

Drum-Taps

Synopsis

“Drum-Taps” is a sequence of 43 poems about the Civil War, and stands as the finest war poetry written by an American. In these poems Whitman presents, often in innovative ways, his emotional experience of the Civil War. The sequence as a whole traces Whitman's varying responses, from initial excitement (and doubt), to direct observation, to a deep compassionate involvement with the casualties of the armed conflict. The mood of the poems varies dramatically, from excitement to woe, from distant observation to engagement, from belief to resignation. Written ten years after "Song of Myself," these poems are more concerned with history than the self, more aware of the precariousness of America's present and future than of its expansive promise. In “Drum-Taps” Whitman projects himself as a mature poet, directly touched by human suffering, in clear distinction to the ecstatic, naive, electric voice which marked the original edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

First published as a separate book of 53 poems in 1865, the second edition of *Drum-Taps* included eighteen more poems (*Sequel to Drum-Taps*). Later the book was folded into *Leaves of Grass* as the sequence “Drum-Taps,” though many individual poems were rearranged and placed in other sections. By the final version (1881), "Drum-Taps" contained only 43 poems, all but five from *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel*. Readers looking for a reliable guide to the diverse issues raised in the sequence would be advised to turn to the fine study by Betsy Erkkila. Interested readers will find the more ironic and contemplative poems of Herman Melville's *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) a remarkable counterpoint to Whitman's poems.

From:

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