

# Unveiling the metaphor of light in civil war poems



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The above passage is excerpted from Canto I of Longfellow's translation of Dante Alighieri's *Paradiso* (22-24). In this third section of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante uses light as a metaphor for goodness; as objects move closer to God, they reflect more light. However, light serves another purpose in the work, as well. The divine light in *Paradiso* is so bright that at first, the speaker cannot even bear to look at it in its entirety. His experience of visiting *Paradiso* is so intense that he is continually conscious about using language to recount it accurately. In the quotation, the speaker can only hope to convey "a shadow" of the great light to which he is exposed.

As a poet, Whitman, too, is conscious about his ability to accurately depict what he observed in visiting Union hospitals during the Civil War. In the introduction to his *Memoranda*, written between 1862 and 1865, he writes:

Of the present Volume most of its pages are verbatim renderings from such pencillings on the spot. Some were scratch'd down from narratives I heard and itemized while watching, or waiting, or tending somebody amid those scenes. I have perhaps forty such little note-books left, forming a special history of those years, for myself alone, full of associations never to be possibly said or sung. I wish I could convey to the reader the associations that attach to these soil'd and creas'd little livraisons, each composed of a sheet or two of paper, folded small to carry in the pocket, and fasten'd with a pin.

In fact, Whitman uses Dante's metaphor of light and reflection in several of his Civil War poems. In one aspect, Whitman uses the concept of illumination to glorify images of soldiers. However, he also uses the concept of

illumination to expose the horrors of war particularly the bodies of dead or wounded soldiers. In addition, Whitman uses scarcity or reflection of light to articulate a literal absence of holiness, as well as his own concern about depicting real images in poetry. The idea of projecting the shadow or reflection of a true image, introduced by Plato in 360 B. C. E and adapted by Dante in 1300 A. D., resurfaced in the 1860s in Whitman's poetry as a result of growing technological advances in the field of photography. The first successful picture (i. e. image reproduced on a sensitized surface by the action of light) was produced in 1827, but the exposure time was approximately eight hours, restricting subjects to landscapes only. It was not until 1851 only ten years prior to the Civil War that Frederick Scott Archer introduced a method known as the Collodion process, in which exposure times were reduced to two or three seconds, thus opening up new horizons in photography. At that time, the goal of capturing a realistic image in a still photograph revived the age-old question of whether a shadow or reflection of an image could accurately depict its true meaning. Photographs were widely used during the Civil War in capturing images of battlefields and of dead and wounded soldiers.

But just as people wondered whether the photographs could truly portray the reality of their subjects, Whitman, too, wondered whether his poems could accurately describe his experiences and observations to the fullest extent. This is why in several of the Civil War poems, the settings are often poorly lit, and soldiers are described as dark figures or shadows. Furthermore, Whitman capitalizes on the qualities of the moon that capture the essence of

the “light” metaphor; while moonlight can provide an illuminating effect, it is “photographic” in the sense that its rays are reflected from the sun.

Whitman evokes this quality of moonlight in “Look Down Fair Moon.” On one hand, Whitman commemorates the dead soldiers by requesting that the moon “bathe this scene” and “pour softly down.” On the other hand, the fact that Whitman uses moonlight as opposed to a purer kind of light suggests that he is aware that his poem cannot represent them accurately. The poem itself acts as a reflection of the true image of the soldiers, just as the moonlight that bathes them is a reflection of sunlight.

The romantic language of the beginning of the poem comes to a halt at the end of the second line with “faces ghastly, swollen, purple,” indicating that the poem is not solely for the purpose of their commemoration. It is clear, as is the case in many of his Civil War poems, that Whitman intentionally calls the reader’s attention to the body and to the physical appearance of the dead. Here, he describes the dead soldiers as Christ-like figures, saying: “the dead on their backs with arms toss’d wide.” The image is not of soldiers lying at peace, but rather of bodies strewn about as if they died suddenly. The Christ-like language suggests that they are martyrs, or innocent people who died for their country. However, the fact that the bodies are not at peace and the faces are “ghastly, swollen, purple” suggests that there is something horribly wrong with the picture. The poem is indeed like a picture the scene is motionless, and reading the poem gives the eerie impression of looking at a snapshot of a battlefield at night.

In fact, the effect of reading the poem is much like the effects that people had in viewing photographs taken during the war. The poem, like a photograph, is emotionally powerful; yet Whitman is conscious of the problem of attempting to describe something so powerful in a poem, just like the problem of capturing the essence of a true image in a photograph. His intention is not merely to shock the reader, but also to impress the images of the dead on the reader's mind so that he will not forget the horrors of the war. By using moonlight to shine over the soldiers, Whitman commemorates them, while at the same time exposes the horror of their deaths, and expresses his concern about representing them accurately. Whereas Dante could only convey a shadow of the light because it was too divine for words, Whitman presents a reflection of the true image in part because it is too horrific for words. The concept of light becomes somewhat more problematic in "Dirge for Two Veterans."

Whitman's movement from "Look Down Fair Moon" to "Dirge for Two Veterans" parallels the growing issues about photography in his time. While the moon shines over dead, motionless bodies in "Look Down Fair Moon," there is much more movement in "Dirge for Two Veterans," which poses the photographic problem of capturing a moving image. Whitman's attempt to assign meaning to the moon's presence is represented well in the line: "Beautiful over the house-tops, ghastly, phantom moon," since he combines both "beautiful" and "ghastly" in the same adjectival phrase. At the beginning, the poem appears to be about the "two veterans son and father dropt together," but it soon transforms to being about a "strong dead-march." The effect is that the father and son become representative

characters, and the dirge is for all dead soldiers. Thus, in the final stanza, the “you” in “The moon gives you light” refers not just to the two veterans, but to all of the dead who lost their lives unjustly in battle. In saying, “The moon gives you light,” Whitman refers to the moon acting as a force that glorifies their bodies as well as one that unveils the horror of their deaths. Further contributing to that duality is the fact that the poem begins with the last sunbeam falling “from the finish’d Sabbath.” Just like the dead soldiers who lay on their backs like Christ figures, there is something extremely unholy about the burial of father and son in the “new-made double grave” on the Sabbath, the holiest time of the week. His difficulty in reconciling commemoration and exposure of the unholy is paralleled by the movement of the “strong dead-march,” which is harder to capture both photographically and poetically.

Whitman’s use of light becomes even more complicated in “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prepared, and the Road Unknown.” Appropriately, the setting of the poem is darker and more vague than in others. Instead of the moon, Whitman uses a scarcity of light to represent the photographic problem of capturing moving images as well as the problem of balancing commemoration with exposure of the grotesque. Since the poem deals more directly with what Whitman actually saw and recorded in Union hospitals, his concerns about being able to convey his observations accurately are well-developed through the use of images of scarce light and shadows.

Throughout the poem, things are described as poorly lit. In the third and fourth lines, the retreating army comes upon the lights of a “dim-lighted building.” Inside, he sees: a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever

made, Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles and lamps, And by one great pitchy torch stationary with the wild red flame and clouds of smoke.

The dark and dimly-lit atmosphere underscores the very idea that what the speaker sees is “beyond all the pictures and poems ever made.” Whitman’s own experience of seeing the heaps of wounded soldiers is so intense that he cannot describe it clearly for the reader, nor can it be captured entirely in a photograph, for that matter. Hence, it is “beyond all the pictures and poems ever made.” That is why the images in the poem are vague and difficult to see. In essence, the words themselves are mere shadows of the true forms from which they are inspired. Whitman mentions his own doubts about portraying the experience through the voice of the nurse by saying, “I stanch the blood temporarily.” In this instance, Whitman represents himself as being ineffective as a nurse in order to express his concern about being ineffective as a poet. The stanching of the blood is an ephemeral act, just as Whitman believes his poem to be ephemeral and incapable of describing the experience. He reinforces the notion that he cannot effectively recount the experience by using vague and nondescript language, as in the line: “faces, varieties, postures beyond description”.

Continuing the sense of duality in “Look Down Fair Moon” and “Dirge for Two Veterans,” Whitman incorporates the commemoration of the soldiers along with the exposure of the unholy. “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest” takes place in “a large old church at the crossing roads, now an impromptu hospital.” The fact that the soldiers are in a church suggests that they are somehow sacred and praiseworthy. However, there is a bitter irony in their

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location, much like the way the dead soldiers are depicted as Christ-like figures in "Look Down Fair Moon" and the way in which the father and son are put to rest on the Sabbath in "Dirge for Two Veterans." The fact that the soldiers who are wounded from battle are inside a place of worship suggests that there is something sacrilegious about the entire scene. The scarcity of light in the poem returns to the idea of Dante's *Paradiso*, in which the amount of light reflected in an object is proportional to its goodness. Whitman concludes the poem with an image of darkness, with the army "ever in darkness marching." The image of the marching army is significant because at the time of the Civil War, technology was not yet efficient enough to photograph a moving army. Furthermore, the army would have been impossible to photograph since it is in darkness, without a light source such as the moon in the other poems. Thus, in addition to the scarcity of light, as in the "dim-lighted building" and the "shadows of deepest, deepest black," the problem of capturing movement in a photograph, such as the marching on in darkness, serves to convey Whitman's perceived shortcomings about the poem's ability to portray reality. At the same time, the literal distance of the soldiers from light serves to convey the blasphemy of the situation.

In 1839, following the death of Joseph Niepce, the producer of the first successful photograph, Louis Daguerre invented the Daguerreotype, which produced images on photographic plates. At the time, some were skeptical of the process of photography and what it sought to achieve. For example, a German newspaper report stated: The wish to capture evanescent reflections is not only impossible... but the mere desire alone, the will to do so, is blasphemy. God created man in His own image, and no man-made machine



may fix the image of God. Is it possible that God should have abandoned His eternal principles, and allowed a Frenchman... to give to the world an invention of the Devil? In writing poems about what he witnessed in hospitals during the Civil War, Whitman sought to counter opinions like the one stated in the article above. By publishing his journals and numerous poems describing the nature of the war in great detail, he strove to accomplish what photographers of the time were striving to do capture the essence of a true image in a still frame. Just like the photographers of his time, however, Whitman was aware of the physical difficulty of attempting this. This is why so many of the poems express concerns similar to those of the speaker in *Paradiso* about a failure to relate the experience. Combining the function of light in photography with the metaphorical purpose of light in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Whitman succeeds in illuminating the essence of the Civil War its glory as well as its horror while conveying his concern about being able to reproduce it accurately.