

# Making Sense of Battle: Journalism and Photography of the Civil War

## An Online Professional Development Seminar



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## FRAMING QUESTIONS

- How did changes in communications systems in the mid-nineteenth century affect the way people on the home front received and processed information about the Civil War?
- How does the poetry of the Civil War reflect the journalism and photography that brought the War to the home front?
- How did the poetry, journalism, and photography of the War work together to communicate with readers?

## Understanding

The Civil War was the first conflict in which images of mass death reached wide audiences. The mediation and circulation of war information through newly consolidated mass media networks created what observers called “war fever” or simply “shock” in people on the home front. Non-combatants, particularly in the North, encountered an unprecedented bombardment of information about tragic events at a distance. Crucially, they had to figure out what to think and how to feel about this vivid intrusion of carnage into the daily routines of their lives. Poetry, which circulated alongside journalistic coverage, helped to shape their responses as they confronted such new questions as how are we supposed to feel when masses of strangers fight and die to defend our causes while we are safe at home, and how are we to make sense of such loss?

## Understanding

US literary history traces a transformation from “romance to realism” over the course of the nineteenth century, and the Civil War is considered the event that fueled this transformation. The standard critical line holds that the War rendered portrayals of idealized characters and situations hopelessly outdated. This transformation can be traced by juxtaposing the poetry of the War next to its print and photographic documentation. Reporters, through the use of poetic language, and photographers, through stark and vivid images, strove to capture and make meaningful what they witnessed. Poets absorbed and tried to make sense of what they and others non-combatants saw and read through careful attention to accuracy and fidelity to truth.



## Eliza Richards

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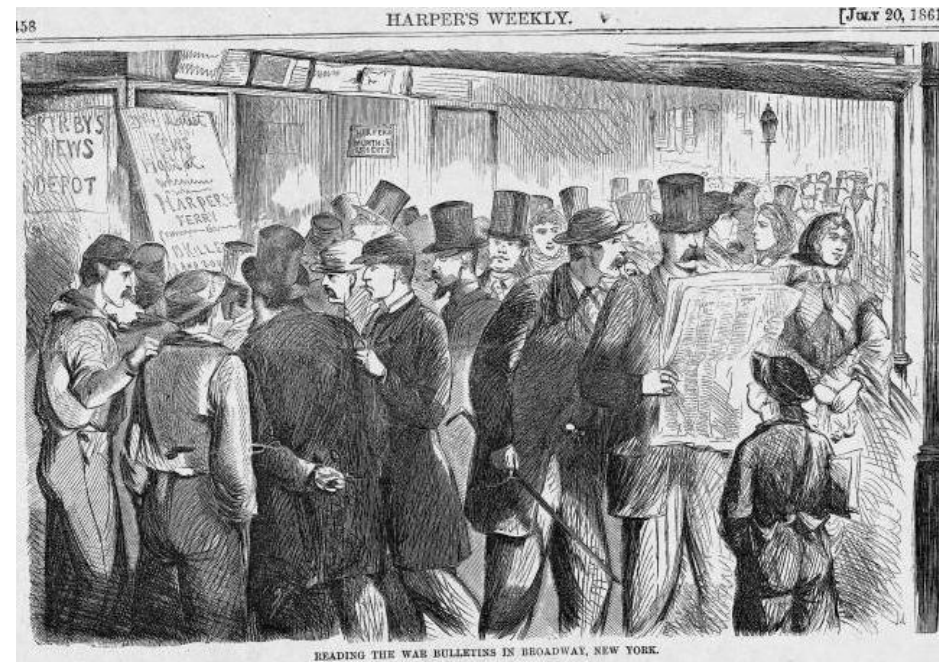
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*Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle*  
2004



## Consolidation of mass media in the late 1850s, especially in the North

- Steam press allowed for rapid reproduction of newspapers
- Extensive railway system allowed for rapid and broad dissemination of the news
- Network of telegraph lines could transmit information almost instantaneously across vast distances
- Changes in photography that allowed for photographers in camps and on battlefield
- All this led to the advent of eyewitness reporting: sketch artists and writers in the field sent images and news back to illustrated weeklies and other newspapers



“Reading the War Bulletins in Broadway,  
New York.”

*Harper's Weekly* June 20, 1861

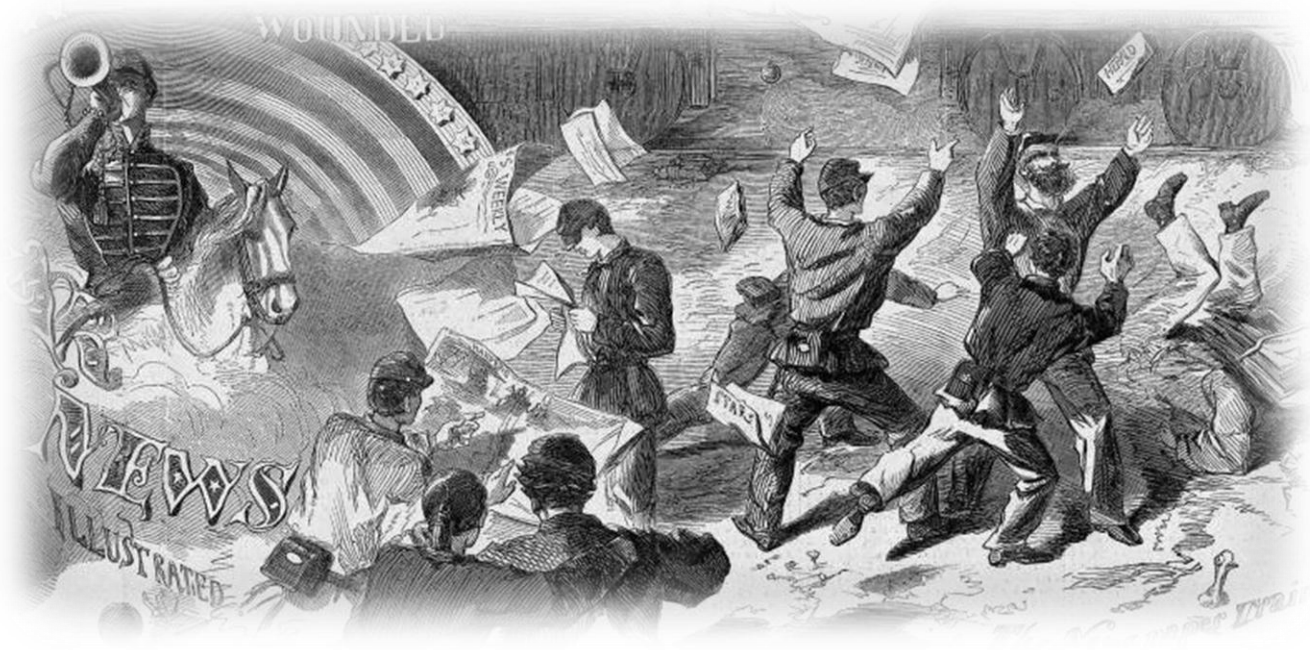
## In Time of War

The “Extras” fall like rain upon a drought,  
And startled people crowd around the board  
Whereon the nation’s sum of loss or gain  
In rude and hurried characters is scored.

*Harper’s Weekly*, August 15, 1863

### Discussion Question

What is this poem about?



I had been to the opera in Fourteenth street that night, and after the performance was walking down Broadway toward twelve o'clock . . . When I heard in the distance the loud cries of the newsboys, who came presently tearing and yelling up the street, rushing from side to side even more furiously than usual. I bought an extra and crossed to the Metropolitan Hotel, where the great lamps were still brightly blazing, and, with a crowd of others who gathered impromptu, read the news—which was evidently authentic.

For the benefit of some who had no papers, one of us read the telegram aloud, while all listened silently and intently.

No remark was made by any of the crowd, which had increased to thirty or forty, but all stood a moment or two, I remember, before they dispersed. I can almost see them there now, under the lamps of midnight again....

Whitman, *Specimen Days*

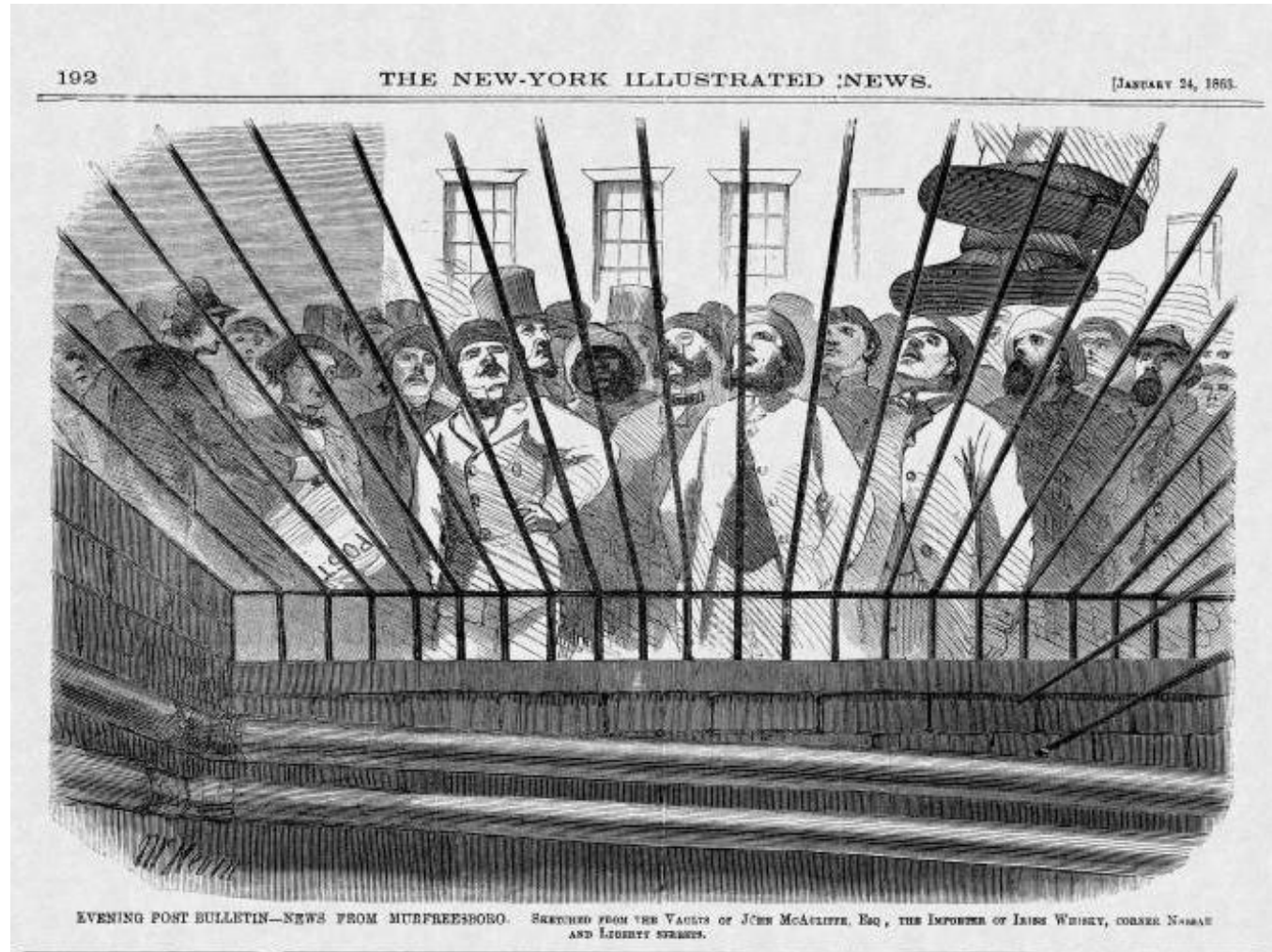
## Discussion Question

What does this passage tell us about the way Civil War news was delivered and received?



## Discussion Question

What does this image tell us about the receipt of Civil War news?



News from Murfreesboro. Sketched from the Vaults of John McAuliffe, Esq., Importer of Irish Whiskey, New York Illustrated News, January 1863

## From Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Bread and the Newspaper” (1861) War Fever

When any startling piece of war news comes, it keeps repeating itself in our minds in spite of all we can do. The same trains of thought go tramping round in a circle through the brain like the supernumeraries that make up the grand Army of the stage show. Now, if a thought goes round the brain a thousand times in a day, it will have worn as deep a track as one which has passed through it once a week for 20 years.

...there are new conditions of existence which make war as it is with us very different from war as it has been. The first and obvious difference consists in the fact that the whole nation is now penetrated by the ramifications of a network of iron nerves which flash sensation and volition backward and forward to and from towns and provinces as if they were organs and limbs of a single living body. The second is the vast system of iron muscles which, as it were, move the limbs of the mighty organism one upon another...

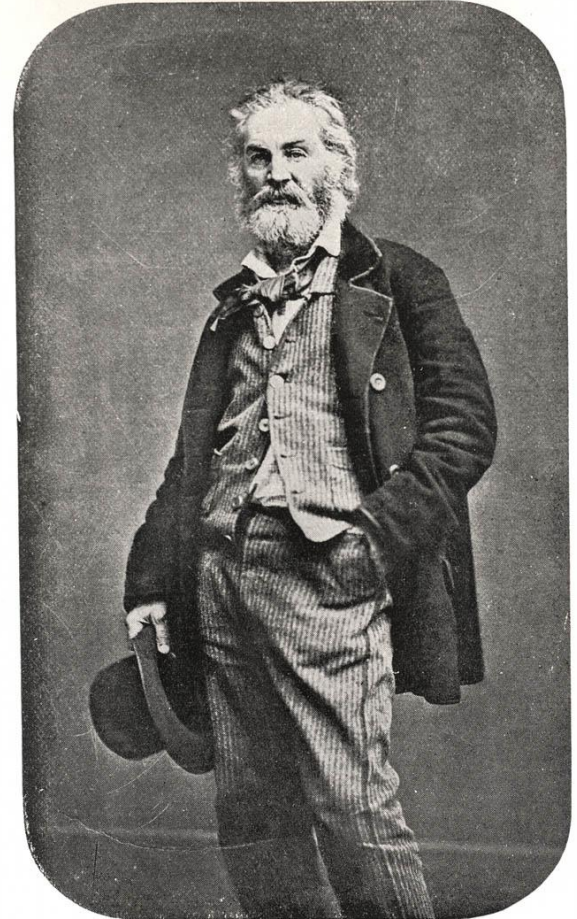
This perpetual intercommunication, joined to the power of instantaneous action, keeps us always alive with excitement. It is not a breathless courier who comes back with the report from an army we have lost sight of for a month, nor a single bulletin which tells us all we are to know for a week of some great engagement, but almost hourly paragraphs, laden with truth or falsehood as the case may be, making us restless always for the last fact or rumor they are telling.

### Discussion Questions

How does Holmes imagine the Union?      How does the news affect its recipients?

## Case Study

### Journalistic Engagements in Walt Whitman's Poetry



*Walt Whitman*





## Hospital Note Book

Walt Whitman

“I carried sometimes half a dozen such books in my pocket at one time—never was without one of them: I took notes as I went along—often as I sat...writing while the other fellow told his story I would work in this way when I was out in the crowds, then put the stuff together at home. Drum Taps was all written in that manner—all of it—all put together by fits and starts, on the fields, in the hospitals, as I worked with the soldier boys.”

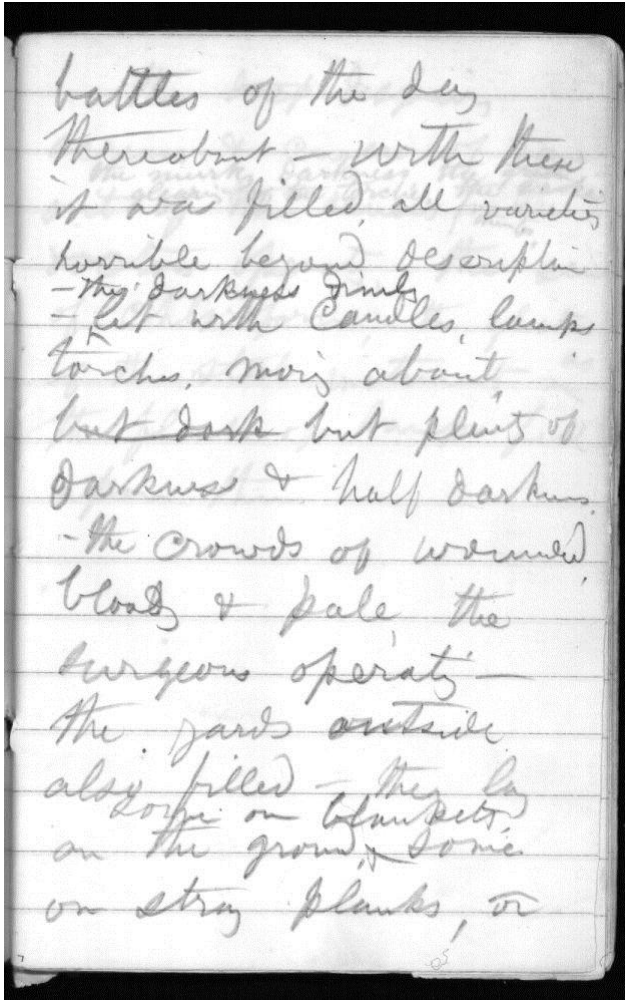
## From Whitman's hospital notebook (LC #101):

Scene in the woods on the peninsula—told me by Milton Roberts, Ward G (Maine)

After the battle of White Oaks Church, on the retreat the march at night—the scene between 12 and 2 o'clock that night at the church in the woods the hospital show at night, the wounded brought in—previous the silent stealth march through the woods at times stumbling over the bodies of the dead men (there had been terrible fights there [next page] that day, only closing at dark)—we retreating the artillery horses feet muffled orders that men should tread light and only speak in whispers---

Then between midnight and 1 o'clock we halted to rest a couple of hours at an opening in the woods—in this opening was a pretty good sized old church used impromptu for a hospital for the wounded of the [next page] battles of the day thereabout—with these it was filled all varieties...





A Page from Whitman's hospital notebook;  
source of "March in the ranks"

horrible beyond description

--the darkness [...]

--lit with candles, lamps

torches, moving about

but dark but plenty of

darkness + half darkness

--the crowds of wounded

bloody and pale, the

surgeons operating—

the yards outside

also filled—they lay

some on blankets

on the ground—some

on stray planks

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surgeons operating—**

**the yards outside**

**also filled—they lay**

**some on blankets**

**on the ground—some**

**on stray planks**

From "March in the Ranks Hard-Prest,  
and the Road Unknown"

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 of soldiers —the yard  
outside also fill'd;**

**Some on the bare ground, some on planks  
or stretchers, some in the death-  
spasm sweating;**

## CAVALRY CROSSING A FORD.

A LINE in long array, where they wind betwixt green islands;  
They take a serpentine course—their arms flash in the sun—Hark to the  
musical clank;  
Behold the silvery river—in it the splashing horses, loitering, stop to drink;  
Behold the brown-faced men—each group, each person, a picture—the  
negligent rest on the saddles;  
Some emerge on the opposite bank—others are just entering the ford;  
The guidon flags flutter gaily in the wind.

Walt Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 1865

Cavalry Crossing a Ford  
--Walt Whitman (1865)

A line in **long array**, where they wind  
**betwixt green islands**;  
They **take a serpentine course**—their arms  
**flash in the sun**—Hark to the musical  
clank;

Report in New York Times (August 3,  
1864):

The **long array** of horsemen winding  
**between the green islands** and **taking a**  
**serpentine course** across the ford—**their**  
**arms flashing back the rays of the**  
**burning sun**

## Discussion Question

What does Whitman take from the article?  
In what ways are these images photographic?

## Photography during the Civil War

- Not the first extensively photographed war (the Crimean War, 1853-1854, was also photographed), but the first images of mass death to reach a wide public.
- First war open to mass photographic reproduction because of advances in photography. Daguerreotypes and ambrotypes couldn't be reproduced because the direct, positive image was burned a single time into a plate. The glass plate negative was invented in 1851, ten years before the war; it enabled mass reproduction.
- Still, because the wet plate process was cumbersome and slow, it was impossible to capture motion; thus the emphasis on posed portraits and the dead.
- The possibility of mass reproduction caused Mathew Brady and other photographic companies to recognize the potential for profit in producing stereo views and album cards of war scenes; this resulted in equipping photographic companies to travel to battle fronts.
- The Battle of Antietam occurred on Sept 17. Brady's corps had arrived by the 18<sup>th</sup>. Most recent photographs of battlefield thus far. These were the first pictures of battle-field carnage ever to reach a broad public.



Discussion  
Question

Does Leutze  
portray  
battle?



Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851  
(Oil on canvas) Compare with photographic images of  
Civil War a decade later



Alexander Gardner and James Gibson. Antietam, MD. Bodies of the Confederate dead gathered for burial. Sept.-Oct. 1862.





M. B. BRADY'S NEW PHOTOGRAPHIC GALLERY, CORNER OF BROADWAY AND TENTH STREET, NEW YORK. - See Page 106.

M.B. Brady's New Photographic Gallery, Corner of Broadway and Tenth Street, New York. *Frank Leslie's*, January 5, 1861





“Scenes on the Battlefield of Antietam—From Photographs by Mr. M. B. Brady” *Harper's Weekly*, October 18, 1862



Close up of left-hand lower portion of *Harper's Weekly* collage, alongside "Brady" photo by Alexander Gardner





Close up of right-hand lower portion of *Harper's Weekly* collage, alongside "Brady" photo by Alexander Gardner

Excerpt from “Brady’s Photographs,” New York Times, Oct. 20, 1862

The living that throng Broadway care little perhaps for the Dead at Antietam, but we fancy they would jostle less carelessly down the great thoroughfare, saunter less at their ease, were a few dripping bodies, fresh from the field, laid along the pavement. There would be a gathering of the skirts and a careful picking of way; conversation would be less lively, and the general air of pedestrians more subdued. As it is, the dead of the battle-field come up to us very rarely, even in dreams. We see the list in the morning paper at breakfast, but dismiss its recollection with the coffee. ...

Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along streets, he has done something very like it. At the door of his gallery hangs a little placard, “The Dead of Antietam.” Crowds of people are constantly going up the stairs; follow them, and you find them bending over photographic views of that fearful battle-field, taken immediately after the action. ....You will see hushed, reverend groups standing around those weird copies of carnage, bending down to look in the pale faces of the dead, chained by the strange spell that dwells in dead men’s eyes. ....

These pictures have a terrible distinctness. By the aid of a magnifying glass, the very features of the slain may be distinguished. We would scarce choose to be in the gallery, when one of the women bending over them should recognize a husband, a son, or a brother in the still, lifeless lines of bodies, that lie ready for the gaping trenches....

Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Doings of a Sunbeam,” *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1863

Let him who wishes to know what war is look at this series of illustrations. These wrecks of manhood thrown together in careless heaps or ranged in ghastly rows for burial were alive but yesterday. How dear to their little circles far away most of them! – how little cared for here by the tired party whose office it is to consign them to the earth! An officer may here and there be recognized; but for the rest – if enemies, they will be counted, and that is all. “80 Rebels are buried in this hole” was one of the epitaphs we read and recorded. Many people would not look through this series. Many, having seen it and dreamed of its horrors, would lock it up in some secret drawer, that it might not thrill or revolt those whose soul sickens at such sights. It was so nearly like visiting the battlefield to look over these views, that all the emotions excited by the actual sight of the stained and sordid scene, strewn with rags and wrecks, came back to us, and we buried them in the recesses of our cabinet as we would have buried the mutilated remains of the dead they too vividly represented.

## Case Study

### The Poetry of Antietam: The Influence of Journalism and Photography





Discussion  
Questions

How are these  
images like  
photos?

How are the  
unlike?



The Battle of Antietam. Sketch by A. Waud, *Harper's Weekly* (October 11, 1862)



The field and its ghastly harvest which the Reaper had gathered in those fatal hours remained finally with us. Four times it had been lost and won. The dead are strewn so thickly that as you ride over it you cannot guide your horses's steps too carefully. Pale and bloody faces are everywhere upturned.

George Smalley, *New York Tribune* report on Battle of Antietam, Sept 17, 1862.

After All

The apples are ripe in the orchard,  
The work of the reaper is done,  
And the golden woodlands redden  
In the blood of the dying sun.

William Winter

*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*  
October 18, 1862

## Discussion Questions

What do these passages share?  
How do they diverge?

## AFTER THE BATTLE OF ANTIETAM.

The harvest-moon o'er the battle-plain  
Shines dim in the filmy eyes of the dead,  
And the yellow wealth of the later grain,  
Ground by the millstones of death and pain,  
And wet with the life-blood of the slain,  
Is kneaded to horrible bread.

The dying by twos and threes, at night  
Kissed their brows with cooling breath,  
Gather, with falling outward sight,  
To tell of the inward visions bright  
That rise like a tender morning light  
Over the hills of death.

Two who have stood up hand in hand,  
Brethren to-day as in years gone by,  
When, on the slopes of the Northern land,  
Was treaded closely each separate strand  
Of their lives in a perfect, golden band,  
Close to each other lie.

"Tom," says the elder, wiping slow  
From his comrade's lips the crimson stain,  
"Does the thirst torment you now?" "Oh no!"  
Says the other, with broken voice and low,  
"My wounds stopped bleeding an hour ago,  
And now I am free from pain.

"Don't think of my trouble, Ben, for you  
Are wounded far worse I know than I;  
I am only a little stiff and blue  
With lying out in the evening dew;  
But Ben, you are shattered through and through:  
Do you think you are going to die?"

"No, Tom, the bleeding is almost done;  
I shall live this many and many a day;  
And I felt all round to find my gun  
As I heard the firing just as the sun  
Went down; the rebels I think have run,  
The noise was so far away.

"I shall live to fight as never before—  
In the battle's front I shall hear my part;  
And when it is over, on the floor  
I shall play with my boy; and by the door  
My wife shall sit, with the fear no more  
Of war in her gentle heart."

"Oh, Ben! the days of battle appear  
A great way off; I'll forget them soon.  
I have been thinking while lying here  
It was just a year ago—a year—  
That I went a-matting with Nellie dear,  
In the sunny afternoon.

## After the Battle of Antietam,

*The harvest-moon o'er the battle-plain  
Shines dim in the filmy eyes of the dead,  
And the yellow wealth of the later grain,  
Ground by the millstones of death and pain,  
And wet with the life-blood of the slain,  
Is kneaded to horrible bread.*

July 4, 1863

*Harper's Weekly*



Only known photograph of Emily Dickinson

Dickinson letter, circa 1864: to the Norcross sisters

....Sorrow seems more general than it did, and not the estate of a few persons, since the war began; and if the anguish of others helped one with one's own, now would be many medicines.... I noticed that Robert Browning had made another poem, and was astonished—till I remembered that I, myself, in my smaller way, sang off charnel steps. Every day life feels mightier, and what we have the power to be, more stupendous.

## The Newness of the News

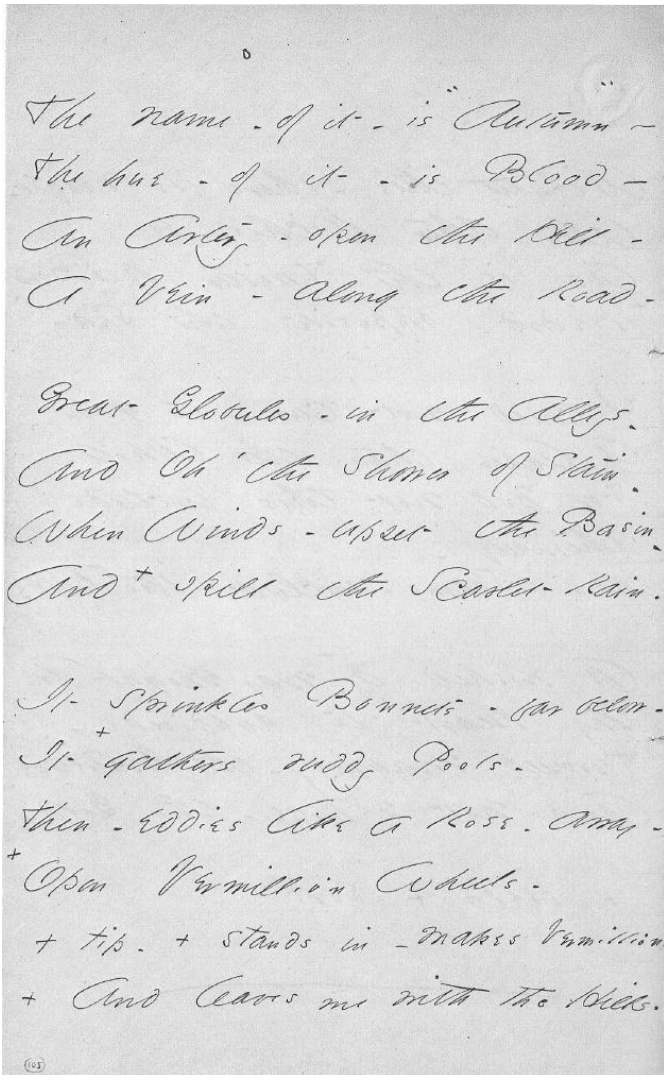
How News must feel when traveling  
If News have any Heart  
Advancing on the Transport  
'Twill riddle like a Shot.

Emily Dickinson

### In Time of War

The "Extras" fall like rain upon a drought,  
And startled people crowd around the board  
Whereon the nation's sum of loss or gain  
In rude and hurried characters is scored.

*Harper's Weekly*, August 15, 1863



The name – of it – is “Autumn” –  
The hue – of it – is Blood –  
An Artery – upon the Hill –  
A Vein – along the Road –

Great Globules – in the Alleys –  
And Oh, the Shower of Stain –  
When Winds – upset the Basin –  
And spill the Scarlet Rain –

It sprinkles Bonnets – far below--  
It gathers ruddy Pools –  
Then – eddies like a Rose – away –  
Upon Vermilion Wheels –

Emily Dickinson, late summer  
1862 , #656(J) #465(F)



## Autumn

Thy shield is the red harvest moon, suspended  
So long beneath the heaven's o'erhanging eaves;  
Thy steps are by the farmer's prayers attended;  
Like flames upon an altar shine the sheaves;  
And, following thee, in thy ovation splendid,  
Thine almoner, the wind, scatters the golden leaves!

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1845

O still belov'd, once worshipp'd! Time, that frowns  
In his destructive flight on earthly crowns,  
Spares thy mild splendour; still those far-shot beams  
Tremble on dancing waves and rippling streams  
With stainless touch, as chaste as when thy praise  
Was sung by Virgin-choirs in festal lays;

From William Wordsworth, "To the Moon"

The name – of it – is “Autumn” –  
The hue – of it – is Blood –  
An Artery – upon the Hill –  
A Vein – along the Road –

Great Globules – in the Alleys –  
And Oh, the Shower of Stain –  
When Winds – upset the Basin –  
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Emily Dickinson, late summer  
1862 , #656(J) #465(F)

## What about the South?

- Centers of publishing were in northern cities before the war—Boston, New York, Philadelphia. Basic lack of resources impeded Confederate publication: paper, ink, type, printing presses.
- Lack of manpower to power presses, because so many men were fighting in the war.
- South was under siege: Union army actively destroyed communications network.
- For the Confederacy, propagandistic functions of newspaper and magazines were essential to establishing a new nation: they concentrated more energy perhaps on developing Confederate national identity



“The War in Georgia—Destroying the  
Telegraph Across the Marshes Between  
Savannah and Fort Pulaski.”  
*Frank Leslie's*, April 5, 1862

Final slide.

Thank You