Where Have All The Flowers Gone?

By Pete Seeger

Where have all the flowers gone?
Long time passing
Where have all the flowers gone?
Long time ago
Where have all the flowers gone?
Girls have picked them every one
When will they ever learn?
When will they ever learn?

Where have all the young girls gone?
Long time passing
Where have all the young girls gone?
Long time ago
Where have all the young girls gone?
Taken husbands every one
When will they ever learn?
When will they ever learn?

Where have all the young men gone?
Long time passing
Where have all the young men gone?
Long time ago
Where have all the young men gone?
Gone for soldiers every one
When will they ever learn?
When will they ever learn?

Where have all the soldiers gone?
Long time passing
Where have all the soldiers gone?
Long time ago
Where have all the soldiers gone?
Gone to graveyards every one
When will they ever learn?
When will they ever learn?

Where have all the graveyards gone?
Long time passing
Where have all the graveyards gone?
Long time ago
Where have all the graveyards gone?
Covered with flowers every one
When will we ever learn?
When will we ever learn?
The folk song, Where Have all the Flowers Gone? was written by Pete Seeger and made popular by the Kingston Trio in the 1960s. At the time it was a kind of protest song about war. In an interview Seeger had said that he got the idea to write the song from a Russian novel called “And Quiet Flows the Don” by Mikhail Sholokhov. In the story a group of Cossacks in Czarist Russia ride out of their village singing, "Where are the flowers? The girls have plucked them. Where are the girls? They've all taken husbands. Where are the men? They're all in the army. Gallop, gallop, gallop, wheeeeee!"

Pete Seeger added a few verses and made the song into a cycle. Although Seeger's song was originally made popular in the time of upheaval that surrounded the protests in the United States about the Viet Nam War, the lyrics take on a wider meaning. The song is really about the cycle of history and how impossible it is to break.

The first stanza goes:

Where have all the flowers gone? Long time passing...
Where have all the flowers gone? Long time ago...
Where have all the flowers gone? Maidens picked them every one!
When will they ever learn? When will they ever learn?
Then the song asks a series of questions in a similar vein, one proceeding from the other.

Where have all the maidens gone?...Taken by young men.
Where have all the young men gone?...Turned to soldiers.
Where have all the soldiers gone?...Gone to graveyards.
Where have all the graveyards gone?...Turned to Flowers.
Where have all the flowers gone?...and so the cycle repeats.

Much has been written about cycles in history. A very popular book in the 1990s was The Fourth Turning in which distinct generational phases and cycles could be discerned in American History. While the authors of The Fourth Turning (William Strauss and Neil Howe) took a serious, academic approach, Pete Seeger's song is more philosophic. It takes on a wistful tone. It is a vague commentary on human nature. It is happy and sad at the same time. There is joy in picking flowers, marrying, turning to soldiers. In some ways there is even a melancholic satisfaction in the death of the soldiers. And the graveyards turning to flowers disguise for the next generation what is to come.

Is there a cycle of history? Most historians would say that there is, which would account for such apocryphal sayings as, "Those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it." The narrator of the song stands above it all, observing the cycle recurring over and over. Is there a superior tone? Yes and no. The singer can observe it all, but is powerless to stop it. He asks the question, "When will they ever learn?" This is a cry of the heart, but no action is taken. Perhaps Seeger believed that the song itself would help stop war. That to see and understand history might allow the cycle to be broken. This would certainly be in line with our apocryphal saying quoted above.

In Where Have all the Flowers Gone? Pete Seeger produced a haunting melody and a perceptive comment on history. The narrator of the song asks the question, "When will we ever learn?" Yet, it is obvious that simply seeing the cycle is not enough to end it. Arguments rage in political circles about the solution.

In the flow of the poem, the material is forwarded through continuous interrogative form, repeating the same interrogative form ‘where’. It is quite interesting because this technique contributes enormously to coincide the theme and the material of the poem, with its rhythm. These questions really appear as rhetorical questions as they have been utilized to convey the poet’s contributions to the theme.

On the other hand, all these have been composed in Present Perfect Tense so as to denote that man has already experienced the bitterness of the war or he has been experiencing if for a long time. Repetition which embraces the whole poem really offers much influence to reinforce the emphasis on anti-war sentiments.