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Walt Whitman – A Critical Introduction

In his book *The Best Poems of the English Language*, critic Harold Bloom labels Walt Whitman “The central American poet” and goes on to say that “Whitman, with Emily Dickinson, is one of the two great poet-originals. He does not have Dickinson’s cognitive originality; what is new in Whitman is expressed in gesture, nuance, rhetorical stance, the mythology of the self. No poet since Whitman, in any language I know, has anything like his largeness of being, his enormous consciousness of himself, of his time, and of his nation” (527).

Walt Whitman – A Biography

(Note: The following short biography about Walt Whitman appears on the Poetry Foundation’s website.)

Walt Whitman is America’s world poet—a latter-day successor to Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare. In *Leaves of Grass* (1855), he celebrated democracy, nature, love, and friendship. This monumental work chanted praises to the body as well as to the soul, and found beauty and reassurance even in death.

Along with Emily Dickinson, Whitman is regarded as one of America’s most significant nineteenth century poets. Born on Long Island, Whitman grew up in Brooklyn and received limited formal education. His occupations during his lifetime included printer, schoolteacher, reporter, and editor. Whitman’s self-published *Leaves of Grass* was inspired in part by his travels through the American frontier and by his admiration for Ralph Waldo Emerson. This important publication underwent eight subsequent editions during his lifetime as Whitman expanded and revised the poetry and added more to the original collection of twelve poems. Emerson himself declared the first edition was “the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed.”

Whitman published his own enthusiastic review of *Leaves of Grass*. Critics and readers alike, however, found both Whitman’s style and subject matter unnerving. According to *The Longman Anthology of Poetry*, “Whitman received little public acclaim for his poems during his lifetime for several reasons: this openness regarding sex, his self-presentation as a rough working man, and his stylistic innovations.” A poet who “abandoned the regular meter and rhyme patterns” of his contemporaries, Whitman was “influenced by the long cadences and rhetorical strategies of Biblical poetry.” Upon publishing *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman was subsequently fired from his job with the Department of the Interior. Despite his mixed critical reception in the U.S., he was favorably received in England, with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne among the British writers who celebrated his work.

During the Civil War, Whitman worked as a clerk in Washington, DC. For three years, he visited soldiers during his spare time, dressing wounds and giving solace to the injured. These experiences led to the poems in his 1865 publication, *Drum-Taps*, which includes, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Whitman’s elegy for President Lincoln.

After suffering a serious stroke in 1873, Whitman moved to his brother’s home in Camden, New Jersey. While his poetry failed to garner popular attention from his American readership during his lifetime, over 1,000 people came to view his funeral. And as the first writer of a truly American poetry, Whitman’s legacy endures. According to *The Longman Anthology of Poetry*, Whitman’s “ambition, expansiveness, and embrace of all the high and low features of American life influenced many poets of the twentieth century, including D.H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, and Allen Ginsberg.”

Three Rhetorical Devices: Parallelism, Anaphora, and Apostrophe

There are many important rhetorical devices used in this poem by Walt Whitman. Here are three of them.

Walt Whitman was famous for his use of repetition. Let's look at two kinds of repetition that writers often use: **parallelism** (or parallel structures) and **anaphora**. Both parallelism and anaphora can create rhythm and emphasis.

1. Parallelism – the repetition of the same grammatical structures, ranging from the same kinds of words (e.g., all nouns, all verbs, or all adjectives), to the same kinds of phrases (e.g., prepositional phrases), or even the same kinds of clauses.

Examples of Parallelism

"Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall **pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe** to assure the survival and the success of liberty."— John F. Kennedy

(repetition of *verb-direct object phrases*)

"...and that government **of the people, by the people, for the people**, shall not perish from the earth."

— Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*

(repetition of *prepositional phrases*)

2. Anaphora – One way to achieve parallelism is through **anaphora**, which is the repetition of a specific word or expression at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, sentences, or verses especially for rhetorical or poetic effect.

Examples of Anaphora

"...**we cannot** dedicate—**we cannot** consecrate—**we cannot** hallow—this ground."

—Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*

"**It was the** best of times, **it was the** worst of times, **it was the** age of wisdom, **it was the** age of foolishness..."

—Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

"**In every** cry of every man, / **In every** infant's cry of fear, / **In every** voice, **in every** ban, / The mind-forged manacles I hear..."

—William Blake, "London"

3. Another device that Whitman uses frequently is **apostrophe**, which is a rhetorical figure of speech used when a speaker or writer **breaks off and directly addresses an imaginary person or abstract quality or idea**. In dramatic works and poetry written in or translated into English, such a figure of speech is often introduced by the exclamation "O".

Examples of Apostrophe

"Roll on, **thou** dark and deep blue Ocean -- roll!"

—Lord Byron, "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage"

"**Death**, be not proud, though some have called **thee** / Mighty and dreadful, for **thou** art not so."

—John Donne, "Holy Sonnet X"

"And **you, O my soul**, where **you** stand, / Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space..."

—Walt Whitman, "A Noiseless Patient Spider"

Four Lyric Poems by Walt Whitman

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

5

I Sit and Look Out

I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all oppression and shame;
I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men, at anguish with themselves, remorseful after deeds
done;
I see in low life the mother misused by her children, dying, neglected, gaunt, desperate;
I see the wife misused by her husband—I see the treacherous seducer of young women;
I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequited love, attempted to be hid—I see these sights on the
earth;
I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tyranny—I see martyrs and prisoners;
I observe a famine at sea—I observe the sailors casting lots who shall be killed, to preserve the lives of
the rest;
I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon laborers, the poor, and upon
negroes, and the like;
All these—All the meanness and agony without end, I sitting, look out upon,
See, hear, and am silent.

5

10

O Me! O Life!

Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew'd,
Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,
Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

5

Answer.

That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

10

A Noiseless Patient Spider

A noiseless patient spider,
I marked where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Marked how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launched forth filament, filament, filament out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them. 5

And you O my Soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be formed, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my Soul. 10

Introduction to a Longer Poem – “Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking”

“Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking” is about an experience. This longer poem illustrates many of the traits of Walt Whitman’s unique style, as well as many of the important themes of Whitman’s poetry. Like other Whitman poems, “Out of the Cradle...” is rich in both anaphora and imagery, two important aspects of Whitman’s style (as well as allusion, if you know where to look); but it is also rich in what critic Harold Bloom describes as “Four great images [that] merge into one in Whitman’s strongest poems: night, death, the mother, and the sea” (528).

“Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking” is a lyrical account of a young boy who wanders on the beach at night and hears a song that changes his life, a song that permanently alters both his sense of what is real and his sense of who he is. (It reminds me when Pip—at the opening of *Great Expectations*—describes for us his “first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things.”) “Out of the Cradle...” is a complex, incantatory poem about a child who experiences an awakening that will fill his listening ear with multiple voices, an awakening that replaces his innocence with awareness and wisdom, an awakening that has transformed his own silence into song. The speaker of the poem is ostensibly a man, but in truth there are many speakers in the poem, multiple voices Whitman enables us to hear, and the speaker himself walks in two times—the past and the present, the grown man retracing the footsteps of the young boy and the consciousness that directed those steps.

Instructions/Tips for Reading

- 1) Carefully read the poem, paying attention not only to the **story** it tells, but to its **structure and organization**, its use of **diction** and **imagery**, its **tone**, its **syntax** (i.e., word order and sentence structure, including length vs. brevity of sentences)—as well as its use of **parallelism**, **anaphora**, and **apostrophe**. (Yes, that is a lot to pay attention to...)
- 2) In addition, consider these questions that address some of the poem’s complexity and nuances:
 - How many different **voices**, **speakers**, or **singers** are there in the poem, and how many **songs** are there?
 - Since memory plays a role in this poem, what is the importance of **time** in the poem? How **old** is the speaker in the poem?
 - What does this poem communicate about **poetry** itself? To the speaker, **where** does poetry come from, and **why**?