

An explication of walt
whitman's "give me
the splendid silent
sun"



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In his January 6, 1865 letter to fellow writer and self-confessed radical William O'Connor, Walt Whitman states in no uncertain terms that his poetry collection *Drum Taps* "delivers my ambition. . . to express. . . the pending action of this time and land we swim in, with all (its) despair. . . the unprecedented anguish of {the} suffering, the beautiful young men, in wholesale death and agony." But in contrast to this view, Whitman also declares *Drum Taps* to be a collection which reverberates with "the blast of the trumpet and the undertones of. . . comradeship and human love, (with) the clear notes of faith and triumph" (Bradley 765). In his poem "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun," first published in *Drum Taps* in May of 1865, Whitman describes his emotional attachment to the Civil War through his own experiences in New York City where the war efforts of the North were being examined and discussed by virtually every citizen. In his landmark work *American Renaissance*, F. O. Matthiessen notes that Whitman's "deepened perception of the meaning of suffering" brought on by his "resolution to become a volunteer nurse during the Civil War" resulted in the creation of *Drum Taps* (537). While living in Manhattan, Whitman heard "the sound of the trumpets and drums" (line 30), "the rustle and clang of muskets" (line 39) and witnessed "the soldiers in companies or regiments" (line 31) and "the dense brigade. . . with high piled military wagons" (lines 34-35), all examples of the on-going struggle between the Union and the Confederacy over state's rights and slavery. This poem, however, is not totally concerned with the war, as in Whitman's anthem "Beat! Beat! Drums!" in which he explores his dedication to the military principles of the North. In "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun," Whitman offers two conflicting points of view, the first being a calm, peaceful co-existence with nature

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which can only be achieved via a complete indifference to the war, and secondly, a turbulent, war-mongering attitude replete with flag-waving, cheering crowds, marching soldiers and shows of military pomp and circumstance in the streets of Manhattan. Whitman's use of declamation or rhetorical speech, as in "Song of Myself," is also highly represented in "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun," for he interprets and defends his ideals of nature with commands like "Give me a field" (line 3), "Give me an arbor" (line 4), "Give me fresh corn" (line 5) and "Give me nights perfectly quiet" (line 6). In contrast, he demonstrates his ambivalence with lines like "Keep your woods O Nature" (20), "Keep your fields of clover" (22) and "Keep the blossoming buckwheat fields" (24), all in relation to his yearning to join the celebrations in the streets of Manhattan due to his love for city life. In the first stanza of "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun," Whitman presents a portrait of nature separate from "the noise of the world" (line 12), a metaphor indicative of the urban dissonance of the city, a product of the Industrial Revolution. The "splendid silent sun" symbolizes the source of all life on earth, with "splendid" denoting the changes in the seasons which bring forth ripe fruits, fields of wheat, arbors and fresh vegetables, while "silent" points to the sun's indifference to the societies of man. Whitman's primal connection with nature is shown in such phrases as "Give me odorous at sunrise a garden of beautiful flowers" (line 8), "Give me a perfect child" (line 12) and "Give me solitude, give me Nature" (line 11). Whitman's poetic vision in "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun" also revolves around music which appropriately must be conveyed in all poetry in order to maintain a sense of balance, tone and rhythmic structure. "Give me to warble spontaneous songs recluse by myself, for my ears only" (lines 8-9)

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shows that Whitman is a musical being dependent on the music of nature and existence. His "spontaneous songs," a reflection of his need to improvise, demonstrates his personal harmony with nature via a chord tuned to his spiritual self, a contrapuntal fugue in tune with nature's "primal sanities!" (line 12). At the conclusion of this stanza, Whitman reverses himself with "still I adhere to my city/Day upon day and year upon year" (lines 16-17) which reinforces his love for the city in contrast to his longing for nature. The "splendid silent sun" is then replaced with images of the city in the second stanza—"Give me faces and streets" (line 27), "Give me women—give me comrades and lovers by the thousand!" (line 28) and "Give me Broadway" (line 29). This serves as a second means for Whitman to describe his delight with music through the vocalizations of the people in the streets and the shows on Broadway with their bawdy renditions of dancing and singing—the heartbeat of Manhattan that Whitman so adores. Towards the conclusion of the second stanza, the music continues with the rhythms of "soldiers marching" (line 29), the blaring of trumpets and the banging of drums which shows Whitman's adoration for military processions. This musical extravaganza terminates with "People. . . with strong voices" (line 36), "Manhattan streets with their powerful throbs" (line 37) and "The endless and noisy chorus. . . the turbulent musical chorus" (line 39) of the boisterous crowds of New York City, shouting and singing the joys of their forthcoming victory over the Confederacy. The final line of "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun" presents Whitman's ultimate decision—he wishes to be given "Manhattan faces and eyes forever." Despite his love for nature and the peacefulness that it represents, Whitman's mood remains unalterable, due to the fever pitch created by the Civil War in the boroughs and

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neighborhoods of New York City, for he has accepted, without reserve, the chaotic, turbulent society inherent in the city. Bibliography Bradley, Scully & Harold W. Blodgett, Eds. "Whitman on His Art: Comments, 1855-1892." Leaves of Grass. NY: W. W. Norton, 1973. Matthiessen, F. O. American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman. NY: Oxford UP, 1979.