

Minh Vu

2020

minh.vu@yale.edu

ENGL 127: American Literature

Professor Caleb Smith

“Obscuring Gender into Oneness: in Canto 21 of “Song of Myself”

An essay exploring gender theory in Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”: how the poet employs rhetorical devices to blur the line between the gender binary. In performing this close-read, I reveal how Waltman’s feminist literary movements allow male and female to melt into nature—a realm where binaries and dichotomies need not exist.

Minh Vu

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. I also give permission for the Writing Center to publish all or part of my essay as an example of good writing in a particular course or discipline, or to provide models of specific writing techniques for use in teaching. This permission applies whether or not I win a prize, and includes publication on the Yale College website or in a booklet prepared for Yale College students or faculty.

Obscuring Gender into Oneness: in Canto 21 of “Song of Myself”

In Canto 21 of his “Song of Myself,” Walt Whitman absorbs the gender binary in his proclamation “I am the poet **of**¹ the woman the same as the man” (4). Some have pointed to the imperfection of Whitman’s project of collapsing categories, expressing that although Whitman swallows the two genders through an all-encompassing poet, he continues to perpetuate and reinforce the dichotomy by equating them on a par: ‘the woman the **same as** the man.’ Not only that, but Whitman seems to even falter in maintaining this equation, as in just eight lines, he reverts to the masculine pronoun when discussing nature: “I am **he** that walks with the... night” (12). However, upon closer inspection of Whitman’s intricate depiction of the relationship between man and the night, we can elucidate how the poet actually succeeds in subverting the gender dichotomy and ultimately unifies man and woman into a singular being. The arc of this trajectory is such: (1) man is **equated to** woman, (2) man is **with** woman, and lastly (3) man merges **into** woman. This paper will work to unpack the method behind this progression through a close reading of lines 12 to 18. In gleaming upon Whitman’s chiasma; diction; anaphora; and oral register, we will see how he gradually reconfigures the initial relationship to blur the lines between man and woman into that of beautiful symbiosis.

¹ Bolded portions of quotes are meant to convey emphasis. This notation will be sustained throughout the remainder of this paper.

Before delving into the crux of this paper, we must first establish what Whitman means in his mentions of ‘night.’ In his characterizations of the night, he surrounds it with an aura of femininity,² affixing the word with modifiers such as “tender (12), “half-held” (13), and “nourishing” (14). Here, it is emotionalized as a warm and compassionate being. Whitman pushes this description even further through personification, attaching a “bare-bosom” to the night, embodying her in a “naked” (16) humanly form. ‘Night,’ then, is symbolic of a woman, resolving man’s contact with it as a gendered as well as sexual one.

In the first two lines of the fifth stanza, Whitman transfigures his initial statement:

“I am the poet of the woman **the same as the** man
A B

And I **say it** is as great to be a woman as to be a man” (4-5) ...
A B

“I am he that walks **with** the tender and growing night
B A

I **call to** the earth and sea half-held by the night” (12-13).
B A

The chiasmic movement is crucial to highlight: the poet inverts the position of man and woman to display the concurrence between them as interchangeable figures. This syntactic shift mirrors the man's night stroll: like how man and woman cross sentence-structural paths, the physicality of his "walk[ing]" intimately mingles with her soft "tender / h[o]ld" (4-5). This syntactic and bodily harmony redirects the tone of Whitman's poetry. In the first instance, the poet utters the brash claim "And I **say it is** as great to **be**" into the empty air (4). However, when he walks alongside the night, he can speak to her, modifying his previous line to "I **call to** the earth" (14). The preposition 'to' here is potent here, as it adds a direct object to the poet's dialogue and in turn showcases the reining in of his dogmatic 'it is.' In doing so, he sublimates the address into

² (*Aside*) and sexist

Our framework complicates even further as move into line 14, where the male pronoun disappears and instead we spot double mentions of ‘night’:

Some may attribute this inconsistency as yet another imperfection of Whitman's project, as the matriarchal negation of the man signifies the poet's elevation of one gender above the other. However, this is not the case when scrutinizing the interplay of structure and sound within these three lines. Here, the positionalities of 'night' conduce a series of sandwiching. Furthermore, although inexplicit, the man is still present within the lines; his caesuras are triggered in response to the night's touch, which he himself beckons with the imperative form. Thus, following these two observations, the woman does not stand alone in these lines, but rather hugs man. What is furthermore striking to pinpoint is night's flux within the entreaty: she is not static, but rather vacillates between serving as a predicate in line 14, standing as the subject in line 15, and reverting back as a predicate in line 16. This evokes the night as a dynamically vast figure, as she can expand across stanzas and warmly envelop the man in his communication with her.

³ A reconstruction of this would diagram as: $A=B \rightarrow A\&B$

The effect of such embrace can be elucidated through close examination of night's aural evocations. The poet celebrates the attractiveness of her body by crafting sexual imagery with sensuous consonance: 'bare-**b**osom... **n**odding **n**ight... **n**aked **n**ight.' These alliterative pairs are cuttngly provocative, and they intimately tie into the man's purely physical request to '**p**ress **c**lose,' which exhibits the same sort of consonant hardness the pairs produce. However, night is not only portrayed as sexy, but is manifested with a softness as well. In line 15, the clauses trail off with a quieter 's': 'Night of south winds—night of the large few stars.' Its gentle assonance mirrors that of 'press close,' and works in conjunction with the regularity of Whitman's anaphora ('press close... press close'; 'night of... night of) to showcase the stability and sustenance the night, in addition to her sexiness.

Thus, the man is consumed and nurtured by night's boundless sexual and motherly embrace, and as a result melts into her poetry. The 'I' blurs away, and Whitman again redefines the relationship between man and woman: in the stanza's beginning, man is **with woman**, walking with her; but now, man is **subsumed** by her.⁴ We can observe this unity through engagement with another chiasmic structure Whitman employs:

"Press close bare-bosom'd night—press close magnetic nourishing night! ...

C
D
 "Night of the south winds—night of the large few stars!"
 Still **n**odding **n**ight—**m**ad **n**aked summer **n**ight." (14-6).
D
C

After 'pressing close' to her, the couple merges and is able to move throughout the lines together. Here, the hard 'b's and 'd' of '**b**are-**b**osom'**d**' reflect the hard 'd's of '**m**ad **n**aked **n**ight.' The same mirror image is created through the gerund and assonance of 'no' in '**n**ourishing **n**ight' and

⁴ A&B → A and B superimposed on each other

‘nodding night.’ This crisscrossing condenses the ‘walking’ of the stanza’s beginning into poetry. In lines 12-13 man and woman are adjacent to each other, but in this new configuration, their relationship is modified to transcend syntax and move across the stanza through the medium of sounds—as if both genders have collapsed into each other as a consolidation who can blend into the earth.

This image is consummated as we enter the outset of the 6th stanza:

**“Smile O voluptuous cold-breath’d earth!
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees”** (17-8).

The erotic diction of ‘voluptuous,’ ‘breath,’ and ‘liquid,’ signals the sexually charged atmosphere. Furthermore, the double exclamation of “earth” across lines 17 and 18 creates an enjambed quality that alters the rhythm of our reading. The pace hastens and breaks the aurally regulating parallelism of “Earth of the,” likening the lines to the intense ‘breath[ing]’ of copulation. And this image is sublimed, marked by the poet’s apostrophic ‘O,’ whose long sound rings throughout the rest of the line ‘O, **voluptuous cold.**’—essentially evoking a sustained orgasm. Furthermore, what is striking to unfurl is Whitman’s peculiar selection of ‘liquid trees.’ The line harkens back to his opening line “The first [woman] I graft and increase upon myself” (3). In dendrology, a graft is a twig that is inserted into a tree trunk’s slit in order to extract sap. Applying this definition to Canto 21, the implications are doubly fascinating: not only does Whitman romanticize sex as raw act of nature, but he also transforms it. Here, the traditional dynamic of man’s ejaculation into woman is reversed, as now he is receiving fluids from the woman. Yet, despite biological impossibility, the woman is still fertile and abounds with life: **“Far-swooping elbow’d earth—rich apple-blossom’d earth”** (22). This is the apotheosized version of the previous stanza: there, man and woman’s naked bodies hug and conjoin; here, they dissolve into

each other and “increase [their] single [s]elf,” painting a remarkably beautiful image of perfect symbiosis (3).

In tracing the arc of Whitman’s relationship between man and woman in Canto 21, we see that they are intimately consociated beyond mere mathematical equation. At first, we considered Whitman’s encapsulation of “I am the poet of the woman and the same as the man” as an egotistical and logically flawed project (4). However, upon closer scrutiny of Whitman’s progression and reconfiguration of gender across lines 12 to 18, we can realize that the “I” does not merely embody everything, but also dissolves alongside gender into the earth. And in unspooling this highly nuanced trajectory, we unpack the many layers that gender holds for Whitman—the physicality, emotionality, nature, sex, syntax—and thus find ourselves swept away by the poet’s intricacies, just like how he begins walking but eventually melts with the woman. And it’s no coincidence that “Song of Myself” (3) commences with an “I” and ends with “you” (67).

Work Cited

Whitman, Walt. Canto 21, "Song of Myself." *The Portable Walt Whitman*. Penguin, 2004.