

Shiloh: a Requiem (April, 1862)

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
 The swallows fly low
 Over the field in clouded days,
 The forest-field of Shiloh—
 Over the field where April rain
 Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain
 Through the pause of night
 That followed the Sunday fight
 Around the church of Shiloh—
 The church so lone, the log-built one,
 That echoed to many a parting groan
 And natural prayer
 Of dying foemen mingled there—
 Foemen at morn, but friends at eve—
 Fame or country least their care:
 (What like a bullet can undeceive!)
 But now they lie low,
 While over them the swallows skim,
 And all is hushed at Shiloh.

Herman Melville

First published in *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866)

THE TRAGEDIES OF HISTORY INFORM US

The turmoil we endure in today's world disturbs and challenges us. Some would argue that this is the nature of life. News of battles and war have become daily features in the media. For many of us, we can't help but think back on our history. I remember with grief the death of high school mates in Vietnam more than 50 years ago, and then I read of coffins coming back from Afghanistan filled, yet again, with snuffed young life. I sometimes think in terms of the Dickensian phrase "...the worst of times." But then my mind drifts back to the American Civil War, and I know that was far worse.

Ken Burns' dramatic miniseries detailing the history of that infamy is contemporary, but Herman Melville's "Shiloh: A Requiem (April, 1862)" appeared in his first book of poetry, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866), and also reminds us of that tragedy. Paying more attention to history can help us understand our dilemmas of today, and poetry helps with that. Melville, better known as the novelist of *Moby Dick* (1851), his seminal work, turned to poetry in his early career when his literary success was questioned. His first book of poetry was not a success, with fewer than 500 copies sold by 1868. In that work, Melville included essays on how he believed Reconstruction of the South should be carried out, and this apparently sparked controversy and limited sales. His poem "Shiloh: A Requiem (April, 1862)" was short, artistic, and haunting, recounting the battle's death and mayhem the day after the fight. The 1862 Battle of Shiloh was waged in Tennessee when General Ulysses Grant's Union troops were surprised by the Confederates. Union soldiers fought fiercely and ultimately prevailed, but the cost was horrific. Together, the casualties totaled almost 24,000, setting a record for lives lost in a day for American troops.

Across eons, much poetry has been about war and battle. The art captures the devastation, darkness, heroism, and triumph of the reality. It is worth reading to understand and gain insight, and to that end, Homer's Iliad would be a great place to start.

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