Whitman and the War

The following collection of poems from Walt Whitman’s *Drum Taps* is intended to be an examination of the ways in which the Civil War influenced Whitman, both personally and in his writing. In *November Boughs* Whitman writes “without those three or four years [during the Civil War] and the experiences they gave, *Leaves of Grass* would not now be existing” (Asselineau 170). Although this claim may seem somewhat odd considering that the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855, six years before the war started, when one examines the way in which Whitman evolved as a person and as a poet during those years it is clear that they were indeed formative in forcing Whitman to readdress and reevaluate his understanding of the claims he made in 1855*.*

Whitman began the war in relative luxury and distance. Asselineau tells us that, although he was shaken by the news of the beginning of the war, “he continued nevertheless shamelessly to enjoy all the pleasures which a great city has to offer” (139). It was not until December of 1862 that Whitman saw the war first hand when his brother, George, was listed among the wounded from a battle in Virginia. Whitman immediately set out to find his brother and ensure his safety. It was during this trip that Whitman began to visit the army hospitals and he soon became a fixture there, sitting by the bedsides of wounded, bringing them gifts, writing them letters, and simply being there to lend an ear to their suffering. The experiences he had, both during his time in the army camp with George, and his time in the hospitals led Whitman to reexamine his understanding of the world, life, death, and America. His poetry ranged from pro-war poems intended to rally America behind a cause, to poems lamenting the loss of those who died for that cause. In the end though, we find that Whitman had deepened his understanding not only of the world around him but of himself as well.

In the following annotated collection I have attempted to collect ten poems which chronicle the way in which Whitman’s understanding adapted and evolved to fit a country ravaged by war. Although there is no way to know when Whitman wrote each poem, all but one was first published in 1865; however, I attempted to organize them in a way which I feel follows Whitman’s evolving understanding of the war. All the poems were taken from the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass* in order to examine the changes Whitman had in his poetry before he edited them later in life. Although he never abandoned any of the ideas set forth in his poetry completely, he did temper and change them as he incorporated new understandings and experiences.

The collection begins with Whitman’s pro-war poetry which depicts Whitman’s early view of the role of the poet in the war. Asselineau writes that “his true vocation was to sing and celebrate the Union and the indissoluble compact which bound the various states together” (142). In poems such as “1861” and “Long, Too Long, O Land” Whitman seeks to sing the glory of the cause of the Union, beyond any feelings of support for the North or South, abolitionists or slave-holders, Whitman sought to reunite the country.

The poems following begin to address the soldiers in a more personal way, rather than speaking of the country and the cause, Whitman talks about the actual people affected by the war. “I Saw Old General at Bay,” although dealing with an entire group of soldiers, singles out a few soldiers who go off to give their lives for the cause. Whitman still maintains a distance from these soldiers, not delving into their thoughts on the war or where they are going, he holds onto his position as omniscient observer.

From here the poems trace Whitman’s increasing empathy for the pain and suffering the war inflicted on the soldiers. Poems such as “As Toilsome I Wander’d Virginia’s Woods” and “Come up From the Fields Father” address the implications of the war on those not fighting directly in it; Whitman acknowledges that with the war comes loss, suffering, and death. It is also in these poems that we begin to see Whitman come into his role as healer. This role is made much clearer in poems such as “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim” and “The Dresser.” Whitman takes on a personal relationship with the soldiers, as he began to experience death and suffering up close he found he could not ignore the tragedy the war wrought. He did not give up on his view from poems like “1861,” but he was forced to add another layer of understanding on top of this.

In order to reconcile the differences between his pro-war poetry and his healing poetry Whitman had to develop his understanding of how the war would move the nation to a new and hopefully better place. We can see this view developing in the final three poems of this collection. “Hymn of Dead Soldiers,” “Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice,” and “Pensive on Her Dead Gazing, I Heard the Mother of All” all recognize the loss that the war inflicted on the country. All can be read as mourning pieces for the soldiers lost in battle, but they each maintain a note of hopeful optimism. All three speak of a better time, of taking the pain and using it to move the nation forward.

In tracing Whitman through his Civil War poetry I was able to understand Whitman in a way which I had previously been unable to grasp. Throughout the semester I had glossed over Whitman’s pro-war poetry. I felt that they were aggressive, arrogant, and showed a deep misunderstanding about the nature of war. Instead I focused on the poetry in which I found the tender, caring wound dresser. It was not until this project however that I began to understand the fact that these two voices of Whitman could not be separated as cleanly as I had tried to do.

Following Whitman’s poetic and personal evolution throughout the Civil War helped me to better understand the value in the pro-war poetry as part of the message Whitman was attempting to spread through his poetry. Whitman was not attempting to glorify the war as war in and of itself; he saw it as a catalyst to move the nation towards its own future. Asselineau writes “[Whitman] did not glorify all wars, or war in general, but this particular one which involved an ideal – his ideal, the cause of democracy which he had always placed above everything else” (155). Whitman’s pro-war poetry was not intended to praise fighting as good and right; rather it was intended to praise the belief that democracy and unity was a cause worth fighting for.

In understanding this, I was able to recognize his pro-war poetry as something other than simple propaganda. In understanding that, I was able to read a deeper meaning in his poetry of mourning, originally I had read this poetry as a sort of apology for his previous views. An apology to the dead, an apology to those left behind. After gaining a greater understanding of what his previous views were, however, I was able to read them as more. Although there is still a note of apology, it appears to be more of an apology that this was the only way to move the nation forward. Whitman praises the soldiers for giving their lives, and mourns the fact that they had to. Throughout all of this, however, he maintains that good will come from the war, that it will accomplish the goal he set forth in poems like “1861.”

Not only did I develop a new appreciation of *Drum-Taps*, I also was able to appreciate *Leaves of Grass* as whole even more so than before. Whitman’s expansive way of writing *Leaves of Grass* allows for an ability to grow and learn with the poet. Early on Whitman sets himself forth as the poet who will teach America, he tells us “stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,” but he maintains that he will not proselytize, rather he claims “you shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, /You shall listen to all sides and filter them for yourself” (Whitman 28). Reading *Drum-Taps* with a new understanding of Whitman’s views allowed me to see how he sought to make this claim a reality. Following Whitman’s progress throughout his evolution as a person and a poet allows the reader to experience things in a way which requires them to face the dilemmas that Whitman came across. For instance, Whitman was forced to reconcile his various understandings of the war; by placing all of his poems in *Drum-Taps* he forces the reader to address these understandings in their own life.

Although Whitman does require the reader to follow his train of thought, by supplying not only the final conclusion poems such as “Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice,” he seems to leave room for dissent. One may disagree with his conclusion, one could argue that nothing good came from the war and poems such as “Long, Too Long, O Land” are misrepresentations of the value of war. Or one could argue that those poems are truly valuable for a nation while poems such as “A Sight in Camp at Daybreak Gray and Dim” are overly sentimental. Whitman’s poetry allows the reader to follow Whitman in his personal growth, but beyond that, it allows the reader to grow as well.

*Drum-Taps* is more than just a collection of poetry, it is a chronicle of Whitman’s experiences throughout the war, it is a eulogy for the dead, it is an attempt to teach, and it is an attempt to grow. *Drum-Taps* is an attempt on Whitman’s part to apply the lessons and ideas of *Leaves and Grass* to a nation, and a poet, in chaotic times. Without the war, without *Drum-Taps*, *Leaves of Grass* would have still physically existed, but without those formative years, Whitman might never have developed and deepened his understanding, of people, loss, progress, and the nation.