitman physically looked like he was in his seventies, aged from his voluntary work in the hospitals, though he was only in his late forties at the time. This is evident in numerous photographs taken of him during and after the war. Though he was gray-haired before the war, his appearance was not as ragged or aged as it was after the war.<sup>111</sup> In 1864 Whitman began complaining of dizziness, an aching throat, and headaches.<sup>112</sup> Physicians convinced him to move back to Brooklyn to rest and recuperate, and he spent that time working on his manuscript for *Drum-Taps*.<sup>113</sup> Despite his efforts to tend to his health, the damage on his physical image and wellbeing had already been done. Whitman physically embodied the Wound Dresser persona from living the routine day to day throughout the war. At the same time, it was during his volunteer years that he found his true calling and greatest satisfaction of his life, tending to soldiers.<sup>114</sup> He wrote, “The doctors tell me I supply the patients with a medicine which

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<sup>111</sup> Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*, 235.

<sup>112</sup> Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, “*Drum-Taps* and the End of the War,” Walt Whitman Archive, [http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt\\_whitman/index.html#reconstructing](http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt_whitman/index.html#reconstructing), accessed January 16, 2015.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

all their drugs and bottles and powders are helpless to yield.”<sup>115</sup> Whitman gave the wounded hope by writing letters home to soldiers’ families if they were unable to, sometimes more than a dozen a day. Whitman would also spend his personal paychecks on food or common necessities that they needed.<sup>116</sup> Though he did not tend to any physical wounds, Whitman addresses their emotional injuries and kept their spirits up in the best ways he could. Whitman was a Wound Dresser to the emotional wounds of the soldiers by listening to their concerns, hopes, and fears. Whitman listened to them, which is what dying men needed most in their last moments while confessing their sins. Whitman confirms this by reporting “I supply often to some of these dear suffering boys in my presence and magnetism that which doctors nor medicines nor skill or any routine assistance can give.”<sup>117</sup> He goes on arguing that he can confidently attest “that friendship has literally cured a fever, and the medicine of daily affection, a bad wound.”<sup>118</sup> Whitman addressed their emotional injuries much like he did for the nation in his post-war poetry. This is evident in his poem “A Midnight Sleep,”

In midnight’s sleep, of many a face of anguish,  
Of the look at first of the mortally wounded—of that indescribable look;  
Of the dead on their backs, with arms extended wide,  
    I dream, I dream, I dream.  
Of scenes of nature, fields and mountains;  
Of skies, so beauteous after a storm—and at night the moon so unearthly bright,  
Shining sweetly, shining down, where we dig the trenches and gather the heaps,  
    I dream, I dream, I dream.  
Long, long have they pass’d—faces and the trenches and fields;  
Where through the carnage I moved with a callous composure—or away from the  
fallen,  
Onward I sped at the time—But now of their forms at night,

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 124.

<sup>117</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 431.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

I dream, I dream, I dream.<sup>119</sup>

In this poem he is dreaming of the wounded and dying in war. He first thinks of the horror on their faces that he says is “indescribable.” Whitman never suppressed the dreadfulness of war and made it a point to discuss it regularly in his poems. Later in the poem he is transported to a heavenly nature scene. This is the transcendent remembrance of the dead that Whitman is known and cherished for. The dead, the trenches and the unknown are being cared for by divine nature, where they will rest in peace. He ends the poem explaining that though he put on a brave face as a witness but, the images and faces of the dead still haunt his dreams. A reader today can feel his heart and soul mending through the poems as he attempts to cope with what he saw and experienced, like so many others. He gave himself and all Americans a language in which they were able to discuss the losses they experienced because of the war. This caused American perspective of him to change after the war and why, even today, he is the poet one reads to explain the deaths of the American Civil War. Whitman’s traumatic experience at Chatham Manor following the Battle of Fredericksburg transformed him and his words eventually became the way to imagine the dead and in turn framed the American collective memory of the war.

By 1860, the third edition of *Leaves* had a very melancholy tone that was much different than the electric and exciting tone of the first edition that can be easily observed in “Song of Myself” and unique in comparison to his work before the war. Yet, it also preserved some aspects of previous *Leaves* editions. Many of the poems in the fourth

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<sup>119</sup> Walt Whitman, Bartleby Great Online Books, "In Midnight Sleep," <http://www.bartleby.com/142/188.html>, accessed January 16, 2015.

edition, containing both *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, were directly related to the war. In “To Thee Old Cause,” Whitman directly addresses this in writing,

“These recitatives for thee, —my book and the war are one,  
Merged in its spirit I and mine, as the contest hinged on thee,  
As a wheel on its axis turns, this book unwitting to itself,  
Around the idea of thee.”<sup>120</sup>

Whitman later explained that *Drum-Taps* was pivotal to *Leaves*, even though most of the poems were written before the war, because the book revolved around the war as a whole.<sup>121</sup> His statement that “my book and the war are one” suggests that the war established a true mission and meaning for his poetry, which he accomplished through his persona as the “Wound Dresser.” The Wound Dresser poetry exposes the war accurately because of the first-hand experience that Whitman had in the hospitals. Whitman was able to portray the war through his persona with organic realism that the nation respected and connected with on a deep emotional level.

“The Wound Dresser,” *Memoranda During the War*, and *Drum-taps* are Whitman’s most famous Civil War work. In the introduction to the *Memoranda* Whitman explains that he cannot read his notes or letters from his volunteer years “without the actual army sights and hot emotions of the time rushing like a river in full tide through me,” but “each line, each scrawl, each memorandum, has its history.”<sup>122</sup> The hardest thing to process out of all Whitman witnessed was the weight of all the unknown dead, those unrightfully buried in mass graves, or not buried at all. Ted Genoways, author of *Walt Whitman and the Civil War*, fills in a lot of missing details of Whitman’s life

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<sup>120</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 6.

<sup>121</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 413.

<sup>122</sup> Whitman, *Memoranda*, 2.

between 1860 and 1862. In his book he states that Whitman was “obsessed by the visions of anonymous death” and “this notion—that the dead might be forgotten by the living...was deeply troubling to Whitman.”<sup>123</sup> Whitman could not bear to see other soldiers hold the fate of the men whose limbs he found aimlessly disposed of outside of the hospital in Fredericksburg. He believed honorable, brave and noble soldiers deserved to be treated with the decency of human beings. Genoways goes on to say that Whitman “recoiled from the idea of anonymity, of namelessness, and most of all from the appearance of willful erasure at the hands of future generations.”<sup>124</sup> The purpose of the publication of Whitman’s *Memoranda During the War*, published first in 1875, was to tell the history of the common soldiers, both North and South, and the “specimens of first-class heroism.”<sup>125</sup> This literature became an important publication because of what it meant to the nation, those who had passed fighting in war, and those that still continued to suffer from melancholia and mourning. The American culture and memory of the dead depended on it. Whitman’s own explanation of this importance in the *Memoranda*, found in the preface, reads:

Of that many-treaded drama, with its sudden and strange surprises, its confounding and prophecies, its moments of despair, the dread of foreign interference, the interminable campaigns, the bloody battles, the mighty and cumbrous and green armies, the drafts and bounties—the immense money expenditure, like a heavy pouring constant rain—with, over the whole land, the last three years of the struggle, the unending, the universal mourning-wail of women, parents, orphans—the marrow of the tragedy concentrated in those Hospitals—those forming the Untold and Unwritten History of the War—ininitely greater (like Life’s) than the few scraps and distortions that are ever told or written. Think of how much, and of

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<sup>123</sup> Ted Genoways, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 145.

<sup>124</sup> Genoways, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War*, 146.

<sup>125</sup> Whitman, *Memoranda*, 3.

importance, will be—how much civic and military, has already been—buried in the grave, in the eternal darkness!<sup>126</sup>

Whitman's transcendent beliefs ring through in this passage. He believed that divinity was found in nature as well as the good of humanity, which was hard to consider in a time of war. Many of his poems connect the dead and dying in the war to nature, because it gave Whitman peace of mind. He notes the blood and bodies as a constant storm. Though Whitman's language is very somber in tone, *Memoranda* helped him work through the tragedies he experienced. The last five lines of this passage are crucial to Whitman's impact on the collective memory of death and the war. He speaks of the "universal mourning-wail..." of family members across the nation for the deaths of their loved ones. He says that the dead are an unknown and "untold" history, mainly because no one knew how to discuss or remember the dead. Americans were used to family members dying in their homes and being able to bury them and have a funeral to assist with the grieving process. Whitman goes on to state in the passage that "much...importance..." has been buried in "eternal darkness." Whitman is not only referring to the dead soldiers in the mass graves and fields in these lines, but also the possibility that the dead might be forgotten, which was unfathomable for him.

As a witness, Whitman experienced a lot of trauma and horror in northern hospitals. Faust notes that Whitman believed to understand even a portion of the war "it was necessary to try always to 'multiply...by scores, aye hundreds,' the particular 'hell scenes' of battle and the individual soldiers he had watched suffer and die."<sup>127</sup> Though, he knew that the men in the hospital beds had families at home grieving and wondering

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>127</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 262.

where their loved ones were and if they were alive. Through other poems he references these families and what they must be experiencing when they receive letters from the front. Whitman's poem "Come Up From The Fields Father" is a prime example of this.

Down in the fields all prospers well,  
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.*

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 a door leans.

*Grieve not so, dear mother,* (the just-grown daughter speaks through  
her sobs,  
The little sisters huddle around speechless and dismay'd.)  
*See, dearest mother, the letter says Pete will soon be better.*

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.<sup>128</sup>

This poem describes the scene in a rural family home when they receive word from the front. However, it is not from their son, it is from another stranger writing on his behalf. Whitman poetically explains in this poem a regular occurrence in the Civil War, where

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<sup>128</sup> Walt Whitman, *Drum-taps (1865) and Sequel to Drum-taps*, (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1959), 33.



families would receive letters from strangers on their family member's behalf. This poem explains the anxiety, fear and hopelessness that the family feels receiving the stranger's letter. The odds of survival during the war were low. The mother is very fearful of her son's fate and though she does not say anything it is clear that she knows her son is dead. Faust states that in this poem "it is a letter that will destroy the mother, as a rifle has already destroyed the son."<sup>129</sup> They all know Pete's fate. Whitman uses the word "speechless," which connects to the American silence on the discussion of the Civil War dead. Though this poem was Whitman's imagination of a family receiving word from the front, it was also his thoughts of a family receiving one of the hundreds of letters he wrote home. Whitman felt the fear and anxiety when he heard his brother was wounded and possibly dead. He knew that many other families felt the same upon receiving his letters. He also says that Pete was a brave and simple soul. Whitman believed all the soldiers were brave and common men and men that America should pay homage to. So many American families during the war related to this poem. They all know this event well and will most likely never forget it. Whitman gave a voice to all of the things that were left unsaid by Americans who experienced this moment. It was because they did not know what to say, how to feel, or if they could bring themselves to discuss it. Death had never happened at this magnitude or in such violent ways and people did not know how to handle it. People were desperate for a memory for the men that were rotting in fields, unknown and unburied without a good death. Whitman's poems discussed so many things that had not been explained before. He also explained death and horror in an honest and naturalistic sense, changing the traditional memory of the dead.

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<sup>129</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 125.

Poetry in contrast to Whitman was very structured in its format and had a formal and structured tone. A typical Civil War era poem looked like Herman Melville's poem "Shiloh," written in 1862.

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,  
    The swallows fly low  
Over the field in clouded days,  
    The forest-field of Shiloh—  
Over the field where April rain  
Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain  
Through the pause of the night  
That followed the Sunday fight  
    Around the church of Shiloh—  
The church so lone, the log-built one,  
That echoed to many a parting groan  
    And natural prayer  
Of dying foemen mingled there—  
Foemen at morn, but friends at eve—  
    Fame of country least their care:  
(What like a bullet can undeceive!)  
    But now they lie low,  
While over them the swallows skim,  
And all is hushed at Shiloh.<sup>130</sup>

Melville's poem is romantic and formal in language and poem is structured in the arrangement of the lines and rhymes. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and post-war poetry was the exact opposite of Melville's "Shiloh." American readers enjoyed poetry like Melville's before the war and completely opposed Whitman's pre-war poetry and cast him out from American society. However, once the war came they clung to Whitman's poetry because of its honesty and uncensored account of the war. Melville does address the deaths of war in "Shiloh." However, he is nowhere near Whitman's frankness in discussing it. Whitman addresses the slaughter head-on because of his haunting witness

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<sup>130</sup> Herman Melville, *Battle-pieces and aspects of the war*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1866), 63.

accounts. He was driven to write of the horror to work through what he saw and because he wanted Americans to be informed and to address it as well. The Civil War was the climax of America in the nineteenth-century and Whitman believed the nation needed to contemplate the veracity of the war. This connects those on the field with those at home. In the article “Addresses to the Divided Nation: Images of War in Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman,” written by Faith Barrett, Barrett explains that “Whitman turns his hand to the related task of linking those at home with those on the front-lines, linking the observers of the war with the soldiers fighting and dying in it.”<sup>131</sup> This is what set him apart from poets of this era and why Americans found something in his writings comforting.

### **Business of War: Death and Dying**

The death and carnage of the American Civil War was unimaginable and unexplainable. A majority of Americans believed the war would be over within a few months with very little bloodshed. Unfortunately, their predictions could not have been more incorrect and the war devastated the nation in diverse ways. The identifications of Confederate and Unionist divided the country in half. Towns were ruined, private property was seized or demolished in the South, and citizens employed by the war economy were soon unemployed as the government demobilized and factories shut down.<sup>132</sup> The hardships of war leaked into the civilian homes and women and children

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<sup>131</sup> Faith Barrett, “Addresses to the Divided Nation: Images of War in Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman,” *The Arizona Quarterly*, (Winter 2005; 61, 4), 77, <http://www.proquest.com/>, accessed December 4, 2014.

<sup>132</sup> Mark R. Wilson, *The Business of Civil War: Military Mobilization and the State, 1861-1865* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 197.

were also plagued by epidemic disease, guerrilla attacks and starvation. At the end of the war there was a severe shift in roles, such as farmers raising livestock for armies and warehouses employing civilians and producing weapons produced by the thousands, and as Economist and Historian Mark R. Wilson explains in *The Business of the Civil War*, “buyers became sellers; thousands of public employees returned to the private sector; the U.S. military machine moved back to the West,” and life was expected to return to normal.<sup>133</sup> Civilians and those who enlisted had sacrificed everything, and following the war it was time to mend fences in more ways than one. Reconstruction, however, proved to be a more difficult feat than demobilizing the military economy. The Union was at odds in deciding how to handle Reconstruction and how the South might be repaired, reintegrated, and forgiven, which would be the most difficult task of all.

Historian Drew Gilpin Faust notes in *This Republic of Suffering* that 50,000 civilians died during the war, in addition to the deaths on the battlefield. Faust argues “the war created a veritable “republic of suffering...” and “death transformed the American nation as well as the hundreds of thousands of individuals directly affected by loss.”<sup>134</sup> The republic of suffering Faust mentions is the republic that Whitman witnessed in the hospitals and that he himself was a product of. He and his poetry are a direct reflection of this, and were transformed by the war, much as the nation was. The republic of suffering created Whitman’s new identity as the Wound Dresser and he attempted to heal the republic and soothe those who still suffered through his poems, later becoming the Good Gray Poet.

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<sup>133</sup> Wilson, *The Business of Civil War*, 191.

<sup>134</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xiii.

“Men and women approach death in ways shaped by history, by culture, by conditions that vary over time and across space,” argues Faust.<sup>135</sup> There was an estimated 620,000 soldiers killed in the war.<sup>136</sup> Just as importantly, those deaths for the American generation in the Civil War violated practices, traditions and beliefs about a proper death. Men were taken too soon in life with wounds from the battlefield, sickness and disease. They died without family members near, holding their hands and reciting scripture as they drifted off to meet their Maker. M. Wynn Thomas, specialist in American poetry, has noted that Whitman was “a surrogate mourner of the dead—one who took it on himself to do what the relatives could not do: to remember the dead man in the very presence of the corpse.”<sup>137</sup>

The effects of the Civil War infiltrated every aspect of American lives and they lived it every day, morning to night. Everyone had someone or knew someone who had fallen in battle or had died of other ailments as a result of the tragedy of war, such as infection or disease. Americans were not emotionally or logistically prepared to face the death tolls of the war. Field hospitals were expected to quickly crop up at every battle. There were never enough surgeons, medicine, or supplies to go around to properly assist the wounded and dying. A system for burying, identifying, or sending home the dead did not exist. Whitman accounted of a soldier in a hospital he visited who had been lying in a hospital for over twenty-four hours who had still not been attended to.<sup>138</sup> These were the realities of the Civil War, but also realities that Americans had never had to face before.

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, xi.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, xi, xii.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>138</sup> Whitman, *Memoranda*, 49.

A “good death before” the war had been a formal event in a family’s home and somewhat of an art form. Faust explains that “the Good Death proved to be a concern shared by almost all Americans of every religious background.”<sup>139</sup> Death had been important for centuries before the American Civil War. Jeremy Taylor’s *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying*, published in London in 1651, was a classic in the nineteenth century and proved to be an expert’s account of *ars moriendi*, or fifteenth-century rules for dying. The Good Death spread through scientific research and writing as well as prevalent literature in the nineteenth century. Faust maintains that there are key steps in a successful execution of a Good Death. The first is that the family was present. This was mostly so they could hear and report on their kin’s last words. Faust explains that “family members needed to witness a death in order to assess the state of the dying person’s soul, for these critical moments of life would epitomize his or her spiritual condition...a life was a narrative that could only be incomplete...without the life-defining last words.”<sup>140</sup> However, soldiers that died on the battlefields did not have the luxury of the company of loved ones. Soldiers often clung to other soldiers, nurses, or doctors if possible to complete this last step of life. The dead were often found with photographs of their families clasped in their hands or alongside them. If they were able, they would also write their family a note, as one last effort to complete this stage of a Good Death. Whitman served as a script writer for many dying men in hospitals for this purpose. Faust quotes a letter Whitman wrote home for a late soldier, Corporal Frank H. Irwin, stating first the details of his death, the site and that he died March 25, 1865.<sup>141</sup> He then goes on to say

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<sup>139</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 7.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 6-10.

<sup>141</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 124.

“he was so good and well-behaved...He was perfectly willing to die...I do not know his past life, but I feel as if it must have been good.”<sup>142</sup> Whitman also wrote to assure the family that his death was properly prepared, patriotic and offered Christian sympathies and referenced God, despite his personal unorthodox beliefs. In the same letter, he touched on another key aspect of a Good Death in the statement that Irwin was willing to die. The physical attributes of death were important because kin wanted their loved ones to die in peace, metaphorically and literally. While family members knew that the war brought destruction and devastation, they did not want to imagine or believe that their brother, husband or son died in pain or agony.

The dead were unknown, unburied, buried in massive graves, or buried at unknown locations. Unknown deaths and burials were the worst fear of families at home and for Whitman. Even a stranger’s words were comforting, as many families received letters from others reporting the death of a loved one. Whitman carried this desire to comfort soldiers’ families into his poetry, and those families found solace in his words.

Other authors of Whitman’s time, also sought to convey these elements of the good death to their readers, but none were as successful as Whitman was with his poetry. Faust names Emily Dickinson, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Harriet Beecher Stowe as specific examples. Louisa May Alcott, another nineteenth-century author, was thirty years old when she volunteered as a nurse in Georgetown during the Civil War.<sup>143</sup> She spent six weeks at the Union Hospital in Washington and kept a journal which was published in 1863 as a book titled *Civil War Hospital Sketches*.<sup>144</sup> It reads more as a

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Civil War Hospital Sketches*, (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), iii.

<sup>144</sup> Alcott, *Hospital Sketches*, iii.

novel than Whitman's Civil War literary work but, Alcott includes an account of her attempt to provide a good death for her patient, John. She had formed a close friendship with him, as Whitman did with his wounded and it was difficult for her to witness John succumb to the war like so many others. After he died she cut locks of hair for herself and his mother and then "left him, glad to have known so a genuine man, and carrying with me an enduring memory of the brave Virginia blacksmith, as he lay serenely waiting for the dawn of that long day which knows no night."<sup>145</sup> Alcott was desperate to remember John as a brave and honest man that fought courageously for his country. She created a good death for him as a way to work through and mourn his death. She had the luxury of keeping locks of his hair, a practice that Faust explains offered Americans a lasting memory of their loved ones.<sup>146</sup> Alcott created a good death and memory of John, and Whitman did the same for all of the Civil War dead.

### **Whitman and the Collective Memory of the War**

The work Whitman produced during his years in hospitals with the dying and wounded was completely dissimilar than the poetry in early editions of *Leaves of Grass* and this produced a new appreciation of him in the American public. His war literature was a combination of poems, letters detailing his daily experiences, and hospital accounts and as they were published public appreciation of previous editions *Leaves* rose as perceptions of him shifted. Kenneth M. Price writes in the first line of his book, *To Walt Whitman, America*, that "Walt Whitman is the foundation of American culture."<sup>147</sup> This new acceptance and celebration of Whitman was due to his determination to grant good

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>146</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 19.

<sup>147</sup> Price, *To Walt Whitman, America*, 3.



deaths to all of the soldiers lost in the war through his poetry. The good death that Whitman ended up granting to the fallen soldiers of the war was different because it was non-traditional for the nineteenth century. It was non-traditional in the sense that it was transcendent and connected to Mother Earth, themes that are referenced often in his post-war poetry. This was a nonmainstream idea because for nineteenth-century Americans a good death was a common Christian tradition and assured families that the loved one who passed had made it to the Holy Land.<sup>148</sup>

The influence of Whitman's poetry on the national collective memory can be explained by a theory proposed by Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist and expert on the study of human memory. Halbwachs argues that group memories overshadow individual memories.<sup>149</sup> Collective memory is product of remembrances shared by a group of people. The memory of the group survives after people in the group die and a younger generations maintain the same memory, allowing it to live on.<sup>150</sup> Before the war Whitman was perceived to be an outcast whose poetry was filth and unacceptable. This perception shifted during the war because his writing granted the grieving nation a collective memory of a naturalistic good death for their lost loved ones. Whitman never differentiated between the North and South and wrote for all soldiers. Americans accepted that Whitman expressed the emotions they could not, and he expressed this collective memory for the entire nation. This perception of Whitman lived on after the war and led to his designation as "the American poet."

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<sup>148</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 6.

<sup>149</sup> Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vintzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy, editors, *The Collective Memory Readers*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), 142.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

While Whitman's writing was instrumental in mitigating the pain of American's mourning, perhaps his greatest service resulted from his ability to dispel the melancholia that shrouded the nation following the war. Sigmund Freud, the famous psychoanalyst and neurologist explained the psychological difference between humans mourning, the grief resulting from loss, and melancholia, or a consuming depression resulting from the inability to identify or work through the grief one is feeling.<sup>151</sup> Faust acknowledged that "the particular circumstances created by the Civil War often inhibited mourning, rendering it difficult, if not impossible, for many bereaved Americans to move through the stages of grief."<sup>152</sup> Through his Wound Dresser persona, Whitman aided in assisting Americans in first identifying, and then working through their melancholia, and this allowed them to address and complete the process of mourning with his post-war poetry.

With all that he had witnessed, Whitman had much to work through as well, and he did so through his writing. He knew firsthand the grief and pain that the war brought and knew that many others felt the same way. Writing during the war was a therapeutic experience for him even as it aided the healing of his readers. It allowed them to remember the men who fought and believe they had died the good death described in his poems. One of Whitman's post-war poems that is well-known today is "Pensive On Her Dead Gazing" and it is emblematic of Whitman's efforts to assure grieving loved ones that the dead, known and unknown, were at rest and at peace.

Pensive on her dead gazing I heard the Mother of All,  
Desperate on the torn bodies, on the forms covering the battle-  
fields gazing,  
(As the last gun ceased, but the scent of the powder-smoke

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<sup>151</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 144.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

lingere'd,)
   
As she call'd to her earth with mournful voice while she stalk'd,
   
Absorb them well O my earth, she cried, I charge you lose not
   
my sons, lose not an atom,
   
And you streams absorb them well, taking their dear blood,
   
And you local spots, and you airs that swim above lightly
   
impalpable,
   
And you all essences of soil and growth, and you my rivers' depths,
   
And you mountain sides, and the woods where my dear children's
   
blood trickling reddened,
   
And you trees down in your roots to bequeath to all future trees,
   
My dead absorb or South or North—my young men's bodies
   
absorb, and their precious blood,
   
Which holding in trust for me faithfully back again give me many
   
a year's hence,
   
In unseen essence and odor of surface and grass, centuries hence,
   
In blowing airs from the fields back again give me my darlings,
   
give me my immortal heroes,
   
Exhale me them centuries hence, breathe me their breath, let not
   
an atom be lost,
   
O years and graves! Oh air and soil! O my dead, an aroma sweet!
   
Exhale them perennials sweet death, years, centuries hence.<sup>153</sup>

Whitman added this poem to his second edition of *Leaves* in the section he titled “Songs of Parting,” published in 1865. The poem speaks of the “Mother of All,” Mother Earth, or the divine power in which he devoutly believed. However, this poem also expresses the feelings of the nation as a whole, and for all family members who had lost someone. It offers a voice to the grieving Americans who were unable to express the pain they felt. The mystical mother asks the earth to remember her sons and asks the earth to not allow the essence of them to be lost. Speaking to the nation, asking for history to not forget the brave heroes who were lost and left on the fields, he pleads that history and generations to come “exhale” their memories and stories for centuries to come. This poem describes a divine rejuvenation of the soldiers and clearly indicates that although Whitman still has

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<sup>153</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 370.

faith in humanity, tragedy of the war must be faced and remembered. His poetry would live on, unlike his fellow citizens, and carry forward the soldier's memories and sacrifices in a divine way.

Whitman's mission to speak of that tragedy remained a central theme in his post-war writing. It is especially evident in a poem also included in his 1900 edition of *Leaves* which reads,

Spirit of hours I knew, all hectic red one day, but pale as  
death next day,  
Touch my mouth ere you depart, press my lips close,  
Leave me your pulses of rage—bequeath them to me—fill  
me with currents convulsive,  
Let them scorch and blister out of my chants when you are  
gone,  
Let them identify you to the future in these songs.<sup>154</sup>

Whitman is speaking to the spirit of war, begging it to allow him to possess all of its anger and wrath. Roy Morris, Jr. argues that Whitman “assumed the responsibilities of perpetuating...” the war’s “hideous truths, even though talking of those ‘dreadful hours’ might ‘scorch and blister’ his own mouth.”<sup>155</sup> Morris adds that “Whitman offered himself as a sort of surrogate sacrifice to the malign gods of war.”<sup>156</sup> If the tragedies and deaths are forgotten the same fate will befall the memories of the men who gave all they had. His poetry of this period was raw and uncensored, but it also championed the natural divinity of the slaughter, the unknown, the unburied, and the missing in a way that America needed.

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<sup>154</sup> Morris, *The Better Angel*, 228.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

Another very famous post-war poem by Whitman is “O Captain! My Captain!,” an elegy for Abraham Lincoln in 1865 following President’s assassination.

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.

O Captain! my Captain! 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.

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.<sup>157</sup>

The loss of Lincoln added exponentially to the grief the nation was already bearing.

Whitman personally admired and respected the President and he was deeply shaken by his death. “O Captain! My Captain!” was Whitman’s eulogy and transcendent effort to come to terms with the loss and although he wrote it to relieve his own emotional distress, his words once more guided the nation through yet another period of melancholia and allowed its citizens them to mourn for their President. Like many of Whitman’s other war poems, Lincoln’s eulogy was romantic in its language and message. In the poem,

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<sup>157</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 284.

Whitman compares Lincoln to a captain that has successfully completed a strenuous voyage and his mission is won, only to die at its end. Whitman also speaks of Lincoln as his father, and in doing so he spoke for millions of Americans who could be perceived Lincoln to be the father of the Union. Whitman as with his other war poetry, in “Oh Captain! My Captain!” created a transcendent memory and, as Faust argues, “served, as he had throughout the war, as the poet not just of death but of survival, of the suffering of the not-dead.”<sup>158</sup>

Whitman loved his country and its people, and his transcendentalist beliefs led him to seek the intrinsic goodness in people and nature. He was consumed by the fear that the unknown dead might not be remembered as having died good deaths, or that they might be forgotten all together. Through his poetry, diaries and letters that he published, he was able to change the remembrance of Civil War death to a transcendent and holistic memory that revealed the heinousness of war, while assuring the nation their sons, brothers and fathers would be rejuvenated through nature and live on in memory. In a time when many questioned their belief in God, Whitman offered a spiritual alternative that allowed them to find faith through nature as preserved in his transcendental writing. For Whitman the war for all its hideousness, “proved Humanity and proved America.”<sup>159</sup> To the dead and the loved ones left behind Whitman the Wound Dresser offered peace and assurance:

The moon gives you light,  
And the bugles and the drums give you music,  
And my heart, O my soldiers, my veterans,

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<sup>158</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 161.

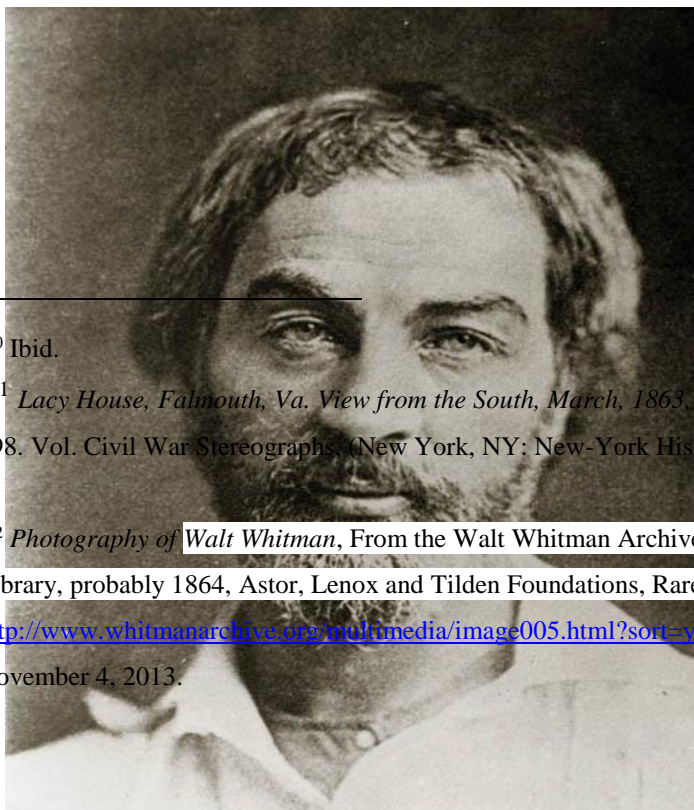
<sup>159</sup> Morris, *The Better Angel*, 244.

My heart gives you love.<sup>160</sup>



**Figure 3-1 Photograph of the Chatham Mansion or “Lacy House” in Falmouth, Virginia taken in 1863.**

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

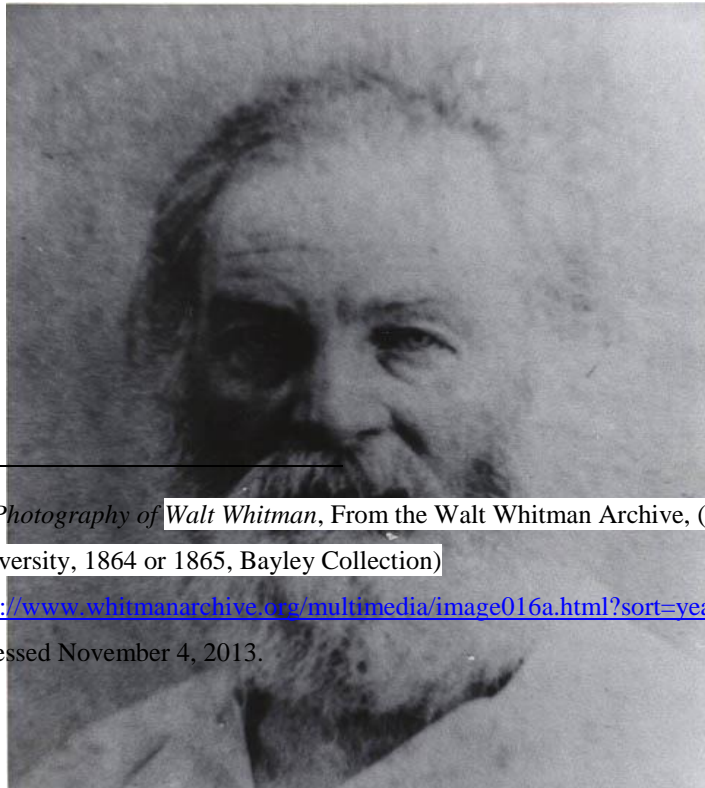
<sup>161</sup> *Lacy House, Falmouth, Va. View from the South, March, 1863*, Photographic Incidents of the War., 698. Vol. Civil War Stereographs, (New York, NY: New-York Historical Society, 1863).

<sup>162</sup> *Photography of Walt Whitman*, From the Walt Whitman Archive, (New York: New York Public Library, probably 1864, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, Rare Books Division),

<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/multimedia/image005.html?sort=year&order=ascending&page=1> accessed November 4, 2013.

**Figure 3-2 Photograph of Whitman in 1854, age 37.**

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<sup>163</sup> *Photography of Walt Whitman*, From the Walt Whitman Archive, (Washington, D.C.: Ohio Wesleyan University, 1864 or 1865, Bayley Collection)

<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/multimedia/image016a.html?sort=year&order=ascending&page=2>

accessed November 4, 2013.

**Figure 3-3 Photograph of Whitman ten years later, age 46 or 47.**





## Chapter 4 - Whitman's Transition to the "Good Gray Poet"

In his persona of the Wound Dresser Whitman had done all that he could to bind up the wounds of soldiers and the nation as a whole. The war transformed him emotionally, mentally and physically. The public began to call him "The Good Gray Poet," a persona that originated from the affection and appreciation felt for his cause of the wounded and his poetry that healed the nation. Because of his work in the war, the public perhaps looked past his homosexuality and he embraced his new persona.<sup>164</sup> It provided acceptance for the stories of the war he told and from the soldier's perspective. Whitman continued to write after the war, but the vulgar and erotic poetry he published before the war was replaced by sentimental works on life, love and nature. He continued to edit *Leaves* until his death by continuously adding poems and rearranging the contents, but he never removed his war poems.

Almost all families had lost someone in the war, and more likely than not, they were unable to bring them home for burial. The wounded in this case was the "republic of suffering," the term coined by Faust. Civil War diaries and letters note that Americans were unable to grasp the realization that their loved ones were not going to return home.<sup>165</sup> Faust relates this republic to Sigmund Freud's work on melancholia and mourning, where melancholia is a state where an individual is unable to come to terms with reality, and mourning is a process of grieving with an eventual end. Faust argues that "the particular circumstances created by the Civil War often inhibited mourning, rendering it difficult, if not impossible, for many bereaved Americans to move through

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<sup>164</sup> Eiselein, "Whitman's Life and Work, 1819-92," 21.

<sup>165</sup> Morris, *The Better Angel*, 144.

the stages of grief.”<sup>166</sup> With many Americans in a state of melancholia, the nation may have appeared to be a ghost town of citizens in a state of numbness and denial. Through his Wound Dresser persona, Whitman allowed Americans, as well as himself, to work through their stage of melancholia and able to mourn for their loved ones.

The poem “The Wound-Dresser” appeared in the fourth edition of *Leaves*. In this poem, Whitman confronts his new persona head on. Whitman describes the Wound Dresser as an old nurse who is constantly seeing new patients in the war hospital. The poem also depicts the Wound Dresser aging and only being able to sit with the wounded and the dead and ease their sorrow “or silently watch the dead.”<sup>167</sup> However, the poem also portrays the Wound Dresser in vivid hospital scenes following battles, coming swiftly to aid the wounded. The reader is inclined to believe that these scenes are part of a dream the Wound Dresser is having from the repeated line, “in silence, in dreams’ projections.”<sup>168</sup> One powerful explanation for the mental and physical symptoms Whitman was beginning to manifest is that he was suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, brought on by his haunting nightmares of wounded and dead flooding into hospitals. Today, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is recognized as one of the most common and most debilitating threats nurses face. Facing death and suffering on a regular basis, some nurses find that the experiences embed into their psyche where they become vivid memories that cannot be switched on and off. The effects of the disorder range from becoming numb and emotionally detached to chronic and debilitating guilt or depression because the suffering and dying go on regardless of the care provided to

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 259.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

patients. Whitman experienced such guilt and depression, and as his health deteriorated, he began to present physical symptoms such as intestinal distress and blinding headaches.

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Whitman's complete immersion into the trauma of hospital service is clearly evident in "The Wound Dresser."

An old man bending I come among new faces,  
Years looking backward resuming in answer to children,  
Come tell us old man, as from young men and maidens that  
    love me,  
(Arous'd and angry, I'd thought to beat the alarum, and urge  
    relentless war,  
But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd and I resign'd  
    myself,  
To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead;)   
Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these  
    chances,  
Of unsurpass'd heroes, (was one side so brave? The other was  
    equally brave)...

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,  
Straight and swift to my wounded I go  
Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,  
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass on the ground...

One turns to me his appealing eyes—poor boy! I never knew you,  
Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if  
    that would save you...

... Thus in silence in dreams' projections,  
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,  
The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,  
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,  
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,  
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and  
    rested,  
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Nurses" CEUfast Blog, <https://ceufast.com/blog/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-in-nurses>, accessed April 6, 2016.

<sup>170</sup> Whitman, *Leaves*, 261.

This last stanza depicts Whitman's new character well by reflecting both the literal and metaphorical aspect of the Wound Dresser. It describes a scene of a younger generation asking for stories from his Civil War years. He depicts his work in the hospital and aiding the wounded as a literal understanding of a wound dresser. Whitman was not a trained nurse, but this poem portrays the Wound Dresser as someone who has medical training and literally dresses wounds as men come into the hospital off the battlefields. This poem also confronts Whitman's own emotional troubles he faced during his voluntary years and witnessing so many deaths of young men with potential. The poem says that Whitman would trade his life for the wounded he saw being brought into the hospitals to be treated. Whitman's transcendental ideals are still evident in these lines as he describes the experience as "sweet and sad." This can be explained as Whitman still believing that death is sweet, but the loss of these brave men is sad for the Wound Dresser, who cherishes everything they stand for and symbolize. The last line also relates to the intimacy he felt with men and the soldiers. It can be seen as romantic and related to Whitman's homosexuality, and as an organic and effortless intimacy that Whitman felt with the wounded. It is known that Whitman felt a kinship with the soldiers and believed them to be a reflection of everything good. The last line of "The Wound Dresser" might be describing an innocent and pure expression of love from the Wound Dresser to all soldiers.

Whitman's years spent as a nurse changed his life in more ways than one. Most importantly, he found his true calling as the Wound Dresser and his calling in poetry revolved around the Civil War. Relating back to Whitman's poem "To Thee Old Cause," Whitman believed his fourth edition of *Leaves* embraced the bravery, sorrow, suffering,

and grief entirely, which he and the nation experienced during Civil War. Whitman was a changed man mentally and emotionally from his wartime experiences and the Wound Dresser was his outlet to connect with his demons and soothe the nations' emotional demons, too. This is evident in his correspondence to family and friends during the war. Whitman avidly wrote home and wrote mostly to his mother, Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, while volunteering providing her with detailed updates on patients and his daily whereabouts and activities. In a letter to Louisa February 2, 1864 Whitman wrote from Washington, DC,

I am writing this by the side of the young man you asked about, Lewis Brown,<sup>1</sup> in Armory Square hospital—He is now getting along very well indeed—The amputation is healing up good, & he does not suffer any thing like as much as he did. I see him every day...there has been several hundred sick soldiers brought in here yesterday—

I have been around among them to-day all day—it is enough to make one heart-sick, the old times over again—they are many of them mere wrecks, though young men—(sickness is worse in some respects than wounds)—one boy<sup>2</sup> about 16, from Portland, Maine, only came from home a month ago, a recruit, he is here now, very sick & downhearted, poor child, he is a real country boy, I think has consumption—he was only a week with his reg't—I sat with him a long time—I saw [it] did him great good—I have been feeding some their dinners—it makes me feel quite proud, I find so frequently I can do with the men what no one else at all can, getting them to eat, (some that will not touch their food otherwise, nor for any body else)—it is sometimes quite affecting I can tell you—I found such a case to-day, a soldier with throat disease, very bad—I fed him quite a dinner—the men, his comrades around, just stared in wonder, & one of them told me afterwards that he (the sick man) had not eat so much at a meal, in three months—Mother, I shall have my hands pretty full now for a while—write all about things home—<sup>171</sup>

Whitman does not spare any details in his letters home to his family and friends about the suffering he sees daily. One would imagine that he would spare his mother these specifics, so not to let her worry about him, but Whitman does quite the opposite. His

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<sup>171</sup> "Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 2 February 1864." *The Walt Whitman Archive*, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org> accessed 28 July 2015.

letters between the spring of 1864 and summer of 1864 offer a glimpse into his transformation from Wound Dresser to Good Gray Poet. He documents his diminishing health, both mentally and physically from his daily exposure to the dead and dying.

Whitman wrote to Louisa again on February 5, 1864:

I am going down in front, in the midst of the Army, to-morrow morning, to be gone for about a week<sup>1</sup>—so I thought I would write you a few lines now, to let you know—

Mother, I suppose you got my letter written last Tuesday—I have not got any from home now for a number of days—I am well & hearty—the young man Lewis Brown is able to be up a little on crutches—there are quite a number of sick young men, I have taken in hand, from the late arrivals, that I am sorry to leave—sick & downhearted & lonesome, they think so much of a friend, & I get so attached to them too—but I want to go down in camp once more very much—& I think I shall be back in a week—I shall spend most of my time among the sick & wounded in the Camp hospitals—if I had means I should stop with them, poor boys, or go down among them periodically, dispensing what I had, as long as the war lasts, down among the worst of it—(although what are collected here in hospital, seem to me about as severe and needy cases as any after all)—<sup>172</sup>

Whitman makes note of his problem with emotional attachment to the wounded in his letter home, which was a leading factor to the shift in his post-war poetry and to his physical demise. Unfortunately for Whitman, it gets worse as the war goes on. He wrote his mother again a week or so later while he was in Fredericksburg, Virginia for a few days on invitation of Captain Henry Loud Cranford.<sup>173</sup> Most of the content is depiction of the improving city since the Battle of Fredericksburg and an explanation of the field hospitals they use. Near the end of the letter he reminds her again of his personal attachment to the soldiers stating, “I have no difficulty at all in making myself at home among the soldiers, teamsters, or any—I most always find they like to have me very

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<sup>172</sup> "Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 5 February 1864." *The Walt Whitman Archive* <http://www.whitmanarchive.org> accessed 28 July 2015.

<sup>173</sup> "Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 12 February 1864." *The Walt Whitman Archive*., <http://www.whitmanarchive.org> accessed 28 July 2015.

much, it seems to do them good, no doubt they soon feel that my heart & sympathies are truly with them, & it is both a novelty & pleases them & touches their feelings, & so doubtless does them good—and I am sure it does that to me.”<sup>174</sup> Whitman wrote his mother again once he returned to Washington, it was then mid-March, to report that the hospital had the worst cases he had seen in three years.<sup>175</sup> He closed the letter adding that it made him “sick” to see the doctors and nurses in charge of the patients treat them coldly and without compassion and afraid to make contact with them. Whitman wrote again to his mother a week and a half later on March 22, 1864 and the letter’s content was much the same as the previous ones stating,

O mother, to think that we are to have here soon what I have seen so many times, the awful loads & trains & boat loads of poor bloody & pale & wounded young men again—for that is what we certainly will, & before very long—I see all the little signs, getting ready in the hospitals &c.—it is dreadful, when one thinks about it—I sometimes think over the sights I have myself seen, the arrival of the wounded after a battle, & the scenes on the field too, & I can hardly believe my own recollection—what an awful thing war is—Mother, it seems not men but a lot of devils & butchers butchering each other—<sup>176</sup>

Again, Whitman is reporting the haunting thoughts he has day in and day out of what he has experienced in the hospitals. His personal obsession with the wounded rendered him unable to leave Washington for the safety of his own family he left at home. It is clear in these writings that Whitman had significant difficulty processing the massacre of the Civil War.

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> "Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 15 March 1864." *The Walt Whitman Archive*, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org> accessed 28 July 2015.

<sup>176</sup> "Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 22 March 1864." *The Walt Whitman Archive*, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org> accessed 29 July 2015.



It is in late March that Whitman's emotional wellbeing begins to take a turn, so much so that he mentions it to his mother in a letter on March 29, 1864. Whitman writes,

I feel lately as though I must have some intermission, I feel well & hearty enough, & was never better, but my feelings are kept in a painful condition a great part of the time—things get worse & worse, as to the amount & sufferings of the sick, & as I have said before, those who have to do with them are getting more & more callous & indifferent—Mother, when I see the common soldiers, what they go through, & how every body seems to try to pick upon them, & what humbug there is over them every how, even the dying soldier's money stolen from his body by some scoundrel attendant, or from some sick ones, even from under his head, which is a common thing—& then the agony I see every day, I get almost frightened at the world—Mother, I will try to write more cheerfully next time—but I see so much—<sup>177</sup>

Whitman's physical transformation begins with his head and with fatigue. He begins to write his mother regularly of his symptoms. Two months later, his head is still causing him suffering and he tells her, "I will only write you a hasty note this time, as I am pretty tired, & my head feels disagreeable, from being in too much."<sup>178</sup> By "in" he is referring to the hospitals, because in the next sentence he reports his voluntary routines and whom he visited and spoke with. He finishes the letter as though he has had an epiphany of the change he is experiencing in seeing the dead and dying day after day. Whitman writes to Louisa, "Mother, I see such awful things—I expect one of these days, if I live, I shall have awful thoughts & dreams—but it is such a great thing to be able to do some real good, assuage these horrible pains & wounds, & save life even—that's the only thing that keeps a fellow up."<sup>179</sup> Whitman's bodily and emotional suffering increases as his letters continue. In a letter written in June he told his mother that if the Richmond campaign was

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<sup>177</sup> "Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 29 March 1864." *The Walt Whitman Archive*, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org> accessed 29 July 2015.

<sup>178</sup> "Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 18 May 1864." *The Walt Whitman Archive*, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org> accessed 29 July 2015.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

not ongoing he would “stop here” and return home because he believes, “it is now beginning to tell a little upon me, so many bad wounds, many putrified, & all kinds of dreadful ones, I have been rather too much with—but as it is I shall certainly remain here while the thing remains undecided.”<sup>180</sup> He noted that, “I feel a little blue this morning, as two young men I knew very well have just died, one died last night, & the other about half an hour before I went to the hospital, I did not anticipate the death of either of them, each was a very, very sad case, so young—well, mother, I see I have written you another gloomy sort of letter—I do not feel as first rate as usual.”<sup>181</sup> It seems obvious that Whitman now began to reach his threshold of hospital work in June of 1864 as the number of wounded and dying increased and the cases became graver. He added a note at the bottom of the letter after signing his name, almost as an afterthought, “You don't know how I want to come home & see you all, you, dear Mother, & Jeff & Mat & all—I believe I am homesick, something new for me—then I have seen all the horrors of soldier's life & not been kept up by its excitement—it is awful to see so much, & not be able to relieve it.”<sup>182</sup> Just two days later Whitman wrote to tell her that his symptoms were growing worse.

Mother, I have not felt well at all the last week—I had spells of deathly faintness, and bad trouble in my head too, & sore throat, (quite a little budget, ain't they?)—My head was the worst, though I don't know, the faint weak spells were not very pleasant—but I feel so much better this forenoon I believe it has passed over—There is a very horrible collection in Armory Building, (in Armory Square hosp.) about 200 of the worst cases you ever see, & I had been probably too much with

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<sup>180</sup> "Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 3 June 1864." *The Walt Whitman Archive*, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org> accessed 28 July 2015.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

them—it is enough to melt the heart of a stone—over one third of them are amputation cases—<sup>183</sup>

As evident in this quote, Whitman is becoming obsessed with the suffering of the wounded. Readers can see this same shift in his poetry after the war, when his subject matter becomes solely about the death and suffering caused by the war. The effects of Whitman's traumatic stress are evident in another letter written on June 10, 1864.

“Mother,” he wrote, “I have not felt well again the last two days as I was Tuesday, but I feel a good deal better this morning, I go around, but most of the time feel very little like it—the doctor tells me I have continued too long in the hospitals, especially in a bad place, armory building, where the worst wounds were, & have absorbed too much of the virus in my system...”<sup>184</sup> By mid-June the stress had become debilitating and the hospital physicians prohibited him from entering the hospitals until his health improved.<sup>185</sup>

Unaware that he was suffering from post-traumatic stress, he blamed the unhealthy air in his apartment, for his illness and listed his symptoms as, “spells of faintness & very bad feeling in my head, fullness & pain—& besides sore throat.”<sup>186</sup> On June 17 he wrote his mother that his service in the hospital was at an end.

I got your letter this morning—this place & the hospitals seem to have got the better of me—I do not feel so badly this forenoon—but I have bad nights & bad days too, some of the spells are pretty bad—still I am up some & around every day—the doctors have told me for a fortnight I must leave, that I need an entire change of air, &c—

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<sup>183</sup> "Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 7 June 1864." *The Walt Whitman Archive*, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org> accessed 28 July 2015.

<sup>184</sup> "Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 10 June 1864." *The Walt Whitman Archive*, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org> accessed 28 July 2015.

<sup>185</sup> "Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 14 June 1864." *The Walt Whitman Archive*, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org> accessed 28 July 2015.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

I think I shall come home for a short time, & pretty soon...<sup>187</sup>

Whitman's Wound Dresser persona had allowed him to depict the war in ways that he could not have known before the war and it won for him the love and acclaim of a public that had just his pre-war poetry to be coarse and vulgar. The Wound Dresser character had a softness about him that resented the war in respectful, candid, and natural verse. For example, in "Pensive on Her Dead Gazing" Whitman describes the aftermath of a battle, and the wounded and dead lying throughout the fields. The poem depicts a "Mother of All" walking among the bodies in so much emotional pain that she cries out to the earth to take up the bodies into the grass, leaves and trees.<sup>188</sup> This mother seems to be Mother Earth, and is drawn from Whitman's transcendental beliefs. This maternal figure begs the earth to not "lose an atom" of her sons, the soldiers whom Whitman believed to be sons and brothers, and to absorb them into the universe forever.<sup>189</sup> Post-war poems such as this expressed an organic, unrefined perception of the war that only a man who had experienced could produce. The nation embraced the Wound Dresser because, like the soldiers that Whitman sat next to night after night in the hospitals, Americans needed to voice their own anguish and deep distress, if they were to be able to work through their heartache. Whitman's work was their voice.

Whitman had finally reached the success as a poet he had hoped for his whole life and this is evident in public reviews. In a review of the 1867 edition of *Leaves*, John

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<sup>187</sup> "Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 17 June 1864." *The Walt Whitman Archive*, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org> accessed 28 July 2015.

<sup>188</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 417.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

Burroughs applauded Whitman for “finally justifying himself.”<sup>190</sup> Burroughs holds the *Drum-Taps* poems to be distinctly humane, “unspeakably precious in filling out and completing the idea of the work... they sanctify and make beautiful, like a great heroic act, everything in the author's previous life or previous poems.”<sup>191</sup> The Wound Dresser persona adapted in the fourth edition of *Leaves* led Americans to reassess Whitman’s earlier editions and applaud them as well. Americans glorified them as works of art. Reviewer William Douglas O’Connor contended that the book may be, “the most astounding one of the age.”<sup>192</sup> What some previously believed to be “filth” was now blessed as the best of American poetry because of the Wound Dresser’s literal and metaphorical character. The Wound Dresser physically assisted the wounded and dying and in doing so he guided the nation through its grieving process by depicting the war in ways they could not on their own. Following the fourth edition, judging from the critics’ review, assured Whitman’s national fame and adoration. Burroughs sums up this new adoration well by stating,

The newer collection called *Drum Taps*, which this volume now includes, and which is the poet’s latest work, comes near the close of the volume, as it ought. These poems, taken in connection with the author’s services in the army-hospitals during the war, form a sort of coloring or atmosphere through which his entire work is to be read. Their chief feature is their humanity, and they are unspeakably precious in filling out and completing the idea of the work. They sanctify and make beautiful, like a great heroic act, everything in the author’s previous life or previous poems. Walt Whitman has at last justified himself. As he has surpassed all others in rude force and virility, he has surpassed all others in tenderness and love. All his ‘hairy Pelasgic strength,’ all his vast abysmal power, have at last

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<sup>190</sup> John Burroughs, "Review of *Leaves of Grass* (1867)," *Boston Commonwealth* (10 November 1866), 1-2.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> William Douglas O’Conner, "Walt Whitman," *The New York Times* (2 December 1866), 2.

blossomed into a benevolence such as was never before the inspiration of poems.<sup>193</sup>

In an article in the *New York Times* in 1867 Burroughs wrote a review of contemporary American poetry and included almost a full page on Whitman's character and new work.<sup>194</sup> Burroughs again gave *Drum-taps* a wonderful review and stated that "the reader of *Drum-taps* soon discovers that it is not the purpose of the poet to portray battles and campaigns...but rather to chant the human aspects of anguish that follow the train of war."<sup>195</sup> As for the latest edition of *Leaves*, Burroughs wrote, "I love *Leaves of Grass* for its cheerful good faith."<sup>196</sup> He argued that "such writing is truly magnificent..." and shows "a bold and vivid sketch of American personality..."<sup>197</sup> Nor was this new found reverence and adoration for Whitman short lived.

An 1882 *New York Times* review declared that "no writer has been more persistently condemned, and none more persistently and passionately praised, than Walt Whitman has been."<sup>198</sup> The author referred directly to the dramatic difference in American perceptions of Whitman before and after the war. Whitman's transformation was complete and the nation eagerly accepted his final persona, the Good Gray Poet.

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<sup>193</sup> J[ohn] B[urroughs]. "[Review of *Leaves of Grass* (1867)]." *Boston Commonwealth* (10 November 1866): 1-2. <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1867/anc.00063.html>, accessed March 13, 2015.

<sup>194</sup> "CURRENT LITERATURE," *The New York Times*, June 30, (1867): 3, <http://www.proquest.com/>, accessed December, 7, 2014.

<sup>195</sup> "CURRENT LITERATURE," *The New York Times*, 3.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> "CURRENT LITERATURE," *The New York Times*, 3.

<sup>198</sup> G.E.M., "MAN, POET AND SEER: A REVIEW OF HIS LITERARY SCHEME, WORK, AND METHOD," *The New York Times*, March 27, (1892): 10, accessed December 7, 2012, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

## Chapter 5 - Whitman: the Good Gray Poet

Literature can serve as a window on the history of the era in which it was written. It can offer a previous and unique perspective, and this is what Whitman provided through his writing. He offered vivid accounts of the war and the suffering and the emotional turmoil that Americans faced once the war was over. He was able to mend the wounded bodies and souls of Americans and he offered the nation a means to move from destructive melancholia to the healing process of mourning. In the persona of the Wound Dresser he provided kinship to the wounded, but he also provided closure for those left behind who would have otherwise gone unnoticed. Once the nation began to heal and move forward, Whitman adopted the soothing persona of the Good Gray Poet.

Walt Whitman's life was one of transforming personas. His initial persona was that of a brash and despised aspiring poet. Though he desperately wished for national acceptance he refused to change his beliefs, writings or lifestyle to win over the general public. He made small changes to his early editions to *Leaves of Grass* in an attempt to sway readers into acceptance and adoration, but the negative reviews continued to flood in. Just prior to the Civil War the reviews improved somewhat, but he was still largely disregarded as a poet.

While in Fredericksburg he walked to the Chatham Mansion Union hospital and what he experienced there was so traumatic that he stopped immediately to write an entry in his diary about it. The sight of doctors amputating limbs feverously in an attempt to save as many wounded as possible mortified Whitman and ignited his determination to assist the wounded and dying by any means until the end of the war.

In his persona of the Wound Dresser he made daily visits to the wounded and dying in the hospitals and on the battlefield year after year, seeking to assist the wounded in any way that he could. This often included bringing them comforts of home, writing letters to their loved ones, reading to them, or writing home to report their death. All the while Whitman was accumulating experiences he would later pour into his post-war poetry. Whitman had always felt a closeness with blue-collar Americans, but the soldiers offered a different kind of closeness. He admired their devotion to their country and their sense of brotherhood. He viewed them as higher beings in some way, almost divine. This is overwhelmingly evident in his writings after the war.

Whitman worked tirelessly, even when it became evident that his health was failing and he was near a nervous breakdown. He stayed at the hospitals in Washington D.C. until he was ordered by the doctors to cease his work and return home to recuperate. Even at home, however, he visited hospitals in Boston because he could not bear to stay away from his soldiers. His sense of duty to them continued until the end of the war. Scholars estimate that from 1862 to 1865 Whitman administered to over 100,000 soldiers, an average of 91 men per day. The physical stress and emotional exhaustion he experienced during those three years left him a frail old man with afflictions that would worsen over time, and it was at this point that he assumed his final persona, the Good Gray Poet.<sup>199</sup>

Despite his poor health Whitman continued to write and to edit *Leaves of Grass* and published three additional versions before his death in 1892. He died ten days after

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<sup>199</sup> See figures in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5.



writing his final poem.<sup>200</sup> Whitman's later editions of *Leaves*, *Memoranda during the War*, and *Drum-Taps* kept him in the literary limelight after the war and newspapers began to refer to him as the Good Gray Poet. Literary reviews and readers began calling Whitman the Good Gray Poet before his death, and after death the public also adopted the title when referring to him. The war had physically aged Whitman and he looked like a warm and friendly grandfather that readers could connect with rather than the impetuous and vulgar Whitman whose photograph was included in the pre-war *Leaves*. Judging from the critics' reviews, readers forgot about the Whitman that existed before the war and accepted him now as either the Wound Dresser or the Good Gray Poet.

His popularity was such that newspapers reported where he was going, what he was doing, and what he was wearing, and how his health appeared. For instance, an article published in 1891 reported that "Walt Whitman, affectionately known wherever the English language is known as 'the good gray poet,' had his photograph taken the other day at his home in Camden."<sup>201</sup> A review of the fourth edition of *Leaves* referred to Whitman as the "Good Gray Poet" and provided a positive evaluation of the book stating, "This last volume contains the original poems, with 'Drum Taps,' and some twenty others, later and fresher...the arrangement of this new volume will be attractive to those who have seen the old."<sup>202</sup> A review in the *Boston Post* echoed this sentiment in noting that, "The 'good grey poet' but a few days since left Boston...Mr. Whitman's poems

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 25.

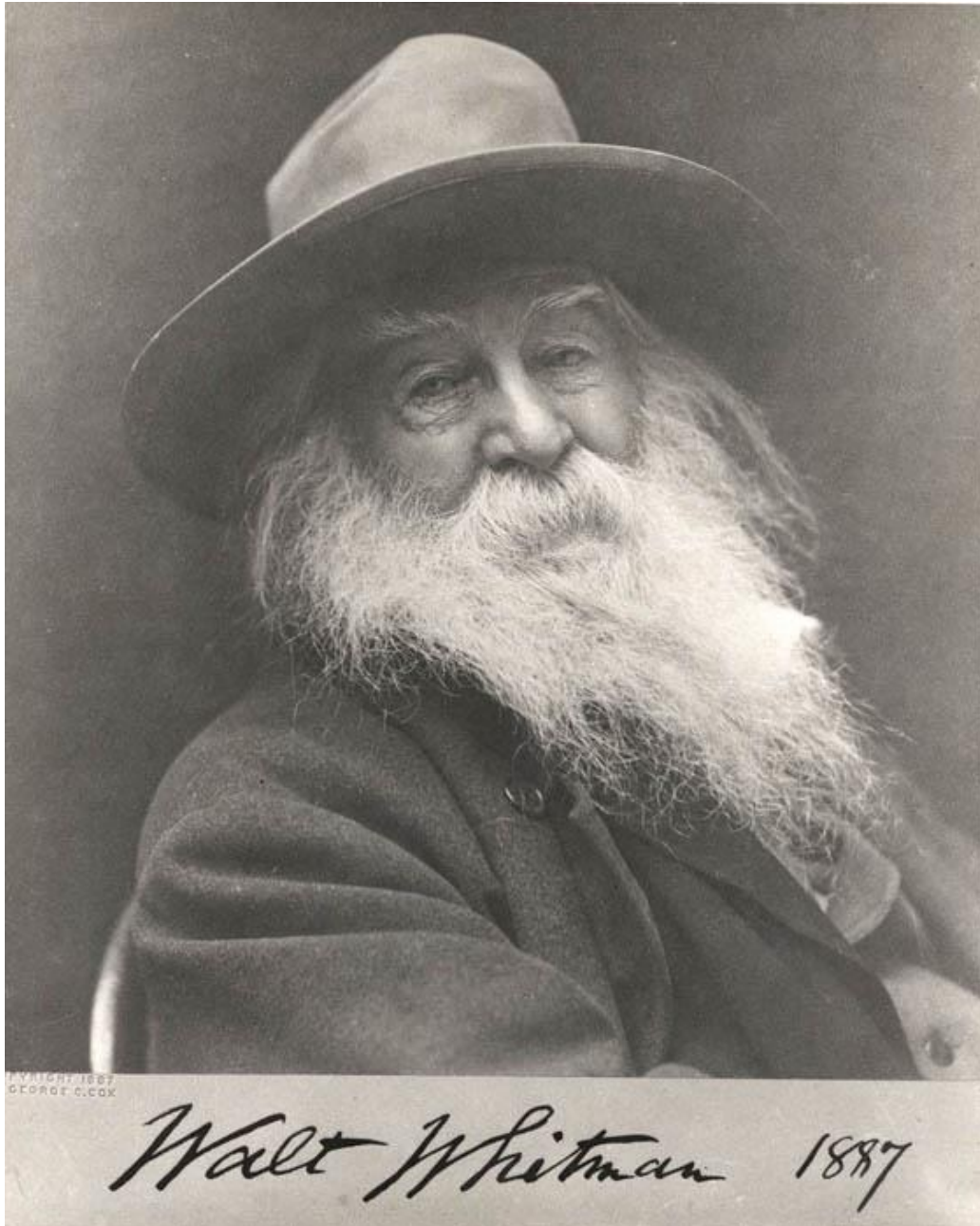
<sup>201</sup> William, "Literature of the Day," *Morning Oregonian* (Portland: Oregon, 10 May 1891: 11, *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*), <http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/dvnw/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=DVNW&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&docPage=article&docId=GT3009804663&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>, 6 Oct. 2015.

<sup>202</sup> OBSERVER. "[Review of *Leaves of Grass* (1867)]." *The Massachusetts Weekly Spy* (2 November 1866): 1. <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1867/anc.01069.html> 3.12.15

have been severely criticized, but much of the criticism is due to a failure to understand.”<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> [Anonymous]. "Walt Whitman. The Man and His Book—Some New Gems for His Admirers." *The Boston Post* (2 November 1881): 2, accessed March 14, 2015, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/leaves1881/anc.00206.html>.



**Figure 5-1 Photograph of Whitman taken by George C. Cox in 1887.<sup>204</sup>**

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<sup>204</sup> George C Cox., Charles E. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress, 15 April 1887, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/multimedia/image103.html?sort=year&order=ascending&page=11> accessed March 14, 2015.



**Figure 5-2 Photograph of Whitman near the end of his life taken by Samuel Murray in Camden in May of 1891.<sup>205</sup>**

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<sup>205</sup> Photograph of Walt Whitman taken by Samuel Murray, May of 1891, Camden: New Jersey, (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, ID: 129),

<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/multimedia/image129.html?sort=year&order=ascending&page=13>,

accessed October 1, 2015.

## Chapter 6 - Conclusion

By the end of his life, Whitman finally achieved the adoration from the country he had always sought, but by the time he retired to Camden, New Jersey in 1873 he was in such grave health that he was physically incapable to work.<sup>206</sup> Scholars argue that his exhausting voluntary hours spent in hospitals led to his declining health and this is supported by the fact that hospital physicians urged him to end his work when his physical and emotional condition began to deteriorate. Photographs of Whitman taken during the war clearly show the war aged him tremendously. He also went through family difficulties and deaths that took an emotional and physical toll on him. One article titled “A Poet’s Declining Years” published in February of 1885 reported that “Whitman is feeling the weight of years,” and another from in 1885 reported that “In 1861 he went down to the field and spent four years as a hard-worked unpaid army nurse, unselfishly and uncaringly tending the seeds of the disease which crippled him and made him old before his time.”<sup>207 208</sup>

Upon Whitman’s death in 1892, many articles and reviews were quick to pay homage, and referred to him as the Good Gray Poet. *Harper’s Weekly* included a full page article on Whitman, including a large headshot of him. The article stated that

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<sup>206</sup> Eiselein, “Whitman’s Life and Work, 1819-92” in *A Companion to Walt Whitman*, 22.

<sup>207</sup> "A Poet's Declining Years." *Milwaukee Daily Journal* (Milwaukee: Wisconsin, 7 Feb. 1885: n.p). *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*. <http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/dvnw/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=DVNW&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&docPage=article&docId=GT3013757941&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>, accessed 6 Oct. 2015.

<sup>208</sup> "'The Good, Gray Poet'." *Atchison Daily Globe* (Atchison, Kansas, 4 Mar. 1885: n.p. *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*), <http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/dvnw/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=DVNW&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&docPage=article&docId=GT3011859594&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>, accessed 6 Oct. 2015.

Whitman “has been accepted as the one great true American poet, the long-waiting voice of the new teeming forces of the great North American continent...”<sup>209</sup> Another article from *The New York Times* in 1892 said that Whitman was “a remarkable and original literary character—a poet who was little careful of rhythm and had the courage to speak out”<sup>210</sup> Whitman was certainly unconventional in the style of his poetry and he never lacked the courage to “speak out,” especially on the horror of war. The same article also argued that Whitman was a poet for the ages by asking “how can the men of the future fail to be won over by a man who believes so rapturously in the essential goodness of all created things—even of that pit, the soul of man?”<sup>211</sup>

American readers now embraced all aspects of Whitman’s persona. They now accepted his transcendental faith and his determination to speak the truth about the war and his reassuring ability to find nature’s spirituality in the men lost in the conflict. In a time where God was hard to find and men were savage, Whitman wrote of the cruelty of war, but he also asked his readers to accept the basic goodness of mankind. Another review titled “Whitman the Prophet” published thirty years after his death discussed a straw poll of 200 readers which inquired if his works were gaining or decreasing in popularity.<sup>212</sup> The findings overwhelmingly indicated that his fame was growing. The article noted that his books were being published in German and French and that

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<sup>209</sup> “Walt Whitman,” *Harper’s Weekly*, April 2, (1892): 317, accessed December 7, 2012, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

<sup>210</sup> “Walt Whitman’s Career,” *The New York Times*, March 27, (1892): 10, accessed December 7, 2012, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> “WHITMAN AS PROPHET.” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Jun 03, 1923. <http://search.proquest.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/docview/103199497?accountid=11789>.

“Whitman grows in esteem from year to year.”<sup>213</sup> The author maintained that “America has pretty well caught up with Whitman,” and he characterized Whitman as the poet who “threw open the windows in locked chambers of the soul which have never been so firmly closed since, and never will be so long as our civilization in any form endures.”<sup>214</sup> This quote applies not only to readers of Whitman, but also to Whitman himself. The Good Gray Poet was not just a symbol of Whitman’s fame and national acceptance, but one of personal acceptance. As the Good Gray Poet Whitman embraced his experiences during the war and turned them into a means for a growing nation to mourn and come to terms with the tragedy of war. Whitman had also caught up with himself.

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

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