

Walt Whitman

The Adhesive Rough in a Populous City

Walt Whitman is one of the greatest and still, to this day, one of the most controversial of all American writers. He was controversial for two reasons: first, because he wrote poetry in a form people did not consider “poetic”; and second, because in his poetry, he alluded to things which, in his day, were not even talked about among friends. These days, Whitman is claimed by many as the first and greatest of the American “gay” poets. Even this claim is still controversial, not so much because of his apparent homosexuality, but because no one can be quite sure what he was writing about: was it sexual activity, a democratic ideal, or some kind of praise of male bonding? In many ways, all this is the more important because Whitman not only groomed himself throughout his literary life as the American National Poet, but to a large extent, he achieved his ideal.

Whitman was born the second of nine children on a farm in South Huntington, on Long Island on May 31, 1819. His mother was illiterate, his father nearly so and it is doubtful if they ever saw, or if they did, that they would have understood any of their son’s publications. The family moved to Brooklyn in 1923 where the young Walt had only six years schooling before being set as an apprentice to a printer. Thereafter, and in the great American tradition, he was almost entirely self-educated, reading in particular the works of Homer, Dante and Shakespeare.

As a young man, Whitman worked variously as a printer, a teacher and a journalist. In 1840, he even worked for the presidential campaign of Martin Van Buren. Then, after a dispute with the Democratic Party, he moved to New Orleans where he edited *The Crescent* for three months but was sacked for some undisclosed reason (a rumour put about later claimed Whitman had had an affair with a high-ranking Creole woman but this is now known to have been part of a smoke screen of Whitman’s making) .

Nonetheless, this New Orleans period was a turning point for Whitman. It was while he was here that he saw slavery for the first time. And, although we cannot be sure what history lay behind it, in a poem about this period in his life called “*Once I pass'd through a populous city,*” he wrote about a man he had met and loved there. However, on publication the poem appeared in a heterosexual form, the beloved being

a woman who had detained him there.... In 1925 a manuscript was discovered which showed how, in an act of self-censorship to make it “fit for publication”, Whitman had reversed the gender. The original version, according to the manuscript, reads thus:

*Once I pass'd through a populous city imprinting my brain for future use with
its shows, architecture, customs, tradition,
Yet now of all that city I remember only a man I casually met there who
detained me for love of me,
Day by day and night by night we were together — all else has long been
forgotten by me,
I remember I saw only that man who passionately clung to me,
Again we wander, we love, we separate again,
Again he holds me by the hand, I must not go,
I see him close beside me with silent lips sad and tremulous.¹*

Whitman moved back to the north where he continued to work as a newspaper editor in New York and in Long Island. It was during this period that several early works, including several short stories and a temperance novel, were published.

By the time Whitman began to publish his writing, the publishing industry in the United States had developed into one of the most advanced and vigorous in the world with authors such as Emerson, Fuller, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Stowe and Thoreau deliberately setting out to create a literary culture for the young country which it could claim as its own. This was a time of great enthusiasm for the principles on which the republic had been founded — after all, the American War of Independence and the drafting of the Constitution were still in living memory.

In 1843, the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson published an essay called “The Poet” in which he called for a truly original national poet. Seemingly in conscious response to this call, on 4th July 1855, Walt Whitman published the first edition of “*Leaves of Grass*” and in doing so, deliberately identified himself as “one of the roughs”, or one of the common men. At this stage, “*Leaves of Grass*” was a slim volume of about 150 pages, containing an introduction and 12 long, untitled poems. This turned out to be a work in progress which continued over Whitman’s life because he kept adding to it and republishing under the same title, the last edition of which came out in 1891. By the

¹ Rictor Norton, "Walt Whitman, Prophet of Gay Liberation", *The Great Queens of History*, updated 18 Nov. 1999 (<http://www.infont.demon.co.uk/whitman.htm>).

time he died the following year, on 26 March 1892, "*Leaves of Grass*" was a tome of more than 600 pages...

While public response was mildly positive to the first edition, Emerson responded to the copy he received as a gift in July 1855 with an enthusiastic letter in which he thanked Whitman for "the wonderful gift" and said that he had rubbed his eyes a little

*".....to see if the sunbeam was no illusion."*²

To further his goal of being the poet of the American people, Whitman himself wrote a self-promoting anonymous review of "*Leaves of Grass*" which he hailed under the headline "An American Poet At last!"

In the second edition which came out the following year (1856) there were 20 new poems and a copy of Emerson's congratulatory letter from the First Edition. Whitman had not obtained Emerson's permission.

In many ways, the Civil War was the high-point of Whitman's career. He worked as a nurse, caring for wounded soldiers in and around Washington, DC. It is said he went around the wards not only dressing the men's wounds but also giving them fruit and writing letters home for them. Reportedly he was a charismatic figure on the wards, many surgeons attributing almost miraculous recoveries to his presence. Whitman himself attributed his healing powers to his love and affections for these sad men:

The men feel such love more than anything else. I have met very few persons who realize the importance of humoring the yearnings for love and friendship of these American young men, prostrated by sickness and wounds. To many of the wounded and sick, especially the youngsters, there is something in personal love, caresses, and the magnetic flood of sympathy and friendship, that does, in its way, more good than all the medicine in the world. Many will think this mere sentimentalism, but I know it is the most solid of all facts.

It was during this time too that he saw a lot of Abraham Lincoln whom he grew to admire greatly. Profoundly shocked and grieved when Lincoln was assassinated in

² Quoted in <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/waltwhitman>

1865, Whitman wrote two of his best-known poems, "O Captain! My Captain!" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed".

It was during the Civil War that Whitman witnessed the intense comradeship which developed between the soldiers fighting at the front, comradeship which, as in most wars, often became sexual. These experiences led him to believe there was a convergence between homosexuality and democracy, a notion he began to express in his long essay, "Democratic Vistas".

Intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man — which, hard to define, underlies the lessons and ideals of the profound saviours of every land and age, and which seems to promise, when thoroughly developed, cultivated, and recognized in manners and literature, the most substantial hope and safety of the future of these states will then be fully expressed.

With Socratic resonances, Whitman discriminates between what he called "amative" love between men and women and "adhesive" love which exists between men. It is this "adhesive love" (a term borrowed, I think from phrenology, a popular pseudo-science of the time) which is the key to the development of a sense of community, the basis for democracy. He wrote:

It is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship (the adhesive love, at least rivaling the amative love hitherto possessing imaginative literature, if not going beyond it), that I look for the counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof. Many will say it is a dream and will not follow my inferences: but I confidentially expect a time when there will be seen running through it like a half-hid warp through all the myriad audible and visible worldly interests of America, threads of manly friendship, fond and loving, pure and sweet, strong and life-long, carried to degrees hitherto unknown, not only giving tone to individual character and making it unprecedentedly emotional, muscular, heroic and refined, but having the deepest relation to general politics. I say democracy infers such loving comradeship as its most inevitable twin or counterpart, without which it will be incomplete, in vain and incapable of perpetuating itself..... In my opinion, it is by a fervent, accepted development of comradeship, the beautiful and sane affection of man for man, latent in all the young fellows, north and south, east and west, — it is by this I say and by what goes directly and indirectly along with it that the United States of the future, I cannot too often repeat, are to be most effectively welded together, intercalated, anneal'd into a living union.

Whitman has always been criticized for both his poetic technique and his subject matter. Even Henry James wrote a vicious attack when he was only 22, a youthful “impudence” (his word) he later regretted and apologised for. Poetic technique aside, Whitman’s sexuality and its expression in his work created a dilemma for those who appreciated the literary quality but could not bring themselves to accept its homosexual implications.

Early enthusiastic critics, often called “Whitmaniacs”, did their best to sanitise the great man’s work and to clean up his personal image. Others, for example the Secretary of the Interior James Harlan and the Boston district attorney Oliver Stevens, dismissed Whitman “as simply a libertine or pervert”.³ (In fact, after the Civil War was over, Whitman had got himself a job as a clerk in Harlan’s department but was dismissed as soon as Harlan learned he was the author of “*Leaves of Grass*”).

Although homosexuality in Whitman’s work is often nebulous or deliberately disguised (as in the “populous city”), the modern concept of “homosexual” was coming into being during the poet’s lifetime. In Foucault’s terms, “*the sodomite had been a temporary aberration. The homosexual was now a species*”. Those who identified with the “species” also embraced Whitman, among them Oscar Wilde who visited Whitman at his home in Camden, New Jersey and boasted that “*the kiss of Walt Whitman is still on my lips*” to which Whitman was reported to have replied that Wilde “had the *good sense* to take a fancy to me!”⁴

A closer relationship existed between the English sexologist, John Addington Symonds who repeatedly pestered Whitman to tell him outright about his personal “adhesiveness”. Whitman avoided a direct answer until, finally, he wrote Symonds a letter⁵ in which he invented a wife and large family....

“My life, young manhood, mid-age, times South, etc., have been jolly bodily, and doubtless open to criticism. Tho’ unmarried I have had six children — two

³ Reynolds, David S. : *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1995. p455, 540

⁴ Reynolds p540

⁵ Hollaway, Emory. Biographical Note. *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*. Vol. I. New York: Peter Smith, 1932. *xlvi*-*xlviii*.

are dead — one living, Southern grandchild, fine boy, writes to me occasionally — circumstances (connected to their fortune and benefit) have separated me from intimate relations"

Around this letter has grown up a whole industry of academic speculation, fuelled by Whitman's own censorship of the "populous city" poem and other efforts he made to disguise his homosexuality. Of the earlier Whitman scholars, it was Basil de Selincourt who attempted most thoroughly to "sanitise" Whitman. In his 1914 biography, *Walt Whitman: A Critical Study*⁶, de Salincourt asserts that in *Calamus*, Whitman

.....advocates and to a certain extent himself practiced an affectionate demonstrativeness which is uncongenial to the Anglo-Saxon temperament and which those Englishmen who forget that there are two sides to the Channel find even shocking. The result ... is that he is quite generally suspected of a particularly unpleasant kind of abnormality....

That was as full-frontal de Salincourt could be when acknowledging Whitman's sexuality. However, we should not judge these academics too badly. After all, as Reynolds⁷ comments,

The clear homophobia of their time rendered impossible a frank appraisal of Whitman, and it was necessary to create a hetero- or non-sexual Whitman in order for there to occur any broader discussion of his works at all: consider the decades of critical oblivion to which Wilde's works have been consigned since his disgrace. (As Camille Paglia observes, in typically direct style, even today a male scholar of Wilde risks being "judged both queer and frivolous")

Half a century after Whitman's death, scholars were still attempting to explain away his homosexuality. One of the most eminent, Henry Seidel Canby in *Walt Whitman: An American* (1943) asserted that:

Whitman was ... intermediate in sex.... Such men are very common, especially among strong creative intellects, whose imaginative sympathies penetrate beyond sexual differences. They are very seldom homosexuals in the vulgar sense of the word. [Whitman's] eroticism ... was sublimated into a fatherly love of innumerable 'sons,' and into magnificent poems of the comradeship of true democracy.⁸

⁶ Ibid, p204

⁷ *ibid*, p512

⁸ Henry Seidel Canby: *Walt Whitman: An American*, 1943, 201-02

The stance taken by academics and other Whitman scholars by mid-Twentieth Century was summed up by Henry Street⁹ :

Clearly, the prevailing trend during this middle period of Whitman studies-- between the age of the "Whitmaniacs" and the Gay Studies movement beginning in the late 1970 — -was to acknowledge Whitman's sexuality while seeking to mysticize, minimize, or pathologize it. Once again, the reader's desire, resulting as it does from social pressure, creates a Whitman appropriate to the reader's day. In this middle period, when the homosexual identity was more fully developed yet still quite dangerous, the Whitman most suited for public discussion was a homosexual who was somehow not affected by it.

No matter how we might feel about these attempts to disguise or explain away Whitman's homosexuality, we should remember — as Reynolds¹⁰ reminds us — that in the days before Freud and Havelock-Ellis,

".....passionate intimacy between people of the same sex was common.... The lack of clear sexual categories (homo-, hetero-, bi-) made same-sex affection unself-conscious and widespread" Such now-common (and salacious) expressions as "sleep with," "lover," and "make love to" simply did not have sexual connotations in Whitman's time. Indeed, intimacy between same-sex friends bore the imprimatur of such then-influential ideas as romantic friendship and phrenology.¹¹

A life of men

Whatever the earlier critics might have written or said to hide Whitman's homosexuality, modern scholarship has unearthed and published much more than was probably previously realized about the man and his secret life of men. These days we

⁹ Henry Street: "Constructing Walt Whitman: The Critics Contend With the Good G(r)ay Poet", an on-line essay at <http://sunset.backbone.olemiss.edu/~jmitchel/walt.htm>, 1997.

¹⁰ Ibid, p391; 398-399

¹¹ Reynolds quotes two examples (pp 393-394) This unself-consciousness resulted in physical relations between friends that might astonish the modern reader. A case in point is that of two Connecticut College students, Albert Dodd and Anthony Halsey. As Dodd wrote: "Often too [Anthony] shared my pillow--or I his, and then how sweet to sleep with him, to hold his beloved form in my embrace, to have my arms around his neck, to imprint his face with sweet kisses" (393). Even genital contact between friends did take place, and was discussed freely, as we see in an exchange of letters between James H. Hammond and Thomas Withers, in which Withers asked Hammond whether "he had recently had 'the extravagant delight of poking and punching a writhing Bedfellow with your long fleshen pole--the exquisite touches of which I have often had the honor of feeling?'" and "humorously recalls feeling defenseless before 'the crushing force' of Hammond's 'Battering Ram'" (394).

can buy annotated copies of his notebooks which list over 150 young men with whom he had some form of “adhesion” even if only for a one night stand. From their number and the comments Whitman made about the young men, clearly he was in modern Gay-Speak “cruising” and doing so rather obsessively.

Not all were one-night stands, however. Apart from the New Orleans love affair, short and “tremulous” as it was, Whitman fell in love for a second time in 1858 or 1859 with a man whom he identifies only as “M”. The notebooks reveal this to have been an affair of passion, but unfortunately, a passion unreciprocated. When the men finally broke up, Whitman was left on the brink of suicide. It was this affair which led to the composition of the most homosexual of all his collections of poems, the 1860 collection he called “*Calamus*” after the Greek river god Calamus who grieved his boy lover, Carpus, who — like Antinous — died by drowning. A plant the tubers of which look like penises in various stages of tumescence which grown along river banks in the Mid-Eastern states is named *Calamus acornus* or “sweet flag”. Of his poems, “*Calamus*”, Whitman wrote:

*"I loved a certain person ardently and my love was not return'd,
Yet out of that I have written these songs."*

Edward Carpenter who visited Whitman at Camden in 1877 (and apparently had sex with him while he was there), commented later than Whitman dared not reveal his homosexuality:

He knew that the moment he said such a thing he would have the whole American Press at his heels, snarling and slandering, and distorting his words in every possible way. Things are pretty bad in this country [England]; but in the States (in such matters) they are ten times worse.

Peter Doyle

As America began to lick its wounds and recover from the Civil War, Whitman met the man who was to remain with him for the rest of his life. This was Peter Doyle, a 19-year-old Irish lad whom some describe as a “bus driver” and others as the conductor of Navy Yard horse car in Washington. They met one night when Whitman was the only passenger on the bus... Doyle reported in 1895, three years after Whitman’s death, that

"We were familiar at once — I put my hand on his knee — we understood. He did not get out at the end of the trip — in fact went all the way back with me. I think the year of this was 1866. From that time on we were the biggest sort of friends.

Doyle had fought in the War on the Confederate side, a fact Whitman often referred to by calling him his “rebel”. The two men were inseparable, although they never actually lived together. Whitman used to wait for Doyle to finish work or often, ride on the bus with him:

"Walt rode with me often — often at noon, always at night. He road round with me on the last trip — sometimes rode for several trips."..... "I never knew a case of Walt's being bothered up by a woman. In fact, he had nothing special to do with any woman except Mrs O'Connor and Mrs Burroughs [his landlady and housekeeper]. His disposition was different. Woman in that sense never came into his head. Walt was too clean, he hated anything which was not clean. No trace of any kind of dissipation in him. I ought to know about him those years — we were awful close together."

The lovers often went for long walks together or slept together under the stars. Doyle was illiterate when they met, but Whitman taught him spelling, arithmetic and some geography. He even bought him flowers... In this way they shared their daily life until Whitman moved to Camden in 1873, but even this did not keep them apart because they frequently met up, corresponded regularly and visited New York and even Canada together.

Towards the end of his life Whitman suffered several strokes. In 1889 while he was recovering from yet another, Horace Traubel and Tom Harned paid him a visit. They commented on a photograph of Peter Doyle and Walt Whitman, facing each other and gazing tenderly into each others' eyes.

"What do I look like here?", Whitman asked.

"Fondness, and Doyle should be a girl," replied Harned.

Laughing, Whitman responded

"No, don't be too hard on it: that is my rebel friend, you know . . . That fond expression, as you call it, Tom, has very good cause for being: Pete is a master character. A rare man: knowing nothing of books, knowing everything of life: a great big hearty full-blooded everyday divinely generous working man."

Some Poems

Extracts from
Song of Myself

Part of... #5

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer
morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd
over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your
tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held
my feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge
that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my
own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the
women my sisters and lovers,

And that a kelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder,
mullein and poke-weed.

Or later, talking of common men....

Part of #14

I am enamour'd of growing out-doors,
Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods,
Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes
and mauls, and the drivers of horses,
I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out.

We Two Boys Together Clinging

We two boys together clinging,
One the other never leaving,
Up and down the roads going, North and South excursions making,
Power enjoying, elbows stretching, fingers clutching,
Arm'd and fearless, eating, drinking, sleeping, loving.
No law less than ourselves owning, sailing, soldiering, thieving,
threatening,
Misers, menials, priests alarming, air breathing, water drinking, on
the turf or the sea-beach dancing,
Cities wrenching, ease scorning, statutes mocking, feebleness chasing,
Fulfilling our foray.

When I Heard at the Close of the Day

When I heard at the close of the day how my name had been receiv'd
with plaudits in the capitol, still it was not a happy night for
me that follow'd,
And else when I carous'd, or when my plans were accomplish'd, still
I was not happy,
But the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of perfect health,
refresh'd, singing, inhaling the ripe breath of autumn,
When I saw the full moon in the west grow pale and disappear in the
morning light,
When I wander'd alone over the beach, and undressing bathed,
laughing with the cool waters, and saw the sun rise,
And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way
coming, O then I was happy,
O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food
nourish'd me more, and the beautiful day pass'd well,
And the next came with equal joy, and with the next at evening came
my friend,
And that night while all was still I heard the waters roll slowly
continually up the shores,
I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me
whispering to congratulate me,
For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in
the cool night,
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast — and that night I was happy.