

Every Atom: Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"

CLASS EIGHT • Video Transcript

>>>Chris, in this session we want to talk a little bit about Whitman's politics and how politics plays into Song of Myself in the sections that we've all read for today we find the whole poem slowing down around the topics of war and scenes of war and from section 33 we get the amazing passage about "I am the hounded slave I wince at the bite of the dogs hell and despair are upon me" and it moves into the Battle of Goliad had in the lead-up to the Mexican War and the tale of the murder love 412 young men and then we move into a Revolutionary War scheme battle and that battle moves us to a scene on the ship of amputation and I think it's impossible to read this poem, it's a pre-civil war poem as we talked about and yet it's a poem that's also a post-civil war poem because Whitman continues to come back to it, to revise it, and to continue to incorporate it into Leaves of Grass after the war so when we hear something like "the hiss of the surgeon's knife, the gnawing teeth of his saw, Wheeze, cluck, swash of falling blood, short wild scream, and long, dull, tapering groan, These so, these irretrievable." I think we've we can't hope but look forward at this point to the Great War amputation the Civil War and so much I of politics, Whitman believed, lead to war and that would be one above focuses on Song of Myself and all of Leaves of Grass.

CHRIS: And what he foresaw and how it played out is the subject of this next session.

Whitman took a keen interest politics. Politics is a key part of Song of Myself, whether we're talking about issues of slavery, of war, of women's rights, how political is the poem? And how does politics weave its way through these lines?

ED: Well as we talked about earlier, Whitman's conception of democracy was one that pushed democracy beyond the political it had to begin in the political but it then had to extend, for the politics to work, extend through every aspect of our lives, every aspect of the culture. Religion had to become more democratic, sexuality to become more democratic, the military to become more democratic, institutions like marriage had to become more democratic, our reading habits had to become more democratic, we talk again and again about the problem of democracy in America was largely a problem of reading habits because readers tended to think of themselves as vessels into which wisdom was poured by an authority, by an author, and Whitman would say "no no reading is a wrestling match, you struggle, you fight with the author and you fight authority every step of the way" so a poem is never something which is put on a page and left there, a poem is what happens in the interaction between a living mind and words page. So for every reader a poem is a different thing and the reader has as much work to do as the poet has. So in a way Whitman invents what we come to think of as reader response criticism. He was well aware that every reader brings something new and different to a text and if you don't read passively but read actively, really read to struggle with the text, you'll make something new out of that text in every reading experience.

CHRIS: As he does with his poem through the course of his whole life.

ED: Yes, and so democratic reading is another way in which the politics of democracy diffusers out into every aspect of the culture around it. So there are all kinds of political things in this poem certainly, slavery was obviously one of the burning issues in the culture and its everywhere in this



poem you know we get "a runaway slave came to my house stopped outside I heard is motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile through the swung half door the kitchen I saw limpsy and weak and went where he sat on a log and let him in and assured him and brought water and filled a tub for his sweated body and bruised feet and gave him a room that entered from my own gave him some coarse clean clothes and remembered perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness and remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck ankles he stayed with me a week before he was recuperated and passed north I had him sit next me at table my fire log leaned in the corner." and in that passage we are introduced to the notion of slave escape narrative, something that the culture was well-versed in at this time and then we get also the beginnings of what's going to be a kind of motif that's going to pop up like a cork immersed in water that just keeps coming to the surface of concerns with slavery and then we begin to feel that all through this poem, the "I" that's speaking this poem who occasionally will merge with the slave and then come back out, we begin to see much like Thoreau saying were all enslaved, slavery is not just an issue of southern masters over African American people, holding mastery over African-American people, it's something that all of us are always struggling against, we're all enslaved to all kinds of conventions in thinking and ways of thinking, and so you can think of Song of Myself in one sense as a slave-escape narrative. It's a narrative about the "I" escaping all kinds of mastery and authority times.

CHRIS: Received wisdom and ideas.

ED: Yeah exactly. So it comes up in all kinds of ways, around that passage with the runaway slave, that passage about the runaway slave is framed by passage about the marriage of the trapper and the red girl, so it's taboo lines in the culture at the time, taboo racial lines, that keep getting crossed. You get the white trapper and the American Indian woman who touch, love, marry. You get the white narrator with the black runaway slave who come together and in that very physical passage they share a room, the narrator washes his feet of the slave.

CHRIS: They sit at the table together.

ED: Langston Hughes would pick up on that much later and have that democratic meal around the table in a poem called I, Too, one of his many nods to Whitman over his career. And then following that runaway slave passage, we have the passage about the 28 young man and the 28-year-old woman who's looking out at those young men and she is single, unmarried, she's rich, she lives in a mansion that she owns, and she's lonely. And she looks out at the 28 young working guys who have jumped in the river naked to cool off from a day working at the factory and she looks out and the "I" the poem follows her looking out at them all immersed in this homoerotic play she then imagines herself touching their bodies and moving across another boundary line, another taboo in the culture, one that's a taboo in sexuality, taboo in gender, and so you have a male "I" looking through the female looking to the males and then you put the reader behind that "I" looking at the "I" looking at the female so you at least have one cross gender moment to get out to those young men and if it's a female reader reading for a male narrator reading through female looking out that you get a double gender crossing. Everything in the poem and it's really I think captured in those 3 passages is testing what have been given to us as borders you don't cross: racial borders, gender borders, political borders, religious borders, all kinds of boundaries that can't be crossed and Whitman keep saying "can't cross them? Let's try it. Let's see." So much of the energy of the poem, it seems to me, is in the energy of those, what we would now think of as political crossings, but I

think in Whitman's time were actually, would have been perceived as simply, radical violations of social cultural taboos.

CHRIS: And this is happening in the run-up to the Civil War. How does that shape it?

ED: Well it's happening in the run-up to the Civil War and it's, in Whitman's mind, I think an attempt to prevent that war you know I think you really has that kind of faith in what a poem could do if only a democratic readership would latch onto it and begin to think about what it is to think democratically, that all kinds of things that were leading to that war would begin to dissipate, would begin to come apart. If you think of slavery itself, and the master-slave relationship, and we talked about the lines that generated poem, "I am the poet of slaves and the poet of the masters of slaves", the idea to speak from that perspective that combines all would be to perceive as a master that the master exists only when the slaves exists, that the slave exists only when the master exists. Melville at the same time is writing *Benito Cereno*, publishes it at exactly the same moment as the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in which we get the slaves that have become the masters on ship after the mutiny and how, in Melville's terms, there's no difference, ultimately, between the slave and the master, it's a simply endless cycle of slaves becoming masters and enslaving the other, in Whitman's mind that slave master dichotomy doesn't generate and ongoing slave-master relationship, what it does is, at a certain point when you understand and can occupy both the master and the slave, then the boundaries collapse.

CHRIS: But, then, let's say 1861 comes along, von Clausewitz tells us that war is the continuation of politics by other means, the democratic experiment of *Leaves of Grass* has not staved off the bloodshed, what is Whitman's reaction?

ED: Well it's a complex reaction, and part of it was to basically give up *Song of Myself*. I mean there was a point at which Whitman believed that *Leaves of Grass*, as he had written and conceived it and published it in the 1855 edition 1856, and 1860 edition, that it failed and that it was over and he began writing poems about the Civil War and put them together in a book called *Drum Taps* that he began to think about as a book totally separate *Leaves of Grass*, that *Leaves of Grass* was now a thing of the past, and I think he began thinking about *Leaves of Grass* at that point as this "I" that was all about unity at all about the possibility absorbing difference and living with difference and diversity in the same body, whether that body was a body politic or an individual human body, that the key was absorbing all that diversity and then the Civil War seemed blast apart, the country literally comes apart at the seams, it seems to prove that that we cannot contain that diversity. But then in the years right after the civil War, after he publishes *Drum Taps*, he begins to go back to *Leaves of Grass* and he begins to think "No wait a minute, that vision is a vision not just for this moment. We may have failed at this moment but it's still a vision for the future. There's going to be a reconstruction of unity and we're going to need that same "I", that same democratic "I" to come up, and what has always amazed me about Whitman's dealing with that book in the years just following the Civil War when he developed the 1867 edition, he's had it set in a typeface that would match the drum taps type face and then the book comes out and he takes the unbound copy of the drum taps poems and I always think of it as an act of suturing, he sutures them in to the back of *Leaves of Grass* and it's his first attempt to pull the war into "*Leaves of Grass*" as a part of the ongoing sense of struggle and division that ultimately will lead to a greater unity.

CHRIS: So that in the end for Song of Myself to be the true area of his dwelling, the true plenitude, it will have to incorporate all the heartache and tragedy and bloodshed of the war.

ED: Yes to the point that at the end of his life Whitman would say the Civil War is the very center and heart of Leaves of Grass. If it hadn't been for the war there wouldn't be Leaves of Grass.