

Accepting Death in Whitman's Poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"

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Abstract: President Abraham Lincoln's assassination touched the American poet Walt Whitman and inspired him to create the superb elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." While the poem mourns Lincoln's death, Whitman also suggests that death is not something to be afraid of. This paper examines how the poem shows the speaker's change from an intense feeling of grief to a reconciliation with the truths of life and death. Through close analysis of the poem's imagery, and language, it explores how the poet comes to recognize death as a natural process that leads to rebirth and brings hope. Despite the profound loss experienced by the American people, the poet remains optimistic that the country will flourish once again, just as spring follows winter. The poem also emphasizes the importance of welcoming death as a way to connect the soul and body and find relief from suffering. Ultimately, the whole poem conveys a powerful idea of accepting death.

1. Introduction

The poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" was included in Whitman's book *Leaves of Grass*, a seminal work in American literature that celebrated the beauty and diversity of the nation. Notably, Whitman once agreed with the comment by his devoted amanuensis Horace Traubel that "if *Leaves of Grass* is remarkable for anything, it is its celebration of death" [1]. It is true that in many poems of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman expresses a fascination with death and a deep understanding of its inevitability. He often writes about death as a natural part of life, a transition that should be accepted and celebrated rather than feared.

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is an elegy for President Abraham Lincoln, one of the most beloved leaders in American history. Lincoln's assassination in 1865 deeply affected Whitman, who was a passionate supporter of the president and his policies. His death produced a profound and lasting effect upon Whitman in both a personal and a creative sense. In the article "Walt Whitman and Lincoln", "It would be impossible to read any of [Whitman's] poems or prose pieces written about Lincoln after his death without being aware of the depth and sincerity of the personal emotion present as well as of the sound, even prophetic, evaluation of the significance of Lincoln to America and to the world" [2]. Thus, Whitman wrote the poem "Lilacs" as a tribute to Lincoln's life and legacy and as a lasting monument for him. In this poem, Whitman not only expresses his grief and sense of loss but also offers readers a reminder of the importance of accepting death by depicting

his emotional changes.

2. The Poet's Initial Reluctance to Accept Death

At the very obvious level, the poem shows that in the beginning the poet who felt grief and a sense of loss could not accept the death of Lincoln. Whitman's reaction to the shocking death of Lincoln proves his extreme grief and desperation at that moment. Whitman depicted, "The day of the murder we heard the news very early in the morning. Mother prepared breakfast—and other meals afterward—as usual; but not a mouthful was eaten all day by either of us. We each drank half a cup of coffee; that was all. Little was said. We got every newspaper morning and evening, and the frequent extras of that period, and pass'd them silently to each other" [2]. Hearing the news of Lincoln's death, Whitman was devastated and could not accept the fact that his beloved President was no more.

2.1. The image of the lilacs shows the poet's sorrow for Lincoln's death.

Firstly, the poet used the image of the lilacs to highlight his painful feelings for the death of Lincoln. The poet began by saying that he grieved "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd" [3], which means that he went through a period of mourning during springtime. The date of Lincoln's death is 15 April and lilacs were actually blooming then in Brooklyn. Whitman remarked later, "By one of those caprices that enter and give tinge to events without being at all a part of them, I find myself always reminded of the great tragedy of that day by the sight and odor of these blossoms. It never fails." [4]. Thus, Whitman's use of lilacs in the poem is functional, which shows that each spring when lilacs bloomed, mourning was constant for the speaker so that he could not accept Lincoln's death immediately.

2.2. The image of the fallen star shows the poet's despair for losing Lincoln.

Secondly, the poet used the image of the fallen star to show his despair and helplessness for losing Lincoln. When Whitman is struck by the news of Lincoln's death. It opens with a tragic cry: "O powerful western fallen star!" [3]. The western star that has fallen in the sky symbolizes Lincoln himself, who also fell too soon because of assassination. Lincoln is a star for the United States because he led the country through the civil war, preserved the Union, and ended slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation. He promoted democracy, equality, and unity throughout his presidency, leaving a lasting impact on American politics and culture. Then, Whitman continued to lament, "O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!" [3]. The "shades of night" and "moody, tearful night" symbolically refer to the night Lincoln died. By lamenting that "O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me! / O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul" [3], the poet showed his helpless feelings towards Lincoln's assassination. He viewed Lincoln's death as a tragic loss, and his feeling of grief and sense of loss would never free his soul. He could not easily accept the fact that President Lincoln had passed away.

3. The Poet's Gradual Optimism to Accept Death

Despite feeling grief, the poet still possesses optimism to accept death. Such optimism not only comes from the lilacs finally making him realize that death means rebirth in the cycle of life and can bring hope, but also originates from his discovery that Lincoln's death will not prevent the United States from flourishing again.

3.1. The lilacs represent rebirth and hope after death

Firstly, lilacs represent the springtime reemergence of life and hope after a period of winter and

death. The lilac “blooming perennial” means its sustained ability to reproduce [3]. The life cycle of lilacs is endless. The poet describes, “I leave the lilac with heart-shaped leaves, / I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring” [3], which means the lilac revives from death in winter and its life will continue. Thus, every spring, with “delicate-color’d blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green”, lilacs will always bring life after death in winter [3]. For lilacs, death is only the rebirth within the natural life cycle. As Whitman wrote in the Preface to the 1876 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he reaffirms this belief again, “estimating Death, not at all as the cessation, but as somehow what I feel it must be, the entrance upon by far the greatest part of existence, and something that Life is at least as much for, as it is for itself” [4]. Whitman views death not as an end, but as a rebirth, a transition into a new form of existence. He sees death as a necessary and valuable part of the cycle of life, rather than something to be feared or avoided.

3.2. The journal of the coffin represents the flourishing life after Lincoln’s death

Secondly, the poet realizes the existence of optimism because the United States will still flourish even after the death of Lincoln. The journey of the coffin through natural scenery and industrial cities in sections 5-9 represents the flourishing life in the United States after Lincoln’s assassination. Above all, the natural landscapes of the United States in the journey describe the thriving country. The “regeneration, continuity, and even resurrection” [5] are reflected in nature through the “old woods, where lately the violets peep’d from the ground” [3], “the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards” [3], and “the yellow-spear’d wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen” [3]. Also, these lines imply the “regeneration” of Lincoln’s spirit, “Lincoln’s image will possess comparable cyclical immortality, returning with ever-returning spring as a spirit of fertility and regeneration” [5]. Even after his death, Lincoln’s spirit can make the United States flourish again. The poet also mentions “sea-winds blown from east and west” are meeting in the center of the country [3], highlighting that the resilient American spirit unites people from coast to coast together. Thus, the country still flourishes after the death of Lincoln. Besides, the poet also depicts American industry in the journey, including “all the scenes of life and the workshops” as well as “the workmen homeward returning” [3]. The descriptions show the hard work and dedication of the American people, which again prove that the nation continues to grow powerfully after the experience of losing Lincoln. Thus, after seeing the natural landscapes and the industry of the United States still flourish, the poet accepts Lincoln’s death peacefully.

4. The Poet’s Final Willingness to Accept Death from the Bird’s Song

The real point for the poet to accept death is the lesson from the bird’s song. Walking between the two companions “the knowledge of death” and “the thought of death” [3], the poet goes to the swamp to listen to the song of the hermit thrush, hoping to experience the acceptance of death. As shown in section 14, after describing the spring weather and landscapes, the poet suddenly discovers, “lo, then and there, / Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest, / Appear’d the cloud, appear’d the long black tail, / And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death” [3]. “The knowledge of death” ([3] represents the poet’s realization that death is a crucial part of life, because as the season changes from “the fields of spring” to “the summer approaching with richness” [3], the death will gradually fall upon every creature. Death is a natural and important part of life. “The thought of death” [3] represents the grief experienced by death’s living survivors. In other words, it means the poet, as a survivor, holds great grief towards the death of Lincoln. He always conveys his incapacity of detaching himself from Lincoln’s death: “But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain’d me. / The star my departing comrade holds and detains me” [3]. Walking with his two companions, the poet waits for the night offering him peace of mind, which will help him understand the song of the bird and accept death. The bird’s song helps Whitman gain a new perception of death, which promotes his willingness to welcome death. The poet describes, “The

voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird” [3]. Here, Whitman uses “tally” as a verb in the line preceding the bird’s specific song to mean that the poet’s spirit corresponds with the bird’s song. Thus, the bird’s song merges and shifts the poet’s mental state. The poet agrees with the interpretation of death from the bird’s song.

4.1 The bird’s song glorifies and welcomes death

Regarding the content of the bird’s song, firstly, the song praises and welcomes death. The bird describes death as “lovely”, “soothing” and “delicate” [3]. Death is not scary. The bird even sings that death is better than many good things in the universe like joys, knowledge, and love: “*Prais’d be the fathomless universe, / For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious, / And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise! / For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death*” [3]. Love, knowledge, and joys are things that normally gain praise. Compared with them, death is more worthy of praise in the bird’s song. Next, the bird’s song describes death as a dark mother that must be welcomed. The bird sings, “*Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet, / Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome? / Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all, / I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly*” [3]. Death must indeed be the “dark mother” in the creation, “the grim but perfecting element of life” [6]. Thus, the bird glorifies death above all and asks it to come as fast as possible.

Then, the bird’s song praises that death can free humans from the suffering of life into its bliss. In the song, the bird compares death to the “strong deliveress”: “*Approach strong deliveress, / When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead, / Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee, / Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death*” [3]. Death frees people from pain in life and brings bliss to them. Thus, people must welcome death with joy.

4.2 The bird’s song suggests that death connects the body and the soul.

Besides, the bird’s song shows that death brings the connection between one’s soul and the body. The bird sings: “*And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil’d death / And the body gratefully nestling close to thee*” [3]. Death is not fearful because death can unify the body and the soul. Finally, the poet corresponds with all the interpretations of death in the bird’s song by saying “To the tally of my soul, / Loud and strong kept up the gray-brown bird. / With pure deliberate notes spreading filling the night” in section 15 [3]. The expression “tally of my soul” echoes the verb form “tallied” in the line “The voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird” in section 14[3]. In section 15, the poet uses “tally” as a noun to mean a reckoning or an instruction, which shows that the content about death in the bird’s song has served as an instruction to the poet. Thus, the poet can accept death’s coming as a necessary cycle of life.

4.3 The bird’s song suggests that death frees offers people from suffering in the civil war.

After listening to the carol of death sung by the bird, the poet believes that death offers relief from suffering. The song of the bird reminds the poet of the four long years of the civil war. As the poet sees “the armies”, hundreds of torn and bloody battle flags, “a few shreds left on the staffs”, “battle-corpses, myriads of them” and “the white skeletons of young men” [3], he turns from a specific death of Lincoln to a more general one during the civil war. Through his understanding of death from the bird’s song, the poet discovers a piece of comfort: the dead are in peace; the survivors from the war are still suffering. Whitman describes, “*And I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war, / But I saw they were not as was thought, / They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer’d not, / The living remain’d and suffer’d, the mother suffer’d, / And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer’d / And the armies that remain’d suffer’d*” [3]. These lines show two points to the readers. Above all, by reemphasizing “at rest” and “they suffer’d not”, Whitman conveys the idea that

on a logical level, the soldiers who died in the war were indeed dead. They can't feel anything anymore now. Thus, the soldiers will not suffer and will be free from humanity's violence. Secondly, Whitman has a revelation here—it is the living people who still suffer: the mother, the wife, the child, etc. They are suffering from having lived through the civil war and from having lost so many people. Although Whitman suggests the common suffering of all survivors, he still puts forward a kind of comfort at the same time: death frees people from suffering. Therefore the song of the hermit bird and “the tallying song” of the speaker's soul are described as “Victorious song, death's outlet song” [3], because “the very sorrow that the speaker feels is one kind of suffering from which the dead man is free”[4]. Such realization of death is not fearful but reassuring.

In the end, the poet reaches the status of accepting death peacefully. In the final stanza of the poem, the poet expresses his success in detaching himself from Lincoln's death mentally. He says, “I cease from my song for thee / From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing with thee” [3], which means the poet will cease excessively attaching to his memories of Lincoln and clinging to his grief at Lincoln's death. His memories of Lincoln no longer evoke the same despair the poet felt as a mourner. However, the thrush's song, the lilac, and the western star will always be a part of the poet's soul, which means the poet combines memories of loss with the new vision of death and the hope of America's rebirth.

5. Conclusion

As to Whitman's literary achievement, D. H. Lawrence asserted that Whitman “would not have been the great poet he is if he had not taken the last steps and looked over into death” [6]. Throughout his poems, Whitman always embraces the idea of death as a natural and necessary part of life, encouraging his readers to view it not with fear, but with acceptance and understanding. As shown in the poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd”, Whitman not only expresses mourning for the death of President Lincoln but also depicts how he changes emotions from sorrow to despair, and thence to hope and towards the acceptance of President Lincoln's death peacefully. The poet can embrace death as a crucial part of life because he understands that death means rebirth and brings hope. Death is praiseworthy and must be welcomed. It not only connects one's soul and the body but also offers relief from suffering. Even if the death of Lincoln is a huge loss for the American people, the country will still flourish again as spring follows winter. Thus, the poet is willing to accept death at the end of the poem. In the poem, Whitman made out of death and sorrow and suffering one of the greatest works of literary art thus far produced in America, and by so doing he also made himself immortal.

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