A Sight in Camp
Walt Whitman was born in 1819 and died in 1892. During the time of the Civil War, he was a radical Republican and a strong supporter of the Union Army. In 1862, Whitman’s brother was wounded at Fredericksburg, and he traveled to Washington D.C. to care for him. Whitman was also a caretaker for wounded soldiers at the Armory Square Hospital.
A SIGHT in camp in the day-break grey and dim,
As from my tent I emerge so early, sleepless,
As slow I walk in the cool fresh air, the path near by the hospital
tent,
Three forms I see on stretchers lying, brought out there, untended lying,
Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish woollen blanket,
Grey and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.
Curious, I halt, and silent stand;
Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest, the first,
just lift the blanket:
Who are you, elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-grey’d hair,
and flesh all sunken about the eyes?
Who are you, my dear comrade?
Then to the second I step— And who are you, my child and darling?
Who are you, sweet boy, with cheeks yet blooming?
Then to the third— a face nor child, nor old, very calm, as of
beautiful yellow-white ivory;
Young man, I think I know you— I think this face of yours is the face
of the Christ himself;
Dead and divine, and brother of all, and here again he lies.
This experience with the wounded soldiers during the Civil War caused Whitman to greatly respect the sacrifice of the soldiers and to write this poem. “A Sight in Camp” was included in *Leaves of Grass* in a section called *Drum Taps*.

A Sight in Camp depicts a soldier’s experience while walking through his camp. He sees three stretchers with dead soldiers, covered by blankets, lying in the camp. He lifts the first blanket and sees an elderly man. He lifts the second and sees a young, sweet boy. He lifts the third and remarks that the face is the face of Christ. The poem ends by saying “dead and divine, and brother of all, and here again he lies”
A Sight in Camp

• Speaker- a soldier
• Audience- Americans during the time of war
• Tone- a solemn and dreadful tone, but also shows admiration for the soldiers
• Setting- daybreak of the Civil War
• Central Purpose- to honor the soldiers that died in the Civil War
Imagery

• “elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-grey’d hair, and flesh all sunken about the eyes”- shows the aging and the effects of war on the man

• “sweet boy with cheeks yet blooming”- describes the youthfulness and innocence of the young boy

• “a face nor child, nor old, very calm, as of beautiful yellow-white ivory”- shows the pureness of the face
Symbols

- “Grey and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.”
  - This literally is the blanket covering the dead soldiers, but it is also the covering up of the horrors of the war and the covering of the identities of the many soldiers that died.

- “Who are you, elderly man?” and “And who are you, my child and darling?”
  - This is a symbol for the vast range of the ages of soldiers who died in the Civil War, approximately 620,000 men died in the Civil War and it included men of every age.

- “Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies”
  - Means not only the deaths of the soldiers, but is a symbol for the sacrifice of Christ compared to the sacrifice of the soldiers.
Literary Devices

• **Metaphor**- “this face of yours is the face of Christ himself”- comparing the sacrifice of the soldiers to the sacrifice of Christ

• **Simile**- “a face nor child, nor old, very calm as of beautiful yellow-white ivory”- used to describe the face of the soldier who is compared to Christ
More Literary Devices

- **Inversion**- “Three forms I see on stretchers lying” and “Over each the blanket spread”
- **Rhetorical Question**- “Who are you, my dear comrade?” and “And who are you, my child and darling?”
- **Repetition**- Repeated use of the word “grey” to add to the bleak and solemn tone
The purpose of this poem is to honor soldiers that died in the Civil War. Whitman most likely wrote this because he had extensive experience with dead or injured soldiers while working at the Armory Square Hospital, and to inspire a sense of patriotism in America. In this poem, the speaker sees three dead bodies ranging from old to young to a person compared to Christ. A theme of this poem is clearly shown in the last line, “Dead, divine, and brother of all, and here again he lies.” This shows the comparison between the soldier’s sacrifice and Christ’s sacrifice, and it shows how soldiers risk their life to fight for all the people of America. It seems that Whitman greatly respected the soldiers and wanted to honor them with this poem.