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Walt Whitman's Watch Over the War Dead

The 1865 poem 'Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night' is a mourning ritual in verse for all those fallen and left behind on the battlefields of the Civil War



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By Kelly Franklin

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Looking back on the Civil War in his 1882 “Specimen Days & Collect,” Walt Whitman reflected that “the real war will never get in the books.” He had tried, in “Drum-Taps” (1865), a collection of poems forged in harrowing personal experience. Whitman had gone to the front in December 1862, when his brother George was wounded at Fredericksburg. George sustained a minor injury; others fared worse. Outside a field hospital, Whitman found a heap of amputated limbs—enough, he recorded, to fill “a one-horse cart.” His weeks with the Union army changed his life. In January 1863 he moved to Washington and began volunteering in the military hospitals. And he wrote. A notebook he carried that year contains drafts of one of his finest poems, the Civil War elegy “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night.”

At first glance, it tells a simple narrative: When a young soldier falls in battle, an older comrade returns at night to bury the body. Beneath its simplicity lay a painful problem for Americans of the North and South: how to maintain proper rituals of burial and grief during a catastrophic war. This question had high

stakes. Shared rituals are at the heart of culture, but the war seemed to make the old traditions of death impossible. How could family and friends find closure when soldiers died or disappeared far from home? Was respectful burial feasible under the pressures of battle? It was a cultural disaster in the deepest sense. Whitman's poem meets this head-on, adapting the old conventions of mourning and burial into a new ritual. Even in the disruptions of civil war, he suggests, we can still reverently put our dead into the ground.

The opening line addresses the problem: "Vigil strange I kept on the field one night." It is "strange" because everything is wrong. Wakes and burials were family affairs, usually with religious meaning; this vigil happens on the "battlefield dim," with only a fellow soldier (the poetic speaker) attending. But the narrator calls the dead man "son"; while father-son enlistments occurred, the word may simply be an endearing term for a younger man. Either way, family—literal or surrogate—keeps watch. Whitman preserves a spiritual dimension: The speaker spends "sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours" keeping watch. Reading the poem aloud, we hear rhythm and repetition: "Vigil of silence, love and death, vigil for you my son and my soldier." Whitman repeats "vigil" 12 times in just 26 lines—the poem itself becomes a funeral chant.

Whitman's speaker goes beyond improvising a battlefield ritual; he preserves solemnity and reverence. The Civil War had its share of shallow graves and mass burials, as armies dealt with decomposition and the pace of combat. Whitman's poem has no hurry. "Long there and then in vigil I stood," the speaker says, and "long, long I gazed." He prepares the body meticulously: "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." Whitman's word choice dramatizes tender reverence through the doubled adjectives "well" and "carefully," alongside the verbs "wrapt," "envelop'd" and "Folded."

For many Americans then and now, mourning included hope for resurrection or immortality. Whitman's speaker tells the dead soldier, "I think we shall surely meet again." He describes new stars rising in the night sky—evoking mythological figures who received immortality via transformation into new constellations. Even the timing of burial indicates resurrection: "And there and then and bathed by the rising sun, my son in his grave, in his rude-dug grave I deposited." Whitman links the homophones "sun" and "son": Both will rise

again. Despite Whitman's religious ambivalence, his poetry always affirmed life after death.

Whitman's poem weaves these conventions into an unconventional ritual, yet part of its brilliance lies in what it leaves out. Other "Drum-Taps" poems deploy proto-realist aesthetics, featuring the gangrene, bullet-wounds and amputations Whitman saw firsthand. Here, he selectively imagines things as they should have been, not as such scenes frequently were. He calls the night "fragrant" and "silent," improbable adjectives for a battlefield likely reeking of gunpowder and smoke, and echoing with the cries of the wounded. The poem leaves out the battle's duration; if it began more than a day or two earlier, the ground might be littered with dead men and horses in various stages of decay. None of that appears. Instead, Whitman's poem creates the idealized ritual that the dead—and the culture—really needed.

We never learn the dead soldier's name, or whether he fought for the Union or Confederacy. It is a master-stroke of elision. Without these details, the dead man represents any soldier who died in the war; his reverent burial provides imaginative solace for North and South, for all who need help mourning their dead. Perhaps Whitman's poem accomplishes something just as important as getting "the real war" into the books.

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