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Walt Whitman's "The Sleepers" : Fantasia of the Unconscious or a Consciously Rendered Dream?

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Ce mémoire intitulé : Walt Whitman's « The Sleepers » :
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Abstract

As poet and man in search of his complete liberation from the norms imposed by a homophobic society, Whitman offers his readers "The Sleepers," a poem that has fascinated and bewildered the world since its first appearance in 1855. The poem symbolizes Whitman's descent into his own heart of darkness where he becomes both seer and seen, observer and participant in the dramas of his sleepers: Whitman's personae. Whitman uses his dream/vision in his attempt to cure himself and the world. He uses the dream world to make his sexual proclivities known, proclivities that are not evil but only misunderstood. Analyzed "en-masse," the poem puzzled those scholars who have been trying hard to find a unifying thread that will eventually bind this fragmentary poem together. The thesis proposes a detailed reading of the text, reading that will allow everyone to follow Whitman's intentions: his overt confession but hidden behind the cloak of the night. The poem is still opened to bold interpretations and discussions because of the mesmerizing series of questions it arises, questions that have not been answered yet. The poem occupies a crucial place in Whitman's poetry: the poet's new and unique posture as a loafer during the night of his excruciating experiences. His painful but revealing experiences are rendered in flowing and vivid passages incorporated in the mysterious world of dreams. Because he does not want to be a "scarlet letter" bearer all his life, Whitman, in "The Sleepers," endeavors to cast off the chains imposed on every one who is different by a narrow-minded society. His dream/vision, real or conceptual, has been transformed into a poetic instrument conveying the inner turmoil of the poet in his effort to unite and merge all the existing contraries and to release them free in his poetic imagination only to be, later on, shared with the reader. "The Sleepers" epitomizes the poet's acceptance of the "unconscious" poetry - making powers (a process later adopted by the surrealist

artists): the surrender, for a while, of the poet's own self to the tenebrous and mysterious forces of the dream world in order to absorb the healing powers of the restorative night/sleep and to emerge into a universe of light, health, harmony, and felicity. After descending into his own heart of darkness, Whitman/loafer/quester re-acquires his lost direction and re-dresses his tormented and torn self in order to be able to face the world devoid of hypocrisy and at peace with his "sinful secrets." No longer alienated, Whitman succeeds in bridging the universal and the particular abysses. He succeeds in balancing the cosmic and his own contradictions. The thesis emphasizes that Whitman does not intend to annihilate the conflicting elements that rule the world (it would have been a futile attempt), but to make them more tolerable and to re-integrate them all into a larger order: a universe of unity in diversity. Only by counteracting all these opposites can Whitman liberate himself from anguish and despair. The poem allows Whitman to translate the various visions of his dream/dreams into personal and universal symbols of life, death, and love. His overwhelming nocturnal experience has unbound hidden or hypothetically hidden emotions and thoughts otherwise impossible to utter during the day time/waking state. In "The Sleepers," Whitman penetrates a new realm of existence - the dream world - a realm so powerfully compelling because it can transcend time and space: a limitless realm. In this unbound world where everything is possible, Whitman will find himself and will easily express his sexual frustrations using the dreams of "the other." A rebel against a society encapsulated within its bigoted mentality, Whitman realizes that, because he lives and moves in this biased world, he must establish a candid dialogue with it; directly expressing his inner thoughts, the poet will ultimately find his way to salvation: moral and spiritual. Whitman's self dwells somewhere locked in his paradoxical nature: the self must keep a distance from the world while, at the same time , it must have a continuous relation to it. This strange relationship is established through a constant dialogue Whitman is having with the reader/you/society, a dialogue that finally narrows the discrepancy between the poet and the world, a dialogue that must be opened and sincere. However, Whitman's openness masks the tragic sexual tensions that are corroding his being. Whitman's aesthetic and spiritual life are so real that he often confuses the physical and the psychological realms of experience. The thesis has attempted to underline that the poem, so necessary for Whitman's life and poetic career, stands for the poet's doubts, how to solve them and to incorporate them in the cycle of life, Nature, and the universe. It is a poem that audaciously renders a new shore of experience, a shore that goes beyond the rational thinking of the waking state. It is this tempestuous dream/vision that will help Whitman establish his lost harmony, for harmony resides at the very core of the poem. Finding harmony within the tormenting night, Whitman heals himself and his sleepers. He knows that within every person, there are two co-existing forces: good and evil, forces Whitman attempts to integrate in a larger entity that represents man's life. The solar "Song of Myself" would not have been possible without "The Sleepers," its lunar counterpart. As a lunar poem, "The Sleepers" forwards a mythic view: in the moon, light and dark interact (good and evil) within one sphere making the seen unseen and the unseen seen. This is, after all, the very root of the poem: concealing and revealing. In the darkness of his nightmare, Whitman correlates his sexuality with the interior eye of his mind that has the power to "pierce" the darkness of a veiled and antithetical existence and to reconcile the antipodes. "The Sleepers" is Whitman's eye that penetrates without fear into the vicissitudes of man's life, life that, on earth/waking state, is limited by space and time. "The Sleepers" is a cornerstone in Whitman's literary career because it paves the way to understanding, forgiving, and accepting the difference, a way continued by poets to come, poets that have suffered, as Whitman has, because of their sexual inclinations that contradict the social taboos. The poem epitomizes the dark night of a soul that, through unusual experiences, will achieve the jubilant vision at the end of the poem when all the polarities are harmoniously orchestrated into a hymn dedicated to Mother Nature, healer of wounds and scars. It is an exotic experience that signifies a therapeutic process so much needed by Whitman in order to integrate himself in a society that refuses to accept and welcome the difference.

Résumé de synthèse

Poète homosexuel, à la recherche d'une libération complète, loin de toutes les normes imposées par une société ségrégationniste, Whitman nous offre "The Sleepers", un poème qui séduit le monde dès sa publication en 1855. Ouvert aux interprétations les plus diverses et aux discussions les plus audacieuses, "The Sleepers" représente un mystère pour les critiques qui tentent de trouver une ligne directrice dans ses nombreux fragments. En effet, à priori, cette oeuvre primordiale de l'auteur semble poser une série de questions sans réponses quoiqu'elle positionne en même temps le poète qui cherche son inspiration à la source douloureuse de ses expériences nocturnes personnelles.

Le présent essai démontrera que, refusant l'emprisonnement d'une société qui rejette la différence, Whitman, dont l'homosexualité influence de façon significative le développement de sa personnalité poétique, essaie de trouver la liberté d'être. En effet, partant du monde mystérieux de ses rêves, qu'il transforme en un instrument poétique proliférant d'images, un symbole de sa force poétique où tout est possible, un royaume attrayant, illimité, où il peut accélérer le temps et varier l'espace, l'auteur exprime son agitation intérieure, ses tensions, ses doutes et son effort d'unir et de fondre toutes ses contradictions pour leur donner, dans son imagination, la liberté d'action. Croyant aux pouvoirs curatifs du sommeil, Whitman plonge dans cet univers onirique qu'il décrit comme étant rempli de lumière, de santé, d'harmonie et de bonheur. Bref, présageant la théorie des rêves de Freud et le mouvement surréaliste dans l'art et la littérature, Whitman utilise le rêve dans lequel il peut exprimer ses émotions, ses pensées et dévoiler sa sexualité pour soigner le monde et soi-même tout en informant le public de ses inclinations sexuelles incomprises.

Nous verrons que Whitman, bien qu'il se détourne du discours traditionnel qui rejette la différence, va redresser son âme tourmentée après être tombé dans un gouffre de peurs et de doutes. Ce flâneur rebelle, défenseur des oppressés, des déshérités, des esclaves, des femmes

et des adolescents - tous coupables aux yeux de la société - va comprendre ainsi la nécessité d'un dialogue avec les autres, un dialogue ouvert qui l'aidera à trouver son chemin moral et spirituel. Whitman sait désormais que l'homme est gouverné par deux forces majeures, le bien et le mal, et que ces deux forces opposées luttent en tout temps mais toujours dans le but de progresser. Il sait dorénavant qu'il ne peut effacer les contradictions existant dans le monde (ce serait impossible et futile) mais il croit néanmoins possible d'équilibrer les antithèses et de les intégrer au cycle de la vie, de la matière et de l'univers. Cette intégration dans l'équilibre et l'harmonie représente pour lui le seul critère possible permettant d'acquérir la quiétude de l'âme. N'étant plus aliéné, Whitman va donc unir l'universel et le particulier et établir ainsi, dans cette équation fondamentale, un équilibre dans l'univers cosmique et dans son âme.

Dans ce poème lunaire, ayant sa propre mythologie où la lumière et l'obscurité coexistent, où l'invisible peut devenir visible et le visible invisible, Whitman parvient donc à unir sa sexualité à sa pensée, les deux pénétrant dans la nuit d'une existence voilée où les différences se réconcilient. C'est finalement sans peur qu'il affrontera les vicissitudes de l'homme dans un temps et un espace limité par sa vie terrestre. "The Sleepers" devient alors l'instrument qui nivelle le chemin vers la compréhension et l'acceptation des différences, un chemin qui sera poursuivi par les poètes de l'avenir qui souffriront eux-mêmes de leur propre homosexualité.

Malgré ses apparences chaotiques, le poème de Whitman fait preuve d'une structuration organisée et soignée. En effet, l'unité organique de l'oeuvre est basée sur une association d'idées, une suite de pensées et de rôles accomplis par Whitman et/ou son "moi". D'ailleurs, l'ossature flexible de "The Sleepers", convenant tout à fait à "La Révolution du Langage Poétique" de Julia Kristerva, provient du fait qu'elle est construite sur des antagonistes interdépendants. Le présent essai ne propose donc pas "The Sleepers" comme le voyage du poète dans le chaos mais plutôt comme le trajet conscient qui mène Whitman à la recherche de sa propre identité, à la révélation finale de "where my feet stand" et enfin à l'harmonie et à l'équilibre tant recherchés!

Toutefois, c'est effectivement et seulement en maintenant ensemble tous les fragments du poème que nous pouvons véritablement comprendre Whitman. Car c'est en exprimant sa fantaisie nocturne, ce qui lui permet de vivre dans l'imaginaire, aux dépens de son impulsion de sexualité et de mort, que Whitman révèle finalement tout son symbolisme. Symbolisme qui n'est plus un masque, au contraire, puisqu'il indique sa vérité plus qu'il ne la cache.

Nous démontrerons donc, dans cet essai, que cette pénible et étrange quête de la vérité aboutit finalement à la lumière grâce à la puissance magique d'un chaman prêt à guérir les maux d'une société bigote et préjudiciable et que "The Sleepers" est un éloge à l'amour, à l'acceptation et à la tolérance de l'autre, un hymne à Mère Nature qui cicatrise les blessures.

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Introduction

In 1855, Whitman published the first of many editions of *Leaves of Grass,* a volume of twelve untitled poems preceded by a long preface and written in a new kind of versification different from the traditional poetry of the time. Praising the beauty of the human body and glorifying the senses, Whitman's poems shocked the American reader who, unprepared for his bold images, could not absorb him and his poetry during his time. The twelve poems were considered an assault on poetry, religion, body and soul, and life. They generated an unbridgeable gap between the poet and his prudish reader.

The historian Carrol Smith-Rosenberg argues that, in the 1850s and 1860s, American bourgeois culture knew a period of maturation. Smith underlines that the adolescents of Jacksonian America may be divided into two distinctive groups: the rural young man and the urban one. The rural fathers would guide the adolescent past his sexual desires and would instill in the youngster a safe maturity of self-control. The urban adolescent lacked family stability and would become both threatened by and threatening to the bourgeois America. It is during this period of time that Whitman produced his freshest and boldest poetry. Whitman and his poetic works may be perceived both as a menace to the structure of society and as a victim of it. In a society dominated by an ideal male figure whose sexual and physical productivity is praised, Whitman creates, in his poems, a world of friendship and love based on sexual nonproductivity.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the healthy American was characterized as white, heterosexual, energetic, and aggressively phallic. Given the circumstances of the era when the homosexual, the masturbator, the hysterical woman were considered unnatural, it would have been quite difficult for Whitman to discuss his sexual desires publicly. Under no circumstances could he have said that his longings were homosexual. Nevertheless, in a male dominated heterosexual society, Walt Whitman, the poet of the body and its polymorphous pleasures, found the inner resources and had the undaunted courage to treat sexuality overtly. Whitman celebrated the body and the soul, the physical and spiritual world. Wrapped up in his cosmic consciousness, Whitman transported his readers into a new world of friendship and love, a world in which he could enter into platonic relations with members of the same sex.

Because of Whitman's novel and modern style, biographers and scholars have always attempted to explain the mystery of this extraordinary man who, unexpectedly revealed himself as a poetic genius. Some have thought that Whitman was aroused by his own psychological and sexual frustrations; some others have been inclined to believe that a mystical experience or experiences made him a prophet and a poet. It has also been said that had Whitman enjoyed a normal sexual life, he would never have become the greatest American poet of the nineteenth century. Asselineau argues that, "The genesis of *Leaves of Grass* is [still] an insoluble problem" (*The Evolution of Walt Whitman,* 2). Nothing in the life of the poet justifies the sudden blossoming of such a masterpiece. However, no matter what Whitman experienced or felt because of his sexual orientation and frustration, the birth of a genius is always something of a miracle. The poet of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass,* undoubtedly, experienced a profound turbulence from which sexual images were translated into symbols of love uniting the personal with the universal. "To leaf through them [Whitman's notebooks], deciphering the large curves of Whitman's handwriting, is to examine the fossil remains of an unexampled upheaval, one of the puzzles of American literature: the emerging with no apparent preliminaries, of a poet" (Zweig, *The Making of a Poet,* 176).

The dynamic force of Whitman's poetry springs from sensuous pleasures as an integral part of the earthly human existence and never separated from the spirit. Whitman does not try to control the desires of the body but aims at realizing himself with the whole being, body and soul. Contrary to most traditional poetry, Whitman's verse is an active interplay of physical and spiritual energies in harmony with a universe in action where everything is connected to everything else.The twelve untitled poems of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, hardly separated from one another, are naturally flowing with the endless rhythm of a river that tries innumerable ways of liberation and advances steadily to a cosmic ocean.

Aggressively innovative in his approach to literary form and profoundly radical in examining critically not only himself but the entire society of his time, Whitman offers the reader a powerful and important work in his search of freedom of expression. By breaking down the barriers, Whitman identifies himself with the marginalized voices of America. Whitman tries to define a model person who can heal the social and physical diseases of the nineteenth century America. In "The Sleepers," a poem full of mobility, moving from one topic to another, Whitman attempts to set up a democratic economy of the body and soul. In the process, the poet, emphatically modern, detaches himself from what Bakhtin calls the poetic genre "in the narrow sense" (285) and establishes a new relationship between his language and the language of the masses, a relationship that "could never be foreign to a historically existent poet, as a human being surrounded by living hetero- and polyglossia; but this relationship could not find a place in the *poetic style* of his work without destroying that style, without transposing it into a prosaic key and in the process turning the poet into a writer of prose" (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* 285).

The longest and generally considered the best, later to become "Song of Myself," the first untitled poem is a vision of a symbolic "I" enraptured by senses and vicariously embracing all people and places in a universe flooded by light and optimism. In "Song of Myself," Whitman premiers his physical identity as Walt Whitman, a solar man and lover, a "kosmos" in himself. The poet introduces a new speaking subject whose constantly growing and expanding ego is never satisfied, never self sufficient, but always in search of attaining cosmic proportions. That Whitman's "I" is the poet himself or his persona appears difficult to determine, though in "Song of Myself" he loudly declares, "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son" (l.497). However, Whitman's "I" epitomizes a universal self in which fear, desire, anxiety, doubt, frustration, and love are feelings that animate every man's life. In "Song of Myself,"Whitman's optimism leads him to a denial of evil. His "I," that contains multitudes, becomes a spiritual healer minimizing the power of evil in the world. For more than a century, scholars have heaped contempt upon Whitman for ignoring or at least minimizing the existence of evil. But evil is present almost everywhere in his poems. Whitman's position toward the notion of evil is only different. For Whitman, evil implies the absence of relationships or love. Man's horror springs from his loneliness in an indifferent universe. Whitman will connect heaven and joy with a universe ruled by love and hell and agony with absence of love. Apart from "Song of Myself," most of his poems have a negative center always framed by optimistic images that have a recuperative vigor. This curative strategy is particularly visible in the fourth untitled poem, later to become "The Sleepers."

Known as "Night-Poem" in 1856 and "Sleep-Chasing" in the 1860 and 1867 editions, "The Sleepers" acquires its final title in the 1871 edition. In the 1855 and 1856 editions, the poem has no stanzas or section numbers. Stanzas appeared in the 1860 edition and, in the editions of 1867 and 1871, both stanzas and section numbers were included. Whitman not only revised the poem as it passed from one edition to another but also modified its punctuation, added a line and a word, introduced commas, and even excised two exquisite lyrics: "O Hot Cheek'd and Blushing" and "Now Lucifer Was Not Dead." Scholars have explained that Whitman deleted these two segments to accommodate his critics, publishers, and Puritanical readers.

In "The Sleepers," the "dark twin of 'Song of Myself" (Zweig, 245), Whitman, under the protection of a dream experienced through surrogate identities, dares to advance toward those savage, guilt-haunted regions of the mind. In "The Sleepers," "the drama of cosmic identification [witnessed in "Song of Myself"] is followed by that of self-extrication" (Chari, *Whitman in the Vedantic Light,* 111). "The Sleepers," one of Whitman's most complex and rewarding poems, proves his deep insight into the unconscious dream-world in order to define the dark side of human condition. "The Sleepers" is Whitman's voyage into the darkness, and in the process, he discovers and confesses his sexual identity. In a period of time of hiding and concealing and, in a society ruled by homophobia, Whitman emphasizes the emergence of new sexual categories that upset the established social taboos. In *Walt Whitman's Blue Book,* Arthur Golden emphasizes that the poem expresses Whitman's insistence on a psychological and spiritual love unsoiled by bourgeois conventions. In "The Sleepers," "Whitman's fluid and productive performances of gender and their relation to the national imagery" (Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet,* 13) have appropriated his sexual politics to speak for identities that even he could not have anticipated.

In "Song of Myself," Whitman writes, "I contain multitudes" and "I am afoot with my vision." These two lines, centered and optimistic, describe a well-defined direction of a confident "I." In "The Sleepers," we read, "I wander all night in my vision" and "I become the other dreamers." They underline Whitman's indirection and confusion waiting to be solved. This oscillation between confidence and direction and indirection and doubt will lead Whitman through his nocturnal journey in order to define his sexual proclivity: his homosexuality seen as "the source of sometimes anguished but ultimately triumphant poetic passages written in defiance of a prudish and homophobic society" (Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America,* 198). It is this dichotomy within Whitman, the man and the poet, that triggers the urgency of writing a confession in the form of a poem: "The Sleepers."

Dream, mystical vision, or Whitman's creative imagination, "The Sleepers" is another visionary flight of Whitman's, a flight not into chaos but toward self-definition, self-discovery, and self-revealing in his life long quest to find out "where my feet stand." "The Sleepers" is far from being what Lawrence called Whitman's fantasia of the unconscious. The poem is a consciously rendered dream in which the hero, who has the power to absorb numerous personae, speaks for the oppressed, the socially deprived, the slave, the woman, the guilty adolescent. Such a hero, speaking for the other, leaves behind the conventional discourse and reveals a new discourse based on a representation of bodily forces that overwhelm the rational, self-defensive methods of the traditional writing.

"The Sleepers," the only surrealist poem in nineteenth century American poetry, anticipates Freud's theory of dreams and the surrealist movement in art and literature. Whitman's distrust of rationalism and formal conventions compels him to explore, in "The Sleepers," the world of the unconscious and the dream. In "The Sleepers," Whitman stresses the role of the unconscious in creative activity. Whitman employs the psychic unconscious in an orderly and serious manner. Though the poem consists of compressed segments apparently disconnected, these segments are unified by the relation they establish: they impress. Their free flow creates a rapport with the subconscious mind of the reader. Heterogeneous images that originate chaos, disorientation, and loss but also images of love, friendship, and admiration follow one another at cosmic celerity. They express emotions at a level of intensity which is rarely reached in the ordinary routine. The blurred and ghostlike images ("the wretched features of ennuyees, the white features of corpses, the livid faces of drunkards, the sick-gray faces of onanists") and the dream-like atmosphere of the poem ("The earth recedes from me into the night") convey, from the outset, violent, uncontrolled emotions that break accepted rules and personal behaviour in order to liberate their inner sense of truth. Ambiguous images, scenes of revolt, dream perspectives, and pervasive sexual organs increase the symbolic force of the poem and add suggestions never indicated directly but always deliberately oblique. Like a painting by the Russian Chagall, the Spanish Picasso, or the Catalan Dali, "The Sleepers" appears an opaque composition surrendered to the dark forces of the unconscious. Yet, if we move rapidly from one fragment to another, we understand that Whitman carries the reader toward an astonishing quest for truth.

The most startling dream in American literature, "The Sleepers" is Whitman's revelation of reality through the freest possible activity of the unconscious. Richard Bucke, Whitman's friend and biographer, described the poem as, "a representation of the mind during sleep of connected, half-connected, and disconnected thoughts and feelings as they occur in dreams, some commonplace, some weird, some voluptuous, and all given with the true and strange emotional accompaniments that belong to them. Sometimes (and these are the most astonishing parts of the poem) the vague emotions, without thought, that occasionally arise in sleep, are given as they actually occur, apart from any idea - the words having in the intellectual sense no meaning, but arousing, as music does, the state of feeling intended" (Norton, 425).

One of the most controversial poems in Whitman's poetic corpus, "The Sleepers" has known a plethora of readings that help us penetrate into Whitman's poetic imagination at its best form of expression. Scholars have attempted to define and understand what Whitman discovers during his nightly journey into the dream world. It has been said that "The Sleepers" has not received the attention it deserves. However, since its publication in 1855, "The Sleepers" has never been neglected. For Whitman's contemporaries, his nocturnal flight and vision was considered a useful poetic device. The poem was placed within the trend of the time that loved the theme of redemption in darkness. The poem was seen as the vision of a mystic who wrote it under the influence of harmonialism, spiritualism, and mesmerism. Whitman himself admitted in his notebook that he could imagine himself in a trance with all his senses alert. "The Sleepers" is, thus, Whitman's mental voyage to distant times and places, a voyage John Burroughs remarks he and many others could not understand. An early review of the poem underlines that "The Sleepers" is Whitman's running toward an impossible to penetrate or solve dilemma. First critics concentrated on the mystical coat of the poem and felt satisfied with Whitman's religious experience and vision. But Whitman was not a mystic in the literal meaning of the word. He was only a person hypersensitive to the wonders and the spirituality of matter and soul and celebrated them both in his controversial poetry.

With the rise of Freudianism, the mystical reading of "The Sleepers" was replaced with the erotic, sexual, and psychological implications to be found in the poem, though we can never exclude mysticism or mystical experiences from it. Chari, who has interpreted Whitman's poetry in the light of Vedantic mysticism, emphasizes that "The Sleepers" is centered toward the theme of intuitive identification. Freudian scholars contemplate Whitman as Oedipal father-hater, mother-lover, or/and homosexual and reject Whitman's image as a religious seer from the poem.

Since Holloway argued that "The Sleepers" represented the core of Whitman's poetic creativity, the poem has become so well known that it is, today, considered second to "Song of Myself." "The Sleepers" is filled with a personal, almost private symbolism that is given public dimensions. In the post-Freudian era, "The Sleepers," introducing the reader into an esoteric world, is interpreted as dealing with the mysterious world of the unconscious. Justin Kaplan defines it as "a prolonged out-of-the-body experience" (*Walt Whitman,* 190). "The Sleepers" brings in both personal and impersonal worlds, real and imaginative powers, and anticipates "James Joyce's interior monologue-stream-of-consciousness style" (Knapp, *Walt Whitman,* 227). Conveying the poet's frank sexuality and his uninhibited delight in psychological and spiritual love, "The Sleepers" is seen today as Whitman's transcendental, mystic, sexual, psychical, and physical experience that unites the body and the soul in one organic whole. The poem is seen as Whitman's imaginary flight to cure himself and a bigoted society. Defined as such, the poem becomes of interest to the psychological investigator.

Richard Chase maintains that the poem stands for the activity of the mind as the way in which the poetic imagination is achieved. Fred Carlisle describes the poem as a dream vision or a psychological journey in which Whitman penetrates a realm of existence, both within himself and in the world, that transcends time and space and finite limits. Malcolm Cowley regards the segments of the poem as coming and going like the waves of the ocean. Allen and Davis speak of "The Sleepers" as consisting of spatially arranged fragments rather than logically arranged ones. Some critics have argued that, in the poem, there is a certain movement-action but there is no form. Pearce sees in "The Sleepers" intense and personal feelings experienced only in the mind of the poet. Allen describes the poem as the most successfully motivated and the most interesting, psychologically speaking. He explains that Whitman achieves both poetic and mystic unity by projecting himself like a spirit among the sleepers of all lands in his attempt to heal and soothe each in turn. All modern critics agree that "The Sleepers" reveals Whitman's sex psychology. Schyberg sees in it adolescent eroticism and E. H. Miller describes it as a re-enactment of ancient puberty rites. James Miller presents "The Sleepers" as being focused on the identity of the poet, identity that is more spiritual that physical. He argues that the poem is a mystical experience conceived in Whitman's imagination and presented dramatically with Whitman assuming different roles. However, a thorough reading of the poem demonstrates that "The Sleepers," set at the border line between conscious and unconscious, shows a new poet that is totally liberated from the restrictions and divisions imposed by social institutions he himself despised. "The Sleepers" becomes Whitman's unique response to the total liberation of the human body and mind.

Another aspect, considering the reception of the poem, is closely connected to its seemingly chaotic form. Most critics have focused their attention on discovering a traditional unity within the poem that might offer the reader a guide to its understanding. They have ignored the fact that Whitman conceived "The Sleepers" as a disorganized structure on purpose and that the poem follows the "pattern" of a dream intuitively fathomed by Whitman and scientifically explained by Freud. They have concentrated on discussing certain fragments, seen as more important than others, disregarding the fact that Whitman imagined his poem as a well-organized whole that could not be divided. James Miller argues that Whitman's nocturnal flight stands for the world of spirituality and the sleep represents the release of the soul in death. Edwin Haviland Miller and Stephen Black look at the poem from a psychological point of view; they both present "The Sleepers" as Whitman's unsolved oedipus conflict. Miller and Black regard the poem as Whitman's departure from normal sexuality. They ignore the fact that normal sexuality has more than one heterosexual pattern. Erkkila emphasizes only the social, political, and historical implications of the poem. She states that Whitman or his persona penetrates not only in the unconscious of his mind but also into "a political unconscious of the nation" (*Whitman the Political Poet,* 120). Erkkila will concentrate her attention on certain fragments with political flavor such as Washington, the Indian squaw, or the deleted Lucifer segment. On the other hand, Killingsworth stresses that the unity of the poem is obtained by what it is called sexual politics that affects the way we think of ourselves in relation with the other. Martin interprets the poem as an expression of Whitman's homosexual feelings and underlines the importance of Whitman's sexual proclivity in shaping the poet's career. This essay will use the existing readings of "The Sleepers" and will attempt to demonstrate that this seemingly chaotic poem rich in profound ideas is organically unified. Its organic unity is based on association of thoughts, trains of thoughts, the roles performed by the poet, and images reiterated at a superior level of understanding and perception. Regarded only as a dream poem, as a chaotic structure, or from one point of view, "The Sleepers" loses its powerful messages. My essay presents the poem not only as a vision but as a quest for truth and a shaman's performance.

As a dream poem, "The Sleepers" fits Freud's epochal work *The Interpretation of Dreams*. For Freud, dreams are symbolic fulfillments of unconscious wishes. They appear in symbolic form because otherwise they are shocking and disturbing enough to wake us up. Freud argues that, during our sleep, various images emerge in a hypnotic whirl, most of the time disconnected or with no apparent connection. Freud explains that a dream consists of the dream thought that triggers the dream and the dream content, submitted to the phenomena of the dream work, that is the dream itself. The dream thought is carefully concealed within the dream content. The dream thought and the dream content are the same but they appear in two different languages. The dream content appears as a translation of the dream thought into another mode of expression. The dream content is laconic, concentrated, and full of symbols that must be rephrased into the language of the dream thought. The images of the dream content are so distorted that even the dreamer finds it difficult to understand. Following Freud's theory of dreams, we may assume that "The Sleepers" is the dream content that hides the dream thought within its fragmentary aspect. This essay is the interpretation of a condensed dream; it tries to put the pieces of the puzzle-picture together and to reveal the richness of ideas enclosed in the dream thought. Like any dream, the poem must not be regarded en-masse but analyzed fragment by fragment. If we look at "The Sleepers" en-masse, the interpretation of the poem will not work. If we study "The Sleepers" closely and systematically, we will understand not only what Whitman is doing or saying but why.

In his dream, Whitman will embark upon a long voyage to discover his identity. The poem becomes, from the very first line, a quest for truth: "I wander all night in my vision." As a quest for truth, "The Sleepers" is built on what Kristeva defines as the interrelation of contraries. "The Sleepers" is a fragmentary poem with a very flexible pattern based on opposite pairs that do not exclude each other but are interdependent. It is this interdependence of contraries that confers on the poem its organic unity. "The Sleepers" introduces a dreamer/quester who wanders without direction, lost and confused, during a nocturnal journey of painful experiences. On his way, the quester finds contradictory elements that are interrelated. They create a circular path which merely returns to the point of departure, the point that originated the quest.This point is never static but turning and the circular movement of integration becomes a spiral movement of understanding. The poem starts with "I," lost, confused, ill-assorted, and contradictory and ends with "I," this time, "well brought forward" and confident. The new "I" who, for a while, has found release in the dream world will go well prepared in the day light world of contradictions and denials. Finding his direction during the nightly flight, the "I" is ready to accept and face the world of light. The poem starts with the verb "sleep" and ends with the verb "come home." Returning to the point of departure does not mean withdrawal but progress. Coming home signifies that the quester has reached the level of accepting reality, a level where the antipodal forces that generated the quest are balanced and reconciled. During the quest, the questing individual participates in different experiences which are introduced into the written text. To the phenomena of displacement and transference, characteristic to the dream work, Kristeva introduces the phenomenon of transposition or inter-textuality. It is the passage of the sign from one system to another: from the narrative (what Whitman sees in his dream) to the written text or from a carnival scene ("a gay gang of blackguards! with mirth-shouting music and wild-flapping pennants of joy!") to the same written text. Formerly understood in the sense of study of sources, inter-textuality has a historical, cultural, political, and social import directly associated with the background that shaped the artist's personality. Kristeva, following Bakhtin's theoretical concepts, explains that the enunciation and its denoted object are never singular, complete, or identical to themselves. They are always plural and capable of being arranged and rearranged. Bakhtin argues that the word, which might have had only one meaning in Adam's time, directed to its object, enters a dialogically agitated environment in which it establishes new relations. This way, the word shapes its discourse. It complicates its expression, creates a new stylistic profile, breaks through its own meaning, shapes its style and tone, and shapes a new concept of its own. In the traditional discourse, the word acknowledges only itself and its object. Bakhtin underlines that a living word never relates to its object in a singular way. The relation established between the word and its object becomes elastic, easily altered and influenced, and opened to interpretations connected to a historical moment in a socially specific environment. If we follow Bakhtin's and Kristeva's theoretical concepts closely, we realize that Whitman's "The Sleepers" becomes an active participant in social dialogue. A thorough reading of Freud, Bakhtin, and Kristeva directs anyone to the conclusion that this seemingly disconnected poem is not grounded in confusion but in great art. Key lines and suggestive images create a new and significant artistic potential in "The Sleepers." "I wander all night in my vision," "I become the other dreamers," "I am a dance," "I am the everlaughing," "I am she," "I fade away" bind the poem together. The interaction between darkness (background and participant in the action of the poem), hand (caressing, helping, touching, fighting), water (flowing and making all contradictions more malleable), and sensual scenes (experienced or imagined) prove that Whitman writes, consciously, a night fantasy that allows him to depart from the traditional discourse that has its communicative limits and to turn to a new discourse that breaks all the existing boundaries.

In his vision, Whitman dwells in the imaginary at the expense of his drives: sexual and death. It is in this phantasmagoric world that Whitman begins his painful quest for truth, breaks through the symbolic, becomes the other, wears different masks that reveal more than conceal, and emerges to light and salvation with the powers of a shaman who can cure and restore the wounds inflicted by the day light world of social constraints. Only in the dream world could Whitman pursue his quest for what is missing: his sexual identity or, to quote Whitman, "where my feet stand."

"The Sleepers," in its intricate form, sends the reader three subtle messages.The general message would be the social background against which Whitman establishes his nocturnal flight. The second one may be defined as the emotional message. It announces Whitman's sexual experiences and his response to the visceral forces that originated the poem. The last message would be loudly vocative. Whitman has retrieved his direction, discovers "where my feet stand," returns to his cumulative catalogues, and is free to concentrate on the shamanistic process of healing. The final invocation attempts to alert the reader to realize the unknown aspects and forces inherent within every human being. These messages are consciously delivered in the form of a fragmentary poem that follows the pattern of a dream. The messages are brought forth spontaneously by Whitman's poetic creativity. "The Sleepers" disregards the traditional norms of writing and the ability of the reader to receive Whitman's messages logically.

My essay suggests a close reading of "The Sleepers" and attempts to prove Whitman's minute organization of the material that consciously follows the circular path of a quest for truth. The theory, integrated in the essay, makes everyone aware of the unity and mutual interrelation of all characters and events within the poem. The fragments must be regarded as interdependent and inseparable parts of a whole. The basic oneness of the poem cannot be understood as isolated segments, but only as integrated parts of an entirety. Whitman's real mastery rests upon his spontaneous expression. His new poetic technique transcends the traditional patterns of poetry and grows out of his poetic imagination. Defying the codes of his time, Whitman sets up a new, rebellious, and revolutionary poetry in his attempt to have a great impact on human culture and "above all else to affect profoundly the thinking of his own and succeeding generations" (Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook,* 236).

"The Sleepers": A Fantasia of the Unconscious or a Consciously Rendered Dream?

Part 1: Dream and Quest

The most startling dream in American literature, "The Sleepers" is Whitman's painful night vision at odds with the life-affirming "Song of Myself." These two poems, the former sunlit, conscious, and public, and the latter nocturnal, secret, and private, seem totally different, but at a close reading, they supplement each other. They are meant to be read together because what Whitman started in "Song of Myself" could not be understood without "The Sleepers." "The Sleepers" is a poem that offers us the necessary key to Whitman's poetic corpus.

Although, superficially speaking, most of Whitman's great poems are disorganized structures, "The Sleepers" may be characterized as the most chaotic of all. However, if we follow Kristeva's theoretical concepts and if we regard the poem as a progression of contraries and contradictory moods within Whitman, "The Sleepers" clearly reveals not only what Whitman is doing or saying but why. Autobiographical in essence, "the poem discloses the joys and sufferings of a sensitive young man whose sexual proclivities become increasingly clear during his visionary expedition" (Knapp, *Walt Whitman,* 196). But, to define "The Sleepers" merely as a confession of Whitman's homosexuality would mean to downgrade the profound messages to be found at the core of the poem. We cannot call Whitman a homosexual in the definitional meaning of the word without altering the truth about the poet. His sexual orientation goes far beyond the idea of sex. His sexual emotions defy discriminations of gender and race and break through conventional traditions and boundaries.

In a society ruled by homophobia and racism, Whitman could not have expressed his feelings, frustrations, and anxieties freely. Long before Freud, Whitman becomes fascinated with the dream world, various and unified at the same time, a world in which imagination roams without restraint. In "The Sleepers," under the protection of a dream, Whitman finds the resources to confront the horrors that the waking state could not possibly look in the face.

Sleep and dream are fully unfolded in "The Sleepers," a poem in which the nightly act of sleeping is imagined as relieving all kinds of social and psychological ills. The poem cannot be be defined as a dream only. It is also a quest for truth, a shaman performance, and a hymn dedicated to the night that has the power to soothe the wounds inflicted by the day light reality of social constraints and to reconcile the polarities of the waking state.

In "Song of Myself," Whitman is journeying toward the sun. In the process, he realizes that ascent to light and salvation is not possible without descent. Instead of continuing his flight upward, Whitman plunges into the night of his discontentment to search for and reconcile the contradictions within himself and between himself and society. "The Sleepers" fuses a vision of pain, isolation, and death with peace, unity, and life. At the end of his nocturnal vision, Whitman or his persona emerges to light "well brought forward" and ready to integrate into the stream of life. Conceived as a progression of contraries within Whitman's familiar "I," this seemingly disconnected poem proves not to be grounded in chaos but in Whitman's great art.

"The Sleepers" opens on a note of diminished confidence.

> I wander all night in my vision,
> Stepping with light feet . . . . swiftly and noiselessly stepping and stopping,
> Bending with open eyes over the shut eyes of sleepers;
> Wandering and confused . . . . lost to myself . . . . ill-assorted . . . .
>   contradictory,
> Pausing and gazing and bending and stopping.

The first line introduces the reader into Whitman's favorite device: the open road. From the outset, "The Sleepers" becomes Whitman's aesthetic journey into the night of his ordeals in which the dream is constantly associated with the human condition. Whitman's "I," "lost" "confused," and "contradictory," is in a transitional state, from waking to sleeping or from day to night, and tries to find a personal center for his self who is moving without direction. He is caught up in his own confusion. This nocturnal indirection does not imply impotence; on the contrary, it generates a contradictory force that impels Whitman to fight against his own stasis. Although the verbs that describe Whitman's quiet wandering: pausing, bending, stopping, express lack of motion, their grammatical form (present participle) indicates the poet's progress through the night in order to gather information about the contradictions in the world. During his noiseless roaming, he turns his attention to those who sleep. Observing, "How solemn they look there, stretched and still;/How quiet they breathe, the little children in their cradles" (*LG* 1855, 107), Whitman realizes how powerful the night is, how easily it levels them all, "the little children," and how it makes them all look equal when they sleep.

The action of looking at the sleepers, instead of bringing in peace, generates opposing feelings because Whitman sees the misery that rules the world.

> The wretched features of ennuyees, the white features of corpses, the livid
> faces of drunkards, the sick gray faces of onanists,
> The gashed bodies on battlefields, the insane in their strong-doored rooms, the
> sacred idiots,
> The newborn emerging from gates and the dying emerging from gates,
> The night pervades them and enfolds them. (*LG* 1855, 107)

The first catalogue of the poem, unusually brief for Whitman, covers disturbing aspects of American society. He does not accuse the sleepers whose life is hell, but the bigoted society that imposes its rigid norms and pushes its members to the margins. They are dead soldiers spread over battlefields, the insane who cannot integrate in the social order, the innocent idiots who live on the borders of the "symbolic." These images of degeneration, death, and isolation are enough to destroy Whitman's composure. He reduces his catalogue to one line, "The newborn emerging from gates and the dying emerging from gates," which includes all the sleepers on the Earth.

Killingsworth asserts that this powerful line reveals the sleepers' "traumatic separateness or severedness" (*Whitman's Poetry of the Body,* 16). Killingsworth describes it as a dried up current of sympathy between the sleepers. E. H. Miller also sees, in the line, "only the waste of human life, the loneliness of those destined to isolation" (*Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 73). We may add that "The newborn emerging from gates and the dying emerging from gates" underlines not only Whitman's cyclic vision of life but also the cyclic movement of the poem itself. The word "gates" signifies a passage to freedom from the womb and release in the tomb. Death is not seen as an end but as a new beginning, "the dying emerging from gates." "Gates" symbolizes entrance and exit, coming and leaving as well. James Perrin Warren, in "Catching the Sign," writes, "The image of 'gates' recalls the first leaf of 'The Sleepers' notebook, where Whitman asserts that 'the efflux of the soul comes through beautiful gates of laws.' Moreover, the phrasal catalogue enacts the spiritual efflux, for the progression in the catalogue remains half-hidden and cannot be well traced" (*WWQR,* 5:2, 1987. 19). This line creates the future mobility of the poem and gives the poem the characteristics of a journey that is just about to begin. "Emerging from gates" liberates the poet who will embark upon a search for his own identity. He will open gate after gate; he will participate in different experiences behind each gate and will emerge to light and salvation. The second segment of the poem is sealed by a succinct description of the night that approaches, comes nearer, and unites the sleepers.

> The night pervades them and enfolds them.

The new catalogue, by contrast, points out the way to salvation: family security. It features calmness, comfort, quietness, and peace in the sympathetic embrace of love. This stanza also articulates Whitman's own tragedy: his longing for a loving family. E. H. Miller states that Whitman "gave himself an idyllic family life centering in an angelic mother. It diverts attention from the truth: that he was a lonely, unappreciated child who was in deep conflict with his parents" (*Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 9).

> The married couple sleep calmly in their bed, he with his palm on the hip of the
> wife, and she with her palm on the hip of the husband,
> The sisters sleep lovingly side by in their bed,
> The men sleep lovingly side by side in theirs,
> And the mother sleeps with her little child carefully wrapped. (*LG* 1855, 107)

The four-line stanza illustrates an ideal tableau of peace and unity of the assorted pairs: married couple, sisters, friends, mother and child. It also introduces the protective image of "the mother" who caresses and unconditionally accepts all her children without any trace of discrimination or moral evaluation. The gentle figure of "the mother" sleeping "with her little child carefully wrapped" will be replaced, later in the poem, by Whitman's mother, a woman torn by unfulfilled erotic desires. This is a powerful image of a mother as spiritual castrator and, in dreams, it becomes a sign stimulus of considerable force because it brings about nightmares. Whitman never described "the mother" as the subdued housewife. His "mother" is loving indeed, but she is also a contradictory human body, passionate and full of unuttered desires. It is the body of this type of mother/woman that "mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations" (Kristeva, *Revolution,* 27).

The harmonious existence of the assorted pairs sharply contrasts with the sleepers brought forward in the next two fragments. They are those isolated by physical and moral impairment as well as loss and evil.

The blind sleep, and the deaf and dumb sleep,
The prisoner sleeps well in the prison . . . . the runaway son sleeps,
The murderer that is to be hung next day . . . . how does he sleep?
And the murdered person . . . . how does he sleep?

The poem builds its tension, alternating flashes of tranquillity with moments of violent suffering. "The blind sleep" in the darkness of their life; "the deaf and dumb sleep" in the darkness of their simple-minded existence. The stanza reaches an unexpected climax when Whitman, suddenly, asks two brutal questions. They are not answered on purpose because they must increase the provocative aspect of the poem whose roots are in Whitman's dissatisfaction caused by failure of desires, hopes, and expectations.

Faithfully following the same pattern (a four-line stanza), Whitman introduces new images of frustrated desires and social revolt,

The female that loves unrequited sleeps,
And the male that loves unrequited sleeps;
The head of the moneymaker that plotted all day sleeps,
And the enraged and treacherous dispositions sleep. (*LG* 1855, 108)

In a later edition the last line reads, "And the enraged and treacherous dispositions, all, all sleep." By adding only two words, Whitman increases his inner anxiety from an observer to a political agitator. He attempts to use the journalistic language of confrontation to unmask the evil aspects of the American society. The last two lines are a vehement warning against the oppressors involved in morally objectionable schemes while the poor starve. In addition, they acquire the form of a powerful working class discourse that instigates to mass revolt. "Although he shared the concern and language of the radical agitators of the day, he did not go as far as many did in their efforts to overthrow or supplant the American system.

He took only passing interest . . . . in the utopian socialist movement that swept the nation in the forties" (David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America,* 141-142).

So far, Whitman has introduced the reader into what Freud defines as "the facade of the dream" (Freud, *Introductory Lectures 1,* 216). This facade has its "meaning, and reproduces an important component of the latent dream-thoughts with little or no distortion" (Freud, *Introductory Lectures 1,* 216). Distortions will appear in the dream itself due to the dream work: condensation, displacement, transference, identification, and composition. However, we must avoid concluding that the above segments were brought together on purpose. It is too early in the dream and a dream is not a logical narrative. What appears as expressions of judgment, of criticism, or of astonishment may as well be portions of the latent dream-thoughts that have passed over into the manifest dream with a certain amount of modification and adaptation to the context. The latent dream-thoughts, hidden during the dream, are revealed in a distorted manner by the manifest dream. Even if the introductory fragments have a sensible exterior, we have to understand that they have only come about through dream-distortions.

Surrounded by moral and physical misery and tired of what he has witnessed, Whitman prepares himself to fall asleep. In his dream, Whitman will start a visionary quest for truth to find out where his "feet" and the feet of his sleepers stand sexually and morally. The text becomes a metaphor for an identity quest. The opening stanzas describe different sleepers belonging to all social strata. The fragments and the sleepers are unified by the lulling repetition of the verb "sleep." Everyone can sleep, risking temporary death, but the poet. The intensive repetition of the verb "sleep" has miraculous powers inasmuch as the poet becomes so composed that he visualizes himself soothing the moral and physical wounds of his disturbed sleepers. If we consider the position Whitman conferred on "The Sleepers" after 1871, we may assert that the poet is to be identified with the "wound-dresser," so "calm, gentle, at peace with himself and eager to bring the world to peace" (Waskow, *Explorations in Form*, 143).

Gazing over the sleepers that look so vulnerable, the poet, after having assuaged his inner tension, endeavors to heal the alienated sleepers. Energized by his lighthearted mood, the poet assumes the role of a shaman, a role that will become more and more evident as the poem reaches its finale. Killingsworth emphasizes that, at this particular moment, "The poet's function becomes the function of a shaman who in his turn "plays out alternative roles that show others how it is possible to move toward new behavioral and cultural norms. The aim of the shaman is, in Whitman's words, to indicate 'the path between reality and the [people's] souls' (*Preface 1855)*" (*The Growth of Leaves of Grass,* 97).

> I stand with drooping eyes by the worstsufferng and restless,
> I pass my hands soothingly to and fro a few inches from them;
> The restless sink in their beds . . . . they fitfully sleep. (*LG* 1855, 108)

"I pass my hands a few inches from them" is a key line emphasizing the fact that at this moment there is no touching between the poet and his sleepers. As observer, Whitman sees the suffering that rules the world: images of frustration, insanity, perversion, and death parade in front of his eyes and make him understand the hardships involved when compelled to cope with multiple as well as conflictual situations. However, the distance between the poet and the sleepers in not insurmountable. In his desire to help the others, Whitman performs the role of a father confessor whose universal gesture of forgiveness and empathy will alleviate the pains of the "worstsuffering." E. H. Miller, who discusses the poem from Freud's point of view of the family triangle, explains that "The movement of the hand is pivotal in the development of the poem. The hand is directly linked with the three roles the 'I' in 'The Sleepers' will play in his frequent and sexual metamorphoses - mother, father, and adolescent." (*Walt Whitman's*

Poetry, 74). In other words, the hand caresses, blesses, and touches the young body in erotic movements.

The night that started in a phantasmagoria of "corpses," "gashed bodies," "the insane," "the murderer," "the murdered person," "the female" and "the male" that love "unrequited" reveals itself as a resolver of tension. The powers of the night are sustained by the soothing hand of the poet whose affection and care will comfort the agonizing sleep of the unfortunate. Whitman's personal and tremendous care for his human fellows "brings together body and mind unifying them in man" (Kristeva, *Revolution,* 128). Whitman "puts to sleep the elements that corrupt and inhibit" (Whelan,"Do I Contradict myself?" *WWQR,* 10:1, 1992, 28) the natural development of the human body and soul. Kristeva classifies these elements as "abjection," a term that explains how the self tries to expel the unexpellable; but the unexpellable belongs to the self. Whitman knows that these poisonous elements are part of the self. In the self, the good and the bad coexist. The rejection of the bad opens the gate to the good side of the self. When the untamed elements are put to sleep, Whitman's transcendental self that mediates between the sleepers' "faces" and "features" and himself will attempt to merge with the tormented dreamers. The idea of merging with the other leads to "the death of [Whitman's initially disoriented] ego [and] clears the way for union" (Whelan, "Do I Contradict Myself?" 28). This ego has "a real basis in seeing and judging. [S]eeing and judging prove to be at one in positing the transcendental ego, which will posit transcendental intention and intuition" (Kristeva, *Revolution,* 135).

Now that Whitman realizes the restorative power of the night and sleep, he allows himself to sleep and dream. Sleep and dream set Whitman free from the constraints of the day and pave the way to union with the other. The dream within a dream acquires cosmic dimensions. The poet leaves the earth to enter a new realm where the tormented sleepers and all the elements merge. Identifying with the other sleepers, Whitman experiences a moment of ecstasy. In this new state of bliss, Whitman becomes a shaman. "The erotic component of ecstasy answers the special difficulties of people whose desires for sexual fulfillment are frustrated in daily life. Since the shaman's aim is to help the others or to discover solutions to communal problems, ecstatic performances engage the audience directly in the experience of revelation and inspiration." The poem, regarded as such, is, therefore, "culturally unified by the concept of shamanic performance (or healing ceremonies)" (Killingsworth, *The Growth of Leaves of Grass,* 97-98).

> (Now I pierce the darkness, new beings appear,) [added in 1860]
> The earth recedes from me into the night,
> I saw that it was beautiful . . . . and I see that what is not the earth is
> beautiful.
>
> I go from bedside to bedside . . . . I sleep close with the other sleepers, each
> in turn;
> I dream in my dream all the dreams of the other dreamers,
> And I become the other dreamers. (*LG* 1855, 108)

The poem grows in intensity that manifests itself in shifting forms. The initial act of observation gives way to the act of identification. The poet will come into contact with new beings that sleep behind the "faces" and the "features" in the opening lines of the poem. Whitman "pierce(s) the darkness and "the shut eyes" of the sleepers and becomes one of them. Freud explains that identification with the other is used where the dream is concerned with persons and consists in giving representation in the dream-content to one or more persons who are related by some common features. "In the dream this one 'screening' person enters into all relations and situations which derive from the persons whom (the dreamer) screens. [T]he identification or combination of persons serves various purposes in our dreams; in the first place, that of representing a feature common to two persons; secondly, that of representing a displaced common feature; and, thirdly, that of expressing a community of features which is merely wished for. As the wish for a community of features in two persons often coincides with the interchanging of these persons, this relation also is expressed in dreams by identification" (Freud, *Interpretation,* 210 & 212).

The earth becomes part of the past, "I saw that it was beautiful," and when "new beings appear," the poet realizes that "what is not the earth is beautiful." It is a new realm, the world of dreams which allows Whitman to place himself into a new relation with the sleepers. In this new world, as beautiful and complete as the earth, the poet will find the courage to express himself freely. The added line, "Now I pierce the darkness," which is to be linked with many passages in the poem, attains a double meaning: an act of sexual penetration, thus, preparing the reader for the orgasmic moments of the poem and the power of the poet to penetrate into the mind and the heart of his tormented sleepers. This way, Whitman will identify with them so that he will become "the other dreamers." Protected by the night, Whitman experiences a feeling of liberation from the constraints of the day and assuming the role of the other, the poet can reveal his secrets without being afraid. "I become the other dreamers" indicates that Whitman will adopt the voice of the others who are as disturbed and tortured as he is.The poet will multiply his own image. Following his contradictory impulses, he will allow his private life to become public. The poet "enters a dream consciousness that is at once timeless and erotically charged where social and sexual distinctions break down" (Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet,* 118).

The discovery, "I become the other dreamers," is overwhelmingly intoxicating and it does succeed in transforming an "ill-assorted" and "confused" man into someone caught up in the wild, maddening whirlpool of his own imagination. James Perrin Warren asserts that, "By enacting the identification of the poetic self with the sleepers, Whitman gains verbal power over the problems he addresses in the poem" ("Catching the Sign," 20)."I become the other dreamers" offers Whitman the freedom to keep "the distance between his conscience and the dreams he would rather not be responsible for by explaining that they are not even his" (Marki, *The Trial of the Poet*, 237). If the dreams are not his, why do they create such a profound anxiety? We may assume that they have "a greater private significance than that which meets the casual eye" (Marki, *The Trial of the Poet*, 238).

What follows becomes so intricate that the fragments of the poem acquire a plethora of readings. This is what Bakhtin calls an active understanding of the text because it "assimilates the word under consideration into a new conceptual system, that of the one striving to understand, establishes a series of complex interrelationships, consonances and dissonances with the word and enriches it with new elements. It is precisely such an understanding that the speaker counts on" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 282).

> I am a dance . . . . Play up there! the fit is whirling me fast.
> I am the everlaughing . . . . it is new moon and twilight, (*LG* 1855, 108)

"I am a dance" acquires a cosmic movement of momentary obliteration and a detachment from the personal uncertainties only to drive in the divine energy that may gratify the unuttered desires of the poet. A dancer lives in the world of dance and music for a while, achieves glimpses of his mute passions, and dwells in its beauty. Whitman does not become a dancer who must operate within the system of the day. He becomes a dance. Being a dance, Whitman can enjoy its ecstatic, unremitting, everlastingly repetitive, ever revolving movements that remind the reader of the universal cycle of light and dark, day and night, life and death. Kristeva emphasizes that dance, a pre-verbal mode of expression, " exposes the subject to impossible dangers: relinquishing his identity in rhythm, dissolving the buffer of reality in a mobile discontinuity, leaving the shelter of the family, the state or religion. The commotion the practice creates spares nothing: it destroys all constancy to produce another and then destroys that one as well. Although modern texts are the most striking example of this unsatisfied process, equivalents can also be found fairly readily in nonverbal arts that are not necessarily modern. Music and dance, inasmuch as they defy the barrier of meaning, pass through sectors within the signifying process which, though fragmentary (since there is no signified, no language), obey the same lines of force as those induced by the productive device of significance seen in texts" (*Revolution,* 104). Dance, Kristeva explains, creates a semiotic violence that breaks through the symbolic or social order and dissolves the logical order. It becomes the laboratory of theater and poetry.

Laughter also breaks through the symbolic prohibitions. "There is a strange problem in the way laughter works: the ego that laughs through the irruption of the drive charge tearing open the symbolic is not the one that observes and knows. In order to make the irruptive charge pass into discourse so that the addressee may laugh, the instigator of laughter, just like the artist, must bind and rebind the charge" (*Revolution in Poetic Language,*224). Laughter leads to the lifting of the inhibition. "The practice of the text is a kind of laughter whose only explosions are those of language. The pleasure obtained from the lifting of inhibitions is immediately invested in the production of the new. Every practice that produces something new is a practice of laughter: it obeys laughter's logic and provides the subject with laughter's advantages"(*Revolution,* 225).

Becoming a dance and the everlaughing, Whitman prepares us for the carnivalesque atmosphere that will follow. "I am a dance" is a perpetual rhythm of contrary forces emphasizing that Whitman casts "aside the dark dress of American puritanism and Western inhibitions" (Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 72). Whitman "dances like a Dionysian, or one of the 'monsters' in Hawthorne's curiously ambivalent tale of "The Maypole of Merry Mount" (Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 72). "I am a dance" intimates a combination of motion and music, therefore, a combination of the myths of Dionysus, the god dead and resurrected, and Orpheus, the legendary singer that tamed all the evils of the land. Whitman moves his poem into the spiritual state of the uninitiated natural man who sees but does not understand. The uninitiated and questing individual faces a difficult dilemma: how to understand his own mysterious self. This predicament is surmounted by Whitman who is expressing his hidden emotions using various masks. "These masks create around themselves their own special little world, their own chronotope. They carry with them into literature first a vital connection with the theatrical trappings of the public square, with the mask of the public spectacle; they are connected with that highly specific, extremely important area of the square where the common people congregate; second - the very being of these figures does not have a direct, but rather a metaphorical significance. Their very appearances, everything they do and say, cannot be understood in a direct and unmediated way but must be grasped metaphorically. Third and last, their existence is a reflection of some other's mode of being, not a direct reflection. They are life's maskers, their being coincides with their role, and outside this role they simply do not exist" (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 159).

"I become the other dreamers," "I am a dance," and "I am the ever-laughing" confer on Whitman the privilege "to be 'other' in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; [these masks] can exploit any position they choose, but only as a mask. These figures are laughed at by others, and themselves as well. Their laughter bears the stamp of the public square where the folk gather. [E]verything is brought out on to the square, so to speak, their entire function consists in externalizing things (true enough, it is not their own being they externalize, but a reflected, alien being - however, that is all they have). This creates that distinctive means for externalizing a human being, via parodic laughter" (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* 159-160).

"I am a dance" and "I am the ever-laughing" carry the poet toward a union with "the other dreamers." Kristeva finds that dancing and laughing lead to "semiotic violence . . . . This practice is the representation that generally precedes sacrifice; it is the laboratory for, among other things, theater, poetry, song, dance, art. The Dionysian festivals in Greece are the most striking example of the deluge of the signifier, which so inundates the symbolic order that it portents the latter 's dissolution in dancing, singing, and poetic animality" (*Revolution,* 79).

Dancing and laughing "are a perpetual energy in the Self's struggle for union without self-extinction" (Whelan,"Do I Contradict Myself," p. 29). Without losing his identity, Whitman comes closer and closer to the sleepers until they merge. Only by merging with "the other dreamers" can Whitman experience metamorphosis after metamorphosis. "The identifications with the other or suppression of the other that operate in this sort of society produce jubilatory phases and pleasures for the subject who identifies and they thus become 'objects' of his 'desire' " (Kristeva, *Revolution,* 177). Dance and laughter will indicate a loss of control, "The fit is whirling me fast," not loss of identity. Through dance and laughter, "through subtle differences made vocal or semantic in laughter and wordplay" the poet is kept "on the surface of pleasure in a subtle and minute tension"(Kristeva, *Revolution,* 179-180) that will usher in the moment of ecstasy that follows.

Changing his mood abruptly, Whitman emphasizes that his own excitement, confusion, doubts, and chaos are calling out from inside to be clarified and unlocked. It is a moment of rapture when Whitman realizes he becomes not only a healer of the others but the healer of his own wounded and scarred soul. "Liberated from the sexual ban, he is free at last, like Faust, to enjoy the pagan, unchristian pleasures of a Walpurgisnacht" (Knapp, *Walt Whitman,* 198). "I am a dance" and "I am the everlaughing" are more than "Ballroom dancing quickened in the forties by introduction of lively polkas and gallop" (Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America,* 177).

Whitman becomes a "dervish intoxicated by his own dance" (Zweig, *Whitman: The Making of the Poet,* 245), a dance that awakens him sexually.

> I see the hiding of douceurs . . . . I see nimble ghosts whichever way I look,
> Cache and cache again deep in the ground and sea, and where it is neither
> ground or sea. (*LG* 1855, 108)

After having absorbed the sleepers and their dreams, Whitman knows a gratifying sense of surrender and release and he puts to sleep his own fears of death or of a lesser death: sexual intercourse. Dream creatures, phantoms of the universe, appear and disappear from their secret hidden places to reveal to the wanderer their "douceurs" translated into erotic pleasures. Martin emphasizes that "the 'cache' is both the action of hiding and the hiding place; what is hidden is sexuality" that will be addressed unambiguously in the following lines "which continue this section's concern with the motifs of concealment and revelation" (Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition,* 10). Stephen Black asserts that "the hiding douceurs" and "nimble ghosts" are "the infantile fantasies" that are to be found "at the core of the poem" (*Whitman's Journey into Chaos,* 127). An unmistakable initiation into sexual awareness by a knowledgeable companion pervades the passage that follows, a passage that reproduces the "polymorphously perverse" infantile sexuality (Freud, *Introductory Lectures 1,* 246). It is within this a-sexual confusion that Whitman will start his painful search of his own identity.

> Well do they do their jobs, those journeymen divine,
> Only from me can they hide nothing and would not if they could;
> I reckon I am their boss, and they make me a pet besides,
> And surround me, and lead me and run ahead when I walk,
> And lift their cunning covers and signify me with stretched arms, and
> resume the way;
> Onward we move, a gay gang of blackguards with mirthshouting music
> and wildflapping pennants of joy. (*LG* 1855, 108)

The fragment becomes a metaphor for a carnival that, in Kristeva's words, underscores the limits of socially useful discourse and attests to what it represses: the process that exceeds the subject and its communicative structures. The carnival involves the unconscious, subjective, and social relations expressed in gestures of confrontation, destruction, and construction. This productive violence is, then, introduced in the written text.

The "nimble ghosts," phantasmagoric creatures, are converted into "journeymen divine," a "metaphor for the sexual instincts" (Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body,* 17). The hidden "douceurs" are no longer hidden and, miraculously, all contradictions are dispersed. Whitman's incredible cheerfulness is short lived because he is afraid of abandonment. His own fears exhort him to affirm, "And surround me, and lead me and run ahead when I walk." This line attests the unremitting energy in the self's struggle for union without self-extinction.

Afraid of being left alone, but curious to find out what the "cunning covers" conceal, Whitman looks for the merry company of the "journeymen divine." However, once united with the "mirthshouting" gang, the poet wishes to keep intact his identity. The night that started in perplexity acquires "the strange atmosphere of levity which prevails as the covers are lifted and the genitals revealed" (Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition,* 10). The night becomes a journey of self-discovery, union, and initiation into the secrets of sexual life. The sexual images suggest "a description of adolescent awakenings to the sensations of sex" (Gay Wilson Allen, *Walt Whitman Handbook,* 103). E. H. Miller asserts that the passage, and by extension, the whole poem may be regarded as "inexplicable personal and sexual transformations because it evokes vague memories of almost forgotten rites of cultures which provided meaningful communal ceremonies to celebrate the individual's journey to adulthood" (E.H. Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 72).

"The journeymen divine" and the "gay gang of blackguards" symbolize the Orphic and Dionysian rituals of initiation of the young man. The loud music that accompanies the "gang" gives the whole group a deep sense of ceremonious transit from immaturity to adulthood. The Orphic/Dionysian initiators are inciters of the mystic ecstasy and become vehicles of revelation and initiation in the sexual act, act that piques the poet's curiosity. The "journeymen divine" entice the poet with their "stretched arms" inviting him to participate and discover the "douceurs" of intercourse. For a brief moment, Whitman becomes the "boss" of a "gay gang of blackguards" only to be suddenly demoted to their "pet," a position he delightedly accepts due to their protective and seductive gesture - "with stretched arms" - a gesture that reminds us "of a motherly figure or death itself, which is a matriarchal deity, to shield "I" from realities he cannot cope with" (E.M. Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 6).

The "journeymen divine" and "the blackguards" represent the "roughs" Whitman was so fond of because only among them could he feel loved; they were the only ones that could respond to his needs for love. In *Whitman's Poetry of the Body*, Killingsworth explains that at the time when the poem was written, sensual awareness was "associated with 'lower classes.' 'Journeymen divine' signifies members of the working class, but a special breed - skilled, accomplished workers. The term 'blackguard' originally referred to the lowest order of household servants, the keepers of the pots and pans. By the nineteenth century it had become a general term for a user of vulgar and obscene language" (18).

In Whitman's Daybooks and Notebooks, we read, "I think ten million supple-wristed gods are always hiding beauty in the world - burying it every where in every thing - and most of all in spots that men and women do not think of and never look - as Death and Poverty and Wickedness - Cache! and Cache again! all over the earth, and in the heaven that swathe the earth, and in the waters of the sea. - They do their job well; those journeymen divine. Only from the Poet they can hide nothing and they would if they could, - I reckon he is Boss of those Gods, and the work they do is done for him; and all they have concealed for his sake.- Him they attend indoors and outdoors. - They run ahead when he walks, and lift their cunning covers and signify him with pointed stretched arms" (Mishra, "*The Sleepers* and Some Whitman Notes," *WWQR,* 1:1, 1983, 33). The fragment quoted proves how difficult it is for us to interpret Whitman. In reading Whitman there will always be a discrepancy between our understanding Whitman and Whitman's own intentions. It becomes obvious that Whitman emphasizes the divine mission of the poet himself guided by heavenly inspiration. Whitman always entertained the idea of being regarded as a prophet. In the Preface of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass,* he places himself, as poet, among God's chosen people. He writes, "[The poet] is a seer . . . . he is individual . . . . he is complete in himself . . . . the others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not. He is not one of the chorus" (ll.164-166). A little farther, we read that, "[The poet] shall go directly to the creation. His trust shall master the trust of everything he touches . . . . and shall master all attachment. The known universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet" (ll.212-216). In his everlasting struggle with his own contradictions, Whitman found the link between his sexual orientation, creative imagination, and prophetic inspiration. The link is his capacity to love unconditionally not only the earth with its small or big creatures starting with the insignificant "leaf of grass" [to be read ad literam] but the whole universe in which body and soul coexist in harmony. In his notes, Whitman seems to imply that his vision of a world ruled by love comes to him from celestial spheres. They whisper words of love, joy, and friendship. We cannot reduce the segment merely to a sexual awakening. Sexuality is a day-time concept. The passage becomes, in Mishra's words, a hide and seek game, a discovery of life through divine dance and music.

The dream-text acquires a multitude of associations because of the "trains of thoughts which proceed from more than one center, but which are not without points of contact" (Freud, *Interpretation,* 202). The dream content, which is the dream itself, grows out of the dream thought. Integrated in the dream, the dream thought becomes a symbol that must be translated and explained. In a dream, images are so distorted and condensed that, although the dream appears "meagre, paltry and laconic" (Freud, *Interpretation,* 175), the interpretation would reveal the richness of the material hidden in the dream-thought and not always visible in the dream content.

"I am their boss and they make me a pet besides" stresses Whitman's longings for love. These longings emphasize his emotions due to deprivation and fears of isolation. Considering himself the "boss" of the gang, Whitman gains a dominant masculine role abruptly shifted to a feminine role, "a pet." The line may also represent "the interplay of the active and passive aspects of the initiate's character" (Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body*, 18). David Reynolds, in *Walt Whitman's America*, highlights the same idea when he writes, "In early poems like 'Song of Myself' and 'The Sleepers' both sides of his nature merge so tightly that he can seem 'masculine' in one line and 'feminine' in another, though his self-conscious masculine voice presides" (398).

The initiation ritual reaches its climax when Whitman exclaims, "Onward we move, a gay gang of blackguards with mirthshouting music and wildflapping pennants of joy." In the dream-language, "wildflapping pennants of joy" becomes a symbolic representation of the male genitals. "The male organ finds symbolic substitutes in things that resemble it in shape - things, accordingly, that are long and up-standing, such as sticks, umbrellas, posts, trees, and so on" (Freud, *Introductory Lectures 1,* 188). Martin also argues that "The mood of sexual (phallic) arousal is suggested through the use of metaphors, 'the cunning covers' and 'wildflapping pennants of joy" (*The Homosexual Tradition,* 10). "Wildflapping pennants of joy" stands for the phallus which "is not given in the utterance but instead refers outside itself to a precondition that makes enunciation possible" (Kristeva, *Revolution,*47-48).

From the moment when Whitman writes, "I become the other dreamers" to "Onward we move, a gay gang of blackguards," we encounter "a series of hauntingly beautiful if sometimes elusive emotions and symbols" (Chase, *Walt Whitman Reconsidered,* 55) which will help the poet explain to himself "the nature of friendship and the poetic self, to establish a link between his homosexuality and the power and identity as a poet" and to define his "struggle with his own fate as a man and poet" (Mishra, "*The Sleepers* and Some Whitman Notes," 30).

Terrified by what he has just discovered: intercourse with an objective person, Whitman "flees, fearing that abandonment or rejection will result from" any sexual "intimacy" (Black, *Whitman's Journey into Chaos,* 126). Black maintains that Whitman seeks neither heterosexual nor homosexual love "but masturbation, the ecstatic climax of which floods him with an infantile sense of oneness" (*Whitman's Journey into Chaos,* 126). Unlike Black, Martin supports the idea that, when Whitman finds "the pleasure of men together" (*The Homosexual Tradition,* 10), he experiences a curious euphoria that makes possible the dissolution of his ego into pulverized atoms that are to be found in every human being. Surrounded by the "gay gang of blackguards," Whitman experiences a momentary happiness that allows him to pass from one identity to another. "The world of sorrow" is suddenly turned into "one of festivity" (Knapp, *Walt Whitman,* 199) and Whitman, intoxicated and elated, exclaims:

> I am the actor and the actress . . . . the voter . . the politician,
> The emigrant and the exile . . the criminal that stood in the box,
> He who has been famous, and he who shall be famous after today,
> The stammerer . . . . the wellformed person . . the wasted or feeble person.
> (*LG* 1855, 108-109)

Miller reads the catalogue as "the bisexual desire of adolescence" (*Walt Whitman's Poetry,*,75). Black states that the catalogue represents the infantile sense of oneness. In Freud's reading, the catalogue stands for the pre-oedipal world of the infant who "attach[es] no special importance to the distinctions between sexes" (*Introductory Lectures 1,* 245).

Another explanation would be that, changing identities, Whitman integrates them in a catalogue that dissolves the boundaries between male and female characters and unites the opposites. The catalogue is short and striking because Whitman enumerates unfamiliar and unconventional contradictory pairs. Betsy Erkkila writes that, "Duplicating in image and structure the ill-assorted, contradictory, and confused impulses of the dream state, the poet whirls into a timeless and erotically charged dreamscape where social and sexual distinctions break down" (*Whitman the Political Poet,* 118). The heterogeneous images included in the catalogue increase the inner tension of the dreamer, tension engendered by the drives' aggressiveness that "makes the semiotized body a place of permanent scission" (Kristeva, *Revolution,* 27). Whitman becomes "male and female (actor and actress), giver and receiver (voter , politician), accepted and rejected (emigrant, exile), past and future (the once famous, the future famous), healthy and ill (wellformed, wasted)" (Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body*, 19) preparing the reader for the delirium that will follow when the poet can shed his own sexual identity and become a woman. "I am she" signifies Whitman's liberation from any traces of social constraints. By changing sexual identities, by becoming he and/or she, Whitman formulates his own quagmire: how to make public his sins/secrets considering his sexual orientation. Whitman must experience different identities and sexual relations in order to find his own sexual inclination. David Reynolds minimizes the significance of the catalogue and explains that "I am the actor and the actress" sends no special message. He states that, "Once when she [Charlotte Cushman] played Romeo, a commentator wryly observed, 'Miss Cushman is a very dangerous man.' The shape shifting androgynous persona of Whitman's poetry, then, was not unusual. In a time of flexible role players, Whitman proved himself as flexible as any, ready to absorb himself at will into many identities, regardless of gender" (*Walt Whitman's America,* 162).

The catalogue emphasizes that Whitman's fluid self can and will transgress the gender barriers. His identification with an actor and/or an actress allows the poet to go through and even undergo a female role. When Whitman becomes "she," he emphasizes his own suspicions about his sexual identity. Betsy Erkkila underlines that, "In his dream world where the bounds between male and female disappear, Whitman releases his own homosexual yearnings in ambiguous but sexually nuanced images. He imagines himself as the 'pet' of a 'gang of 'blackguards with mirthshouting music and wildflapping pennants of joy,' and assumes the body of a woman aroused by a lover who becomes one with the darkness" (*Whitman the Political Poet,* 118).

In a Freudian reading, "The Sleepers" is the dream-content and consists of condensed fragments. Within each fragment, there is a dream thought that must be translated into words and interpreted. The condensation of and the discrepancy between the fragments lead to the presumption that the poem is one dream, a number of dreams, or what Whitman could remember when he woke up. However, within "The Sleepers," "we are concerned with unconscious thinking, and the process may be easily different from that which we observe in deliberate contemplation accompanied by consciousness" (Freud, *Interpretation,* 178). The dream thoughts, that are very rich and substantial in matter, form trains of thoughts proceeding from different centers. Since only a few of the elements make their way into the dream-content, dreams are the extreme concentration effected by the dream-work which is centered elsewhere. Thus, there have occurred "in the process of dream formation a displacement and a transference of the psychic intensities of the individual elements, from which results the textual difference between the dream-content and the thought content" (Freud, *Interpretation,* 199). It is this difference that makes the dream-poem chaotic.

Like any dream, "The Sleepers" is built on sudden metamorphoses, unexpected shifts, and contradictory statements. They help Whitman find the answer to his own anxieties common to many people whose desires for sexual fulfillment are frustrated by the norms dictated by a heterosexual society. In a homophobic society, sexual relations must be related to procreation. If sexual relations do not lead to having children but respond only to personal needs, these relations are considered a crime against the whole social system and the individual branded as pariah. Killingsworth states that, "Whitman's anxiety and acute sensitivity to sensual stimuli derived from the repression of his sexual desires" (*The Growth of Leaves of Grass,* 97).

> I am she who adorned herself and folded her hair expectantly,
> My truant lover has come and it is dark.
>
> Double yourself and receive me darkness,
> Receive me and my lover too . . . . he will not let me go without him.
>
> I roll myself upon you as upon a bed . . . . I resign myself to the dusk.
>
> He whom I call answers me and takes the place of my lover,
> He rises with me silently from the bed.
>
> Darkness you are gentler than my lover . . . . his flesh was sweaty and
> panting,
> I feel the hot moisture yet that he left me.
> My hands are spread forth . . I pass them in all directions,
> I would sound up the shadowy shore to which you are journeying.
>
> Be careful, darkness . . . . already, what was it touched me?
> I thought my lover had gone . . . . else darkness and he are one,
> I hear the heart-beat . . . . I follow . . I fade away. (*LG* 1855, 109)

In the utter confusion created by the previous catalogue, Whitman throws off his own sexual gender and assumes the body of a woman. She ushers in a shadowy lover who becomes one with the darkness. The transformation of Whitman into a woman and of her/his lover into darkness makes the passage difficult to translate into words. In the language of the dream, we are faced with a double displacement. The seduction of Whitman/woman appears more spiritual than physical. Identifying with a woman, Whitman covertly expresses his appalling fears and pains regarding his own identity. The passage is as renowned as that in "Song of Myself" where Whitman presents the twenty-eight bathers. In the well known fragment Whitman becomes both the woman and the young men in a double-sexed vision. The sexual enjoyment of the woman is Whitman's repressed homoerotic pleasure. In "The Sleepers" Whitman "writes out another fantasy, the night-time fantasy of a sleeping woman" (Maire Mullins, "*Leaves of Grass* as a 'Woman's Book,' " *WWQR,* 10:4, 1993, 201). "In the speaking subject," Kristeva writes, "fantasies articulate this irruption of drives within the realm of the signifier, they disrupt the signifier and shift the metonymy of desire, which acts within the place of the other, onto a jouissance that divests the object and turns back toward the autoerotic body" (*Revolution,* 49). [Jouissance means the totality of enjoyment. It is sexual, spiritual, physical, conceptual at one and the same time.]

Though the woman/poet is waiting for her/his truant lover, Waskow draws our attention that "the ambiguous 'it is dark' raises the possibility that the lover is the 'dark' itself"(*Waskow, Explorations in Form,* 146). Surrounded by darkness and plunged in the queer world of dreams, Whitman can express himself in a manner that leaves the conventional discourse behind. In the darkness, all the repressed desires bloom rapidly. By writing out his sexual longings, the poet produces a new type of discourse directly linked to human behavior that "permits Whitman to give expression to deep sexual desires and passions, in an all-consuming love for the world" (Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition,* 10).

To penetrate into the profound meaning of this segment, the reader must be conversant with Bakhtin's theory of the word as a living utterance. Bakhtin explains that any used word "is directly, blatantly oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it, and structures itself in the answer's direction forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue" (*The Dialogic Imagination,* 280).

In the line, "Double yourself and receive me darkness," Whitman addresses "darkness" to "double" itself; so, "darkness" must become "double" to receive the woman/poet and her/his lover, or the poet alone in the "double" role of lover and beloved. Michael Davidson explains that, "By asking that the darkness 'double' itself, the speaker demands both obscurity as well as duplicity in the erotic scene about to take place. By doubling the darkness, she/he may be released from all boundaries and 'resign' her/himself to whatever happens" ("Redressing Whitman" *Breaking Bounds,* 224). "Receive me darkness" has to be connected with "Now I pierce the darkness" (the line added after 1860) because both stand for the double meaning of "darkness,": both male and female. "Now I pierce the darkness" and "receive me darkness" are a male's appeal to a female lover. When addressed by the young woman, "Darkness you are gentler than my lover," Whitman confers on "darkness" a visible masculine part. In other words, Whitman, as a male lover, pierces the female darkness and, as a female, accepts the gentle caressing of a male darkness that envelops and ensconces his own double nature. Michael Davidson asserts that, "Perhaps the most famous moment of cross-dressing, aside from the twenty-eight passage, is in 'The Sleepers' where Whitman as a dreamer becomes both female lover and male beloved as well as the surrounding darkness. In the passage's opening lines, the speaker is female, but genders quickly change place as the darkness is invoked" ("Redressing Whitman," in *Breaking Bounds,* 224). Everything is possible in dreaming due to a moratorium on morality that increases the distance between the waking state and the sleeping state. If we add that the poet himself asserts that he becomes the other dreamers and absorbs the dream of the other, we conclude that Whitman places himself outside accepted roles. He does that because he attempts to convey his own sexual proclivity and to emphasize the emergence of new sexual identities.

The lover who appears and disappears becomes a "projection of the young woman's conception of him (or a projection of the self), a 'doubling' onto the darkness . . . . onto a truant lover who may or may not exist" (Whelan,"Do I Contradict Myself?" p. 30). The lover is a presence in absence or "the absence of the object" (Kristeva, *Revolution,*143) that increases the inner desire of the young woman. Her "desire is founded on drives that remain unsatisfied, no matter what phantasmatic identifications desire may lead to because, unlike desire, drives 'divide the subject from desire.' Desire's basis in drives will thus be dismissed and forgotten so that attention may be focused on desire itself, reactivated by the reiteration of castration. [D]esire will be seen as an always already accomplished subjugation of the subject to lack: it will serve to demonstrate only the development of the signifier. From these reflections a certain kind of subject emerges: the subject, precisely, of desire, who lives at the expense of his drives, ever in search of a lacking object (*Revolution,* 131-132).

In his dream, Whitman can afford to play both the active and the passive roles in a love scene in which he enjoys the complicity of a new protagonist: "darkness." The dreamer's wish has been accomplished: he is loved and he can love; he is caressed and he can caress. "I roll myself upon you as upon a bed" insinuates male aggressiveness while "I resign myself to the dusk" implies female passivity. "The Sleepers" is a poem full of cross-dressing images that, deliberately, confuses definitional distinctions of gender. In his dream, Whitman finds the liberty to identify himself not only with men but also with women. "Whitman returned again and again to the woman's problem and through his imaginative fusion of different cultural images offered a pathway to freedom" (Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America,* 231). Gustav Bychowsky suggests that the poet's sexual desire is to be loved as a woman who is passive in the hands of aggressive men. "Song of Myself" and "The Sleepers" contradict this statement because, in both poems, we witness a sexual act that defies the logic of female passivity. In their fantasies, both women initiate the sexual act that takes place outdoors and represents a departure from the bourgeois value of secrecy. Whitman's identification with a woman may be described as the poet's desire to remove aggression from the sexual act. In his conception, the sexually aggressive male is be identified with the patriarchal society that reduces the woman to a passive partner. In a male dominated society, for a woman to achieve a passive role may call for a large amount of activity: how to accommodate herself within social customs that force her into passive situations. Freud states that, "in a woman, on the basis of her share in the sexual function, a preference for passive behaviour and passive aims is carried over into her life to a greater or lesser extent, in proportion to the limits, restricted or far-reaching, within which her sexual life thus serves as a model"(*New Introductory Lectures 2*, 149).

It is very difficult to specify the exact nature of the sexual act that is about to take place because even the sexual partner is not clearly revealed. "Perhaps the indefinite style may be attributed to [Whitman's] desire to conceal his homosexuality" (Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body,* 41) even from himself. Perhaps "the presence of travestism in literature represents a crisis elsewhere in society; a displacement of tensions in culture at large onto normative logics of gender differentiation" (Michael Davidson, "Redressing Whitman," *Breaking Bounds,* 222). Whitman, adopting a female persona/voice, conveys the emergence of new sexual categories that were beginning to be defined in medical and psychological literature of the time. In "The Sleepers," Whitman implements a gender-crossing strategy, that is to say, the poet adopts a feminine position to articulate his own confusion regarding his sexual proclivity. In a dream-poem, Whitman finds it easier to reveal his sexual orientation through shifting roles or positions that allow the speaker to be caught among multiple personae. The rapid transformations from one gender to another are rendered through a rhetoric of dressing and undressing, concealing and revealing, covering and uncovering in which the action of changing clothes (identities) imparts an identity hidden beneath. When Whitman becomes he or she, when he declares, "Agonies are one of my changes of garments" (Song of Myself, l.1844), "the gay or lesbian poet, however, might hear not simply identity within difference but identity within identity, the adoption of one role to articulate another" (Davidson, "Redressing Whitman," in *Breaking Bounds,* 221).

In the fragment, there is a constant shifting of roles due to the phenomenon of displacement that will unite the female, the male, and the darkness in one."As a result of condensation, one element in the manifest dream may correspond to numerous elements in the latent dream-thoughts; but, conversely too, one element in the dream-thoughts may be represented by several images in the dream. Still more remarkable is the other process - displacement or shifting of accent. No other part of the dream-work is so much responsible for making the dream strange and incomprehensible to the dreamer. Displacement is the principal means used in the dream-distortion to which the dream-thoughts must submit under the influence of the censorship" (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures 2,* 49-50).

"Darkness" that, initially, has invited the two lovers or the "two-in-one lover" to a swirling, maddening, exhausting, and chaotic sexual act, becomes the new lover, protecting, caressing, sexually inviting the young woman who, in her fantasy, confused, uncontrolled, and full of desires whispers, "Be careful darkness . . . already, what was it touched me?" Mixed feelings overwhelm the woman whose "hands are spread forth . . I pass them in all directions," - an unambiguous act of masturbation leading to a vortex that makes her murmur, "I hear the heart-beat . . . . I follow . . I fade away." However, "My hands are spread forth . . I pass them in all directions" rises above the act of masturbation. Whether the speaking subject is man or woman, active or passive, whether there is a lover or no lover at all becomes of secondary importance. The hands are spread forth to complete the action of merging with the other sleepers in an embrace of universal love. The open hands, spread forth, open the erotic body toward a universe traversed by love.

Being enticement, solace, and accomplice, darkness obviously signifies a return to the world prior to the sex differentiation, to the pre-oedipal stage - "the pre-genital state" (Kristeva, *Revolution,* 50) when there is no castration fear or no social taboos. "All is acceptable in this homoerotic and heteroerotic sphere. Soothing pleasures encourage the observer/dreamer to penetrate ever more deeply into this wondrous subliminal world. Instinctively, darkness directs its hand, paving the way for the orgasm and ecstasy in ejaculation. The 'heart-beat follows the body's rhythms, intensifying that moment sublime, which then fades into oblivion" (Bettina Knapp, *Walt Whitman,* 199). It is only a momentary oblivion because Whitman, fading away, separates from the young woman and continues his identity quest, announced in the line, "I would sound up the shadowy shore to which you are journeying." The seductive darkness becomes an abstract darkness. James Perrin Warren writes that "shadowy shore" signifies death. "I fade away" connected to "shadowy shore" insinuates the death of the "ill-assorted" and "confused" "I," a departure from the wanderer at the beginning of the poem. It is no retreat , but a step forward to self-discovery and to light.

The intrinsic value of the segment is reduced by both E. H. Miller and Richard Chase to an intense oedipal conflict in which the poet assumes three distinctive roles: the father, the mother, and the sexually aroused child. Miller writes that, "The action represents both sides of the oedipal ambivalence: the "I" is the woman receiving her 'lover,' the father, and the 'darkness that is 'gentler than my lover' and replaces the father; thus he is the father's rival for the mother, and at the same time he substitutes for the mother in the primal act" (*Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 76). Chase also underlines that the young woman waiting for the indistinct lover is the mother. But, to look at the poem only from one point of view: the oedipal conflict, means to diminish the profound messages of a poem that stands above the family triangle drama. The import of "The Sleepers" springs from man's deep-rooted but forbidden desires that must be played out in the dark. Whitman becomes the voice of those who must hide their real sexual identity.

"I fade away," in the 1855 edition, introduces pre-Freudian symbols in a superbly written passage later deleted by Whitman because he himself regarded it too sexually explicit. Michael Rainer, who discusses the poem under the influence of Jung's and Erich Newman's theory of uroboric incest (the return of the conscious to a pre-conscious state, a regression that is of major import to the dream state), suggests that the following lines, excised after 1876 and from all subsequent editions, "are in opposition to the movement of the poem. The awakening of sexuality described in these lines is the opposite of the moving away from the ego that has been taking place and is not in keeping with the movement into the pre-conscious. By excising these lines, Whitman maintains the thrust of the poem and avoids breaking the development that continues in Section 2" ("Uroboric Incest in Whitman's 'The Sleepers'" *WWQR*, 1:2, 1983, 10).

The 1855 edition is considered the buried masterpiece of American literature because Whitman is at his freshest and boldest way of expressing himself. The poem without the two excised lyrics loses part of its extremely powerful meaning. By deleting "O Hot Cheek'd and Blushing," Whitman desexualizes the message of the poem. "O Hot Cheek'd and Blushing" stands as a logical continuation of the "young woman" fragment insofar as it represents the awakening of the poet who, now, contemplates his own drama in a language full of erotic gibberish, a melange of symbols that speaks for itself. Betsy Erkkila explains that "the erotic flow of night is juxtaposed with images of anxiety and shame" (*Whitman the Political Poet,* 119). Having enjoyed the young woman's sexual fantasies, Whitman undergoes a traumatic moment that "paralyses the function of the pleasure principle and gives the situation of danger its significance, a signal generated for a fresh reason" (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis 2,* 126).

> O hotcheeked and blushing! O foolish hectic!
> O for pity's sake, no one must see me now! . . . . my clothes were stolen while
> I was abed,
> Now I am thrust forth, where shall I run?
> Pier that I saw dimly last night when I looked from the windows,
> Pier out from the main, let me catch myself with you and stay , , , , I will
> not chafe you;
> I feel ashamed to go naked about the world,
> And I am curious to know where my feet stand . . . . and what is this
> flooding me, childhood or manhood . . . . and the hunger that crosses
> the bridge between.
>
> The cloth laps a first sweet eating and drinking,
> Laps life-swelling yolks . . . . laps ear of rose-corn, milky and just ripened:
> The white teeth stay, and the boss-tooth advances in darkness,
> And liquor is spilled on lips and bosoms by touching glasses, and the best
> liquor afterward. (*LG* 1855, 110)

"I fade away" does not mean the quietus of the poet but his awakening to "where my feet stand," a question obviously inquired from the very beginning of the poem, a question covered but organically implied.

In his *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton writes that, "Dreams for Freud are essentially symbolic fulfillments of unconscious wishes, and they are cast in symbolic form because if this material were expressed directly then it might be shocking and disturbing enough to wake us up. In order that we should get some sleep, the unconscious charitably conceals, softens and distorts its meanings, so that our dreams become symbolic texts which need to be deciphered" (136). Bakhtin explains that one word is always oriented toward another. The word is seen as an active component, modified and transformed in meaning by protean valuations and connotations. The word cannot be a neutral element, but the core of a crucial struggle and confrontation. In the new segment, Whitman reveals his sexual proclivities in veiled, ambiguous, and delusive terms: highly charged symbols. Whitman favors sexual liberation and fights a constant battle against censorship be it social, religious, aesthetic, or sexual. As a sexually explicit lyric, this excised passage describes Whitman's erotic and turbulent impulses and longings.

Freud tells us that, "Symbolism is perhaps the most remarkable chapter of the theory of dreams" (*Introductory Lectures 1*, 184). The sexual images and symbols enclosed in the fragment are consciously employed by Whitman who knows that "reason becomes the enemy which withholds from us so many possibilities of pleasure" (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures 2*, 62). The symbols Whitman is using are "all the signs, miracles, prophecies and apparitions which have been reported to us from ancient times and in ancient books and which we thought had long since been disposed of as the offspring of unbridled imagination or of tendentious fraud, as the product of an age in which man's ignorance was very great and the scientific spirit was still in its cradle" (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures 2*, 63). All these symbols suddenly emerge to light in this exquisite but difficult passage.

The young woman/Whitman fades away and, changing identities, the poet wakes up from his dream within a dream only to find himself in a vulnerable and painful position: ashamed and remorseful. The poet's clothes are stolen while he is asleep, and his sexual dreams make him feel ashamed and naked. [We do not have to assume that "his clothes had actually been stolen while he was abed, though in the 1850's this was a common experience of unsophisticates who visited the brothels of New York City. Certain of these places were notorious for their sliding panels, behind which hid pickpockets who worked with the co-operation of the 'girls' "(Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer,* 167)]. Naked ("my clothes were stolen while I was abed"} or scantily dressed demands our attention when the dreamer experiences a feeling of painful shame and embarrassment. Disoriented, Whitman or his persona, anxious to hide his nakedness, speaks to himself, "Now I am thrust forth, " a gloomy echo of the full of enthusiasm "Now I pierce the darkness." The euphoria at the beginning of the poem when Whitman believes in his shamanistic soothing powers is abruptly replaced by a feeling of frustration.

> O for pity's sake, no one must see me now!

"No one" implies a number of people and, in *The Interpretation of Dreams,* Freud explains that "a number of strangers . . . . always signifies a secret" (144). Being afraid that his secret will be discovered, Whitman is now controlled by the " unconscious need for punishment," signifying a certain degree of "aggressiveness that has been internalized" (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures 2,* 142) and is waiting to be resolved. Controlled by his "unconscious sense of guilt" (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures 2,* 142), Whitman attempts to find a safe escape, "Where shall I run?" Curious and anxious to discover "where my feet stand," overwhelmed by ambiguous and conflicting feelings of violent distress, Whitman wants to run away and hide. He realizes that the phallic "pier that I saw dimly last night . . . . pier out from the main" cannot be approached or crossed so easily as yet.

"Pier" and its homophone "peer" may be regarded in terms of sight and relationship. In and out of his dream, conscious and unconscious of his sexual proclivity, Whitman is headed for the deserted wooden piers of Brooklyn and New York that were hiding places for those who ignored the rules imposed by a homophobic society. Symbolically speaking, the word "pier" acquires a multitude of interpretations. A pier and a bridge are two different structures. However, in the poem, the pier may acquire the image of a broken or an unfinished bridge that makes crossing impossible. What Whitman refers to is difficult to determine accurately. We can only speculate. If we associate the pier with part of a bridge, we may quote Freud who writes that, "the bridge means the male organ, which unites the two parents in sexual intercourse; a bridge becomes the crossing from the other world (the unborn state, the womb) to this world (life); and since men also picture death as a return to the womb (to the water), a bridge also acquires the meaning of something that leads to death, and finally, at a further remove from the original sense, it stands for transition or change in condition generally" (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures 2,* 52). The bridge seen from the window (the eye of the house and hence, the eye of the body) becomes the "bridge between childhood and manhood: the penis itself" (Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition,* 11). As an explicitly phallic image, the pier becomes a reflection of the growing boy who does not know or does not understand his sexual proclivity clearly. It is the "pier" any child must cross on his way to becoming mature. It may also be the gap within Whitman's tormented state, an impossible to cross abyss because of his intense and traumatic fears to reveal his own sexual identity. The night and the phallic pier take the puzzled young man away from home and guide his steps to love and sexual union that he could not understand so far. It is a traumatic moment that pushes Whitman toward water perceived as flowing, dissolving, or making problematic conditions more malleable. Water becomes the symbol of the amniotic fluid and, hence, the protective womb of the mother. The whole fragment stands for a powerful desire for gratification accompanied by a profound aversion to anything which might frustrate it. It is a crucial moment in "The Sleepers," a transition to realizing "where my feet stand." "And what is this flooding me, childhood or manhood . . . . and the hunger that crosses the bridge between" increases the bewilderment of the poet who does not know how to satisfy his "hunger" or sexual desires.

E. H. Miller presents the passage as the perplexed awakening of a young man from his sinfully erotic dreams. He explains that "I will not chafe you" must be related to the reading given to "pier." Miller asserts that, "If the pier is constructed as a male symbol, 'chafe' suggests muscular and sexual overtones . . . . If, on the other hand, the pier is to be linked with (protective) feminine water imagery, then 'chafe' may refer to the child at the mother's breast or to the fetus in the amniotic waters" (*Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 76). If we assume that the "pier" is the poet's salvation and retreat into the womb-like security (a metaphor for the protective mother), the lines that conclude the passage make it clear that Whitman "moves from the moment of troubling discovery to the earlier period of infantile polymorphous sexuality when he confused breast with penis and the mouth with genitals. . . . The regressive impulse led back to the first physical gratification: nursing" (S. Black, *Whitman's Journey into Chaos,* 129). Freud avers that, "Sucking at the mother's breast is the starting point of the whole of the sexual life, the unmatched prototype of every later sexual satisfaction, to which phantasy often enough recurs in time of need. This sucking involves making the mother's breast the first object of sexual instinct" (*Introductory Lectures 1,* 356). The relationship of suckling to mother is a relationship of symbiosis: though two, they represent one: dream and dreamer, the infant and his mother, they form an intimate pair. Mother is associated with beatitude and danger, birth and death, and the inexhaustible nourishing breast. What Whitman offers the reader is a revelation of a large gamut of erotically charged symbols.

He enumerates nourishing factors indicative of physical and spiritual fecundity:

> The cloth laps a first sweet eating and drinking,
> Laps life-swelling yolks . . . . laps ear of rose-corn, milky and just ripened:
> The white teeth stay, and the boss-tooth advances in darkness,
> And liquor is spilled on lips and bosoms by touching glasses, and the best
> liquor afterward. (*LG* 1855, 110)

They are elements of regeneration coming from the earth, elements through which Whitman "visualizes genitals and sexuality in oral images - that, in other words, the protagonist according to an ancient ceremony 'may also be mastering great fear of/or desire for the vagina through oral incorporation'" (E. H. Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 78).

Bakhtin explains that words are not frozen in meaning. They may shape and even shift their significance even within the same context. "Life-swelling yolks" and "ear of rose-corn, milky and just ripened" are both phallic images and inspirations. "Life-swelling yolk" alone may be interpreted as a metaphor for the penis awakened to sexual life and the word swelling emphasizes the image. "Yolk" may be read as the embryo/seed and, hence, the birth of a new type of sexual intercourse of which Whitman becomes more and more aware. If we associate "yolk" and "milky," we obtain the life-giving egg: the embryo and the seminal fluid. Removed from the context but with later implications in Whitman's poetry, the entire image may underline that it is out of the poet's sexual proclivity that his much acclaimed love poems will spring to life. On the other hand, due to his homosexuality, due to the fact that he becomes male or female in the poem, "Laps life-swelling yolks - laps ear of rose-corn, milky and just ripen'd" becomes, in Freud's reading, the female genitals. The line stands for an agricultural landscape used in dreams to represent the female organs.[see Freud, *Introductory Lectures 1,* 196 to 198.] The orgasm, camouflaged through the whole passage, is "transformed and portrayed symbolically with nutritive, oral imagery" (Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body,* 21). The speaker's orgasmic experiences "lead to a sense of connectedness with the earth's generative cycle" (Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet*, 119). Martin reads the passage as "the act known politely as fellacio. . . . performed on a man by a woman, but this seems extremely unlikely in view of nineteenth-century attitudes" (*The Homosexual Tradition,* 11). "'Laps' used as noun and verb, as protective covering and oral stimulation" (M. Davidson, "Redressing Whitman" in *Breaking Bounds,* 225) makes the sexual act extremely difficult to place. If "laps" is interpreted as "lapping waves," for example, it will introduce the image of water directly connected with the line, "And liquor is spilled on lips and bosoms by touching glasses, and the best liquor afterward." Thom Gunn writes, referring to "laps," that "the cloth doubles for both the bedcloth and the table napkin around the speaker's neck, and 'laps' has perhaps a primary sense of 'wraps around' but with several ancillary senses" ("Forays against the Republic" *The Continuous Presence of Walt Whitman,* 210). Furthermore, "And liquor is spilled on lips and bosoms by touching glasses, and the best liquor afterward" expresses the ejaculation of the seminal fluid. "The boss-tooth advances in darkness" must be correlated with "Now I pierce the darkness," both unequivocally describing an act of penetration, an act performed by an aggressive male toward the feminine value conferred on "darkness."

Betsy Erkkila writes that, "Though the images are orgasmic, the precise nature of the experience - oral, anal, vaginal, heterosexual, or homosexual - is unclear" (*Whitman the Political Poet,* 119). We may only assume that the nature of the sexual act is homosexual, but it is not defined as such. Martin emphasizes that, "What mattered to Whitman at this time was the role of sexuality in the establishment of a mystic sense of unity; the kind of sexuality involved was unimportant. Whether this was due to a deliberate act of evasion, or to a relatively underdeveloped homosexual consciousness, it seems impossible to know at this time. It is likely that Whitman felt it dangerous to reveal himself, in a poem devoted to the portrayal of universal union, as an outsider" (*The Homosexual Tradition,* 12).

Whitman makes it difficult for the reader to recognize the real nature of the sexual act. Perhaps he does it on purpose. Using poetry as a weapon, all his life, Whitman fought a constant battle against a bigoted society. The sexual experiences presented in the text emphasize Whitman's conscious desire to liberate the human body from any sexual oppression. Whitman uses the human body to restore its physicality. He insists that the emancipation of the sexual instincts of the human body will change the restrictive patterns of a society ruled by homophobia.

Although Whitman wants us to believe that he is writing an "illogical dream," he is in full control of his material and even manipulates the reader's interpretation of the material.

"The movement of the poem, like the orgiastic crescendos and decrescendos in the music of Richard Wagner, captures the protagonist's sexual tensions and anxieties. . . . Only with this sexual expenditure is the protagonist at peace with himself and the universe" (E. H. Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 78). Whitman discovers "where my feet stand." He will continue his dream and painful journey into the night haunted by guilt and fear. He descends his western course toward death in order to escape "the fire, the sweet hell within,/The unknown want, the destiny of me" ("Out of the Cradle, ll.156-157).

Freud reminds us that during one night, the sleeper may have two or three dreams whose content is so different that even the dreamer is totally puzzled. Freud underlines that, even if the dreams are extremely dissimilar, they still belong to the same dream thought. Some represent a punishment while others "the sinful wish-fulfillment. It amounts to this: if one accepts the punishment for it, one can go on to allow oneself the forbidden thing" (*New Introductory Lectures 2,* 56). In Whitman's dreams, the punishment for his sexual delusions is still to come: his fear of death coalesced with his curiosity what death is after all. Freud explains that the final goal of life is death seen as a blissful state where the ego cannot be injured; Eros, the sexual energy, is a powerful force which comes into contradiction with Thanatos, the death drive. Our life is a struggle onward only to be always drawn back to return to a state where there is no struggle. Man's life is an intolerable fight to repress any desire and to defer any gratification that may come into conflict with the norms imposed by our civilized society. Freud writes that, "If it is true that - at some immeasurably remote time and in a manner we cannot conceive - life once proceeded out of inorganic matter, then, according to our presumption, an instinct must have arisen which sought to do away with life once more and to re-establish the inorganic state. If we recognize in this instinct the self-destructiveness, we may regard the self-destructiveness as an expression of 'death instinct' which cannot fail to be present in every vital process. The instincts that we believe in divide themselves into two groups - the erotic instincts, which seek to combine more and more living substance into greater unities, and the death instincts, which oppose this effort and lead what is living into an inorganic state. From the concurrent and opposing action of these two proceed the phenomena of life which are brought to an end by death" (*Introductory Lectures 2,* 140).

If we consider the poem without the deleted lyric, the young woman/Whitman fades away into a new experience in which the poet encounters death and "must accept it as a brutal part of life" (Carlisle, 166).We are going to witness a simultaneous "rupture and renewal" (Kristeva, *Revolution,* 204) or "nothing other than the death drive or jouissance" (Kristeva, *Revolution,* 204). We will see a moment of rupture from sexual topics and a renewal, in the last two sections of "The Sleepers," expressed by Whitman's glorious reconciliation of the antipodes. In between, Whitman compels the reader to face death as the poet sees and interprets it.

In only two lines, Whitman travels through a lifetime and a lifetime travels with him:

> I descend my western course . . . . my sinews are flaccid,
> Perfume and youth course through me, and I am their wake. (*LG 1855,* 110)

"My sinews are flaccid" indicates that the effect of the orgasm leads to sleep and dream. It may also stand for decrepitude due to "sinful" sexual acts. After the orgiastic sensations rendered in natural manifestations signifying the very fertility of our earth, the poet, no longer young or vigorous, envisions himself as an old woman, a widow, and a shroud.

> It is my face yellow and wrinkled instead of the old woman's,
> I sit low in a strawbottom chair and carefully darn my grandson's stockings.
>
> It is I too . . . . the sleepless widow looking out on the winter midnight,
> I see the sparkles of starshine on the icy and pallid earth.(*LG 1855,* 110)

Whitman identifies himself with an old woman whose face is "yellow and wrinkled" and with a "sleepless widow" mourning the death of her husband. These are faces of frailty due to aging. However, they do not imply morbidity or despair. They come accompanied by love, hope, and peace. R. S. Mishra writes that the old woman is darning the stockings with "love... while the widow (pining for her husband)... can 'see sparkles of starshine on the icy and pallid earth' "(*"The Sleepers* and Some Whitman Notes," *WWQR*, 34). Who are these two women? Are they disguises of the young woman making love with both a shadowy lover and the darkness itself? Are they specters of the sexually aroused woman in the famous passage of the twenty eight bathers in "Song of Myself"? Like the woman in "Song of Myself," the widow looks out the window herself. Unfortunately, she does not see the sunny beach and the athletic bodies of the bathers. She sees the "pallid earth," the eternal bed not only of her husband but of everyone else including Whitman.

No longer a voyeur, Whitman is trying to discover the mysteries of the unseen world in order to find the meaning of death, a thought that terrifies him much more than his sexual proclivity. Curious to discover what death is, Whitman takes a startling descent into a coffin.

> A shroud I see - and I am the shroud . . . . I wrap a body and lie in the coffin;
> (*LG 1855*, 110)

From "perfume and youth" to different forms of deaths, separation, and loss to follow, the poet needs a period of transition that will help him continue his quest and struggle against isolation and marginalization, a struggle that prompted his phantasmagoric journey in the first place. What is about to happen in the poem will be seen through the eyes of someone who has experienced both the beauty and the horror of the night.

In one line, Whitman will encapsulate a disturbing subterranean experience. The gradual metamorphosis from an old woman to a coffin signifies Whitman's looking for "the warm protectiveness of the 'dark grave.' We have the linkage of the cradle and the coffin which is to be elaborated in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." The sexual bed becomes the death bed" (E. Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 79).

The word "shroud" acquires two meanings: a place of hiding and death. In Whitman's perception, a shroud becomes the very symbol of concealing that goes "against Whitmanian imperative to 'undrape.' This is the poet who remarks the 'curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the naked meat of the body' (*LG,* 101). Without this contact, 'whoever walks a furlong without sympathy, walks to his own funeral dressed in a shroud' (*LG,* 86). The shroud hides a degenerative self-isolation: 'those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves' (*LG,*93)" (Whelan,"Do I Contradict Myself?" *WWQR,* 31). [Quotations from "Song of Myself" and " I Sing the Body Electric."]

On the other hand, since time immemorial, prophets, philosophers, man-gods, and saviors have tried, with little or no success at all, to ameliorate the earthly tragedy: death. Becoming a shroud and lying still in the coffin, Whitman equates sleep and darkness with death. Darkness, sleep, and death are the voiced elements of the universal cycle; light, waking, and life are not articulated but their presence is felt in the poem. They will be considered carefully in the last sections of the poem. There, in the darkness of the coffin, Whitman comes to the conclusion that there are no conflictual forces there: all is blank.

> It is dark here underground . . . . it is not evil or pain here . . . . it is blank
> here, for reasons. *(LG 1855,* 110)

His underground experience makes him realize that the quiet atmosphere in the grave is far from idyllic; Whitman links death with blankness, nullness, loss of sensation. Whelan connects "blank" with poetic talent and interprets "blank" as a page without the body of the text or a poet without the life his page returns. "The text," Kristeva writes, "as signifying practice points toward the possibility - which is a jouissance - of a subject who speaks his being put in process/on trial through action. In other words and conversely, the text restores to 'mute' practice, the jouissance that constitutes it but which can only become jouissance through language" (*Revolution,* 210).

Death becomes a synonym of isolation, the isolation of an artist misunderstood by his audience as well as the isolation of any marginalized person who cannot, as yet, find his place in a heterosexual society. Whitman's brief experience in the coffin does not frighten him. He will only draw a shocking conclusion:

> It seems to me that everything in the light and air ought to be happy;
> Whoever is not in his coffin and the dark grave, let him know he has enough.
> (*LG 1855,* 110)

Placed in parentheses in later editions, this statement seems to be Whitman's, the poet, the day time person and not Whitman's, the protagonist of "The Sleepers." The poet, a solar person, lives and loves life; the protagonist of the poem must experience death in order to appreciate life. We have to add that the dead body in the coffin though it is " 'blank is not 'wretched.' The sense of suffering is neither accentuated nor dismissed. This even temper actually influences and modulates all other scenes of death and loss that follow Section 2" (R. S. Mishra, "*The Sleepers* and Some Whitman Notes," *WWQR,* 34). Loudly affirming that "Whoever is not in his coffin and the dark grave, let him know he has enough," Whitman emphasizes that "the light and air" are, after all, friendlier than "the dark grave" that acquires the meaning of "disease, impairment, isolation" (Whelan,"Do I Contradict Myself?" *WWQR,* 32). Death does not mean a denial of pain or suffering. It is only employed to re-affirm Whitman's belief in a renewed life, though not necessarily being born again and again.

E. H. Miller, who reads the poem from the Oedipus complex point of view, a complex very much present in the poem but not the only one that triggered it, asserts that 'I become a shroud' means that Whitman's " sexual sins" and the veiled oedipal conflict "have no resolution except in death" (*Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 79). The old woman, the widow, and the shroud stand for wife and husband, mother and father and "the grave is the solution for the boy who wishes the father dead, and wishes himself dead for having the wish. In death there is release from guilt and torment: 'it is not evil or pain here . . . . it is blank here, for reasons' " (E. H. Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 79). In *Walt Whitman Reconsidered,* Richard Chase argues that the mother as she "appears in the guise of the young woman who receives her shadowy lover, as the 'sleepless widow' who looks out on 'the winter midnight' and sees the shrouded coffin of her husband" has a central part in the poem emphasizing, thus, "the dark motives and characters of that family drama" (55). However, "I am a shroud" is more than the horrifying figure of death, more than the punishment for a boy who longs for his mother's love; it is one standpoint among the multiple experiences the poet must undertake on his way to light and salvation.

Kristeva explains the connection between death and art. She argues that, "artistic practice considers death the inner boundary of signifying process. Crossing this boundary is precisely what constitutes 'art.' In other words, it is as if death becomes interiorized by the subject of such a practice; in order to function, he must make himself the bearer of death. In returning, through the event of death, toward that which produces its break, in exporting semiotic motility across the border on which the symbolic is established, the artist sketches out a kind of second birth" (*Revolution,* 70). Descending in the coffin and becoming a shroud and a corpse, Whitman, dreamer and quester at the same time, realizes that life is better than death even if life is a long string of painful confrontations. When he loudly declares that, "Whoever is not in his coffin and the dark grave, let him know he has enough," the poet is on his way out of the dark. From now on, Whitman's "fantasies revolve around death" (B. Knapp, *Walt Whitman,* 200), but it is clear that "a brief symbolic glance at deadness is altogether enough"

(S. Black, *Whitman's Journey into Chaos,* 130) for the poet to choose and treasure life.

Whitman conceived "The Sleepers" as an "irrational" poem closely following the "logic of a dream." Its chaotic aspect is only a very superficial coating. At a close reading, a reading suggested by this essay, we understand that Whitman chose every word so carefully and meticulously so that they would supplement each other somewhere in the poem. What seems totally misplaced or out of the context at a given moment, is further emphasized. This way, the reader conversant with Whitman's work and with a deep insight into his poetry must understand and discover the profound massages of the poem.

Part 2: The Storyteller.

Sexual experiences and, for a short time, identification with a shroud and a corpse are not enough to fill the blankness of Whitman's night journey. Whitman will resort to myth making. The poem continues with "four stories of commitment, battle, destruction, and ritual sacrifice" that lead "to what he [Whitman] will call 'the myth of heaven'" (Black, *Witman's Journey into Chaos,* 130). The four vignettes are moments of stasis that naturally follow the fatiguing drives: sexual and death. Besides, they give Whitman "a momentary insight into himself and his relation to the situations he describes" (Black, *Whitman's Journey into Chaos,* 130). The narratives, that will treat death, loss, and separation, prepare the reader for the poem's finale when Whitman finds his way to light and salvation and regains his dynamism of always going "onward and onward." In these stories, prudence will replace adventure because Whitman has learned that dangers lurk behind hazardous experiences. Waskow asserts that, "what has been a whirling dance of discovery is now a grim dance of death" (*Explorations in Form,* 148).

I see a beautiful gigantic swimmer swimming naked through the eddies of
sea,
His brown hair lies close and even to his head . . . . he strikes out with
courageous arms . . . . he urges himself with his legs.
I see his white body . . . . I see his undaunted eyes;
I hate the swift-running eddies that would dash him headforemost on the
rocks.
What are you doing you ruffianly red-trickled waves?
Will you kill the courageous giant? Will you kill him in the prime of his
middle age?

The first story introduces a "beautiful gigantic swimmer swimming naked through the eddies of the sea." The sea evokes "the archetypal image of birth and destruction" (Whelan, "Do I Contradict Myself," *WWQR*, 33). Whitman confers on the sea a double significance: love and death. Seeing in the sea a potential killer and being afraid not to be crushed by it,Whitman will enjoy the distance he assesses between himself and the swimmer.

The swimmer is, undoubtedly, Whitman himself. "The swimmer recalls the poet's own pleasure in bathing as well as the 'twenty-ninth bather' of 'Song of Myself.' The passage in the poem also supports this identification between the poet and the swimmer, for Whitman notes that 'the courageous giant' is in the prime of his middle age.' This recalls the image of the poet presented in the final version of 'Song of Myself.' 'I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,/Hoping to cease not till death.' Whitman added these lines to the 1881 edition of the poem, so it is obvious that he idealized his earlier physical and poetic health" (James Perrin Warren, "Catching the Sign," *WWQR*, 23).

The middle-aged swimmer and the poet are also connected by the use of water imagery. The young woman, sexually aroused by 'darkness,' is following it to the "shadowy shores"; the young poet, afraid of his sexual proclivity, is running to the pier in search of his protection; the orgasm, in the excised lyric, is presented in terms of "flooding" and "spilled liquor." In this vignette, "the death of the swimmer [seems] to be an elaboration of the image of the 'white teeth,' the emblem of feminine sexuality" (E. H. Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 79). The sea, "customarily in Whitman's poetry . . . . the female principle" (E. H. Miller, 80) generates "castration fears and exposure of self" (Martin, *Homosexual Tradition,* 12) because it becomes a horrendous power "of natural energies (including sexual energy)" (Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body,* 22). Furthermore, the image of the naked swimmer and his story justify the maternal image of the sea in its "twofold role of creator and destroyer. In the amniotic fluids a child is born, and to the waters the man [will be] borne" (E. H. Miller, 42).

Whitman's identification with "the courageous swimmer" is only partial. "I see" makes it clear that the reader will meet a new Whitman: quester-observer. When, at the beginning of the poem, Whitman exclaims in a moment of enthusiasm, "I become the other dreamers," he can hardly anticipate that this identification will prove painful. When he realizes the sufferings of his dreamers, Whitman will no longer be a participant. From the shore, Whitman is watching the swimmer, "a youthful Promethean . . . . whose undaunted sexual energy seems unlimited" (Knapp, *Walt Whitman,* 200). He realizes that the swimmer's "courageous arms," his athletic body, and his "undaunted eyes," though powerful, are not powerful enough to fight the unleashed forces of the "ruffianly red-trickled waves." The swimmer becomes an example to the poet, "a warning in dream terms of the dangers in the unconscious world of the sea" (Martin, *Homosexual Tradition,* 12). The swimmer's battle with the waves is Whitman's own struggle with his internal turmoil. Watching the swimmer, Whitman comes to understand that the man "in the prime of his middle age" "must die because of his impulse to swim" (Black, *Whitman's Journey into Chaos,* 131). This impulse is nothing else but Whitman's erotic wishes that end in death.

Steady and long he struggles,
He is baffled and banged and bruised . . . . he holds out while his strength
holds out,
The slapping eddies are spotted with blood . . . . they bear him away . . . . they
roll him and swing him and turn him;

His beautiful body is borne in the circling eddies . . . . it is continually bruised
on rocks,
Swiftly and out of sight is borne the brave corpse. (*LG 1855,* 111)

Martin suggests that Whitman staged the violent death of the swimmer, a death that implies "sadistic and masochistic fantasies" (*Homosexual Tradition,* 12). Freud argues that humans are dominated by a desire for gratification and an aversion to anything that might frustrate it. He sees the human being languishing in the grip of a terrifying death drive, a primary masochism that the ego unleashes on itself. Whitman does not stage the swimmer's death; he only dramatizes it. Had the swimmer not died, his struggle to overcome the power of the sea would have been a punishment for his natural but forbidden impulses. The swimmer could have chosen to yield or die. The decision was in his hands. His death becomes an act of defiance like a martyr's death. He epitomizes the fighter against the social order that attempts and succeeds in imposing its laws over its members.

"Baffled," "banged," and "bruised," the swimmer will continue to fight against the destructive force of "the slapping eddies" that "roll him and swing him and turn him" until he is "bruised" on rocks and becomes a "brave corpse." The gigantic swimmer dies, but he dies neither shrouded nor coffined. He dies a free man liberated from any social constraints. His "brave corpse" becomes "the body of the human race in action and it becomes a character. It is not the individual body trapped in an irreversible life sequence. [His body becomes] the impersonal body, the body of the human race as a whole, being born, living, dying the most varied deaths, being born again, an impersonal body that is manifested in its structure, and in all the processes of its life" (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* 173).

The devastating death of the swimmer increases Whitman's confusion. He declares,

> I turn but do not extricate myself,
> Confused . . . . a pastreading . . . . another, but with darkness yet.
> (*LG 1855,* 111)

Marki, ironically, writes that, "His dreams, confused and indistinct as they are, grow more somber. As if to remind himself that he is dreaming, about halfway through the poem the 'I' - turning over in his sleep, one might say - mutters: 'I turn but not extricate myself' " (*The Trial of the Poet,* 236). In the swimmer's story, there is a profound sense of sympathy with the brave athlete, dead, lost, and gone forever. The swimmer's death does not make the reader burst into tears because his death is controlled by Whitman, who prepares his readers for the next three vignettes that will treat the same theme: different kinds of death.

The swimmer's death is not enough for the poet to "extricate myself" from the experiences of his night journey of self discovery. Whitman is frightened that his own body may be "borne away," lost, and never to be born again, translated: never to find his own identity. Furthermore, these two lines are a distant echo of the opening stanza, in which Whitman, "confused," lost to myself," and "ill-assorted" is framing his own disorder underlining his movement without direction. Perrin Warren explains that the act of pastreading "does not seem to have freed the poet" ("Catching the Sign," *WWQR*, 24). Because the previous act of identification threatens to destroy "the barely created poetic self" (Perrin Warren, "Catching the Sign," *WWQR*, 24), Whitman will put a visible distance between his sleepers and himself.

"Confused . . . . but with the darkness yet," the poet increases the images of death and disaster from one/the swimmer to an indefinite number, thus, escalating the morbidity that dominates his nightmare. In the next narrative, Whitman observes how the sea wrecks a ship and the impotence of the rescuers who fight against the icy destructiveness of the enraged waves. Whitman will not even attempt to save the "beautiful gigantic swimmer." This time, he wants to become more involved. Unfortunately, he is not able to save the people on board the doomed ship. Afraid not to be overwhelmed by the powers of the sea,Whitman insists, this time, on man's impotence when faced with forces beyond his control. Witnessing the unleashed energies of the sea-storm, Whitman becomes one of the many who cannot do anything but watch the tragedy that unfolds in front of their eyes.

> The beach is cut by the razory ice-wind . . . . the wreck-guns sound,
> The tempest lulls and the moon comes floundering through the drifts.
>
> I look where the ship helplessly heads end on . . . . I hear the burst as she
> strikes . . I hear the howls of dismay . . . . they grow fainter and fainter.
>
> I cannot aid with my wringing fingers;
> I can but rush to the surf and let it drench me and freeze upon me.
>
> I search with the crowd . . . . not one of the company is washed to us alive;
> In the morning I help pick up the dead and lay them in rows in a barn.
>
> (*LG 1855,* 111)

Whitman's "wringing fingers" are so different from the soothing hand, the erotic hand, or the "courageous arms" of the swimmer. Whitman's hand that can cover continents is helpless this time: it cannot save human life. His "wringing fingers" will "pick up the dead and lay them in rows" "to consecrate them in the transcendence of art" (Whelan, "Do I contradict Myself?" *WWQR,* 34). Helping "pick up the dead and lay them in rows in a barn," Whitman gains an inner balance and control over death and destruction because both have been frozen in an work of art.

These two stories will transform Whitman into "a voyeur of death" (Black, *Whitman's Journey into Chaos,* 132) and force him to accept even "his mortality" (Black, 131). Though "these two scenes . . . . appear to depict the sexually aggressive woman (or mother), the destruction of virile men by a superior force" (E. H. Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 80), they will also add vigor to Whitman's strength that is absolutely necessary for him in order to remove himself from the next two vignettes. Whitman realizes that, like the night of his dream, the sea, though endlessly rich in possibilities, is full of dangers.

Having experienced the horror of both the darkness and the sea, Whitman attempts to extricate himself from the horrors of his dream. In the next narrative, Washington, the "mythical hero for America . . . crosses the water to safety" (M. Rainer, "Uroboric Incest," *WWQR,* 11). Whitman's voice, no longer dramatic, becomes the voice of a narrator telling about a past action. Though " 'a pastreading' ...... it is as happening in the present time of the dream world" (Waskow, *Explorations in Form,* 151).

> Now of the old war-days . . the defeat at Brooklyn;
> Washington stands inside the lines . . he stands on the entrenched hills
> amid a crowd of officers,
> His face cold and damp . . . . he cannot repress the weeping drops . . . . he
> lifts the glass perpetually to his eyes . . . . the color is blanched
> from his cheeks,
> He sees the slaughter of the southern braves confided to him by their
> parents.
>
> The same at last and at last when peace is declared.
> He stands in the room of the old tavern . . . . the wellbeloved soldiers all pass
> through,
> The officers speechless and slow draw near in their turns,
> The chief encircles their necks with his arm and kisses them on the cheek,
> He kisses lightly the wet cheeks one after another . . . . he shakes hands
> and bids goodbye to the army. (*LG 1855,* 112)

Terry Eagleton asserts that, "Time is not a medium we move in as a bottle might move in a river; it is the very structure of human life itself" (*Literary Theory,* 54). Freud argues that the dream-work changes temporal relations into spatial ones. In dreams, time becomes irrelevant. The event itself is kept in mind and the chronological order is either altered or dismissed. Time is a notion that belongs to the waking state of consciousness when man organizes his existence within a system. In the dream-world events are placed outside any temporal frame. The fact that the Washington vignette and the Indian squaw vignette take place in a period of time well defined proves that Whitman has recovered his equanimity. Richard Chase asserts that the whole poem is "the descent of the as yet unformed and unstable ego into the id" (*Walt Whitman Reconsidered,* 54). "The Sleepers" is indeed the descent of the ego into the id, but only to a point: Whitman's identification with his afflicted and confused sleepers who are prototypes of misery. The moment he tries to disassociate from them and to place his sleepers and himself within a well-defined period of time, Whitman will apostatize their world for the external world of reality. It is in this world that the phenomenon of consciousness arises and functions. Freud explains the relationship existing between the id, ego, and time. "The logical laws of thought do not apply in the id, and this is true above all of the law of contradiction. Contrary impulses exist side by side, without canceling each other out or diminishing each other: at the most they may converge to form compromises under the dominating economic pressure towards the discharge of energy. There is nothing in the id that could be compared with negation; and we perceive with surprise an exception to the philosophical theorem that space and time are necessary forms of our mental acts. There is nothing in the id that corresponds to the idea of time; there is no recognition of the passage of time, and - a thing that is most remarkable and awaits consideration in philosophical thought - no alteration in its mental processes is produced by the passage of time" (*New Introductory Lectures 2,* 106). Freud states that the 'id' knows no judgement of value, no good and evil, no morality. It is directly linked to the pleasure principle. "The ego is that portion of the id which was modified by the proximity and influence of the external world....[T]he ego must observe the external world, must lay down an accurate picture of it in the memory - traces of its perceptions. ... In that way it (ego) has dethroned the pleasure principle which dominates the course of events in the id....and has replaced it by the reality principle, which promises more certainty and greater success. The relation to time......is also introduced into the ego by the perceptual system; it can scarcely be doubted that the mode of operation of that system is what provides the origin of the idea of time. But what distinguishes the ego from the id quite especially is a tendency to synthesis in its contents, to a combination and unification in its mental processes which are totally lacking in the id" (*New Introductory Lectures 2,* 108).

The third story starts nonchalantly and it is an invitation to the public to listen to the storyteller. What follows is less private and less dreamlike because "Whitman extricates himself from the confusion of his dark dreams by pushing the dreams into the past and by creating a temporal frame" (J. P. Warren, "Catching the Sign," *WWQR,* 24). The gigantic swimmer is metamorphosed into a gigantic personality, George Washington, "whose role in the battle and his later reunion with the troops are sentimentally embellished" (Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America,* 13).

In this vignette, Whitman integrates two different events but of paramount importance in the American Revolution: the defeat at Brooklyn and the final victory of the American Army. Although the poem is Whitman's psychological quest to define himself, to know and let everyone know "where my feet stand," the poet does find time to correlate his personal anxiety with the "anxiety about the democratic dream of America" (Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet,* 120). Ten years before the devastating Civil War, Whitman felt it was his duty to remind his American fellows that soldiers from the south and the north sacrificed their lives for the American dream: independence. The legendary figure of Washington emphasizes

Whitman's belief that the battle of Brooklyn might have been a national disaster if Washington had not gathered all his inner forces and inspired the troops to fight valiantly for the cause they believed in. Whitman himself considered the Fourth of July the most significant holiday in America, more important than Christmas or Easter. It is also perfectly recognizable that Washington becomes Whitman's answer to his own doubts: to fight till the end in order to bring his own drama into full consciousness, discern his own feelings, find a meaningful direction, and emerge victoriously from darkness to light. Whitman's frustration when he witnesses the death of the swimmer and his tremendous pain when faced with the death of the sailors are similar to Washington's mute agony when "He sees the slaughter of the southern braves confined to him by their parents." In a way, Whitman, without intimating directly, seems to identify with Washington. His defeat at Brooklyn is not only a historical defeat but a personal one as well. As for Whitman, his personal defeat consists in his not being able to publicly accept his "destiny," and to surmount his own anxieties and doubts.

The General is powerless in front of death/destruction/war, as powerless as the swimmer/the crew have been when faced with the horrendous forces of the sea. In " 'The Sleepers,' the powerless of the great General is contrasted with the murderous power of the sea, which in the two preceding stories has destroyed a middle-aged swimmer and a ship" (E. H. Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 50). Nevertheless, the death of "the southern braves" was not in vain; they died so that peace may be achieved. When "peace is declared," Washington's tears of grief become tears of joy. Encircling the necks of his soldiers, kissing them on the cheek, and shaking hands, the general "sadly parts with the survivors" (Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body,* 23). Betsy Erkkila avers that "the figure that Whitman evokes represents a rebellion against more patriarchal models of authority associated with the feudal past" (*Whitman the Political Poet,* 121).

The narrative expresses Whitman's esteem for Washington, though his feelings toward the Revolutionary War are mixed. To create an extraordinary effect and to deepen his people's consciousness toward the real significance of the word "war," Whitman mentions only the word "peace" never "victory" "as if he knew that if there were to be another 'family' war, there could be no victor. Like the wet cheeks of the soldiers who file past Washington, the scene is drenched in sorrow, a sorrow that in part reflects the pained awareness of the cost, in lost lives, of victory and peace. Even before the Civil War, Whitman has begun to mourn the war dead" (Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet,* 121). Furthermore, in this vignette, Whitman, uses the historical present in order to emphasize the tragic consequences of a 'family' war on the brink of breaking out.

Waskow avers that the narrative itself "is again concerned with cold, weeping, and death, but it moves in the end toward peace and comradeship, restating Whitman's typical movement toward comradeship when he is wounded by experience" (*Explorations in Form,* 151). Miller underlines that, "the poem is in one sense a chronicle of the death of men, the husband in the coffin, the middle aged swimmer, and now the Revolutionary War soldiers" (*Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 81).

The portrait of the General, limned more indirectly and less melodramatic, ushers in the presentation of Whitman's mother, a woman as torn by unfulfilled desires as the poet himself. In the next vignette, Whitman, using the simple past tense, demonstrates that he is implementing the real narrative technique and that he is almost out of his frightening night experiences. Whitman has achieved the power to face the reader and to tell him a story directly. Though the narrative will treat the same ideas: loss and separation (very similar to death itself), no longer does the poet hide behind a shield of indirections.

Superficially speaking, Louisa van Velsor's story is simple, but the implications are very deep. In her childhood, a beautiful Indian 'squaw' had come to Louisa's homestead. Young

Louisa instantly fell in love with her. Later in the afternoon, the Indian went away never to be seen again. A feeling of anxiety mixed with an unshared desire remained in Louisa's heart for a long time, but, unfortunately, the Indian woman never returned.

The Indian's entry in the story, so strangely and powerfully compelling, creates an aura of timelessness. Whitman presents the story as a personal reminiscence, "what my mother told me one day as we sat at dinner together." Whitman takes us from the historical past and, in a spectacular shift, brings us nearer to his own past, as if he were trying to explain his own conflicts, conflicts strongly correlated to his love for his mother. Beginning the vignette with "Now," the poet proves that he, as sleeper, is no longer present, no longer involved. He has succeeded in extricating himself from the entangled labyrinth of his dreams. The story of the "red squaw," placed in Whitman's past, is not totally separated from the present, a present full of tormenting pains but organically connected with the past.

> Now I tell what my mother told me today as we sat at dinner together,
> Of when she was a nearly grown girl living home with her parents on the
> old homestead.
> A red squaw came one breakfasttime to the old homestead,
> On her back she carried a bundle of rushes for rushbottoming chairs;
> Her hair straight shiny coarse black and profuse halfenveloped her face,
> Her step was free and elastic . . . . her voice sounded exquisitely as she
> spoke.
>
> My mother looked in delight and amazement at the stranger,
> She looked at the beauty of her tallborne face and full and pliant limbs,
> The more she looked upon her she loved her,
> Never before had she seen such wonderful beauty and purity;
> She made her sit on a bench by the jamb of the fireplace . . . . she cooked
> food for her,
> She had no work to give her but she gave her remembrance and fondness.
> The red squaw staid all the forenoon, and toward the middle of the
> afternoon she went away;

O my mother was loth to have her go away,
All the week she thought of her . . . . she watched for her many a month,
She remembered her many a winter and many a summer,
But the red squaw never came nor was heard of there again.(*LG 1855,* 113)

Seldom can we find any portraits in Whitman's poetry and even more rarely women-portraits. When he depicts a woman, she generally assumes the image of an archetypal mother who has "no discontents or satisfactions. This archetypal gratified and gratifying mother, the mother as selfish nurturer is very different from the love hungry mother depicted in "The Sleepers." In this episodic poem, Whitman's mother, Louisa van Velsor Whitman, is defined by unsatisfied desire" (Vivian R. Pollak, "In Loftiest Spheres," *Breaking Bounds,* 99). In this segment, Whitman brings forth a significant life experience about which he only seems to talk casually. There is neither anger nor sorrow in this vignette. However, its significance lies in the story itself and its clear message: human beings must and will, eventually, learn to relate to each other.

Erkkila writes that, "as Whitman descends into his own past" (*Whitman the Political Poet,* 121), we feel his sense of nostalgia and national loss as well as "his historical authenticity" (Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body,* 23). Compared to the other three chronicles, the fourth one is a happy account though profoundly marked by the squaw's abrupt departure. Whitman's mother is attracted by the purity of the Indian, perfect in body and spirit. The Indian remains in the memory of Whitman's mother and, then, the memory is transferred to the son who will record it into his poem.

Maurice Kenny, in his article "Whitman's Indifference to Indians," writes that, Whitman "devotes a passage to an Indian 'squaw' though she was a somewhat supernatural being who appeared before his mother" (*The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman*, 35). The Indian woman, the original energy of the American soil, carrying "a bundle of rushes for rushbottoming" unfinished chairs, is herself unfixed, uncommitted, a drifting soul, as drifting as Whitman's. Though elusive and ephemeral, the Indian woman is given an outstanding position in the poem, because, like George Washington, she represents a cultural icon. Kenny asserts that, "Whitman was obviously unaware that the word 'squaw' was a derogatory term that referred to a woman's reproductive organs" ("Whitman's Indifference to Indians" 35).

The story of Louisa van Velsor and the Indian squaw seems a little strange if we consider the fact that Whitman never paid much attention to the first inhabitants of the American continent. On the contrary, we have to point out that Whitman always showed a particular pride when the west was opened by the white pioneers. He seems to have ignored the cruel truth: the Indians had been massacred by both the settlers and the American Army and the survivors had been subjected to the painful process of assimilation in the name of the superior white civilization. That is why Maurice Kenny indignantly explains that, Whitman "was the poet of the ordinary person - butcher, baker, candlestick maker but not of the Indian Chief. He sang the bus driver, the factory hand, the mechanic, the farmer, the ferry man of Brooklyn but not the feathered warrior" ("Whitman's Indifference to Indians," 28). Nevertheless, the story is part of the organic development of the dream and underlines the idea of love ending in loss as well as Whitman's own fear of attachment not to be abandoned. The idea is not unfamiliar. At the beginning of the poem, Whitman, surrounded by "a gay gang of blackguards" and reaching a state of elated euphoria, hides from them, being afraid that too much love can hurt or kill.

Whitman emphasizes the power of love, power that can dissolve any conceivable boundaries: gender, class, race. Love brings everything to flourish, each in terms of its own potential, and, thus, it becomes the true teacher of open, free societies. Love has been the prime substance of all things since the original sin. Plato identified it with harmony and the celestial music which, in turn, was linked to the mysterious Orphic lyre and song. After all, love for his human fellows is one of the main ideas the poem is built on. "Love opens inward toward the mystery of character, destiny, and worth, and at the same time outward, toward the world and the wonder of beauty, where it sets the lover at odds . . . . with the moral world" (Campbell, *The Masks of God - Creative Mythology,* 187).

Martin sees in the bond established between the two women a homoerotic liaison, though he himself underlines that the passage is much more than that: it is relevant for "Whitman's deep sense of caring for those he felt to be victims" (*The Homosexual Tradition,* 13). The narrative reveals the mute understanding between two women that belong to two different social groups, but both marginalized within the broader social frame. If Washington stands for a patriarchal model, "the relationship between [Whitman's] mother and squaw suggests a primary, prematriarchal bond as the foundation of democratic community" (Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet*, 121).

The mute bond established between the two women and its erotic flavor are, however, obscured by a more significant image: the disappearance of an ideal way of living in harmony with nature. Even if she had wanted to, the Indian woman could never have remained "on the 'homestead' (government land taken from the Indians)" (Whelan, "Do I Contradict Myself?" *WWQR,* 35). Had she stayed there longer, she would have been "bound in the white man's architecture" (Whelan, "Do I Contradict Myself?" *WWQR,* 35). Her sudden departure signifies the loss of a culture as the Americans advanced westward. The bond between the two women is, therefore, set against the dark side of American history when the white population tried to erase the "native American culture in the name of civilization and progress" (Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet,* 122). "The story is the most extended treatment of desire between women and also between races in all *Leaves of Grass*......(T)his central scene of cross-racial and female-female attraction is represented by Whitman as being his mother's desire, long and fondly and lovingly remembered by both of them" (Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Confusion of Tongues" in *Breaking Bounds,* 25).

The fourth vignette acquires a special place in the progress of the dream. The Washington vignette deals with an important event in American history. The new story introduced in the dream is directly connected with lived experience that takes place not in a distant past but in a more recent past. It is one episode in the life of Louisa van Velsor. Louisa told her son the story, the story was recorded by Whitman and, then, transferred in his personal dream as an impression directly linked with the realities of the day. The story of Louisa and the Indian squaw breaks down any barriers between races. It also attempts to redefine the relations between people: love and respect. The story is an innocent encounter between two women, both marginalized members in a male-dominated society. Though belonging to two different races, their destinies are bound together against a corrupted society that despises and condemns the difference. The fourth vignette subtly introduces the issue of race and difference that will be developed in the next lyric deleted by Whitman after 1876. "The Sleepers," an unpolitical poem, succeeds in heightening the reader's sensitivity to race and human spirituality.

Part 3: Hell on Earth

The inner peace and composure, attained by Whitman, dreamer-observer, while recounting the four stories, are abruptly transformed into an unexpected outburst of anger addressed to a male figure. The sudden irruption of the poet's unsatisfied drives forces him to put on another mask behind which the reader finds an explosive hero who is the narrator himself.

> Now Lucifer was not dead . . . . or if he was I am his sorrowful heir;
> I have been wronged . . . . I am oppressed . . . . I hate him that oppresses me,
> I will either destroy him, or he shall release me.
>
> Damn him! how he defiles me,
> How he informs against my brother and sister and takes pay for their blood,

How he laughs when I look down the bend after the steamboat that carries
away my woman.

Now the vast dusk bulk that is the whale's bulk . . . . it seems mine,
Warily, sportsman! though I lie so sleepy and sluggish, my tap is death.

Kristeva argues that, " the subject's first elaboration - reconstruction of his past history takes the form of a narrative: 'The first narrative, the individual's first true past, is elaborated during the Oedipal phase. In other words, in a phase, when all the previous stages are taken up again, but this time within the frame of desire and the problematic of castration. [T]his narrative structure is characterized by a repetition with a momentary resumption of a free circulation of energy rapidly followed by binding of that energy with unconscious representations which are overdetermined by the family triangle (*Revolution,* 90-91). The matrix of this narrative is centered on an explicit or implicit "I," a projection of the paternal role in the family. This position is mobile; it can take on all the roles in the family and is as changeable as a mask. In such a narrative, the speaking subject is forced to recognize himself in the multiple aspects the "I" will assume. The "masks or protagonists [correspond] to the signifying process' abutments against parental and social structures"(Kristeva, *Revolutio*n, 91). Because the poem is a quest for truth, the hero of the quest becomes anxious "to appropriate the truth of social and kinship relations. [Such a quester is to be understood as] a "problematic hero whose psychology is never complete" (Kristeva, *Revolution,* 92).

"Now Lucifer was not dead . . . . or if he was I am his sorrowful heir" introduces a Lucifer that can be read from a plethora of angles. Lucifer is the mythical arch traitor who rebelled against the celestial father. Lucifer deprived Adam and Eve of their Eden and of God's love as a father deprives a son of his possessive love for his mother. Considering only the first line, Lucifer may be looked upon as the evil oppressor. But Lucifer's roles change very fast and he departs from his well-known image of evil doer and becomes, in turn, the oppressed, the son, the slave, the rebel fighting for acceptance and freedom.

If Lucifer is regarded as the oppressed son, the passage expresses Whitman's wrath unconsciously related to his unresolved oedipal conflicts. Miller states that the Indian squaw "like the merciless sea is another destructive maternal figure. Unconsciously, the "I" is recording the young man's feeling of maternal betrayal by projecting the betrayal upon the Indian, since he cannot dare to indict the mother directly. At the same time, the squaw, like the father, is the rival since she has stolen his mother's affection. Thus, when he is ready to 'destroy his rival, he suddenly shifts to the masculine pronoun" (*Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 81) and becomes Lucifer, the angel who fought against the supreme father whose mythic malice has created the conflict between father and son, the Oedipus conflict.

"I have been wronged . . . . I am oppressed . . . . I hate him that oppresses me,/I will destroy him, or he shall release me" epitomizes the rebellious drive that "attacks what [Whitman} thinks symbolizes hated qualities in his father. The father is both Whitman's interpretation of his real father and the poet's unconscious superego; if Whitman could destroy an uncontrollable object, he might be less troubled by the uncontrollable inner self" (Black, *Whitman's Journey into Chaos,* 133). Whitman is, thus, voicing, loudly and overtly, his own murderous oedipal tendencies.

With "Damn him! how he defiles me," Whitman reintroduces the image of the hand. It is not the erotic or soothing hand, but the hand of a cruel father who "laughs when I look down the bend, after the steamboat that carries away my woman." The disappearance of the woman "down the bend" recalls both the water image and the line in the dream sequence, "I would sound up the shadowy shores to which you are journeying." "My woman" is an ambiguous term that may designate a wife, a mother, or any woman Whitman cannot have or cannot win because he "feels too weak to compete for her" (Black, *Whitman's Journey into Chaos,* 133). The line may also be regarded as the gruesome image of a slave being sold "down the river" by the cruel Southern master.

"Damn him" related to "I feel ashamed to go naked about the world" emphasizes Whitman's feeling of impotency when faced with the intimidating figure of the father. Whitman internalizes his aggressiveness within a verbal threat and, hiding behind a new mask, he pretends to be "the vast dusk bulk that is the whale's bulk." He becomes a potential force but chooses to lie "sleepy and sluggish" in the "feminine sea" (E. H. Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 83). "My tap is death" is an intimidation only uttered because the "sportsman," who could not reach the phallic pier, cannot as yet fight against the father.

In an earlier draft, Whitman's intentions considering the identity of Lucifer's "sorrowful heir" appears to have been more evident. Lucifer, the black angel, becomes the black slave "wronged" and "oppressed" by the Southern master.

> Damn him, how he defiles me!
> Hoppler of his sons, breeder of children and trader of them -
> Selling his daughters and the breast that fed his young.
> Informer against my brother and sister and taking pay for their blood.
> He laughs when I looked from my iron necklace after the steamboat that
> carried away my woman.

The curse uttered by Lucifer's heir is the curse that falls on the oppressor who violates human rights and imposes his unjust rules on the human body, mind, and soul.

The lyric, excised after 1876, becomes an abusive parable against slavery and predicts the slave's inevitable fight for freedom. Described as "a hell-name and a curse" and "a God of revolt," Lucifer's heir becomes "a figure of revolutionary defiance and a sign of the evil of slavery at the foundation of American Republic" (Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet*, 122). At that time the most ardent issues of America were slavery and the threat of a Civil War. Whitman turns to his own time and penetrates deeper into "the racial and racist consciousness of America" (Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet,* 122). Whitman is fighting for the complete liberation of all human beings, no matter the color of their skin. He believes that no man must ever become the master of another man. "Every man who claims or takes power to own another man as his property," writes Whitman, "stabs me in the heart of my own rights - for they only grow from that vast principle, as a tree grows from the seed" (*DN,III*, 761).

"The Sleepers" without this lyric loses part of its profound message."This crucial omission depoliticized the poem; for, like the other passage, these lines enhance the climatic structure of the poem" (Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body,* 24). If we put together the Indian squaw passage and the Lucifer passage, we understand that Whitman reveals two contrasting ways of existence: "the egalitarian and essentially matriarchal vision of mother and squaw" (Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet,* 123) and the patriarchal vision in which the master, seen through the eyes of the slave, is the tyrant whose viciousness appalls Whitman. The master represents a double exploitation: sexual and moral.

The last two lines of the lyric convey what J. C. Furnes calls the Spartacus complex. It is the belief that the masters will be crushed by a massive revolt, a revolt Whitman might have considered although "sometimes he gave in to his culture's notion of black inferiority" (Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet,* 123). Reynold states that, "Stirred as he may have been by the new antislavery associates, he was still far from being an abolitionist. He maintained a moderate course on slavery issue, much like the 1860 Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln. Well into the second year of his administration, Lincoln would insist that his main goal was to save the Union. Whitman, in 1860, had a similar goal, but his strategy for saving the Union still lay in the realm of poetry, not politics" (*Walt Whitman's America).* Whitman will cancel the lyric from "The Sleepers" because, in a poem dedicated to human love, revenge has no place. Reconciliation becomes the key word in the last fragments of the poem. National reconciliation, after the Civil War, must have become Whitman's rationale when he decided to delete the lyric.

Lucifer's "sorrowful heir" acquires yet another interpretation: Lucifer is the angel who mutinied against the supreme father, God. Whitman "attempts to mythologize the historically specific political struggles as universal and divinely ordained" (Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet,* 92). Lucifer becomes a pattern of the yearning and striving and creative spirit. "Now Lucifer was not dead - or if he was, I am his sorrowful heir" plunges the reader into the myth of creation that polarized the whole universe and established the Law of the Father. The confrontation between God and the rebel angel who refuses God's imposed laws generated a sordid history of collision, vituperation, violence, and blood. Lucifer stands for the fighter against an omniscient and omnipotent God who exacts unquestionable submission. Lucifer fights for freedom of expression. Freedom means the right to be different and accepted within society. Lucifer falls because he wants to be free and because he refuses to bow down in front of a God who is above law and order because he is the law and the order. Lucifer rejects imposed authority. Lucifer's fall is a triumph of humanism. Lucifer fights not for supremacy but for acceptance.

However, Lucifer, not submissive enough to be kept in heaven, is not evil enough to be destroyed. His presence brings, from time to time, order and equilibrium in the world. He is the figure who opposes any psychological oppression that may lead to despair and a general desensitizing of all emotions. It is against this moral and spiritual paralysis that Whitman fights when he assumes the mask of Lucifer. Lucifer's disobedience epitomizes the exercise of individual judgement and freedom of choosing and deciding for himself. He stands for the ideal of humanity to improve man's standing within a society that follows the fixed rules of the patriarch and ignores the difference: different opinion, skin color, sexual orientation.

In the last two lines of the lyric, Whitman will assume another mask: the Leviathan. God's victory over the Leviathan establishes God's authority on earth. Humanity must obey and rejoice in the omnipresence of God. In "The Sleepers," the Leviathan, having learned the biblical lesson, is "sleepy and sluggish" waiting, at the bottom of the sea, for a propitious moment to fight against the inconceivable power of a god who demands total obedience; otherwise, he condemns people to misery for no real reason. Assuming the identity of nature itself, the whale and the sea, Whitman becomes a potentially "life-threatening force" (Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body,* 24) ready to fight but choosing not to.

The lyric is of paramount importance for the poem. It is the cornerstone of "The Sleepers." Whitman's discontentment, though present from the beginning of the poem, is not really detectable until now. Hidden, blurred, or camouflaged, his bitterness is only suspected and felt. However, it grows steadily and reaches a climax in this condensed fragment. All the strings of the poem are tied up within the lyric which represents the very place where Whitman wants to bring his reader.

During his quest, Whitman, dreamer and quester, experiences sexual relations, pleasurable but forbidden, faces different kinds of death, loss, and separation, and accumulates his dissatisfaction directed toward the external world of the day. He is ready to fight but, had he struck and destroyed his rival, the final sections of the poem would have been meaningless. The whale/Whitman retreats into the protective sea to brood. Whitman prepares the reader for the last fragments of the poem which become the harmonious conclusion of an optimistic spirit. He will emerge to light a new and well prepared man, ready to face the hostilities that rule over a bigoted society. The lyric bridges Whitman's visceral acrimony with the hymn of reconciliation that ends the poem. Reaching the depths of his own psyche and of "the national psyche [Whitman moves] from darkness to light, winter to summer, hate to love" (Erkkila, *Whitman the political Poet,* 124).

Chase avers that, "The dark actions of the poem having been allayed, the ostensibly ill-assorted personages having been brought into relation, there can follow a pleasurable idyll which celebrates forms of unity" (*Walt Whitman Reconsidered,* 55). Only by approaching the depths of his inner turmoil can Whitman return to reunion and contact with the whole world and the universe. Had he not voiced his painful frustrations, Whitman would have found difficult "to accept the daytime world of disunity as part of the cycle which always leads back to the night and love and the Great Mother" (Martin, *Homosexual Tradition,* 13).

Whitman will continue his quest "onward and onward" toward light. Whitman comes to understand that "a retreat is necessary before experience can be felt as something other that an assault" (Waskow, *Explorations in Form,* 151). His dream fantasies will be entirely different: a "merging and wish fulfillment in which everyone participates" (Waskow, *Explorations in Form*, 153).

Part 3: The Myth of Heaven

The eruption of the ungovernable id is stopped as abruptly as it started. Whitman's sudden change in vision, images, and tone underlines "the poet's acceptance of the world, an acceptance made possible by his perception of unity in time and space" (Martin, *Homosexual Tradition,* 13). The atmosphere of the poem is modified to reflect the new mood of the dreamer-quester who has just found his way out of the terrifying night. He was imprisoned in his world of doubts and confusion. He searched for his own standing in a homophobic society. Now,Whitman, not fully awake, recovers his composure. His new posture "makes the merging and dissolving of distinctions in the poem a moral force" (Mishra, "'The Sleepers' and Some Whitman Notes,"*WWQR,* 35). He will, from now on, ascertain the significance of love in integrating man in the universal cycle of life.

The personal and political tension that originated the poem is not really solved. It is made more acceptable by Whitman's new perception of night and sleep. They acquire the meaning of spiritual regeneration. He transforms the nightmare into a glorious vision that unites all the polarities and "help[s] alleviate life's sorrows" (Knapp, *Walt Whitman*, 201).

If we read the poem without the Lucifer segment, Louisa van Velsor's story "leads into the sublime shift of awakening and rebirth" (Whelan, "Do I CONtradict Myself? *WWQR*, 38). If we read the poem with "Now Lucifer Was Not Dead," Whitman's anger addressed to a changeable male-figure that represents an oppressor any way we look at releases the poet from the chains of his "dark secrets." Liberated, Whitman can concentrate on the process of healing and restoration.

From experiencer to narrator, from narrator to teacher, Whitman, "overwhelmed with friendliness" will issue didactic statements:

> A show of summer softness . . . . a contact of something unseen . . . . an amour
> of the light and air,
> I am jealous and overwhelmed with friendliness,
> And I will go gallivant with the light and the air myself,
> And I have an unseen something to be in contact with them also.(*LG1855,* 113)

The night fantasy becomes a resolver of tension and the poet re-establishes his contact with the external world, "an amour of the light and air." If Whitman is awake or still sleeping is hard to specify. The next line, "And I will go gallivant with the light and the air myself" places the poem within the same timeless dream-frame. However, "And I will go" underlines his desire to reintegrate in the day light world some time in a near future when the quest is completed.

In 1871, Whitman removed the line, "And I have something unseen to be in contact with them also." Killingsworth states that the excised line "may refer to the penis; it anticipates a similar reference in the 1856 "Bunch Poem" ("Spontaneous Me"). It also suggests, however, the body's instinctual life (for which the penis is a synecdoche) that rises to meet the demands of nature, the arousing light and air which in turn suggest elements of imagination. Instinct and imagination, on which the hope of the romantic is based, provide the speaker's salvation by returning him to the sympathetic life of eros" (*Whitman's Poetry of the Body,* 24). Perrin Warren relates "the unseen something" to "the hiding of douceurs" and the work of "journeymen divine." It is this "unseen something" that will help Whitman establish a new interdependence between the world and himself. The new contact based on love will transform the poet's indirection, helplessness, and frustration into revelry and fulfillment. Reconnected with the world and partially liberated from his feelings of guilt, Whitman assumes a conciliatory voice. He will introduce the seasonal cycle of nature seen as the background of man's life. "The seasons of the year, ages, nights and days," Bakhtin states, "serve to plot the course of an individual life and the life of nature" (*The Dialogic Imagination,* 208).

> O love and summer! you are in my dreams and in me,
> Autumn and winter are in the dreams . . . . the farmer goes with his thrift,
> The droves and crops increase . . . . the barns are wellfilled. (*LG 1855,* 113)

"The realization of the life returning, first demonstrated by the sexual experience, is confirmed in the seasonal cycle" (Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body,* 25). The universal cycle is integrated in the sexual cycle of the individual and "out of the penis is born the cycle of the soul, out of his erection, ejaculation (the pun is crucial), and reerection comes Whitman's faith in the cycle of the world" (Martin, *Homosexual Tradition,* 33).

Whitman equates man's life with a universe perfectly organized, a universe full of diversity, a universe that is never static. In Whitman's universe, order does not imply uniformity and platitude; order means movement "onward and onward" and transformation due to the antipodal forces within. "Whitman tries to show humanity's invisible 'hold-together' at work. If we trouble too much over what seems to be irretrievable, unrestorable, irrecuperable, then we will miss the sublime moment" (Whelan, "Do I Contradict Myself?" *WWQR*, 37).

"Elements merge in the night" and the previous line, "And I have something unseen to be in contact with them also" will bring together all the characters departed from the poem. "Elements merge in the night" must be connected with "The night pervades them and enfolds them." Both lines emphasize the healing powers of the night. In the moon light, "it is moon and twilight" (*LG 1855,* 108), light and dark coexist and interact, annihilating all polarities. During the day, subject and object are always two and separated. It is the night that restores the world to grace and unites the antipodes. During the night, Whitman feels he can restore his suffering sleepers and bring them all home: the beautiful swimmer, the crew of the ship, the red squaw, the midnight widow, the criminal, the ennuyee, the onanist, the female that loves unrequited, and so on.

> The antipodes, and every one between this and them in the dark,
> I swear they are averaged now . . . . one is no better than the other,
> The night and sleep have likened them and restored them. (*LG 1855,* 114)

The word "now" emphasizes that all the sleepers are being averaged "at this present moment in the act of the poet's saying and writing. Whitman transforms the act of 'past-reading' into an act of present-saying. Moreover, he enables himself to state his positive vision of the relationship between apparent evil and eventual good, and the affirmation, in the simple 'I swear' is the first real assertion of the poet's belief in the elementary vigor of his words" (Perrin Warren, "Catching the Sign," *WWQR,* 27).

The "home coming" catalogue makes it clear that the afflicted sleepers are now sailing home to safety. However, they return "beyond months and years," suggesting that their voyage home takes place at some infinitely distant time in the future. The "home coming" catalogue does not contradict "onward we move, a gay gang of blackguards," on the contrary, it underlines the circular movement of the poem and Whitman's careful organization of his material. The catalogue is an incantatory performance of arriving and returning that proves that the quester is close to completing his journey of self-discovery. He himself is ready to come home. All the lost people are reinvigorated physically and morally. Agony, defeat, and death, seen as punishments or trials, are surmounted by the healing powers of the night and by Whitman's love for the "worstsuffering." The "confused," and "lost" quester realizes that all the contradictory forces that originated the quest, though a painful source of inner conflicts, are part of a universe in order and ruled by love.

> I swear they are all beautiful,
> Every one that sleeps is beautiful . . . . every thing in the dim night is beautiful,
> The wildest and bloodiest is over and all is peace.
>
> Peace is always beautiful,
> The myth of heaven indicates peace and night.
>
> The myth of heaven indicates the soul; (*LG 1855*, 115)

Whitman's myth of heaven is the soul that knows neither descent nor fall but only the real Eden: nature in all its majestic aspects. "The hidden themes of beauty and soul become explicit here" (Perrin Warren, "Catching the Sign," *WWQR*, 24). They emphasize how central to the poem the beauty of the soul is. Fear and isolation have indicated Whitman the path to love and peace: the soul of every living creature. He becomes meditative and draws the conclusion that the soul "comes from the embowered garden and looks pleasantly on itself and encloses the world."

Whitman's fascination with the soul and body becomes obvious in the next lines when he writes,

> Perfect and clean the genitals previously jetting, and perfect and clean the
> womb cohering,
> The head wellgrown and proportioned and plumb, and the bowels and joints
> proportioned and plumb. (*LG 1855,* 115)

Whitman attempts to find a way of harmonizing the sexual desires of the body with the spiritual needs of the mind and soul. In all his poems, Whitman "presents the human body, all its parts and members, all its organs and functions, in their anatomical, physiological aspects. It was important [for him] to demonstrate the whole remarkable complexity and depth of the human body and its life, to uncover a new meaning, a new place for human corporeality in the real spatial-temporal world. In the process of accommodating this concrete human corporeality, the entire remaining world also takes on new meaning and concrete reality, a new materiality; it enters into a contact with human beings that is no longer symbolic but material. Here the human body becomes a concrete measuring rod for the world, the measurer of the world's weight and of its value for the individual. And here we have the first attempt of any consequence to structure the entire picture of the world around the human conceived as a body . . . . " (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* 170-171).

The harmonious relation established by Whitman between soul and body becomes the foundation of Whitman's universe. The body is beautiful and the soul is beautiful. The soul appears, comes, lags behind, looks, and encloses the whole earth. The image of the soul in motion helps Whitman harmonize "the diverse" in a universe perfectly organized. He will place his sleepers and himself within this universe that is flowing toward spiritual progress.

> The universe is duly in order . . . . every thing is in its place,
> What has arrived is in its place, and what waits is in its place;

Invigorated by a feeling of inner peace, Whitman is free to imagine himself in harmony with the whole universe. Though Erkkila maintains that Whitman's world is a "universe in which everything is not in order and diversity does not cohere" (*Whitman the Political Poet,* 124), we must emphasize that Whitman's universe is a universe in which all the existing contradictions are reconciled and balanced. His universe comes with the astonishing modern concept that being different does not have to lead to exclusion but to acceptance.

> The diverse shall be no less diverse, but they shall flow and unite . . . . they
> unite now. (*LG 1855,* 115)

"The myth of heaven" has dissolved the distinctions between individuals and united them in perfect harmony with the surrounding world. Using a cordial voice, Whitman imagines all his sleepers flowing "hand in hand over the whole earth." The image of the water, so often used in the poem as a binding element of all the fragments, is reintroduced by Whitman, this time, with a new meaning: water flows, unites, and makes suffering more tolerable.

> The father holds his grown or ungrown son in his arms with measureless love
> . . . . and the son holds the father in his arms with measureless love,
> The scholar kisses the teacher and the teacher kisses the scholar . . . . the
> wrong is made right,
> The call of the slave is one with the master's call . . and the master salutes the
> slave,
> They pass the invigoration of the night and the chemistry of the night and
> awake. (*LG 1855,* 116)

The last catalogue of the poem becomes a celebration of love and life here and now. Whitman celebrates a "transformed world, a world redeemed by the Spirit and ruled by love. For Whitman, this world could be attained through an exploration of the possibilities of love. Like the Quakers, Whitman believed human regeneration and reconciliation to be possible in this world, and like them he had a radical vision of love" (Martin, *Homosexual Tradition,* 14).

The soul is beautiful, the universe is "duly in order," and the sleepers become "very beautiful as they lie unclothed." The night of his ordeals is no longer appalling, no longer the reverse of the day, but an alternative. It provides Whitman a sense of liberation and the poet, changing the pronouns, becomes himself: his powerful 'I.'

> I too pass from the night;

Changing "they" into "I," Whitman proves he himself is ready to start a new life or to "fade away" into the experience of the day. The confused, lost, and ill-assorted "I," in the opening lines of the poem, becomes the impotent and afflicted "they"/the other dreamers only to rebound, at the end of "The Sleepers," as a restored "I" invigorated by the therapeutic powers of the night.

Although, at the end of the poem, Whitman attempts to make the reader accept that his new vision will lead to his reintegration in the world, nature, and the universe, "beneath the idea of transcendence lies the impossible wish to return to primary symbiosis" (Black, *Whitman's Journey into Chaos,* 136) when mother and child are two, yet they seem one.

> I too pass from the night;
> I stay awhile away O night, but I return to you again and love you;
> I will duly pass the day O my mother and duly return to you;
> Not you will yield forth the dawn again more surely than you will yield forth
> me again,
> Not the womb yields the babe in its time more surely than I shall be yielded
> from you in my time. (*LG 1855,* 117)

Deleting the last two lines after 1855, Whitman proves that he is not fully satisfied if his present restoration and salvation do not bring back the security of the womb. When he writes "I will duly pass the day" (man's life on earth) and "duly return to you," Whitman underlines his wish to go back to Mother Earth, Mother Nature, or Mother Night. The line must be connected with the image of "gates" in the opening stanzas of the poem: "The new born emerging from gates and the dying emerging from gates." It is his wish to return to the womb of the universe to be reintegrated in the eternal cycle of the universe. Killingsworth states that, "The poet returns to the mother, the night, as if returning to the womb to be born again" (*Whitman's Poetry of the Body,* 25). Metaphorically interpreted, "O mother" epitomizes the generative womb of time: the beginning and the end which leads to a new beginning. From the point of view of either waking state or dream state, sleep would be darkness. Yet, from this darkness dreams are poured forth and out of darkness comes waking seen as a new birth. In Whitman's particular approach, his invocation "O mother," is not retreat but "acceptance of, or faith in, the meaningfulness of life. The "I" sees himself as part of an eternal cycle which is dominated not by a destructive maternal figure but by a goddess of fertility" (E. H. Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry,* 84). When, at the poem's conclusion, Whitman comes back to the realm of daylight, we are left with his glorious vision "Which returns to a state of primal consciousness that is prepatriarchal, cyclical rather than linear. His essentially matriarchal vision leads the poet back to the Night-Mother (forces of darkness, mystery, and unknown) to be reborn from her. Through this vision Whitman would come to his understanding of the world and greet all women and men as sleepers, each dreaming their own dream, yet each dreams like the others" (Martin, *Homosexual Tradition,* 15).

Conclusion

Whitman's fascination with the dream world, a world both various and unified at the same time, inspires the poet to write "The Sleepers," an intricate poem which confers public meaning to private thoughts. The most startling and modern poem in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass,* "The Sleepers" introduces the reader into the bewildering world of dreams. In this world, imagination is free to roam toward impossible to reach shores where ominous and protective forces, malignant and benign beings are merged into guileful images that appear from or disappear into the abyss of the night.

Conceived as a dream-poem, "The Sleepers," defined by scholars as chaotic, proves, at a close reading, that it is not Whitman's fantasia of the unconscious but a consciously rendered dream minutely and carefully organized by Whitman. "The Sleepers" is not a mechanical poem but a spontaneously sincere confession whose disparate fragments are organically connected by Whitman's originality.

This essay has attempted to demonstrate that "The Sleepers" is Whitman's willing descent into the dream world or the night of his ordeals in order to find his identity as man and poet. In his effort to define himself, Whitman opens the gate of the dream world, passes through thick layers of darkness where he must face his own doubts and fears. The poet and his disoriented self wander without direction to the mysterious levels of his heart of darkness in a painful journey of self-definition and self-revealing. During his excruciating nocturnal journey, the poet discovers that his own contradictions are polarities familiar to man's thoughts and feelings. They structure man's own reasoning regarding issues as life and death, true and false,health and illness, good and evil, confidence and fear. He understands that these antipodal forces appear sharply differentiated in those who do not know their identity be it sexual, religious, political, or racial. In such cases, contradictions, positive or negative in content, are accompanied by doubt. Doubt makes itself felt in the intellectual field and, little by little, it destroys even what seems most certain. The process ends up in an increasing indecision or loss of confidence or confusion. Afraid that his own doubts and fears related to his sexual proclivity may ruin the delicate balance of his newly poetic self, Whitman writes "The Sleepers," a confessional poem that helps him overcome his traumas, reveal "where my feet stand," and liberate him from keeping secret his "dark" sins that, otherwise, might have poisoned his life. Moreover, hiding and concealing go against Whitman's concept of "undrape" and reveal. However, in a rigid Puritanical society, it would have been inconceivable for anyone to confess his/her sexual orientation overtly and receive universal acceptance without punishment and exclusion. "The Sleepers" becomes an extended metaphor for a confessional poem that will eventually set the poet free from the constraints imposed by a bigoted society ruled by homophobia.

"The Sleepers" has its roots within Whitman's insight into his own contradictions as well as the social, political, and cultural antagonisms of his own time. His disquietudes and yearnings are projected upon the social canvas of a male-dominated society that brands as "outcast" anyone that has a different orientation, opinion, belief, color of the skin, and gender. Transforming his personal anxieties into universal ones, Whitman demonstrates he is not an impotent beholder but "a great leader, a great changer in the veins of men" (D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature,* 246). Whitman has the power to reveal and, then, to balance the antithetical elements in himself and in the world. "The beauty of this strategy," Whelan argues, "is in Whitman the poet's power to take advantage of the fear and desires with which Whitman the man would continue to fight" ("Do I Contradict Myself?" *WWQR,* 31).

"The Sleepers" shows that Whitman falls asleep on purpose in order to surrender himself to the dream world, to his afflicted sleepers, "to become the other dreamers," and to reveal his personal traumas impossible to render during the waking state. In his dream or in a dream that is not even his, Whitman embarks upon a quest for self-definition. He will travel through different strata of a homophobic society that rejects the difference: gender, race, sexual orientation. His sexual proclivity seen as a crime against society will be associated with the most ardent problems of the nineteenth century America: gender and race. They will be incorporated into the notion of "the other." Whitman's nocturnal journey becomes the space where "the other" lives. Within this space, Whitman will delve into the contradictory doubleness characteristic to any homosexual living in a heterosexual society: visible-invisible, here-there, hiding-revealing.

Whitman's desire to confess his sexual proclivity overcomes his fears and gives him the necessary strength to speak about the unspeakable during his imaginary flight through the night. It is a performance that breaks time and space barriers, negates, and undermines any conceivable closure. Within this open space, Whitman presents the reader images that are only juxtaposed and associated, but never really combined. Whitman's innovative style and linguistic sabotage establish a new relationship between the poet and the reader. His powerful "I" knows "a liberation from his 'I-ness,' which is a condition of the day. In the night, the "I" cannot choose but be 'you' " (Mishra, "Some Notes," *WWQR*, 35). The distance between the poet and the reader is bridged by Whitman's integration of "you" into the dreams of "I" who, in turn, becomes "she," "he," or "they." During his nightly quest, Whitman confesses his sexual proclivity without fear or guilt, relies on the reader's acceptance without judging or punishing him, and makes the dark space the ground on which poet and reader meet. The reader can only imagine Whitman's hot desires, which are not directly expressed in the poem. "The Sleepers" creates an intimacy between poet and reader, intimacy that becomes possible only in the dark.

"The Sleepers" is a unique poem, as unique as Whitman, man and poet. "The Sleepers" is an invitation "to penetrate beyond the rational world, with its systematic schemes, into irrational and unlimited spheres - into a meta world *Beyond Good and Evil,* to use Nietzsche's title. Whitman like Nietzsche rejected Christianity for all its 'don'ts,' its credos that teach people how to die but not how to live. And also like Nietzsche, Whitman encouraged 'dancing and laughing' so that humanity would be able to better partake of the lust for life in this world"(B. Knapp, *Walt Whitman,* 99). Whitman has committed his whole life to humanity. The poet of body and soul, of man and woman, of America and democracy, of country and city, of time and space, of day and night, of life and death, of the Earth and the universe, Whitman orchestrated his poetry to celebrate the future of mankind.

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