# A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the

## POEM TEXT

A march in the ranks hard-prest, and the road unknown,
A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the darkness,
Our army foil'd with loss severe, and the sullen remnant retreating,
Till after midnight glimmer upon us the lights of a dim-lighted building,
We come to an open space in the woods, and halt by the dim-lighted building,
'Tis a large old church at the crossing roads, now an impromptu hospital
Entering but for a minute I see a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made,
Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles and lamps,
And by one great pitchy torch stationary with wild red flame and clouds of smoke,
By these, crowds, groups of forms vaguely I see on the floor, some in the pews laid down,
At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death, (he is shot in the abdomen,)
I stanch the blood temporarily, (the youngster's face is white as a lily,)
Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o'er the scene fain to absorb it all,
Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in obscurity, some of them dead,
Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood,
The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms, the yard outside also fill'd,
Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating,
An occasional scream or cry, the doctor's shouted orders or calls,
The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the glint of the torches,
These I resume as I chant, I see again the forms, I smell the odor,
Then hear outside the orders given, Fall in, my men, fall in;
But first I bend to the dying lad, his eyes open, a half-smile gives he me,
Then the eyes close, calmly close, and I speed forth to the darkness,
Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching, on in the ranks,
The unknown road still marching.

## SUMMARY

We're on a difficult, painful march through unfamiliar territory, making our way through thick woods, our steps quiet in the dark. Our army has been badly beaten; only a few of us, sad, silent, and battered, are left to retreat. We do so until after midnight, when we see the faint lights of a building, find it in a clearing in the woods, and then stop there. It's an old church at a crossroads, turned into an improvised hospital. When I go in just for a minute, I see something that no poem or picture could ever capture. Deep, dark shadows are barely illuminated by lamps and candles, and by one smoky torch shooting red flames. By that light, I can vaguely see huge numbers of people lying on the floor and the pews. Right at my feet, more clearly, I can see a soldier—just a boy—bleeding to death from a gunshot wound in his belly. I manage to stop the bleeding, though not for long. The boy's face is lily-white. Before I leave I look around to try to take in what I'm seeing. There are all kinds of people here, strewn around with indescribable expressions and in indescribable positions. Most are hard to see in the darkness. Some of them are dead. There are surgeons performing operations, assistants holding up lights, the smell of anesthesia and blood. Oh, the crowd of gory bodies—so many that the churchyard is full of them, too. Some people are lying directly on the ground, some on stretchers; some are sweating and convulsing as they die. I hear screams, and the doctors' shouted instructions; I see the surgical instruments glittering in the torchlight. As I tell this story now, I see these things again, and smell those smells—and finally hear my commander outside shouting, "Back to the march, men, get in line." Before I go, I bend down to the dying boy at my feet. His eyes are open, and he gives me a faint smile. Then his eyes fall gently shut, and I rush out into the dark. I march again, always in darkness, among my fellow soldiers, marching along down that unfamiliar road.

## THEMES

### THE HORROR, CHAOS, AND TRAUMA OF WAR

Whitman's poem records the hellish violence, pain, and terror of the Civil War. The speaker, a soldier retreating from a terrible battle, describes encountering a field hospital in which countless men lie wounded and dying—a sight whose horror is "beyond all the pictures and poems ever made." Paying special attention to a young boy dying of a gut shot, this speaker's story suggests that war is unspeakably horrific and cruel, indiscriminately destroying even the most innocent life and leaving survivors traumatized.

The poem's speaker has already seen plenty of dreadful things when this poem begins: he's one of the survivors of an "army foil'd with loss severe," retreating from a defeat in battle. It's not the battlefield that stays with him, however, but a hospital. As he and his comrades reach a "large old church" that has become an "impromptu hospital," he finds that this holy place has become something rather like an outpost of Hell. With "shadows of deepest, deepest black" lit only by a "pitchy torch" that emits "wild red flame," it's jam-packed with horribly wounded men, a "crowd of bloody forms" that overflows into the yard outside.

So much suffering, the speaker says, is "beyond" art: he can't even begin to capture just how awful it was. The war's horrors are so great they're almost unspeakable.

Amid all the dying men, the speaker is most struck by a young boy, a "mere lad" dying of a gut wound. The speaker tries to give this young man a little comfort, but all he can do is "stanch the blood temporarily" before the boy's eyes "close" forever. With a face as "white as a lily," this youthful, innocent figure seems to symbolize *all* the countless young men whom war chews up. Part of what's so terrible about war, his death suggests, is that it mercilessly and arbitrarily destroys goodness and youth.

Worse still, war scars even those who survive. The soldier telling this story may have made it out alive, but he'll also carry the traumatic memories of the hospital with him for the rest of his life. Even as he tells his story now, he can "resume" the sights and sounds of that awful night as if he were still there.

All this horror is especially appalling because it's part of a march down a "road unknown." The poor men fighting in this war can't know when, where, or *whether* this carnage will ever stop. The poem thus becomes, not just an all-too-real record of the Civil War in particular, but an anti-war poem in general, suggesting that war is a futile, meaningless trudge down the ugliest and cruelest of paths.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-25

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-5

*A march in the ranks hard-prest, and the road unknown,*
*A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the darkness,*
*Our army foil'd with loss severe, and the sullen remnant retreating,*
*Till after midnight glimmer upon us the lights of a dim-lighted building,*
*We come to an open space in the woods, and halt by the dim-lighted building,*

As the poem begins, a soldier is on the retreat. He and his companions have suffered a "loss severe," badly losing a battle, and only a "sullen remnant" (a few gloomily silent survivors), "hard-prest" and exhausted, remain. They're marching through dark woods on a "road unknown," going who knows where.

Notably, they're doing all of this in the present tense. Using his customary long, swinging lines of free verse, Walt Whitman puts readers right in the moment with this soldier, tracking his progress on what will turn out to be one of the more terrible nights of his life.

Whitman usually wrote in his own voice, but this poem is a story told by a character. It's based on real events observed by a real person, a wounded soldier named Milton Roberts whom Whitman met while he was volunteering in military hospitals during the American Civil War. There's a documentary quality here: Whitman is making a record of the real-life horrors of his era.

In these first lines, though, this poem feels as if it could take place during any war, anywhere—or as if it could be a sinister fairy tale, for that matter.

As the soldiers make their way through dark woods at midnight—so far, so mythic!—they at last encounter a "glimmer" of light. Not much of it, though: they see only the "lights of a dim-lighted building." They find that building in a clearing in the woods and stop there.

Listen to the way the speaker uses epistrophe here:

> Till after midnight glimmer upon us the lights of a dim-lighted building,
> We come to an open space in the woods, and halt by the dim-lighted building,

This gloomy building, the repetition suggests, is going to be important. It's also *ominous*. A few dim lights don't promise much warmth and comfort for a band of exhausted marchers.

The retreating soldiers, readers might already suspect, aren't in for anything good in there.

## LINES 6-10

*'Tis a large old church at the crossing roads, now an impromptu hospital*
*Entering but for a minute I see a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made,*
*Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles and lamps,*
*And by one great pitchy torch stationary with wild red flame and clouds of smoke,*
*By these, crowds, groups of forms vaguely I see on the floor, some in the pews laid down,*

Peering at the "dim-lighted building," the speaker sees that it's a church, now transformed into an "impromptu hospital" to care for fallen soldiers. The speaker ducks in "but for a minute," only to find an unspeakable sight. What he sees in that hospital, he says, is "beyond all the pictures and poems ever made."

Readers thus learn that this poem will be an attempt to describe what can't be described, to capture what can't be captured: a sight appalling beyond words.

What happens next unfurls like a horror movie. At first, the speaker can hardly see at all. He observes "shadows of deepest, deepest black"—a moment of helpless epizeuxis that suggests he's already struggling to describe *just how black* those shadows were.

Those shadows are relieved only by a few "moving candles and lamps" and by "one great pitchy torch," a smoking, ugly beacon emitting "wild red flame and clouds of smoke." The imagery of flames and smoke around that torch suggests that the speaker feels as if he's gazing into Hell itself.

But for a moment, the speaker doesn't reveal exactly what he *sees* in the dull red torchlight. All he says is that he can "vaguely" make out "crowds, groups of forms": human bodies lying on the floor and the repurposed church's pews. Putting the synonyms "crowds" and "groups" right next to each other, he stresses that there were an awful lot of these "forms," but he doesn't say much about them directly.

It's that restraint that produces the horror here. Readers know they're being invited to imagine a scene straight out of Hell. They know that there are countless wounded and dying people lying around in this church, breathing smoke in the darkness. The speaker doesn't have to say the sight is terrible for readers to feel chilled. Instead, he sets the scene, then leaves readers to imagine their own worst nightmares.

It's no coincidence that Whitman was reading Dante when he wrote this poem. Here, he's borrowing both Dante's visions of Hell (including the idea that one finds its gateway in a dark wood) and his insistence that some things just can't be put into words.

## LINES 11-12

*At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death, (he is shot in the abdomen,)*
*I stanch the blood temporarily, (the youngster's face is white as a lily,)*

After that first confused, terrifying impression of heaps of dead and dying men in dim torchlight, something more concrete catches the speaker's eye. Right at his feet, "more distinctly," he sees a young soldier "in danger of bleeding to death" from a gunshot to the gut.

This terrible sight clearly moves the speaker. He calls the poor dying soldier a "mere lad," a "youngster"; just a boy, in other words. He knows, too, that the best he can do for him is to "stanch the blood temporarily," perhaps giving him just a few more minutes of life by trying to keep him from bleeding even more. It's not looking good, though. In a room full of this many dying men, with a hemorrhaging gut wound, this boy is clearly a goner.

Describing this young man, the speaker uses the poem's sole moment of figurative language, saying he's "white as a lily." Delicate, pale lilies are common symbols of innocence, purity, youth—and mourning. The simile here thus feels especially poignant. This "mere lad" is horribly young and definitely on his way out. He's also as pale as he is because he's lost so very much blood.

By choosing to use a simile here and nowhere else, the speaker singles this boy out, suggesting that his face is one of the things he remembers most distinctly from this dreadful night. The image of the lily in particular also suggests that this young boy has a symbolic role, standing in for *all* the very, very young men whom war chews up and spits out.

## LINES 13-19

*Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o'er the scene fain to absorb it all,*
*Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in obscurity, some of them dead,*
*Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood,*
*The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms, the yard outside also fill'd,*
*Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating,*
*An occasional scream or cry, the doctor's shouted orders or calls,*
*The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the glint of the torches,*

Looking up from the dying lily-white boy at his feet, the speaker takes one last glance around the makeshift hospital before retreating. He wants, he says, "to absorb it all," to take in everything he can about this hellish scene. In fact, he's "fain to

absorb it all"—*eager* to hold onto it. Considering how awful a sight it is, this might seem strange. Perhaps, though, it's the very awfulness that makes him want to keep an impression: to convince himself it's real, to tell the story to other people.

He still has a difficulty, though: what he sees remains "beyond description," just as it was "beyond all pictures and poems ever made." He can say that he sees "faces, varieties, postures" of all sorts, but he doesn't give any specifics; he simply leaves readers to imagine broken bodies in sickening, unnatural positions, faces (living and dead) with unspeakable expressions.

He seems, now, to fall into a kind of fugue state, describing what he sees in flashes. Take a look at the way he uses caesura and asyndeton to shape these lines:

> Surgeons operating, || attendants holding lights, ||
> the smell of ether, || the odor of blood,
> The crowd, || O the crowd of the bloody forms, || the yard outside also fill'd,
> Some on the bare ground, || some on planks or stretchers, || some in the death-spasm sweating,

Commas divide these lines into roughly even segments, each new clause hitting like a traumatized flashback. No reassuring, concluding "and" ever comes along to bring this list of terrible sights to a close: each sight the speaker describes only leads to another.

Repetitions, too, suggest that the speaker feels trapped in what he sees. When he cries, "The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms," he echoes the "crowds, groups of forms" he described back in line 10, adding the unhappy detail that these forms were "bloody." His diacope on the word "crowd" makes it clear that he can't get over how overwhelmingly *many* injured men there are.

So does his anaphora in line 17: "Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating." Those poor men, this repetition shows, are absolutely everywhere you look, and they're suffering terribly.

Most of the imagery here remains fairly vague. The speaker mentions, for instance, "the smell of ether" and "the odor of blood" without trying to describe what these smells were *like* (sweet, sickly, coppery?). But amid the "occasional scream[s]" and the "doctor's shouted orders," one all-too-specific vision does stand out: the light glittering on the doctor's surgical instruments. That vision gets a whole long line to itself, breaking the stretch of lines divided by choppy caesurae.

Listen to the way the speaker brings this awful vision to life with alliteration and consonance:

> The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the glint of the torches.

The "glisten" of the instruments reflects the "glint" of the torches in its nasty /gl/ sound, too. And all those little /t/ sounds are scalpel-sharp.

## LINES 20-25

> *These I resume as I chant, I see again the forms, I smell the odor,*
> *Then hear outside the orders given, Fall in, my men, fall in;*
> *But first I bend to the dying lad, his eyes open, a half-smile gives he me,*
> *Then the eyes close, calmly close, and I speed forth to the darkness,*
> *Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching, on in the ranks,*
> *The unknown road still marching.*

After the speaker's dreadful list of the sights, sounds, and smells of the makeshift hospital, there's a surprise. This present-tense poem, it turns out, has been a memory all along; the speaker is "chant[ing]" a tale from his past. The trouble is, that tale still feels hideously immediate to him. As he speaks, he can "resume" his place in the scene, so that:

> [...] I see again the forms, I smell the odor,
> Then hear outside the orders given, Fall in, my men, fall in;

These lines suggest a concentrated moment of memory. Everything the speaker has seen (and smelled) so far gets all wrapped in the instant that he heard his commander ordering his men to "fall in"—to get back in formation so that they can continue their march. That single moment feels as dense as a nightmare.

A major part of the horror of war, these lines suggest, is that the things a soldier experiences never quite leave him. These traumatic memories might *always* feel present-tense to the speaker; he's never too far from that dismal scene.

The moment of his departure stands out to him, as well, because of his last interaction with the poor dying boy he noticed earlier on. Before he follows orders and rejoins his rank, he bends over the boy, who gives him a sweet, unexpected, out-of-place "half-smile"—then closes his eyes, likely for the last time. The speaker marvels, "the eyes close, calmly close," his diacope showing just how eerie it is that the boy should be *calm* in these circumstances: death has already gotten its hooks in him, he's already far away.

In shock, the speaker leaves him and "speed[s] forth"—only to find himself in another waking nightmare. Along with his fellow survivors, he goes right back to:

> Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching, on
> in the ranks,
> The unknown road still marching.

Those three "marching"s show that the soldier's dreadful war isn't over yet. He'll go on "marching" down that "unknown road" for who knows how long. His return to the word "resuming" (echoing the "resume" back in line 20) suggests that, in some sense, he's *still* marching down that road in his mind.

The image of a constant trudge interrupted only by spells of intense horror starts to feel symbolic. By repeating language from the first line of the poem here at the end, the speaker suggests that war creates endless *cycles* of misery—and perhaps endless cycles of conflict, too. While this poem is based on a story from the American Civil War, its horrors could come from any time and place soldiers have marched.

Here at the end of the poem, readers might also realize that this whole story has been told in a single, unbroken sentence, inescapable as the speaker's memories.

## SYMBOLS

### THE DYING BOY

Looking around at a room crammed full of dying men, the speaker singles out one person in particular: a boy lying at his feet, dying of a gunshot wound to the gut. With his face pale, delicate, and innocent as a "lily," this boy symbolizes *all* the heartbreakingly young men that war destroys. In a poem where the speaker never discusses the war's larger purpose (or even mentions what war he's describing), this boy's death feels particularly arbitrary and horrific, suggesting that all such deaths are a dreadful waste of young life and potential.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 11-12:** "At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death, (he is shot in the abdomen,) / I stanch the blood temporarily, (the youngster's face is white as a lily,)"
- **Lines 22-23:** "But first I bend to the dying lad, his eyes open, a half-smile gives he me, / Then the eyes close, calmly close,"

## POETIC DEVICES

### IMAGERY

This poem's imagery presents the horrors of war through the traumatized speaker's eyes. His memories of what he saw in a makeshift hospital one terrible night veer from foggy, overwhelmed impressions of hellish crowds to appallingly precise visions of glinting surgical instruments.

When he first arrives in the "dim-lighted" hospital, for instance, he sees a picture straight out of Dante's *Inferno* (which, not coincidentally, Whitman was reading at the time he wrote this poem). "Shadows of deepest, deepest black" are illuminated by "one great pitchy torch," a smoking beacon that emits "wild red flame and clouds of smoke." He remembers this sinister light in far more detail than he remembers what it illuminated: the "groups of forms" that lie groaning around the room appear only "vaguely" in the smoky light and in his memory. This movement from the specific to the vague suggests that much of what the speaker saw was just too terrible either to describe or to remember clearly; his traumatized mind blanks some of the specifics out, leaving only a nightmarish general impression behind.

That doesn't stop him from having nastily specific memories of what it was like in there: the "smell of ether" and the "odor of blood" return to him even as he describes the experience, as if he never really escaped. The "glisten of the little steel instruments" as desperate surgeons try to operate on dying men sticks with him, too.

By describing the room *around* the "crowd of the bloody forms" in more detail than he describes most of the dying or dead men, the speaker invites readers to imagine horrors beyond imagining and "beyond description."

**Where Imagery appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the darkness,"
- **Lines 4-5:** "Till after midnight glimmer upon us the lights of a dim-lighted building, / We come to an open space in the woods, and halt by the dim-lighted building,"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles and lamps, / And by one great pitchy torch stationary with wild red flame and clouds of smoke,"
- **Line 12:** "(the youngster's face is white as a lily,)"
- **Lines 14-19:** "Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in obscurity, some of them dead, / Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood, / The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms, the yard outside also fill'd, / Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating, / An occasional scream or cry, the doctor's shouted orders or calls, / The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the glint of the torches,"

### SIMILE

This gruesomely vivid poem uses only one moment of figurative language: a single simile in line 12. Not only is this the only simile in the poem, but it's also the only moment that the speaker singles out one face among all the screaming, writhing, sweating sufferers in the makeshift hospital. In this moment, the speaker describes the face of a young man—a "mere

lad"—who's bleeding to death from a bullet to the gut. His face, the speaker says, is "white as a lily."

That lily-white face, pale and delicate as a flower, feels out of place in the hellish darkness of the repurposed church: its beauty and innocence come as a horrible shock amid "clouds of smoke" and the "odor of blood." That shock is precisely the speaker's point. There's something just plain *wrong* about this young face dying in this hellish room.

The mention of a lily in particular suggests that the speaker sees something symbolic in this poor boy, too. Lilies are old images of innocence and purity—qualities that war chews up and spits out.

By including this lone pointed simile in a poem that otherwise sticks to grimly matter-of-fact imagery, Whitman singles this dying boy out, making him a representative of *all* the doomed young men who die senselessly on battlefields.

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Line 12:** "the youngster's face is white as a lily,"

## REPETITION

The poem's repetitions create queasy suspense, shock, and—above all—a sense that the horrors the poem records can be neither described nor escaped.

When, in line 4, the speaker and his fellow soldiers first stumble across the makeshift hospital in the woods, they see only the "lights of a dim-lighted building." The polyptoton there suggests that whatever hope these lights might provide, it seems faint from the start: what light there is here is "dim." When the speaker ends line 5 on that same "dim-lighted building," the repetition feels ominous: it's as if the soldiers are being helplessly beckoned toward that building, unable to avoid seeing what they're about to see.

Inside, one of the first things the speaker will see is pure darkness: "shadows of deepest, deepest black." That epizeuxis gets at the speaker's difficulty in describing just what he saw. It's as if he's saying, *The shadows were as dark as it could possibly be—no, darker than that—darker!* In fact, he'll twice say that what he saw—hellish heaps of dead and dying bodies—was "beyond" his ability to describe it, or anyone's ability: "beyond all the pictures and poems ever made," "beyond description."

The speaker only gets a short, traumatic look at the contents of the hospital before he and his fellow soldiers are called to return to the march again. The language he uses at the end of the poem mirrors the language he used at the beginning. Compare the first two lines to the last three:

> A march in the ranks hard-prest, and the road unknown,
> A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the darkness,
> [...]
> Then the eyes close, calmly close, and I speed forth to the darkness,
> Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching, on in the ranks,
> The unknown road still marching.

The echoes of the first lines suggest that the things the speaker has seen this evening are part of an ongoing atrocity. The longer the soldiers march, the longer the war goes on, the more horrors they'll see. The diacope on the words "marching" and "darkness" in the last few lines stresses the idea that this dark march feels as if it might go on forever.

**Where Repetition appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-2:** "A march in the ranks hard-prest, and the road unknown, / A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the darkness,"
- **Line 4:** "lights of a dim-lighted building,"
- **Line 5:** "dim-lighted building,"
- **Line 7:** "beyond"
- **Line 8:** "deepest, deepest"
- **Line 14:** "beyond"
- **Line 21:** "Fall in," "fall in"
- **Line 23:** "close, calmly close"
- **Lines 23-25:** "I speed forth to the darkness, / Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching, on in the ranks, / The unknown road still marching."

## PARALLELISM

Parallelism helps to evoke the relentless horror of the speaker's experiences.

The poem's first lines begin with moments of anaphora:

> A march in the ranks hard-prest, and the road unknown,
> A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the darkness,

The emphasis on the word "A" there makes it clear that this dismal march is one of many this speaker and his fellow soldiers have endured (and will endure).

When the speaker enters the hospital for a moment, he describes what he sees in a passage full of thumping parallelism and anaphora:

> Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood,
> The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms, the yard outside also fill'd,

Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating,
An occasional scream or cry, the doctor's shouted orders or calls,
The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the glint of the torches,
These I resume as I chant, I see again the forms, I smell the odor,

- In lines 15-16, the speaker makes a list of the things he saw, leading in with nouns: "surgeons," "the smell," "the yard."
- When he begins describing the wounded men in line 17, he uses anaphora on the word "some" to suggest just how many people were laid out there.
- In lines 18-19, he returns to those awful nouns again.
- And in line 20, he seems to see (and, horribly, smell) all these things again as he describes them now, using anaphora on "I"—"I see," "I smell"—to stress how inescapable these memories are.

The relentless parallelism all through these lines presents the speaker's memories as a series of horrible disconnected images, like fragments of a nightmare. His use of asyndeton makes it all feel even worse: there's no conjoining "and" in there to suggest that this parade of horrors will ever come to an end.

**Where Parallelism appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "A march"
- **Line 2:** "A route"
- **Lines 15-19:** "Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood, / The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms, the yard outside also fill'd, / Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating, / An occasional scream or cry, the doctor's shouted orders or calls, / The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the glint of the torches,"
- **Line 20:** "I see," "I smell"

## ASYNDETON

Asyndeton conjures up the relentless horror of the field hospital.

Describing what he sees as he takes a last glance around the hospital, the speaker makes a long list of individual sights, sounds, and smells—all of them upsetting:

Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in obscurity, some of them dead,
Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood,
The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms, the yard outside also fill'd,
Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating,

This is only the beginning of a description that goes on and on. Sinisterly, no "and" ever brings this list to a close. The lack of coordinating conjunctions here suggests that the speaker *could* carry on describing the terrible things he noticed in that hospital indefinitely. Even this long list of terrors only hints at what he saw; as he observes more than once, the hospital is really "beyond description."

Something similar happens when the speaker gets back on the road with his regiment:

Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching, on in the ranks,
The unknown road still marching.

Here, asyndeton suggests that the "march" might be as endless as the hospital's misery.

**Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 14-20:** "Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in obscurity, some of them dead, / Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood, / The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms, the yard outside also fill'd, / Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers, some in the death-spasm sweating, / An occasional scream or cry, the doctor's shouted orders or calls, / The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the glint of the torches, / These I resume as I chant, I see again the forms, I smell the odor,"
- **Lines 24-25:** "Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching, on in the ranks, / The unknown road still marching."

## VOCABULARY

**Ranks** (Line 1, Line 24) - Lines of soldiers.

**Hard-prest** (Line 1) - Struggling, laboring under difficult conditions.

**Foil'd** (Line 3) - Defeated, conquered, thwarted.

**Sullen** (Line 3) - Unhappily quiet.

**Remnant** (Line 3) - The remaining part, the survivors.

**Impromptu** (Line 6) - Improvised, not previously planned.

**Pitchy** (Line 9) - Covered in pitch—that is, tar.

**Stationary** (Line 9) - Holding still.

**Pews** (Line 10) - Church benches.

**Stanch** (Line 12) - Stop, restrict (usually used to describe stopping a wound from bleeding).

**O'er** (Line 13) - A contraction of "over."

**Fain** (Line 13) - Willing to try to, wanting.

**Obscurity** (Line 14) - Darkness, dimness. If something is "obscure," it's hard to see.

**Ether** (Line 15) - A powerful anesthetic.

**Death-spasm** (Line 17) - Jerky, involuntary movements made by a dying person; convulsions.

**Resume** (Line 20) - Here, the word "resume" is used to mean something like "remember." This choice of word suggests that the speaker still feels like he's right there as he tells this story; he can "resume" his place in the scene right as if he never left.

**Fall in** (Line 21) - Get back into formation (in order to continue marching).

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

This poem uses Whitman's trademark form: one long stanza of free verse. In fact, this poem isn't just one long stanza, but one long sentence, evoking the nightmarish, inescapable "march" of the Civil War.

At only 25 lines, this is one of Whitman's shorter poems; many of his most famous works are long, sprawling, mystical tales. That brevity suits this poem's project. The speaker knows that the horrors he's describing are "beyond description," so he doesn't linger over them for long or give much color commentary: he only tells the bare, appalling facts of what he saw.

Unusually for Whitman, this poem takes on the voice of a distinct character: a soldier based on a Civil War veteran, Milton Roberts, whom Whitman met while he was working as a nurse.

### METER

This poem is written in Whitman's characteristic free verse. Whitman was a pioneer of this form, and he used it like no one else. Though there's no regular meter here, the poem still has a hypnotic, pulsing momentum, driven along by chant-like repetitions and long runs of asyndeton.

For example, listen to what happens when the speaker begins to describe the things he saw in the depths of the hospital (lines 14-16):

> Faces, || varieties, || postures beyond description, ||
> most in obscurity, || some of them dead,
> Surgeons operating, || attendants holding lights, ||
> the smell of ether, || the odor of blood,
> The crowd, || O the crowd of the bloody forms, || the yard outside also fill'd,

The caesurae here divide this catalogue of horrors into small, rhythmic moments, like flashes of nightmare; the asyndeton means that there's no "and" to reassure readers that this list of awful sights might be about to come to an end.

### RHYME SCHEME

This free verse poem doesn't use a rhyme scheme. However, it still uses artfully echoing sounds: it's full of atmospheric assonance and alliteration. When the speaker describes his terrible march down a "road unknown," for instance, that long assonant /oh/ feels like a quiet moan of pain and fear. And the sinister /gl/ alliteration in the "glisten of the little steel instruments catching the glint of the torches" suggests darting, uneasy flickers of light over bloody scalpels.

## SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a soldier describing his harrowing memories of a Civil War field hospital. Though he says that what he saw there was "beyond all the pictures and poems ever made," his words do a pretty good job of conjuring the overwhelming horrors he saw in the shadowy building.

What the speaker *doesn't* say about what he saw is just as meaningful as what he does say. He never says outright, *This hospital was one of the most horrible things I've ever seen.* He merely describes quick impressions, like flashes of nightmare: "the smell of ether," "the glisten of the little steel instruments," "the odor of blood." These awful glimpses—and his insistence that what he saw was "beyond description," more and worse than he could ever say—suggest that the reality was utterly hellish.

The poem's horrible verisimilitude is drawn from a first-hand report: Whitman based this poem on a conversation with a soldier, Milton Roberts, who witnessed just such an overwhelmed hospital after the Battle of White Oaks Church.

## SETTING

This poem takes place during the American Civil War. Its setting, however, at first feels timeless as a nightmare. The speaker, one of a column of soldiers retreating from a serious defeat, stumbles across a "dim-lighted building," a church at a crossroads in thick woods at midnight. It's the stuff of a dark fairy tale.

Inside the church, things feel no less grim and mythic. By the smoky, reddish light of a "torch," the speaker sees a scene from what might as well be Hell. Heaps of dead and dying men lie

wherever there's room; a few doctors try to save them, but they're clearly fighting a losing battle. Only the mention of "ether" (an old-fashioned anesthetic) and surgical instruments places this scene in the 19th century. Everything else is just a vision of the everlasting horror of war.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) is often seen as a founding father of the 19th-century American Transcendentalist movement. His poetry, imbued with mysticism and firmly rooted in the natural landscape, was an inspiration to fellow American writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

But, like his contemporary Emily Dickinson, Whitman was also one of a kind, standing apart from the literary world around him with his inimitable style. Whitman pioneered free verse at a time when most poetry was still bound by metrical convention, and he remains an acknowledged master of the form.

This poem was first collected in Whitman's 1865 book *Drum-Taps*, in which Whitman reflected on the horrors of the American Civil War. At the time he wrote this poem, Whitman was volunteering in military hospitals and carrying around a copy of Dante's *Inferno*, sometimes making notes on his conversations with wounded soldiers in the margins. Dante's influence is clear in this poem's description of the makeshift hospital's lurid, hellish light.

More than 200 years after his birth, Whitman is still one of the world's best-known and most beloved poets. Some of his poems are so famous they're almost proverbial: for instance, "I am large, I contain multitudes" is a line from his "Song of Myself."

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Walt Whitman didn't fight in the American Civil War himself. (One of his friends once said that imagining the pacifistic Whitman on a battlefield was as incongruous as imagining Jesus Christ holding a gun.) But he saw plenty of its horrors when he volunteered in military hospitals. While working as a nurse, he took extensive notes on the conversations he had with wounded soldiers. This poem is based on his conversation with a soldier named Milton Roberts, who would himself lose a leg not long after his terrible "march" past a makeshift hospital.

Whitman hated both war and slavery, and he felt great hope and relief when the anti-slavery Union won the war in 1865, only a few months before *Drum-Taps* (the collection in which this poem appeared) was published. But his relief was short-lived. He was devastated when, shortly after the end of the war, Lincoln was assassinated. Whitman had deeply admired and sympathized with Lincoln. (And the feeling was mutual: Lincoln is known to have read poems from Whitman's major work *Leaves of Grass* aloud.)

Whitman would reflect on Lincoln's death and the lasting trauma of the Civil War for the rest of his life; his grief inspired some of his finest poetry.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Drum-Taps — See images of a first edition of Drum-Taps, the important collection in which Whitman first published this poem. (https://whitmanarchive.org/published/other/DrumTaps.html)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Whitman's life via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walt-whitman)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a moving performance of the poem. (https://youtu.be/7ZYiJpfwzb0)
- The Walt Whitman Archive — Visit the Walt Whitman Archive for a wealth of resources on Whitman's life and work. (https://whitmanarchive.org/)
- Some Background on the Poem — Learn about the conversation that inspired Whitman to write this poem. (https://iwp.uiowa.edu/whitmanweb/en/writings/civil-war/week-15/a-march-in-the-ranks-hard-prest)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALT WHITMAN POEMS

- A Noiseless Patient Spider
- Beat! Beat! Drums!
- Crossing Brooklyn Ferry
- I Hear America Singing
- I Sing the Body Electric
- O Captain! My Captain!
- O Me! O Life!
- One's-Self I Sing
- The Voice of the Rain
- When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer
- When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd

## HOW TO CITE

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