

International Bachelorette

Extended Essay

To what extent are consistent themes present in Walt Whitman's
"Song of Myself" and his Civil War poems?

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Abstract

Walt Whitman is one of America's most well-known poets, and is primarily recognized by his mystical, idealistic themes as well as powerful tone. One of his most impactful works is the elaborate and extensive poem "Song of Myself," where he asserts such themes as the innate interconnectedness, psychosomatic nature, and immortality shared by all human beings, in which can be found a certain equality and deep, confident hope. Fifteen years after the original publication of "Song of Myself," the United States erupted in an incredibly bloody civil war, and the union which Whitman put so much faith in was tearing itself apart. The themes present in the collection of poems that Whitman wrote during the Civil War, "Drum Taps," reflect the pain felt by wounded soldiers and their families, as well as felt by the poet himself. This paper investigates the consistencies and disparities in themes found in "Song of Myself" and select poems from "Drum Taps." I examine the way that the concepts of human interconnectedness, the inseparability of body and spirit, and life that follows death are reflected, but modified, in the poems "Come Up From the Fields Father," "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, And the Road Unknown," and "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night." Although many of the same general ideas are present in both his earlier work and his war poems, they are asserted in slightly different ways, often with a more passive and distant tone. This suggests that Whitman was deeply affected by the horrors he witnessed during the Civil War, but was able to maintain his optimistic views of the world and human nature.

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INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman is considered by many to be America's most "influential and innovative poet,"¹ and his work sought to be just as unique as the country itself. *Leaves of Grass* was rather unpopular during the poet's lifetime because of its unconventional (and somewhat controversial) style and themes. Whitman abandoned poetic convention of the time and sounded in free-verse, mimicking in part the long cadences found in Biblical poetry.² His conversational and informal tone was off-putting, and similarly his content seemed to be too personal and erotic at the time. Many of Whitman's poems confidently sing of the intimate connection between one's physical being and spirit, and in turn the innate intimate connection human beings share with each other. These powerful themes are especially prevalent in "Song of Myself." This immense poem was written in 1855 and encapsulates Whitman's core beliefs at the time. In a strong and assured tone, "Song of Myself" expresses the existence of "a knit of identity," which transcends time, continent, and class.³ (p193) People are connected, the poem asserts, because we are all made from the same stuff and we are all going to the same place. Whitman speaks for the common man, representing multitudes and capturing the "divine average,"⁴ thus demonstrating the significance of and connection between even extremes. "Song of Myself" serves as a celebration of the body, as well as the soul and mind. The poem articulates Whitman's belief that "the soul existed only in the body, that the arms and legs were extensions of the soul, the legs moving the soul through the world and the hands allowing the soul to express itself."⁵ Interwoven amid these other prominent themes, the poet emphasizes the idea of immortality. He cheerfully revels in the certainty of the infinity of life, achieved through our human kinship and resilient spirits. "Song of Myself" appears in *Leaves of Grass*, a volume whose name is representative of both interconnection and immortality: individual human beings are connected the

¹ Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, "About Walt Whitman," Modern American Poetry, last modified 1998, http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/whitman/bio.htm.

² Lynne McMahon and Averill Curdy, *The Longman Anthology of Poetry* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006).

³ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: First and "Death-Bed" Editions* (New York, NY: Fine Creative Media, 2004). Subsequent citations taken from this edition.

⁴ Martin G. Murray, "Traveling with the Wounded: Walt Whitman and Washington's Civil War Hospitals," *Washington History: Magazine of the Historical Society of Washington*, 1996.

⁵ Folsom and Price, "About Walt," Modern American Poetry.

same way that blades of grass share an immense root system, and the grass itself — “the beautiful uncut hair of graves” — is proof of the life that follows death. (p196)

This poem was written when Whitman was thirty-seven years old, and a few years after its original publication the Civil War broke out in the nation he loved so dearly. Whitman had built *Leaves* upon “faith in union, wholeness, the ability of a self and a nation to contain contradictions and absorb diversity. . . a belief in the power of affection to overcome division and competition.”⁶ Now, the United States was coming apart and young men were killing each other. Though Whitman did not serve in the conflict, he sought to guide the country back towards its ideals⁷ through his writing and by bringing solace and comfort to the soldiers wounded by the conflict. The poet visited soldiers in war hospitals in Washington D.C. for three years during the Civil War. He provided the damaged men with the compassion they were so starved for. This was not without cost to Whitman, however. He witnessed terrible carnage and was constantly surrounded by death and dismemberment— the Union Army alone lost 300,000 soldiers.⁸ Indeed, during Whitman’s first hospital visit, he saw a heap of amputated limbs and dead bodies; this undoubtedly haunted him, a poet who viewed the body as a sacred extension of the soul, who believed the two to be vitally inseparable.⁹

Witnessing such human desolation evidently impacted Walt Whitman’s work. He produced a series of poems titled “Drum Taps” in 1865. These war poems contrast hugely with the idealistic “Song of Myself,” written ten years previously: he projects himself “as a mature poet, directly touched by human suffering, in clear distinction to the ecstatic, naive, electric voice which marked the original edition of *Leaves of Grass*.”¹⁰ In spite of the horrors he witnessed, however, Whitman presents some of the same hopeful themes from “Song of Myself” in select poems from “Drum Taps.” This essay examines the

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ “American Experience: Walt Whitman,” PBS, last modified 2009, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/whitman/more/e_war.html.

⁸ Murray, “Traveling with.”

⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁰ Huck Gutman, “Drum Taps (1865),” in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Cummings (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), [Page #], previously published in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, http://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_83.html.

extent to which Whitman's primary themes —interconnectedness, the psychosomatic nature of man, and immortality— from "Song of Myself" are consistent with the themes presented in poems from "Drum Taps." In addition, this essay examines the consistencies and disparities in literary devices utilized by Whitman to communicate these themes. These similarities and differences will be illuminated by deeply exploring both the content and craft of "Song of Myself" and three of Whitman's shorter Civil War poems: "Come Up From the Fields Father," "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prepared, And the Road Unknown," and "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night."

INTERCONNECTEDNESS

One of the strongest ideas asserted in "Song of Myself" is that of an innate, universal kinship shared by all human beings. Whitman communicates this through his own being's fluidity and ability to transcend all barriers to connect with all different kinds of people. He makes it clear that he does not simply empathize with people: he is *formed* of all human life, and in turn forms all human life: "And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,/And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,/And of these one and all I weave the song of myself." (p206) Whitman's use of diction in these lines, employing phrases such as "tend inward" and "infold" suggest such a deep kinship between himself and the characters he refers to that without it they are left almost without substance, as "nothing." This means that deep human connection is vital to one's existence because a person is the embodiment of all of the people they have met. This does not mean that human beings are all the same; Whitman celebrates the diversity of life. He argues that rather than our strong connectedness melding us into one collective and consistent being, all people are individual parts of one whole, unable to function to maximum potential apart from each other.

This sense of interconnectedness is reinforced as the poet establishes a universality through himself: "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul." (p210) He is representative of *the* Body and Soul, implying the collective physical and spiritual of human beings. Statements such as this further emphasize the strong and confident tone of the poem. As the poem continues, he intimately travels

through the communities of the world, declaring “My palms cover continents.”(p223) One of Whitman’s most primary literary devices in “Song of Myself” is the use of long lists and lofty sentences. These serve to demonstrate the speaker’s vastness as he attempts to account for as much diversity of human life as possible. The lofty sentences also serve to enhance the powerful tone of the poem, as well as mirroring the fluidity with which the speaker himself seems to pass among all people. For example: “The bugle calls in the ball-room, the gentlemen run for their partners, the dancers bow to each other,/The youth lies awake in the cedar-roof’d garret and harks to the musical rain.” The lists also utilize imagery to further distinguish between scenes and dramatize diversity. The fluidity in structure and sound present in these long lists act to accentuate the closeness of human beings’ ties to each other, even as the speaker transitions from speaking of an immigrant in a field to a gentleman at a ball. Thus, through human connection, a certain equality is generated and irrefutable. An immigrant is as essential to the root system of the human race as a gentleman.

In “Song of Myself,” Whitman wishes to be as near to everything as possible, “Absorbing all to myself and for this song.” (p202) He welcomes closeness, and wills himself to give everything he is to the world. He immerses himself so much in the immense diversity of humankind — “I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,/Regardless of others, ever regardful of others” (p206) — it is at the point of contradiction: “Do I contradict myself?/Very well then I contradict myself,/(I am large, I contain multitudes.)” (p250) He is unmindful of the possibility of giving too much of himself, or not receiving as much in return. The way to fully live to one’s potential, he argues, is by absorbing so much of the world and human goodness that it even seeming contradictions begin to make sense.

Whitman’s Civil War poem “Come Up from the Fields Father” contrasts hugely with “Song of Myself,” especially in the manner in which it is written. This poem describes the scene of a family who has received a letter of the death of their son, who was a soldier in the war. The scene primarily follows the mother, who is affected the most by the news. “Come Up from the Fields Father” exhibits the theme of interconnectedness so prevalent in “Song of Myself,” though the presentation of the theme is extremely different. Whitman, rather than demonstrating his own immensity and including lengthy lists with

extravagant phrases, narrows his range in representation and speaks often in much shorter sentences. In addition, Whitman distances himself from the characters he describes in this selection from “Drum Taps” by speaking primarily in third person and inserting parenthetical asides to create a more passive tone. This is extremely different from “Song of Myself,” where the poet sounds in first person and utilized parenthetical asides primarily to further insert himself in the stories of other characters and add to the confident tone of the poem. The parenthetical asides utilized in “Come Up from the Fields Father,” however, further pull the speaker away from the actions of the poem by bringing attention to details about the family rather than himself: “Alas poor boy, he will never be better, (nor may-be needs to be better, that brave and simple soul).” (p452) In this poem, Whitman still communicates the connection between human beings through transcendence, by becoming the mother of the boy rather than simply empathizing with her, voicing her deepest thoughts: “O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life escape and withdraw,/To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son.” (p453) This poet, who fearlessly loves all and absorbs them to himself in “Song of Myself,” takes himself out of this poem almost completely, almost as if it is too painful to love the mother and her lost son completely. The way that Whitman distances himself from others in this poem through such a passive tone is rather alarming, because it suggests that the previously incontestable necessity of human connection can perhaps be disrupted by some painful events. Nevertheless, perhaps the empathy expressed in Whitman’s Civil War poem is more realistically attainable than the mystical absorption of diversity presented in his earlier work. Thus, “Come Up from the Fields Father” perhaps carries more weight and meaning in this way because of its more grounded application.

BODY AND SOUL CONNECTION

The psychosomatic nature of man, the vital connection between one’s physical being and his soul, is perhaps one of Whitman’s themes which is most contrasted in “Drum Taps” compared to “Song of Myself.” In his earlier work, he establishes this inseparability between body and spirit, describing himself as “divine am I inside an out.” (p215) The diction demonstrated by the word “divine” stresses the this

close link, and the sacredness of human life. Whitman strongly believed in the fortitude of human beings, and believed that every person had immeasurable potential which that had only to “unscrew the locks from the doors!/Unscrewed the door themselves from their jambs!” (p214) Whitman asserts that a certain universal human potential, the ability to optimize the beauty that comes from and is enjoyed in one’s life, abides only in the bond between physiology and psychology: “I have said that the soul is not more than the body,/And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,/And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one’s self is.” (p248) The parallel structure in these lines adds to the confident and optimistic tone of the poem, reflecting how Whitman believes these things to be absolutely certain. He argues that individuals are made divine because they take the beautiful abstracts of God and place them in tangible bodies. In addition, our bodies are made beautiful by the souls that they encapsulate.

Whitman continues to express this theme in “Song of Myself” by relating corporeal states of being to the psychological and emotional states of being. The lines “O span of youth! ever-push’d elasticity!/O manhood, balanced, florid and full” utilize diction to represent the distinct parallels between the bodily and mental positions of a person. (p243) In addition, Whitman uses the example of traveling as both a physical and intellectual pursuit: “I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!)/My signs are a rain-proof coat, good shoes, and a staff cut from the woods.” (p244) The parenthetical aside, which addresses the reader, again acts to pull the reader in, inviting them to learn of their aforementioned potential and follow the speaker’s example. These lines suggest that actual travel is necessary in the pursuit of knowledge and truth, that mental expansion is possible through expanding the capacity to travel with one’s body. (An unsurprising suggestion, as Whitman has always advocated learning from one’s world rather than a classroom.) The speaker pronounces how innate and paramount the relationship between body and soul are in metaphor and other figurative language: “Mine is no callous shell,/I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,/They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me./I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy,/ To touch my person to some one else’s is about as much as I can stand.” (p219) What happens to the body has a profound effect on the spirit because the physical self “is no callous shell.” Whitman voices that the ability to connect somatic

sensations to deep emotions is vital to happiness. As human beings, it is impossible to simply exist in some conceptual state of being; we rely on our physical bodies to transport, express, and maintain our existences.

In the context of the Civil War, however, where destruction surrounded Whitman and his work, this metaphysical theme is no longer hopeful at all— it is rather the opposite. If a person's body is an extension of his soul, what consequences apply to the souls of those soldiers who have been literally torn apart by the conflict? In the selection "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, And the Road Unknown" from "Drum Taps," the speaker describes a disheveled hospital and the terrible forms of wounded soldiers. Whitman does not use metaphor as he does in "Song of Myself," and instead exercises intense imagery, letting the literal situation speak for itself, creating its own dismal and horrified tone: "Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles and lamps,/And by one great pitchy torch stationary with wild red flame and clouds of smoke." The desolate tone continues through the entire poem, starkly contrasting with Whitman's idealistic assertions about human potential in his older work — "It is not chaos or death — it is form, union, plan — it is eternal life — it is Happiness" — the dark imagery effectively describing chaos and death, destroyed potential. (p250) Whitman, a poet whose long prose in "Song of Myself" made it seem as though his words could flow without end, recognizes his own inadequacy to describe the horrors he witnesses in this poem, stating "I see a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made." (p254) This suggests to the reader that Whitman has lost some of the hope he expresses in "Song of Myself," if such atrocities cannot be rationalized by even a man who attempted to rationalize human nature and even some mysteries of the universe. Thus, even Whitman is humbled and left in a state of deeply distraught pondering of how such horrors could possibly exist alongside the breathtaking wonders of the world.

"A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest" certainly does articulate the connection between the body and soul, though the fortitude of this link is no longer expressed as it was in "Song of Myself." Individuals are almost totally forgotten in the smoke and confused terror of the scene, and are only described as "bloody forms" and "faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in obscurity, some of them dead." (p455)

The diction used to describe the wounds of the soldiers mirrors the undoubtable spiritual torment experienced by the men. The theme which was so strongly expressed in "Song of Myself" has its place in this poem, though it results in a rather dreary interpretation. At the end of the poem, the speaker witnesses a young man die, and rather than a mention of hope for life after (another powerful and recurring one of Whitman's themes) the speaker "speeds forth to the darkness/resuming, marching." (p455) This implies that because the body and spirit are so intimately tied, the destruction of one could result in the destruction of the other. This is perhaps one of the most alarming disparities of all between Whitman's Civil War Poems and "Song of Myself," and more than anything else depicts the dismal effect of the terrible conflict on the poet; he questions some of his most fundamental beliefs, expressing uncharacteristic confusion and hopelessness.

IMMORTALITY

Beside the theme of interconnectedness, Whitman vigorously expresses the idea of immortality, or the hope for something more to follow death. In "Song of Myself," the speaker inquires, "Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?/I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it." (p197) It is lucky to die, Whitman proposes, because "I do not know what is untried and afterward,/But I know it will prove sufficient, and cannot fail." (p241) Much of the poem consists of extended lofty sentences, and these shorter and matter-of-fact statements and the precision of language in these lines punctuates the speaker's certainty about these things. Though Whitman celebrates the mystery of life and death in the universe, he is totally sure of his "rendezvous," claiming "The Lord will be there and wait till I come on perfect terms,/The great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine will be there." (p244) The speaker's confidence is a primary contributor to the overall optimistic tone of the poem. This hope of something better that follows death adds to the depth of joy that can be felt by being alive, because the joy and fulfillment of living is not limited by a lifespan.

The speaker refers to an abstract and mystical destination to follow death, but he also points to the tangible life that all humans come from and return to. Speaking of grass, he says "And now it seems to me

the beautiful uncut hair of graves. . . This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,/Darker than the colorless beards of old men,/Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.” (p196) The decomposition of a human being’s body results in this new life, “darker,” deeper than the life it came from. Whitman even points to the grass as the place to find him after his own body has passed away: “If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.” (p250) Because the poet has asserted his authority as a representative of the human race, Whitman’s confidence in his own immortality can be reflected onto everyone that has and will live.

Another key aspect of this theme in “Song of Myself” is that Whitman suggests that eternity exists in the present: “There was never any more inception than there is now,/Nor any more youth or age than there is now,/And will never be any more perfection than there is now,/Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.” (p192) The parallel structure in these lines accentuates the message of a consistent infinity. Through this, the speaker articulates that this immortality is, has been, and will continue to be forever existent and available to all people and mortality proves the something more: “Lacks one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,/Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.” (p193) Such faith can be placed in the “unseen” because, much like man’s psychosomatic nature, tangible things in the world are dependent on and demonstrate the abstract constantly.

This hope for something that follows death is expressed in many of the selections from “Drum Taps,” including the poem “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night,” though in a much less confident tone. This poem tells the story of the speaker who holds a vigil for a close comrade who fell in battle beside him. In contrast with the vivid imagery utilized in “Song of Myself,” this poem provides the reader with a much more vague description of the events taking place. *Insert example.* Whitman presents, in a way, the illusion that he has some control over death —the place he ends up and the spirit he departs with— claiming, “As to you Death, and you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me.” (p249) However the vague descriptions and solemn tone of “Vigil Strange” suggest that death did prove rather alarming, and it is too painful to delve deeper into details. However, even while mourning the loss of his comrade, the speaker finds some hope in imagining an eventual reunion: “Vigil final for you brave boy, (I

could not save you, swift was your death,/I faithfully loved you and cared for you living. I think we shall surely meet again.)” (p454) Thus, the total optimism for true immortality that is so prominent in “Song of Myself” is only a small light in this dim poem from “Drum Taps.” However, Whitman demonstrates the resiliency of the human spirit by holding onto this incredibly optimistic in the face of such horror and destruction, thus perhaps proving the certainty of such immortality.

CONCLUSION

In the end, Walt Whitman remains Walt Whitman. Although there are several disparities between “Song of Myself” and his Civil War poems, especially in presentation, the poet’s idealist themes prevail. Walt Whitman is considered by many to be “America’s world poet,”¹¹ and he is indeed untamable: his “barbaric yawp” would not be contained by classrooms, convention, or the tragedies of the Civil War. His voice transcends place and era, sounding “over the roofs of the world.” (p251) His ability to maintain his core beliefs in light (or dark, rather) of the horrors he witnessed during the Civil War demonstrates that it is possible to remain hopeful and un-jaded even through indescribably difficult circumstances. Whitman is his own proof for the validity of his resilient themes —anyone who reads his poetry does not find it difficult to feel a strong connection with the one hundred-twenty year old poet, and his lasting words demonstrate his literary immortality (at the very least). Mystery still abounds in his work, but I find comfort in the last lines of his great song: “Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,/Missing me one place search another,/I stop somewhere waiting for you.” (p250)

¹¹ "Walt Whitman," Poetry Foundation, last modified 2016, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/walt-whitman>.

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Appendix I

“Come Up from the Fields Father”

Come up from the fields father, here's a letter from our Pete,
And come to the front door mother, here's a letter from thy dear son.

Lo, 'tis autumn,
Lo, where the trees, deeper green, yellower and redder,
Cool and sweeten Ohio's villages with leaves fluttering in the moderate wind,
Where apples ripe in the orchards hang and grapes on the trellis'd vines,
(Smell you the smell of the grapes on the vines?
Smell you the buckwheat where the bees were lately buzzing?)

Above all, lo, the sky so calm, so transparent after the rain, and with wondrous clouds,
Below too, all calm, all vital and beautiful, and the farm prospers well.

Down in the fields all prospers well,
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.

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

“A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown”

A march in the ranks hard-prest, and the road unknown,
A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the darkness,
Our army foil'd with loss severe, and the sullen remnant retreating,
Till after midnight glimmer upon us the lights of a dim-lighted building,
We come to an open space in the woods, and halt by the dim-lighted building,
'Tis a large old church at the crossing roads, now an impromptu hospital
Entering but for a minute I see a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made,
Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles and lamps,
And by one great pitchy torch stationary with wild red flame and clouds of smoke,
By these, crowds, groups of forms vaguely I see on the floor, some in the pews laid down,
At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death, (he is shot in the
abdomen,)
I stanch the blood temporarily, (the youngster's face is white as a lily,)
Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o'er the scene fain to absorb it all,
Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in obscurity, some of them dead,
Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood,
The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms, the yard outside also fill'd,
Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating,
An occasional scream or cry, the doctor's shouted orders or calls,
The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the glint of the torches,
These I resume as I chant, I see again the forms, I smell the odor,
Then hear outside the orders given, Fall in, my men, fall in;
But first I bend to the dying lad, his eyes open, a half-smile gives he me,
Then the eyes close, calmly close, and I speed forth to the darkness,
Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching, on in the ranks,

The unknown road still marching.

“A Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night”

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 battle-field spreading,
Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet there in the fragrant silent night,
But not a tear fell, not even a long-drawn sigh, long, long I gazed,
Then on the earth partially reclining sat by your side leaning my chin in my hands,
Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours with you dearest comrade—not a tear, not a word,
Vigil of silence, love and death, vigil for you my son and my soldier,
As onward silently stars aloft, eastward new ones upward stole,
Vigil final for you brave boy, (I could not save you, swift was your death,
I faithfully loved you and cared for you living, I think we shall surely meet again,)
Till at latest lingering of the night, indeed just as the dawn appear'd,
My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop'd well his form,
Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over head and carefully under feet,
And there and then and bathed by the rising sun, my son in his grave, in his rude-dug grave I deposited,
Ending my vigil strange with that, vigil of night and battle-field dim,
Vigil for boy of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding,)
Vigil for comrade swiftly slain, vigil I never forget, how as day brighten'd,

I rose from the chill ground and folded my soldier well in his blanket,
And buried him where he fell.