

A Commentary on Whitman's "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night"

By
Marcus Grandon

Abstract

"Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" can be found in Walt Whitman's later editions of *Leaves of Grass*. The surface subject matter addresses some of the atrocities of the American Civil War, but the deeper meaning has more mystical implications. For Whitman eternal life "... took the form of metempsychosis, and he believed that every individual will be reborn, usually but not always in a higher form." Lyrically, the poem portrays death and war, but camouflaged throughout are influential writing techniques that add profound substance to the message.

"Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" can be found in Walt Whitman's later editions of *Leaves of Grass*. The surface subject matter addresses some of the atrocities of the American Civil War, but the deeper meaning has more mystical implications. For Whitman eternal life "... took the form of metempsychosis, and he believed that every individual will be reborn, usually but not always in a higher form."⁽ⁱ⁾ Lyrically, the poem portrays death and war, but camouflaged throughout are influential writing techniques that add profound substance to the message.

Whitman starts the poem with one of his well-known threads: the universal relationship spanning humanity. The "son" is not actually a blood son, but related

only in the cosmic sense of the word. Whitman's personal philosophy grouped humanity into a holistic family, and in the poem the apparently older man only referred to the younger lad as "son". "Comrade" may be a better way to look at the situation, because they were both fighting side by side for the same ideological values in the war, but the reference to "son" is clearly a figurative one.

The Civil War turned Whitman's writings to new settings, but didn't tremendously alter his messages. As a nurse, he undoubtedly dealt with many a morbid scene, and with medical technology what it was then, probably witnessed the gruesome saga of war from a perspective that is hard to comprehend according to today's standards. Soldiers were said to rather die quickly on the battlefield than lie in a hospital bed to agonizingly meet their fate. "The idea that a surgical dressing ought to be sterilized never entered anyone's head; . . . If a surgeon's instruments were so much as rinsed off between operations at a field hospital, the case was an exception." (ii) Medical kits consisted of tourniquets, hand saws (that wouldn't even be used to cut wood today), and bottles of anaesthetic whiskey; and many medical personnel had no previous training.

Conciliatory gestures were often the best offerings to fallen soldiers, and this is what is being described in lines 4 and 5 as the protagonist and the dying boy locked hands and eyes. The ambiguity of this vis-a-vis glance allows us to subjectively interpret it. Pegged only as unforgettable, was it one of frightful helplessness, or angelic serenity?

The immersion in what can be called dated medical surroundings that caused Whitman to observe the happenings of the day from an unusual angle inundated him with extreme suffering and morbid stench, therefore; it's not surprising to see penned poems about these very things. The motif of war inevitably leads to the topic of death, and this poem is no exception.

“... the even contested battle,...” evokes thoughts of the poet’s stance on war itself. By reading into it, it takes on connotations of a classical pacifist statement revolving around the tragically senseless waste of human lives attached to factional feuding. The reason that it is an “even contested battle” is because nobody wins in such an environment of destruction. The views of government may stand to conquer, but the proletarians of the battle field, along with their families and friends are the eventual losers. With the aforementioned universal brotherhood of all in mind, this statement effectively balloons up so as to comprehensively include the entire human race.

Knowing that these battle scenes took place during the Civil War, and how the fight is described as “spreading” around causes subjective imagery of whatever the reader can picture about that time in history. Typical thoughts would be of trenches fortified with crudely cut logs, smoldering barns, cannons on wheels, men on horseback, and regiments firing at each other from close range.

Note the way some of the words are written without e’s where they should be: envelop’d, brighten’d, return’d, reach’d, reliev’d, and appear’d. The specific purpose of this is to show that the speech is not of an aristocratic class, but the peasantry. Most wars have traditionally been fought by the masses, and avoided by the ruling class. It continues to be so today.

Death in war provides Whitman with an opportunity to expound his esoteric views on *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The poet’s eschatological philosophy closely resembles Indian doctrine, and it floods into the poem. He sheds no tear nor feels much mourning for the fallen soldier because of his belief in an afterlife. An allusion to this comes in line 7: “(never on earth responding)”, from which a logical assumption is that if there is no responding on earth then there will be responding somewhere else. Later in line 17, the trust in the existence of the hereafter is blatantly reinforced with “... I think surely we will meet again.”

A cleverly disguised bit of imagery that was definitely out of the main stream in its day lies in line 15: "As onward silently stars aloft, eastward new ones upward stole,". The silent stars must represent the slain boy, and of course the new ones mean the beginning of a new life (found in death). To take it a step further would be to brand it with its indicative tone of reincarnation.

Taking advantage of a kind of cadence to accentuate the power of the reading is evidenced by the double use of the word "found" in line 7, and "One" in lines 3 and 4. The repetition of the phrase "never again on earth responding" echoes this sentiment as well, and appears to be a kind of refrain or chorus. This technique is most palpable in the use of the word "vigil" which is written 11 times, and is used twice in the same line on 3 distinct occasions. The message conveyed here is that although not much grief is accompanying the death, there still needs to be some kind of hieratic ceremony (vigil) for a peaceful transition from this life to the next.

Succession is another way in which Whitman chose to display his message. Twice he points attention to the thought of a lack of bereavement in the form of no tears or words. There are also three separate lines dedicated to the description of the meticulous wrapping and folding of the blanket around the reposed boy. Two would have been sufficient, and the third actually appears verbose. Again, the indirect message implied here is to demonstrate the kind of pious rites executed to usher the soul to its new destination.

Although no direct references to religion are made in the poem, it is filled with the things unmistakably related to the concept. Throughout the magnanimous vigil it seems as if the main character is in a solitary prayer or meditation. The exactitude with which the body was shrouded is akin to a latitudinarian sacrament, and the performance of the ritual by the man at dawn is significant symbolism because the virgin light of day represents the rebirth of the soul and the start of new life on

another plane. The man has assumed the role of a officiant performing obsequies to assist the spirit onward, and concludes the silent eulogy with a reverent burial representing a complete and successful transition.

This poem synchronizes several key themes while causing the reader to peruse their individual thoughts on matters that many find too visceral to examine. The fear of the unknown has a lot to do with this, but also because the words dig at issues controversial (war) and extremely personal (religion). Whitman masterfully incorporated tools available to him in the form of ambiguity, cadence, symbolism, and succession to ring his points home; and they make the reading more personalized as readers with varying levels of education and backgrounds are given the freedom to decipher certain passages in their own way. This adds a charm to the work, however; the true essence of it is spiritual immortality - where we are all going to not only someday formlessly reside, but where we'll be living together as one single entity.

Notes

- i Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, Edited, with an Introduction By Malcolm Cowley, (New York, New York: Penguin Classics, The First (1855) Edition), p. xxi of the Introduction.
- ii Catton, Bruce, *The Civil War*, (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company,1960), p. 154.

Marcus Grandon

A Commentary on Whitman's "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night"

Bibliography

Bowes, John, S., *Avenues to America's Past*, Silver Burdett Company, Morristown, New Jersey, 1969.

Catton, Bruce, *The Civil War*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, MA, 1960.

Feibleman, James, K., *Understanding Oriental Philosophy*, Times Mirror, New York and Scarborough, Ontario, 1976.

Noss, David, S., and Noss, John, B., *A History of the World's Religions*, Macmillain Publishing Company, New York, New York, 1990.

Ravitz, Abe, *Defining the Humanities: Literature*, HUX 502 Course Guide, 1993.

Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, Introduction by Francis R. Gemme, Airmont, New York, New York, 1892.

Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, Edited, with an Introduction by Malcolm Cowley, Penguin Classics, New York, New York, The First (1855) Edition.