

American Literature M.A. (2nd Semester) Paper VIII

Walt Whitman

Biography

Walt Whitman is both a major poet and an outstanding personality in the history of American literature. Walt Whitman was born in West Hills, Long Island, New York on May 31, 1819. His father, Walter, was a laborer, carpenter, and house builder. His mother, Louisa, was a devout Quaker. In 1823, the family moved to Brooklyn, where Walt had his schooling (1825-30). From 1830 to 1836 he held various jobs, some of them on newspapers in Brooklyn and Manhattan. From 1836 to 1841 he was a schoolteacher in Long Island, despite the paucity of his own education. He also traveled extensively throughout America, and so could appreciate the various regions of the land.

Between 1841 and 1851 Whitman edited various periodicals and newspapers. It was, apparently, during this period that he began to compose the poems which were later published as *Leaves of Grass*. In 1862 Walt's brother George was wounded in the Civil War. The Civil War was a major event in Whitman's career, stirring both his imagination and his sensibility and making him a dresser of spiritual wounds as well as of physical ones as he worked as a volunteer in hospitals.

In Whitman's last years (1888-92), he was mostly confined to his room in the house which he had bought in Camden, New Jersey. Two friends, Horace Traubel and Thomas B. Harried, attended him. He died on March 26, 1892.

Whitman was truly a representative of his age and reflected its varied crosscurrents. His poetry shows the impact of the romantic idealism which reached its zenith in the years before the Civil War and also shows something of the scientific realism which dominated the literary scene after 1865. Whitman visualized the role of a poet as a seer, as a prophetic genius who could perceive and interpret his own times and also see beyond time. The ideal poet, thought

Whitman, portrays the true reality of nature and comprehends and expresses his genuine self.

A Whitman Chronology

1819 Born May 31 at West Hills, Huntington Township, Long Island, New York.

1823 Family moved to Brooklyn, New York.

1825–30 Attended public school in Brooklyn.

1830–31 Office boy in lawyer's office, then doctor's; then printer's apprentice.

1832–36 Various jobs: printer's devil, handyman.

1836–41 Schoolteacher in Long Island.

1841–47 Reporter and editor for various newspapers. Editor (1846) of Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*. Published (1842) *Franklin Evans, or the Inebriate*, a tract.

1848 Discharged from the *Eagle*. Visited New Orleans (worked on New Orleans newspaper) and traveled on the Mississippi River and the Great Lakes.

1849 Editor of the Brooklyn *Freeman*, a journal.

1850–54 Part-time journalist. Carpenter and house builder in Brooklyn (with father).

1855 First edition of *Leaves of Grass* published in July. It contained twelve poems and a prose preface.

1856 Second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, containing twenty additional poems.

1860 Third edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Traveled to Boston to discuss the preparation of this edition with Emerson.

1862–63 Went to Virginia to attend brother George, who had been wounded in Civil War, Did volunteer work in government hospitals.

1863–73 Lived most of the time in Washington, D.C. Worked for the government.

1864 *Drum-Taps* published.

1867 Fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

1871 Fifth edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Also published *Democratic Vistas* (a prose pamphlet).

1873 Suffered mild paralytic stroke. Moved to Camden, New Jersey. Mother died.

1876 Sixth edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

1879 Traveled to St. Louis to visit his brother Jeff.

1881 Visited Boston to prepare the seventh edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published that same year.

1882 *Specimen Days* published.

1884 Bought house in Camden, where he lived the rest of his life.

1888 *November Boughs* published.

1889 Pocket-size edition of *Leaves of Grass* published for his seventieth birthday.

1891–92 Final ("deathbed") edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

1892 Died March 26. Buried in Harleigh Cemetery, Camden.

Out of Cradle

Out of the ceaselessly rocking cradle of the sea waves, a memory comes back to the poet. He recalls that as a child, he left his bed and "wander'd alone, bareheaded, barefoot" in search of the mystery of life and death. He is a man now but "by these tears a little boy again," and he throws himself on the shore "confronting the waves." He is a "chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter," and he uses all his experiences but goes beyond them.

The experience he now recalls is that on the Paumanok seashore one May, when lilacs were in bloom, he observed two mockingbirds, "feather'd guests from Alabama." The female crouch'd on her nest, silent," and the male went "to and fro near at hand." The birds sang of their love; the words "two together" summed up their existence. One day the female disappeared, "may-be kill'd, unknown to her mate." The male anxiously awaited her, He addressed the wind: "I wait and I wait

till you blow my mate to me." His song penetrated the heart of the curious boy who "treasur'd every note for he understood the meaning of the bird, whom he called his "brother."

The bird's lament, or "aria," affected the boy deeply. Every shadow seemed to the bird the hoped-for shape of his mate reappearing. He had loved, but now "we two [are] together no more.

The notes of the bird were echoed by the moaning sea, "the fierce old mother." To the boy who became the poet, "to the outsetting bard," the sea hinted at secrets. The boy eagerly asked the sea to let him know the ultimate meaning, "the word final, superior to all." Before daybreak the sea whispered to the poet the "delicious word death . . . /Death, death."

In this experience the boy attempted to fuse the vision of the sea with that of the bird, and this knowledge marked the beginning of the poet in him. The bird, the solitary singer, was a projection of the boy's consciousness. The sea, like the "old crone rocking the cradle," whispered the key word in his ears.

This poem was first published under the title "A Child's Reminiscence" (1859), was later called "A Word out of the Sea" (1860), and the present, highly symbolic title was given it in 1871. The present title suggests "a word from the sea," and that word is death, which is the second phase in the process of birthdeath-rebirth.

The poem, an elegy, is thought to be based on an intensely personal experience of the poet. Just what that experience was is a favorite but fruitless field of speculation for Whitman's biographers. The poem asserts the triumph of the eternal life over death. The meaning of the poem is not stated explicitly, but it springs naturally from a recollection of the narrator's childhood days. Whitman imaginatively recreates the childhood experience of this inquiring lad and also shows how the boy becomes a man, and the man, a poet. This time sequence is as much the essence of the poem as is the growth of the consciousness of the poet. Memory plays an important part in this dramatic development. First, the boy tries to absorb the moving song of the mockingbird. Later, the boy replaces the bird as a significant character in the drama because he attempts to fuse the substance of the bird's song with the secret emanating from the sea; this synthesis is, in essence, his poetry. The word "death" is "delicious" because it is a prerequisite for rebirth. Thus the secret of life which the boy grasps from the sea is the recurrent pattern of birth-death-rebirth.

"Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is one of Whitman's great poems because of his use of image and symbol. The title itself is a symbol of birth. The sun and the moon, the land and the sea, and the stars and the sea waves contribute to the atmosphere and symbolic scenery in the poem. These images deepen the effect of the emotions in the poem, as in the bird's song, and are part of the dramatic structure. The poem is very melodious and rhythmic and may itself be compared to an aria (in opera, an aria is an elaborate melody sung by one voice). Its use of dactylic and trochaic meter is very appropriate in describing the motion of the sea waves and their meaning.

TEXT

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,
Out of the Ninth-month midnight,
Over the sterile sands and the fields beyond, where the child leaving his bed
 wander'd alone, bareheaded, barefoot,
Down from the shower'd halo,
Up from the mystic play of shadows twining and twisting as if they were alive,
Out from the patches of briers and blackberries,
From the memories of the bird that chanted to me,
From your memories sad brother, from the fitful risings and fallings I heard,
From under that yellow half-moon late-risen and swollen as if with tears,
From those beginning notes of yearning and love there in the mist,
From the thousand responses of my heart never to cease,
From the myriad thence-arous'd words,
From the word stronger and more delicious than any,
From such as now they start the scene revisiting,
As a flock, twittering, rising, or overhead passing,
Borne hither, ere all eludes me, hurriedly,
A man, yet by these tears a little boy again,
Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,
I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
A reminiscence sing.

Once Paumanok,
When the lilac-scent was in the air and Fifth-month grass was growing,
Up this seashore in some briers,
Two feather'd guests from Alabama, two together,

And their nest, and four light-green eggs spotted with brown,
And every day the he-bird to and fro near at hand,
And every day the she-bird crouch'd on her nest, silent, with bright eyes,
And every day I, a curious boy, never too close, never disturbing them,
Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating.

Shine! shine! shine!
Pour down your warmth, great sun!
While we bask, we two together.

Two together!
Winds blow south, or winds blow north,
Day come white, or night come black,
Home, or rivers and mountains from home,
Singing all time, minding no time,
While we two keep together.

Till of a sudden,
May-be kill'd, unknown to her mate,
One forenoon the she-bird crouch'd not on the nest,
Nor return'd that afternoon, nor the next,
Nor ever appear'd again.

And thenceforward all summer in the sound of the sea,
And at night under the full of the moon in calmer weather,
Over the hoarse surging of the sea,
Or flitting from brier to brier by day,
I saw, I heard at intervals the remaining one, the he-bird,
The solitary guest from Alabama.

Blow! blow! blow!
Blow up sea-winds along Paumanok's shore;
I wait and I wait till you blow my mate to me.

Yes, when the stars glisten'd,
All night long on the prong of a moss-scallop'd stake,
Down almost amid the slapping waves,
Sat the lone singer wonderful causing tears.

He call'd on his mate,

He pour'd forth the meanings which I of all men know.

Yes my brother I know,
The rest might not, but I have treasur'd every note,
For more than once dimly down to the beach gliding,
Silent, avoiding the moonbeams, blending myself with the shadows,
Recalling now the obscure shapes, the echoes, the sounds and sights after their sorts,
The white arms out in the breakers tirelessly tossing,
I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair,
Listen'd long and long.

Listen'd to keep, to sing, now translating the notes,
Following you my brother.

Soothe! soothe! soothe!
Close on its wave soothes the wave behind,
And again another behind embracing and lapping, every one close,
But my love soothes not me, not me.

Low hangs the moon, it rose late,
It is lagging—O I think it is heavy with love, with love.

O madly the sea pushes upon the land,
With love, with love.

O night! do I not see my love fluttering out among the breakers?
What is that little black thing I see there in the white?

Loud! loud! loud!
Loud I call to you, my love!

High and clear I shoot my voice over the waves,
Surely you must know who is here, is here,
You must know who I am, my love.

Low-hanging moon!
What is that dusky spot in your brown yellow?
O it is the shape, the shape of my mate!
O moon do not keep her from me any longer.

Land! land! O land!
Whichever way I turn, O I think you could give me my mate back again if you only
would,
For I am almost sure I see her dimly whichever way I look.

O rising stars!
Perhaps the one I want so much will rise, will rise with some of you.

O throat! O trembling throat!
Sound clearer through the atmosphere!
Pierce the woods, the earth,
Somewhere listening to catch you must be the one I want.

Shake out carols!
Solitary here, the night's carols!
Carols of lonesome love! death's carols!
Carols under that lagging, yellow, waning moon!
O under that moon where she droops almost down into the sea!
O reckless despairing carols.

But soft! sink low!
Soft! let me just murmur,
And do you wait a moment you husky-nois'd sea,
For somewhere I believe I heard my mate responding to me,
So faint, I must be still, be still to listen,
But not altogether still, for then she might not come immediately to me.

Hither my love!
Here I am! here!
With this just-sustain'd note I announce myself to you,
This gentle call is for you my love, for you.

Do not be decoy'd elsewhere,
That is the whistle of the wind, it is not my voice,
That is the fluttering, the fluttering of the spray,
Those are the shadows of leaves.

O darkness! O in vain!
O I am very sick and sorrowful.

*O brown halo in the sky near the moon, drooping upon the sea!
O troubled reflection in the sea!
O throat! O throbbing heart!
And I singing uselessly, uselessly all the night.*

*O past! O happy life! O songs of joy!
In the air, in the woods, over fields,
Loved! loved! loved! loved! loved!
But my mate no more, no more with me!
We two together no more.*

The aria sinking,
All else continuing, the stars shining,
The winds blowing, the notes of the bird continuous echoing,
With angry moans the fierce old mother incessantly moaning,
On the sands of Paumanok's shore gray and rustling,
The yellow half-moon enlarged, sagging down, drooping, the face of the sea almost touching,
The boy ecstatic, with his bare feet the waves, with his hair the atmosphere dallying,
The love in the heart long pent, now loose, now at last tumultuously bursting,
The aria's meaning, the ears, the soul, swiftly depositing,
The strange tears down the cheeks coursing,
The colloquy there, the trio, each uttering,
The undertone, the savage old mother incessantly crying,
To the boy's soul's questions sullenly timing, some drown'd secret hissing,
To the outsetting bard.

Demon or bird! (said the boy's soul,)
Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to me?
For I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now I have heard you,
Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,
And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer, louder and more sorrowful than yours,
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die.

O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me,
O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you,
Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,
Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me,
Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before what there in the night,

By the sea under the yellow and sagging moon,
The messenger there arous'd, the fire, the sweet hell within,
The unknown want, the destiny of me.

O give me the clew! (it lurks in the night here somewhere,)
O if I am to have so much, let me have more!

A word then, (for I will conquer it,)
The word final, superior to all,
Subtle, sent up—what is it?—I listen;
Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you sea-waves?
Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands?

Whereto answering, the sea,
Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before day-break,

Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death,
And again death, death, death, death,
Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous'd child's heart,
But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,
Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,
Death, death, death, death, death.

Which I do not forget,
But fuse the song of my dusky demon and brother,
That he sang to me in the moonlight on Paumanok's gray beach,
With the thousand responsive songs at random,
My own songs awaked from that hour,
And with them the key, the word up from the waves,
The word of the sweetest song and all songs,
That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet,
(Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet garments, bending
aside,)
The sea whisper'd me.

Reference

1. <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/l/leaves-of-grass/summary-and-analysis-calamus/out-of-the-cradle-endlessly-rocking>
2. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48858/out-of-the-cradle-endlessly-rocking>