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Poets Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg, though having inhabited different literary and social eras, are intangibly connected through a number of commonalities in their writings, stylistically and culturally (in addition, according to Ginsberg, to their indirect genital contact). Stylistically, both writers frequently use long lines—suspending subject, verb, or end-punctuation for sometimes page-long stanzas in order to allow the reader to meander through the work. Both writers also use catalogs as means of encouraging the reader to empathize with a diverse array of perspectives outside of her own. While these stylistic similarities are worth noting, it is their connection to the values of their respective time periods that stands as central to their relatedness as poet. Both poets include themes of sexuality within their works—typically detailing sexual encounters between lovers, as well as directly celebrating the naked human body. Among the more prominent similarities between the works of these two poets is the inclusion of homoerotic themes. This paper seeks to explore the representation of romantic attraction between two men in the works of Whitman and Ginsberg in order to demonstrate that Whitman writes of his alleged attraction to men in a much less overt—and much more emotional—manner than does Ginsberg.

Before dissecting the texts of these writers, however, one should note that Whitman himself never openly identified as gay. Although intellectual debate persists as to whether or not he truly was a member of the queer community, much of the biographical and literary research done has affirmed his alleged attraction to men. The poet likely did not grapple with his queer sexuality until some point in the 1850s, according to American poet Galway Kinnell, primarily because he was "subject to the same inhibitions as the whole period was."[1] That is, Whitman was just as likely to suppress his queer identity as was the majority of LGTBQ+ society in the nineteenth century as a result of rampant homophobia. In fact, as noted in the footnote to Calamus in the 2002 Norton Critical Edition of *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, when his sexuality was eagerly questioned by English poet John Addington Symonds, Whitman aggressively protested, asserting that he was not only heterosexual, but had

apparently fathered six children with various women.[2] According to psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's phenomenon of over-resistance, Whitman's stern refusal in response to being questioned about his sexuality ultimately suggests his queer sexual identity. He overcompensates for this repressed identity by not only denying it, but fervently attempting to prove his heterosexuality.[3]

Many long-time readers of Whitman are able to recognize the surfacing of this repression in Calamus—most notably in the poem "Here the Frailest Leaves of Me", in which Whitman admits to the revealing, and simultaneously concealing, nature of his writings. In this poem, he claims, "Here I shade and hide my thoughts—I myself do not expose them, / And yet they expose me more than all my other poems."[4] Here, Whitman expresses that his authentic thoughts are unconsciously revealed in his poetry. He, himself, may not outwardly announce his gay identity, but this identity is woven throughout in his works. Between his defensive use of resistance, lack of evidence tracing any children back to his seed, and vulnerability suggested by "Here the Frailest Leaves of Me," it is possible that Whitman made these extravagant claims about fathering six children in an anxious attempt to mask his true sexuality.

The queer tropes that appear in Whitman's poetry within the context of this personal background greater illustrate the poet's emotional attraction to men. Of course, this is not to say that Whitman never did experience sexual attraction to men, as such a claim is likely untrue. However, sexual relations between men in the nineteenth century were considered far more taboo than were emotional relationships. In fact, emotional companionships between two members of the same sex—often termed "homosocial" relationships—were considered both acceptable and normal during the period. The prominence of state sodomy laws in the United States at this time, however, served as a strong indication of America's disapproval of same-sex sexual relationships – specifically between men. Thus, the sexual attraction Whitman experienced toward other men, as a result of societal condemnation, is made much more discrete in his poetry than is his emotional attraction. Take, for example, the following erotic scene chronicled in Section 5 of *Song of Myself*:

I mind once how 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.[5]

With some of the aforementioned information in mind, we read this oral sex scene as though it were between Whitman and another male lover. However, whether or not Whitman truly is alluding to a scenario between himself and another male, he anticipates our assumptions and disguises this erotic scene potentially between two men as literally being between the body and soul. Thus, if Whitman were accused of alluding to gay oral sex in this section of *Song of Myself*, he could simply deny this accusation, claiming that the aforementioned erotic scene is between body and soul—not man and man.

A similar disguise is seen again in Section 11 of *Song of Myself* in which Whitman describes a masturbation scene between a female voyeur and twenty-eight swimming men upon whom she gazes. He descriptively notes, "The beards of the young men glisten'd with wet, it ran from their long hair, / Little streams pass'd all over their bodies."[6] These two lines sexualize the bodies of the male swimmers, putting them in a position of spectacle. The female voyeur, however, is not sexualized to the same degree as the men upon whom she gazes. Because it is the men, rather than the female voyeur, whom Whitman describes as sexually desirable, he feels an obligation to disguise his own implicit sexual attraction to the bathers as that of the female voyeur—placing himself in her body. In this way, Whitman cannot be outwardly accused of exhibiting sexual desire for men, because he masks his own desire within the fabricated narrative of his poem. He, himself, is the body receiving fellatio from the soul in Section 5. He, himself, is the woman viewing the male swimmers here. He simply substitutes some other subject in the poem for himself in order to protect his queer identity from homophobic disdain.

Ginsberg, on the other hand, was much more overt about his sexual attraction to men, likely, in part, due to influence from the oncoming Sexual Liberation Movement of the 1960s. Featured in the "Walt Whitman" episode of the Voices and Visions series, Ginsberg confidently asserts,

"[Whitman] loved his fellows. He loved his young fellows…whether it was genital is another matter. Likely it was, as I know I've slept with Neal Cassady, who slept with Gavin Arthur, who slept with Edward Carpenter, who described sleeping with Whitman to Gavin Arthur."[7]

Unlike Whitman, Ginsberg was not fearful of using his own, first-person voice when referencing sexually explicit, and often non-fictitious, scenes in his queer poetry. Consider some of the more straightforward lines in his poem "Sphincter" from *Cosmopolitan Greetings: Poems 1986-1992* which read, "I hope my good old asshole holds out / … active, eager, receptive to phallus / coke bottle, candle, carrot /banana & fingers." He then goes on to note his sphincter's "rubbery muscular" texture and beckons any "orgasmic friend" to come enter him, "unashamed wide open for joy."[8] In his poem, Ginsberg makes clear that his specific sphincter is the one being addressed—that his sphincter welcomes the phallus and whatever else may come. With the removal of those sodomy laws that thwarted Whitman's ability to be outward about his sexual relations with men, in addition to the socio-political influence of the Sexual Liberation Movement that contributed to the normalization of queer relationships and deconstruction of traditional gender roles, Ginsberg feels less of a necessity to hide his sexual desires from his audience. The societal constraints that inhibited Whitman were in the process of degradation by the mid-twentieth century.

Even in his better-known works, Ginsberg does not shy away from detailing his sexual experiences with other men. Consider his 1955 poem "Howl (For Carl Solomon)," which honors those members of society who are generally met with resentment, such as the impoverished, queer, or radical socio-political activists. Ginsberg, unapologetically using provocative language, celebrates those men "who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy," and those "who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailor, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love."[9] This line is especially significant in that it explicitly refers to gay oral sex between two men—directly contrasting Whitman's masked allusion in Section 5 of *Song of Myself* and effectively indicating the continued degradation of stigma surrounding sexual encounters between men in the twentieth century.

While not as explicit about his sexual encounters as Ginsberg, Whit-

man is rather direct about the emotional attraction he has experienced with members of the same sex. In fact, even Ginsberg himself recognized these differences between his own writing and that of Whitman's. During a brief segment on Whitman's sexuality in Voices and Visions, Ginsberg asserts, "[Whitman] never was overt in the sense of the 'love that dare not speak its name.' On the other hand, his descriptions of his feelings were overt."[10]

Indeed, Whitman displays a much greater comfortability expressing emotional attraction to men in his poetry than he does expressing sexual attraction. Perhaps the most widely-cited lines that suggest this emotional connection appear in "When I Heard at the Close of the Day." Reveling in the memories of being united with his male lover, Whitman describes, "… the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in 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."[11] Notice that the two men are merely sleeping, the lover's "arm [laying] lightly around [Whitman's] breast." This tender scene between two male lovers makes no reference to a sexual experience (such as fellatio or masturbation). However, Whitman paints the image of two men embracing one another, united under a mutual sense of emotional security. Most notably, unlike his use of homoeroticism in *Song of Myself*, Whitman recounts his emotional experiences with men in the first-person point of view. He uses I-statements such as "… the one I love …" and "… that night I was happy."[12] By doing so, the poet not only confirms that he, himself, had these emotional experiences with another man, but that he feels comfortable letting others know about them.

This emotional attachment is suggested again in another Calamus poem titled "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances," in which Whitman claims that the love shared between he and his male lovers secures his sense of reality. Of his doubts about reality, he notes, "To me these and the like of these are curiously answer'd by my lovers, my dear friends, / When he whom I love travels with me or sits a long while holding me by the hand."[13] Again, there is no reference to a particular sexual experience as there is in *Song of Myself*; rather, there is only the emotional—in this case, almost spiritual—bond that unites male lovers. It is not the sex or physical attachment that secures Whitman's sense of reality, but it is the

emotional reliance on a man that solidifies his doubt. Similar to his use of language in "When I Heard at the Close of Day," the poet recounts his emotional desires in the first-person point of view in "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances." Just as it does in the latter poem, the use of first-person insinuates that Whitman feels no obligation to mask his emotional attraction to men as he does his sexual attraction.

Whitman spent much of his time in the mid-to-late 1850s exploring this emotional attraction to men in Pfaff's Cellar—a restaurant and literary paradise for aspiring writers in bohemian Manhattan. An organized group of men seeking romantic companionship with other men—of which Whitman was included—known as the Fred Gray Association frequented Pfaff's Cellar.[14] It was among the Fred Gray Association that the poet met his alleged male lover Fred Vaughn, with whom he often shared letters. However strong their romance was, historical evidence suggests that it was Peter Doyle who ultimately stole Whitman's heart (so much so that Doyle allegedly inspired the writing of Drum-Taps) in the late 1960s.[15]

Despite his membership in the organization (and the relationships that are rumored to have ensued), Whitman was confined to expressing romantic and sexual desire in secrecy—under the societally approved guise of homosocial friendship. Professor of English at Université de Montréal Robert Martin claims that, although being openly gay was decriminalized in a number of Western nations by the late-1800s, men were still being repeatedly attacked—even killed—for same-sex relationships in England and the United States well through the nineteenth century.[16] Because Ginsberg was not subject to the same intensity of homophobia in the mid-to-late twentieth century as was Whitman in the nineteenth century, he had much more freedom to express his sexualized identity in his poetry.

Rebellion against WASP America's orthodox views regarding sexuality strengthened in the mid-twentieth century as rock 'n' roll music, second wave feminism, and other major influences gained the attention of America's youth and degraded those traditional value systems encouraged by its parents. By the 1960s, the Sexual Revolution in the United States was well underway, granting Ginsberg greater leeway to express his gayness openly without constant fear of personal harm.

Whitman, however, lived in an America that was far from accepting

of total sexual liberation. For this reason, he felt a societal pressure to disguise his sexual desire for men in his poetry. Rather than outwardly expressing his sexual experiences with other men, he alludes only to emotional experiences, as comradery between men was much more accepted as a social norm. Nonetheless, small scraps of his sexual desire for men are littered, perhaps without deliberation, throughout his poetry—noticeable only to those willing to find them. As Ginsberg points out in "A Supermarket in California," "I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator andeyeing the grocery boys."[17] We, too, see you, Whitman—receiving fellatio, watching those twenty-eight men wet and naked, gazing upon the grocery boys. You may not have been as outward about your queer identity as was Ginsberg, but we recognize the signs you left us among your leaves.

Notes

1. *Voices and Visions: Walt Whitman*, video, 1987, 56 mins 41 secs.

2. Walt Whitman, "Calamus," in *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002).

3. Sigmund Freud. *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920).

4. Walt Whitman, "Here the Frailest Leaves of Me," in *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), 2-3.

5. Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), 87-90.

6. Ibid., 210-211.

7. *Voices and Visions: Walt Whitman*, video, 56:41, 1987, http://www.learner.org/catalog/extras/vvspot/Whitman.html.

8. Allen Ginsberg, "Sphincter," in *Cosmopolitan Greetings: Poems, 1986-1992* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), 1-15.

9. Allen Ginsberg, "Howl (For Carl Solomon)," in *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956), 36-37.

10. *Voices and Visions: Walt Whitman*, video, 56:41, 1987. http://www.learner.org/catalog/extras/vvspot/Whitman.html.

11. Walt Whitman, "When I Heard at the Close of Day," in *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), 15-17.

12. Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), 15-17.

13. Walt Whitman, "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances," in *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), 10-11.

14. "The Vault at Pfaff's: An Archive of Art and Literature by the Bohemians of Antebellum New York," *Lehigh University*, 2017. https://pfaffs.web.lehigh.edu/node/54279.

15. Martin G. Murray, "Pete the Great: A Biography of Peter Doyle," *The Walt Whitman Archive*, last modified August, 2018. https://whitmanarchive.org/.

16. Robert K. Martin, "Gay Studies and the Victorian Period," *Newsletter of the Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada* 13, no. 1 (1987): 69-76. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27794106.

17. Allen Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California." In *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956).

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