

## ANALYSIS

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (1865)



Walt Whitman

(1819-1892)

“Whitman was not concerned with the expression of merely personal emotion; he wanted to give it an objective existence as broad as the country over which the coffin passed on its journey to Illinois.... What has taken place through the fusion of Whitman’s materials is that the planet whose radiance had so impressed him a month before has become for him now ‘O powerful western fallen star!’ It has become the symbol, in its disappearance into the dark, for the President himself. Whitman does not handle his subject primarily by objective description, but by thematic use of three primary symbols--the lilac, the star, and the song of the thrush--which are repeated with the most subtle ordonnance that he ever managed....

The lilacs ‘fronting an old farm-house near the white-ash’d palings’ are lent a special relevance by their ‘heart-shaped leaves of rich green.’ They have come to Whitman from his Long Island childhood, and their use in the poem may unconsciously have been suggested to him by his having been at home in Brooklyn on the day of the assassination, alone with his mother.... The bush was right by the windows at Whitman’s birthplace at West Hills... The lilac is almost as native a symbol as the common grass itself... The fifth and sixth sections present the picture of the coffin in its night and day journey past depots and streets and over the breast of the land, met everywhere by solemn crowds. Standing among these in his imagination, as the train slowly passes, the poet bestows his ‘sprig of lilac.’ But not ‘for you, for one alone,’ he says... It is notable that, in deep fulfillment of his instinct for universality, Whitman nowhere in the poem mentions Lincoln by name...

The poet’s voice now matches that of the bird, as, in the longest section, he launches into his aria to ‘the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death,’ and urges, ‘when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly.’ But before this, in addition to declaring his carol a brother to that of the thrush, he has felt all three of his symbols coalesce into an organic whole: ‘O liquid and free and tender!’... He has blended the impressions of his different senses, of hearing, sight and smell, as they do blend in an individual’s full impression of a moment. Moreover, in ‘liquid’ he has suggested the kind of touch and movement that most

appealed to him, just as in 'wild and loose' he has characterized the kind of form he felt at home with, and in 'free and tender' the emotional range he could encompass best.

The symbolists were to carry much farther the merging of sensations, to the point of transference of one into another, as of color into sound or smell. But Whitman's greatest act of pioneering was in helping the modern sensibility feel at home in the natural world. He was able to suggest the interdependence of man and Nature since his 'trinity' of symbols sprang from the forces of the earth, no matter what spiritual implications they could rise to in his hymn to rebirth through fertility.... In the capacity to suffer revealed in this poem, Whitman moved farther away from the superficial innocence of evil with which Yeats has charged him."

F. O. Matthiessen  
*American Renaissance*  
(Oxford 1941) 618-624

"Walt Whitman...must have been practically a musical illiterate, for his references to music are of a uniform and magnificent banality... Even a casual reading of 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' shows that the entire effect is dependent on the three principal symbols of lilac, star, and bird; and that these symbols are constantly varied in application and combined both with each other and with various subsidiary symbols and ideas. A detailed examination will reveal how such an excellent and comparatively long poetic work is evolved out of such slight materials. But before beginning a consideration of the structure of the poem we may note that this symbolic treatment has the remarkable effect of universalizing the theme.... By using symbolic themes developed in what is essentially a musical way, Whitman achieved the universality of great music rather than the particularity of the ordinary type of in memoriam verse....

Section 2 develops the recently introduced symbol of the star. By associating it with night, referring to it as 'fallen' and 'disappear'd,' hidden by black murk, Whitman establishes the idea of grief for departed brilliance and prepares for the later specific references to death. Likewise, in the last two lines, he reiterates the fact that the real topic is his own grief rather than the blotting out of the star....

We must classify Whitman's elegy as a poem not based on any specific musical form and probably not written with any musical analogy in mind, but nevertheless conforming to certain general structural principles which are more musical than literary. The essential plan is that of three symbols separately introduced, developed both singly and in every sort of combination (with the addition of subsidiary symbols and of a fourth one of major importance—"the tallying chant of my soul"—derived from the interplay of the first three), and finally restated in much their original form, but with a great enrichment resulting from their intermediate relationships. This is clearly the circular structure of the typical musical composition rather than the linear development of the literary work. Furthermore, the principle (though not the structure itself) is that of sonata form: statement of related but contrasting themes, development of these themes, and recapitulation of them in much their original form....

One cannot say what the poem is 'about' except that it is about the symbols themselves and their interrelationships—including the various treatments of the idea of death as one of these symbols. And no verbal summary can represent the material of the poem except in these terms. It is clearly inadequate to say that the poem is 'about' the death of Lincoln, or death in general, except in the same way that Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* is... The real subject of the poem is the complex and beautiful interrelationships in the author's mind by which a number of hitherto insignificant things have come to symbolize a complex experience. It is really about its symbols and their development, precisely as the Beethoven symphony is really about its themes and their interrelationships. Thus the poem approaches far more closely than do most literary works to that condition which Schopenhauer and Pater describe as the particular glory of music--the inseparability of form and content."

Calvin S. Brown  
*Music and Literature*  
(Athens 1948) 178-94

"Though Lincoln is not mentioned by name in 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd,' his death in April 1865 was the occasion of its composition. It is, by common consent, the greatest of the many

poems about Lincoln in American literature; and in the judgment of John Bailey, perhaps the most judicious of Whitman's critics, the lyric within the poem (beginning 'Come lovely and soothing death') is 'one of the great lyrics of the world.' The poem was first printed in *Sequel to Drum-Taps* in 1865.

Whitman and Lincoln never met formally or talked together, though Whitman wrote in *Specimen Days* for August 12, 1863: 'I see the President almost every day, as I happen to live where he passes to and from his lodgings out of town.... We have got so that we exchange bows, and very cordial ones.' And the story is related (in Bucke's *Life of Whitman*) that Lincoln, seeing Whitman walk by the White House, asked who he was, and upon being told, said, 'Well, he looks like a man.'

'Of all the days of the war,' Whitman recorded in *Specimen Days*, 'there are two especially I can never forget. Those were the day following the news, in New York and Brooklyn, of that first Bull Run defeat, and the day of Abraham Lincoln's death. I was home in Brooklyn on both occasions. 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.'

James E. Miller, Jr.  
*The Literature of the United States II*, 3rd edition  
(Scott, Foresman 1953,1961,1966) 143

"The death of the great person stirs the poet not to a tragic sense of life but to its exquisite pathos. The idea of redemption and eternal life is present, but the mood is aesthetic and moral rather than religious.... Whitman's unacknowledged convention, here as everywhere, makes it impossible for him to conceive either the being or the value of the individual without conceiving him as an example of mankind in general. Were he to read Whitman's poem, Milton would doubtless observe that instead of bestowing flowers upon Lincoln, as he should, the poet bestows them first on all the dead equally and then on death itself....

In Whitman's poem the poet finds solace for his grief, not by placing himself in a grieving society but by withdrawing from the world and, in effect, curing his grief by feeling the more powerful emotion of loneliness. And the poem then recounts the poet's search for comrades, whom he finds in the symbolic star and singing bird and finally in death itself. There is no doubt that something morally incomplete has taken place when a poet is unable to speak of the death of a man--and he a beloved man--except in terms of his own loneliness. Yet there can be no doubt about the surpassing beauty of the verse....

It must be noted finally that in contrast to that in 'Lycidas' [by Milton] the feeling of immortality is extremely weak in Whitman's poem. There is no liberating promise of personal immortality to the dead man, and at the end we find a beautiful but very sad recession instead of the buoyant promise of 'fresh fields, and pastures new.' The symbol of the lilac 'blooming, returning with spring' recurs, with its suggestion of resurrection. But this does not at all succeed in releasing the poet from his conviction that he has found the ultimate felicity of comradeship in the equalitarian democracy of death itself....

And if the mind whose imprint we read on the Lincoln elegy is harmonious and moving, it is also in danger of an excessive refinement. It is in danger of wishing to substitute antiseptics for the healing processes of Nature in which it cannot quite believe any more. How else is one to account for the sterile, the really Egyptian, atmosphere of odors, perfumes, herbage, pine, and cedar, to say nothing of the outright lyric worship of death itself? Yet despite its artificiality 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' stands up well if we compare it with other expressions of the refined American spirit--the 'Sunday Morning' of Wallace Stevens, let us say, and James's *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, and Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Different as these works are they share a tendency toward the abstract forms of myth and music, allegations of portents and miracles, appeals to the restorative cosmic forces. It is 'late' work, and (within the Whitman canon) it has the sound, as well as the emotional appeal, of a swan song."

Richard Chase  
*Walt Whitman Reconsidered*  
(William Sloane 1955) 140, 142-45

“Like ‘Out of the Cradle,’ ‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d’ is concerned with love and death, but of a different kind and on a different level. The poem opens, like the traditional elegy, with an expression of uncontrollable grief—‘O powerful western fallen star! / O shades of night--O moody, tearful night!’ By the time the poem concludes, the grief has subsided and the lines are filled with the mood of reconciliation. The drama of the poem lies in the narrative of the poet’s vacillation between the lilacs and the hermit-thrush, between the overpowering emotion of loving grief for the dead President and the subdued emotion brought by insight into the spiritual meaning of death. The structure of the poem is cyclic in nature, moving from star to lilac to bird, and back to star again, to repeat the circle--but eventually settling with the hermit-thrush.

The emotions of the poem are embodied in a number of powerful symbols. The western star is Abraham Lincoln, its fixed position in the heavens suggesting his steady leadership of the nation. The ‘harsh surrounding cloud’ represents death and the tragic loss it leaves in its wake. The lilacs, returning every spring, symbolize the eternal memory of the President and the strong love of the poet for him. The hermit-thrush represents the voice of spirituality, his song ‘Death’s outlet song of life.’

When the poet, his emotions spent, finally heeds the call of the hermit-thrush, it is to follow him to the swamp cedars with two ‘companions’: the ‘thought of death’ (memory of Lincoln) and the ‘sacred knowledge of death’ (spiritual insight). There by the ‘shores of the water,’ on the ‘path by the swamp in the dimness,’ he hears the thrush’s carol of death, a carol of joy and praise for the ‘dark mother’ and ‘strong deliveress.’ With his soul ‘tallying’ the bird’s song, the poet has a moment of spiritual ecstasy that bestows a vision confirming the bird’s joy in death. With this insight the poet becomes reconciled to death, and his grief subsides. The closing section of the poem ritualistically chants the poet’s gentle and gradual release from the powerful grip of his emotions, concluding: ‘Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul, / There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.’”

James E. Miller, Jr.  
*Walt Whitman*  
(Twayne 1962) 100

“A string of words, D. H. Lawrence once said, that mysteriously makes the ear tingle--has to do with the relation between death and poetry. The death of Lincoln provided the occasion, and the emergent grief of an entire nation served as large but distant background. What is enacted in the foreground, however, is what so often summoned up Whitman’s most genuine power: the effort to come to terms with profound sorrow by converting that sorrow into poetry. By finding the language of mourning, Whitman found the answer to the challenge of death. By focusing not on the public event but rather on the vibrations of that event--vibrations converted into symbols--within his private self, Whitman produced one of his masterpieces and perhaps his last unmistakable one.”

R. W. B. Lewis  
*Major Writers of America*  
(Harcourt 1962) 984

“An elegy on the death of Abraham Lincoln, *Lilacs* is considered one of Whitman’s finest poems and one of the greatest elegies in world literature. The first four sections of the poem comprise the first cycle, which presents the grief of the poet over the death of Lincoln and introduces the symbols of the lilac with its blossoms and heartshaped leaves (love and rebirth), the western star (Lincoln, the beloved comrade), and the hermit thrush (the soul, the poet). The second cycle (sections five through nine) presents the journey of the coffin, first the coffin of Lincoln and then all coffins. Moving from the particular death to universal death, the poet covers the coffins with lilacs, placing the symbol of ever-returning spring over the symbol of death. The tension between grief and the spiritual knowledge to be found in death is built up, to be continued in cycle three (sections ten through thirteen). Cycle four (sections fourteen through the end) is a celebration of the mystery and glory of death, a reconciliation of the tension of cycle three, in which ‘lilac and star and bird [are] twined with the chant of [the poet’s] soul’.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

“The lilacs poem is a work inspired by Whitman’s grief at the death of Abraham Lincoln, but, like all supreme expressions of sorrow, it surpasses its occasion, memorializing all the dead soldiers of the Civil War and in the end becoming a song for ‘lovely and soothing death.’ That is, with all its particular, American symbolism--of western fallen star, lilac blossom and heart-shaped leaf, and the song of the hermit-thrush--the poem follows most of the conventions of the traditional elegy. The poet feels at first what seems to be immitigable sorrow, but through the carol of the thrush is freed by the knowledge that the dead rest well and will live long in memory. A particularly fine touch is Whitman’s creating ‘adornments’ for the burial house of ‘him I love’; for they are not the slaves, unguents, urns of food, or ships of a Pharaoh, but native odors and pictures for a President--the odor of lilacs and sea-winds, pictures of growing spring, fulfilled noon and welcome night.”

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.  
*Twelve American Writers*  
(Macmillan 1962) 397

“‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’ed’ certainly established the proper tone, but today the poem’s original greatness has perhaps been obscured by critics and teachers who overemphasize its trinity of symbols in the lilacs (the poet’s perennial love for Lincoln), the fallen star (Lincoln), and the hermit thrush (death, or its chant). Whitman himself did not consider it his best poem.... It was Whitman’s passion for the president as the redeemer of the Union and its democracy that makes the poem so successful as a national elegy, turning a monologue into a dialogue with the American reader. Also at work is Whitman’s mourning for Lincoln as the commander-in-chief of his beloved soldiers, who suffered and died as Lincoln now has. It was probably the poet’s intense involvement in the hospitals that made Lincoln’s death so monumental to him... For him, Lincoln’s death symbolized the war’s most profound loss.”

Jerome Loving  
*Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*  
(U California 1999) 288-89

Michael Hollister (2015)