



A Harvest of Death, Timothy H. O'Sullivan

A Harvest of Death

Timothy H. O'Sullivan,
photographer, and Alexander
Gardner, printer
American, **negative**, July 4,
1863; print, 1866

Albumen silver print

7 x 8 11/16 in.
84.XO.1232.1.36



Questions for Teaching

Take time to look closely at the work of art. What do you notice first? What do you notice next?

What do you notice about the clothing of the figures? What does their clothing tell you about who they are? (*They are wearing uniforms that reveal they are soldiers. Some are not wearing shoes. During the American Civil War, shoes were routinely removed from corpses because supplies were scarce and surviving troops needed them.*)

What do you notice about the setting? (The landscape is stark and desolate.)

Describe the **foreground**, **middle ground**, and **background**.

How would you describe the mood? How does color affect the mood? (*The mood is somber. The sepia tone of the black-and-white photograph enhances the somber mood.*)

Is this a realistic depiction of war? Why or why not?

How does this battle scene compare with those we see today in movies or on the news?

Background Information

Slowly, over the misty fields of Gettysburg—as all reluctant to expose their ghastly horrors to the light—came the sunless morn, after the retreat by [General Robert E.] Lee’s broken army. Through the shadowy vapors, it was, indeed, a “harvest of death” that was presented; hundreds and thousands of torn Union and rebel soldiers—although many of the former were already interred—strewed the now quiet fighting ground, soaked by the rain, which for two days had drenched the country with its fitful showers.

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This paragraph opens the text that Alexander Gardner wrote to accompany this photograph in *Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War*. Both text and image eloquently capture the Civil War’s toll of death and destruction, especially apparent after the **Battle of Gettysburg**, which took place from July 1 to July 3, 1863. Gardner’s caption identifies the men in the photograph as “rebels represented...without shoes.” During the war, shoes were routinely removed from corpses because supplies were scarce and surviving troops needed them.

About the Artist

Timothy H. O’Sullivan (American, 1840–1882)

Timothy H. O’Sullivan began his photography career as an apprentice to the American photographer Mathew Brady, but he left the Brady gallery to photograph **American Civil War** battlefields on his own. In 1862 or 1863, he joined the studio of Alexander Gardner, who included forty-four of O’Sullivan’s photographs in *Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, the first published collection of Civil War photographs.

O’Sullivan’s experience photographing in the field earned him a position as photographer for the Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel, the first governmental survey of the American West. He returned to Washington, D.C., in 1874 and made prints for the Army Corps of Engineers. Soon after being made chief photographer for the United States Treasury in 1880, O’Sullivan died of tuberculosis at age forty-one.