Walt Whitman, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*

(1) BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

For biographical information on Walt Whitman, please refer to the “Song of Myself” Study Guide, or visit Wikipedia at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman), a host of other websites, or read the biographical note on Whitman in Radeljković’s “American Topics” (listed underneath in the Recommended Reading list).

(2) TEXT OF WORK

Read the poem with annotations at: [http://www.bartleby.com/142/192.html](http://www.bartleby.com/142/192.html)

(3) ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY (includes summary of poem)

This 1865 poem is part of a series of pieces written after Lincoln's assassination. While it does not display all the conventions of the form, this is nevertheless considered to be a *pastoral elegy*: a poem of mourning that makes use of elaborate conventions drawn from the natural world and rustic human society. Virgil is the most prominent classical practitioner of the form; Milton's "Lycidas" and Shelley's "Adonais" are the two best-known examples in the English tradition. One of the most important features of the pastoral elegy is the depiction of the deceased and the poet who mourns him as shepherds. While the association is not specifically made in this poem, it must surely have been in Whitman's mind as he wrote: *Lincoln, in many ways, was the “shepherd” of the American people during wartime, and his loss left the North in the position of a flock without a leader.* As in traditional pastoral elegies, nature mourns Lincoln's death in this poem, although it does so in some rather unconventional ways (more on that in a moment). The poem also makes reference to the problems of modern times in its brief, shadowy depictions of Civil War battles. The natural order is contrasted with the human one, and Whitman goes so far as to suggest that those who have died violent deaths in war are actually the lucky ones, since they are now beyond suffering.

Above all this is a **public poem of private mourning**. In *it Whitman tries to determine the best way to mourn a public figure, and the best way to mourn in a modern world.* In his resignation at the end of the poem, and in his use of disconnected motifs, he suggests that the kind of ceremonial poetry a pastoral elegy represents may no longer have a place in society; instead, symbolic, intensely personal forms must take over.

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is **composed of three separate yet simultaneous poems**. *One follows the progress of Lincoln’s coffin on its way to the president’s burial. The second stays with the poet and his sprig of lilac, meant to be laid on the coffin in tribute, as he ruminates on death and mourning. The third uses the symbols of a bird and a star to develop an idea of a nature sympathetic to yet separate from humanity.* The progression of the coffin is followed by a sad irony. Mourners, dressed in black and holding offerings of flowers, turn out in the streets to see Lincoln's corpse pass by. The Civil War is raging, though, and many of these people have surely lost loved ones of their own. Yet their losses are subsumed in a greater national tragedy, which in its publicness and in the fact that this poem is being written as part of the mourning process, is set up to be a far greater loss than that of their own family members. In this way the poem implicitly asks the question, "What is the worth of a man? Are some men worth more than others?" *The poet’s eventual inability to mourn, and the depictions of anonymous death on the battlefields, suggest that something is wrong here.*

The poet vacillates on the nature of symbolic mourning. At times he seems to see his offering of the lilac blossom as being symbolically given to all the dead; at other moments he sees it as futile, merely a broken twig. *He wonders how best to do honor to the dead, asking how he would decorate the tomb. He*
suggests that he would fill it with portraits of everyday life and everyday men. This is a far cry from the classical statuary and elaborate floral arrangements usually associated with tombs. The language in the poem follows a similar shift. In the first stanzas the language is formal and at times even archaic, filled with exhortations and rhetorical devices. By the end much of the ceremoniousness has been stripped away; the poet offers only “lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of [his] soul.” Eventually the poet simply leaves behind the sprig of lilac, and “cease[s] from [his] song,” still unsure of just how to mourn properly.

The final image of the poem is of “the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.” All has been worked through save nature, which remains separate and beyond. The death-song of the bird expresses an understanding and a beauty that Whitman, even while he incorporates it into his poem, cannot quite master for himself. Unlike the pastoral elegies of old, which use a temporary rift with nature to comment on modernity, this one shows a profound and permanent disconnection between the human and natural worlds. “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” mourns for Lincoln in a way that is all the more profound for seeing the president’s death as only a smaller, albeit highly symbolic, tragedy in the midst of a world of confusion and sadness.

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” is an elegy on the death of Abraham Lincoln, though it never mentions the president by name. Like most elegies, it develops from the personal (the death of Lincoln and the poet’s grief) to the impersonal (the death of “all of you” and death itself); from an intense feeling of grief to the thought of reconciliation. The poem, which is one of the finest Whitman ever wrote, is a dramatization of this feeling of loss. This elegy is grander and more touching than Whitman’s other two elegies on Lincoln’s death, “0 Captain! My Captain!” and “Hush’d Be the Camps To­day.” The form is elegiac but also contains elements found in operatic music, such as the aria and recitative. The song of the hermit thrush, for example, is an “aria.”

Abraham Lincoln was shot in Washington, D.C., by Booth on April 14, 1865, and died the following day. The body was sent by train from Washington to Springfield, Illinois. As it crossed the continent, it was saluted by the people of America. Whitman has not only men and women but even natural objects saluting the dead man.

The first cycle of the poem, comprising sections 1-4, presents the setting in clear perspective. As spring returns, the lilacs blossom, and the planet Venus “nearly dropp’d in the western sky,” the poet mourns the loss “of him I love.” He mourns the “powerful western fallen star” now covered by “black murk” in the “tearful night,” and he is “powerless” and “helpless” because the cloud around him “will not free my soul.” He observes a lilac bush, is deeply affected by its perfume, and believes that “every leaf [is] a miracle.” He breaks off a small branch with “heart­shaped Leaves.” A shy, solitary thrush, like a secluded hermit, sings a song which is an expression of its inmost grief. It sings “death’s outlet song of life.”

This first section of the poem introduces the three principal symbols of the poem—the lilac, the star, and the bird. They are woven into a poetic and dramatic pattern. The meaning of Whitman’s symbols is neither fixed nor constant. The star, Venus, is identified with Lincoln, generally, but it also represents the poet’s grief for the dead. Lilacs, which are associated with everreturning spring, are a symbol of resurrection, while its heart­shaped Leaves symbolize love. The purple color of the lilac, indicating the passion of the Crucifixion, is highly suggestive of the violence of Lincoln’s death. The bird is the symbol of reconciliation with death and its song is the soul’s voice. “Death’s outlet song of life” means that out of death will come renewed life. Death is described as a “dark mother” or a “strong deliveress,” which suggests that it is a necessary process for rebirth. The emotional drama in the poem is built around
Stan.tk Study Guide – Walt Whitman, When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d

this symbolic framework. The continual recurrence of the spring season symbolizes the cycle of life and death and rebirth. The words “ever-returning spring,” which occur in line 3 and are repeated in line 4, emphasize the idea of rebirth and resurrection. The date of Lincoln’s assassination coincided with Easter, the time of Christ’s resurrection. These two elements provide the setting to the poem in time and space.

The second stanza of the poem describes the poet’s intense grief for the dead. Each line begins with “O,” an exclamation which is like the shape of a mouth open in woe.

The second cycle of the poem comprises sections 5-9. It describes the journey of the coffin through natural scenery and industrial cities, both representing facets of American life. The thrush’s song in section 4 is a prelude to the journey of the coffin which will pass “over the breast of the spring” through cities, woods, wheat fields, and orchards. But “in the midst of life we are in death,” as it says in the Book of Common Prayer, and now the cities are “draped in black” and the states, like “crape-veil’d women,” mourn and salute the dead. Somber faces, solemn voices, and mournful dirges mark the journey across the American continent.

To the dead man, the poet offers “my sprig of lilac,” his obituary tribute. The poet brings fresh blossoms not for Lincoln alone, but for all men. He chants a song “for you 0 sane and sacred death” and offers flowers to “the coffins all of you 0 death.”

The poet now addresses the star shining in the western sky: “Now I know what you must have meant.” Last month the star seemed as if it “had something to tell” the poet. Whitman imagines that the star was full of woe “as the night advanced” until it vanished “in the netherward black of the night.” Whitman calls upon the bird to continue singing. Yet the poet momentarily lingers on, held by the evening star, “my departing comrade.”

The symbols are retained throughout this section. The poet bestows, as a mark of affection, a sprig of lilac on the coffin. The association of death with an object of growing life is significant. The star confides in the poet—a heavenly body identifies itself with an earthly being. The star is identified with Lincoln, and the poet is still under the influence of his personal grief for the dead body of Lincoln, and not yet able to perceive the spiritual existence of Lincoln after death. The song of the hermit thrush finally makes the poet aware of the deathless and the spiritual existence of Lincoln.

In the third cycle of the poem, sections 10-13, the poet wonders how he shall sing “for the large sweet soul that has gone.” How shall he compose his tribute for the “dead one there I loved”? With his poem he wishes to “perfume the grave of him I love.” The pictures on the dead president’s tomb, he says, should be of spring and sun and Leaves, a river, hills, and the sky, the city dense with dwellings, and people at work—in short, “all the scenes of life.” The “body and soul” of America will be in them, the beauties of Manhattan spires as well as the shores of the Ohio and the Missouri rivers—all “the varied and ample land.” The “gray-brown bird” is singing “from the swamps” its “loud human song” of woe. The song has a liberating effect on the poet’s soul, although the star still holds him, as does the mastering odor” of the lilac.

In this cycle the description of natural objects and phenomena indicates the breadth of Lincoln’s vision, and the “purple” dawn, “delicious” eve, and “welcome” night suggest the continuous, endless cycle of the day, which, in turn, symbolizes Lincoln’s immortality.

Sections 14-16 comprise a restatement of the earlier themes and symbols of the poem in a perspective of immortality. The poet remembers that one day while he sat in the peaceful but “unconscious scenery of my land,” a cloud with a “long black trail” appeared and enveloped everything. Suddenly he “knew death.” He walked between “the knowledge of death” and “the thought of death.” He fled to the bird, who sang “the carol of death.” The song of the thrush follows this passage. It praises death, which it describes as “lovely,” “soothing,” and “delicate.” The “fathomless universe” is adored “for life and joy” and “sweet love.” Death is described as a “dark mother always gliding near with soft feet.” To
her, the bird sings a song of “fullest welcome.” Death is a “strong deliveress” to whom “the body gratefully” nestles.

The thrush’s song is the spiritual ally of the poet. As the bird sings, the poet sees a vision: “And I saw askant the armies.” He sees “battle-corpses” and the “debris of all the slain soldiers.” These dead soldiers are happy in their resting places, but their parents and relatives continue to suffer because they have lost them. The suffering is not of the dead, but of the living.

The coffin has now reached the end of its journey. It passes the visions,” the “song of the hermit bird,” and the “tallying song” of the poet’s soul. “Death’s outlet song” is heard, “sinking and fainting,” and yet bursting with joy. The joyful psalm fills the earth and heaven. As the coffin passes him, the poet salutes it, reminding himself that the lilac blooming in the dooryard will return each spring. The coffin has reached its resting place in “the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.” The star, the bird, and the lilac join with the poet as he bids goodbye to Lincoln, his “comrade, the dead I loved so well.”

The poet’s realization of immortality through the emotional conflict of personal loss is the principal theme of this great poem, which is a symbolistic dramatization of the poet’s grief and his ultimate reconciliation with the truths of life and death.

(CliffsNotes)

(4) SOURCES CITED

“Whitman’s Poetry: ‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.’” SparkNotes. 9 Nov. 2008

“ When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” CliffsNotes. 9 Nov. 2008

(5) RECOMMENDED READING


(Includes the text of whole poem with analysis and commentary on specific parts. To access commentary, click on bold-faced words and expressions in poem. Also refer to main page on Whitman for more information about the author, his poetry, and the historical and cultural context in which he lived.)


(The essay includes a comprehensive analysis of Walt Whitman's work with special emphasis on “Song of Myself” and ties in Whitman’s work well with his Transcendentalist/Emersonian influences. Also refer to page 360 for a more intimate account of Walt Whitman's biography.)

End of Stan.tk Study Guide

Disclaimer: All works, critical analyses, and other material herein presented are the intellectual ownership of their respective authors and/or sources, whether hard-copy or online.