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Naturalization of War Within Walt Whitman Poetry

Countless poets and writers have attempted to express the aspects and feelings created by war. Walt Whitman, a poet during the 19th century, offers his interpretation of war in his piece **“**An Army Corps on the March,” which is a part of a series of seventy-one poems titled Drum Taps. Drum Taps was originally published following the Civil War in 1865. However, Whitman continued revising, editing and adding new poems to the collection until 1881. Whitman bases his interpretation of war on the American Civil War, which he participated in, serving as a medic for the Union side. Throughout his years of service, Whitman was exposed to countless horrors and death which can be expected in almost any war. In the face of these experiences, Whitman offered a very different interpretation that did not speak of horrors or show the fighting in a negative light. Instead, Whitman seemed to normalize the soldiers, the actions they took, and the idea of war itself. Many scholars believe Whitman to be a transcendentalist, which was a growing movement in North America during the latter half of the 19th century. Core beliefs of transcendentalism are individualism, idealism, and the divinity of nature (Kulik, Beth. 2019). The normalization Whitman attempts, comes through the use of nature-based descriptions and word choices involving nature.

Although “An Army Corps on the March” has not received significant amounts of literary criticisms, Drum Taps as a whole has been dissected and analyzed immensely. Many of the overall themes and intentions of Whitman flow from poem to poem, and these trends have been the main discussion for critics. Specifically debated is the changing of intentions and tones among the poems. Some believe Whitman’s poems that open Drum Taps “represent a call to arms,” and “a passionate cry to defend the imperiled nation” (Gutman, Huck 2019). The opening poems represent Whitman’s belief in a unified America and serve as a begging call to avoid a devastating war. Once the war begins, the poems’ intent and makeup begin to change into more of the style used in “An Army Corps on the March.” These newer poems seem to use “precise word-pictures of men at war which have been variously and oppositely described as imagist, naturalist, subjective, and objective” (Gutman, Huck 2019). It is believed that Whitman goes into such vivid descriptions to give the observations of what an ordinary soldier would see. More importantly, he attempts to show these soldiers in a positive light and make their actions as normal and natural as the environment they are in.

There are countless examples of this normalization through naturalization within the seemingly short and straightforward “An Army Corps on the March”. The first comes in the opening line when the word cloud is used to describe the Confederate soldiers mounting in front of the Union army. The Confederate soldiers wore gray uniforms, which evoke a somewhat dark grey thunderstorm cloud. This image represents the potential for danger that the Union soldiers are walking towards. A few lines later, Whitman describes the movement of the Union soldiers as swarming. The frenzied swarming calls forth the chaos of the battlefields especially in the pre-modern war era. The next line extends the nature-based descriptions: “Glittering dimly, toiling under the sun—the dust-cover'd men,” (Whitman, 1865). Whitman here refers to the sun and dust instead of referencing the actual fighting and death that surrounds this nature. The poem continues, suggesting that the soldiers move with the flow of the ground. The rising and falling of the soldiers as they move over hills in the ground gives a feeling of waves within the ocean. The pairing of these nature descriptions that conjure images of waves and storm clouds shift the readers focus away from the fighting to nature. This shift in focus causes the reader to associate the Union soldiers with nature instead of with violence. The last two lines of the poem involve less nature, however they still thrust the normalization to the forefront of readers minds: “the wheels rumble, the horses sweat” makes it seem as if what there are no events taking place around it and the final line of “As the army corps advances” cements the notion that these events are just as normal as anything else (Whitman, 1865).

Overall, Whitman does a masterful job infusing description into “An Army Corps on the March,” which gives readers the ability to imagine themselves in that moment. On a deeper level, however, Whitman crafted these descriptions to emphasize nature in order to normalize the soldiers and the war that was taking place in front of him. This idea can be supported by his connection to the transcendentalist movement that was gaining popularity in America at that time. Transcendentalists believed in individualism, idealism, and the divinity of nature which were all concepts that opposed the industrial revolution that was also taking place in America. One of the effects of an industrial revolution is an increase in militarization sometimes referred to as industrial warfare. Since industrialization and war go hand in hand, discouraging war would be a priority to Whitman. He also would have been a very strong supporter of nature-based thinking and its divinity. Through the writing of his poem, Whitman was able to incorporate both of his ideologies and promote nature and its beauty while shifting focus away from war and the soldiers.

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