

**Is Liberty Gone Out of that Place:
Walt Whitman's Opposition to War**

“The battle rages with many a loud alarm and frequent advance and retreat...the enemy triumphs...the prison, the handcuffs, the iron necklace and anklet, the strong throats are choked with their own blood...the young men drop their eyelashes toward the ground when they pass each other... and is liberty gone out of that place? No never.”

*Walt Whitman
Introduction to 1855 Leaves of Grass (16)*

Throughout his poetry, prose, and letters, Whitman depicts war as a useless battle in which soldiers use their “liberty” to choose to fight and, consequently, they lose their autonomy, their identity, and their humanity through the strain of the army. Whitman believes nothing, not war, not the nation’s cause, not the officers’ commands, is worth the sacrifice of one’s own self. Walt Whitman did not adopt this antiwar stance based on his experience as a nurse in the Civil War; but rather, he was always against war. He wrote the Preface to *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, years before the first shots of the Civil War rang out. Whitman wrote the above passage to exemplify his philosophy, using it as a critical lens to reveal his ultimate opposition to war. By depicting war as a push and pull, the “frequent advance and retreat” of a battle between two sides, Whitman demonstrates the contradiction of the conflicted nature of war in this often overlooked passage. War seems to be the easy answer and thus, the soldiers and the nation “advance,” however, when the enemy retaliates with such great force, the only thing left to do is to “retreat.” Whitman portrays fighting as an obligation to “advance and retreat” once the initial weapons are fired. “[T]he prison, the handcuffs, the iron necklace and anklet” all negatively describe a war as inescapable. Once a battle commences, the soldiers, the officers, the nations are fettered by that decision. They are trapped amidst the fighting with no way out once the

“battle rages” and the “loud alarm” sounds. Even soldiers find remorse in making the choice to fight. “[T]he young men drop their eyelashes toward the ground when they pass each other” out of shame for the decision they made with that choice. The soldiers, “the young men,” are not proud of fighting. They are “choked with their own blood,” thus killed by their own decision to fight, which is ultimately their decision to die. But the “liberty” is “not gone out of that place,” the place of “frequent advance and retreat,” the place where “the enemy triumphs.” Whitman’s idea of “liberty” is the freedom to choose something for oneself, therefore, “liberty” is never really gone, but rather, it is forfeited in the beginning of any war. The soldier goes on to follow the orders of his perceived superiors and, in turn, he loses any “liberty” to make a decision for himself. His autonomy is seized from him, and he becomes a faceless and unknown soldier sacrificing his life for, what he thinks, is a greater cause. But to Whitman, war is not a greater cause than one’s own cause, his or her life. Whitman writes about his experience in the Civil War in a letter, “[...] to see what I see so much of, puts one entirely out of conceit of war – still for all that I am not sure but I go in for fighting on – the choice is hard on either part, but to *cave* in the worst” (*The Sacrificial Years* 30-31). Though Whitman seems to be advocating for war, the key word here is “choice.” War is a “choice.” Although Whitman believes that in the midst of war “to *cave*” is the “worst,” he thinks that the decision to fight in the very beginning is an even bigger mistake. The soldiers and the nation always have the “liberty” to choose whether or not to fight. It is a paradox, then, that soldiers use their autonomy to choose to fight, for in doing so, they ultimately give up this very autonomy.

Whitman's works are full of paradoxes and inconsistencies and he would be the first to admit to it. He writes in his poem, "Song of Myself," "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (1325). However, although Whitman is contradictory on many other topics, he doesn't sway in the context of war. Though Whitman respects the heroism of the soldiers, he doesn't praise their decision to fight. In his poem, "The Wound-Dresser," Whitman writes of his experience as a nurse tending to these soldiers in the Civil War hospitals. He calls the soldiers "unsurpass'd heroes" but he refuses to glorify the decision they have made with their "liberty" (8). Though he doesn't neglect to call these men "heroes," Whitman refuses to applaud their choice. Whitman describes the many injured men lying in beds from a "crush'd head" to a "wound in the side, deep, deep" (40, 50). He can't stand to see the effects of a war he deems so deadly and so useless. "These and more I dress with impassive hand," Whitman writes, "(yet deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame)" (55). He puts on the façade of impartiality, yet Whitman is angry at these soldiers. He feels "a fire, a burning flame" out of resentment for their willingness to fight and, ultimately, to sacrifice their precious lives. He sees them waste their "priceless blood" in a pool where it "reddens the grass the ground," believing nothing is worth this sacrifice (28). Though Whitman tries his best to clean up the "blood," he can never change the fated position the soldiers have put themselves in.

Many critics attest that Whitman rejected the morality of war solely based on this experience as a nurse in the Civil War. However, Whitman's anti-war ideal was evident even before the Civil War began as seen in his 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and other works written prior to the Civil War. Whitman's antagonism to war was merely

cemented by his encounters with the dead and dying soldiers in the Civil War hospitals. This sentiment is even marked in Whitman's non-war poems, demonstrating Whitman's foremost beliefs in the autonomy and equality of every human being over any war.

The first section of this essay deals with Whitman's idea of inequality and the overall negative power structures set up in such relationships as the soldier and the officer, which is similar to the unequal relationships between the President and the citizen and the master and the slave. The second section explains how Whitman establishes his notion of democracy and autonomy based on his conception of equality. He struggles between the idea of the democratic nation as a whole, and the autonomous man or woman as an individual. Though Whitman wrestles with these two polarities, he ultimately upholds the value of the individual over the whole, especially in the case of the soldier and his officer. This individuality defines each person's inherent dignity, yet no one person can survive alone. The third section of this essay covers Whitman's concept of humanity and human bonds. Whitman has faith in the natural interconnection of every human being as a means to better humankind without such impositions as the army and wars. The army uses soldiers in war not as human beings, but rather as simply bodies. The final section describes Whitman's belief in each human being's value as both physical body and spiritual soul without diminishing one or the other as seen through the image of the slave and the soldier. Whitman uses the slave and the soldier as icons to portray the destructive and inhumane nature of setting up any unequal power structures. Ultimately, this essay will attempt to prove the notion that Whitman was always against war, even before the Civil War came to a head. Whitman was consistently against any war based on its unequal, antidemocratic, unnatural, and inhumane tactics.

Equality and the Separation of Ranks: Relationships Based Upon Power

To Whitman, the armed forces are against his ideal of democracy in which all human beings are equal regardless of skin color, occupation, gender, and other such qualities. For Whitman, each person is of the same stature and any institution, such as the army, that would set up a separation in ranks or status is anti-democratic in Whitman's eyes. He writes in this way to erase the distinction between different classes of people in various conditions. Ed Folsom writes in his article, "Democracy," "As part of his democratic effort, [Whitman] tried to invent a poetry as open, as nondiscriminatory, and as absorptive as he imagined an ideal democracy would be" (171). In Whitman's poetry, true democracy is the voice of the common man, the voice of the individual, over any authoritative figure. In his poem, "Says," Whitman writes,

With one man or woman-(no matter which one-I even pick out the
lowest,
With him or her I now illustrate the whole law;
I say that every right, in politics or what-not, shall be eligible to that one
man or woman, on the same terms as any. (24-26)

Each common "man or woman" has the right to power just as much as does any man or woman in the legislature. The common man, "even [...] the lowest," has equal power. He or she has a voice in "the whole law" without exception to any one part of the "politics or what-not." All common men and women have "every right" to be heard just as much as anyone else. Everyone is "on the same terms," no matter how much money he or she has or how powerful he or she is seen in society. Democracy, to Whitman, is having an equal opportunity. Sam Hamill explains in his article, "A Monk's Tale," "[Whitman] rejects the imposition of authority from 'above,' insisting that first there

must be authority from within” (137). The common man is equal to the President, the man who is seen as “above.” There is “authority from within” when the common man has just as much authority as does the President.

Whitman sets up a utopian world in his poems in which this sense of equality is lucidly demonstrated. There is no class division, no caste system, no difference in rank. To Whitman, all men really are created equal. He writes in his poem “The Sleepers,” “The call of the slave is one with the master’s call..and the master salutes the slave” (188). In 1855, at the time of publication, slaves and masters were considered opposite poles in terms of social class. However, in Whitman’s idea of a perfectly democratic world, there is no sense of this class system. The master and the slave are equals. The “call of the slave” is deemed equivalent to the orders or “the master’s call.” The master shows respect to the slave in “salut[ing]” him, thus bringing the master down to the slave’s level or even bringing the slave up to the master’s level. Regardless of the order, though, the master and the slave are seen as equal. Whitman extends this idea of equality to himself by placing himself at the same level as his readers. He writes, “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs [...] no stander above men and women or apart from them” (Song of Myself 499-501). He describes himself as a simple “American,” just “one of the roughs.” He doesn’t put himself on a pedestal “above” or “apart” from any other person, not even the slave. In using himself as an example, Whitman practices what he preaches, thereby validating his belief in a classless system to his readers.

Through this perspective of equality, we come to understand Whitman’s stance on equality among other relationships based on power, including authoritarian figures and the common man. Just as the master becomes one with the slave, the President becomes

one with the citizen of his country. Whitman portrays this relationship in his Introduction to *Leaves of Grass*, “[T]he President’s taking off his hat to [the common people] not they to him” (6). Just as the master salutes the slave, the President “tak[es] off his hat” to the common people. They are equals in that the President shows humility towards the common man. Furthermore, Whitman writes in his poem, “A Song for Occupations,” “The President is up there in the White House for you....it is not you who are here for him” (83). Similar to the master/slave relationship, Whitman sets up the President/citizen relationship as one of power. Whitman gives the power to the citizen, declaring that the President is there because of the citizen and not vice versa, just as he gives the power to the slave when the master salutes him. Whitman reverses the dichotomy of the original power relationship in order to demonstrate the leveling of different classes. In giving the power to the slave, to the citizen, and to the reader, Whitman reveals the true order of things in his notion of the perfect democracy.

Whitman uses these power structures of the slave and the master and the President and the citizen as examples to reveal other negative relationships based on power, including that of the chief, the officers, and the soldiers. The armed forces set up a separation in ranks, positions, and power. This perspective is evident in Whitman’s poem, “A March in the Ranks Hard Prest, and the Road Unknown.” He writes, “[E]ver in darkness marching, on in the ranks” (24). Everyone has a “rank,” a title assigned to individuals to diminish the notion of equality of the chief, the officer and the soldier. An officer is ranked above the soldier. A chief is perceived to be higher than the officer. In his poem “The Sleepers” Whitman first sets up the separation of rank in labeling one man the “chief” and the others “officers” and “soldiers.” However, Whitman uses the image

of a *retired* chief in a tavern to emphasize the division of rank that has been broken down between the chief, the officers, and the soldiers now that the war is over. He writes,

The same at last and at last when peace is declared,
He stands in the room of the old tavern....the wellbeloved soldiers all pass
through
The officers speechless and slow draw near in their turns,
The chief encircles their necks with his arm and kisses them on the cheek,
He kisses lightly the wet cheeks one after another....he shakes hands and
bids goodbye to the army. (The Sleepers 105-109)

Only after the war is over, “when peace is declared,” is the chief equal with his officers and soldiers. They become “[t]he same at last.” The soldiers are no longer faceless beings to yell orders at. They are now “the wellbeloved soldiers.” These men are “speechless and slow,” as if tiptoeing around the sensitive aspect of the ranks being broken down. The war set up a division in ranks and now, in the tavern, the chief, the soldiers, and the officers must figure out how to treat each other as equal men once again. It is a humbling experience when “[t]he chief encircles [the soldiers’] necks with his arm and kisses them on the cheek.” He is to be a great hero and yet he sits in a tavern hugging and kissing the soldiers that were always seen as subservient to him. He shows humility in this way, kissing the cheeks of those who were once his inferiors. The soldiers all have “wet cheeks” as they cannot help but cry for the decision they made to fight. They say “goodbye to the army,” and yet the army and its power hierarchies will never leave them.

Though they are viewed as equals again in the tavern, chiefs, soldiers and officers will never go back to what they were. To leave the army is a departure from the ranks that were set up, and though they are no longer assigned, these ranks will never truly be forgotten. In his “Specimen Days,” Whitman writes in the section called “Boys in the

Army” about young veterans he comes across on the street. He writes, “[...] as my eye pick'd them, moving along, rank by rank” (754). Though “[t]hey had all the look of veterans, worn, stain'd, impassive, and a certain unbent,” these “boys” were still walking “rank by rank” (754). These “boys” Whitman encountered may have been out of the army, but they will never be out of the mindset of the ranks set up by that army. They become the “sacred idiots” that Whitman mentions earlier in “The Sleepers” (9). In this poem written previous to the Civil War, Whitman discretely inserts his anti-war perspectives. The soldiers in the tavern, as well as the “boys” on the street, are not “the gashed bodies on the battlefields” as placed towards the beginning of “The Sleepers” (9). These bodies are the other soldiers who didn't make it out of the war. The soldiers in the tavern later in the poem, and also the “boys” in the street, are not “the insane in their strong-doored rooms” either, which are mentioned earlier in the same poem. These are the soldiers suffering so severely from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome that they must be locked up in “strong-doored rooms” (9). The soldiers in the tavern and the “boys” in the street are merely the “sacred idiots,” the third and final phase of a soldier's career. If they are neither “the gashed bodies” nor “the insane,” then these soldiers and “boys” are fated to be the “sacred idiots.” They believed they would come back as heroes, but instead, they are doomed to pass through a tavern where their officer “kisses lightly” their “wet cheeks” and “bids goodbye to the army.” They are not “sacred” at all, but they feel like “idiots.” Whitman portrays the chief kissing the soldiers like a kiss good-bye to a decision the men will all come to regret, if they don't already.

The Individual vs. the Mass:

Autonomy vs. Democracy

Whitman views differences in rank, such as that of the officer and the soldier, as opposite to his idea of democracy. In his poem, "A Song for Occupations," Whitman writes, "I shall be even with you and you shall be even with me" (15). This sense of equality is synonymous with his ideal of democracy. The master and the slave, the President and the citizen, the officer and the soldier all shall have a say in the politics of the nation. They work together for the greater good. With a combined effort, no one man shall have a say above another. Whitman portrays this idea of democracy in his poem "One's-Self I Sing." He writes, "One's-self I sing-a simple, separate Person; / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word *En-masse* [...] I say the Form complete is worthier far [...]" (1-2, 5). In titling the poem, "One's-self I sing," Whitman praises the importance of the individual. Whitman upholds the value of the common man, the "simple, separate Person." Without taking away from this value, though, Whitman declares the greater whole is superior to its separate parts. In other words, the country as a whole is stronger than the individual man. "The Form complete is worthier far," Whitman proclaims. Although each citizen remains equal, the combined effort of all the citizens seems to be more powerful than one single, solitary man. Whitman's idea of a combined effort, "the word *En-masse*," however, is undercut in the de-individualizing press of the army. No longer is the group effort valued more than the individual in the context of war, as Whitman points out in many of his works.

Whitman's idea of "the Form complete," the effort of the whole group as a unit, can be applied to the relationship of the officer and the soldier; however, Whitman would disagree that the army "is worthier far." Whitman declares in his poem, "Song of Myself," "[N]othing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is," (1269-1271).

Whitman uses such a bold statement to emphasize the importance of “one’s self.” The “self” is to be the most valued and no one, not “God,” not “the Union,” not “the Form complete,” is above it. Though the common man finds power in the nation by working together with others for the greater good, the soldier loses any form of power and equality he might have through the autocratic structure of the army. Officers are ranked above the soldiers forcing the soldiers to act out a subordinate role. Soldiers are to follow orders as commanded without a choice. This control of one man over another contradicts

Whitman’s belief that each individual has the right to be heard. In her book, *Whitman the Political Poet*, Betsy Erkkila writes, “[...] Whitman presents the war as a mass action and part of an inexorable march toward the democratic future” (223). Whitman indeed “presents the war as a mass action” but he does not portray the war as “an inexorable march toward the democratic future” as Erkkila claims. In fact, Whitman presents the war as a march in the opposite direction of his idea of a natural democracy. Democracy is the natural state of the world to Whitman. In other words, it is unnatural that the officer and the soldier be divided by ranks or that the slave be subservient to his master or that the President have control over the common man. Ed Folsom writes, “Whitman chose to view democracy as a force of nature, an antidiscriminatory law manifested in the fullness of the natural world” (173). If Whitman’s idea of democracy is natural, then the war is certainly not an inevitable, or “inexorable,” attempt to attain this equality.

In the army, there is no equality. No soldier speaks for himself. He becomes just one of many mere “actors” who have no say “in a drama of history they no longer produce or control” (Erkkila 223). Soldiers are coerced into believing the control of the officers’ demands and thus “the power of autonomy of the individual human agent

appear[s] to be lost” (223). Therefore, the soldier comes to believe that these orders are mere echoes of his own desires. Whitman describes this totalizing nature of war in his poem “Beat! Beat! Drums!” He writes,

Then rattle quicker, heavier drums-you bugles wilder blow,
Beat! Beat! Drums!-blow! bugles! blow!
Make no parley-stop for no expostulation, [...]
So strong you thump O terrible drums-so loud you bugles blow. (14-16,
21)

The rhythm of the poem mimics the overpowering force of a beating drum. The drums “rattle quicker,” accelerating the pace of the poem. Whitman also intensifies the poem by using the word “heavier” to describe the pounding of the drums. The “heavier” the “beat[ing],” the louder and more forceful the sound that is produced. The “beat[ing]” and the “blow[ing]” imitate the dictatorial power of the officers’ orders. They are loud and intense with an exclamation point after each word. These orders, the “beat” of the drums and the “blow” of the bugles, are so loud that they come to drown out the soldier’s own rationality. He becomes a mere puppet, following his officers into battle without any input from himself. There is to be neither “parley” nor “expostulation.” In other words, a soldier should not discuss the situation or even use reasoning in the midst of war. This concept goes against one of Whitman’s great influences, the Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant. “Kant having studied and stated” Whitman writes of Kant’s influence on him in his poem “The Base of all Metaphysics” (7). Whitman uses Kant’s ideals in his writing. Kant says in his essay “What is Enlightenment,” “Have the courage to use your own understanding!” (Kant 1). However, the soldier does not “use [his] own understanding” when following the orders he is given. Soldiers merely use the “understanding” of their officers without any discussion or contention. Kant writes, “But

on all sides I hear: 'Do not argue!' The officer says, 'Do not argue, drill!' (1).

Whitman's idea of the democratic right to rationality, based on Kant's ideal of one's "own understanding," is surrendered after the soldier's initial choice to fight. Soldiers are told not to "argue" but to "drill!" "In this," Kant explains, "we have examples of pervasive restrictions on freedom" (2). The "freedom" to "use one's own understanding" is seized and ultimately "restrict[ed]" in the context of war. Betsy Erkkila claims, "[...] Whitman saw the war as a struggle to preserve the Union and to secure the advance of democratic freedom throughout the world" (196). Whitman does not see the war as "advanc[ing]" the "democratic freedom" at all. To Whitman, "democratic freedom" is the freedom to individuality, the freedom to autonomy, the freedom to choose for oneself. This "democratic freedom" is inherent and, therefore, does not need to be fought for or even "secured." The war is a wasted effort for the freedom of autonomy is already granted to every human being. Though the army brings together individuals working for a greater good, the individual soldier is told what to do and what to say. While Whitman encourages the union of individuals for a greater good, the war is not a greater good to him. War simply means "the wreck-guns sounds" (*The Sleepers* 94). It is about death and destruction. To Whitman, there are no positive outcomes to a war. Though he wanted the nation to come together as one, he never wanted "the drumbeat of war" to be the catalyst of "gather[ing] the separate energies of people into the single rhythm of the Union cause" as Erkkila puts it (196). Whitman wanted the connections of humanity to be the cause that brought people together, not war. During war, commands are given and followed without question. Whitman's ideal of democracy is thus deflated in the context

of war, because during wartime the soldier loses his individuality and his sense of democracy.

In the democratic spirit, soldiers come together to gather behind one cause, yet in doing so, they become anonymous beings. The “[s]quads gather everywhere by common consent and arm” and, as a result, they become just one of the indiscernible objects (First O Songs for a Prelude 27). The soldiers give “common consent” in listening to the “thump” of the “terrible drums” as in “Beat! Beat! Drums!” (21). They listen to the “thump” of the drums as intently as they listen to the demands of their officers. Thus, the drums are metaphorically the officers’ voices. In giving “common consent,” they jointly make a group decision to give into their so-called superiors. The soldiers are granting the officers permission to overpower and to rule them, thus renouncing their individuality. “[T]heir brown faces and their clothes and knapsacks cover’d with dust!” hide their identity and their individuality (33). “[T]heir brown faces” become just white eyeballs in a cloud of dust. No one man is known apart from another. One man’s distinct features are hidden from the world and he is no longer an individual. “[T]heir clothes and knapsacks” are identical, even beneath the layer of dirt. No man is distinct; no man is recognizable from the others. “[C]over’d with dust” the soldiers become the nameless individuals fighting a losing battle. This is not the democracy Whitman envisioned in his poems.

Whitman’s perspective of the army and the war is inconsistent with his notion of democracy. His idea that “the Form complete is worthier far,” from “One’s-Self I Sing,” is questioned in this context. In other words, the combined effort of everyone is “worthier far,” and more significant than the effort of one individual. However, this is

not the case in Whitman's perspective on war. In his poem, "To Think of Time," Whitman sings praises to the individual, the "simple, separate Person" that he relinquishes to the greater good in "One's-Self I Sing." He writes, "You are not thrown to the winds..you gather certainly and safely around yourself, / Yourself! Yourself! Yourself forever and ever!" (73-74). An individual is in charge of his or her own destiny. He or she is not simply "thrown to the winds." An autonomous being is someone who is responsible for his or her own well-being. He or she shall "gather certainly and safely around [him or her]self" without doubt. Whitman uses exclamation points in this poem to stress the importance of this power in the individual. This punctuation is similar to that in "Beat! Beat! Drums!;" however, the exclamation points are emphasizing opposing ideas between the separate poems. In the poem, "Beat! Beat! Drums!", Whitman exaggerates the beating of the drums that represents the overpowering orders of higher officials. In "To Think of Time," Whitman stresses the importance of the independent self, "Yourself!" The autonomy of the individual overcomes any ideal of the "Form complete." The authority of the individual comes to override that of the greater whole. "I celebrate myself, and sing myself," Whitman writes in his 1855 poem "Song of Myself" (1). It is the individual self to whom one must sing praises above all else. This notion of autonomy, however, contradicts Whitman's ideal of democracy as the unification of different individuals. Ed Folsom writes,

[Whitman] wrestles with the thorny problems of democratic theory, especially the irresolvable tension between the many and the one, between the social cohesion necessary to make a democracy work and the equally important necessity of individual freedom. (173)

Though Whitman certainly "wrestles" with the "democratic theory," he values the individual's autonomy over the ideal of democracy. While Whitman sees democracy as

beneficial in working toward the greater good, he also upholds the value of each individual's self-rule. He wavers back and forth between the concept of working together and working for oneself. However, Whitman doesn't sway in this decision when it comes to war. In the context of war, the "tension between the many and the one" is not "irresolvable" to Whitman. The autonomy of "the one" is more significant than the "social cohesion" of "the many." The individual soldier is more important than the army as a whole. In his Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes, "[E]very man shall be his own priest" (22). He advises each person to listen to him- or herself as attentively as he or she would listen to a "priest." One's self is the most significant agent in making an autonomous decision.

The soldiers listening to the "Beat!" of the drums, all "cover'd with dust," are devoid of this autonomy. They lose their individuality and become, nameless beings. Whitman gives this lost individuality back to the soldiers through his experience as a nurse and in his writing. Mark Rozzo writes in his article, "Whitman and War- A Poet Among the Soldiers," reviewing Whitman's *Memoranda During the War*, that Whitman is "preoccupied with wholeness, yearning to reunite a severed country, to restore a Pennsylvania or Tennessee boy to health, hearth and home" (2). Whitman wants to repair the "wholeness" of the soldier's individuality. He takes away the mask of seeing a soldier as merely a soldier. Whitman steps back to see the whole picture, taking the time to realize each soldier as a human being. He sees a soldier in detail and comes to know that the soldier is from "Pennsylvania or Tennessee." Though Whitman does take care of the medical needs of these soldiers, he is more deeply concerned with their sense of "hearth" and "home." He listens to each man's stories, treating him as a human being

instead of just another body in a hospital bed. In a letter from his experience as a Civil War nurse, Whitman writes about “a young man from Plymouth County, Massachusetts; a farmer’s son, aged about 20 or 21, a soldierly American young fellow, but with sensitive and tender feelings” (*The Sacrificial Years* 22). To Whitman, this young man has a hometown, a father, a birthday. Though this man is “a soldierly American young fellow,” he also has the antagonistic quality of having “sensitive and tender feelings.” He has emotions. He is not only a stoic soldier, but he is also a caring human being.

Whitman says, “Let me tell his story – it is but one of thousands” (22). This soldier is not a number to Whitman. He is one man, “one of thousands” of stories to be told.

To Whitman, no one is to be seen as merely a number. He also writes in his “Specimen Days” of particular individuals in a section called, “Some Specimen Cases.” Whitman writes, in detail of soldiers such as “an Irish boy” named “Thomas Haley,” of “company M, 4th New York cavalry” (Specimen Days 724-725). This soldier was a “fine specimen of youthful physical manliness,” Whitman writes, “shot through the lungs -- inevitably dying -- came over to this country from Ireland to enlist -- has not a single friend or acquaintance here” (724-725). But “Thomas Haley” has a friend in Whitman. Whitman tells the story of these soldiers that is seldom heard. Each person, to Whitman, has an individual life that is unique and separate from every other person. Whitman believes in the “romantic ethos” that places “the greatest importance on the individual” (Rosenwein). But this importance is disregarded in the dynamics of a war. Soldiers become expendable. They start to “appear as infinitely replaceable goods filling the gaps in the assembly line of war” (Erkkila 218). As soon as one dies, another man is sent to take his place. There is no end to the cycle. In one of his letters, Whitman writes, “Death

is nothing here... All useless ceremony is omitted. (The stern realities of the marches and many battles of a long campaign make the old etiquets a cumber and a nuisance)" (*The Sacrificial Years* 14). This emphasizes the negligence of one man's value. Death is neither mournful nor upsetting. It is "nothing." Burials that could distinguish an individual are "omitted." No "ceremony" is necessary for a soldier who is unrecognizable amongst the rest. Because of the mass deaths of soldiers in the "many battles of a long campaign" the traditional funerals would take too much effort. The "old etiquets" are no longer adhered to. Instead, they become "a cumber and a nuisance" for such a large-scale death toll.

The soldiers who die are wasted sacrifices. Whitman writes, "I also say it is good to fall...battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are won" (*Song of Myself* 368). Whitman is not being characteristically contradictory, but rather, he is being facetious. It is not good to fall just as you would not "sound triumphal drums for the dead" as Whitman writes in the following line of "*Song of Myself*" (369). The dead soldiers are not "triumph[ant];" they are dead. They have wasted the same "self" that Whitman celebrates in the first line of this poem. Though these soldiers may have been "bravely fighting" they "silent[ly] fell" (*Ashes* 2-3). Whitman does not take away from these soldiers the quality of courage; however, he does silence them as if to say the effort was futile. They are "overcome heroes," "numberless unknown heroes" (*Song of Myself* 371). They are "heroes" but they are "overcome" and "numberless" without fame or glory. These men who have fallen so quietly, so indistinctively, now fill "unmention'd graves" (*Ashes* 4). They are not immortalized by their courage; they are forgotten about. In his "*Specimen Days*," Whitman writes in the section, "The Million Dead, Too,

Summ'd Up," "We see, and ages yet may see, on monuments and gravestones, singly or in masses, to thousands or tens of thousands, the significant word Unknown" (777).

These men fall without the recognition they once yearned for. Though they are "significant," they become the "Unknown" without remembrance or acknowledgment for their sacrifice. No matter how hard Whitman tries to give the individuality back to the soldiers in the hospitals, he can do nothing for the dead.

These soldiers have given the ultimate sacrifice of their autonomy, but they are still human beings and they still feel the interconnection among one another. Whitman, himself especially, feels this interconnection while treating the soldiers. In a letter to the family of one of these dead soldiers, Whitman writes,

I write to you this letter, because I would do something at least in his memory-his fate was a hard one, to die so-He is one of the thousands of our unknown American young men in the ranks about whom there is no record or fame, no fuss made about their dying so unknown, but I find in them the real precious & royal ones of this land, giving themselves, up, aye even their young & precious lives, in their country's cause-...Though we are strangers & shall probably never see each other, I send you and all Erastus' brothers & sisters my love- Walt Whitman" (*The Sacrificial Years* 54)

This letter clearly articulates Whitman's sentiment for these soldiers. Whitman doesn't want these soldiers to be forgotten about. He can't stand that these soldiers who sacrificed their "precious lives" become simply "unknown American young men in the ranks about whom there is no record or fame." Whitman writes many similar letters to families all over the nation. He can't stand to see these soldiers overlooked. The soldiers are not only a part of their own family, but they are a part of Whitman's bigger family of mankind. Whitman not only refers to the "Erastus' brothers & sisters" as the soldier's siblings, but also as his own through this interconnection of humanity.

Interconnection:

Humanity and the Bonds that Tie it Together

Whitman believes in the importance of autonomy, but he also believes in the strong bond of humanity. As a nurse in the Civil War, Whitman came to love these soldiers like family members, such as the Erastus man. He didn't know these men previously, but he looked upon them as if they were of his own blood. Even a stranger, to Whitman, was family through the bond of humanity. He writes in his poem, "Song of Myself," before the Civil War, "I love him though I do not know him" (274). Whitman speaks of the love for a stranger even without knowing him. This depicts the unconditional "love," or connection, of one human for another, even strangers, solely based on the fact that each is a part of mankind. It is a bond that is absolute, regardless of gender, skin color, wealth, etc. The soldiers, however, seem to ignore this bond. They are told who the enemy is and, though these enemies are also humans, the soldiers deny this fact in order to do their job. Whitman forgave the soldiers for this act, and experienced the bond of humanity, himself, with these same soldiers as he cared for them. He never once refused a man aid based on any superficial qualities. Whitman treated each soldier as he would treat his own brother. Through these bonds, however, Whitman does not devalue the worth of individuality. Whitman writes, "The diverse shall be no less diverse, but they shall flow and unite....they unite now" ("The Sleepers" 178). The characteristics of each person, the "divers[ity]" among people, are not taken away. Conversely, the soldier is seen as the same as everyone else. In the army, there is no "diversity" among the soldiers except for the ranks set up between them. Whitman gives a fluid quality to describe his notion of humanity. People "shall flow and unite,"

taking and giving like the ebbs of a river. Though each particle in the water is a separate chemical composition, they all “unite” to make one body of water, one idea of an equal, “diverse,” mankind. In making each man and woman equal in power, class, and capability, Whitman makes each person “no less diverse” but similar in that each is human. This quality can be tried and tested, but never taken away. Although the slave questions his own humanity under the dehumanizing force of slavery, or the soldier feels the loss of humanity in the strain of battle, the slave and the soldier will never lose the bond of mankind. Herbert Levine writes in his article, “Union and Disunion in ‘Song of Myself,’”

[...] the experience of [Whitman’s] own body and soul, his land, its animals, people, occupations and history, the earth, its evolutionary past and cosmic future—all was to be portrayed as a vast seamless web, within which differences could be accommodated without dismembering the whole. (576)

This “seamless web” is the interconnection of mankind. Though “differences could be accommodated” amongst individuals, “the whole” would not lose any strength. This is not the case for the army, though, to Whitman. The soldiers’ individuality is ripped from them in order to strengthen the power of “the whole,” the army itself, “without dismembering it.” Soldiers must be desensitized to the bonds of humanity in order to carry out their tasks of killing other human beings. The soldiers’ sense of connection among other people is skewed. The teachings of the army attempt to numb these soldiers’ bonds with other humans.

Whitman believes every person shall put this connection of humanity above all else, however, soldiers tend to ignore this ideal. In a war, soldiers put aside their bonds with humanity, and aimlessly fire at any moving body on the enemy’s side. Though

Whitman does not admonish the soldiers for this duty they carry out, he never commends them for it. Whitman cares for the soldiers who have made this mistake without reservation. Though he doesn't believe in the ideal of war, he feels an obligation to help these soldiers through the interconnection of human beings.

He has tenderly cared for the wounded, nursed the sick, consoled the dying and buried the dead. This he did not for pay or for glory - for he got neither - but for love of the sacred cause of freedom and of mankind.
("Literary Review" 1)

Whitman feels strongly tied to these soldiers, even if he has never met them. He doesn't care about money, he works solely "for the sacred cause of freedom and of mankind" that has been taken away under the strain of the war. He says in a letter, "I do not see that I do much good to these wounded and dying, but I cannot leave him" (*The Sacrificial Years* 12). Whitman feels obligated to stay with these men. He simply "cannot leave" the men in the beds looking up to him for comfort and for help, though he cannot see the overall therapeutic power he has. Whitman strongly advocates these connections and bonds that are taken away from the soldiers both physically and emotionally. In his poem, "A Song for Occupations," Whitman writes, "I pass so poorly with paper and types....I must pass with the contact of bodies and souls" (6). He wants to avoid the medium of "paper and types" and, in turn, deal with people face to face, "with the contact of bodies and souls." Though Whitman defines himself as a poet, he more strongly identifies with the notion of being a part of mankind. Thus he helps the soldiers not only with his poetry, his "paper and types," but rather, Whitman nurses these soldiers by making use of his physical presence, connecting "bodies and souls." "[T]he real war will never get in the books," Whitman writes in his "Specimen Days" (778). To Whitman, the "real war," is this experience of "bodies and souls" that cannot be written in "paper and

types.” It is the emotion that Whitman feels, the sights that he sees, the sounds that he hears. To Whitman, “the real war” is not about which side wins or loses, but about watching the torment of the soldiers lying in the beds. It is about humanity and not the politics of the time.

Whitman makes himself an example of the physically and emotionally empathetic human that he wants everyone to be. As a nurse, Whitman experienced the pain vicariously through the soldiers suffering. He says in his poem written previous to this experience, “Song of Myself,” “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person” (845). Whitman not only watched these soldiers agonize, but he, himself, felt their pain. He writes in his section of “Specimen Days,” called “An Army Hospital Ward,”

You may hear groans or other sounds of unendurable suffering from two or three of the cots, but in the main there is quiet -- almost a painful absence of demonstration; but the pallid face, the dull'd eye, and the moisture on the lip, are demonstration enough.
(719)

Though these soldiers no longer have the strength to “groan” or to make “other sounds of unendurable suffering” Whitman can see the pain in their “pallid face, the dull'd eye, and the moisture on the lip.” He knows their pain is beyond words, and though Whitman lived by his words, he could never describe the amount of anguish he witnessed in the Civil War hospitals. It was “a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made” (A March 7). Whitman couldn't even describe in detail the terrible emotions stirred by this “sight,” but he was loyal to the soldiers despite this scene. Whitman's presence became more important than any medical care that could be given. In a letter he wrote, “The doctors tell me I supply the patients with a medicine which all their drugs & bottles &

powders are helpless to yield” (*The Sacrificial Years* 53). Whitman became the family, the friends, the lovers that were absent to these soldiers. To Whitman, there is one bloodline that all humans are connected by. Mankind is of one kin. Many of these soldiers called Whitman “Uncle” or “Father,” and one even named his son after Whitman (Rozzo 2). Whitman embodied the ideal he wrote about years earlier in his poem, “To Think of Time.” He writes, “When medicines stand unused on the shelf, and the camphor-smell has pervaded the rooms, / When the faithful hand of the living does not desert the hand of the dying” (16-17). “When medicines [stood] unused on the shelf,” there was nothing for Whitman to do but provide comfort to the dying soldiers. The “medicines” were useless. The odious “camphor-smell” consistently reminded the soldiers of their despair. It was a reminder of where they were, in those beds in a Civil War hospital mostly waiting to die. The hope of survival was gone for many of these soldiers, but Whitman was “the faithful hand of the living” who provided the physical and emotional connection when nothing could be done to save them.

The deaths of these soldiers cause a ripple effect in Whitman’s interconnected humanity’s, in his “web.” Everyone feels the effect of the war. Whitman writes in his poem, “Beat! Beat! Drums!,”

Through the windows-through doors-burst like ruthless force,
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
Into the school where the scholar is studying;
Leave not the bridegroom quiet-no happiness must he have now with his
 bride,
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his
 grain,
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums-so shrill you bugles blow. (2-7)

The war, the “whirr and pound” of the “drums” and “bugles,” echoes so loudly that no one is untouched by it. No “windows” or “doors” could protect a citizen from the

“ruthless force” of a nation at war. The “solemn church” and the “peaceful farmer” are sharp juxtapositions to the loud “drums” and “bugles” thus portraying how dominant the war really is. The soldiers and the officers fighting in the war are undoubtedly not the only ones affected. The “congregation,” the “scholar,” the “bridegroom” and “his bride,” the “peaceful farmer” are all in the midst of the war, just as much so as the soldiers and the officers. The “church” is no longer “solemn,” the “bridegroom” is left with “no happiness,” the “peaceful farmer” is no longer in “peace.” The war, any war to Whitman, leaves the nation’s citizens in disarray without the “happiness” and without the “peace” they came to know before the war. A war is inevitable for sadness and death. When one person is harmed in this way, everyone is affected through Whitman’s interconnected bond of humanity. The effect of the war goes “[t]hrough the windows-through doors” with such strength, with a “burst like ruthless force,” that no one is unaffected. To Whitman, the interconnection between human beings is strongly emphasized in times of disparity, such as in the midst of battle.

Whitman writes of this sentiment in his poem, “The Wound-Dresser,” “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” (37-38). Whitman feels such a powerful empathetic tie to this young man that he would rather die than watch this soldier suffer. The paradox is that this man suffers for the country he voluntarily fights for, and yet Whitman, a citizen of the country who chooses not to fight, would rather give up his life. War seems to be the answer until it is right there before one’s eyes. “At my feet more distinctly” Whitman writes, “a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death” (11). This is a critical lens that Whitman sees often as a nurse. The country is behind the

concept of war until they feel the impact. It is “no mere parade now” as Whitman writes in his poem “First O Songs for a Prelude” (45). The men are no longer marching in the “parade” in their uniforms jovially rousing support. Whitman writes of the defeat at the Battle of Bull Run in 1861 in his “Specimen Days,”

Where are the vaunts, and the proud boasts with which you went forth?
Where are your banners, and your bands of music, and your ropes to bring
back your prisoners? Well, there isn't a band playing -- and there isn't a
flag but clings ashamed and lank to its staff. (708)

He criticizes the soldiers for being too “proud” and too “boast[ful]” of what they were to accomplish. But the soldiers find that the war is more serious than simply waving around “banners” and having “bands of music.” Whitman illustrates the flag not billowing in the wind, but rather “cling[ing] ashamed and lank to its staff.” The “flag” is a metaphor for the soldiers. They shall hang their heads “lank” in shame instead of boasting about something as negative as war. They are fighting in the midst of a bloody, death-ridden battle. But it is not until a mother loses a son in that battle that she changes her mind. He goes off to war a hero and returns in a casket covered in an American flag. The mother no longer advocates for the war, but feels the same emotion Whitman expresses. She wants to die to be with her son. Whitman writes, “But the mother needs to be better [...] / O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life escape and withdraw, / To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son” (Come Up 31 & 36-37). When a soldier dies it starts this web of sorrow. It is not only the mother of the “dear dead son” who will be mournful. His family, his friends, his fellow soldiers will feel this loss. Humankind will feel this loss.

Whitman himself experienced this sense of sadness as a nurse even though the doctors and nurses shut off their emotions to it. Whitman writes in his “Specimen Days” about an officer’s death. In the section “Death of a Wisconsin Officer,” Whitman writes,

There is no fuss made. Not a bit of sentimentalism or whining have I seen about a single death-bed in hospital or on the field, but generally impassive indifference. All is over, as far as any efforts can avail; it is useless to expend emotions or labors. (736)

A soldier’s death, each and every one of them, will be felt eventually no matter how repressed one’s emotions may be. The doctors and the nurses make “no fuss” about these deaths at the time out of self-preservation. If they allowed themselves to feel this sorrow, they would be overwhelmed by the grief of all the patients they had lost. There is “[n]ot a bit of sentimentalism,” though, in these hospital wards. The doctors and nurses treat these soldiers with “impassive indifference” in order to keep themselves distanced from the pain. But Whitman feels this pain. He doesn’t find it useless to “expend emotions or labors” on these soldiers. In a letter, Whitman writes, “I see so much of butcher sights, so much sickness and suffering, I must get away a while, I believe, for self-preservation” (*The Sacrificial Years* 51). Whitman experienced the war emotionally. He watched the “butcher sights” and took care of the “sickness[es] and suffering” so engrossingly that he felt that he “must get away a while” for his own good. He never shut off his sentiments to these soldiers. “It arous’d and brought out and decided undream’d-of depths of emotion,” Whitman writes in “Three Years Summ’d Up” of “Specimen Days” (776). Whitman allowed himself to feel the anguish, the “undream’d-of depths of emotion,” that the doctors and nurses refused to feel. In turn, he came to understand the soldiers’ suffering on a whole other level of empathy that the doctors and nurses refused to acknowledge. War forces people to turn off their emotions in order to save themselves

from the pain. But this is unnatural to Whitman's idea of interconnection. No human being is untouched by these sights. Though the doctors and nurses bottled up their emotions at the time, it will come back later on to haunt them.

The officers and the soldiers also equally empathetically experience the grief for a war they soon come to regret fighting in. The retired chief mentioned in Whitman's poem, "The Sleepers," experiences a sense of guilt when "He sees the slaughter of the southern braves confided to him by their parents" (104). He knows he is responsible for these deaths and he is remorseful. The young men were "confided to him" and yet, he cannot return them to "their parents." "His face is cold and damp...he cannot repress the weeping drops" (103). He cries out of love for mankind, he cries out of empathy, feeling the loss himself. No matter what he cries for though, the officer realizes the bounds of humanity as he simply "cannot repress" this expression of emotion. He is overwhelmed by it because of its strength. Soldiers, as well as chiefs and officers, feel this bereavement in terms of their fellow soldier as well as of their enemy. In his poem, "Reconciliation," Whitman writes through the eyes of a soldier who has survived a war. The soldier says,

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.
(3-5)

Whitman poignantly points out his ideal of equality when even the soldier perceives his enemy to be "a man as divine as [himself]." The corpse of this enemy is depicted as innocent and pure with a "white face." This soldier no longer sees his enemy as evil or as the enemy at all. Instead, the soldier sees the enemy for what he truly is, a fellow human being. Through this perspective, then, the soldier "bend[s] down and touch[es] lightly

with [his] lips the white face in the coffin.” Much like the chief humbles himself in kissing the cheeks of the soldiers in Whitman’s poem, “The Sleepers,” this soldier levels himself with his enemy by kissing the face of the corpse. He kisses the dead man’s face feeling that the bond of humanity and a sense of equality are stronger than the hatred for an enemy.

Human Life:

The Body, the Soul, and the Freedom for Both

To be human is to experience these bonds and sentiments in a physical and conscious way. Whitman writes, “I accept Reality and dare not question it, / Materialism first and last imbuing” (Song of Myself 483-484). Human life is about the physical entities of the material world such as the “weeping drops” of the soldier or the “sniff of green leaves and dry leaves” (The Sleepers 103, Song of Myself 24). Whitman praises the sensual pleasures and sentiments of the physical world. In his poem “Song of Myself,” Whitman writes, “I believe in the flesh and the appetites, / Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle” (522-523). The “flesh” is what matters to Whitman. Life on earth is more important than the spiritual world that may or may not come. One’s main concern in life, for Whitman, should be to satisfy the “appetites.” Whitman demonstrates his reverence for the physical world by using the word “miracles” to describe something as ordinary as the human senses. Whitman is obsessed with the tangible earth. He writes of the atmosphere saying, “I am in love with it [...] I am mad for it to be in contact with me” (Song of Myself 19,20). Whitman thrives off of the bodily life that others, such as soldiers, seem to throw away in a wasted sacrifice. In his poem, “I Sing the Body Electric,” Whitman writes, “Have you seen the

fool that corrupted his own live body? [...]” (116). He labels the person a “fool” who does not cherish his or her own body. The soldier is thus a “fool” for “corrupt[ing] his own live body” in the midst of fighting in a war and sacrificing himself. Furthermore, Whitman exclaims, “Who degrades or defiles the living human body is cursed” (117). This statement is a double-edge sword for the soldier in the army. Not only does the soldier put his own body in harm’s way, but he also “degrades and defiles” the bodies of his enemies killing and mangling them beyond repair. Thus, the soldier is “cursed” for the deed he has done in the midst of battle, according to Whitman. The body is not a mere vessel carrying the spirit as many religions believe. To Whitman, everything about the physical life is hallowed. He writes, “If life and the soul are sacred the human body is sacred” (I Sing the Body Electric 113). But the soldier who puts the importance of the army over the value of himself does not see his body as “sacred.” Instead, he sees the cause of the nation as sacred and disregards the safety of his own cause, his life.

Whitman sees life not only as the body, but also as the intertwining of body and soul. He writes, “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” (Song of Myself 1269-1270). In other words, no one should be seen as merely a spiritual soul nor should they be perceived as simply a physical body. The interaction of body and soul is what gives a man or woman value as a human being. When a human being is seen as merely a body, however, his or her dignity is denigrated. Karen Sanchez-Eppler explains this idea in terms of the African American slave in early American history. She writes in her article, “To Stand Between: A Political Perspective on Whitman’s Poetics of Merger and Embodiment,”

On the auction block, regardless of whatever other claims to identity a slave might express, he or she is nothing but body, flesh for sale. The

slave at auction provides the quintessential instance of what it means for one's identity to be entirely dependent upon one's body. (926)

This idea can be extended in Whitman's writings beyond the slave to the soldier. The soldier fighting in the war is also seen as "nothing but body." The way in which these soldiers are degraded and stripped of their own autonomy causes their "identity to be entirely dependent upon one's body." Since they are not seen as individuals, soldiers are merely a "cloud of skirmishers," "the swarming ranks" (An Army 1, 3). Soldiers are simply seen as bodies that can wear uniforms and fire guns. But one soldier is able to see the soul of another, even if his officer and the nation are blind to it. Whitman writes, "I see behind each mask that wonder a kindred soul, / O the bullet could never kill what you really are dear friend, [...] The soul! Yourself I see, great as any, good as the best" (How Solemn 6-7,9). Whitman depicts the face of the soldier as a "mask" in order to portray the dehumanizing effect of the war. The "mask" is without the expression of a human face. The soldier's face is a "mask" to hide, or to "mask," the emotions he, like the doctors and nurses, represses through the war. Only later, as in the tavern of "The Sleepers," do these men express this overwhelming emotion. But Whitman sees "behind" the "mask" to the "kindred spirit." He knows these men are more than numb soldiers. They are sentimental human beings and "dear friend[s]." Though the nation uses these soldiers as bodies for their cause, the soldier views his fellow man as a fellow human being. To Whitman, these soldiers are not only body but they are also "The soul!" Whitman sees these men in equal light as he would any other man. They are "great as any, good as the best." Though both the slave on the auction block and the soldier in the ranks are used for their manual labor, Whitman sees beyond their use to their humanity.

Whitman sets up a juxtaposition of a slave and a soldier in his poem, "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors," in order to demonstrate the ideal that both are in the same position of oppression. The slave, the "dusky woman," is portrayed as watching a battalion of soldiers march by on the road (1). Whitman begins the poem with a question. "Who are you," the speaker asks the woman while making the observations that she is "so ancient," and "hardly human" (1). She is "hardly human," not because she is an African American slave, but rather because of the vilification she has experienced in her position. "Why, rising by the roadside here, do you the colors greet?" the speaker questions the woman (3). She stands, "rising" in respect to the soldiers, not because of their noble cause, but because she knows empathetically what it is like to be in a position of oppression. The soldiers are not even called soldiers. They are described as "the colors," "the regiments," "the guidons" (3,12). They are not acknowledged for the human beings that they are. These men are labeled by their work. They are grouped together into an image of objects and not human lives. The woman "curtseys" to these men knowing how it feels to be used as merely a body for manual labor. In his essay, "What is Enlightenment" Immanuel Kant writes that a "government[...] finds that it can profit by treating men, who are now more than machines, in accord with their dignity" (4). Whitman certainly agreed with the notion that men, and women in his mind, are "more than machines." However, slaves and soldiers alike are not "treat[ed] [...] in accord with their dignity." They are exploited under the forces of both slavery and the army. It is not a coincidence that Whitman used a woman slave to depict this idea. In using a female slave and male soldiers, Whitman portrays the idea that both men and women in these situations are denigrated though they are both of equal value no matter their gender.

Whitman makes one important distinction in terms of freedom between the slave and the soldier, though. He writes through the view of the slave woman saying, “A little child, they caught me as the savage beast is caught” (8). She had no choice in the face of slavery. This woman, as a child seen as a “savage beast,” was forced into this life by the “cruel slaver” (9). She was stuck without the freedom, or liberty, to make the choice for herself. The soldier, on the other hand, maintains this freedom to choose which path to take. He is not forced into fighting for his nation, but he takes the liberty into his own hands to make the decision of sacrifice. This makes the tone of, “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors,” one of puzzlement. The slave woman cannot seem to understand the soldier’s willingness to submit himself to such treatment. The speaker questions,

What is it, fateful woman-so blear, hardly human?
Why wag your head, with turban bound-yellow, red and green?
Are the things so strange and marvelous you see or have seen? (13-15)

The speaker can’t seem to understand why the woman “wag[s]” her head at the soldiers. She shakes her head in disagreement with the soldier’s active decision to go into the ranks where he is under another man’s control. All of her life the slave woman wishes to be free of the control the soldier gives up his own life to. She is called “fateful woman” because she is bound to be a slave for life without an option. The soldier could also be called “fateful,” for, even if he leaves the army, he will never forget the experience of the army or of the war. The slave and the soldier are both “fate[d]” to be in their positions for life. However, the slave is held against her will in slavery while the soldier uses his *free* will to join the army. The things are “so strange and marvelous” that the slave woman sees because she cannot comprehend the situation. She watches as the soldiers march in formation and are ordered by their officers. The slave woman yearns for the

freedom that the soldier has given up to the officers of the army. She simply cannot imagine even having this freedom, let alone giving it up.

The slave does not have the “liberty” that the soldier freely surrenders when going into the army (Introduction 16). So, “[I]s liberty gone out of that place?” For the slave woman, yes, the “liberty” is “gone” because it never existed to her. She has no definition of “liberty” as she has always been oppressed. The slave woman has lived her life as an inferior. She has followed orders as commanded, she has been worked to the bone without pay, she has been whipped and she has been treated as an animal. And the slave woman obeys because that is all she knows. She knows of no “liberty.” However, ask the same question of the soldier, “[I]s liberty gone out of that place?” Whitman ever so simply and boldly states, “No never.” Though the soldier takes on the conditions of life of the slave woman, he *freely* chooses this life. His “liberty” is not “gone” because he used it in making the decision to fight. The slave woman does not choose to be a slave, but the soldier chooses to be a soldier.

The soldier is against Whitman’s essential beliefs in the equality, the autonomy, the humanity, and the spiritual self of every human being. The soldier is not forced into the oppression, but instead, he *decides* to become one of the “ranks” (A March 1). The soldier puts the importance of the nation, the democratic cause, above himself, his own autonomous being. In doing so, he disregards the impact he will have on all of mankind. He does not recognize the pain he puts his mother through or even the anguish he subjects Whitman to. The soldier also ignores his own spirituality, his own soul. He allows himself to be used as merely a body as a means to an end. Whitman saw the soldier’s sacrifice as unequal, anti-autonomous, inhumane, and unspiritual long before he

watched and nursed thousands of soldiers through these situations in the Civil War. He witnessed sights beyond mention, however, these scenes of blood and gore only reinforced Whitman's antiwar perspective. "The battle" inevitably "rages with many a loud alarm and frequent advance and retreat." Though Whitman will be there to nurse the wounds, he will not be there in support of the fighting. He will give back the individuality to the soldier who has lost it. Whitman will write of these men in his poems, his prose, and his letters and though he will call these men heroes, he will never support their use of "liberty" in deciding to fight.

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