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Blood, Guts and Glory: Soldiers and Nurses in the Civil War

Of all the things that can occur in a lifetime, war is the one thing that can excite a wide range of emotions in a very short time. A nation experiencing a war will seesaw back and forth between sheer joy and sheer terror. The United States experienced this and more during its Civil War. For the most part, a nation's initial reaction to a war is shock and then bravado. The populace thinks, "We're going to beat these guys to a pulp!"

Most of the time, the reason for the war isn't an issue; the people just want to fight. Once the battles begin, those who remain home become fixated on news from the war. With every victory, people get more and more excited and their national pride soars. The soldiers are heroes; they can do nothing wrong. But the soldiers are the ones who actually fight the battles. They're the ones actually risking their lives for their country. While everyone knows this and talks about it, the soldiers are the only ones who truly understand it. They are the ones who see their friends killed. The folks back home get statistics-they don't see the blood and the guts; they only see glory. The soldiers see their glory dissolve into blood and death, and then war becomes a reality. This is what happened in the Civil War.

This differing view on war was very common: romanticism versus realism. It affected everyone, even including those who tended the wounded. While the doctors were the ones who treated the wounded, the nurses were the ones who actually cared for and ministered to the hourly needs of the injured. Yet, even they remained privy to the exalted feelings of glory experienced by the folks at home. Seeing the injured come in day after day, after every battle didn't seem to alter their heroic perceptions. Evidence of this exists in the works of Walt Whitman, Louisa May Alcott, Constance Fenimore Cooper, Grace King, Rose Terry Cooke and Elsie Singmaster. But, as previously stated, the soldiers' perceptions of war quickly changed. It didn't matter what side you were on, the revolutionary experience was the same. The best evidence of this comes from Ambrose Bierce and Sam Watkins. As news of the attack on Fort Sumter erupted across the country, Southern states joined the wave of secessionism and men on both sides enlisted in the military. Everyone wanted to help out in some way, including the women. Everyone thought their cause was the right cause. The excitement of war was in the air, as Sam Watkins points out. At every town and station citizens and ladies were waving their handkerchiefs and hurrahing Jeff Davis and the Southern Confederacy. Magnificent banquets were prepared for us all along the entire route. It was one magnificent festival from one end of the line to the other. At Chattanooga, Knoxville, Bristol, Farmville, Lynchburg, everywhere, the same demonstrations of joy and welcome greeted us (23).

Heroism and glory were on everybody's minds; no one escaped the euphoria. The sensation of being drilled and then fitted with new uniforms left the soldiers felt invincible. Rivers could be forged wondrously and the enemy could be tamed regally. It was with this

mentality that the officer in Bierce's "Four Days in Dixie" began his adventure.

Striking into a road of which we knew nothing . . . we found our advance interrupted by a considerable creek, which we must ford or go back. We consulted a moment then rode at it as hard as we could, possibly in the belief that a high momentum would act as it does in the instance of a skater passing over thin ice. Cobb was fortunate enough to get across comparatively dry, but his hapless companion was utterly submerged. The disaster was all the greater from my having on a resplendent new uniform, of which I had been pardonably vain. Ah, what a gorgeous new uniform it never was again! (19)

The sense of honor and pride which a uniform imparted was incredible. Couple this with the fact that soldiers were also given their own weapons and ammunition, and the sense of power felt was obviously enormous. The men, however, were not the only one's to feel this pride. No, the women were just as proud and eager to fight for the cause. But because they were women living in the nineteenth century, not many were brave enough to disguise themselves as men and join the fighting. Instead, they either joined societies that provided the soldiers with supplies, or they joined the medical corps as nurses. These women were quite eager to help out in whatever way they could; some even went out of their way to prove their reliance. This is the case with Miss Dane in Alcott's "The Brothers."

Of course I will, out of perversity, if not common charity; for some of these people think that because I'm an abolitionist I am also a heathen, and I should rather like to show them, that, though I cannot quite love my enemies, I am willing to take care of them (13).

Miss Dane feels quite strongly about her ability to help all people, including the Confederate

captain put in her charge after this declaration. Because of this, she is eager to provide him with the best care. But she must first take care of the other patients in her ward. To leave them only partially attended would not have been right; she had to do her job correctly.

Miss Dane is not the only fictional heroine to feel this sense of duty. Elinor, in Woolson's "Crowder's Cove," is also a woman wanting to be heroic. She's a girl of strong northern convictions who's "trapped" on a mountain living with her sister and neutral brother-in-law.

Elinor found no great deeds to do in all those long months, despite her great longing, and by January she had worked herself up to such a pitch that she began to plan how she could flee northward through the lines and reach the Ohio River . . . [She] studied county maps and asked a quiet question now and then, reckoned over her store of money, and planned to increase it (79).

Elinor was determined to do her share for the war effort. She couldn't bear to think of all the other people back home who were helping out while she was up on that mountain! She had to be involved. She eventually achieves this by escaping the cove in an effort to warn a regiment of Union troops of an ambush. She is then allowed to go north and she becomes a nurse. Yet, women were not the only ones who went into nursing. Men who were too old to fight but still wanted to participate often entered the field; this is the case with Walt Whitman. Thus, because he is a man unable to fight, and because he is a nurse, Whitman suffers an acute case of war romanticism. He is possibly even more incensed than Elinor, as he shows in his "First O Songs for a Prelude."

The blood of the city up-arm'd! arm'd! the cry everywhere,

The flags flung out from the steeples of churches and from the public
buildings and stores, . . .

All the mutter of preparation, all the determin'd arming,

The hospital service, the lint, bandages and medicines,

The women volunteering for nurses, the work begun for in earnest, no
mere parade now;

War! an arm'd race is advancing! the welcome for battle, no turning
away;

War! be it weeks, months, or years, an arm'd race is advancing to
welcome it.

Mannahatta a-march-and it's O to sing it well!

It's O for a manly life in the camp (2).

Yes, Whitman was, in many ways, in love with the war. He saw the war as an opportunity to prove himself as great a hero as any of the soldiers. He saw himself as the great unifier of the United States through his poetry. If he couldn't fight with a gun, he would fight with words. However, this romanticism surely couldn't last forever! The transition to realism was not easy, but it came to the soldiers and nurses in varying degrees and with varying success. The soldiers tended to see the inhumanity in their glorious deeds while the nurses did not. For Private Sam Watkins, he soon learned that war did not always bring out the noblest of people.

Faro and roulette were in full blast; the skum had begun to come to the surface and shoddy was the gentleman. By this, I mean that civil law had been suspended; the ermine

of the judges had been overridden by the sword and bayonet. In other words, the military had absorbed the civil. Hence the gambler was in his glory (25).

These boys who would be men had no idea what reality was all about. They had no clue about the state of some members of humanity. They believed that because they felt so strongly about their causes, everybody else did too. Of course, at this stage, this was, for the most part, true. But some, like Captain Armisted in Bierce's "An Affair of Outposts," sought refuge in the war from the problems in their life.

Another aspect that caused reality to sink into a soldier's brain was the peril in which they daily placed their lives. The officer in Bierce's "Four Days in Dixie" gets a firsthand experience with this feeling. After having inadvertently gone for a swim, he and his comrade, Cobb, come across some Confederates. At first, outrunning them is fun. But this fun soon turns dangerous as the two men get separated and have to find their way back to safety in an unfriendly neighborhood. The officer, in his eagerness to do this stumbles across two camps; the first was asleep, the second was not.

In this mad attempt I ran upon a more vigilant sentinel, posted in the heart of a thicket, who fired at me without challenge. To a soldier an unexpected shot ringing out at dead of night is fraught with an awful significance. In my circumstances-cut off from my comrades, groping about an unknown country, surrounded by invisible perils which such a signal would call into eager activity-the flash and shock of that firearm were unspeakably dreadful (23).

The terror of nearly losing your life sobers anyone up. The officer was no exception. He ran

through cornfields, swam rivers, crawled through thickets and brambles with one thing in mind: survival. He no longer cared about his new uniform; he only wanted to live. Bierce's experiences clearly show through in the changing attitude of his characters. Soldiers learn that survival is key. Again, the naivete most soldiers entered with was incredible. They had no idea what war was about because most of them had never been shot at before. They had never experienced war. Watkins, like Bierce, soon learned what it was about though.

One evening about 4 o'clock, the drummers of the regiment began to beat their drums as hard as they could stave, and I saw men running in every direction, and the camp soon became one scene of hurry and excitement. I asked some one what all this hubbub meant . . . "Why, sir, they are beating the long roll." Says I, "What is the long roll for?" "The long roll, man, the long roll! Get your gun, they are beating the long roll!" This was all the information I could get. It was the first, last, and only long roll that I ever heard (Watkins 28).

The bloodiness of battle was about to begin. They could no longer deny what war really was.

But we soon found out that the glory of war was at home among the ladies and not upon the field of blood and carnage of death, where our comrades were mutilated and torn by shot and shell. And to see the cheek blanch and to hear the fervent prayer, aye, I might say the agony of mind were very different indeed from the patriotic times at home (21).

The tide began shifting for the soldiers. Their dreams of glory, honor, and heroism began to die the minute they experienced their first battle and encountered Death face to face.

And what of the nurses? Did they, too, start making this transition into realism? The answer to

that question is rather ambiguous. Some of the nurses did appear to begin to make the transition, but then they reverted back. Take, for example, Cooke's Josephine Bowen Addison in "A Woman." Josephine got engaged to Frank Addison shortly before the war began. There were two conflicting reports on her personality. She was either an airhead or a rather intelligent girl; two very opposite extremes. Then the war breaks out and she is faced with the fact that Frank will want to go to war. Rather than plead with him not to go, she decides to move the wedding date up. This is a somewhat heroic act-marrying her fiancé so he can go to war-she is definitely acting bravely. Yet, she doesn't seem to realize the magnitude of what she is doing. But the reality is that Josephine is putting up this incredible brave front so Frank won't worry about her. She collapses into a faint the minute he walks out the door.

So here we have a woman who knows that she may never see her husband again. And, yet, she pretends that everything is fine when he is there. Therefore, on the one hand we can say that Josephine is very aware of the reality of war; while, on the other, we see that she is playing into romantic notions of war by acting bravely, heroically. And what does she do when Frank is killed? At first she acts heroically; she doesn't cry, doesn't show her grief. But after Sue breaks her by leaving Frank's uniform in her bedroom, she becomes a nurse. Why? She reasons:

I have been selfish, Sue; I will try to be better now; I won't run away from my battle. Oh, how glad I am he didn't run away! It is dreadful now, dreadful! Perhaps, if I had to choose if he should have run away or-or this, I should have wanted him to run,-I'm afraid I should. But I am glad now. If God wanted him, I'm glad he went from the front ranks. Oh, those poor women whose husbands ran away, and were killed, too! (Cooke 62)

Such reasoning seems a little skewed. So she goes into nursing so that others may take heart from her kindness and braveness. And when soldiers are brought in from Frank's regiment, she gives them extra special attention. Her actions were so heroic that Doctor Rivers commented, "Really, . . . that little Mrs. Addison is a true heroine!" Which Sue inwardly counters with, "Really, she is a true woman!" (65) Still, Josephine reverted back to the notion of war as glorious-the romantic view.

Josephine was not alone. Nurses all over the country were doing this, even Alcott's Miss Dane. After working so hard to dissuade Robert from killing the captain, she revels in the story of his participation of the storming of Fort Wagner. Then, his actions are glorious, even though he has lost his life doing it, specifically going after Captain Fairfax again. This does not seem to bother her as much when it's set in the context of battle. Miss Dane, too, has reverted back to romanticism after a momentary glimpse of realism.

The same is true of Christine, or Titine, in King's "Bayou L'Ombre." While nursing a supposed Yankee officer, Titine begins to think of him, not as the enemy, but as a human being with a mother. She had thought of the war as a glorious piece of work-men doing battle for the honor of their principles and their country. What could be more noble? She first notices the splendor of his uniform. "How much gold! How much glitter! Why, the sun did not rise with more splendor of equipment. Costumed as if for the conquest of the worlds" (King 125). Yet it was war that had led left this poor young man injured-disfigured. The horror of war! This soon changes to thinking of his mother and hers watching over this room from heaven. For their sake, she must act kindly-nobly. She must tend to him with the best of her abilities. Titine has reverted

as well. She cannot help it; the war gives everyone the chance to be noble-including her.

Whitman doesn't escape this either. In his poem "The Wound Dresser" he talks about going around the hospital ward dressing wounds and amputating limbs. Some of the soldiers are in extreme pain and discomfort; others are denying the fact that they've been maimed. Yet even through this, Whitman finds honor in the way they handle their pain-nobly.

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,

I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and

blood,

Back on his pillow, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody

stump,

And has not yet look'd on it (19).

Whitman describes each soldier in an epic tone. They are noble and brave, graceful and strong.

And when they behave less than nobly-human-their behavior is separated from the self: "The crush'd head I dress, (poor crazed hand tear not the bandage/away,)" (19, my emphasis). The

hand is now an entity alone, having a mind of its own; it is not connected to the soldier's

consciousness. If it were, the soldier would cease to be heroic. As with the rest of the nurses,

Whitman continues to view the war romantically. His fleeting moments of realism are swiftly replaced by the heroism he cannot cease to find.

The same did not hold true for the soldiers. Being immersed in the action of the war day after day, they could not revert back to their old romantic notions. At times they tried to ignore the horror going on around them, as in the interrupted snowball fight in Watkins' Co. Aytch, but

they could not ignore reality forever. Take the Battle of Shiloh, for example. Both Bierce and Watkins experienced this battle firsthand (for all we know they might have shot at each other, face-to-face). The lulls in battle were times for the men to think-there wasn't much else to do. They contemplated the war and why they were there; they thought about their loved ones at home; they observed their surroundings; they slept; they ate. And when it came time to fight, they had to maneuver their path amongst the dead.

Very often we truck our feet against the dead; more frequently against those who still had spirit enough to resent it with a moan. These were lifted carefully to one side and abandoned. Some had sense enough to ask in their weak way for water. Absurd! ("What I Saw of Shiloh" 7)

The soldiers were losing their sense of sympathy-humanity-by being exposed to so much killing. They had become embittered by the war. In another passage, Bierce comes across a man whose skull was shattered by a bullet, yet he was still alive.

He lay face upward, taking in his breath in convulsive, rattling snorts, and blowing it out in sputters of froth which crawled creamily down his cheeks, piling itself alongside his neck and ears. A bullet had clipped a groove in his skull, above the temple; from this the brain protruded in bosses, dropping off in flakes and strings. I had not previously known one could get on, even in this unsatisfactory fashion, with so little brain (10).

Bierce then goes on describe scores of more dead soldiers, always in the same gruesome, detached manner. He says:

According to degree of exposure, their faces were bloated and black or yellow and

shrunk. The contraction of muscles which had given them claws for hands had cursed each countenance with a hideous grin. Faugh! I cannot catalogue the charms of these gallant gentlemen who had got what they enlisted for (14).

Such disregard for the dead is even more disturbing when taking into account the soldiers mentality when killing. Watkins expounds on this at some length in his chapter entitled "Shiloh."

Down would drop first one fellow and then another, either killed or wounded, when we were ordered to charge bayonets. I had been feeling mean all the morning as if I had stolen a sheep, but when the order to charge was given, I got happy (42).

The battle is then described as "fun." These soldiers had become desensitized to the world around them. The war was their world and in this world there were no rules, save one: kill the enemy. There are no names and faces, just The Enemy.

A private soldier is but an automaton, a machine that works by command of a good, bad, or indifferent engineer, and is presumed to know nothing of all these great events. His business is to load and shoot, stand picket, videt, etc., while the officers sleep, or perhaps die on the field of battle and glory, and his obituary and epitaph but "one" remembered among the slain, but to what company, regiment, brigade or corps he belongs, there is no account; he is soon forgotten (22).

Once again we see the extent to which the soldiers have lost their romantic visions of the war. Faced with daily, brutal carnage, it was hard to maintain that level of naivete; reality hit with a vengeance.

And what of our reverting nurses? Did they ever see the truth about the war? The answer

is “no.” They retained the romanticism about the war that they had gone in with, even after all the suffering they saw it cause. The only story that comes close to having a nurse rebel against the war is Singmaster’s “The Battleground.” This story follows a young, widowed nurse, Mary Bowman, who has let her home fall into disrepair because of the anguish she feels over her husband’s death. Mary hates the war and vows never to let her children think of it gloriously. It is the vehicle that killed their father and they should never forget this. She has seen countless lives torn apart by this war and can’t understand the joy her townspeople experience when they learn President Lincoln is coming to their town, Gettysburg, to make a speech from the old battlefield.

Mary is determined not to go and keep her children from it as well. But the judge has other ideas. He is determined to see Mary and her children at this historic address and convinces her to go. Once this happens, the heroine is doomed. President Lincoln’s manner and famous Gettysburg Address are too much for her and she is overtaken by patriotism all over again. President Lincoln reached out to her soul and smoothed it out (Singmaster 141). She later learned the speech and taught it to her children and grandchildren. Her husband had not died in vain; he was a martyr! And Mary, like the rest of the nurses, believed in the righteousness of the glorious war.

What was it that caused these two groups to interpret the same history so differently? The answer is simple enough: proximity. The soldiers were immersed in the war on a daily basis. They were the ones who were actually shot at; they were the ones who saw their comrades torn to pieces by these shots. The nurses did not fight. They did not see the war as it actually happened. What they saw were the results of the war-the broken pieces that they could fix, or else prepare

for the journey home if they could not. If they ever began to get glimpses of reality, it was quickly replaced by the familiar heroism. In a way, it was necessary and good that they remained romantic-injured soldiers would be cheered by admiration-a reminder of why they chose to fight in the first place. The nurse's romanticism was not feigned, however; it was genuine. They did not personally witness the carnage, which made their romanticism all the more sincere.

As for the soldiers, they had no choice but to become realistic. Even if they deserted, they had witnessed war firsthand and would never think of it in the same way. War, sadly, is not a game; people lose their lives. And although it sometimes seems necessary in the grand scheme of world affairs, there is really nothing glorious about it.

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