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ENGL 361

2 December 2014

### Exploring Masculinity through Walt Whitman

American masculinity is this grand concept with an obscure meaning. It begins with the formation of this nation-- forged for and by the men who created America. Changing fads of what it means to be a man may affect the appearance of men at different times, but they don't change what it means to be masculine in America. This quality is complex; yet, Walt Whitman--a homosexual Romantic poet--may hold the key to it. Whitman's "Children of Adam" explores the intricacies of the purpose and meaning of masculinity. As masculinity gains a more complex depth through a cultural reading of Whitman's poem so does the masculine writer. From Whitman's poem "Children of Adam" his analysis of both men and women exposes how he embodies American Masculinity in a unique way.

The specific ideals of what a man should look or act like have changed slightly over the generations. For example leading men in movies from different decades show us how chest hair or bulging muscles have been more or less important. While these small visual fads within masculinity may change there are universal concepts that remain the same. Within different time periods certain men are seen as figureheads for masculinity. Sometimes they may seem odd when viewed from outside their time period. Similarly Walt Whitman, as the picture of American masculinity towards the end of the 19th century, may seem a little off. From a modern perspective his poems may not be the picture of masculinity. His fascination with nature may seem a little off when read by a modern

audience think about masculinity, as would his passion for men. However, critics in his day often called him “that masculine” poet. Other critics simply threw around the term masculine to describe every aspect of his writing. A.S. Hill in his review of “Drum Taps” said that Whitman had a “masculine directness of expression”. How is it that so many people have attributed such masculinity to Whitman, and his writings, despite his lack of what we may see as typical masculinity? An exploration of the popular science of Whitman’s day can help us clue into why he is this masculine figure.

Within Whitman’s circle of influence was a doctor who wrote about the creative and sexual science of the day. His book, *Creative and Sexual Science: or Manhood, Womanhood, and Their Mutual Interrelations, &C.*, helps key into both the society that was reading Whitman’s work as well as the community that was influencing Whitman’s work. From Dr. Fowler one can see his idea that instead of masculinity being arbitrary ideals concocted by a society it is a biological drive innate in each of us. Masculinity is often seen as a set of actions or a man’s appearance but Fowler postulates that it is more complex than that. This added complexity is explored throughout Whitman’s poems, particularly in “Children of Adam”. This poem may be read as being purely about the physical relationship of men and women. However, as this is coming from a homosexual Romantic author such a reading barely scratches the surface. Within “Children of Adam” Whitman uses the ultimate fulfillment of gender relations to explore masculinity.

### **Understanding the Science**

By analyzing some of what Fowler discussed one can gain a deeper understanding of what Whitman meant in his poem “Children of Adam” and thereby deepen the understanding of Whitman as an icon for masculinity. In Fowler's book he says, "To

originate life together where they created: therefore there must be a system of laws governing their *co-operative* action. This requires and presupposes their mutual *adaptation to each other*, as well as their conjoint creative work...to initiate life impregnate woman alone were female and created a male" (104). We can understand from this that Whitman would have been familiar with the idea that the whole purpose of gender and sexuality is for procreation. After cementing this idea Fowler then proposes that masculinity and femininity is based on what the opposite sex finds attractive and wants to have in their children. In fact he goes so far as to say, "all his conduct towards women must be governed by this his male office, and promotive of it" (104). Therefore, everything masculine hinges on what can promote procreation or what can attract women. This ties masculinity completely to women. According to Fowler the father pass on more traits to their children than the mother, so women want men who have the traits that they want in their children. This is understood in the book as the reason why certain features are more preferred at different times. Fowler lists many attributes that women of his time were seeking, which included: tall, large, physical power, brawn, large bones and strong muscles, courage, force, and firmness in men, heroic, brave bold, and daring (549). All of these things seem to be evolutionary reasons to pick a mate; biological factors that would help their children survive. By understanding this broad concept of masculinity one can better understand the picture that Whitman was trying to capture. His familiarity with this concept can be seen in shaping how he portrays masculinity in respect to femininity.

### **Children of Adam**

With this understanding of the logical aspects of masculinity that Whitman would have been learning about, his series Children of Adam gains new depth. His poem about the

love and procreation between men and women can be seen as an exploration of the true purpose of our gender as described by Fowler. Whitman explains this concept in his poem when he says, "Sex contains all" (88). Here Whitman expresses why he believes that a poem centered on procreation will uncover truth, because it contains everything. Despite his own sexual preference Whitman used this poem to observe and understand this culturally accepted balance of nature, the male with the female.

When the poem was published many people lumped it with the prevalent pornography. This, however, is far from the case. Whitman was said to abhor pornography, Reynolds in his book *Walt Whitman's America* says that, "his distaste for pornography was linked to his hostility to prissiness and sexual repression. The scabrous and the repressed, he thought, were two sides of the same cultural coin. Both reflected skewed visions of womanhood and manhood" (196). We can further see this illustrated in his poem "Children of Adam" when he says, "The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred"(85). Their bodies with their procreative power and purpose are sacred. This isn't a poem that demeans this act but seeks to understand it. Rather than a pornographic work of poetry "Children of Adam" is trying to use sex to explore the depth of what it means to be a man. If the true purpose for the genders and the root of masculinity and femininity is procreation then Whitman needed to explore the act itself to get to the heart of what it means to be masculine.

### *The Masculine*

He begins his poem by directly addressing this topic by saying he is, "singing the song of procreation" (79). Whitman not only used the poem to explore the depths of manhood but he also sought to create a completely masculine figure. His notes show this as

one of his purposes in writing. Reynolds says in his book, "in planning his sexual cluster of poems, 'Children of Adam' he specified in his notebook that he wanted to present 'A fully complete, well-developed man... bearded, swart, fiery'" (207). In his poem you can clearly see this man defined. He is a robust, natural being who employs this idea of manhood that Whitman was trying to reach. In creating this man Whitman not only looks to fit the physical representation of a man but also the more abstract concepts of manhood. By keeping this poem centered on the ultimate reason for gender Whitman is able to boil down what it means to be masculine.

Whitman continues to use the vehicle of procreation to understand the complex topic of being a man, within your sexuality. He utilized an almost heroic archetype, the swart and fiery man. In order to create this fully developed man he calls upon Adam, the very first man. Whitman uses the Adam character to invoke the very essence of manhood. Adam, as the father of all, is a powerful masculine figure. This heroic archetype connected with a biblical connection is an imaginative way of saying: this is the way it has been and this is the way it should always be. With "Children of Adam" Whitman takes this strong stance on what being a man entails. Masculinity is centered on what attracts women, and in having relations with them. It isn't your sexual drive alone but rather your whole being focused on this power. Whitman takes masculinity farther than other writers may. Some stop at what masculinity acts like or what it looks like. Instead of staying on the surface he dives into the depth of what it means to be human. The act of procreation is what men and women are designed for, the very entities of man and women are formed along these two halves of a whole. To be a man means to procreate with a woman so masculinity natural derives it's meaning by what gets you to that point.

In "Children of Adam" Whitman pays homage to this meaning of masculinity over and over again. Whitman may not always display this meaning in the most eloquent terms, but words for the purest things often elude us. For instance he takes a stanza to explain what happens when he plants his seed within his lover, he says:

On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved of me and America,  
The drops I distil upon you shall grow fierce and athletic girls,  
new artists, musicians, and singers (89)

This certainly isn't the most comfortable way for us to hear about making babies. However, despite the occasional crude phrase or distant feeling he is able to convey this pure form of masculinity. It is no wonder that so many of his critics have used the word masculine to describe him. Whether they searched for this buried understanding or not the truth rings clear from the text. Whitman's male character becomes this ultimate masculine figure as he takes on archetypal and biblical roles to fulfill his gender role.

#### *Understanding the Masculine Through The Feminine*

While he focuses more on the male perspective in "Children of Adam", it can be seen that he does try to add equality to procreation. In *Walt Whitman's America* David Reynolds describes Whitman's advocating for women's rights, particularly when it came to their sexuality. Reynolds quotes Whitman in his book saying; "he identified 'the current conventional, prurient treatment of sex' as the main obstacle to women's social and political equality" (195). This was mostly in conjunction with the large consumption of pornography and prostitution of the time. The vast amounts of pornography particularly troubled Whitman. He discussed in "A Memorandum at a Venture" the need for a better understanding of the complexity of women, particularly; they're being a sexual being. This fit well into the ideas of the time, Reynolds wrote, "marriage reformers, associates with

women's rights and free love movements, demanded a wholesale redefinition of gender relations by which women would be liberated from virtual enslavement and marriage would be reestablished on the basis of true passion and mutual respect" (196). In "Children of Adam" Whitman sought to re-classify women as sexual beings who were more than the types that society created for them.

In these poems the woman is a sexual being that helps fulfill her divine purpose, as does her partner. In *Children of Adam* he writes, "Be not ashamed women, your privilege encloses the rest, and it the /exit of the rest, /You are the gates of the body, are you are the gates of the soul" (84). This example of masculinity speaking out about women's rights, both in his poems and in his other writings, may seem contrary to the idea of masculinity. Yet, Whitman, the masculine poet, consciously advocates for a change in the perspective of women.

While it may seem counterintuitive for masculinity to advocate for femininity it actually perfectly fits in with the deeper form of masculinity that Walt Whitman embodies. As Fowler previously explained masculinity is defined by its connection with the opposite sex. Just as genders are two halves of a whole so are masculinity and femininity. In "Children of Adam" Whitman writes, "The oath of the inseparableness of two together, of the woman/that loves me and whom I love more than my life"(80). This mutual affection connects them as two complementary beings. They are inseparable, together for this observance of their purpose in procreation.

We can only understand what is masculine when we understand the feminine, as the other influences them. Therefore Walt Whitman's desire to include women as whole beings reinforces the masculine as well as defines the feminine. He tells women to be not

ashamed of her actions and purpose in this poem. For from her come men and women (84). Together they fulfill this purpose for which masculinity and femininity were created. If the one is better understood then the other is as well. They are perfectly intertwined. Whitman creates the full picture of masculinity like few before him because he accepts and furthers the roles of women.

Whitman is an unexpected champion for masculinity, particularly in our time. Despite this Whitman does more than exhibit masculinity; he brings new depth and understanding to the word. In America our masculinity is often portrayed in the toughest of men: cowboys, soldiers, or cops. However, in Whitman's "Children of Adam" we are able to see that masculinity runs deeper. It is the father and the lover combined. "Children of Adam" goes to the basics of human existence. At its core, humanity is a man and a woman-creating life. Through his biblical reference and allusion Whitman brings the reader to the very beginning. Life and gender originated with Adam and Eve. By centering this poem, starting with his title, around the first couple Whitman shows that Masculinity is centered on this powerful act. The intricacies of this purpose manifest themselves as masculinity and femininity.

Whitman explores all these truths with himself at the helm. This masculine character that Whitman uses isn't a nameless figure but himself. He is Adam. He is the father and the lover. Whitman the character is the vehicle for this deepened understanding of what it means to be a man. This choice to center the poem on Whitman the character creates a contingency. Whitman the author's exploration and added depth to Masculinity can only be understood by using Whitman the character as the epitome of masculinity. Whitman uses Adam to create himself as a new Adam, a father of America. He transforms

America into “the new garden the West” (92). This makes America a new Garden of Eden with him as the “Adomic” figure that we come from. He then becomes every important male figure for the reader. He is their father and the lover as well as Adam and a new American Adam. By taking on all these roles on Whitman solidifies himself as the ultimate man.

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