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Whitman And The Elegy: Mythologizing Lincoln And The Poetic Reconstruction Of Mourning

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BY

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ABSTRACT

In Walt Whitman's mind, Abraham Lincoln represented the very essence of America and, because of this, Lincoln and his assassination were the ideal subject through which Whitman could explore the art of mourning on both individual and collective scales. The regimented order of lament, adoration, and consolation of the traditional elegy were not enough to accommodate the complex, organic mourning that Whitman sought to capture in his poems. Whitman's series of elegies following the death of Abraham Lincoln mythologized the president in ways that still permeate our historical view of Lincoln today. This essay seeks to give an in-depth explication of the ways in which Whitman consciously subverted the established traditions of the elegiac form to demonstrate that the process of grief could not be broken down to a simple formula as suggested by past elegists.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

If Walt Whitman was the voice of American democracy in the Civil War era, he viewed Abraham Lincoln as the face. For Whitman, Lincoln was the facilitator for the changes he wished to see in the country. Although he never met Lincoln in person, he commended Lincoln for his political savvy and his decision to go to war in an attempt to unify the country. Whitman believed that the similarities between all people should pull them toward common goals instead of their differences pushing them apart. He openly critiqued class structures, slavery, and organized religion in an attempt to create a poetic voice that captured the essence of an American, democratic bard. He hoped to enact change through his poetry by appealing to the sensibilities of the average American to unlock the promise of a united and egalitarian America. When Whitman was writing *Leaves of Grass*, the country was deeply divided. His work was born out of his social and political frustrations in the face of tension surrounding the ensuing Civil War. However, after little success in revolutionizing the American people with his poetry alone, Whitman came to understand that there needed to be a catalyst to create unity in the deeply divided nation outside of himself and his works.

The Civil War took an immense toll on the country and on Whitman personally. Little influenced Whitman's work more, however, than the death of Abraham Lincoln. This loss inspired Whitman to write some of the most highly anthologized poetry in the American literary canon. The President represented, for Whitman, every American ideal. Whitman's elegies for Lincoln offer a unique

glimpse into the sociopolitical climate after Lincoln's presidency, and they demonstrate how tragedy sparks new modes of poetic creation. Americans today still view Abraham Lincoln through the poetic lens that Whitman created. Lincoln is still the subject of books, movies, television programs and more, most of which include obligatory references to Whitman's poetry. Whitman transformed one of the most traditional forms of poetry, the elegy, into a vehicle that would mythologize Lincoln's life and legacy by deliberately subverting nineteenth-century norms regarding public versus private mourning and collective loss.

CHAPTER 2

LINCOLN AS WHITMAN'S EPITOME OF AMERICANNESS

According to Roy Morris' *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War*, in the midst of the controversial election of 1860 that Lincoln won by only a margin of about one million votes, war was brewing. Morris notes, "Whitman's depression [during this period] mirrored the mood of anxious Americans everywhere concerning the future–if any–of their imperiled republic" (10-11). Lincoln's election platforms for both of his terms as president were based upon liberation through democracy and nationalism. However, many Americans of the time saw no plausible answer in sight for a resolution to the weighty issues that deeply divided North and South. Abraham Lincoln, "the one individual charged with holding the states together politically as Whitman had tried to do poetically," shared many of the same values as Whitman; unity and kinship were vital to Lincoln's goals as president just as they were to Whitman's work as a poet (Morris 12). Lincoln expressed these through his powerful oratory as Whitman did the same in both his public and private writing. Interwoven with images of the country as it existed in his age, as well as Whitman's hopes for the country, *Leaves of Grass* encapsulated the unity and equality that Whitman and Lincoln alike viewed as essential to making America the free and unified country that it had the potential to be.

Whitman saw Lincoln in person a couple of times, but they never spoke or were formally introduced. William Barton notes the claims of Henry B. Rankin and William Douglas O'Connor that Abraham Lincoln read *Leaves of Grass* and

recognized Whitman in passing in Brooklyn. However, Barton also noted that these incidents could have been fabricated as there is no tangible proof aside from their personal accounts. However, we do know that the closest Whitman came to the president was on Monday, October 31, 1864. On that day, Whitman went to the White House to see John Hay because he was seeking a ticket to and from New York, which was a common journey for Whitman. John Hay acquired this pass in hopes that Whitman and his friends would be more apt to vote in favor of Lincoln (Barton 79). While Whitman was there, he saw Lincoln a short distance away having a conversation with a friend. For Whitman, "simply being where he could see the great President, face to face with a friend, unconsciously revealing his character in human relations, deeply impressed [him]" (Barton 80). Whitman was a man to whom small details and seemingly insignificant observations were noteworthy. Although he never spoke to Lincoln, he felt personally connected to him through their similar beliefs in democracy, freedom, and unity. Whitman looked up to, and doted upon, Lincoln as the paternal guide that would lead America down the path of decency. Cavitch notes that "more than anyone else, Lincoln was Whitman's creature of reminiscence: the object of his cruising glance, the star of his national dramaturgy, the father of his family, and, to the end, his persistently ineffable loss" (243). In his essay "Personal Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln" in *North American Review*, Whitman called him "the grandest figure yet, on all the crowded canvas of the nineteenth century" and with his death, Whitman felt as though he and America lost a remarkable fatherly figure (Barton 89). Whitman viewed Lincoln with the adoration that a child may

bestow upon his father; Lincoln represented the unity, democracy, and very spirit of America.

President Abraham Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth at the Ford Theater and died on April 15, 1865 in Washington, D.C. The Civil War had ended just six days earlier, so his death, after such a triumph, devastated the nation. Whitman was distraught over the Civil War, but he believed that the "cost had been worth it" (Morris 3). Lincoln's death, however, catapulted Whitman into a creative whirlwind with the intent that Lincoln's legacy might be preserved. Whitman's papers from 1865 reveal a brainstorm of words that expose exactly how he was feeling upon hearing the news of Lincoln's death: "sorrow," "dismal," "anguish," "sobs," "total darkness," "disaster" ("[sorrow]"). This creative whirlwind produced a series of elegies with Lincoln as their subject. Whitman never mentions Lincoln by name in his elegies, but Americans in the postbellum era recognized his presence in the poems. Additionally, the absence of Lincoln's name gives the poems a certain degree of flexibility, allowing them to speak to loss or mourning in nearly any situation. Later in his career, however, Whitman grouped his elegies in a cluster titled "President Lincoln's Burial Hymn" in an annex to his 1871 collection of poetry, *Passage to India*. Additionally, in the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman included the elegies again in a cluster called "Memories of President Lincoln." These intricately crafted elegies mythologize Lincoln by portraying him as a fiercely committed leader who made the ultimate sacrifices in order to unite America during the greatest internal division the country had ever seen and whose death was deeply felt by all

Americans. Whitman's poetic treatment of Lincoln's death uniquely manipulated traditional features of the elegy by simultaneously grieving for and celebrating the dead, coupling death with peace, and treating the mourning of the individual as a metaphor for collective loss.

CHAPTER 3

THE AMERICAN ELEGY: SITUATING WHITMAN'S WORK

Properly understanding the ways in which Whitman actively worked within and against the form of the traditional elegy requires an extensive understanding of the situation of the elegy in the mid-nineteenth century, including how people mourned both publicly and privately, how people wrote about grief, and the historical significance of the elegiac form. According to Max Cavitch's *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman*, the elegy "has an unbroken history in English-speaking North America from the earliest years of British settlement. Yet beyond its puritan phase it has received no comprehensive treatment" (2). Cavitch, situating his own work with Peter Sacks on *The English Elegy*, names Whitman's elegies as some of the earliest cases of "an American counter tradition in elegy" (27). Though Cavitch acknowledges Whitman's significance as a poet, he fails to address how Whitman revolutionized the form itself. Whitman played an integral role in changing modern lyric poetry in that, while his work maintained aspects of traditional poetic forms, it also consciously worked to subvert them. Cavitch speaks of Whitman's elegies and his relationship with Lincoln quite broadly, but there is much more to be seen upon an in-depth analysis of the poems themselves. More specifically the imagery, language usage, and structure of each poem warrant deep explication to do justice to their function as subversive and mythologizing works.

Cavitch articulates through the course of his book, that elegies were still being written throughout the nineteenth century, but they did not receive attention in the ways they had up until the Puritans. The earliest instances of the elegy stem back to Ancient Rome and the work of Virgil and Ovid, which inspired John Milton's "Lycidas," one of the greatest examples of pastoral elegy. However, the genre had not yet taken shape or begun to develop into well-defined sub-genres. Cavitch notes that elegies were being written before Whitman and they were quite diverse in content, though the form remained relatively consistent. However, the gap in attention after the Puritans makes the elegies relatively difficult to historicize. Still, a brief overview of the elegiac form is necessary to understanding its significance. Anne Bradstreet is commonly referred to as the mother of the American elegy. Bradstreet's private elegies were mostly about her deceased grandchildren wherein she praised their innocence. Though these poems do break convention in that they question God's plans, this expression of mourning still contrasts sharply with the desecration of the family that Plath, Lowell, and Sexton would employ much later (Ramazani 222). Like Milton and other seventeenth-century elegists, Bradstreet was careful to keep the focus of her private works on pious elements as opposed to worldly ones, meaning that the poems focused on religious and spiritual themes as opposed to societal or social ones. She displayed humbleness, honesty, and other characteristics that are associated with a pious person (Ramazani 222-3). Her work expresses intense, individual mourning and her only confidant is God. There is no sense of collective

loss appearing in her private poems. Her public poems adhered to the conventions of praise dictated by the elegy formula.

The New England elegists of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were the forefathers of the tradition. Poets like Cotton Mather, who deeply admired Bradstreet, sought to follow in past elegists' footsteps by what Cavitch refers to as a legitimate succession (35). His elegy to the late Harvard president Urian Oakes begins by Mather placing himself among a "chorus" of elegists, religious and political leaders. Those who wrote elegies did so with the understanding that their deaths would be commemorated by the same form and so on, thus immortalizing both the poets themselves and the form. Additionally, elegists felt it to be their duty to write elegies to other significant men whose legacies they viewed as important. Urian Oakes, for example, was a part of the Harvard institution that produced many great New England men, so by writing an elegy to Oakes, Mather was soliciting future generations to uphold both his legacy and his institution.

Unfortunately, the elegy did not live on in the ways its admirers would have wished, presumably much to the chagrin of Mather. Benjamin Franklin and other authors of the mid- to late- 1700s began to take part in anti-elegy satire that parodied, mocked, and ridiculed the form (Ramazani 216). In the words of the satirists, the "elegy-by-recipe" composed of virtues, last words, melancholy images, weak rhymes/form, and haphazard classical references were nothing but mindless and ingenuine slop. Though this trend in satire persisted for a short time, the formula found its way back into popularity. However, when it arose again, the

form took on a more active role in that while the form still adhered to the traditional phases of loss, they also moved away from the religious, mythological aspects.

George Washington's death in 1799 evoked a great body of work with similar intentions upheld by Mather and the elegists before him: to uphold the deceased's legacy and the tradition of poetic mourning through elegy. These works sought to represent grief on a national scale for the first time in America. However, this caused the concept of individual mourning to be pushed out of American literary consciousness. Grief became homogenized, at least on paper. The elegiac recipe, ridiculed by Benjamin Franklin, had returned. One would write of lamenting the deceased, then dote on the dead by dressing their burial site or some similar ritual, and then one would feel consolation in that peace had been found in death. David Humphreys' "Poem on the Death of General Washington" is a prime example of the seventeenth-century foundation of the elegy as well as the shift in the American view of mourning. While the poem maintained the idea that a role in the public eye is a double-edged sword, the poem focuses on Washington's time in office and role in the war to evoke the question of what it means to be an American patriot. Additionally, the decision to create an elegy works to uphold the idea that the elegy preserves history. However, this preservation of Washington's legacy and the shift to emphasize the universality of mourning was a small, yet significant, precursor to the shift in the spheres of public versus private mourning that Whitman's work would bring.

Because of the lack of positive, in-depth attention to work in this form between the age of the Puritans and Whitman, "the regimentation of grief, like the regimentation of sexuality, in mid-nineteenth century America" became "increasingly medicalized" (Cavitch 238). Grieving in the early nineteenth century was something that should be done in private unless the tragic event was one on a national scale as demonstrated by the works on Washington. In traditional elegies, "the mournful, often staid formulation of grieving—[was] an elegy's primary rhetorical gesture" (Baker 208). In the case of collective tragedy and loss, mourning was regimented and considered a requirement of patriotism and national pride. Individual mourning was considered inappropriate, illogical, and downright rude to be demonstrated openly (Cavitch 238).

In this essay, I contend that Whitman's dynamic changes to the elegiac form and the treatment of mourning must be understood within the sociopolitical circumstances during which they were composed. Lincoln's presidential legacy already loomed gargantuan over the country well before the end of the war. Abraham Lincoln's death and funeral were so widely publicized and the country's grief put out in the open that Whitman seized the opportunity to make a statement on it through his poetry. Cavitch observes that Whitman's elegiac language "in valuing the left over and the left out—the dead soldier whose name no one knows, the unidentified bones on the battlefield, the murdered president whose democratic vision remains unfulfilled—discovers a moral substitute for statistical analyses of the costs of the war and for the forms of mourning—stoic, efficient, authoritative—that derive from such analyses" (239). In other words, Whitman's

elegies took the clinical, public and private processes of mourning, both inside of and outside of wartime loss, and demonstrated their essentiality to human experience for spiritual and moral growth.

CHAPTER 4

THE ELEGIES

Lincoln's death devastated the country just as it began to taste peace for the very first time since the Civil War's start. The death of Abraham Lincoln spurred Whitman to offer his unique commentary on loss in both the public and private spheres and, in doing so, write Lincoln into history as the epic epitome of Americanness. Whitman's elegies to Lincoln have been studied independent of each other and occasionally in pairs. However, for the purposes of this analysis, it is important to look at the poems as a collection of elegies that work together in their mission to construct both a new form of elegy that would change the way mourning was portrayed and a poetic form that had the ability to successfully capture the aftermaths of Lincoln's life and death. For Whitman, "Lincoln [was] critical to both poetry and politics, a fusing of nation and art that Whitman himself had hoped to embody" (Buinicki 148). Max Cavitch and other scholars have discussed each of the elegies and how Whitman uses traditional elegiac conventions to demonstrate the organic processes of mourning in both the public and private spheres. It is "because death is both a local event and a fact of life, elegy inevitably invokes a tension between the specific and the general, the unique and the representative" (Hammond 210). Whitman latched on to that tension and pulled it to the surface of his works in ways that scholarship has failed to truly appreciate. I demonstrate that Whitman's subversive elegies use Lincoln's death as the primary subject of loss because, to Whitman, he *was* America and change.

On April 19, 1865, Walt Whitman published his very first poem in response to Lincoln's death titled "Hush'd Be the Camps To-day." *Drum-Taps,* a poetry collection about the Civil War, was at the press when Whitman learned of Lincoln's death, so Whitman delayed the printing in order to ensure that "Hush'd Be the Camps To-day" would be included in the collection (Cavitch 249). "Hush'd" was originally titled "April 19," the day that Lincoln's coffin was on display. Officially published in May of the same year in *Drum-Taps*, this poem consists of three short, yet powerful stanzas that have received little critical attention. Though it is one of Whitman's less known pieces, it set the stage for the series of poems that would bring the art of the elegy back to life and become some of the most renowned works in the American literary canon.

Unlike most elegies, the poem begins with a tone of peace and tranquility: "Hush'd be the camps to-day, / And soldiers let us drape our war-torn weapons, / And each with musing soul retire to celebrate, / our dear commander's death" (1-4). The image of the tattered weaponry being laid to rest in the quiet camps of tired soldiers reflects the ceasefire in the wake of the Civil War's end. The soldiers include both the men fighting in the war and the citizens of the country dealing with strife that comes along with a divided country and war-time casualties. The use of the word "us" establishes that the perspective of the poem is not just of one speaker but of many: soldiers and civilians alike. This unique image of collective serenity and relief juxtaposed with the celebration of the "dear commander's death" is atypical of elegies because this peaceful acceptance usually does not come until the poem's conclusion. The use of the word

"celebrate" is interesting because it implies both a joyous occasion and, seemingly contradictory, a somber one. The commander is the literal Commander in Chief, President Lincoln, and the word "dear" signifies that this is not a spiteful celebration but one that demonstrates an intimacy between the commander and his men. They are celebrating the end of the war, the end of a president's struggle for peace in his country, and the final moments of melancholic celebration that comes with funeral rituals.

The subsequent stanza suggests that, in addition to the peace of the soldiers, the Commander in Chief is also at peace in death. The speakers say, "No more for him life's stormy conflicts / Nor victory, nor defeat—no more time's dark events, / Charging like ceaseless clouds across the sky" (5-7). In other words, the struggles that come with life, war, and leading a divided country are behind the commander. He no longer has to bear these burdens and has, like the soldiers, been allowed to "retire." The next stanza of the poem works to solidify the alluded-to perspective of many individuals speaking collectively by its use of first-person plural pronouns: "But sing in our name, / Sing of the love we bore him—because you, dweller in camps, / know it truly" (8-10). Here, the speakers are addressing Whitman directly. They ask him to speak for them and express the love they had for their leader. Additionally, in typical Whitmanian fashion, he makes himself—the poet—both separate from and one with the soldiers. The gratitude of the speakers puts Lincoln on a pedestal, so to speak. Although they have all suffered and sacrificed, they understand the necessity of their strife. Lincoln was the one who led them into war, but he suffered just as they did as he

allowed men to fight for a cause he truly believed in, knowing full well lives would be lost. His people fought hard and with the war's end, they found their peace. Their commander also found his peace, even if it is in death. For his sacrifice, the president's soldiers wished to see his sacrifice written alongside their own. Whitman is well-suited for this job because he worked as a nurse for wounded soldiers during the war so he understands their gratitude for Lincoln "truly." He considers himself to be both literally and metaphorically one with the men.

The final stanza of the poem continues the plea of the speakers to Whitman in hopes that he will write a poem that will encapsulate their collective mourning. This tall order works to make Lincoln seem larger than life because the army, which could potentially harbor anger or resentment toward the man who they pledged to follow into the violent, unforgiving recesses of battle. However, they ask that he "As they invault the coffin there, / Sing—as they close the doors of the earth upon him—one verse, / For the heavy hearts of soldiers" (11-13). The speakers are given a collective identity—soldiers—and they beckon to Whitman to write poetry on their behalf. He recognizes their sacrifice and loved their leader just as they did. Part of Whitman's signature style was establishing a connection with his audience: "he not only wished to be their spokesman, he wanted them to call out to him to be their spokesman, thereby legitimating his writing" (Vendler 5). It is from this call to action by those who fought for the cause of the Union and Lincoln that Whitman was compelled to write his most famous works, "O Captain! My Captain!" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Early

signs of Whitman's form subversion are subtle in "Hush'd," through his tone of peace and emphasis on collective mourning, but they become far more pronounced in his subsequent works.

"O Captain! My Captain!," in both content and cadence, is considerably more upbeat than the quiet, weary tone of "Hush'd Be the Camps To-day." The poem begins with neither the speaker nor audience having any knowledge that a death has occurred; again, beginning the poem in exultation instead of distress reflects Whitman's intentional derivation from elegiac norms. This reflects the state of the country in the brief period of Lincoln's life after the war ended. The country celebrated and the president was there to share in the revelry. The first-person speaker calls out "O Captain! My Captain!" saying their "fearful trip is done" and the "prize [they] sought is won" (1-2). Lincoln, of course, is the captain of the symbolic ship of America. Putting Lincoln in this position of power makes him into a hero. The trip referred to is the long, bloody trek through the Civil War, and the prize won is the preservation of the Union. The people "all exulting" represent the citizens of America celebrating the war's end (3-4). However, in a sudden turn of events, the speaker cries out that the captain "lies, / Fallen cold and dead" (5-8). The quickness with which this image appears mimics the shock of Lincoln's sudden and unexpected assassination. The poem's shift from what seems to be a poem celebrating the triumph of a leader and his people to a solemn realization of the downfall of the leader reflects the atmosphere of shock in the country upon hearing the news of their victorious, long-suffering leader's demise.

The next stanza is one of denial and disbelief. The end of a long, difficult journey was the cause for the celebration in the previous stanza and the speaker desperately pleads for the captain to "rise up and hear the bells; / Rise up—for you the flag is flung" (9-10). The celebratory scene represents the emotional conflict of revelry at the conclusion of the Civil War being interrupted by the president's death. Lincoln was steering the ship of the Union, and he abolished slavery and managed to unify the fractured country. These momentous victories, however, become overshadowed by the tragedy in the eyes of the speaker. The speaker hopes that "It is some dream that on the deck, / You've fallen cold and dead" (15-16). The experience of seeing the captain's corpse seems unreal, especially considering the exuberant backdrop his death is up against.

The final stanza of the poem is the speaker's realization once again that the captain is, in fact, gone, for he "does not answer, his lips are pale and still" (17). The imagery is dark and the tone is somber and intensely descriptive. The speaker comes to mournfully accept that, though the captain is dead, the "ship is anchor'd and safe and sound, its voyage is closed and done" (19). In other words, before Lincoln died, he got the country to a safe and stable position again. The revelry is still well-deserved. However, the reality of the captain's death deeply affects the speaker: "But I, with mournful tread, / Walk the deck my Captain lies, / Fallen cold and dead" (22-24). There is not a sense of resolution at the end of this poem which works against elegiac tradition. Typically, an elegy begins with the sense of disbelief and ends with a sense of peace or acceptance. This order can be seen in many elegies but, most notably, in John Milton's pastoral elegy

"Lycidas," which is often credited with molding the tradition of the pastoral elegy though it was heavily influenced by the even earlier works of Virgil and Edmund Spenser (Patrides 35). This poem begins with the intense sorrow of the speaker as he mourns the loss of "young Lycidas" (Milton 9) and proceeds to sing his praises, equate him with a shepherd, and eventually accept the loss. Whitman has reversed this convention by beginning with a tone of peaceful acceptance and ending with disbelief.

Contrary to Whitman's other elegies to Lincoln, the time span of events in the poem is compressed and the speaker has had no time to process the loss of the country's tried and true captain, President Lincoln. The character of the commander and captain is painted as the ultimate hero and is surrounded by a revelry so massive and universal that his death is surreal to the speaker. Additionally, in each of the three stanzas, Lincoln is referred to as "father." This word works in stark contrast to the title of captain because it is denoting an intimate, relationship with the fallen one. Helen Vendler comments on the descending shift in title: "The position of Commander--remote from his troops--has been lessened to that of Captain--sharing a ship with his men--and then lessened to the familial one of father and son, as Lincoln's hierarchic relation to others becomes ever more democratic, even intimate" (6). The complex relationship between the speaker and the deceased demonstrates that though there was a considerable gap in power dynamic, the relationship was far deeper than superior and subordinate. Therefore, the decision to include the father-son relationship, calling to mind Bradstreet's familial elegies, adds a deeper

dimension of individual loss between the speaker and the captain. Additionally, the use of this relationship operates on a more universal level in that the deceased was father to all his men.

This creates a sense of conflict within the speaker that mimics Whitman's own conflict regarding the president, the larger-than-life captain and father figure, who is taken away while his legacy lives on. The final stanza of the poem juxtaposes these feelings of intense grief with feelings of overwhelming joy. The bells continue to chime as the speaker attempts to come to grips with what has happened to the captain. These conflicting emotions magnify the speaker's disbelief and internal conflict. The refrain that ends each stanza, "fallen cold and dead," ends the poem on a powerful note. The repetition of this phrase echoes the speaker's shock and struggle to accept the reality of what has happened. Once again, the sheer emotion of the speaker's individual pain and disbelief appear to be the most prevalent theme, with no resolution in sight. Structuring the poem in this way shows a real emotional tension which is meant to mimic an organic process of grief. Grief and mourning are situational responses, "arising from a specific occasion, [it] usually fades as the mourner adjusts to the loss" (Hammond 208). Grief, though it dies down, does not always have an absolute end; it lingers on until the intense sting becomes a dull reminder of the loss. Only once the initial pain has fizzled can one reach any kind of release. The novelty in this work is its demonstration that grief should not be reduced to a step-by-step process in poetry because it is not one in real life. The process or mourning is not a perfect formula—it often involves conflict and mixed emotions, no immediate resolution,

it differs from person to person, tragedy to tragedy, and the intentional inversion of the traditional chain of events illustrates that.

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" gives a more detailed and complete description of grieving specifically in the wake of Lincoln's death, and can be viewed as the speaker and celebrators of this poem beginning to process the monumental tragedy. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" seems like a traditional elegy on the surface in that it demonstrates a progression as the speaker moves from intense grief toward understanding and acceptance of death. The three typical phases of the elegy are evident: the lament, the praise/adoration, and the consolation. In its beginning, "the poem abides by a conventional, ritualized manner of mourning" (Baker 208). Whitman also employs specifically pastoral elements, very similar to those employed in Milton's "Lycidas," in that Lincoln serves as the figure of the lost shepherd of the country and the poem is rich with natural, scenic images. However, unlike pastoral elegies of old, the shepherd image is not stated outright and there is no evocation of the muses. Additionally, the poem subdues "Christian symbols to those of Egypt and Greece, celebrating the natural beauty of life rather than the prospective beauties of heaven, finding its consolation in new joyous rituals of death" (Vendler 15). The poem follows the funeral procession of President Lincoln through the streets of Washington as people publicly mourn the loss of the president. The speaker's mourning works as representative of all those mourning for President Lincoln, as well as those mourning the people lost in the Civil War.

This poem is commonly analyzed by its three most prominent images—the lilacs, the fallen star, and the bird. Each of these elements is of the natural world, which maintains the poem's reminiscence of a pastoral elegy. The lilacs represent the speaker's love for the deceased. The star, Venus, represents the deceased himself. The bird, a hermit thrush, represents death. The poem has three primary parts that operate concurrently based upon these images. The idea of nature being personified to mourn the deceased is referred to as the pathetic fallacy, a tool that was a requirement of elegy in Milton's age but that was not properly coined until much later (Patrides 39). The poet puts this fallacy to work when he refers to the intertwining elements of the lilac, the star, and the thrush's song as the "trinity" brought by "ever-returning spring" (4-6). The president's death, then, is being portrayed as of such epic proportion that nature and its cycles are forever marked by it.

Lincoln's death, because it is mourned on a far more massive scale than those of other individuals lost during the Civil War, works as a metaphor for collective grief as a result of war. The poem is narrated from a first-person perspective, aligning with elegiac tradition. When the speaker last "mourn'd," it was springtime, and he recalls that the lilacs were blooming and the "great star early droop'd in the western sky" (1-3). Because of the distinct, cyclical features of the season, the speaker's feelings of mourning about "him [he] love[s]" also return perpetually (5-6). Lincoln was killed in the spring, when these natural events occurred, so the speaker is understood to be mourning the lost president. The speaker cries out to a "fallen star," calling it "powerful" (7). This choice of

words is significant: the fallen star represents Lincoln in death. The use of a star as the symbol of the deceased works to establish the deceased president's position as a figure of cosmic proportion. The subsequent lines consist of the speaker crying out to death which is represented by the "moody, tearful night" and the "black murk that hides the star" (8-11). The speaker evokes the image of the lilac blossoms on a bush in front of an "old farm house" (12). The speaker describes the plant's "delicate" blossoms and its "heart-shaped leaves" twice, calling each "a miracle" (12-16). The repetition of these details, referred to in the analysis of classical elegies as anaphora, works to emphasize their symbolism for adoration of the deceased. The speaker pulls a piece off the bush, representing his attempting to take ownership of his emotion.

The poem moves suddenly to the constricted image of a lone bird, the hermit thrush, hidden in the "secluded recesses" of the swamp (18-22). This dark image begins the section of the elegy that digs into the passionate expression of sadness, referred to as the lament. It sings the "Song of the bleeding throat! Death's outlet song of life— (for well, dear brother, I know / If thou wast not gifted to sing, thou would'st surely die)" (22-25). The speaker associates this concealed, solitary bird with death because its song or death's aftermath reverberates even when it is out of immediate sight. The bird's mournful song again calls to mind the pastoral elegiac tradition in that nature seems to be taking a role in grieving for the dead, but again, the poet switches images which disrupts the linearity that is traditionally demonstrated by elegies. From this reclusive image, the poet moves back into the wide-open space of the natural world at large.

A corpse in a coffin is being carried "over the breast of spring, the land, amid cities, / amid lanes, and through old woods" to "where it shall rest in the grave" (26-32). This journey is a metaphorical one where grief and mourning, like the song of the hermit thrush, cover an expanse far greater than the people and places that are a part of the body's literal journey to the grave. Lincoln's burial procession was a long one through the streets of the nation and its capital, but his symbolic journey back to the Earth from which all life is sprung reached far beyond the borders of the city. These images of nature recur throughout the poem even outside of the trinity images and each time, they demonstrate the relationship between the pastoral and human mortality. The scope of the speaker zooms back in and looks more literally at the journey of Lincoln's procession in the following stanza, describing the people lining the streets, lit torches, flags, and tolling bells (11-44). The lilac then finds its way into the funeral procession scenery.

The speaker offers the "sprig of lilac" to the coffin as a sign of respect (45). However, Whitman follows this individual symbol of mourning, with a parenthetical aside acknowledging the collective: "(Nor for you, for one, alone; / Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring: / For fresh as the morning—thus would I carol a song for you, O sane and sacred death" (46-48). These lines bring back the recurring theme of individual and collective mourning being closely related. The speaker mourns for Lincoln in the coffin, but the ritualistic placing of the flower on the coffin is a symbol not only for the death of a single person but for the deaths of many—those lost in the war and those families grieving. The flower is a typical pastoral element, reminiscent of the symbolism

of laurel in “Lycidas” and the works of Ovid wherein the plant represented honor and distinction (De Cleene 129). This seemingly unimportant moment of symbolism seems to subtly suggest that ritual is less important than individual acceptance and grieving. This reflects the poet’s deliberate aligning and breaking away from the pastoral elegy tradition. Having taken ownership of his love for the deceased and his own grief by literally and symbolically grasping the lilac sprig, the speaker becomes flooded with emotion. The speaker goes on to collect more of the flowers in what seems to be a frenzy of sentiment and “With loaded arms,” the speaker offers them to the coffins of all dead (49-54). Again, the idea of individual grief as representative of all mourning is evident.

The speaker again addresses the “western orb, sailing the heaven,” describing how he and the star had “walk’d” together in the night many times (55-61). These lines refer to the many times Whitman saw Lincoln in passing. The imagery in this section is dark and somber, describing these nighttime travels as “cold,” “shadowy,” and “solemn” (58-60). The speaker describes his star companion as full of “woe” and “sad” (62-65). The darkness of the scene demonstrates Lincoln’s struggle to lead the Union through the grim Civil War. The speaker and the star alike are described as “dissatisfied” (65). Lincoln had only just been relieved of the strain of the war when he, like the star that represents him, was “lost in the netherward black . . . dropt in the night, and was gone” (65-66). Once again, Lincoln’s figure looms huge over the poem. David Baker notes: “the netherward black . . . enlarges to include an epic trope. He himself walks into a dark wood, his Virgil the star, and commences his own

journey to death . . . His elegy, like his great song of himself, is ultimately a self-elegy" (Baker 210). The speaker has what feels like a breakthrough of sorts in the following stanza when he addresses the singing hermit thrush directly, saying that he hears its "notes" and "call" and he understands it, for the first time (67-69). The speaker is accepting death, as represented by the bird's song, and facing his mourning for "the star, my departing comrade" (70-71). The use of the word "comrade" again calls to mind the militaristic and patriotic nature of the relationship between Lincoln and the speaker. Martin T. Buinicki suitably asserts that Whitman "turns Lincoln's assassination into the ceremonial sacrifice that gives new life to the nation." Lincoln's death served as a symbolic rebirth of the country in the image that Lincoln himself set out to achieve: a place of peace and unification.

In the subsequent lines, the poet and the speaker become one to literally and metaphorically write the words of the poem that serve as adoration of the deceased. The speaker goes on to pose the question of how he can properly commemorate the dead in a way that will do him justice: "O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved? / And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?" (72-73). The question is one that has already been answered: the speaker will write a lyric poem for the one he loved. The speaker says that the wind "from east to west" along with "the breath of [his] chant" will perfume "the grave of him [he] love[s]" (77-78). In other words, nature and his poem will do the deceased justice. The grief of the speaker and the grief of the country at large are enough to give the beloved president the proper

send-off. The decoration of the grave is a typical feature of pastoral elegies. The speaker proposes that the way to best adorn the "burial-house" would be to include images of springtime, like those that appear throughout the poem itself, and the "scenes of life" in America (83-90). In other words, Lincoln should be commemorated by the beauty of the country he created and the beautiful spring that literally and metaphorically represents a new beginning in America after the War. The poem goes on to describe some of the beautiful man-made and natural scenes across Lincoln's country that signify the "South and the North in the Light," united. The speaker, for the first time, speaks of night positively, calling "the coming eve, delicious—the welcome night, and the stars, / Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and lane" (99-100). Lincoln's legacy, even in death, lives on through the beauty of the Union. The far-reaching echoes of Lincoln's death permeate Whitman's other elegies in that they make the figure of the lost president seem gargantuan and almost mythical in nature. The speaker has finally come to terms with death, accepted it, and is able to move past his own grief and, in turn, he feels optimistic about the state of the country's collective mourning as well.

Instead of crying out to the hermit thrush in confused agony, the speaker now encourages the bird to "Sing on!" its "Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe" (101-105). The moment of acceptance and the poem has reached the traditionally required moment of consolation. He calls the bird a "wondrous" singer and he ties the three primary images of the poem together. He says that each "holds him," which demonstrates the shift in his perspective of the lilac, the

star, and the song as painful reminders of death. Now, he may take comfort in their perennial returns as positive reminders of the beloved president and the renewal of life that the president and spring both represent. Again, the speaker muses over the "large, unconscious scenery of [his] land," and he can finally appreciate it because he has come to know Death as an entity and he has the "sacred knowledge of death" (120). The speaker closes the poem by walking hand in hand with the thought of and knowledge of death. He says that he is in the middle and, "as holding the hands of companions," he travels to the swamp from which the hermit thrush sings (121-126). He hears the "carol of death, and a verse for him I love" and is charmed by the bird's song, and his own spirit responds to the song (130-135).

The poem seems as though it has come to an end at this point; however, the aforementioned verse is outlined in a section entitled "Death Carol." As mentioned before, the speaker's verse and nature's verse are portrayed as the most fitting commemoration for the beloved president. These songs are of joy and serenity in death. Death is called the "Dark Mother," and the song acts as a hymn of welcome to her as she takes the dead in her arms, nestled close to her and delivers them to somewhere peaceful (136-163). We get the final sights, sounds, and feelings of our poem's speaker in the subsequent stanzas as he stands in the swamp with his "comrades" (163-170). Referring to the thought and knowledge of death as comrades represents that the speaker feels the same amount of warm comfort with them as with the star, Lincoln. He sees the "armies" at war and watches as they battle to their deaths (163-70). However, to his surprise, they

"suffer'd not" in death; instead, it was the living who suffered in life (178-185). He then continues his stroll, "unloosing the hold of [his] comrades' hands" and travels past the "song of the hermit bird" and the "lilac with heart-shaped leaves," leaving "thee" in the "door-yard, blooming, returning with spring" and he ceases his "song for thee" (186-196). In doing this, he has consciously stopped his "song," or his mourning, for "thee," or President Lincoln.

The speaker makes clear that though he no longer grieves, he has not forgotten his "comrade lustrous, with silver face in the night" (198). He gives his final observances, saying that he keeps the thrush's song, the way his soul tallied with it, the lilacs and their perfume, and the hand of death's knowledge and thought (199-204). He says: "and their memory ever I keep—for the dead I loved so well; / For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands...and this for his dear sake; / Lilac and star and bird, twined with the chant of my soul, / There in the fragrant pines, and the cedars dusk and dim" (206-208). The juxtaposition of natural images in the poem that simultaneously break and connect the phases of private mourning in the midst of a public tragedy stray from the traditional pastoral elegy's tendency toward linearity. This modern, fragmented version of the form suggests that ceremony means little in the grand scheme of death and grief. Though Whitman still uses the tropes of lamentation, adoration, and consolation, he goes about them organically. Each of these phases is a part of the process, though they are all mixed up and fragmented. The speaker's mourning and acceptance of death have still come full circle, despite having gotten there through a less conventional poetic path. He acknowledges that, though he will not

forget the grief he endured and the memory of the one he loved, he can now move on and take solace in the concept that death, literally and metaphorically, gives way to new life.

Like the conclusion drawn in "Hush'd Be the Camps To-day," the speaker comes to understand that Lincoln suffered greatly during the course of the war and, though his death was tragic and on the brink of America's new beginning, he no longer suffers the trials of the presidency and can rest peacefully having accomplished unification of the country after the war. Cavitch notes that in "Lilacs," Whitman sought to "find a way to distinguish the unrealized possibilities of the American elegy from their cruder approximations and popular distortions . . . to make preparation for unrealized possibilities a more-than-consolatory aim" (244). In other words, Whitman wanted to bring mourning out into the open and demonstrate how the processing of grief could give way to new modes of creative expression, like those demonstrated in his poetry. Death, in Whitman's works, is intensely emotional, and it cannot be properly dealt with in medicalized, contrived ways. Vendler points to the originality of this poem's "refusal to name Lincoln and its suppression of his civic and military roles--we can see that though it indeed obeys many paradigms of its genre . . . it wears its rue with a difference" (15). In the case of Lincoln's assassination, there was no rhyme or reason that he had to die, and there was no rational way for the country to mourn for him. Therefore, Whitman did what he was best known for: cracking open the conventions of the form just enough to allow natural, more sentimental forms of expression to sprout through the cracks.

"This Dust Was Once the Man" was written in 1871, six years after Lincoln's death. Similarly to "O Captain! My Captain!" the speaker's grief is not only for the individual who has fallen, but for the collective sorrow of the country in the war's aftermath. However, this poem was written in reflection well after the events that are the subjects in the other Lincoln elegies, so there is no sense of frenzied emotion or immediacy. This poem is a short one, but it is jam-packed with wisdom gained through reflection. The entire poem consists of four lines: "This dust was once the man, / Gentle, plain, just and resolute, under whose cautious hand, / Against the foulest crime in history known in any land or age, / Was saved the Union of these States" (1-4). The poem suggests that war is the greatest atrocity. The dust represents Lincoln, who once oversaw the country. He was an ordinary man in the beginning, who had to make the difficult decision to go to war based upon what he believed was best for his country. This is where the word "cautious" becomes very important. Whitman made the choice to include it in line two because it shows that Lincoln knew the risks and weighed his options carefully before he made the decision to go to war. Eiselein notes, "Lincoln's death becomes a metaphor for the bloody war itself and the climax of a lofty tragic drama that redeems the Union" (as qtd. in Buinicki). It was under his "hand" that the atrocity of war was allowed to occur. However, in a time of great division, this war was a necessary evil that served to keep the states united.

In Whitman's quiet reflection, he can calmly see Lincoln's life and death clearly and can, for the first time in any of his works, remember him simply. The realization of death in "Hush'd be the Camps To-day" and the disbelief of "O

Captain! My Captain!" operate as Whitman's own early steps of poetic mourning as a lover of Lincoln and a patriotic American. Then "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is his all-encompassing, comprehensive map of his, his fellow Americans', and his fellow humans' processes of mourning in the face of both individual and collective tragedy. The short, yet extraordinarily telling "This Dust Was Once a Man" seems to be the ultimate consolation and conclusion to Whitman's elegies.

CHAPTER 5

WHITMAN'S NEW ELEGY

Whitman chose the elegy for his poems about Lincoln because he wanted to both build upon and actively work against elegiac traditions and, in doing so, he wanted to write Lincoln into the literary and historical memory of Americans. In the words of Cavitch, "elegies seek to extend the lives of individuals and of groups, augmenting personal remembrance and heritage" (32). Whitman, whether deliberately or not, mirrored the change his work made on lyric poetry with the changes Lincoln's work as commander in chief made on the country at large. Cavitch also says that "in their figures of death, elegies seek to apprehend the ultimate, most knowable condition of privacy, while pointing, in their language of loss, toward the sheer commonality of human experience" and Whitman brought this concept of commonality through the experiences of loss and mourning back to the forefront of American literary consciousness (1). Whitman revived the elegy in an age that had put the ancient poetic form on the back burner.

The essential component to Whitman's treating of this poetic form is his careful handling of the concept that, while grief may have certain phases and effects that are universal, the act of mourning is something that is intensely unique and impossible to map linearly. Although it may seem contradictory, Whitman expresses through poems like "Hush'd be the Camps To-day" and certain sections of "Lilacs" that in the face of large-scale tragedy there is something to be said for public and collective mourning. But he gives with one hand and takes away with the other through his use of these very public displays of grief and the rituals that

come along with death, like funeral processions and burial adornments, to demonstrate the superficiality and almost formulaic nature of these displays that strips them of meaning. He proves, in "Lilacs" in particular, that mourning is something that cannot be put into a rigid framework. Like the speaker of "Lilacs," a person's participation in the shallow rituals surrounding death are trivial in comparison to the individual's own process of mourning. Especially in the case of President Lincoln's death, America was affected, but those who were liberated by the emancipation proclamation, those whose loved ones fought in the civil war, and those who knew him personally needed to mourn in their own ways.

The elegy was the perfect avenue through which Whitman could explore and break away from the formulaic, inauthentic mourning of the age. By using a form that was dictated by tradition, just like the processes of grieving for the dead, Whitman's manipulations of the form carried a multifaceted meaning that reaches beyond the words of the poems themselves. Whitman's use of elegiac conventions such as lament, praise, consolation, pastoral imagery, and first-person narration demonstrate his knowledge of the traditions of the form and their effectiveness. However, his deliberate disconnectedness, out of order sequences, and derivations from the form in poems which were centered upon a modern tragedy, the likes of which his age had never seen, demonstrated that the traditional form had outlived its usefulness. Whitman was the poet of America and, in the same spirit that he set out with when he wrote *Leaves of Grass*, he sought to incite change with his work. He truly believed he could write change into being. Just as America was founded because its people needed to break away from England, with its strict

class and religious regimentation, Whitman believed that the traditional, regimented rituals of mourning that were perpetuated by elegies of old needed to be broken away from as well. He demonstrated through these carefully devised elegies that mourning, literally and metaphorically, needed to be addressed differently. Lincoln's death, for Whitman, was ideal for his own poetic exploration of this shift because so many were mourning at once for numerous reasons that were fueled either directly or indirectly by Lincoln's presidency and the Civil War.

In Whitman's view, Lincoln paid the ultimate price for America by not only being killed for his cause, but making the difficult call to fight and remain vigilant for the entirety of the war for what he, and Whitman himself, viewed as the most important cause of all: unification of the country. In his famous lecture on the thirteenth anniversary of the president's assassination, "Death of Abraham Lincoln," Whitman said that "the immeasurable value and meaning of that whole tragedy lies, to me, in senses finally dearest to the Nation, (and here all our own)—the permeating imaginative and the artistic senses—the literary and dramatic ones" (Whitman 11). This statement, like no other from Whitman, encapsulates his goal to take a tragedy that had greatly affected himself and his fellow Americans so deeply, and use it to rewrite the elegy in a way that could do justice to the life and death of the president who rewrote the narrative of America by giving veracity to the phrase "United States."

Lincoln and Whitman were both deeply patriotic and they valued doing what was necessary to make their American ideals into reality, and it was these

values that connected the two men. The death of Lincoln was more than the death of a president, he "saw the supreme figure for the democratic experiment in Abraham Lincoln, born out West, on the prairie, a self-invented, self-realized man, rough yet incredibly articulate. A hero-spokesman of the people. But this perfect natural man was killed . . . by one of his fellow citizens" (Baker 213-14). In the same way that Lincoln had to incite change through war to achieve his political goals, Whitman had to incite poetic change though conventional poetic forms to achieve a different outlook on grieving and poetic expression. While penning these works on Lincoln, Whitman managed to etch Lincoln into literary history as a larger than life character that would loom over the elegiac form forever.

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