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Dead Broets Society: Masculinity in Walt Whitman's War Verse

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Abstract

There are two images of masculinity in Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps*, his collection of wartime poetry: one, the strong, hardened soldier, the image of manliness, and the other the boyish, rosy-cheeked recruit. Whitman's sexuality, while not the Victorian social norm, was no secret, and he wrote openly of the hospitalized soldiers during his time as a Union nurse with admiration, affection, and love. Some critics, such as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, castigated Whitman's queer themes to be overwhelming, distractingly sensual, and "unmanly," while others, like William Sloane Kennedy, dissented, arguing instead that the overt sexuality present in Whitman's work was precisely what contributed to its masculinity, whether its desires were traditional or not. Whitman's work, "Drum-Taps" included, certainly does overflow with themes of gender and sex with hardly any mention of women. How, then, did the poet find himself in a crossroads of contradicting ideas of masculinity, and what are the implications of this dichotomy? [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Walt Whitman, sexuality, war poems

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Dead Broets Society: Masculinity in Walt Whitman's War Verse

December 21, 2015

By Annika Jensen '18

There are two images of masculinity in Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps*, his collection of wartime poetry: one, the strong, hardened soldier, the image of manliness, and the other the boyish, rosy-cheeked recruit. Whitman's sexuality, while not the Victorian social norm, was no secret, and he wrote openly of the hospitalized soldiers during his time as a Union nurse with admiration, affection, and love. Some critics, such as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, castigated Whitman's queer themes to be overwhelming, distractingly sensual, and "unmanly," while others, like William Sloane Kennedy, dissented, arguing instead that the overt sexuality present in Whitman's work was precisely what contributed to its masculinity, whether its desires were traditional or not. Whitman's work, "Drum-Taps" included, certainly does overflow with themes of gender and sex with hardly any mention of women. How, then, did the poet find himself in a crossroads of contradicting ideas of masculinity, and what are the implications of this dichotomy?



Whitman and his friend Peter Doyle. Photo via sfgate.com

I will admit that it has taken me a while to reach a conclusion to this question, and I still have doubts about my reasoning. I am a lover of Whitman's poetry, and I have always had a respect for his daring display of his own homosexuality, but diving back into "Drum-Taps" and subsequent research stumped me a bit. I finally decided that my conclusion would not come from what was written or presumed by scholars, but from my own literary analysis.

My conclusion is thus: Whitman employed juxtaposing images of masculinity to fill two rewarding roles: the savior and the saved. To the burly mustached soldier, the "true man" cited in poems such as "1861," Whitman was an awe-struck worshipper, a helpless victim saved by the Romantic hero. To the rosy-cheeked boy, a mere child battling dysentery in the white sheets of a hospital bed, Whitman was the savior, the gentle guiding light and stoic father figure who nursed the effeminate soldiers back to health. But masculinity, in both senses, was a mere characteristic of Whitman's greatest subject of admiration and object of devotion: the nation.

This dichotomy blends the more accepted homosocial relationship between men with repressed sexual charge. Whitman could not appeal to readers if his poetry was inundated with eroticism, as indicated by Higginson, so he instead focused his energy and desires into platonic relationships. By appealing to the boyish soldier, young and in-need, he was able to take on a fatherly role, thus appeasing his Victorian contemporaries. "My dead absorb—my young men's beautiful bodies ab / sorb—and their precious, precious, precious / blood," he writes in "Pensive on her dead gazing, I heard the mother of all." Descriptions of the body pervade "Drum-Taps" in examples such as these, intimate moments bordering observation and desire. Whitman in this case is filling the masculine role of the savior, the strong arms that cradle something precious and broken, but the emaciated, dying soldiers to whom he tended in their hospital beds were not the only victim looking for such manly salvation: their suffering bodies are representative of a war-torn America, the nation so proudly beheld by Whitman as the great force of the world now bleeding out from its bullet wounds.

On the other hand, the manly image, the soldier as the savior, is also representative of Whitman's love and desire for both men and country. In "1861," Whitman describes the year itself, the inception of the war, as, "a strong man, erect, / clothed in blue clothes, / advancing, carrying a rifle on your shoulder, / With well-gristled body and sunburnt face and hands." The blue clothes are clearly symbolic of Union Army regalia, while the description of the body, worn and weathered but strong, is descriptive of the working American man, a laborer similar to those included in Whitman's own "I Hear America Singing." These descriptions of strong America are not overtly sexual, either, but instead mirror "traditional" qualities of masculinity: stolid, manly, and sonorous. Compared to the muscled strongmen of the U.S. Army Whitman was a helpless admirer, a subject of the masculine protection they emanated. He was a child, wide-eyed and trembling, looking up to his father or older brother, defenders of the home. The soldier himself was the nation embodied, and the army collectively was each American force that, grinding together, produced a strong, steady, and watchful country.

I can conclude, then, that Whitman's contradicting images and roles of man in "Drum-Taps," in addition to overwhelming homosocial themes, were not a result of his sexuality but simply a reflection of himself; his inclusion of masculinity and its subsequent dichotomy can be attributed instead to his war-time pride and nationalism. In moments of dread, he wrote of the burly manly-

man, savior of the nation, and in moments of pride he depicted the young volunteer, desperately in need of the poet's love and care. Image, however, was but a trifle to Whitman. It was the man himself, his courage and willingness and reflection of country that was the true image of affection.

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