

Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps*: Shifting Attitude towards the Civil War

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Abstract

Walt Whitman was completely disgusted by the social and political condition of Pre Civil War America, and his *Drum Taps* provides an alternative vision of an America ruled by a wave of comradely relationship. However, the poems in *Drum Taps* provide a shifting attitude towards the Civil War, which is undoubtedly influenced by Whitman's own war experience. Whereas the initial section welcomes the terrible war, the middle section turns to depict the violence of the war, and the last section focuses on the reconciliation to the cost of the war and the comradeship among the soldiers; this shifting attitude towards the war is the direct outcome of Whitman's experience in the war hospitals. He believes that the soldiers, transformed by the war experience, will help to build a more egalitarian and democratic society, which he has long been dreaming for.

[Key Words: Civil War, Comradeship, Chauvinism, Democratic idea]

1. Introduction

Drum-Taps, the masterpiece of Walt Whitman, was written on the event of the American Civil War and it focuses on the shifting attitude of the narrator to the war. Whitman saw the Civil War primarily as a war to preserve the Union. He hoped that the Northerners would discover true, or pure, democracy in the very process of defending it. In *Drum-Taps*, we find a dual perspective where Whitman assumes the voice of the soldier and also reconcile that experience through the voice of a compassionate observer. "*Drum-Taps* offers an alternative vision of America, one ruled not by the 'cash nexus' coming to dominate northern society, but by a network of intimate, comradely relationships" (Thomas, 1987, p. 187).

Whitman began to see the Civil War simultaneously as both personal and national history, the memory of which had to be preserved (Szczesniul, 1993, p. 132). On the personal level, the war presented the Whitman's concept of comradeship and love which he experienced in the war hospitals. "On the national level, the war proved to be the testing ground of the American democratic ideal. As a result, Whitman saw in the war the potential for what could be a private, personal poetry with national significance" (p. 132). Whitman was totally against the anti-bellum American society. He dreamt of a truly democratic society and believed that the war would bring an ideal society. "The war, to him, proved humanity, and proved America and the modern" (Thomas, 1987, p. 194). Not only the poet, but people from different spheres of life were against the government, political upheaval and secession, and they believed that the only way to get rid of this situation was to have a war.

The narrative ordering of the poems in the *Drum Taps* cluster suggests Whitman's shifting ambitions, and captures his own development during the war years. The aim of the paper is to prove that the poems in *Drum Taps* do not really stick to any single attitude towards the war; they, rather, convey a shifting war view which actually reflects the changing mindset of Whitman himself towards the war. Working in the war hospitals, staying with the soldiers, and observing the horror of the war, Whitman realizes his ever changing attitude towards the war which he reveals in his poems. His poems shift from portraying the jingoistic attitude towards the war to depicting the horror and brutalities of war; some of his poems describe the reconciliation of the narrator to the cost of the war, and also focuses on the positive aspects of the war such as brotherly love among the soldiers. He believed that the soldiers, transfigured by their experience, would return to inspire the nation's growth toward a truly egalitarian, fraternal and democratic society. The weight Whitman places on the *Drum-Taps* and his hospital life signifies how crucial and significant he considers the war to be in his development as a great poet. His service in the war hospitals earns him the title "wound dresser" and "good gray poet". Besides these, his war poems earn him positive remarks because of his almost photographic accuracy of observation, a masculine directness of expression and real tenderness of feelings. With the collection of war poems, Whitman hoped that his own record of the war would reunite the country.

2. Different Sections in *Drum-Taps*

When the Civil War began in 1861, Whitman, like many of his fellow citizens, welcomed it as a violent but necessary agent to heal the disintegration of the nation. Initially, the poet remained in Manhattan and Long Island, and confirmed his support for the Union; however, this general confidence began to be shattered after the Battle of First Bull Run, which forced the Union troops to retreat to Washington. As Whitman expressed, the outcome of this battle provoked one of “those crises... when human eyes appeared at least just as likely to see the last breath of the Union as to see it continue” (Kaplan, 1996, p. 735). However, in spite of this pessimism, Whitman kept his trust in the Union, which is reflected in the initial poems of *Drum-Taps* in which he asserts that Northerners should to join the army and defend the nation.

The poems of the *Drum-Taps* may be broken down into three sections which correspond to the speaker's shifting attitudes toward the war. The first section, which comprised of eleven poems, serves two main purposes; it describes the jingoistic idealism of the speaker in the early days of the war, and defines the goal of the poet-figure. The second section contains seven poems which deal with the realities of war; these poems shock the narrator and fill him with reservations and doubt. Finally, in the fourteen poems of the third section, the narrator reconciles himself with the war through his rejuvenated sense of comradeship, and interprets it on both a personal and national level. All of the poems of the third section focus on the power of comradesly love and show the recuperated confidence of the poet-figure in his mission. Let's analyze the three sections in detail.

2.1 Chauvinistic Attitude and Welcoming the War

The early poems in *Drum Tapes* are very many patriotic and inspiring in tone. Like most other northerners, Whitman also believed that the war would not be a long lasting one and he was very much enthusiastic about the war. These poems reflect the urban excitement and welcoming of the war, and invite the spirit of war to move everyone to defend the unity of the nation. Although these poems want to justify the cause of war and the participation of the northerners, they also include traces of doubt, fear and anxiety. He places poems like “First O Songs for a Prelude”, “Beat! Beat! Drums!”, “Eighteen Sixty-One”, and “Song of the Banner at Daybreak” which welcomes and mystifies the war. “First O Songs for a Prelude” welcomes a massing force to meet and defeat the

South. It is also an assertion of the popular democratic will after more than a decade of corrupt and unrepresentative government, and a proof of democracy unparalleled in all the history of the world. The speaker describes how soft opera music has been replaced by the sound of drums and how the music of drums has brought a change in the city where he has been living for long years.

“How you sprang—how you threw off the costumes of peace with an indifferent hand,
How your soft opera-music changed, and the drum and fife were heard in their stead,
How you led to the war, (that shall serve for our prelude, songs of soldiers,)
How Manhattan drum-taps led.” (“First O Songs for a Prelude”)

He welcomes the war, no matter how long it continues, and shows how people from different classes and spheres of life move to the war. All are busy with war preparation and even the ladies are ready to work as a nurse. The total situation gets a festive touch.

“The unspent enthusiasm, the wild cheers of the crowd for
Their favorites,
The artillery, the silent cannons bright as gold, drawn along,
Rumble lightly over the stones,”

The poet celebrates the gathering of a professional force as well as the completely voluntary gathering of the true citizen army. The soldiers were not fighting for money or for the interest of others. They were fighting for true democratic equality and freedom (Thomas, 1987, p. 195).

The old men are showing the young, new recruits how to wear the dresses. Armed soldiers arrive every day and pass the city and though they are covered with dust they look absolutely fantastic and solid. The speaker goes on to describe the tearful parting of the mother and son, and, most importantly, although she kisses her son, she does not utter a single word to detain him from going to the war. In the very last line the speaker says that the city is now exultant and it is smiling with ecstasy.

“But now you smile with joy exulting old Mannahatta.”

The poem “Beat! Beat! Drums!” Welcomes the war and urges it to disturb everybody so

that the people cannot do their work. The speaker thinks the war is more important than any other things and people should pay attention to that. He is so enthusiastic that he urges the war, even to shake the dead.

“No bargainers’ bargains by day-no brokers or speculators-would they continue?

Would the talkers be talking? Would the singer attempt to sing?

Would the lawyer rise in the court to state his case before the judge?”

But in the second and the third stanza where the sound of drums is requested to disturb the “bargainers’ bargains by day”, overwhelm the “business of brokers and speculators”, do not consider the old and the young, and shake even the dead, there prevails an undercurrent of doubt and uncertainty regarding the cause and success of the war.

The second function of the first section is to determine the role of the poet. The poems "From Paumanok Starting I Fly like a Bird," "Rise, O Days, from your Fathomless Deeps" and "The Centenarian's Story" expand this notion of the war time poet. From here the poet confidently takes the role of a national poet and he becomes more confident when he asserts in the poem "Rise, O Days, from your Fathomless Deeps," that he is well prepared to sing the song of war. To the poet, the war seemed like a purifying fire that would burn away the city’s problem. In “Rise O Days from your fathomless Deeps” he begged the war to crash louder and louder to three American cities of their prewar evils (Reynolds, 1995, p. 419).

The first section closes with four poems which can be considered as transition between the previous idealistic poems and the later realistic ones. These poems imply the recruitment in the battlefields and the tension of coming war. In these poems, no destruction and sufferings of the people are found; rather only light description of war is shown there. The new grouping of the four poems increases their picturesque qualities; they are snapshots of everyday war scenes and are a sort of verbal expressionistic. In this section, the focus shifts gradually from group to individual by moving from the armies described in the Poems “Cavalry Crossing a Ford”, “An Army Corps on the March”, “Bivouac on a Mountain Side” and “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame” to specific soldiers and their relatives. These poems give us an idea of the soldiers and their lives, and they are not depicted as either Unionists or Confederates but as common soldiers. The first two poems

are of motion, daylight and sunlight and the last to take place at night and in a camp beside the camp fire. The last two poems depict the terror of the night as the night takes on the characteristics which are associated with the suffering, horror and terror of the war.

“The numerous campfires scattered near and far, some away
Up on the mountain,
The shadowy forms of men and horses, looming, large-
Sized, flickering,” (“Bivouac on a Mountain Side”)

2.2 Realities and Brutalities of the War

The second section of *Drum-Taps* comprises of seven poems, and it states the narrator understands of the brutal and harsh reality of the war. His confidence, chauvinism, self-assuredness are shaken terribly in this section. The poems are mainly concerned with the carnage of the war, and describe the terrible brutality of the war in every concrete term. The poems “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown” explicitly describes the experience of a soldier when he, after having a crushing defeat, retreats, enters into a hospital, and watches terrible suffering of the fellow soldiers. He says that after entering the hospital, he sees a scene which has not been portrayed by any picture or movie. He describes the wretched condition of the war hospitals and the hellish life the wounded soldiers have to live there. Here, the speaker has clearly turned away from his earlier jingoistic attitude and tries to focus on the terrible aspects of the war.

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,
.....
Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood,
.....
Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating,
 (“A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown”)

This poem focuses on the terrible sufferings of the soldiers and shows that the medical facilities for the soldiers are not up to the level. In this poem, the speaker soldier is helpless; he

cannot stop war, nor can he save a soldier from bleeding to death. But before he gets the order from his commander to leave, he sits by the dying soldier and gives him company. The war is relentless and no one can stop it. It will continue to move in its own way, no matter how many soldiers die or how much the people suffer.

“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.”

In the poem “Year that Trembled and Reel’d Beneath Me” the speaker is doubtful whether he will continue his earlier jingoistic, patriotic and idealistic manner or not. He is no longer the same speaker; he was at the beginning of the war and the *Drum-Taps*. The continuation of the war has caused doubt in him.

“A thick gloom fell through the sunshine and darkened me,
Must I change my triumphant songs? Said I to myself,
Must I indeed learn to chant the cold dirges of the baffled?
And sullen hymns of defeat?”

The speaker says that he is full of gloom and that he must change his triumphant song into a song of bafflement and defeat. This is the speaker’s emotional low point in the cluster, but he has already provided with a touch of resolution in the previous poem, “As Toilsome I Wandered Virginia’s Woods”. He describes how he sees the inscription written on the tomb of an unknown soldier, which he cherishes for a long time. His particular attitude to see all men as his comrades, even the enemies, saves him from his current sadness. His fellow-feelings help him a lot to reconcile with the enormous and terrible cost of war. Later poems in the *Drum-Taps* mainly focus on the power of love and comradeship. Besides this, the positive outcomes of these brotherly love and comradeship for the nation are also hinted.

2.3 Reconciliation to the Cost of War, Comradeship, and Democratic Idea

The most important part of *Drum-Taps* deals with direct experience of suffering and death in war with high spirituality. Before arriving in Washington Whitman had been in New York and had no

direct experience of war and the battlefield. Though he knew about the war, it did not have any effect or influence on him. Thus, his stay in Washington helped him come in direct contact with the war where he saw the violence and the destruction of the war, and sufferings of soldiers. This particular section of *Drum-Taps* is significant because here, Whitman shows not only the sufferings, but also the love and comradeship the soldiers feel for each other. “Generosity, tact, propriety, affection, and, always, toughness in the face of extreme suffering and impending death: these were the qualities he saw among the wounded” (Reynolds, 1995, p. 426). He believes that when the war finishes, these soldiers will build a new democratic society based on their war experience; this constitutes for Whitman his vision of a perfect democratic society.

In this section of *Drum-Taps*, Whitman puts the reader through the human cost of the conflict and shows the instances of suffering, death, frustration and mourning. He becomes a mediator and pacifier, and his poems give identity to all the unknown soldiers who fought the battle. He reconciles himself with the cause of the war as he finds a new and concrete cause being fought for. “He realizes that abstract democracy is a hollow cause of the war; on the other hand, democracy expressed through brotherly love is significant at any cost. In this final group of poems, the narrator does not extol democracy itself, but man’s love for the fellow man” (Szczesniul, 1993, p. 136).

The poem “Vigil Strange, I kept on the Field One Night” is one of the finest examples of love and comradeship among the soldiers in the battlefield. This is the story of two soldiers and one of them, the younger one, dies. The old soldier passes the whole night with the body of the dead soldier and buries him in the chill ground; his love towards the dead soldier is so intense that he even calls him son. Whitman wants to say that war is not all about destruction. He thinks that the soldiers, in spite of their suffering, wound, and destruction, learn how to feel and show brotherly love to one another. This fellow feeling is crucial and significant in establishing a fully democratic society. The emotion the soldier shows for his dead comrade is amazing.

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

.....
Vigil final for you brave boy, (I could not save you, and swift was your death,
I faithfully loved you and cared for you living; I think we shall surely meet again,)

This poem tells us that in the midst of war, violence, and sufferings these soldiers do not forget their human qualities rather they feel and love one another very much.

“The wound Dresser”, which is about the suffering of the fellow soldiers in war hospitals and the love and compassion the narrator feels for them, is believed to be the finest poem in *Drum-taps*. The poem is autobiographical in the sense that like the narrator in the poem, the poet is also served in the war hospitals where he talks with the wounded soldiers, gives them company and, most importantly, tries his best to work as a pacifier of mental and emotional wounds of the soldiers. The poem describes the sufferings of the soldiers in the Civil War hospitals, and the narrator’s suffering, faithfulness to duty, and developing compassion as he nurses the soldiers’ physical wounds and gives them comfort. Being asked by the children, the narrator, instead of telling the story of brave battle, describes the suffering of the soldiers and the brotherly feelings among them.

The poem is divided into four sections. In the second section, the narrator gives us a terrible picture of the hospitals and the hellish sufferings of the soldiers: row after row of cots, some soldiers without cots lying on the ground bleeding into the dirt, row after row of amputations, gangrene, fevers, crazed minds, bloody rags, open wounds and so on.

Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass the ground,
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof’d hospital,
To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return,
To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss,
An attendant follows holding a tray; he carries a refuse pail,
Soon to be fill’d with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill’d again.

In the midst of all these, he is busy with the soldiers where he sees a boy, and seeing his pain he wants to die instead of him. This feeling of the fellow soldiers helps him come to terms with the violence of war. His love is as deep as that of the soldiers' love for the country as he wants to die in a boy's stead.

“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.”

The third section describes faithfulness, and expands to the poet's experience of compassion as he witnesses the suffering, and suffers himself to see the sufferings as he cannot do anything to relieve them. Apparently, he keeps calm, but inside he is torn with pain to see the brutalities of war. The image of a dying soldier's arm around the neck and kissing show how faithfully the narrator serves his duty as a nurse. “The Wound Dresser” occupies a central position in *Drum-Taps* because here Whitman shifts from his jingoistic attitude to war to the suffering caused by the war, from the glories of war to the mental and emotional realities of war and its cost of human being. Besides this, he, through the speaker, reveals his love, compassion and brotherly feelings for the wounded.

This particular poem is really crucial in the sense that it is directly related to Whitman's personal war experience in the hospital during the war. The way he serves the wounded soldiers, the love and emotion he shows towards them is reflected in the poem through the speaker. He believes that the soldiers are learning a lot of things from the war, especially brotherly love and comradeship, and when the war finishes, these soldiers will go back to their normal lives and will practice these qualities in order to reorganize and reshape the country. By the touch of those soldiers a new America will be created which Whitman has long cherished. The poet wants to bind the people from both North and South through compassion and love, though he has a sense of personal sufferings. It is the recognition of shared loss and pain which will eventually be used to rebuild the nation. The poem's ending with dying soldier's loving arms and kissing implies the power of union.

“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 crossed and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips."

The poem "Dirge for Two Veterans" is a fine example of Whitman's acceptance of the cost of the war where the changing traits of drums reflect the speaker's changing attitude towards the war (Szczesniul, 1993, p. 137). In poem like "Beat! Beat! Drums" and "City of Ship" the drums were associated with invitation to arms that hinted the start of the war, but in this poem sound of drums is associated with the death of two soldiers which no more depicts the passion and exuberance of the war but the brutality. As the funeral procession passes, the speaker tries to find comfort in the scene.

"The moon gives you light,
And the bugles and the drums give you music,
And my heart, O my soldiers, my veterans,
My heart gives you love." ("Dirge for Two Veterans")

The way drums were associated with the longing for war in the first section of *the Drum-taps*, in the same way the night was related to terror and horror of the war in the second section but in "Dirge for Two Veterans" the meaning changes totally. Here the moon gives the dead soldiers light and the drums and the bugles serve as a source of music, and it is the speaker's love for his comrades that bestows the scene with a sense of serenity.

In the poem "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice", the speaker professes that men from the North and the South shall be comrade and this idea gets its fullest expression in the poem "Reconciliation" as he kisses a dead Confederate soldier. To him, the enemy soldier is as divine as he is:

"For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,
I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw near,
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin" ("Reconciliation")

This reconciliation can be interpreted on both personal and national levels. On the personal level, the kiss implies the final act of the poet during the war; he is now fully prepared to interpret the war. “On the national level, the reconciliation is the end of the war, and the hope for the unity between the North and the South in the future” (p. 138).

The poet, in the remaining poems, goes on to interpret the war for the benefit of future generation because he believes that the war has taught people, especially, the soldiers some important lessons which are absolutely necessary to rebuild the nation. For example, in “Spirit Whose Work Is Done,” he addresses the spirit of war as if it was his source of inspiration, and asks that he may be its mouthpiece to the future. In “How Solemn as One by One”, he talks of a kindred spirit which exists between all men and which cannot be killed either by bullet or by the bayonet, and he also goes on to say that the war has strengthened the spirit. In the last poem of the cluster “To the Leavened Soil They Trod”, the speaker again sings of the union between the North and the South; he says that his songs, composed during the war, will travel a huge distance and will be nurtured by the “Northern ice and rain” and ripened by the “hot sun of the South”.

3. Conclusion

The poems in *Drum-Taps* represent an important development in Whitman’s consciousness. Different sections of the book vividly show his shifting attitude to the war. Whereas the earlier poems welcome the terrible war, the middle poems turn to depict the violence of the war, and the last section focuses on the reconciliation to the cost of the war and the comradeship among the soldiers which is believed to be used for rebuilding the nation. The poems in different sections of *Drum-Taps* interpret the war in different ways and put light on the historical perspective of the war. This book also helps Whitman receive positive comments from the contemporary critics, and his activities during the war have been praised highly.

As time passes and the war continue, the poet comes in touch with different incidents, gets direct war experience, his views, attitudes and ideologies regarding the civil war changes, and the focus of the book also shifts. It is really interesting how the focus can be shifted from welcoming the war too, at the end, denoting the fellow feelings and comradeship. In the last poems of the

cluster, the narrator equalizes the enemies with him. The poet's long cherished dream of rebuilding the nation also starts to see the light of hope through the war experiences of the soldiers. He was the loving comrade of both those the war had taken and who had survived to begin a new era.

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