

Homosexuality and Procreation: Opposing Masculine Forces in Whitman's "Song of Myself"

Walt Whitman's homosexual desires and experiences fueled much of his most vitalist and visceral work, simultaneously antagonizing the sexually conservative audience of his time and exciting their sexual egos hidden beneath. Whitman's language in *Leaves of Grass* and in "Song of Myself" in particular is vitalist: it wants to be alive, to procreate. To Whitman, the force, mechanism and meaning of nature is procreation itself, what he describes as the "procreate urge of the world" (line 44). His poetic focus on vitality through reproduction and natural imagery reveals the tension between his homosexual desire and his need for procreation. This reveals a darker side of masculinity, one inextricable with violence, possession, and utter domination. Through Whitman's unstable relationship with masculinity and its inseparable violence, the greater ideals of a young American nation emerge.

In Section 40, an uncharacteristically dark and violent section of a poem that "attempts to be all-affirming and non-judgmental" (Goldstein), Whitman reveals resentment and internalized hatred of women. He resents that he needs to procreate, and therefore through having sex with women he experiences thrills of violence and thrills of power. The power dynamics at play in this sexually charged section also reveals his sense of masculinity and being a man is inextricable with the need to dominate and possess a sexual partner. This reveals the larger truth that the societal concept of masculinity in the 19th century, and arguably into the modern day, being impossible to separate from the violence of total domination and possessiveness.

Whitman's clear disdain of women as the lesser object of sexual desire, but as a necessity for procreation, becomes clear in this section. The concept of anonymity is essential to this reading of the poem. Whitman effectively erases the woman as a whole and autonomous 'other' and instead writes her as vessel or sheath for both his sexual desire and his need to procreate through the act of sex: "I do not ask who you are, that is not important to me, / you can do nothing and be nothing but what I will infold you" (lines 1001-1002). Whitman's masculinity and sense of self is tied up in the act of domination and ownership, and even more than that, in the complete overpowering of the other until they are "nothing." But the essential distinction to the nothingness of the woman is that she is "nothing but what I will enfold you." She is purely a vessel for procreation, for Whitman's future children (although it was never confirmed, he told various news outlets he had six illegitimate children [*Whitman Archive*]).

Whitman's need for dominance and control is made even more apparent through his typical transcendentalist allusions to nature: "Flaunt of the sunshine I need not your bask—lie over! / You light surfaces only, I force surfaces and depths also" (lines 987-990). When he feels most dominant and masculine, most powerful, he is disdainful even towards nature, the sun itself. This further illuminates his need for domination and violence to feel masculine: "You there, impotent, loose in the knees, / Open your scarf'd chops til I blow grit within you" (lines 996-997). Aside from illustrating his need for dominant masculinity, the use of the word "grit" to describe climax and ejaculation is yet another way Whitman unifies himself to nature and natural processes. However this allusion to dirt has an ironic societal message and context: in the 19th century extramarital, and especially homosexual, sex was seen as salacious, deviant, and dirty. He is challenging that societal notion with the double entendre that he uses something dirty

(“grit”) to reveal a more natural state of sexuality as something normal and beautiful, as natural as dirt itself. He reverses even the meaning of the sense of "dirtiness" to be something in alignment with the beauty of nature rather than something salacious and morally wrong. Additionally, his use of “impotent” again illustrates his intersecting need to procreate and dominate women.

At the intersection of Whitman’s complex resentment for women’s necessary role in procreation comes his larger need for domination, that is fulfilled through that emotionless act of procreation of sex with women. His descriptions of sex he engages in for pleasure rather than procreation illuminates the stark difference between his relations with women and his relations with men, his need for domination, and the strength of his homoerotic desire: “To cotton-field drudge or cleaner of privies I lean, / On his right cheek I put the family kiss, / And in my soul I swear I never will deny him” (lines 1003-1005). In this stanza power is newly portrayed as an enjoyable game he can share with a man he deems worthy, and alternative to the domination he needs to feel to be thrilled by in his relations with women and young men. "Family kiss" is an honor he bestows upon the man he is having a relationship with, as the kiss upon the cheek is more intimate and signals a deeper emotional relationship between the two that isn't shared by any of the other conquests he writes about in this section of the poem. Their shared masculinity and the back and forth play of power between the two allows this relationship to progress from the thrill of domination to something shared, something intimate, something transitory and unifying. However, the distinction that this kind of mutual, equal relationship is the exception in Whitman’s life, love and respect as the anomaly, shows the deep dysfunctional of masculinity in that time period.

Even in the face of consensual sex and desire with another man, the power dynamics of domination cannot be escaped to achieve sexual thrill. This illuminates the deeper male psyche of the time: Whitman's inability to achieve pleasure without the interpolation of violence and possession through domination shows that he can only feel a secure sense of self, of being a man, through violence itself: "I seize the descending man and raise him with resistless will, / O desirer, here is my neck, / By God, you shall not go down! Hang your whole weight upon me" (lines 1011-1013). He both needs the man to be entirely reliant on him ("hang your whole weight upon me") and also be entirely in his control ("raise him with resistless will").

Whitman is known as the most American poet, and this poem is no exception. America's love affair with violence, domination, and the masquerade of possession and total control are at the root and in between the crevices of Whitman, the "Poet of America" himself. American culture itself is tied up in the toxicity of masculine appearance and intense need to spread, or procreate and through that procreation increase its own domain and power. Where America is militarist, Whitman is protective and possessive ("arm'd force" [lines 1017], "I and they keep guard all night" [line 1020]), where America is pure manifest destiny, Whitman wants to spread his influence and seed: "He protect his possessions with an intense force, those who he chooses ("lovers of me") are invincible ("not doubt, not decease shall dare to lay finger upon you [lines 1017-1018]) in his protection, they "baffle the grave" (line 1018). In this the echoes of American militarist power as being invincible. Whitman's pleasure in being physically dominant ("I raise him with resistless will") and the mental ("I compel, I am not to be denied") reveals the deeper instability in his masculine identity, and the instability of the male psyche of America itself.