

Professor Alice Fahs  
Humanities Core Course Study Questions, Winter 2014, Week 2

**Please note that there are separate sets of study questions below for the different readings assigned for this week.**

**Overview of Week 2 readings:**

This week we are examining how Americans responded to the terrible scale of death during the Civil War--what cultural and social resources they drew upon in order to give the war meaning.

**Study questions for Louisa May Alcott, HOSPITAL SKETCHES excerpts**

Many commentators have noted the tender relationships among soldiers in *Hospital Sketches*. Are those loving friendships typical of wartime? What constitutes appropriate masculine and feminine behavior in wartime? How does war affect norms of femininity and masculinity?

The powerful centerpiece of *Hospital Sketches* is the chapter "A Night," which closes with the death of the noble soldier John. What about John makes him an emblem of ideal nationhood for Alcott? How does her relationship to John shift, and what does that show us about Alcott's own relationship to ideals of nationhood?

What are the racial dynamics within the hospital? How are African-Americans described in the text? Alcott was an abolitionist; was she committed to social equality with African Americans?

Throughout *Hospital Sketches* Alcott claims maternal authority over her "brave boys." Why? Does calling soldiers her "children" mask sexual tension in the text? What does she gain by taking the role of "mother"?

Alcott wrote and published *Hospital Sketches* in the midst of war. Are there signs in the text that she may have censored her account for the sake of Union morale?

What rhetorical strategies does Alcott use to ingratiate herself with a Northern audience? In other words, how does *Hospital Sketches* work as a piece of writing? Analyze Alcott's diction and imagery. Does she offer "realistic" or "romantic" accounts of soldiers?

What role does humor play in Alcott's depictions of a "woman's war"? Why is humor so important to her? Does her humor undercut sentimentalism, or is it part of a sentimental approach? Does her humor allow her to be more critical of her surroundings?

**Study questions for selected poems of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson**

Literary critics once argued that there were no traces of the Civil War in Emily Dickinson's poetry. How would you counter this argument through a close analysis of the language deployed in her poems?

Other critics have argued that the discontinuities of language and syntax found in Dickinson's poems reveal a questioning of meaning in general. Do you agree? How would you say Dickinson responds to the "crisis of belief" that war presented?

While Emily Dickinson has often been called a "private" poet, Walt Whitman by contrast has been called a "populist" poet who deliberately appealed to democratic masses. Is there evidence that Walt Whitman sought to write for large audiences in his wartime poems? How would you compare the style of "O Captain! My Captain!" to "A Sight in Camp," for instance?

Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" was written after the assassination of President Lincoln in the form of a pastoral elegy. Here Whitman uses an "I" voice. Why? What comfort does the poem offer a grieving nation? What use does it make of natural imagery in offering that comfort? What views does the poem offer of death?

What meaning does Whitman ascribe to soldiers' deaths in "A Sight in Camp"?

How does Whitman use a sense of the visual throughout his war poems? How does he use sound as a device in his war poems?

Explore Whitman's use of narrative in "Come Up from the Fields Father." What story does he tell? How effective is it? Is the mother in the poem meant to be an individual figure or a figure representative of all mothers? Why?

Are there a set of "arguments" to be gleaned from Whitman's war poems? About soldiers? About the nation? About the meaning of war? Why or why not?