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A Civil War Soldier's Letter to His Wife

Sullivan Ballou

Preview

When the American Civil War began in 1861, citizens on both sides of the conflict were driven by equally passionate convictions. One young volunteer was Sullivan Ballou, a 32-year-old lawyer who joined the Union army shortly after war was declared. On July 14, 1861, he wrote the following letter to his wife, Sarah, as he awaited orders in a camp just outside of Washington, D.C. His letter has achieved fame as both a personal expression of love and a heartfelt statement of one young soldier's devotion to his country. One week after writing the letter, Ballou was killed at the Battle of Bull Run.

Words to Watch

impelled (4): forced
communing (7): sharing my thoughts
wafted (10): passing gently through the air
buffet (11): strike against
frolics (14): playful actions

<p>1 July 14th, 1861 2 Washington, D.C. 3 My very dear Sarah: 4 The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days—perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write you again, I feel impelled^o to write</p>	<p>lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more. Our movement may be one of a few days' duration and full of pleasure—and it may be one of severe conflict and death to me. Not my will, but thine, O God, be done. If it is necessary that I should fall on the battlefield for my</p>
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country, I am ready. I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American civilization now leans upon the triumph of the government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution. And I am willing—perfectly willing—to lay down all my joys in this life, to help maintain this government, and to pay that debt.

6 But, my dear wife, when I know that with my own joys I lay down nearly all of yours, and replace them in this life with cares and sorrows—when, after having eaten for long years the bitter fruit of orphanage myself, I must offer it as their only sustenance to my dear little children—is it weak or dishonorable, while the banner of my purpose floats calmly and proudly in the breeze, that my unbounded love for you, my darling wife and children, should struggle in fierce, though useless, contest with my love of country?

7 I cannot describe to you my feelings on this calm summer night, when two thousand men are sleeping around me, many of them enjoying the last, perhaps, before that of death—and I, suspicious that Death is creeping behind me with his fatal dart, am communing^o with God, my country, and thee.

8 I have sought most closely and diligently, and often in my breast, for a wrong motive in thus hazarding the happiness of those I loved, and I could not find one. A pure love of my country and . . . “the name of honor that I love more than I fear death” have called upon me, and I have obeyed.

9 Sarah, my love for you is deathless; it seems to bind me to you with mighty

cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break; and yet my love of country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly on with all these chains to the battlefield.

The memories of the blissful 10 moments I have spent with you come creeping over me, and I feel most gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them so long. And hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of future years, when God willing, we might still have lived and loved together and seen our sons grow up to honorable manhood around us. I have, I know, but few and small claims upon Divine Providence, but something whispers to me—perhaps it is the wafted^o prayer of my little Edgar—that I shall return to my loved ones unharmed. If I do not, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name.

Forgive my many faults, and the 11 many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless and foolish I have oftentimes been! How gladly would I wash out with my tears every little spot upon your happiness, and struggle with all the misfortune of this world, to shield you and my children from harm. But I cannot. I must watch you from the spirit land and hover near you, while you buffet^o the storms with your precious little freight, and wait with sad patience till we meet to part no more.

But, O Sarah! If the dead can come 12 back to this earth and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you; in the garish day and in the darkest night—amidst your happiest scenes and gloomiest hours—always, always; and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it

shall be my breath; or if the cool air fans your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by.

13 Sarah, do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for thee, for we shall meet again.

14 As for my little boys, they will grow as I have done, and never know a father's love and care. Little Willie is too young to remember me long, and my blue-eyed

Edgar will keep my frolics^o with him among the dimmest memories of his childhood. Sarah, I have unlimited confidence in your maternal care and your development of their characters. Tell my two mothers I call God's blessing upon them. O Sarah, I wait for you there! Come to me, and lead thither my children.

Sullivan

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Vocabulary in Context

- _____ 1. In the excerpt below, the word *sustenance* (sŭs'tə-nəns) means
- hope for the future.
 - nourishment.
 - happy memories.
 - concern for someone's welfare.

“But, my dear wife, when I know that with my own joys I lay down nearly all of yours, and replace them in this life with cares and sorrows—when, after having eaten for long years the bitter fruit of orphanage myself, I must offer it as their only sustenance to my dear little children . . .” (Paragraph 6)

- _____ 2. In the excerpt below, the word *hazarding* (hăz'ərd-ĭng) means
- guessing.
 - risking.
 - enjoying.
 - insuring.

“I have sought most closely and diligently, and often in my breast, for a wrong motive in thus hazarding the happiness of those I loved, and I could not find one.” (Paragraph 8)

Central Point and Main Ideas

- _____ 3. Which sentence best expresses the central point of the selection?
- A. The author is willing to suffer as much as other Americans suffered during the Revolution.
 - B. The author realizes that if he is killed in battle, his wife and sons will suffer greatly.
 - C. The author fully expects to see his wife and sons in eternal life.
 - D. The author is willing to sacrifice his life and the happiness of his family to fight for a cause that he believes is just.
- _____ 4. The implied main idea of paragraph 14 is that the author
- A. knows that his sons will probably only have dim memories of him.
 - B. regrets that his sons will never know a father's love and care.
 - C. has confidence that even if he dies in battle, his wife will raise his sons properly so that they all can meet in Heaven.
 - D. knows that his wife will need the help of others in raising the couple's two sons should he die in battle.

Supporting Details

- _____ 5. The author believes that he and others owe a great debt to
- A. Divine Providence.
 - B. the two thousand men who are sleeping around him.
 - C. those who bled and suffered during the Revolution.
 - D. President Lincoln.
- _____ 6. The author regrets that his two sons, like him, may
- A. have bitter memories of their father.
 - B. never know a father's love and care.
 - C. have a weak, unsupportive mother.
 - D. be killed in battle.

Transitions

- _____ 7. The relationship between the two sentences below is one of
- A. addition.
 - B. cause and effect.
 - C. comparison.
 - D. contrast.

“How gladly would I wash out with my tears every little spot upon your happiness, and struggle with all the misfortunes of this world, to shield you and my children from harm. But I cannot.” (Paragraph 11)

Patterns of Organization

- _____ 8. Paragraph 5 compares
- A. American civilization as it is now with the way it used to be.
 - B. the author's willingness to die for his country with the sacrifices of those who suffered and died before him.
 - C. the author's own desires with those of his wife and children.
 - D. the author's debts with those who came before him.
- _____ 9. This selection mainly
- A. lists reasons why the author believes that the Union cause is just.
 - B. presents a series of historical events in time order.
 - C. contrasts the author's love of his country with the personal sacrifices involved in fighting to preserve his country.
 - D. compares his wife's support for the cause with his own.

Inferences

- _____ 10. In paragraph 6, the author wants his wife to know that
- A. he considers himself weak and dishonorable.
 - B. he regrets that his commitment to the Union cause may hurt his family.
 - C. he is as proud and calm as the banner which flies nearby.
 - D. his love of country is useless.
- _____ 11. The phrase "and I, suspicious that Death is creeping behind me with his fatal dart" suggests that the author
- A. feels he will be struck with a dart.
 - B. believes that one of his own men will be responsible for his death.
 - C. suspects that he might not have long to live.
 - D. is naturally very suspicious.
- _____ 12. The "chains" that the author mentions in paragraph 9 refer to
- A. the ties of love that connect him to his wife.
 - B. the way that slaves were routinely treated in the Confederacy.
 - C. the love that the author feels for his country.
 - D. his unwillingness to go to the battlefield.
- _____ 13. In paragraph 14, the author concludes that
- A. he was raised by two women.
 - B. his sons will remember him forever.
 - C. his sons will have bitter memories of him for leaving them fatherless.
 - D. due to his wife's influence, his sons will turn out well.

- _____ 14. On the basis of paragraphs 11 through 14, we can infer that the author
- A. believes that his family might be better off without him.
 - B. believes that he and his family will be reunited after death.
 - C. believes that the dead are powerless to help the living.
 - D. knows that his children will always remember him.
- _____ 15. A reasonable conclusion we can draw from the reading is that
- A. the author is bitter about being forced to choose between his family and his country.
 - B. the author knows that his wife and children can never understand his reasons for fighting.
 - C. few men actually shared the author's belief in the Union cause.
 - D. the author believes that his duty to his country must outweigh his personal happiness and that of his family.

Purpose and Tone

- _____ 16. The main purpose of this selection is to
- A. inform Ballou's wife both of his love for her and his need to fight for a cause which he believes is just.
 - B. persuade his wife to change her mind about her support for the Union cause.
 - C. entertain his wife with amusing stories of life in an army camp.
- _____ 17. The tone of this selection can be described as
- A. nostalgic and bitter.
 - B. affectionate and instructive.
 - C. uncertain and worried.
 - D. loving and serious.

Argument

18. Label the point of the following argument with a **P** and the three statements of support with an **S**.
- _____ A. In paragraph 6, Ballou speaks of his "unbounded love" for his wife.
 - _____ B. Toward the end of the letter, Ballou tells his wife that if the dead can come back to this earth, he will always be near her.
 - _____ C. In this letter, Ballou seeks to reassure his wife of his profound love for her.
 - _____ D. In paragraph 10, Ballou tells his wife that when his last breath escapes him on the battlefield, it will whisper her name.

Critical Reading

_____ 19. The sentence below is one of

- A. fact.
- B. opinion.

“Lest I should not be able to write you again, I feel impelled to write lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more.”
(Paragraph 4)

_____ 20. A housing development near the site of a major Civil War battlefield is called “Liberty Acres.” What propaganda technique did the developer use in naming this development?

- A. testimonial.
- B. transfer.
- C. plain folks.
- D. bandwagon.

SUMMARIZING

Add the ideas needed to complete the following summary of “A Civil War Soldier’s Letter to His Wife.”

Ballou begins his letter by telling his wife that the Union Army will probably move soon. Fearing that he may not be able to write to her again, he says that he is willing to lay down his life for a cause that he feels is just, but struggles with the thought that in laying down his own joys, he must also _____ and leave for his children only the _____.

He goes on to say that even though his love for his wife is deathless, his love of country bears him on _____. He tells his wife that should he die in battle, his last thoughts will be of her. He urges her to forgive him his faults and wishes that he could make her happy and shield her and his children from harm. Unable to do that, he will instead _____ and wait with sad patience until they meet again.

He concludes by telling her that he has unlimited _____ in her maternal care and ability to develop their sons’ characters. He waits for her and expects her to lead his children to him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Sullivan Ballou's letter reveal about his character and principles? Does he deserve to be called a hero? Why or why not?
2. Do you agree with Sullivan Ballou's decision to fight for what he believed in, even though it meant risking the happiness and security of his wife and children? Why or why not?
3. The letter makes clear that author Sullivan Ballou believed he was carrying out a tradition of sacrifice in the defense of liberty that others had begun during the American Revolution. Do you believe that the recent wars in which America has been engaged continue this tradition—or depart from it? Explain.
4. Under what circumstances, if any, would you be willing to sacrifice your life for a cause?

Note: Writing assignments for this selection appear on page 568.

Check Your Performance

A CIVIL WAR SOLDIER'S LETTER

Activity

Number Right

Points

Score

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Vocabulary in Context (2 items) _____ × 4 = _____

Central Point and Main Ideas (2 items) _____ × 4 = _____

Supporting Details (2 items) _____ × 4 = _____

Transitions (1 item) _____ × 4 = _____

Patterns of Organization (2 items) _____ × 4 = _____

Inferences (6 items) _____ × 4 = _____

Purpose and Tone (2 items) _____ × 4 = _____

Argument (1 item) _____ × 4 = _____

Critical Reading (2 items) _____ × 4 = _____

SUMMARIZING (5 items) _____ × 4 = _____

TOTAL SCORE = _____%

Enter your total score into the **Reading Performance Chart: Ten Reading Selections** on the inside back cover.