

4-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Cyr, Kaitlyn, "Walt Whitman: A Man of Compassion" (2009). *Excellence in Research Awards*. Paper 6.
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5/4/09

Walt Whitman: A Man of Compassion

Walt Whitman was a generous man who would help anyone who asked. His poems, though often not easy to understand, spoke volumes about his rare consciousness and awareness of others around him. Born in the early 1800's, Walt Whitman was the second of nine children. Due to this, he held himself to a higher standard and wanted to influence his siblings' lives. His caring nature directly correlates to his time spent in the Civil War, where he was a companion for many soldiers. Walt Whitman's childhood experiences and his time in the Civil War made him into the poet he was, and made him one of the greatest poets of the nineteenth century and today. His experiences are reflected in the poems "Drum Taps," "Ashes of Soldiers," "A Sight in Camp," and "O Captain! My Captain!"

Walt Whitman was born May 31, 1819, in Long Island, New York. His father was a house builder, so the family's income varied from month to month. Due to this, Walt quit school at the age of eleven to get a job of his own to help support his family. His favorite job was as an apprentice working for a printing press, and the aspects of the job stuck with him throughout his life. According to Gay Wilson Allen, Whitman was always reading, and although he quit school, he kept up-to-date with teachings, and many of these readings influenced him in his writing (24-25).

Although he bounced around from job to job and city to city, Whitman kept in contact with all his siblings. His younger sister, Mary, lived in New York and was married to an alcoholic. This worried him since alcoholism ran in his family, and he did not want to see that happen again to his sister. At this time, Whitman lived in Virginia, but he made a reason to visit his sister every month, or as much as possible. Even though some of his brothers also lived in New York at the time, he made sure that he saw for himself

that she was happy and that everything was going fine for her (Loving 7). Little things like this showed what a caring individual he was, and others experienced the same compassion from Whitman in their lives, especially during the Civil War.

Walt Whitman's odd jobs continued throughout his life, varying from newspapers to magazines to monthly catalogs. However, the peak of these peculiar occupations came around 1861, when the Civil War broke out. Whitman registered to be a "psychological" nurse (a term he gave himself) for both Union and Confederate soldiers. His decision mostly came from trying to find his brother, George, who enlisted and was reported dead after the Battle of Fredericksburg. Seeing all the men broken and injured, led Whitman to make his decision to help them in any way he could (List par.5).

During the War, Whitman liked to read to the soldiers and to keep them company, rather than being strictly a medical nurse. He thought that being their friend, listener, and comforter would benefit them more than anything else would, knowing that they had someone to talk to, and to keep their minds off the War. As in Angel Price's article on Whitman, "'The doctors tell me I supply the patients with a medicine which all their drugs & bottles & powders are helpless to yield' in reference to the aid of his cheerful disposition and careful attention to the welfare of the soldiers" (par. 2). During the war, Whitman kept a journal of the things he saw on a daily basis, and wondered how people can even go to war knowing that they may lose. This was also the time that he started adding more poems to his famous *Leaves of Grass*. "Drum Taps," "Ashes of Soldiers," and "A Sight in Camp" were poems that were inspired by his time in the hospital.

In the poem "Drum Taps," Walt Whitman recalls the sounds of war: cheers, crying, drums, guns firing. Whitman was extremely influenced by the Civil War and saw first hand the dreadful experiences that war can bring. He saw death and life all in one, and this is what inspired him mostly as a poet, to reach out and try to help in any way, even if that meant writing a poem about what truly happens in war. "Drum Taps" was not only a poem, but also the title of a book of poems that were inspired by the war. This book, for Whitman, not only told the story of the soldiers, but was also a memoir of their lives. In "Drum Taps," he shows how the war starts, coming, "suddenly, / At dead of night, at news from the south," (Line 18) as though the North was unprepared for it. Whitman then alludes to how everyone gets involved in a war; references to a blacksmith, lawyer, judge, and a driver are made. All these people feel the effects of war and no one is forgotten. Then the soldiers start marching out to the call of duty, leaving what they know and love behind. "The tearful parting—the mother kisses her son—the son kisses his mother," (Line 60). The next part is about the start of war, with the cannons rolling out, and the shiny muskets on the soldiers' backs. The poem goes in chronological order from the start of war, including the mystery of how it all started, the good-byes, the fighting, and the dying. This poem truly showed how war was and it depicted how the soldiers and everyone involved felt. For Whitman, this poem reflected everyday occurrences, and he wrote it to show sympathy for the cause. "*Drum-Taps* reflects Whitman's deepening awareness of the significance of the American Civil War and the hope for reconciliation between North and South" ("Whitman, Walt" par. 6).

"Ashes of Soldiers" also tells a great deal of the tragedies of war and what Whitman saw every day when he went to the hospitals. This poem is about the lost soldiers in the Civil War, and how they were searching for peace of mind in their final

days. The narrator in the poem seems to be talking for the soldiers and how the he wants to protect them from harm. Whitman would give and give to the soldiers; he would take the little money he had and buy them better food or just stay with them so they had someone to talk with. At the camps, when Whitman saw all the soldiers broken and defeated he wanted to do anything to ease their pain, and he showed it by staying with them or just listening to them talk. "When a few of the wounded on that train asked the favor of his company at the hospitals in Washington, Walt could not refuse" ("Walt Whitman" par 116). Whitman was so generous towards them and he would go from his job as a government clerk, to the hospitals, and go back to the hospital, sometimes staying all night if he were asked ("Walt Whitman" par 120). This poem especially speaks volumes about what the soldiers went through, and in it, Whitman wanted to make their side of the story heard. The following lines from "Ashes of Soldiers" represent how Whitman felt towards the soldiers.

"Noiseless as mists and vapors,
From their graves in the trenches ascending,
From cemeteries all through Virginia and Tennessee,
From every point of the compass out of the countless graves,
In wafted clouds, in myriads large, or squads of twos or threes or
single ones they come,
And silently gather round me," (Lines 5-11)

The soldiers all seem to call on him for help, the dead and the living. Whitman saw many soldiers die and their memories seemed to linger even after death, so that he cannot forget a single person. Everywhere in the war, someone needed comfort, and he wanted to be that person for them, who cared for them, or even listened to their problems and stories. Companionship was what he wanted to give them, letting them know that love was out there amidst all the pain and suffering. "Dearest comrades, all is

over and long gone, /But love is not over--and what love, O comrades" ("Ashes of Soldiers" Lines 33-34).

This poem shows how dedicated Walt Whitman was to serve the soldiers, and that he wanted to let them know that even though they saw death everywhere, love was still in the world. He did not care how long it took to tend to everyone's needs; in the end, if the soldiers were happy, then he was happy. Even towards the end of the war, when Whitman was getting ill himself, he always pushed himself to get up every day and help the soldiers, because their happiness was worth more than his own pain. He always put others before himself, and this poem shows how he cared for each soldier as if he were his own child.

Another poem of Whitman's that deals with the sights of the War and injured soldiers, is "A Sight in Camp." This poem deals with the dead bodies that were found throughout camp and the soldiers still living among the dead. While Whitman was a nurse, he saw these sights every day and had to see dead soldiers laying everywhere in camp. It seemed as though everywhere he looked, Whitman would either see a dead body, someone who was about to die, or some other injured soldier. From an excerpt of Whitman's diary dated December 26, 1862:

"Death is nothing here. As you step out in the morning from your tent to wash your face you see before you on a stretcher a shapeless extended object, and over it is thrown a dark grey blanket-- it is the corpse of some wounded or sick soldier of the reg't who died in the hospital tent during the night-- perhaps there is a row of three or four of these corpses lying covered over," (Price par. 5).

These sightings were so common, but yet so disturbing that Whitman turned to his writing and produced another great poem about these tragedies. In "A Sight in Camp," Whitman tells of a normal morning in camp where the narrator wakes up and sees three bodies before him. The first body he comes across is an elderly man scarred with a gaunt expression on his face. All the narrator does is ask who he is, trying to give him a name. The next soldier he comes by is a child who is too young to be in a war, but he is there nonetheless. The final comrade the narrator comes to is a man he calls the "Christ himself" ("A Sight in Camp" Lines 22-23). All these comrades represent the different people that were in the Civil War: the young, the old, the innocent, and the unprepared. These soldiers were models of the many people Whitman saw die and suffer in the War and the ones that fought and died for something they believed in.

Finally, Whitman wrote a poem about the death of Civil War President Abraham Lincoln and "O Captain! My Captain!" became one of his finest poems. It tells of the death of a ship's captain and how the crew mourns his death as a symbolic image of the assassination of President Lincoln. Whitman admired Lincoln so much and stood by his every decision. Whitman wrote freely against the expansion of slavery into the West (which had gotten him fired from the *Brooklyn Eagle*, where he was their editor) and fully supported the Free Soil Party, which kept him from getting jobs (Folsom and Price par. 23). At the start of this poem, the people are elated to see their leader, but it progresses on to the death of the captain. Near the end, the crew (in this case, the nation) mourns for its fallen hero. Although Whitman mourned along with the nation, he could not help but feel the situation was bittersweet: bitter that they lost their great leader, but sweet in that the country was coming together as a whole to mourn for *their* President. This was something that Whitman tried to achieve through *Leaves of Grass*.

He thought that he could unite the country and stop the Civil War from happening by his writings of patriotism and unity. Lincoln's assassination was something that brought the country together again, he felt, when it seemed like it could be permanently torn in two ("Walt Whitman" par 111 and par 138). "O Captain! My Captain!" brought together all of Whitman's feelings for his late President, something that the country could sympathize with.

In conclusion, Walt Whitman was a generous man who would help anyone he could. From looking after his sister and other siblings to tending to soldiers throughout the Civil War, Walt Whitman was there for anyone who needed him. Although his poems were not highly praised when he first started out, he grew in popularity over time through his language and insightfulness. His best poems were the ones he cared for the most and wanted others to see. Whitman wrote many poems and articles in his 73 years, but none of them compared to his original twelve poems in the 1855 Edition of *Leaves of Grass*. These poems were the ones that marked Whitman as one of the greatest poets to ever live by going outside the normal boundaries and themes in his poems. "Walt Whitman died in Camden, New Jersey, in 1892... No wife survived him, and no children; he left his most cherished possession, *Leaves of Grass*, to anyone who would have it" ("Walt Whitman" par 148).

Annotated Bibliography

Allen, Gay Wilson. *A Reader's Guide to Walt Whitman*. New York: Octagon Books, 1979.

The author has written or helped write numerous books on Walt Whitman's life. He compared Walt Whitman's writings and his style to the time-period that he lived

through, so the reader could see how distinctive his writings were. The book had more historical facts than detailed accounts of his life, but was useful.

Folsom, Ed and Kenneth M. Price. "Walt Whitman." The Walt Whitman Archives. 27 Mar 2009 <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/walt_whitman/index.html>.

These two authors have compiled a list of books that they have written on Walt Whitman. The site that they write and edit together is a chronologically accurate account of Walt Whitman's life broken down into several main categories. It was very helpful, especially when focusing on a specific time in Walt Whitman's life.

List, Sarah. "Whitman, Walt." *Americans at War*. Ed. John Resch. Vol. 2: 1816-1900. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 185-186. 4 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Gale. Pace University. 9 Mar. 2009 <<http://find.galegroup.com/>>.

The author writes for Macmillan Reference and her article was used in Gale Group, which only publishes educational papers. Her article told of Walt Whitman's life and gave a short summary of the major events in his life.

Loving, Jerome. Walt Whitman, the Song of Himself. Berkeley: California UP, 1999.

The author has written many books on Ralph Waldo Emerson, and through that research, he got involved in Walt Whitman's life. This book broke down Walt Whitman's life in layman's terms and gave accurate, detailed accounts of his life and poems.

Price, Angel. "Walt Whitman's *Drum Taps* and Washington's Civil War Hospitals." 20 March 2009. <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/hospital/whitman.htm>. >

Historical account of Walt Whitman's life and the time he grew up in. Focused on the Civil War and Whitman's days as a nurse. Full citations of the paper were listed at the bottom of the page. Article was very helpful in understanding Walt Whitman's nursing days.

"Walt Whitman." By Mark Zwonitzer. Dir. Mark Zwonitzer and Jamila Wignot. American Experience.

PBS. 14 Apr 2008. Transcript online. 27 Mar 2009.

<<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/whitman/program/pt.html>>.

The organization has been around for forty years and has been known for its educational broadcastings. It broke down Walt Whitman's life into film form and emphasized the parts of his life that influenced him the most. It was very helpful in recreating the events in Walt Whitman's life.

"Whitman, Walt." 2009. The History Channel website. 29 Mar 2009.
<<http://www.history.com/encyclopedia.do?articleId=225832>>.

This site provides full historical facts that have been thoroughly researched. The site separated Walt Whitman's life into main categories and events and wrote about significant features of his life that occurred in each category. This was helpful in breaking down his life chronologically.

Whitman, Walt. "A Sight in Camp." Famous Poets and Poems. 2009. 11 Mar 2009.
<http://www.famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/walt_whitman/poems/17614>.

Author of over 300 poems and some books about his life. His greatest achievement was *Leaves of Grass*, which had seven volumes and contained almost all of his poems. Over a period of thirty-five years, Walt Whitman added more and more poems to his original 12-poem book.

--- "Ashes of Soldiers." Famous Poets and Poems. 2009. 27 Mar 2009.
<http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/walt_whitman/poems/17473>.

--- "Drum Taps." Famous Poets and Poems. 2009. 27 Mar 2009.
<http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/walt_whitman/poems/17540>.

--- Leaves of Grass. 7 Vols. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1940.