

# The Artilleryman's Vision

Poetry by WALT WHITMAN

# look at this)

Poetry by E. E. CUMMINGS



### Connect to Your Life

**It's War!** People react to war in very different ways. Some are fascinated by the decisions of politicians and generals. Others take interest in the latest weaponry. Still others focus on how the war affects ordinary citizens, perhaps taking pity on its innocent victims or protesting against those who initiate war. Think of a war that has occurred during your lifetime or one that you have learned about. What images of the conflict stick in your mind? What are your thoughts and feelings about that war and its effects?

## Build Background

**Wartime Poets** Both Walt Whitman and E. E. Cummings were strongly affected by the experience of war. During the Civil War, Whitman traveled to the war front in Virginia after learning that his younger brother had been wounded. He remained in Washington, D.C., to work as a volunteer nurse, caring for the war's sick and wounded. Drawing on these experiences, he wrote Civil War poems such as "Come Up From the Fields Father," "Memories of President Lincoln," and "The Artilleryman's Vision."

E. E. Cummings volunteered for duty in another war. He served in the Ambulance Corps in France during World War I, joining a volunteer American corps before the United States entered the war. His prose book *The Enormous Room* is considered to be an outstanding literary account of World War I.

## Focus Your Reading

### LITERARY ANALYSIS TONE AND DICTION

The **tone** of a work—the attitude a writer takes toward his or her subject—may be bitter, serious, angry, or detached, among other possibilities. One element that contributes to a work's tone is **diction**, or word choice. Diction consists of **vocabulary** and **syntax**, or the arrangement and order of the words. Cummings's vocabulary and syntax are highly unusual, an effect heightened by the poet's unique use of punctuation and capitalization, as illustrated by the poem's opening:

*look at this)  
a 75 done  
this . . .*

By contrast, Whitman's diction helps to portray a battle in vivid detail:

*The crashing and smoking, the pride of the men in their pieces . . .*

As you read, notice how each poet's use of diction contributes to the work's tone.

### ACTIVE READING COMPARING AND CONTRASTING SPEAKERS

In poetry, the **speaker** is the voice that "talks" to the reader. The speakers in the following two poems have something in common: both have experienced warfare. In "The Artilleryman's Vision," the speaker recalls the chaos of battle when "the wars are long over." The speaker in "look at this)" reacts to the loss of life in war in a more immediate context, commenting on the recent death of a "buddy." As you read the two poems, continue to **compare** and **contrast** the two speakers and their experiences of war.

**READER'S NOTEBOOK** While reading each poem, think about the kind of person the speaker seems to be and the attitude he has toward war. Jot down notes to keep track of your observations.

Walt Whitman

While my wife at my side lies slumbering, and the wars are over  
 long,  
 And my head on the pillow rests at home, and the vacant midnight  
 passes,  
 And through the stillness, through the dark, I hear, just hear, the  
 breath of my infant,

**1** There in the room as I wake from sleep this vision presses upon me;

**5** The engagement opens there and then in fantasy unreal,  
 The skirmishers begin, they crawl cautiously ahead, I hear the  
 irregular snap! snap!

I hear the sounds of the different missiles, the short *t-h-t! t-h-t!* of  
 the rifle balls,

I see the shells exploding leaving small white clouds, I hear the great  
 shells shrieking as they pass,

The grape like the hum and whirr of wind through the trees,  
 (tumultuous now the contest rages,)

**2** **10** All the scenes at the batteries rise in detail before me again,  
 The crashing and smoking, the pride of the men in their pieces,  
 The chief-gunner ranges and sights his piece and selects a fuse of the  
 right time,

After firing I see him lean aside and look eagerly off to note the  
 effect;

Elsewhere I hear the cry of a regiment charging, (the young colonel  
 leads himself this time with brandish'd sword,)

**15** I see the gaps cut by the enemy's volleys, (quickly fill'd up, no  
 delay,)

I breathe the suffocating smoke, then the flat clouds hover low  
 concealing all;

Now a strange lull for a few seconds, not a shot fired on either side,  
 Then resumed the chaos louder than ever, with eager calls and  
 orders of officers,

**3** While from some distant part of the field the wind wafts to my ears  
 a shout of applause, (some special success,)

**5 engagement:** battle.

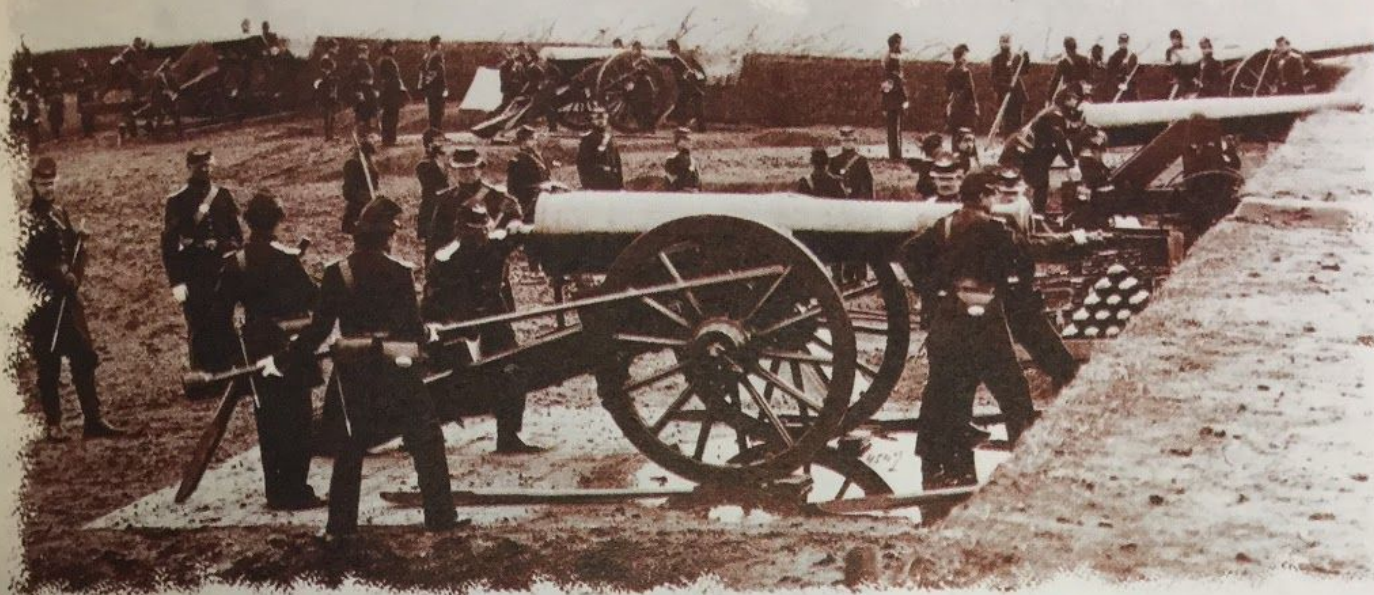
**6 skirmishers:** soldiers sent out in advance of a main attack.

**9 grape:** grapeshot—small iron balls shot in a bunch from a cannon.

**10 batteries:** groups of cannons.

**14 brandish'd:** raised and waving.

**15 volleys:** groups of cannonballs fired at the same time.



Union soldiers drill in preparation for battle during the Civil War.

- 20 And ever the sound of the cannon far or near, (rousing even in  
dreams a devilish exultation and all the old mad joy in the depths  
of my soul,  
And ever the hastening of infantry shifting positions, batteries,  
cavalry, moving hither and thither,  
(The falling, dying, I heed not, the wounded dripping and red I heed  
not, some to the rear are hobbling,  
Grime, heat, rush, aide-de-camps galloping by or on a full run,  
With the patter of small arms, the warning *s-s-t* of the rifles, (these  
in my vision I hear or see,)  
25 And bombs bursting in air, and at night the vari-color'd rockets.

20 **rousing:**  
awakening.

23 **aide-de-camps**  
(ā'd' d'Y-kāmps'):  
assistants to military  
commanders.

## Thinking Through the Literature

1. **Comprehension Check** Where is the artilleryman when he experiences his "vision," and what time is it?
2. How do you think the **speaker** feels about the incidents he describes? Do you think his feelings have changed since his days as a soldier? Use evidence from the poem to support your answer.
3. Why might the artilleryman have such a vision at this particular moment?
4. Why do you think Whitman chose to end the poem as he did?

# look at this)

E. E. Cummings



look at this)  
a 75 done  
this nobody would  
have believed  
5 would they no  
kidding this was my particular

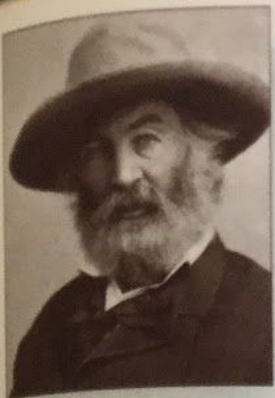
pal  
funny aint  
it we was  
10 buddies  
i used to

know  
him lift the  
poor cuss  
15 tenderly this side up handle

with care  
fragile  
and send him home

to his old mother in  
20 a new nice pine box

(collect



## Walt Whitman

1819–1892

### Other Works

*Leaves of Grass*

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard  
Bloom'd"

*Specimen Days and Collect*

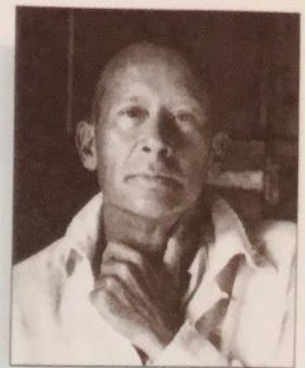
**End of Childhood** Walt Whitman grew up in a hurry. He left school at age 11, and within a few years he was living on his own in New York City. He drifted from job to job, working as a printer, journalist, and carpenter. He loved to stroll around the city, taking in sights and sounds that he would later use in his poetry.

**Leaves of Grass** In 1855, Whitman published 12 poems in a volume called *Leaves of Grass*. During the rest of his life, he continually added new poems and revised older ones, putting out nine editions of the book. On one occasion, he compared the finished book to a tree with its successive rings of growth. Upon receiving a copy of the first edition, the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson declared that it was "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed"; he went on to say that Whitman was "at the beginning of a great career." However, other distinguished American writers shunned Whitman, who at first was better appreciated in Europe than at home. Most editions of *Leaves of Grass* were published by Whitman himself.

**Later Years** In 1873, Whitman suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed. He spent the rest of his life in Camden, New Jersey. In the decades following his death, Whitman gained recognition as one of the greatest American poets, and today *Leaves of Grass* is regarded as one of the most influential books of American poetry.

## Author Activity

**Civil War Experiences** As you know, Whitman devoted much of his time during the Civil War to caring for wounded and diseased soldiers. Read excerpts from *Specimen Days*, Whitman's prose account of his wartime experiences. Then discuss with classmates how his hospital work might have influenced his poetry.



## E. E. Cummings

1894–1962

### Other Works

*Collected Poems*

*The Enormous Room*

*Him*

**A Question of Individuality** Edward Estlin Cummings was raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He came from a cultured family that encouraged him to pursue artistic interests. His earliest poems were traditional sonnets, but while studying at Harvard University he fell under the influence of modernist poets such as Ezra Pound, and he began to write more experimental verse. In many of his poems, Cummings ignored rules of standard punctuation and capitalization, sometimes creating new words or spellings and running words together. He once remarked, "So far as I am concerned, poetry and every other art was and is and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality."

**Military Service** Cummings went overseas in 1917 to serve in the Ambulance Corps in France. With his spontaneity and irreverence, it may have been inevitable that he came into conflict with his superiors. An army censor falsely accused him of treason, and he spent three months in a military prison. He wrote a prose account of this experience, *The Enormous Room*, which made him famous when it was published in 1922.

**Growing Popularity** After the war ended, Cummings lived for several years in Paris before settling in New York City. He had difficulty getting his work published during the 1930s, but in the last two decades of his life he became increasingly popular. He is now regarded as one of the most important American poets of the 20th century. Besides writing poetry, Cummings was a prolific painter.

## Author Activity

**Poet at War** Read excerpts from *The Enormous Room* and discuss how Cummings's experiences in World War I may have led to his writing poems such as "look at this)."

## Literary Analysis

**TONE AND DICTION** **Tone** is the attitude a writer takes toward a subject. To identify the tone of these poems, you might find it helpful to read them aloud, as if giving a dramatic reading before an audience. The emotions that you convey in reading should give you hints about the tone of the work.

One way in which writers create tone is through **diction**, or word choice, which includes both **vocabulary** and **syntax**, or word order. For example, in "look at this)," the use of terms such as "this side up" and "handle with care" contributes to a tone of bitterness about the loss of life in warfare.

**Paired Activity** With a partner, decide which of the following words best describes the tone of each poem. More than one word may apply.

- serious
- proud
- sad
- shocked
- playful
- bitter
- anxious

Review each poem and find examples of ways in which the poet's diction contributes to the tone you have identified.

