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"Of the Woman First of All": Walt Whitman and Women's Literary History

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"OF THE WOMAN FIRST OF ALL": WALT WHITMAN AND WOMEN'S LITERARY HISTORY

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"If you are American, then Walt Whitman is your imaginative father and mother, even if, like myself, you have never composed a line of verse."

-Harold Bloom, "Introduction." Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* i.

*The quotation in the title is by Walt Whitman from Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 2:331. The full quote can be read in chapter 1.

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1. "The Search for Lost Foremothers": Feminist Literary Genealogy and Walt Whitman

> "I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
> And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man."
> (Whitman, "SoM" 1:425-426).

Walt Whitman's passionate and hungry verse fascinated many early feminists, and female writers known for their dynamic contributions to the American canon of literature openly displayed their love for his works. Adrienne Rich, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, H.D., and Willa Cather represent a few of the women who were inspired by Whitman's poetry and paid tribute to him in works of their own. It is fairly simple to show that Whitman was significant to these later authors, but more complex to explore the ways a male author can be situated within a discussion of women's literary history. This study will analyze the function of "inspiration," in literature, then will consider Whitman's relationships with women, his depictions of women, and finally, the many female writers who responded to him favorably.

Men and women are in conversation throughout literary history, and this thesis analyzes Whitman's role amongst female writers during the literary shift towards gender equality and female liberation. In this chapter, I will discuss the feminist search for lost literary foremothers, and I will unite this topic with the argument that many women who strive to create a space for themselves within the literary world are attracted to Whitman's writings. Critics such as Kate H. Winter, Sherry Ceniza, and Betsy Erkkila have recognized that Whitman's poetry and politics were important for several different female writers. I will discuss the arguments of such critics, and demonstrate that Whitman perpetuated pro-feminist ideals.

This is not the first project to notice women writers' eagerness for Whitman's poetry. Kate H. Winter writes,

> As a woman, a feminist, and a writer, I wonder what in [Whitman's] poems generated such fervor in these women of the nineteenth century. Indeed, what stirs my own sensibility? There are in the poems strands of faintly heard music… that is so striking to me that I can imagine how much more so it must have seemed to my great-grandmother and her sisters ("Whitman and the Women" 209).

The attraction women have felt towards Whitman's style is, as Winter points out, multi-generational. Many women of the 19th century, such as Fanny Fern and Anne Gilchrist, heard these "strands of faintly heard music" and wrote positive reviews of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. They felt that Whitman's democratic politics and his worshipful portrayals of women and mothers foresaw liberation and happiness for women. But women's responses to Whitman have been "far from uniform," as Vivian Pollak points out, for many believe that his portrayals limit women to the profession of motherhood (*The Erotic Whitman* 172). However, others, including myself, believe that Whitman's poetry creates an ideal world wherein mothers are not bound to domestic life.

Whitman's language is sometimes trapped by the prejudices of his time, but he is able to rise above prejudice surprisingly often. Women writers have acknowledged him as a source of inspiration, and when compared to other male poets of the 19th century (such as Poe and Longfellow) his work stands out as unusually progressive and deeply rooted in the emerging feminist movement. Even if not all women writers responded to Whitman so favorably, an examination of why many of them do will give way to broader explorations. It will allow us to analyze Whitman's legacy, as well as the ways authors interpret one another and the position of male authors in feminist criticism.

Vital to our understanding of Whitman's pro-feminist politics are his interactions with, and encouragements of, women writers. George Eliot said that Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was "good for [her] soul" (Guttry 102); meanwhile, miles away, Whitman commented, "Can women create, as man creates, in the arts? ... It has been a historic

question. Well—George Eliot, George Sand, have answered it: have contradicted the denial with a supreme affirmation" (Whitman, *Letters*). Female writers' interactions with male authors such as Whitman are often omitted from discussions of female literary history, perhaps because some feminists fear giving men too much attention when shaping a history of women's writing. This is an understandable concern, one that led to many comprehensive and invaluable anthologies of women's writings. However, modern literary criticisms propose that although the creation of a female literary tradition in America has been sometimes burdened with male hindrance, it has also received male support.[1]

The aim of this project is to highlight a male author who was against female subjugation and who played a positive role in the literary lives of later women. During an era that progressed towards a more liberal view of female equality, male authors such as J. S. Mill, who penned *On the Subjugation of Women*, James Russell Lowell, who was a supporter of women's suffrage, and Walt Whitman were able, in part because of their privileges as men in a patriarchal society, to accelerate the movement towards female liberation. The courage, originality, and importance of women who were vital to this movement should not be undervalued, and the ways in which patriarchal norms have limited women's writings should not be ignored. However, criticism should not shy from analysis of the ways in which authors, male and female, have interacted with and been affected by one another's writings.

Common to discussions of women's literary history are metaphors of genealogy; for example, the metaphor of the "literary mother" proposed by feminist literary critics

[1] Like some works of literary criticism, historical studies such as *Women and Literary History: "For There She Was"* have begun "challenging the standard form of reading women's writing in isolation from men's" (Binhammer and Wood).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. The metaphor suggests that women writers want and need female authorial "foremothers"; a concept that is useful for helping people articulate the troubles faced by women writers who felt they had too small a female literary tradition from which to draw encouragement. A literary mother is traditionally a female author, one who perpetuates female traditions in writing (while a literary father is described as a male authorial precursor). In this chapter I argue that Walt Whitman demonstrates that the binary of literary father/mother can be transcended, because he is a male author but one who aids the lineage of women writers.

The relationships between authors of different generations are often described in familial terms, in part because of the influence of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*. The family tree and other symbols of genealogy can be used to survey literary history and analyze the creations of different genres of literature. The literary system of inheritance that has governed the way literary history has been evaluated is detailed by Bloom's famous book: authors produce texts, which might be considered their "children," and then readers internalize the ideas, words, and subjects written by their elders. Lastly, the readers become new authors and continue, or as Bloom argues, break away from, the legacies of their authorial parents. This literary system of inheritance was long considered patrilineal, for the old stance assumed that it is unfeminine for a woman to write. But the last few hundred years of human history have seen fortunate changes, both to literal and literary family units, and the opportunities for women (and people of color, disabled, queer people, and other marginalized groups) to write, be published, and be read have mostly improved.

Nevertheless, the difficulties faced by women writers persist, and one in particular has pervaded feminist conversations since the late 19th century. When the women writers of the 19th century reached for their pens, they felt alienated and orphaned, because the notion that women should not write had limited a number of of their predecessors. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the texts of 19th-century women reveal that these female authors were anxious about the absence of their "literary mothers." Feminists of the late 19th century therefore began the project of rediscovering the "lost foremothers": a project whose significance is vast and that had great rewards, but one that is fading now that the canon of writing by women has mostly been well-established.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the "Great Mother of all feminist critical texts" according to Gilbert and Gubar (*Madwoman,* xxviii), first made the claim that "we think back through our mothers if we are women." Woolf was one of the first to realize that 19th-century women writers "had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help" (*Room* 11). The idea that an accessible female tradition would be of help to women writers became prevalent following Woolf's publication. The 20th century then saw a flood of women attempting to recover the names of female authors whose writings, exhausted from battling biased patriarchal appraisals, had gone out of print. Gilbert and Gubar support the search for lost female voices in *Madwoman*. They analyze the manners by which 19th-century women writers strove to recover "the lost foremothers who could help them find their distinctive female power" (*Madwoman,* 59). Other feminist critics, including Virginia Woolf and Adrienne Rich, have similarly assigned great value to their foremothers, and have implied that foremothers can help women writers by granting them some kind of female power.

Of what "distinctive female power" consists is unclear, and this vagueness

represents part of the reason the search for lost literary mothers is falling out of vogue in feminist criticism. We can begin to define female power by considering the way it functions as a transmission from mother to daughter, for this is redolent of the secrets and traditions that are historically communicated homosocially. The relationships between mothers and daughters were typically close in 19th- century America. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg discusses these relationships in depth, and emphasizes how important it was for mothers to pass on knowledge to their daughters:

> The roles of daughter and mother shaded imperceptibly and ineluctably into each other, while the biological realities of frequent pregnancies, childbirth, nursing, and menopause bound women together in physical and emotional intimacy. It was within just such a social framework, I would argue, that a specifically female world did indeed develop, a world built around a generic and unselfconscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial networks. These supportive networks were institutionalized in social conventions or rituals which accompanied virtually every important event in a woman's life (9).

In the 19th century, mothers taught their daughters how to act within a patriarchal society. Mother-daughter relationships were cherished because they enabled the transportation of knowledge, traditions, and moral values into the next generation of women, and most importantly, this transmission enabled women to possess and pass on specifically feminine knowledge.

Women have struggled to find their *literary* female power because many of their would-have-been literary mothers were made to be silent during the long epoch in which men dominated the literary profession. In order to write, women in patriarchal societies first had to overcome conventional gender roles, for the occupation of writing seemed "to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex" (*Madwoman* 51). Writers such as Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* and Tillie Olsen in *Silences* explore the causes of female muteness, narrowing them down to social and economic barriers and the

subjugations of non-normative voices.

Gilbert and Gubar further explain this regrettable trend in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, arguing that women writers have to overcome what they call the "anxiety of authorship," if they wish to write. They define the "anxiety of authorship" as "a radical fear that [a woman] cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her" (*Madwoman,* 49). This phrase is offered as the alternative to what Harold Bloom called the "anxiety of influence," a Freudian theory of patrilineal literary inheritance wherein the literary son must metaphorically overthrow the influence of his father. According to Gilbert and Gubar, 19th-century women writers did not do violent battle with their foremothers, for they were often unsuccessful in even *finding* their foremothers. Female authors from before the 20th century often chose not to write because they were given little choice but to suckle from a predominantly male and patriarchal literary tradition, and faced isolation, alienation, and obscurity.

Some women did overcome their anxiety, and our libraries are enriched by the endeavors of authors such as Dickinson, Austen, and Stowe. However, the struggles of women writers brought awareness to the problem of an erased literary tradition. The names of many writers have faded from history due to an unappreciative audience, and the enterprise to discover lost or underappreciated works by the lost foremothers was emboldened in the early 20th century (Ruland and Bradbury 223). This still-ongoing movement fights to establish a scholarly system that includes significant works by female authors:

> Not only has the literary establishment historically been male, but the most revered writers of the American literary tradition have been, not only white, as the blacks complain, but male as well… efforts have been made to define a feminist usable past, a legacy of writing by women offering a viable alternative to the male-dominated canon. Interest grew in Anne Bradstreet… in the domestic "scribblers" Hawthorne had lamented

(Ruland and Bradbury 225).

Gilbert and Gubar have introduced many beginning scholars to the "legacy of writing by women," since they co-edited *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, which includes works of women's literature from all over the world. Many feminist theorists and critics have sought the lost foremothers, searching for a "literature of their own"; Adrienne Rich defends the existence of a powerful female literary tradition in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* and addresses the attempt of women to reconnect with their literary heritage: "Women's work and thinking has been made to seem sporadic, errant, orphaned of any tradition of its own. In fact we do have a long feminist tradition…today women are talking to each other…to name and found a culture of our own" (312). Women of the 20th century such as Tillie Olsen worked hard to uncover the names of forgotten female authors. Had it not been for the endeavors of these activists, many of the female writers who are now significant to the modern day literary canon such as Anne Bradstreet, Zora Neale Hurston, Fanny Fern, and many others may have been permanently lost to history.

It is important that we continue to search for the names of forgotten female authors, and that women writers continue to perpetuate the female literary tradition; however, cultural and societal transformations allowed for a fading of the anxiety of authorship. Communities of women writers enabled a break from the masculine tradition in writing, and because women of the latter half of the 20th century could read works by women writers, many of them did not feel a dire need to search for lost foremothers. The "anxiety of authorship" that led to the search for lost literary mothers has transformed into a more multifarious problem. Instead of longing to find inspiration from a female literary tradition they feel has been erased, women writers are confronted with a multiplicity of traditions, and the vastness of choice has caused new and unexpected

problems. This shift disrupted the worship of the literary mother that pervaded feminist criticism, because it revealed that discovering female foremothers does not grant immediate and abundant female power.

After *The Madwoman in the Attic* achieved some critical success, Gilbert and Gubar wrote *No Man's Land* so they could alter their arguments to contextualize them for the 20th century. They provide an explanation for why women writers do not necessarily uncover their "female power" after reading works by female predecessors. They argue that a woman's search for a literary tradition to which she can "relate" is different (and more arduous) than a man's. They use the phrase "female affiliation complex" to describe the difficulties women writers face as they struggle to identify with either literary mothers or literary fathers. Gilbert and Gubar use the Freudian model in "Female Sexuality" to describe the fatigue of a woman's search for affiliation:

> As Freud describes it, the girl's path towards maturity is far more difficult than the boy's because it is marked by imperatives of object renunciation and libidinal redirection that require enormous investments of psychic energy.
> When we apply the model that we have been calling the affiliation complex to women's literary history, therefore, we inevitably find women writers oscillating between their matrilineage and their patrilineage in an arduous process of self-definition… allegiance to literary fathers does not inevitably sweep away the longing for literary mothers; anxiety about literary mothers does not always lead to desire for literary fathers (169).

The rediscoveries of the names and works of the lost foremothers do not answer all the prayers of 19th and 20th-century women writers. According to Gilbert and Gubar, female writers appreciated the works of their foremothers, but they hated feeling pressured to love them because they also found the works of male authors to be compelling. Without a female literary tradition, a woman writer is cut off from her matrilineal inheritance; with one, she suffers from the affiliation complex and cannot decide between her literary

parents. As understood from *No Man's Land*, it is tricky for a woman writer to choose between her literary mother and her literary father without feeling either traitorous or alienated.

To better understand the "affiliation complex" and its pertinence to Walt Whitman and his female admirers, we might ask what Gilbert and Gubar mean by "affiliate," and whether being influenced by an author differs from affiliating with one. When discussing the connections between authors, Gilbert and Gubar turn from the use of the word "influence," a term popularized by *The Anxiety of Influence.* "Influence" has become central to "influence study," which tends to identify prior documents as "sources" for a given author, and has been criticized for depriving the later author of agency. Gilbert and Gubar point out that the term "influence" implies a force, one that takes away the originality of the later author; it "connotes an influx or pouring-in of external power." They offer "affiliate" instead, because "the concept of affiliation carries with it possibilities of both choice and continuity" and because its derivatives acknowledge both genders, and because it pertains to parentage and has a sense of connectivity. The word etymologically derives from the Indo-European word "dhei" meaning "to suck," and is connected to the phrase "she who suckles," and so it "preserves matrilineal traces and specifically the idea of a nurturing and nurtured female" (170). "Affiliate" is also defined in terms of the male gender, as the OED defines it: "the act of taking a son, the establishment of sonship."

The process of affiliating with former authors, of reading their works and relating to them in this way, is difficult to explain. Affiliation is an even more intricate process than Gilbert and Gubar imply, because they do not delve into the unconscious process of the identification of one's self within an author's works that precedes affiliation. Gilbert

and Gubar infer that affiliation is a conscious decision, a choice that allows an author to "side" with former authors and with a literary tradition. This proposal preserves the later author's originality, but slips past the possibility of unconscious influence. "Affiliation" seems to necessarily begin as an unconscious identification with some of the themes or ideas presented in an author's works; if affiliation is at first unconscious, then it is also uncontrollable.

An author can later, however, consciously choose to demonstrate affiliation by paying tribute to an author or purposefully alluding to his or her works. I focus on women writers who were not only unconsciously captivated by Whitman, but who also decided to show their admiration often and overtly.[2] When discussing Whitman's connection with later female authors, the term "inspire" will be used, because it implies a positive, less forceful relationship wherein an idea is "breathed" from one person to another.[3] The word "relate," used by Gilbert and Gubar to try to describe the connection between authors, is also of use. It evokes a familial connection, as though later authors identify themselves as a former author's literary child. It may also help to think about the process of affiliation as similar to a conversation, for this metaphor can allow us to consider the ways in which authors exchange ideas. Affiliating with an author or tradition does not entail blindly accepting all that they say; the purpose of affiliation seems to be to foster encouragement. An author affiliates with a past author or tradition for hope and inspiration, and can do so while also dissenting with his or her "literary parent" and creating original ideas.

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[2] Willa Cather's novel *O Pioneers!* Is a clear reference to Whitman's poem of the same name. Many other examples of visible and intentional ways in which women writers aligned with Whitman will be further discussed in later chapters.

[3] To "inspire" means: To infuse some thought or feeling into (a person, etc.), as if by breathing (oed.com).

Gilbert and Gubar's terms "literary mother" and "literary father" refer to either female or male writers, ones who perpetuate either the female or male literary tradition. This is rather limiting, because the definition of the word "mother" as a woman who has physically given birth to her children has long been under scrutiny, and suggests that adoptive mothers and fathers are not true parents. Moreover, Gilbert and Gubar separate the maternal and paternal literary traditions based on the genders of the authors. They infer that an author can affiliate with either the male or female literary tradition; however, they allege that an author necessarily becomes a part of the tradition to which he or she "belongs." Modern-day thinking, buoyed by theorists such as Judith Butler, has changed the way we think about gender, so partitioning authors into one of two gendered groups feels problematic.

Though it is perhaps counter-intuitive, the terms "literary mother" and "literary father" need not necessarily be thought of as solely gender-specific. A literary mother perpetuates the legacy of authors who do not fit within strictly patriarchal norms, and grants literary daughters with some kind of power that enables them to write in a society that restricts them. The idea that a literary mother is a woman and a literary father is a man is constraining, yet critics thus far have rarely considered breaking down that binary, and have not taken into consideration that an author can fall between those two categories. My goal is to show that Whitman is just this type of author, because he is male and yet women writers consistently "affiliate" with him.

Critics like Gilbert and Gubar have overlooked the affiliations of women writers with prior male authors— a wary omission, as feminists sometimes see male influence as damaging, or believe it is more urgent to first put women in the spotlight. To disrupt the masculine dominance of the literary world, criticism pointed to a matriline in literature

that has been significant. Yet there is more to the story of the creation of a female literary canon, for men like Whitman were helpful to women writers. The problem of situating men in feminist criticism runs deep, because though omitting men from female history has not been accurate, forcing them to fit the label of "feminist" when they took up no true activism is hardly justifiable. Such a claim can be insulting and detrimental to the female literary sphere, which by necessity eradicated the men who scorned it. Pro-feminist men certainly existed around Whitman's time; John Stuart Mill's *On the Subjugation of Women* (1869) and H. L. Mencken's *In Defense of Women* (1918) may serve as useful examples.[4] Assessing the way men can be invited into the discussion of women's search for useful sources of inspiration without overriding the significance of female community in both life and literature may be tricky. Yet because men were a part of the foundation of feminism such an assessment should not be readily averted.

To situate Whitman into this discussion, we can begin by thinking about Whitman's complication of literary and social customs. He has been widely criticized and widely praised for both upholding and rebelling against traditional norms. Whitman's poetic androgyny gives him the liberty to become this figure. According to David Leverenz, Whitman "speaks as a fatherly midwife," and "integrates maleness and femaleness" because he was "alienated from the masculine conventions of his time," (*Manhood and the American Renaissance* 112). Albert Gelpi claims that Whitman frees his own potential for expression by "admitting and expressing within himself qualities and dispositions usually polarized as feminine or masculine" (*The Tenth Muse* 171). Readers of all genders affiliated with Whitman in part because he refused to force his rhetoric to be stereotypically masculine.

[4] For more on this subject, see Michael Kimmel's work on pro-feminist male texts in *The History of Men: Essays on the History of American and British Masculinities.*

As the first line of Harold Bloom's introduction to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* claims, "If you are American, then Walt Whitman is your imaginative father and mother, even if, like myself, you have never composed a line of verse" (i). Bloom calls Whitman the "imaginative father and mother," of Americans rather than just the "father," and other critics also understand the amalgamation of father and mother that Whitman represents. Historian Philip Callow claims, "In 'Song of Myself' [Whitman] blurs the distinction between [women] and him, a man who is 'maternal as well as paternal.'" Whitman should not be forced to fit the definition of "literary mother," as he is not a woman; however, as a man who is "maternal as well as paternal," he should likewise not be forced to represent only the male literary tradition.

Whitman's poetry and prose both explored unconventional ideas, especially his series of poems "Calamus," that controversially lauded homosexual relations. However, as many critics have deplored, his depictions of mothers seem conventional and patriarchal, not because he mocks mothers, but because he adores them to the point of dehumanizing them. He wrote about mothers consistently, and earned the title of "great tender mother-man" from his friend John Burroughs (Ceniza 68). Whitman's glorifying depiction of the maternal horrifies critics like Vivian Pollak, who condemns "his reaffirmation of the mid-nineteenth-century American cult of the mother, which celebrated maternity as any woman's supreme destiny" (*The Erotic Whitman* 172).[5] D.H. Lawrence further criticized Whitman's "mother poems": "Whitman's 'athletic mothers of these states' are depressing. Muscle and wombs: functional creatures… The woman is reduced, really, to a submissive function. She is no longer an individual being with a

[5] The "cult of domesticity" or "cult of true womanhood" was an idea of womanhood in the 19th-century that professed that the "ideal" woman was a pious, virtuous mother who existed solely in the domestic sphere. A more extensive critique of arguments such as Pollak's will appear in the third chapter.

living soul. She must fold her arms and bend her head and submit to a functioning capacity. Function of sex, function of birth" (618-620).

These critics' instinctual disgust at Whitman's descriptions of mothers is comprehensible, considering that Whitman made claims such as "There is nothing greater than the mother of men" (*LG* 1855: 21). However, as modern criticism has begun to acknowledge, the scholars who bemoan Whitman's presentation of mothers ignore the aspects of his writings that are pro-feminist, and fail to see that his portrayal of mothers is essential to his poetic style. M. Jimmie Killingsworth points out that negative criticism judges Whitman's thought "by twentieth-century standards and does not recognize the historical context in which the female characters appear" ("Whitman and Motherhood" 28). Killingsworth also confirms that "a number of recent critics have affirmed Whitman's good intentions in the area of women's rights and have even seen him as an early champion of feminism" (29). Even if we overlook a study of Whitman's "good intentions," we should note that his depictions of women correspond with his political statements that positively support women's rights. Whitman claims that *Leaves of Grass* speaks for silenced women: "*Leaves of Grass* is essentially a woman's book: the women do not know it, but every now and then a woman shows that she knows it: it speaks out the necessities, its cry is the cry of the right and wrong of the woman sex-of the woman first of all…speaks out loud: warns, encourages, persuades, points the way" (quoted by Ceniza, 227).

Whitman often featured women in a maternal and domestic profession, and this seems uncomfortable for some modern feminists. But in fact:

> [Whitman] shared the views of many of the social radicals of his day, in particular the notion that the female is superior to the male because of her maternal capacity. Today feminists reject this notion as quaint, patronizing, and even repressive, but in the nineteenth century the feminist

> movement was young, and its critique of society had not been refined. Whitman thus became tangled in a confusion that was as much cultural as it was personal, and the badness of his poetry dealing with motherhood may be traced to this confusion (Killingsworth, "Whitman and Motherhood" 29).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was one of the earlier feminists who similarly used domestic life as a platform for women's liberation. It is unsurprising that the literary mother was a sought-after ideal for female writers in the 19th century, since much of young feminism actually revolved around the power of women's "maternal capacity." Whitman was a radical voice in his day. Though some feminists may turn from him, we should consider Whitman's interactions with leaders of the emerging feminism of his time as well as the positive responses of his female contemporaries, because they point to his unique position as a male author in early feminist history.

Sherry Ceniza presents both sides of the argument over Whitman's "pro-feminism," ultimately claiming that the many edits of *Leaves of Grass* show progress, and that Whitman's work eventually created an idealized world of equality for women. She analyzes Whitman's rhetorical shifts as he interacts more and more with feminist reformers such as Abby Hills Price and Paulina Wright Davis, and claims that this shift pointed Whitman towards a desire for equality. She points to Whitman's statement:

> Because women do not appear in history or philosophy with anything like the same prominence as men—that is no reason for treating them less than men:-- the great names that we know are but accidental scraps.—Mention to me the twenty most majestic characters that have existed upon the earth, and have their names recorded.—It is very well.—But for that twenty, there are millions upon millions just as great, whose names are unrecorded (Whitman, *Daybooks and Notebooks,* 3:772-773).

Whitman's speech is remarkably evocative of the concerns of women who lament their lost literary foremothers. Whitman was aware of the potential of women and of the

erasure of their voices, and this demonstrates his sensitivity towards their situation in society. His love of democracy led him to speak for the lost women whose "names are unrecorded," and this seems to contradict the claims of critics such as D.H. Lawrence, who argue that his writings reduce women to functional roles. Although the manifold ways one can interpret Whitman's representations of women seem contradictory, Whitman himself admitted, "Very well then I contradict myself/(I am vast, I contain multitudes)" (*LG,* 1855: 51). A man full of contradictions, Whitman becomes a candidate for someone who breaks down binaries, one who perpetuates not a solitary literary tradition but multiple different ones.

Whitman's breach of the father/mother literary binary disturbs Gilbert and Gubar's assumption in *Madwoman* that female literary history is mostly homosocial. When tracing female literary history, it is assumptive to automatically align a female author with a former female author—Elizabeth Bishop and Emily Dickinson, for example—something that is readily done, even by critics who are not proponents of influence study.[6] Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* mentions male authors, but in their mappings of patterns of female literary inheritance they infer that an all-female familial relationship is the norm for most female writers.

In *No Man's Land* Gilbert and Gubar adjust this view, and acknowledge that it is doubtful that a woman would automatically align herself to foremothers; rather, sometimes women feel dislike towards their female precursors. In discussing why a woman may not respond positively to her literary predecessors, they reference Julie

[6] See Lynn Keller and Christanne Miller's "Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, and the Rewards of Indirection." Their connection is interesting but curious, as Bishop reportedly read Dickinson as a child and had not "liked it much" (535).

Kristeva (266), and this raises Kristeva's concept of the "abject rejection of the mother."[7] Furthermore, in *Black Sun,* Kristeva claims that identification with the mother could produce melancholia in female children. She theorizes that the complexities of simultaneously rejecting and identifying with the mother figure causes melancholy, and this likely played into Gilbert and Gubar's rationale as they shaped the concept of the affiliation anxiety. Kristeva's theories are much more complex than this summary indicates, yet this might at least begin to demonstrate why aligning of women to female literary mothers, without a broader context, is assumptive.

Whitman appealed to a variety of authors, male and female, because he lived both inside and outside the boundaries of what was considered "normal." Betsy Erkkila notes that Whitman "works on the boundaries of traditional sexual, social, and cultural taboos," (ix) which he celebrates in his poetry by declaring, "Unscrew the locks from the doors!/ Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" (*LG* 1855: 48). The coupling of his desire to "unscrew" dividing doors with his own marginality contributes to our understanding of why women writers were sometimes drawn to him. Whitman's writing is narrated by multiple personae as he tries to take on the identities of various people, including women and people of color. His attempt at democracy was important, as it flaunted his desire to become a voice of America. Moreover, he did not limit what is "American," but took democracy to mean equality for all, even non-whites and women—something other authors in American history have occasionally failed to do.

[7] Kristeva creates a broadened definition of the mother with her theory of subject formation, and her approach "emphasizes the maternal role… but does not limit 'mother' to a particular gender" (Jensen ix). Interestingly, Beth Jensen argues that Whitman, like Kristeva does not limit "mother" to a single gender; this will come more into play during the third chapter's discussion of Whitman's language and literary devices.

We should remember that Whitman did not experience some of the silencings that were forced upon women and minorities during his time. But although Whitman had privileges as a white male, he was an outsider to normative life in ways that allowed him to question it. Whitman was fired from jobs and criticized in his day for his sexuality and for his support of the abolition of slavery. June Jordan claims that Whitman is "the one white father who shares the systematic disadvantages of his heterogeneous offspring trapped inside a closet that is, in reality, as huge as the continental spread of North and South America. What Whitman envisioned, we, the people and the poets of the New World, embody…I too am a descendant of Walt Whitman" (4). His democratic poetry strove to encompass the subjectivities of all people in America, not only white males; his understanding of "systematic disadvantages" has made him a major contributor to the myth of American democracy in poetry (VanSpanckeren).

Jordan evokes why she, as a Caribbean-American and a woman, identifies as Whitman's "descendant." She hints at that which many say sets Whitman apart from the other "white fathers": his sexuality. Whitman's sexual identity is a major topic of discussion amongst critics. Part of what made his writings so controversial was his celebration of homoeroticism, but because he also praised the female form and heterosexuality, his poems led to debate over his sexual preference. The celebration of "manly love" is a recurring theme in his works, but Peter Coviello attests that it is wrong to label Whitman as "homosexual," and instead uses the broader term "queer." Coviello persuasively argues that Whitman envisioned a future that does not come to pass: one of a "queer generation," or a generation of people who do not attribute labels to one another ("Whitman's Children 73).

Because he dreamt of an ideal democracy of sexual liberation and was perceived as queer, Whitman was important to members of the gay rights movement. The celebration of the equality of homosexual relationships in his "Calamus" poems was radically influential. Some advocates for the gay rights movement have read Whitman's sometimes crude-seeming poems as supportive of strictly homoerotic sexual activities; yet this is a misreading, because Whitman worshiped all forms of sexuality. This thesis Whitman's positionality within a lineage of women writers whose literature was pivotal for the feminist movement; yet much more could be said about Whitman's significance, especially amongst people who are limited by society. Whitman dreamt of a new loving world that embraces people of all genders and sexualities.

This new world he imagined is an uplifting one for women. Winter, in her analysis of why women have been so drawn to Whitman, argues,

> Whitman's vision of the new land peopled by divinely beautiful women, men, and children could pass for a feminist's dream. From our twentieth-century perspective, we may scorn the limitations of his vision and condemn the whole as mother worship and patriarchal thinking in disguise, but his hope for a new society based in dignity and equality for women is still at the center of feminist ideology (211).

This claim that Whitman's vision was pro-feminist requires further discussion; for now, we might observe Whitman's embrace of equality. His writings are a famous example of a democratic, American voice; he believed that every individual was a part of something greater and had the right to sing out. Because of this quality, his style appealed to and was adapted by people of marginalized groups. His declarations of individuality beginning with "I celebrate myself and sing myself" speak to many groups who are silenced (*LG* 1855: 1). For example, Langston Hughes' "I Too Sing America" alludes to "Song of Myself," and, as both tribute and reprimand to Whitman, it draws attention to the voices of African Americans. Whitman helped initiate the project of cataloging the

different voices that make up the diversity of America, a project that developed especially during the American Renaissance of the mid to late 19th century.

Whitman was aware of the power of women's voices, because he closely interacted with female family members and friends who were part of the early feminist movement. The next chapter will consider the women who had an impact upon Whitman's writing and life, and will show that inspiration between genders can be an exchange rather than an intrusion. I will analyze *Walt Whitman and the Nineteenth-Century Women Reformers,* in which Sherry Ceniza discusses the women reformers, such as Abby Hills Price, who inspired Whitman. Margaret Fuller, Fanny Fern and other female authors, as well as his own mother, whose near-illegible letters affected him and his writing prodigiously, had profound influences on Whitman. By studying the parallels between Whitman's poetry and Fuller and Fern's texts, I will demonstrate that Whitman was involved with multiple members of a growing shift towards women's equality. He quoted the words of these women directly, and revealed in his poetry his great admiration for them and their writing.

The third chapter will focus upon Whitman's poetry, and will scrutinize Whitman's belief that he was "the poet of the woman as well as the man" (*LOG* 1855: 21). It will examine his linguistic constructions, because, for example, he "discarded the habitual use of generic 'man,' replaced it with the construction 'man and woman,' and wrestled with other awkward usages such as 'he-she,' 'he-his,' and 'she-hers' (Winter 211). His language may show why some consider him to be "pro-feminist." Some claim he is pro-feminist because he strove to elevate the domestic and childbearing worlds in order to create a new world for women to thrive independently and find an audience for their own voices. Furthermore, according to Killingsworth, "to the transcendental

‘elevation’ of woman, [Whitman’s] program added ‘expansion’ and ‘invigoration’—important romantic and even radical values” (30). Whitman strove not to just “elevate” women, for he already respected them as human beings; but he believed that “Woman's range should be expanded beyond conventional limits; female emancipation was necessary for the realization of ‘sane athletic maternity’; good motherhood should be the foundation of a new society” (Killingsworth 30). As the third chapter will explore further, Whitman’s presentations of motherhood are complex in their “confused” yet nevertheless radical support of feminist thought.

In the third chapter, I will also examine Whitman’s portrayals of mothers and female reproductive organs. Some critics are concerned that Whitman’s language represents an appropriation of the female body; however, as contemporary critics such as Betsy Erkkila and Daneen Wardrop have recognized, reproduction imagery is vital to his artistic style, and need not be read literally. The mothers in his writing can be interpreted as allegorical examples of an ideal world in which women have creative power and voice. The third chapter will examine Whitman’s androgynous voice and his fixation upon procreation, and unpack the ways in which Whitman’s writings can be seen to perpetuate the ideologies of a female literary tradition.

Whitman’s call for the freedom of each subjective voice was inspiring to women writers, and the fourth chapter will analyze the women whose writings reflect a responsiveness to Whitman. Adrienne Rich will be important to this section, because she paid tribute to Whitman while also heavily criticizing his approach to race. This kind of response is important to thinking about the process of affiliation, which is not a simple act of absorption but also involves the interpretation and translation of ideas. I will also discuss Charlotte Perkins Gilman, as her connection to Whitman has been well

documented: “during a two-year extended lecture tour, when she had no permanent address to call ‘home,’ Gilman included among her travel ‘necessities’ just two books: Olive Schreiner’s *Dreams* and Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*” (Knight 18). I will explore the ways in which Whitman encouraged Gilman’s poetic voice, and will indicate the poet H.D’s overt allusions to his poetry. That these female writers were contemporaneous with Whitman is significant: they all were reacting to similar emerging feminist philosophies, and by examining how these philosophies intersect in their various works, we can arrive at a stronger understanding of the interactions between male and female authors of the 19th and early 20th centuries when the 1st and 2nd waves of feminism took root, and when women’s suffrage became a prevalent topic.

Adrienne Rich claimed, “man will have to learn to gestate and give birth to his own subjectivity—something he has frequently wanted woman to do for him” ("When We Dead Awaken” 25). Her argument that men should cease to view women as beautiful but lifeless tools, useful for men’s writing but not capable of their own art, is an argument that aligns with both Whitman’s ideologies and his eventual impact. The women he interacted with, female authors and reformers, inspired him, and he “used many of the same arguments and rhetorical gestures as his female activist friends” (Ceniza ii). However, Whitman did not treat his female inspirations as simply objects for art, but also as subjects, since he encouraged them to take part in the literary and activist worlds. By using feminine reproductive terms in his poetry (for example, he calls upon the power of the “mother” fourteen times in “Song of Myself” but references “fathers” only thrice), Whitman learned “to gestate and give birth to his own subjectivity” (Rich). The critics who find his reproductive writing offensive or an appropriation of the female capacity for birth should not be overwritten in this discussion; I hope to approach both the negative

and positive responses to Whitman's writing as a "fatherly midwife." Yet I agree with critics Sherry Ceniza, Betsy Erkkila, and Daneen Wardrop, who have recognized that reproduction imagery is vital to Whitman's style, and I wish to demonstrate that his writing created a space for mothers that liberated them by transforming the domestic sphere into a universal one.

Perhaps of the most significance to this thesis are the women who admired Whitman's writing and used his ideas to support their own texts. They demonstrated their responses to Whitman in comments, letters, and by overtly or unconsciously making allusions to his work, and in their own right, they were necessary to the feminist movement. This study will invite new explorations of the ways women search for inspiration, and why their searches are hindered and aided by their relationships with and readings of other authors. Moreover, an analysis of the women who found encouragement in Whitman's poetry can hopefully help broaden the topic of men's placement in feminist literary history. Because of his complex relationships to female authors and activists, his progressively pro-feminist rhetoric, and the profound impact his words had upon later women writers, I argue that Whitman furthered and strengthened traditions of the female canon of literature.

2. Women in Whitman's Life: Fuller and Fern

> "It would seem about time something was done in the direction of the recognition of the women: for some of us to dwell upon the lives of noble big women. History teems with accounts of big men-genius, talent-of the he-critters, but the women go unmentioned. Yet how much they deserve!" (Whitman, quoted by Traubel, *With Whitman in Camden*; 7:440)

> "While early critics paid close attention to charting female traditions and genealogies in literature by women, they often neglected the ways in which works by women writers may have been in conversation with writing by men" (Fishkin ix).

Because they often praise manhood and masculinity, Walt Whitman's poems have been read by many critics as representative of Whitman's homoeroticism and of his love of his fellow man. However, many of the ideas in Whitman's poetry and prose were fostered by his relationships with women, women he talked with, admired, and loved: "noble big women" whom he felt were underappreciated. Whitman's readings of female authors were vital to the expansion of his visions of equality. Authors he read, such as Margaret Fuller and Fanny Fern, disrupted gender norms by writing with styles that are considered both "feminine" and "masculine." We can see that these authors inspired Whitman when we consider the plurality of gender representation in Whitman's poetry. Fuller and Fern perpetuated and contributed to the female American literary tradition, and furthermore, they inspired Whitman to not only become a creator, but also to disrupt several "rules" of literature. In their writing, Fuller, Fern, and Whitman rejected many ideas: that only a woman can mother, that only a man can write, that all men write with masculine styles, and that all women write with feminine ones.

Because Whitman had a position of opportunity in America as a white male poet and a former journalist, he was able to help spread some of the ideas that he gleamed from the proactive women in his life. As Sherry Ceniza argues in *Walt Whitman and 19th-*

Century Women Reformers, a book that will be fundamental to this chapter, Whitman's life was intertwined with the lives of women reformers and female writers. While spending time with women such as his mother Louisa, and while reading the words of the "first feminist" of America, Margaret Fuller, Whitman's writing developed and demonstrates admiration for women and belief in gender equality. Whitman has been considered by much of criticism a "man's poet," and there are numerous articles referring to Whitman's devotion to manhood and masculinity (Ceniza). Scholars are beginning to shift their focus, however, as they are now reading *Leaves of Grass* with a feminist awareness (Killingsworth). This new scholarly approach helps show that the women in Whitman's life were vital to his poetic process.

Some feminist critics argue that over the course of Whitman's editions of his poetry, his voice changed alongside the growth of the young feminist movement, slowly becoming a strong advocate for gender equality. Karen Oakes "speaks of Whitman's early voice as 'feminine' and sees it change as he revised poems and editions" (Ceniza "An Independent Woman" 12). Oakes believes that Whitman's writing becomes more "masculine" over time; contrarily, Ceniza claims that Whitman's "editions of *Leaves* became progressively more radically 'feminist' as he followed the women's rights movement during the 1850's" (x). She proposes that Whitman's interactions with feminist reformers such as Abby Hills Price, Paulina Wright Davis, and Ernestine L. Rose were imperative to the development of Whitman's "feminine" literary sensibilities. I agree with Ceniza's argument that Whitman's writings demonstrate his appreciation of femininity and equality. Furthermore, his experimentation with gender allows his narrative voice to become fluid and indefinable, so that Whitman is able to disrupt the gender binary of poetry as either wholly "masculine" or wholly "feminine."

In her book, Ceniza explains that Whitman's encounters with early feminism became the foundations for Whitman's writings on equality. I do not wish to restate Ceniza's points, nor discuss the same women as she did. Instead, I will expand her method, and consider other progressive women whose writings supplemented American women's literature and who became significant role models for Whitman. Ceniza's book captures the importance of Whitman's interactions with women over the course of the 36 years during which he wrote and rewrote his poems. The women reformers in Whitman's life changed his views and his poetic language, transforming his poetry into an art form that is still important to female readers today.

I will first explain Ceniza's argument, which centers on the claim that Whitman's poetry was grounded in the roots of the women's reform movement. Ceniza begins by providing a defense of Whitman's mother, Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, who has been treated by critics as "a negative, even malevolent, force in Whitman's life" (13). Ceniza argues that Louisa's letters, though they were barely legible, reveal that Whitman saw her as a great source of inspiration. He sometimes quoted from her almost directly, and she in return gave him motherly support. Whitman's biographer Edwin Miller accuses Louisa of "nagging querulousness" (55), however, Louisa wrote letters to her son, which reveal that she was loving and certainly proud of his writing. Referring to his book, she wrote, "i have the whisper of heavenly death it lays here on the table by my side i have read it over so many times" (31 March 1868, Trent Collection).

According to Ceniza, Whitman praises his mother's "style and creativity" (12). This points us to Whitman's representations of women as creative forces; as Ceniza states,

> In his poetry, Whitman often conflates the two: motherhood/creativity. It is criticism, not Whitman's poetry, which has focused on one to the

> exclusion of the other; it is critics, such as D. H. Lawrence, who see wombs as a negative. Not so Whitman (12).[8]

As I will further discuss, Whitman's obsession with motherhood is one way he connected to femininity in his poetry. Viewing women and mothers as a primary source of strength and creativity, Whitman depicted them through metaphors of wombs and fertility. Some feminist critics such as Vivian Pollak have reduced his representation of womanhood to condescension. However, Whitman's portrayals depend upon his love of the feminine, and emerge from his desire to help women receive equal treatment to men. His embrace of femininity can be traced to his childhood and his relationship with his mother.

Later in her book, Ceniza discusses several women reformers and shows that Whitman's poetic voice follows the successes of women who worked within the burgeoning feminist movement. Of special interest is Ceniza's chapter on Abby Hills Price, a woman who has been included in several other critics' contemporary analyses of important women in Whitman's life.[9] Price was an exceptionally good friend of Whitman's, and the two spent time together for 17 years (Ceniza). Price was also an important feminist reformer; she was "one of the few people whose words were recorded in the Proceedings of the 1850 National Woman's Rights Convention" (Spann). According to Ceniza, "Whitman's friendship with Price personalized his awareness of and involvement in women's fight for equality" (46). Price's speeches at feminist events, as well as her letters to Whitman, were significant to the strengthening of Whitman's beliefs about the capabilities of women and the importance of women's suffrage. Ceniza

[8] Lawrence criticized the way Whitman portrayed women in "Whitman," as I discussed in the 1st chapter. His argument revolves around the notion that Whitman's women are reduced to little more than biological, reproductive creatures; an argument that has been refuted by much modern Whitman criticism, such as Ceniza's.
[9] In the scholarship of LeMaster, Pollak, and Loving, for example.

draws many parallels between the Price's words and the poetry, political writings, and prose of Whitman, arguing that the 1856 edition of *Leaves* is a tribute to Whitman's friendship with Price.

I would like to use Ceniza's methodology to consider the ways other women in Whitman's world affected his poetry. I will note the parallels between his poetry and women's writings, and use these to discuss some ways in which Whitman explored and furthered notions of gender, femininity, and motherhood. I have chosen two female authors of the 19th century to discuss in relation to Whitman: Margaret Fuller and Fanny Fern. Like Abby Hills Price, these women represent great strides in early feminism, and were important to the surge of 19th-century female novelists in America. I hope to show that Whitman's relationships with these women allow him to be positioned within the movement for feminism and gender equality in America.

Margaret Fuller is viewed as one of the founders of Transcendentalism, and her work *Woman in the 19th Century* was momentous for the burgeoning feminism of the mid-19th century. Fanny Fern is one of many 19th-century American female authors whose novels have bounced in and out of scholarly popularity. Her books represent the growing numbers of female novelists during this time, and her close friendship with Whitman shows how intimately he was involved with pioneers of the American women's literary movement. Fuller and Fern are representative of a larger shift in American politics and literature, and their works show us both the theoretical and the artistic sides of the proto-feminist movement of the mid 19th-century.

I will discuss the proto-feminism of both Fuller and Fern, and show that their words are relevant to Whitman's pro-feminism. But as I mentioned in the first chapter, the feminism of Whitman's time, and the time of Price and other feminist reformers, is

not identical to the feminism we know today. Killingsworth wrote in "Whitman and Motherhood: A Historical View,"

> Whitman shared the views of many of the social radicals of his day, in particular the notion that the female is superior to the male because of her maternal capacity. Today feminists reject this notion as quaint, patronizing, and even repressive, but in the nineteenth century the feminist movement was young, and its critique of society had not been refined (28).

As Killingsworth indicates, early feminism of the mid-19th century often focused on the maternal life of women in a way that would alarm modern feminists. Fuller and Fern, as well as the reformers discussed by Ceniza, projected feminist beliefs that were in keeping with their era. Therefore, the feminist ideas that Whitman, and Fuller and Fern, displayed in his poetry were radical for their time, but may seem insulting today.

Whitman's poetry questions gender norms, and displays democratic views that echoed some of the feminist ideas that were becoming popular during Whitman's time. It is too presumptuous to claim that writers like Fuller and Fern are directly responsible for Whitman's use of feminine poetic devices and demonstrations of support for gender equality. However, by examining the writing of female authors whom Whitman admired, and asking how components of their literature compare to Whitman's poetry, we can better understand the complexity of the deconstructions of gender roles in all of their writings. The parallels between Fuller and Fern's texts and Whitman's poetry will be important in this chapter, because they will reveal that these women asserted themselves into the literary sphere with conviction during the mid-19th century, and that Whitman admired their progressive use of both feminine and masculine authorial tactics.

Whitman's writing embraces supposedly "feminine" characteristics as well as masculine ones, and the parallels that can be drawn between Whitman and these women

writers draw attention to the function of gender within Whitman's poetry. Karen Oakes details the qualities that, in her opinion, render Whitman's early poetry feminine:

> The feminine text that Whitman creates… has several crucial features: first, an enhanced attentiveness to the body and, in particular, to sexual 'intercourse' with the reader; second, a concern for the process of reading rather than its conclusions (182).

Oakes' claim indicates aspects of Whitman's poetry that we will examine in order to explore why his writings are called "feminine texts." These traits are attentiveness to the body (often in relation to how the body and soul function together), and "concern for the process of reading" as well as for processes in general. I will also note Whitman's general argument for the strength of women, whether in the domestic sphere or out of it, his belief in the need for gender equality, and his use of "jouissance." The gendered styles of Fuller and Fern were both scrutinized during their times as well, as "feminine" authors who sometimes breached "masculine" writing. Oakes' summary of the ways in which Whitman creates a feminine text may help us begin to explore the ways his poems compare to writing of women, his usage of the tools that made him a "woman's poet" (*LOG*), and why his writing was so accessible to his 19th and 20th century female readers.

Whitman admired the writings of female authors, and was unafraid to adapt linguistic traits that are usually considered "feminine." Apparently, even the first-person narration within *Song of Myself* beginning with "I celebrate myself," (*LOG* 1) indicates an embrace of a supposedly feminine word usage, because "Female writers use more pronouns (I, you, she, their, myself) ... Males prefer words that identify or determine nouns (a, the, that)" (Ball). The science of assigning linguistic traits to separate genders is, in my opinion, dubious; however, in Whitman's case, many critics agree that he was unafraid to experiment with the gendered qualities of writing. I will discuss the way

Whitman's poetry deconstructs the notion that male or female authors must utilize certain poetic or linguistic traits. I believe that Whitman's incorporation of "feminine" writing does not make him less masculine, but rather allows him to share his belief in equality.

In order to understand Whitman's approach to gender, we might examine what stereotypically makes writing "feminine" or "masculine" and consider whether Whitman's poetry demonstrates the conflation of such ideas. Furthermore, this chapter shows that Whitman's interactions with female writers inspired him to incorporate their "feminine" and even their "masculine" writing styles. The styles of women writers were often labeled as "feminine" by many of their contemporaries in the 19th century, but proto-feminist writers like Fern and Fuller also sometimes used techniques considered masculine, in order to break free from the gender bounds in which they felt trapped. A study of Whitman and these women can show us that these authors rupture notions about gendered writing styles, by embracing a variety of literary tactics.

This chapter will discuss Margaret Fuller, and argue that Whitman's readings of her impacted his own writing. Fuller and Whitman's interactions will be discussed in primarily authorial, not personal, terms, because there is little evidence that the two authors interacted in person. I examine ideas in Fuller's texts and the ways they align with similar ideas in Whitman's poetry, but I do not wish to argue that Fuller somehow imparted all of her ideas to Whitman. It becomes clear that these two authors—who are both attributed to the Transcendentalist era of American literature— are linked by intertextual similarities. Furthermore, some of these parallels arguably exist because of the direct link between Fuller and Whitman— after all, Whitman does occasionally quote Fuller verbatim in his texts (LeMaster). Unlike his purely literary relationship with Fuller, Whitman knew Fanny Fern personally, and he knew her family for a long time. History

shows us that Whitman and Fern exchanged many letters and discussed writing in depth, and that Whitman derived much happiness from her companionship. This will be significant to my analysis of the ways Fern affected Whitman's writings, and the way we understand that Whitman's readings of her stories may have inspired his poetry.

Several of Whitman's biographers have noted Whitman's admiration of Margaret Fuller. Whitman reviewed her writing in *Papers on Literature and Art,* and apparently, he was pleased by her writings (LeMaster 422). Historian Philip Callow ardently states that after reading Fuller's papers, Whitman "knew he had stumbled on another agent of spiritual liberation" (110). Some critics have spotted some of the ways in which Fuller's writing affected Whitman; they have mainly focused, however, on the fact that Whitman agreed with Fuller's longing to sing and to create a "true American literature" (Callow 115). Indeed, her chapter about America's need to have a diversity of cultures in order to develop a national literature was moving to Whitman. He even tore this chapter out of Fuller's book and "kept it in his collection of best-loved pieces of writing" (Callow 110). However, I believe the ways in which Fuller inspired Whitman go beyond this analysis. Her comments about an American identity and the formation of a national literature were not the only words that inspired him, because he also incorporated notions of equality and female power in his poetry that were similar to hers.[10]

Margaret Fuller's comment in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, "There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman" (103), seems to have resonated with Whitman, who, as Oakes argues, "struggles with patriarchy's idea that males must be

[10] One could argue that he picked up feminist sensibilities from his surroundings, in an unconscious, intertextual way. However, his direct quotations of some of Fuller's phrases (such as "Mother of All"), indicate a more direct response. Furthermore, we often gain more by analyzing parallels between two specific authors than we might gain from merely claiming that his feminist beliefs emerged due to his general surroundings.

masculine and females feminine" (176). Both Whitman and Fuller became major icons of Transcendentalism, and both wrote about gender in unconventional ways. Fuller was "the first, but not the only, Transcendentalist thinker to emphasize the implications of the philosophy for the lives and futures of women" (Wayne 17). Her articulation of the ways in which Transcendental ideals can transform society's notion of gender were adopted by many of her peers, including fellow feminists such as Paulina Wright Davis and Caroline Dall (Wayne). Furthermore, several male authors were also moved by her words. For example, Nathaniel Hawthorne was intrigued by her way of thinking about "the whole race of womanhood," and she was the inspiration for his character Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* and possibly for his character Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance* (Wineapple 25). Fuller's amalgamation of Transcendental and feminist philosophies were groundbreaking and appealing to Whitman, who, like Fuller, "played a key role in opening up a space, both theoretical and literal, for other women to contemplate and discuss issues of gender and of women's social, cultural, and intellectual subordination" (Wayne 17).

Positive views of motherhood from the mid 19th-century are reflected in the works of both Fuller and Whitman. Fuller wrote of men and the maternal: "Nature…enables the man, who feels maternal love, to nourish his infant like a mother (*Woman* 103). Whitman claimed he was "maternal as well as paternal" (*LOG*) and many critics have noted the significance of the mothers within his poetry (Ashworth). His portrayal of men's strength as reliant upon the strength of women, paired with his literary and biographical indications of his "maternal" personality, tie in interestingly with Fuller's claims that motherhood is universal, and not restricted to the female. This passage by Wardrop points to Whitman's creation of a maternal poetics:

Whitman himself commented,

> 'There is something in my nature furtive like an old hen! You see a hen wandering up and down a hedgerow, looking apparently quite unconcerned, but presently she finds a concealed spot, and furtively lays an egg, and comes away as though nothing had happened! That is how I felt in writing *Leaves of Grass*.' (Kaplan, 18)
>
> This response is most often cited to show the author's sly nature, but more crucially it denotes Whitman's use of the language of birth to exceed the bounds of the symbolic by transgressing into the mode of the semiotic; with the language of birth he establishes a new voice, the voice of the mother man. (142).

Whitman sometimes identified with a figure of maternity, an "old hen."[11] As Wardrop has shown, the "language of birth" was significant to the uniqueness of Whitman's writings. Fuller's comment about men's capacity to feel "maternal love" harmonizes with Whitman's poetry.

The topic of the female body and its connection to both motherhood and the soul was prevalent in the works of both Fuller and Whitman. Fuller says that the body is connected to womanhood, and she asks why the soul has been thought of as masculine: "Indeed it was a frequent belief among the ancients, as with our Indians, that the body was inherited from the mother, the soul from the father" (89). Fuller and Whitman argue against this ancient belief that the body and soul are gendered separately; they believed that the female body and soul were connected and both elevated.

Whitman uses the female form as a metaphor for something "electric." This is interesting to note after one has read Fuller's book, in which she declared, "The electrical, the magnetic element in Woman has not been fairly brought out at any period"

[11] It is interesting to note, as Ceniza has, that "in a culture that honored the male child, Whitman thought of *Leaves* as his female child" (8). Whitman wrote in a letter to his friend William D. O'Connor: "Still *Leaves of Grass* is dear to me, always dearest to me, as my first born, as daughter of my life's first hopes" (8).

(64). Whitman emphasizes this "magnetic element" of women in the poem "I Sing the Body Electric." In this poem, Whitman discusses both men and women and praises both genders, celebrating the bodies and souls of each:

> Be not ashamed, women—your privilege encloses the rest, and is the exit of the rest;
> You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul.
> The female contains all qualities, and tempers them—she is in her place, and moves with perfect balance;
> She is all things duly veil'd—she is both passive and active;
> She is to conceive daughters as well as sons, and sons as well as daughters. (*LOG*: 55).

Whitman's attempt to encourage women to "be not ashamed" may seem condescending to some modern feminist readers, yet his admiration of the body and soul of "the female" should not be belittled to patronization. He and Fuller both pair the body and soul of a woman, indicating their convictions that a woman's body is not to be treated as an object but a part of her soul.

Fuller argues for women's liberation, using her discussion of a woman's soul to frame her reasoning that women's liberation is a right, not a "concession" (179). The following passage from Fuller's *Woman in the 19th-Century* interestingly shows her beliefs about women's achievement of freedom:

> I believe that, at present, women are the best helpers of one another.
> Let them think; let them act; till they know what they need.
> We only ask of men to remove arbitrary barriers. Some would like to do more. But I believe it needs that Woman show herself in her native dignity, to teach them how to aid her; their minds are so encumbered by tradition (158).

Fuller suggests that men "remove arbitrary barriers," and I feel that Whitman successfully did so when he created his poetry. He was not an activist for women's rights, but he wrote about women with love and respect, removing "barriers" and allowing the

female characters in his poetry to embody all types of virtues and sins. Fuller's note about minds that "are so encumbered by tradition" calls to mind Harold Bloom's words in *The Anxiety of Influence* about the problem of tradition in men's writing. Here Fuller suggests that the lack of a female tradition in life and literature is actually freeing. Because Whitman strove to break down barriers of gender norms in literature, he seems to have reacted to Fuller's request to remove barriers. The parallels visible between Whitman and Fuller indicate both authors' sensitivity to a social change towards the liberation of women.

Whitman's interactions with the works of female authors go far beyond Fuller. He was also an admirer and friend of Fanny Fern, originally named Sarah Willis Parton. Fern's family communicated with Whitman often; Whitman was indebted to the Parton family on several occasions, and had many conversations with Fanny (Canada 30). Fanny Fern has not been treated well by Whitman scholars, who have either overlooked her and her relationship with Whitman or have belittled her literary efforts. Gay Wilson Allen, who has written a popular biography of Whitman (*The Solitary Singer*), and who offered a favorable view of Whitman's mother Louisa when many other male critics scorned her, "has nothing but scorn for Fanny Fern: 'the highest paid purveyor of sentimental pap, the incomparable Fanny Fern'" (Ceniza review, *An Independent Woman* 90). Yet the influence of Fern's work upon Whitman is well evidenced; it has been suggested that Whitman imitated Fern's book *Fern Leaves* in choosing both his title and his binding for his own book of poetry *Leaves of Grass*, "particularly the floral designs on the cover" (Winwar). Fern admired Whitman's poetry as well, and she commented "I confess I extract no poison from these 'Leaves'—to me they have brought only healing" ("Fresh

Fern Leaves: Leaves of Grass," 4). In a letter, she wrote, “Walt Whitman, the effeminate world needed thee.”

Fern is now not a well-known author, even though she had momentous popularity during her time—her book *Fern Leaves* sold more copies than Harriett Beacher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Canada). She faded from public notice in the late 19th century, in part because in 1855, William Moulton wrote a book called *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern*. He slandered Fern by claiming she was not a “True Woman” (Moulton). To this day, critics discuss Fern by echoing Moulton’s terms, such as “manipulative” and “rebellious” (Reynolds). Indeed she can be said to have been rebellious; feminist critics now point out the noncompliance with patriarchal norms in her writings. Fern has begun to make her way back into feminist criticism, thanks to the rediscovery of her novel *Ruth Hall* and her numerous columns that promoted women’s suffrage. Fern, according to Elaine Showalter, "spoke of writing as a form of resistance for women imprisoned by their social and sexual roles" (Moses 116). In her works *Fern Leaves* and *Ruth Hall*, her humorous form of resistance becomes especially visible.

Fern’s prose in her essays and novels is often considered sentimental, yet the way she satirically presents the themes of economic independence for women made her a controversial author for her time. Her “masculine” voice was both criticized and praised. Interestingly, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was vocal about his distaste for his time’s growing numbers of women writers, was pleased with Fern’s novel:

> I have been reading *Ruth Hall*, and I must say I enjoyed it a good deal. … The woman [Fanny Fern] writes as if the Devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading. Generally women write like emasculated men, and are only to be distinguished from male authors by greater feebleness and folly; but when they throw off the restraints and come before the public stark naked . . . then their books are sure to possess character and value. . . . If you meet her, I wish you would let her know how much I admire her (Ticknor 141).

Hawthorne's admiration is surprising, and says a great deal about both the gender norms in writing during the mid 19th century and Fern's unusual yet impressive lack of "restraints." Hawthorne's condescending comment, "that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading," notwithstanding, his response, according to Ann D. Wood, insists that "Fanny Fern, unlike her feminine competitors, was daringly true to her fundamental experience as a woman, while her critics accused her of betraying and lowering her feminine nature, and hence of being unfeminine, unwomanly" (4). Fern refused to adhere to the public notion of what is "feminine" in her writing and furthermore did not write as the "emasculated man" that Hawthorne describes. She demonstrated "un-femininely bitter wrath and spite" according to one critic, and used her unusually gendered style to express her forward-thinking ideas about womanhood and female independence (Wood). One reason that traditionalists found her satirical writing "unfeminine" is her brazen use of irony in *Fern Leaves*. She used this irony to mock the institution of marriage, as one of her female characters says to a friend, "What have you to cry for! Aint-you-married? Isn't that the summum bonum-the height of feminine ambition?" (Fern 324). In her works, Fern sometimes alludes to desire in ways that allow her female characters to undermine conservative notions of female sexuality. Whitman's poetry does this as well, and Whitman's depictions of the female body exemplify one reason that critics such as Oakes call his writing "feminized." Fern's portrayal of the female body in her stories, as well as her inquisitiveness about the relationship between the female body and soul, are indicative of similarities between her writing and Whitman's poetry.

Whitman's writing, as Mullins points out, liberates the often-silenced desires of women. One of the most famous passages of "Song of Myself," is about a woman behind the blinds of the window: "She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,/ She hides handsome and richly dressed aft the blinds of the window./Which of the young men does she like the best?/Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her." This passage of "Song of Myself" demonstrates Whitman's acceptance of female sexuality, as Whitman flits in and out of the woman's subjective imagination and tells the story of her desire for the young men: "The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to the sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them, / They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch / They do not think whom they souse with spray" (*LOG*, 45: 214-216). The writing of the woman's desire in this part of "Song of Myself" "expands into an erotic act as the bathers, the woman, and the speaker abandon the 'know' and 'think; of conventional expression and instead reach jouissance, with its open-ended, orgasmic implications" (Mullins 202).

Whitman's commitment to showing female desire as something joyous and natural indicates that he shares in Fern's understanding of passion. Fern's descriptions of male bodies are reminiscent of Whitman's poetry, because they are overt in their aesthetic admiration. Fern's three marriages shocked her contemporaries, as did her personal behavior: she "both admired the male form and admitted to feeling desire" (Harker 53). In her articles, Fern praised men with suggestive detail. She admires "an athlete of a gymnast, of glorious chest and calves, and splendid muscular arms, skimming the air as gracefully as a bird, and as poetically," and she humorously discusses her many beaus (*Ginger-snaps* 224-25, 235). Fern makes joking references to sexuality, and to the ways women can "fix" men: "Eve wasn't smart about that apple business. I know forty

ways I could have fixed him--without burning my fingers, either" (Life and Beauties 311). In Fern's writings, "sexuality appears with a frankness and light-heartedness unheard of in most sentimental writers" (Harker 54). The same can be said of Whitman, yet Fern's daringness is made all the more impressive by the fact that 19th-century culture typically did not appreciate such boldness in a female writer.

Fern was vocal about her own longing for the freedom and physicality that men are allowed to possess:

> I want to do such a quantity of 'improper' things, that there is not the slightest real harm in doing… I want the free use of my ankles, without giving a thought to my clothes… but propriety scowls and says, 'ain't you ashamed of yourself, Fanny Fern?' *Yes I am*…I *am* ashamed of myself, that I haven't the courage to carry out what would be eminently convenient, and right, and proper. (Fern "A Law More Nice Than Just, Number II," 1858.)

Fern's opposition to the rules she is told to obey demonstrates her work as a member of the shift towards women's liberation in the mid 19th-century. Her expressions of her own sexuality, and her love of freedom, may have inspired Whitman's works. Whitman's veneration of freedom, of democracy, and of "improper" things is blatant in exploratory poems such as "Song of the Open Road," in which he equally invites men and women to take to the open road with him: "Whoever you are, come forth! or man or woman come forth!/ You must not stay sleeping and dallying there in the house, though you built it, or though it has been built for you." His invitation to break free from the walls of the houses that restrain both men and women seems even more striking when it is read next to Fern's desire for the "courage" to escape the rules that govern women's lives.

Another example of Fern's rebellion against the norms of "proper" female behavior is the way her female characters rise above the domestic sphere by reaching beyond the confines of their bodies. In Fern's *Fern Leaves*, her character Mrs. Croaker

says, “to-day I had a loaf of cake to make. Well, do you suppose, because my body is in the pastry-room, that my soul needs to be there, too? Not a bit of it! I‘m thinking of all sorts of celestial things the while” (*Fern Leaves*, first series 384). Fern’s writing plays with the concept of the body and the soul, like Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” Fern affirms the capacity of a woman to do domestic chores such as baking a cake while simultaneously imagining “celestial things” with her soul. Fern mocks domestic chores through satire, and points to women’s ability to transcend the domestic sphere, even if she cannot literally leave the kitchen. Fern’s novel *Ruth Hall* also focuses upon the home sphere in which women are often placed. Ann Wood writes:

> In her suffering, [Ruth Hall] represented a reproach to the male world. If woman's place is really in the home, why don't men enable her to stay there?, Fanny Fern is implicitly demanding. No one could have been more frail, loving and dependent than Ruth Hall originally was. If men will not even protect and aid a clinging creature such as this, the book's logic seems to suggest, they deserve what they get, for it is what they themselves have forced into being: a smart business woman capable of outwitting them in their sphere (23).

The character of Ruth Hall, as Wood points out, indicates Fern’s conviction that keeping women in their “place” is unsustainable. Fern’s conviction that the bounds of domesticity should either be disrupted or otherwise surpassed was influential for her time.

Like Fern, Margaret Fuller, Abby Hills Price and Whitman similarly indicate that they believe women have the right to leave the domestic sphere if they wish. Fuller demonstrates her desire to free women from domestic life: “Women are better aware how great and rich the universe is, not so easily blinded by narrowness or partial views of a home circle” (61). Price is scornful of the ways women are trapped in a domestic household: “Man says to woman, ‘we want you *there,* and we will take care of you—

we'll keep you in business; mind you *that business*…Woman has a right to choose her own sphere" (Ceniza, quoting Price, "Woman's Right to Suffrage"). Ceniza claims that Whitman's prose, though not his poetry, demonstrates his belief that women and men should work on domestic chores together. In his journal, he writes, "No house, no woman, can be disenthralled until society arrives at a simpler system of the table… as to who shall do the work it is just as becoming, when both understand it as, that the man cook for the woman as that the woman cook for the man" (Whitman *Notebooks*, 1:369).[12] Whitman takes up Price's argument that women deserve more than the domestic sphere, but he uses it to scold women. In a notebook, he writes: "(to women— sternly) Do you suppose you have nothing waiting for yourselves to do, but to embroider, to clean, to be respectable and modest…?" (Ceniza, quoting Whitman, 154).

Price and Fern do not address women directly, but Whitman does. Ceniza says of this occurrence, "Whitman, the lecturer, wants his audience to see that in accepting these socially formed boundaries as if they were intrinsic ('natural'), women deny themselves self-development. Abby Price's words ring through Whitman's" (70). As a man, Whitman's reaction to the dilemma of women is to "sternly" remind them that they deserve a better life than that of a housewife, which verges on condescension. This may suggest a difference between progressive women's ideas and a man's translation of them. Yet this passage mainly demonstrates Whitman's conviction that women should look forward to what they have "waiting" for them—a life of achievement and ascension. The topic of the domestic chores expected of women, and the idea that women can and should rise above that, is present in works by Fuller, Fern, and Whitman, and is central to the discussion of equality and gender reform in the mid 19th century.

[12] This looks forward to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, which will be discussed more in the last chapter.

This discussion of the works of authors Margaret Fuller and Fanny Fern can help us better understand the complexities of gender that are at play in Whitman's poetry, as well as the depth of his involvement with female role models and authors. Fuller and Fern each became highly important to Whitman, and they significantly contributed to his development of a feminine and equality-driven poetics. Whether or not Whitman was a "feminist," or indeed whether these women should be given the term, is a slippery question; it requires a total confidence about the definition of the term and its application to 19th-century circumstances. It is complicated enough to use the word in reference to a man, due to feminist sensitivities about male privilege and the inability for a man to experience, and therefore to truly sympathize with, the subjugation of women. The term "pro-feminist" has more commonly been used in reference to men,[13] and because Whitman never took an active stand in favor of women's rights, his literary support of equality is perhaps better called "pro-feminist" than "feminist." But as many critics have pointed out, Whitman's poems were influenced by, and beloved to, many of his female contemporaries who were part of a larger movement for gender equality. Regardless of whether he was "feminist" or not, Whitman was involved with progressive female writers and his works in turn were beloved by many later feminists.

In thinking about the ways Whitman's poetry parallels the works of Fuller and Fern, and why his ideas may be considered pro-feminist, we might examine why many critics have called his writing "feminine." Whitman's poetry aligns with Cixous' definition of "l'ecriture feminine," because in many ways it echoes the "wandering"

[13] See *The History of Men: Essays on the History of American and British Masculinities* by Michael S. Kimmel. Kimmel never uses "feminist" to describe men, instead using "pro-feminist." His book details many American men of the 18th-20th centuries whom he deems pro-feminist, including Whitman, H. L. Mencken (*In Defense of Women*), Henry Durant, and Frederick Douglass.

quality of a feminine text. According to Cixous, "sensory immersion" is created by a kind of wandering writing, which celebrates the moment and the experience rather than the meaning of a poem (196). This also relates to the notion of the "semiotic," as defined by Julie Kristeva. The semiotic, a stage in child development, is similar to Freud's Pre-Oedipal stage, but is a realm associated with the musical, the poetic, the rhythmic, and which lacks structure and meaning. Furthermore, it is closely tied to the "feminine" (Schippers 220). Cixous and Kristeva were two main proponents of French feminism, so by considering Cixous' "l'ecriture feminine" and Kristeva's "semiotic" state and applying them to Whitman's poetic ideas, we can better understand the ways Whitman's writing ties into feminism.

Maire Mullins discusses Cixous' "l'ecriture feminine" in relation to Whitman's poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry":

> Through an aware detachment, an unmediated sense of the body becomes part of the experience Whitman writes of in this ferry crossing. Time, the ferry, the course of the sun-all moving quickly-are caught in the speaker's gaze:
>
> > 'Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!
> > Clouds of the west-sun there half an hour high-I see you also face to face. (1-2)'
>
> Cixous also speaks of 'wandering, excess, risk of the unreckonable'- all characteristics of a feminine text, which is anti-teleological, negating and undermining any sense of closure, and non-linear (197).

The argument that Whitman's poetry represents Cixous' definition of the "l'écriture feminine"— that his non-linear, detached style as visible in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" as well as other poems— indicates his connection to what some call a "feminine" style. Like Fern's Mrs. Croaker, Whitman's narrator soars amongst "celestial things," while searching for the inscrutable and "unreckonable." By demonstrating the similarities of

Whitman's poetry to the descriptions in Cixous' feminist theory, we can better understand the nuances of gender in his writing.

"Unreckonable" writing, as Cixous calls it, is considered to be a part of the "feminine aesthetic" of writing. In the 19th century, female novelists (such as Fern) often wrote sentimental literature, that Dorri Beam terms the "highly wrought style" (222). Beam argues that the sentimentalism of 19th century female novelists was an attempt to "render the world opaque and strange rather than assimilable and interpretable." She furthermore claims that the "feminine aesthetic" can transcend gender, and is not limited to only female authors (223). By Beam's definition, Whitman's poetry, which sometimes verges on the sentimental and certainly renders its meaning "opaque and strange," often falls under the category of the feminine aesthetic.

The opaqueness that can be found in Whitman and Fern's writings is created because of a certain wandering style. Writers like Margaret Fuller and Fanny Fern did not sacrifice the devices in their writing that are deemed "feminine" in order to self-promote the female author as capable of masculine work. Instead, they brought attention to some of the benefits of fluid writing, showing why it is important to focus on the journey rather than the destination of reading. Whitman borrowed some of these useful concepts for *Leaves of Grass*, especially "Song of Myself," which is a winding poem about the process of poetry rather than its answers.

> Simultaneously obscure and exhilarating, *Leaves of Grass* has never been an easy book for readers. Long unmetrical lines define their own rhythms as they go along. The poems are homerically digressive, often seeming aimless to the point of incoherence. The meanings of the poems seem inseparable from the process by which they are made (Black 25).

Whitman embraced the flowing, obscure quality of "feminine" writing without limiting it specifically to the feminine body, calmly displaying it next to his poetry that also

celebrates “manly love” (Whitman, “A Song”). His appreciation of female authors goes beyond mere admiration, because he employs their techniques while giving them their due credit.

Whitman’s attention to femininity has caught the attention of critics of gender and sexuality, and some consider his appreciation of womanhood to be a rarity in men of his time. Wardrop has commented:

> Rarely do men accomplish translation of gender, but it is possible… Cixous notes that ‘there are some men (all too few) who aren't afraid of femininity’ (‘Medusa,’ 289). Lacan also finds such men: ‘who are just as good as women. It does happen. And who therefore feel just as good. Despite, I won't say their phallus, despite what encumbers them on that score, they get the idea, they sense that there must be a jouissance which goes beyond’ (*Feminine Sexuality* 147).
> (Wardrop 146).

Wardrop claims that there is a “rarity” of men who “can broach female experience.” Indeed, in feminist criticism, rarely do scholars argue *for* men’s ability to embrace femininity; whether this is truly as unusual as criticism makes it appear is another question.

In the above passage, Lacan points to the “jouissance which goes beyond” that women possess, saying that some men are able to sense it. Lacan originally introduced the term “jouissance,” and then Cixous expanded it for feminist criticism. According to Cixous, “jouissance,” is “explosion, diffusion, effervescence, abundance...takes pleasure (jouit) in being limitless" (160). Maire Mullins defines as “the term many French feminist critics and writers use to refer to the liberation of silenced desire in physical, emotional, and spiritual ways” (28) While female writing is not necessarily said to be filled with this “jouissance,” it is certainly found in many women’s works. Whitman’s poetry, especially “Song of Myself,” can be read as not just a discovery of female

"jouissance," but an expression of it. His writing is universally described as limitless and abundant, with a focus upon sensual pleasure, even the pleasure of women; these qualities allow it to represent feminine jouissance in a positive way.

Whitman developed a style of writing that shows an embrace of "feminine" characteristics, but he neither satirizes it nor sacrifices his love of masculinity. One reason some critics have caused him feminine is that he is homosexual, and some equate this with femininity. Furthermore, because Whitman's poetry exaggerates the beauties of both genders, critics (for example, Kaplan, Shaheen, and Gilbert) have construed his writing as "androgynous." Yet while it seems that his poetry suits the definition of androgyny: "having the characteristics or nature of both male and female," or "neither specifically feminine nor masculine" (*OED*), his poetry seems to aim for something less ambivalent and more in favor of the feminist movement for equality. This is visible in lines of his poetry, such as "The Female equally with the Male I sing" ("One's Self I Sing," 6). This line that may at first seem like a combination of the genders, but is more accurately a declaration of female liberation. Though his writing should not be labeled as wholly feminine, the blanket term "androgynous" also does not fit because his poetry refuses stasis in any position.

I would argue that more important than the claim that Whitman's writing is feminine is what this analysis shows in regards to the ways he breaks gender rules. He incorporates stereotypically masculine and feminine linguistic norms so fluidly in his writing that the distinctions between the two begin to blur. This quote from Fuller well describes what authors such as Fuller, Fern and Whitman achieve in the 19th-century: "Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But in fact they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is

no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman" (103). The fluidness of Whitman's writing and his consistent oscillations between female and male narrative voices indicate his appreciation of Fuller's view.

Whitman's deconstruction of the literary gender binary provides one explanation for why women and women writers were especially drawn to his poetry. Furthermore, his interactions with women reformers, advocates for gender equality, and progressive female novelists demonstrate his involvement with the feminist movement, which was rapidly developing during the time of his writing. Whitman's poetry, as Ceniza suggested, was "grounded in the history of the women's rights movement," (12). He interacted with the "true woman of the new aggressive type…woman under the new dispensation" (Whitman),[14] and in his poetry he showed his admiration for strong, intelligent women.

Some critics, such as Byrne Fone (*Masculine Landscapes: Walt Whitman and the Homoerotic Text*), and James E. Miller Jr. ("Sex and Sexuality") have overlooked the significance of Whitman's relationships with women in his life. Yet these women seem to have been vital to the development of Whitman's style that was, according to various critics, "androgynous," "feminine," "masculine," and "fluid." The vastness of gender representation within Whitman's writing, and the malleability of his poetics with regards to gender, indicate that no single one of these terms should be used to label Whitman's poetry. His writing defies labels through its expansiveness and its appetite for containing "multitudes," and in this way it struggles to escape the confines of gender. Fluidity allows his poetry to better present ideas about the necessity of gender equality, and so,

[14] In Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden,* 4:188.

inspired by his female contemporaries, Whitman strives to project ideas of female liberation and strength.

3. "The Great Mother" in Whitman's Poetry

> "[Women] are not one jot less than I am… they are tann'd in the face…ultimate in their own right…and calm, clear, well-possessed of themselves" (Whitman, "A Woman Waits for Me" 102:16).
>
> "This is the female form;
> A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot;
> It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction!
> I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than a helpless vapor—all falls aside but myself and it" (Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric" 91:5:20).

The central point of this thesis must be Whitman's poetry itself, which was both plentiful and varied in subject matter. Inspired by his fellow Transcendentalists such as Emerson as well as the female writers discussed in the previous chapter, Whitman used his experiences as a journalist and a nurse in the war to create a unique voice in his many editions of *Leaves of Grass*. In this chapter, I will consider Whitman in a less biographical way than I have formerly done, and focus more on the text and his fluid sense of poetic speaker. By exploring Whitman's portrayal of mothers and the "Great Mother of All," we can more clearly see the influence of the women he read, as well as begin to think about why his poetry was so significant for his later female readers.

I will primarily examine the portrayals of women in Whitman's poetry, and why his mothers and wombs are significant to his understanding of womanhood. I have touched multiple times in this project upon Whitman's representations of motherhood, and have noted the ways critics have interpreted these portrayals. His fondness for mothers has often resulted in critics' claims that he believes women to be useful only for their reproductive capabilities. However, I, like critics Loving and Killingsworth, argue that Whitman's praise for the great "Mother of All" is more accurately read as a love of creativity, which he expresses by elevating women to positions of power in his poems. Whitman depicted women in many different spheres, and as critics have often pointed

out, his women are often not limited to domestic or maternal spaces. Though he often praises the glory of mothers, he represents women in many other ways, demonstrating the fullness of their capacities in a variety of environments.

In this chapter I show that I agree more with critics such as Loving and Killingsworth, who recognize that Whitman's portrayals of motherhood are liberating for women. By celebrating women as mothers and creating the figure the Great Mother/ Mother of All, Whitman actually liberates women from domestic and maternal life by glorifying women's sexual desires and intellectual and artistic capacities. But various critics, some of whom do not approve of the way Whitman "worships" motherhood, have analyzed the way Whitman glorifies the mother as fertile and sexual in his poetry. Barbara Wardrop, for example, feels that he appropriates women's reproductive capacities for the sake of his own writing. However, she acknowledges that his focus on wombs and productivity is groundbreaking because it allows Whitman to use language in a new way. D.H. Lawrence also felt that Whitman was only fond of women because he reduced them to their reproductive organs. Vivian Pollak has similar issues as Lawrence. Though she appreciates Whitman's "resistance to linguistically totalizing norms" and his progressive ideas about female sexuality and liberation, Pollak finds Whitman's obsession with motherhood to be detrimental for women because it perpetuates the "cult of true womanhood," an ideal of femininity that persisted in the 19th century. She is alarmed by "his reaffirmation of the mid-nineteenth-century American cult of the mother, which celebrated maternity as any woman's supreme destiny" (172).

Pollak's argument that Whitman "reaffirms" the "cult of True Womanhood" through his lavish portrayals of mothers is important to our understanding of the constructions of womanhood that circulated in the 19th century. Whitman's conceptions

about motherhood and the female body were partially suggested to him by his 19th century environment. Glorification of motherhood was not unusual in the 19th-century, because the "cult of true womanhood," pervaded American social sensibilities and encouraged women to be domestic "goddesses." This "cult" is discussed in length by Barbara Welter:

> The attributes of True Womanhood by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues-piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife-woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power (152).

The concept of True Womanhood led to the strict double standard wherein mothers were expected to be the angelic and pure organizers of a household. A woman's life depended upon her relations to men: "The true woman's place was unquestionably by her own fireside-as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother" (Welter 156). Women who were dissatisfied with domestic life and who demonstrated sexual desire were considered "whores" according to this construction. Virgins and whores were kept apart in a dichotomy, something that Whitman opposes in his poetry by bringing all kinds of women together and by celebrating both their domestic mothering and their heated sexuality.

Whitman disagreed with the idea that women should be pure and should stay in the home, as we can see in his political works such as *Democratic Vistas*. And yet because he portrays mothers so gloriously in his poetry, he may have unintentionally reaffirmed the cult of True Womanhood. Some of his readers likely felt that Whitman believed that motherhood is the best occupation for a woman, and so interpreted his works as supportive of that type of ideology. However, Whitman actually believed in an

impossible, idealistic motherhood, not a realistic motherhood that could be carried out by the average woman. He loved actual mothers (such as his own), but the women and mothers in his poetry are figurative representations of nature and of the ever-persisting life force of humanity. The Mother and the many other women in his poems are not "authentic," which occasionally becomes a problem if, as Loving claims, "Whitman's rendering of women is a poetical fantasy that ignores the reality of their future" (27). Whitman creates a contradiction when he writes that there is "perfect equality of the female with the male," (By Blue Ontario's Shores" 104) and when he claims that women are "superior" to men because of their ability to gestate. Whitman's idealizations about gender equality and motherhood are not to be read literally, but as indications of his grand visions for the future. His visions are impossibly over-reaching, because it is difficult for any woman to achieve the kind of freedom in motherhood that he imagines. But for Whitman, women and mothers are the keys to the future, and his female readers reacted positively to this idea, finding solace in finally being taken seriously by a male poet.

The "Mother", also known as the "Mother of All," is one of the recurring figures in Whitman's writing, and is important to our understanding of gender and liberation of the female body in his poetry. In his poems, women and mothers often represent "Nature, the wellspring (Whitman had learned from Emerson) of all poetry" (Loving 30). Whitman's Mother is metaphorical, and represents the creativity of Nature itself. She is a "source of incipient creation" from which all "unfolds" and to which all returns (Burke 297). Though I use "she" here for simplicity, Whitman imagined that motherhood and the Mother were gender-neutral. Furthermore, what sets Whitman's Mother apart is that she is not a passive bearer of children, but an "active, assertive, projection of perception,

engendering a process paralleling female reproduction" (Falk 48). Whitman was enamored with the idea of women as sexual, strong, and liberated, and so his "Mother of All" figure symbolizes both artistic creativity and female liberation. In addition to thinking about the Mother and what she represents in terms of gender, nature, and desire, this chapter will also consider the women in Whitman's poetry prose who are strong, independent, and are granted social equality.

In discussing Whitman's Mother and the women he portrays, we may consider Whitman's destructions of the boundaries between the genders. His poetic style is notably fluid, and shifts between female and male narrative forms. Whitman's Mother of All is not limited to a specific gender or to stereotypical gender roles. The Mother in Whitman's poetry need not be read as necessarily female, because "she" represents a larger belief in the beauty of Nature's procreant abilities, as is also true in Emerson and Thoreau's philosophies. Whitman "could see beyond the arbitrary boundaries attributed to the body and so on some level see that motherhood was not gender bound, just as the possibilities of sexual intercourse were not bound by male/female coupling" (Ceniza, 226).

Beth Jensen argues that Whitman intertextually shared ideas with Kristeva. Kristeva creates a broadened definition of the mother with her theory of subject formation, and her approach "emphasizes the maternal role… but does not limit 'mother' to a particular gender" (Jensen ix). Unlike Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman's bending of gender roles makes room for women to be fathers and men to be mothers. Loving claims that Whitman "would perhaps agree with the behaviorists who argue…that offspring can be 'mothered' by either parent" (21). Whitman's Mother of All, and his own identification with motherhood ("there is something about my nature like a mother hen!"

(Whitman, Letter to Traubel)), demonstrate the extent of Whitman's unconventionality in his attitudes towards gender roles.

Whitman's Mother of All is best understood in his poem "Pensive on Her Dead Gazing, I Heard the Mother of All," in which the Mother recognizes that a single person is synonymous with a small part of the universe.

> Pensive, on her dead gazing, I heard the Mother of All,
> Desperate, on the torn bodies, on the forms covering the battle-fields gazing;
> (As the last gun ceased—but the scent of the powder-smoke linger'd;)
> As she call'd to her earth with mournful voice while she stalk'd:
> Absorb them well, O my earth, she cried—I charge you, lose not my sons!
> lose not an atom (1-6).

This first section of the poem introduces the reader to the idea that the Mother of All is not a literal, singular mother but is instead more broadly representative of Nature. By using possessive pronouns such as "her earth" and "O my earth," Whitman demonstrates that this Mother holds a position of power over the earth, and she can command it to "lose not an atom" of her "sons." The Mother has "self directed power" (Falk) and a role in natural creation. Furthermore, this poem is an example of what Pollak calls "the fully audible female voice" (45). Whitman mythologizes a mother here, choosing the Mother to represent a peace-bearer who understands the consequences of war. This hints at one reason Whitman worships motherhood: because he feels that mothers are the future, and believes them to be more appreciative of tranquility than other people. The mourning Mother is a recurring figure in his poetry, and is a signal of Whitman's concerns for the fate of humanity and the treatment of women by society.

The poem "As I Ebb'd" shows us the power and substance of the Mother in Whitman's poetry, and shows that Whitman admires the Mother's expressiveness and respects her independence. In the first lines of the poem, the narrator notices "the fierce

old mother" who "endlessly cries for her castaways" (*LG*, 253-254). The narrator poet, who is "musing late in the autumn day," depicts the mother in this manner (254). He is "seiz'd by the spirit," of musing and poetry, and perhaps touched by the spirit of the mother herself. Later in the poem, the narrator shifts his perception of the mother, and instead of merely sympathizing with her, he views her as an independent entity and almost fears her: "Cease not your moaning you fierce old mother,/ Endlessly cry for your castaways, but fear not" (*LG*, 255). The narrator now recognizes the force of the Mother, and instead of viewing her as an object of beauty to be used as the subject of his poetry, he understands that her fierceness is backed by an abundance of raw emotional power.

Wartofsky says of this passage:

> The poet can now accept the mother's voice in its fierceness instead of merely in its idealization; the absolute continuity between the mother's tongue and Whitman's own, which earlier seemed essential to Whitman's envisioning his own originality, is no longer necessary. She can speak her own desire, her own capacity to absorb; she no longer needs to be spoken for through the poet's own voice, no longer needs to be translated into a language whose form denies the truth of her substance (205).

Wartofsky's comments point to the issue of whether Whitman's Mother has power, or whether she is passive. Though the Mother in his poems is sometimes depicted through the eyes of a man, or seems to be granted worth because of her relationship to men ("There is nothing greater than the mother of men" (*LOG* 33)), Whitman frequently reverses this and lets the voices of mothers dictate the orientation of a moment in a poem. In "Song of Myself" he claims he needs to "translate," something about mothers: "I wish I could translate the hints… about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps." But Whitman does not need to "translate" a woman's words by a male narrator. He gives the mothers in his poetry the room to speak for themselves, and the Mother in "As I Ebb'd" exemplifies this through the strength of her cries.

The Mother's significance in Whitman's poetry exemplifies the fact that parenting and procreation are thematically imperative to Whitman. Critics have noted the "obsessive theme" in Whitman's writing, one "of parentage, as indeed were so many mid-nineteenth-century stories insisting on the sacredness of home and mother" (Callow, *From Noon to Starry Night: A Life of Walt Whitman*). Though the worship of the family may have been commonplace in literature of 19th- century America, an obsession with procreation and with the mother as a sexual being was not. Whitman's fascination with reproduction is especially visible in "Song of Myself," which recommends regeneration as a path to transcendental knowledge. Whitman is male, but the narrator of "Song of Myself" is not restricted to solely fatherly longings. Whitman's expansive and "barbaric" mode of expression aims to collect multitudes of subjectivities, and to envelop the desires of men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals.

The primary subjective voice of "Song of Myself," reveals Whitman's desire to procreate, not just as a man but also as a woman, with a woman's reproductive body parts and a mother's supposedly intrinsic ability to nurture. Whitman's friend John Burroughs called him a "mother man," referencing Whitman's enjoyment of taking care of the people around him: a characteristic that became most evident during the time when he was a nurse in the Civil War. Whitman "arranges 'Song of Myself' as best he can in order to be able to sing both as man and as mother man" (Wardrop 155), and in this way he refuses to let gender hinder his desire to create and nurture. Moreover, by giving the Mother figure a predominant role in his poetry, Whitman enables a voice that is assumed to be female to take the limelight.

The Mother in Whitman's poetry and his "obsession" with procreation raises the issue of "womb envy."[15] Waldrop argues that men have long struggled with the fact that they cannot "create" new life within their own bodies, and that male authors sometimes incorporate the imagery of the female body in order to appropriate its capabilities. Whitman overtly acknowledges his own limitations, and by admiring the female body, he reveals his "womb envy" but refuses to present it in a hostile manner. Instead, he becomes a creator: "By my life-lumps! becoming already a creator,/ Putting myself here and now to the ambush'd womb of the shadows" ("SoM," 41-41). This is one of the most famous lines of "Song of Myself," and in it he combines the imagery of masculine "life-lumps" and "ambush'd womb" in order to be an independent artistic inventor. The phrase "ambush'd womb" is of significance, and it is suggestive of force or even rape. The womb "of the shadows" is, according to Whitman, "ambush'd" for the sake of creation. Whitman acknowledges that only by appropriating, or "stealing," the female image of the womb can he understand the process of creation, and he concedes that his focus upon women and mothers has something to do with his desire to take part in poetic creation.

The process of childbirth itself becomes representative of Whitman's desire to create. Whitman's statements about the Mother of All sometimes appear to support the view of motherhood as proper and suitable for a woman. Indeed Whitman glorified motherhood, and reveled in the idea of birth: "Oh! How gloriously beautiful motherhood is…[your sister] went through that business of having a baby like the sun comes up in the

[15] Womb envy denotes "the envy men feel towards a woman's primary role in nurturing and sustaining life." The term is coined by the Neo-Freudian psychiatrist Karen Horney (1885–1952), who proposed that men experience womb envy more powerfully than women experience penis envy because "men need to disparage women more than women need to disparage men."

morning: no cross, no shock, no shame, no apology" (WWC 3: 452-53). Yet Whitman's presentation of childbirth was unconventional and helpful to women, because he found nothing crude or disgusting about the process of childbirth and therefore depicted it in a familiar and honest way. In his poetry, Whitman sometimes even acted as a midwife, and represented the "accoucheur": "To his work without flinching the accoucheur comes" ("Song of Myself," 49: 224). Whitman celebrates childbirth, but furthermore he strives to participate in it, joining the mother in a moment of life-giving.

Mothers who do not have "real" jobs are the primary embodiment of womanhood in some of Whitman's poems; however, this is not because he agreed with the concept that women belong in the domestic sphere. In fact, he argued specifically against this, and encouraged women to transcend the limits of domesticity and to find power and liberation. The first step to exceeding the walls of the home, he argues, is to become mothers, because there is "nothing greater" than a mother (*LOG*: "SoM" 25). Ceniza argues in *Walt Whitman and the Nineteenth-Century Women Reformers* that Whitman's excessive conversations about mothers and his praise of them does not make him a proponent of the "cult of true womanhood" (256), and I agree because he transforms the Mother image into a symbol for nature, human power, and equality. He does not see mothers as real women with daily challenges, and this is in many ways a flaw; however, his idealistic, metaphysical view allows him to distance himself from reality and create a new vision for life and motherhood.

Whitman's presentation of women does not restrict their roles to wives and mothers. His portrayal of women is diverse and captures the beauty of all kinds of women. Though none of the women he depicts work outside of the home, they are nevertheless "working women" (Loving 17). They know "how to swim, row, ride,

wrestle, shoot, run, strike, retreat, advance, resist, defend themselves" ("A Woman Waits For Me", *LOG* 106). Whitman maintained close friendships with powerful and active women, as the previous chapter demonstrated, and his relationships with female activists may have contributed to his portrayals of women who are manifold in nature.

> Where before poets had elevated a single woman to a pedestal and praised her, Whitman extols the glory of all women and every woman. Throughout the poems he shows woman in a variety of guises, roles, and stations, especially the common and mean, from the 'clean-hair'd Yankee girl [who] works with her sewing machine or in the factory or mill' to the 'prostitute [who] draggles her shawl, her bonnet...on her tipsy and pimpled neck,' and even to the female noble savage in the figure of the red squaw in 'The Sleepers' (Winter 204).

Winter's indication of here to Whitman's acceptance even of "pimpled" prostitutes subverts the 19th-century obsession with purity and submissiveness, because his depictions of women often give women the space to be ugly, desirous, hungry, dominant, and even masculine.

Though Whitman concentrates upon the female sexuality and mothering capabilities of women, he also portrays them in ways that suggest notions of masculinity, and the Mother of All is ungendered in that "she" is actually a part of Whitman, an extension of his masculinity and his desire to mother. Endowing women with stereotypically male talents and behaviors, Whitman refuses to let them be limited to one category. Winter argues that Whitman's queerness could be a cause of this: "Possibly because of his lack of sexual interest in women, he could see and represent them as more than objects of pleasure and desire" (Winter 204). Though we should remember that Whitman is usually considered to have been homosexual by biographers (such as Kaplan), his lack of desire towards women should not be reduced to a simple explanation for why he felt comfortable with writing about the rights of women. Though Loving

writes, “perhaps only a homosexual could celebrate that capacity [for women to be independent] so *un*possessively” (24).

The women in Whitman’s poetry display strong, passionate, and active characteristics. Whitman may not have created exact replicas of his working female friends, who were reformers, writers, and more in his poetry, but he did create female figures who demonstrate why women deserve to be treated equally to men. These women are proud, fierce, and often physically strong. He describes shameless women in “A Woman Waits For Me”:

> Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex,
> Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers.
> Now I will dismiss myself from impassive women,
> I will go stay with her who waits for me, and with those
> women that are warm-blooded…
> I will be the robust husband of those women.
> They are not one jot less than I am (*LOG* 107).

Whitman accepts that women can have sexual desires, but moreover he actively promotes female sexuality in his poems. Whitman has a heterosexual persona in poems such as this one, and by employing that persona he is more easily able to criticize the double standard that men can enjoy sexual intercourse but that women should not. The woman Whitman prefers is unashamed to admit to the “deliciousness” of sex, and is unafraid to do as she wishes and be aware of the pleasures of the body. Whitman believes that these women “are not one jot less than I am,” which demonstrates that he does not buy into the “cult of True Womanhood” that idealizes delicacy and virginity. Whitman’s heterosexual persona allows him to fully engage with his desire to procreate, and empowers his depictions of women as sexual and passionate.

Whitman’s expression of the beauty of desire and his refusal to depict women as “pure” and incapable of feeling passion was unusual, especially for a male poet of the 19th

century. Furthermore, in his poetry female sexuality is often conflated with motherhood, because of the fluid sense of time in Whitman's writing. Conception and birth are, to him, almost simultaneous, and both are events worthy of celebration. Whitman mentions mothers so often in his poetry (he uses the word "mother" fourteen times in "Song of Myself, and "father" only three times), in part because he is enamored with female sexuality, which culminates in pregnancy and reproduction. Whitman's articulation of female desire demonstrates one way in which Whitman believed that sex is the solution to breaking down limiting barriers in society. Winter discusses why Whitman feels the need to break down conventions concerning female sexuality:

> The barriers that the culture had created-particularly class and gender-were continuously breeched by basic human sexual nature. The sexual impulses of healthy men and women press toward communion and thus deny the artificial differences that society has erected. Women who were allowed to experience their sexuality would lead the assault, right beside the poet, some women carrying their children on their hips (Winter 210).

For Whitman, women and all other peoples would never be liberated until procreation and sex were acceptable and celebrated. The Mother, therefore, is not only a symbol of the beauty of Nature's creation, but is also a figure who can lead the way towards a free America, one that imposes fewer boundaries upon "basic human sexual nature." Winter's analysis suggests that Whitman believed that women who are allowed to take hold of the sexual and maternal pleasures of the Mother are, like the figure of the "poet," capable of revolution.

Whitman saw that his society hindered women from safely expressing or feeling pride in her desires. Whitman simultaneously blames sexual restraint upon "the woman who has denied the best of herself," and society which "will not allow [sex] to be freely spoken of" (*Whitman in Camden* 449). Loving argues of Whitman's comments about female sexuality: "In calling for the liberation of the impassioned woman, Whitman was

also calling for perfect mothers whose full sexual response (including orgasm, it was thought by eugenicists in the nineteenth century) was necessary for healthy offspring" (19-20). Whitman's "perfect mothers" may be liberated in many ways, and are not confined to traditional views of motherhood because they are allowed to experience sexual pleasure. Whitman's view of sexuality may be limiting for non-sexual women or women who have no desire to mother, and this is the basis of criticism of his portrayals. Yet it is important to remember that his notions of womanhood and motherhood were centered on an ideal: one where women and mothers would equally be treated gloriously. This vision was not intended to be realistic, and indeed for most women it was not.

For Whitman, a woman's desire allows her to create. In "Unfolded Out of the Folds," Whitman expresses his belief that women produce everything, and that something feminine must exist for creation to occur. "Unfolded out of the sympathy of the woman is all sympathy:/ A man is a great thing upon the earth, and through eternity—but every jot of the greatness of man is unfolded out of woman,/ First the man is shaped in the woman, he can then be shaped in himself" (*LOG*: 178). The obvious point— that men do not exist unless women give birth to them— is not the focus of the poem. Whitman's main focus is the metaphor of "unfolding," which is the "becoming" of motherhood, and the act of creation. In this poem, Whitman "calls the woman's sexuality the poem from which his own poems come," because he felt that the woman was the best symbol of human growth (Loving). Through her sexuality, a woman can become a creator and a Mother of All. She is not limited to creating men, but also she can "unfold" "all sympathy" since she is the shaper of all things.

Whitman acknowledged the sexual impulses of women as not just normal, but also as beautiful. By representing women both as mothers and as sexual, he combines

conception and birth into an ultimate form of power. Loving's discussion of Whitman's conflation of motherhood and sexual desire is enlightening:

> The celebration in ["Unfolded Out of the Folds"] is ultimately about the nativity of the son *and* the poet who will reinscribe the mother as a lover. This is precisely Whitman's accomplishment in *Leaves of Grass* and why it is 'essentially a woman's book.' By focusing on her fecundity—that is, the woman's *becoming* a mother— he temporarily liberates the female body from its future motherhood (30).

Loving argues that "*becoming*" a mother is the significant part of Whitman's poetry. The path to becoming, not the end result, is the important part of being a mother. Whitman's presentation of female sexuality and motherhood rejoices in the "birth of the new-washed babe" (*LOG* 19), but when Whitman discusses women and mothers, he is more concerned with the "becoming" of a mother rather than the "mothering" process itself. This is important because it shows us that his main focus is a woman's sex and power, and it reminds us of Whitman's skill at portraying the "in-between" moments of life.

The "in-between" space is important to Whitman, and this is equally visible in his perception of gender. We should consider the fluidity of gender of Whitman's narrators, because although the men and women in Whitman's poetry fulfill specific gender roles, he allows for gender changeability. Kate Winter's article "Whitman and the Women" claims that the men and the women in Whitman's poetry represent both masculinity and femininity in exaggerated ways. Although Whitman creates figures that embody masculinity and femininity, he also succeeds in breaking down traditional gender norms and creates a narrative form that moves between the genders fluidly. Winter says of Whitman's men and women:

> What, then, do we make of the mythic male created in the poems? Reconciling the exaggerated persona of the rough, crude, lusty male with the inventory of feminine images requires that we simply accept

> Whitman's construction of the mythical male principle as a balance and fit mate for the woman the poet celebrated. Whitman intended to introduce a new image of woman that would contrast the accepted literary heroine who was dainty, frail, idle, and fashionable (201).

Whitman re-wrote both man and woman in his poetry, creating a "rough, crude, lusty male," and a powerful, sexual female. In "To the Garden the World," Whitman re-writes Adam and Eve as equals, and invites women to walk with men in an imagined social society that would not treat women as inferior: "By my side or back of me Eve following,/ Or in front, and I following her just the same" (*LOG* 157). As R.W.B. Lewis writes, Whitman re-designed both Adam and Even in his own image, and bred "the human race out of his love affair with himself" (52). Whitman's poetry enables him to become both genders, and to procreate as an individual—one who "contains multitudes."

By presenting himself as a "mother man" who can have a womb and procreate, Whitman oversteps gender boundaries that are not only social but also biological. His narrator fluidly becomes both male and female, and so he tries to create poetry that inhabits both a female and male "body." This is a part of the "contradiction" he is famous for: "Very well then… I contradict myself;/ I am large, I contain multitudes" (*LOG* 89). He contradicts himself by trying to portray two genders at once, while maintaining loose guidelines about the roles of each of these genders as Adams and Eves. Whitman found a new way of writing by imagining himself as a female creator. According to Wardrop, Whitman gains the voice of a mother through expression: "With his famous 'barbaric yawp' he accompanies parturition, perhaps, with a rough approximation to the vocalization during female delivery. Whitman finds his very own gender-transgressed resonance… the yawp may sound a kind of victory for Whitman in his attempt to find new tongue and new voice" (Wardrop 154). Whitman's "gender-transgression" in writing

allowed Whitman to explore a new way of writing. His narrator transcends the male body and became accessible to both male and female readers.

The fluidity between male and female voices, and the spotlight upon women and mothers, partially explains why many women have found Whitman so appealing. Whitman suggests that he obscured something behind every line of his poetry that "few, very few, only one here and there, perhaps oftenest women can understand" (Kaplan, 18). According to Wardrop, Whitman's maternal imagery represents a way for a female reader to find "entry" into the overwhelming poem "Song of Myself."

> With every reading of "Song of Myself," I have found myself strangely attendant upon a line appearing in one of the later sections of the poem, which may hint at Whitman's ulteriority. The line remains mysterious and resonant to me: 'Putting myself here and now to the ambushed womb/ of the shadows! (1049). Mysterious as it is, it acts as an entry for me - perhaps because I am a woman reader - into the poem. (Wardrop 143).

This passage hints at why female readers are drawn to Whitman's poetry and are able to "enter" it. The "ambushed womb" seems to be a position of power, as the narrator assumes a dramatic stance that allows him to procreate. Wardrop goes on to add: "We can recognize Whitman, so often seen as the poet of abundance who encompasses worlds and contains multitudes, even more acutely as the poet who, as pregnant mother man, contains and encompasses the fetus he will deliver, enabling him to register language both in the semiotic and symbolic realms" (144). This concept of a male poet as a female creator encompasses Woolf's definition of androgyny as the perfect means of creation.

Wardrop seems to think that Whitman appropriates the female body by "ambushing" the womb and using female reproductive imagery. Yet she also maintains that he employs metaphors of the female body for good reason: to create a new and more powerful form of poetic voice. "Whitman finds transgressive pleasure in becoming a

mother, which is the greatest thing he can be" (147). Whitman's womb imagery in his writing is so prominent because he was able to see himself outside of the boundaries of "male." He could see himself as a mother, as a carrier of tradition, a perpetuator of lineage, and a nurturer of readers. Whitman's love of women and of the female body was a greater contributor to his maternal and feminine poetics than was his latent jealousy of women's ability to birth children. As Woolf said in *A Room of One's Own*, to be "fully masculine," or to not be able to imagine the reality and beauty of motherhood, is not conductive to creativity. Whitman realized this, and he did not force himself to remain within the boundaries of male in his writing.

The fluidity of gender in Whitman's narrative ties into his democratic politics, which became of the upmost importance to his later enthusiastic and liberal-minded feminist readers. By admiring women's abilities to create, not in solely biological terms but also in terms of the intellectual and artistic spheres, Whitman demonstrates pro-feminist ideas and expresses his friendship with progressive women such as Abby Hills Price and Fanny Fern. Whitman's liberal notions about the roles of women and the future of feminism may be said to culminate in *Democratic Vistas*, a prose work he published in 1871 (Ceniza). "The idea of the woman of America...was to be extricated from the daze, [from] this fossil and unhealthy air which hangs about the word *lady*"…. Such women were to be "develop'd, raised to become robust equals, workers, and it may be, even practical and political deciders with men" (Whitman *Prose Works* 389). Not all of Whitman's writing is so overtly in favor of what we now call "feminism," but this was published later than many of his editions of poetry, and illustrates his evolution towards a belief in gender equality. Of note is his dislike of the "unhealthy air" surrounding the

word “lady”—this indicates his frustration with the “cult of true womanhood” that pervaded his time.

Whitman’s vision of gender equality is tied to his love of democracy and his fantasy of a new democratic America, a fantasy that is, again, idealistic and impossible, and yet wholly inspiring. Whitman’s vision of a new democracy is a “glistening garden of erotic heterosexual delight where, at least, woman is no longer subservient to man. She wears her ancient divinity again” (Winter 211). By worshiping the “ancient divinity” of all women, Whitman creates an exaggerated example of what gender equality could be like in America. Whitman’s portrayal of women as strong, independent, and sensual represents his desire for a democratic America where women are treated as equal to men, and who are worthy of admiration. Whitman strove to liberate mothers because of their metaphorical capacity to give “birth” creatively and intellectually. Whitman said in a letter, "Why, mothers are the foundations of society— they need no law" (Whitman quoted by Ceniza 184). His late work *Democratic Vistas* hints at his comprehension that women should be “develop’d, raised to become…it may be, even practical and political deciders with men.” He sounds hesitant, but for the still-early time period, Whitman’s poetry and prose was unusually favorable towards the belief that women should be treated differently by societies and allowed to become “deciders.”

Whitman hated the idea that women should be proper “ladies,” but he despised even more the notion of gallantry and outdated chauvinism. In his letter to Emerson introducing the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman gave one of his reasons for his hatred of gallantry: “Women in These States approach the day of organic reality with men, without which, I see, men cannot have organic equality with themselves. This empty dish, gallantry, will then be filled with something. This tepid wash, this diluted

deferential love...is enough to make a man vomit."[16] Whitman despises this concept of gallantry, and therefore he does not believe his representations of women are charitable. He believes that full equality between the genders is approaching, because without "organic equality" between men and women, both women and men will suffer from society's normative views. Whitman's support for democratic equality between the genders is not gallant; yet it becomes useful for his readers, who find comfort in his words. Several of the feminist readers and writers of the generation after Whitman's were enthralled by his poetry and moved by his politics, and the smallest details about motherhood and female desire became their weapons as they entered the fight for female liberation.

By addressing Whitman's presentation of women and specifically his portrayal of mothers and the "Mother," this chapter has indicated ways in which Whitman's poetry created a new voice by breaking down the male/female poetic and sexual dichotomy. Whitman's "mother worship" exists due to his love of female sexuality and motherhood, and also due to his longing to be able to create. His way of expressing the beauty of Nature is by creating a "Mother of All" who has power and agency. This ties into female literary history and the first chapter's discussion of the "lineage" of female writers, because it shows that a male author like Whitman could write poetry that can be "entered" and fully experienced by female readers. This is an important point, because now we can begin to think about Whitman's beliefs in the strength of women and the injustice of gender inequality, and the ways it he have inspired later feminist writers.

[16] Whitman, Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Brooklyn, August, 1856. (whitmanarchive.org).

4. "I Remove the Veil": Women Inspired by Whitman

> "Whitman's poetic depictions of women illuminated the potential of his largely female audience: as Mabel McCoy Irwin said in her 1905 defense of Whitman, 'He flashed upon woman's transcendent light, that she might discover her own greatness'" (Knight 20).

In *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples*, Michael Robertson argues that Whitman had disciples in the 19th century: men and women who regarded Walt Whitman not merely as a poet but as a religious prophet. Robertson points to the feminists, socialists, spiritual seekers, and supporters of same-sex relationships who saw Whitman as an enlightened figure, one who was the key to creating a truly free American democracy. Robertson's book is fascinating because it depicts the expansive and deep import Whitman had for many people, but especially women. I do not focus, as Robertson does, upon the question of whether Whitman should be considered a religious-type "prophet" because of his spiritual influence. Instead, in this chapter I look specifically at the feminists and women writers who paid tribute to Whitman in some way. Though these women were original and questioned the works of their predecessors, Whitman was important to them, which we can see because they wrote him praises, quoted him, and used his poetry as inspiration for their own work.

I maintain that Whitman had enough of an impact for early feminists that we should consider him a part of the late 19th and early 20th century shift towards feminism in America, and in this chapter, I explore the writings of Anne Gilchrist, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, H.D., and Adrienne Rich. Each of these authors was significant to the feminist movement and to women's literature in her own right, and by considering the ways female authors interpreted the words and themes of Whitman and presented them in their works, we can better understand the importance of a progressive male poet in the literary

world of 19th century-America. What Whitman learned from feminists such as Margaret Fuller, Abby Hills Price, and Fanny Fern, he tries to translate into poetry later passed on to his readers. The notion of "translation," a concept that is important to Whitman, will be prevalent in this section. As Whitman writes in "Song of Myself," "I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men/ and women, / And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring/ taken soon out of their laps" (*LOG* 111). The goal of Whitman— and of most poets— is to translate feeling into words and to use language to see the world in a new light. Whitman's ultimate focus is on the "mothers, and the offspring/ taken soon out of their laps," because mothers and their children symbolize the future. Translation and interpretation are closely linked, because literature requires interpretation when it is translated into a new language. Some of the feminist aspects of Whitman's writing, such as his depictions of the lives of men and women and his views on mothers, are perpetuated in the works of later female writers, and this is part of Whitman's "translation."

The ways women interpreted or translated Whitman's poetry allow us to better understand their points of view. We can learn more about women writers who otherwise may have been overlooked in literary history (like Gilchrist, for example), and by studying these important women writers, we can better comprehend the feminist ideas circulating during their time. Like much of the rest of this thesis, "intertextuality," or the process of comparing different authors by looking at their connecting points, is pertinent. Intertextual criticism is complex because the term "intertextual" has been interpreted variously. But the definition of the term by Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* as the process of pointing out a network of

intersecting ideas between texts roughly describes what I have done with Whitman's works and the works of several women writers.

Part of what propelled this project was the question of why women readers have been so drawn to Whitman. Whitman became a popular male figure for many people, both male and female, and he became for many readers an emblem of desirability, one that embodied a distinctly American ideology. Whitman wanted respect and popularity, and he recognized that his poetry would be well received by some astute women, saying, "*Leaves of Grass* is essentially a woman's book: the women do not know it, but every now and then a woman shows that she knows it" (*With Walt Whitman in Camden* 2:331). Yet supposedly he did not wish to be glorified or put on a pedestal. When author Anne Gilchrist wrote him adoringly, he chided, "You must not construct such an unauthorized and imaginary ideal Figure, and call it WW…The actual WW is a very plain personage, and entirely unworthy of such devotion" (*Correspondences* 2:140).

Despite those words, Whitman valued and courted his female readers, insisting, "I always say that it is significant when a woman accepts me" (Traubel 30). Furthermore, as has been suggested by the past few chapters, "there was a kind of female identification in Whitman that may have been a part of his curious connection with his female audience" (Winter 201). Whitman implied that women are more easily able to decipher the secrets in *Leaves of Grass*, and he derived special joy from his conceived relevancy to women. As Winter points out, "The poet's admiration for strong women, particularly feminists, was reciprocated" (233). Critics have observed that in Whitman's own time, the "most adverse criticism (of his work) and cries of expurgation came from men while ardent admiration came mostly from women" (Guttry 102). Studying this "ardent admiration"

may reveal what it was about Whitman's often-controversial writing that sparked interest from all readers, but especially female and pro-feminist ones.

Anne Gilchrist was one of Whitman's most passionate admirers: she wrote an adoring review of *Leaves of Grass* from the perspective of a woman reader, and later moved from England to be with Whitman in America (Alcaro). Anne Gilchrist and Whitman were friends for a long period of time, and over the course of their correspondence and later their in-person interactions they were vocal in their support for one another's writings. The letters between them have caused many to speculate that their relationship was (at least on Anne's side) romantic; whether this is true or not, it can hardly be doubted that it was a close and loving friendship. Whitman said of Gilchrist: "Among the perfect women I have met (and it has been my unspeakably good fortune to have had the very best, for mother, sisters, and friends) I have known none more perfect in every relation, than my dear, dear friend, Anne Gilchrist" (Harned iv). Whitman's insistence that Gilchrist was "perfect in every relation" demonstrates that the two were close friends for about 19 years until Gilchrist's death.

Gilchrist is not well known as an author, and so her fame has depended almost entirely upon her relationship and significance to Whitman. Yet she contributed to several magazines during her lifetime, including scientific articles and writings about women. She also completed her husband's novel after he passed away, and wrote a biography of Mary Lamb. The letters shared between the Gilchrist and Whitman are rich and significant to our understanding of Whitman's life, so much scholarly work about Whitman has mentioned Gilchrist (Robertson). Moreover, historians have analyzed Whitman and Gilchrist's relationship as a potentially romantic one— evidence that Whitman was not exclusively homosexual. However, Whitman's feelings for Gilchrist

have not been successfully identified as romantic. For our purposes, a study of Gilchrist is significant because she exemplifies that analyzing a well-documented male writer necessitates an understanding of the women in his life.

After reading *Leaves of Grass,* Gilchrist developed strong feelings for Whitman's poetry, and their first correspondences emerged from her letters of wonder to him. In 1869 Gilchrist wrote a supportive response to *Leaves of Grass*, "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman," which was significant because it encouraged Gilchrist's female readers to read and praise Whitman's poetry. In this response, Gilchrist make some statements about Whitman that resemble almost religious worship. She says: "There is nothing in [Whitman] that I shall ever let go my hold of. For me the reading of his poems is truly a new birth of the soul" (Gilchrist 2). Her grandiose praise is fortunately supplemented by less sappy and more usefully specific indicators of some of the reasons women readers are drawn to Whitman's poetry. She alludes to some of the moments in *Leaves of Grass* that transcend gender boundaries and speak of liberation, and in this way she indicates her understanding of his democratic and liberating ideals. She also mentions some of the beliefs about female purity that were prevalent during her time, and insists that a woman's purity cannot be harmed by a sometimes uncouth poet like Whitman. This hardly presents her in a feminist light, and she works to prove her dedication to helping Whitman's public image. Because she might have *had* to depict women as untarnishable souls in order to be published in 1869, we should consider her statements about female purity with a grain of salt, especially since so much of Whitman's poetry lauds not the innocent virgin but rather the sexual mother. Nevertheless, Gilchrist's words on the angelic nature of womankind give us a glimpse of the 19th-century views on women.

Gilchrist writes that Whitman's poems "are vital; they grew— they not made" (3). Her introductory statements in "A Woman's Estimate" focus upon the organic, nurturing quality of Whitman's poetry. Her analysis is sentimental, and she gushes about the "freedom of spontaneous growth," (4) that is found in poems such as "Voice out of the Sea." Yet Gilchrist's sentimental praise is significant, because it establishes that women of Whitman's time were aware that he was a unique poet who saw the beauty in childbirth and other forms of reproduction. Gilchrist loved Whitman's respect for birth, and she detected his capacity for breaking past the gender norms that limit men to fatherly reproduction.

Gilchrist discusses her experience as a female reader of Whitman's poems, saying, "Always for a woman, a veil woven out of her own soul—never touched upon even, with a rough hand, by this poet"[17] (5) indicating that she appreciates the respect Whitman has for women in his poetry. This quote touches upon the veil as a symbol of female purity. Gilchrist later defends Whitman from critics who claim his writing is too crude for women, saying, "A woman's innocence is folded round with such thick folds of ignorance, that what is unsuitable is also unintelligible to her" (7). This outdated view again references the veil, one of ignorance, in relation to women. This sentence reveals Gilchrist's dedication to helping Whitman find acceptance as a poet amongst even conventional women. Gilchrist publically asserts that Whitman's writing, which is often coarse in subject matter and overt sensuality, is not too rough to disturb the purity of a woman's soul. The veil, which has long symbolized female virginity and purity in the West and has been significant to discussions of the silencing of women, will be important later as we consider the function of the veil in the poetry of Whitman and H.D.

[17] Gilchrist makes these observations without much context or explanation of how they relate to Whitman's poetry, so analyzing her response is somewhat difficult.

Later in the review, Gilchrist goes on a short tirade about the ways women are treated, asking, "Do you think there is ever a bride who does not more or less taste bitterness in her cup?" (5). Gilchrist feels Whitman is exceptional because he sees, understands, and expresses the bitterness felt by women. Additionally, she declares, "motherhood is beautiful, fatherhood is beautiful" (6), echoing Whitman's sentiments about the exquisiteness of parenting. She believes that the poet— Whitman— will be useful to women who work to find liberation and beauty in the world. She insists, "Wives and mothers will learn through the poet that there is rejoicing grandeur and beauty there within there hearts have so longed to find it" (9). In this way, Gilchrist marks the poet as the hero of democracy, naming Whitman in particular as the leader of female liberation.

Gilchrist's review of Whitman's poetry leads us to better understand the ways Whitman was perceived by his contemporaneous female readers. Gilchrist's words indicate that Whitman's expressions of birth, freedom, and the female voice were perceptible to women of his time, and that his poetry did not require maturation to be appreciated. Gilchrist was unusual, as her love of both Whitman the poet and Whitman the man compelled her to leave her husband and move to America to live with him. Yet by considering why Gilchrist found his poetry so appealing, we can begin to understand why Whitman was so well received by other female writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Her conception of Whitman as a "hero" to democracy suggests that she perceived his portrayals of women to be supportive of equality and even, perhaps, female liberation.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who fought for this female liberation in her writing, is next in this conversation about female writers who were fascinated by Whitman's poetry. She was a feminist writer whose book *Herland* was lost for (70 years), so she might be

considered one of Gilbert and Gubar's "lost foremothers" of feminist thought (Knight). Her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," and her abundant articles in magazines have also been rediscovered and have demonstrated her significance as an early feminist scholar. Unlike Gilchrist, she did not fill her texts with disclaimers about female purity; she was writing a few decades later (1880-1911), when it was less socially impairing for a woman to question the constructions surrounding femininity. Analyzing Gilman's feminist works can teach us the ways ideologies of feminists were changing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; furthermore, she has an interesting connection to Whitman that shows that reading him influenced her own work. Gilman was "one of the principal speakers at the final meeting of the Walt Whitman Fellowship in 1919, choosing as her subject Whitman's view on women" (Krieg 21). Unfortunately her speech at that meeting has been lost, but this fact exemplifies Gilman's passion about Whitman's writing and her understanding of the significance of his representation of women. In 1919, Gilman wrote an article called "Walt Whitman," and claimed that his book had such a significance to her that it was at one point one of her few belongings: "When for some years my personal possessions were limited to one trunk I carried two books always: Olive Schreiner's 'Dreams'…and Whitman the Great" (28).

Like Anne Gilchrist, some of Gilman's admiration for Whitman is on a seemingly personal level. She writes about the poet in a way that indicates a strong emotional tie to the poet's words, in both her published prose and her personal journals. Her first husband Walter Stetson encouraged her not to read Whitman's poetry, so it was not until she divorced Stetson 1891 that she finally opened *Leaves of Grass* (Knight). As a newly single woman, Gilman encountered liberty and beauty in Whitman's verse, and she soon "publically hailed Whitman as 'America's greatest poet'" (Knight 18). On a more

intimate level, she wrote various diary entries that "revealed her deep and abiding admiration of his verse" (18). Gilman was especially compelled to discuss the poems of *Leaves of Grass* that mention women routinely, and she demonstrated her appreciation for some of Whitman's ideals and images in her own writing.

As Joann P. Krieg writes, Gilman and Whitman are most noticeably connected by the similarities in their views about the significance of motherhood for the future of democracy. Gilman expressed her thoughts about "The New Motherhood" in the first volume of *The Forerunner*, the periodical Gilman wrote and published from 1910 to 1916 (Krieg 22). Her writing encapsulates her standards of what The New Motherhood should consist of:

> First: The fullest development of the woman, in all her powers, that she may be the better qualified for her duties of transmission by inheritance; Second: The fullest education of the woman ... concerning her great office and in her absolute duty of right selection - measuring the man who would marry her by his fitness for fatherhood ... Third: Intelligent recognition that child culture is the greatest of arts (17).

This passage on motherhood is odd, considering that when Gilman divorced her husband Stetson, she sent her daughter to live with him and his second wife. She claimed that her daughter Katharine's "second mother was fully as good as the first, [and perhaps] better in some ways" (Knight 163). Motherhood, according to Gilman, does not require a blood relation; and though Gilman left her daughter, she seems to have no regrets. She moved to live near Katharine forty years after leaving her, stepping back into a mothering role after decades of absence. Gilman's politics on mothering do not seem to be affected by the realities of the trials that mothers undergo; they focus more on a beautiful ideal, one to which Whitman also ascribed.

Gilman and Whitman are similar, according to Krieg, in that their writings feature the "glorification of the female as mother" (24). Gilman's words do recall some ideas of Whitman's that have been discussed in previous chapters. The above passage points to ideas of genetic selection that were becoming popular during Gilman's time because of Darwin and other theorists. As will further be demonstrated, Gilman believed that motherhood and the "power of transmission by inheritance" was the key to the education of all people, and she was certain that if everyone—including men—thought like mothers, the world would be a better and freer place.

In *Herland*, her all-female utopian novel, Gilman suggested that society and education might be different if motherhood, rather than manliness, became the cultural ideal (De Simone 14). The novel *Herland* is about a small group of men who visit a land where neither the private home nor the nuclear family exist. In Herland, the characteristics of love, service, ingenuity, and efficiency became the dominant social norms, and "motherhood became a social rather than a biological category" (De Simone 15). A Herlander explained to a male intruder in her country, "Here we have Human Motherhood--in full working use" (65). Motherhood as a social category allows the children to benefit from education and nurturing. The Herlander continues: "The children in this country are the one center and focus of all our thoughts. Every step of our advance is always considered in its effect on them--on the race. You see, we are Mothers" (66). Educating and raising children are the best occupations in existence, according to *Herland*, and mothers are masters of them both. The society focuses on employing and being grateful for mothers, and while this is shocking and uncomfortable to some of the male visitors, Gilman demonstrates the usefulness of the methods of the women in this society.

Gilman illuminates the unbalanced nature of a patriarchal society, reshaping culture to be more feminine and to tap into the skills of women. She focuses upon appreciating and imitating mothers, writing in *The Man-Made World* that mothers are the greatest teachers: "Motherhood does all it knows to give each child what is most needed, to affectionately and efficiently develop the whole of them" (67). And in *Herland*, the original center of the religion of the women was Mother Earth:

> The religion they had to begin with was much like that of old Greece—a number of gods and goddesses; but they lost all interest in deities of war and plunder, and gradually centered on their Mother Goddess altogether. Then, as they grew more intelligent, this had turned into a sort of Maternal Pantheism.
> Here was Mother Earth, bearing fruit. All that they ate was fruit of motherhood, from seed or egg or their product. By motherhood they were born and by motherhood they lived—life was, to them, just the long cycle of motherhood (88).

Mothers are the center of society in *Herland*, to the point that the religion of the women in the society revolves around the Mother Goddess and her tie to nature.

One could argue that a maternal world where both men and women learn to educate the young based on a mothering type of teaching is the kind of world Whitman imagined. Gilman's statements, such as, "To [the daughters] the longed-for motherhood was not only a personal joy, but a nation's hope" (*Herland* 89), remind us of Whitman's belief that mothers create the future of a nation. Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* long to help women free themselves from the "incredible webs of silliness, millinery, and every kind of dyspeptic depletion" that they face in society, and he wishes to create "a race of perfect mothers" (372), both male and female. Gilman and Whitman's views intersected because they both saw "perfect mothers" to be the future of womanhood, because the "mother," whether literal or not, is extraordinary at teaching and creating a freer, more

benevolent society. Both also indicate that the "mother" and "to mother" are non-gendered, and that all people should come to respect them as the beacons for the future.

Gilman and Whitman drew their beliefs about the beauties of motherhood and the ultimate liberation of all women from similar sources. They were both members of an early feminist movement, though neither specifically worked as activists and both have been criticized for being too focused upon mothers. Whitman was important to Gilman's feminist works because she drew inspiration from his poems, which pointed to mothers as the cornerstones of society. The connections that can be drawn between these two writers allow us to see fascinating insights about the burgeoning feminism in America; moreover, they show the interconnectivity of male and female authors from this time.

As with Gilchrist, we can consider the ways in which Whitman touched Gilman's life. His female readers did not respond so positively to him merely because they could appreciate the fluidity and imagination of his writing. There is something about his approach to human, and especially female, problems and triumphs that drew these women closer to his poems. Whitman's influence on Gilman was more than literary: when Gilman began to plan to commit suicide because she had breast cancer, she wrote friends and family, saying, "No words can say how utterly at peace I am about God and about death" (quoted in Scharnhorst 41). This is a paraphrase of part 48 of "Song of Myself": "No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about death" (*LOG* 48: 74). Gilman's close personal response to the power of Whitman's poetry remained strong until the very end of her life, and the pro-feminist ideas these two authors shared made a difference in the spread of notions of equality in the early 20th century.

Whitman's influence continued to exude into later in the 20th century, and it affected the beginnings of Imagism and Modernism. In fact, Whitman is often credited for the creation and popularization of literary forms that grew to be major characteristics of Modernism: the focus on the first-person subjective voice in poetry, the use of fragmentation to display ideas, and the distancing from traditional Christianity. This portion of this project, therefore, will move past Whitman's death in order to show Whitman's role in the lives of female writers who were almost, but not quite, his temporal peers. The poet H.D., a female writer originally named Hilda Doolittle, is now well-known among scholars who study female writers of the 20th century and Imagism, but she is not always discussed in other spheres of literary scholarship. She made important contributions to Imagism and Modernism, and created original and hauntingly beautiful poetry that occasionally hints at her interpretations of Whitman's writing. As Walkington writes, "In her effort to throw off the restrictive 'fathers' of Modernism, H.D. found inspiration in one of the grand patriarchs of the American tradition, whose "Song of Myself" can be seen as a model for twentieth-century women's spirituality so firmly associated with H.D" (134). As may seem contradictory, H.D. found release from the "fathers" of modernism who she felt controlled her by seeking the work of a different male author. Though H.D. sometimes found her male influences such as Pound and Lawrence to be restraining, she found freedom and voice by reading Whitman's expansive poetry.

H.D. used feminist concepts in her writing, especially in the Modernist poetry she wrote after she moved past her Imagist phase. She and Ezra Pound had a close and complex relationship, and he was significant in helping her pursue her writing goals. She was also close to D. H. Lawrence and other famous names of the time. Ezra Pound was

the first to tell Hilda Doolittle that she should shorten her name to H.D., a command that critics have called domineering and indicative of Hilda's growing dislike of feeling the need to obey the strong male figures of her life (Ayers 9). In a book she published later in life, *Tribute to the Angels*, she uses Greek myths to liberate herself from the male-dominant literary society. Because she discusses mothers in this work, her book *Trilogy* has been considered in relation to Gilbert and Gubar's theories about the difficulty of women to affiliate with past "mother" figures, and Gubar herself discusses it in "The Echoing Spell of H.D.'s *Trilogy*" (1978). And according to Deborah Kelly Kloepfer, one of the main questions of *Trilogy* is, "How is it ... that H.D. managed finally to create a Mother amidst so many jealous, appropriating, demanding 'fathers' to whom she was so tightly bound for the better part of seventy-six years?" (17). She broke past her relationships with controlling men to find a literary mother figure.

H.D. identified with a strong, Grecian mother figure, and in her writing she celebrates motherhood and female sexuality as the roots of creation. J.W. Walkington claims that Whitman and H.D. are brought together poetically because of their use of the mystic, and he claims in his reading of *Tribute to the Angels* and "Song of Myself," "Whitman's mysticism again resumes its importance as we can see how H.D. draws from and redefines his poem" (124). This assertion that H.D. "draws from and redefines" her literary precursor is interesting and contributes to our ideas about the processes of affiliation interpretation. Furthermore, we can think about the mysticism of the mother figure in each of their works, and the way the mother creates comfort and productivity.

Whitman's transformation of sex into something beautiful and linked to motherhood is readable in H.D.'s *Trilogy*. Whitman transforms female sexuality through "translation" in his poetry. He takes the social norm that female desire and childbirth are

vulgar topics, and transforms that into a vision that portrays sex as a beautiful step towards reproduction and glorious motherhood. Whitman unites the Body and Soul: "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul," (*LOG* 48) and because he felt that both body and soul are beautiful, he believed that sex, the uniting of two bodies, was not sinful. He saw no problem with describing the processes of the body in "Song of Myself," writing, "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch/ or am touch'd from,/ The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer" (*LOG* 31). One of Whitman's primary goals is to take coarse or "disgusting" subjects, including female sexuality, and subvert the reader's perception of them. He writes, "The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me, / The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue" (*LOG* 48). This is one of his several references to "translation," as his method of shaping ideas into new forms, and it is significant that he chooses to translate the "pains of hell." By shaping "pains" into new tongues, he rearranges our interpretations of our own vices.

Similarly, in *Tribute to the Angels*, H.D. attempts transformations or "translations" of language, called "associational semantics" according to Kunitz (208). For example, in section 8, H.D. transforms the Hebrew word for bitter, *marah*, into the word "Mother."[18] She asks the word *marah* to "change and alter," and then uses word associations to "transform" the word into something else: "mer, mere, mere, mater, Maia, Mary, / Star of the Sea, / Mother." (552). In this way, H.D. attempts a purification, and she compels the word *marah* to stop referring to "bitterness" and to become beautiful and mothering instead. H.D.'s connection to the mother in this and other poems relates to

[18] This might remind us of the "bitterness" Gilchrist cites as a natural part of marriage and motherhood. H.D.'s efforts to replace that bitterness with respect for motherhood as the "Star of the Sea" reflect her desire to see the struggles of wives and mothers lessened.

Whitman's use of the poetic mother figure, and she overthrows any "bitterness" that she might have had when thinking about her mother or motherhood in general in order to find strength.

Through similar methods of transformation, H.D. translates "despised sexuality into holiness and beauty" in *Tribute* (Walkington 127). She calls upon Greek mythology to subvert the notion that sexual women are vulgar. She defends Venus, who she says is associated with "dirty carnality" (Quinn 122). An "impious wrong" (553) "has been done to Venus by linking her to venery, and H.D. struggles to transform her into the more respected Aphrodite through the alchemy of language" (Walkington 128). This may seem as though H.D. is condemning carnality, but rather she wishes to grant Venus the same credit as is given to Aphrodite, another carnal figure. H.D. writes:

> Venus as desire
> is venereous, lascivious ....
> Swiftly relight the flame,
> Aphrodite, holy name…
> return, 0 holiest one,
> Venus, whose name is kin
> to venerate,
> venerator. (553-554)

The poet tries to break down the dualities of body and soul for all women. She was frustrated with the idea that body and soul are disconnected, and wished to adjust the appellations placed upon women who are sensual. H.D.'s tactics are similar to Whitman's, because he urges the reader to approve of lust. Both poets strive to make sexuality, specifically female sexuality, seem acceptable and beautiful through the process of linguistic translation.

Like Whitman, H.D. identifies as an "artist-mother" (Quinn 56). In the "Red Rose and a Beggar" section of her book *Hermetic Definition*,[19] she tells the story of a young man as a metaphor for her writing process. H.D. tells her reader that "Red Rose and a Beggar" takes place over the course of nine months, so we are to assume that the creation of this poem is akin to the birth of a child. Though the young man in the poem dies at the end, his death gives way to the birth of art, and "Having created a poem which transforms a death into a birth, H.D. feels that her role as artist-mother has been completed" (Quinn 57). Whitman, who refers to "Song of Myself" as his daughter, and calls himself the creator ("becoming already a creator!" (55)), inspires H.D. She "associates the unborn text with the unborn child, both contained within the body of the mother, biological mother and mother-muse" (Kloepfer 92). Whitman and H.D. tap into the power of the symbolic mother in order to create, and in doing so they lift up the mother and her sexuality into a position of glory.

The removal of the veil is an interesting connection between Whitman and H.D's poetry, for the veil is a symbol of female virginity. In "Song of Myself," Whitman discusses his methods of renovation, and he wishes to use words to transform sex so that readers view sexuality as beautiful instead of indecent: "Through me forbidden voices, / Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,/ Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd." (58). And in a pivotal moment of *Hermetic Definition*, H.D. asks,

> Why must I write?
> you would not care for this,
> but She draws the veil aside,

[19] It is no coincidence that *Hermetic Definition* and H.D. have the same initials, as this book is one that H.D. uses to define herself as a woman and poet. It is called "Hermetic" because H.D. uses Hermes to "translate" her words (Walkington).

unbinds my eyes,
commands,
write, write or die. (p. 7)

The "She" referred to in this section is Venus, whom H.D. has previously defended. H.D. claimed that Venus is accused of crude sensuality, and she looks to Venus as a mother figure whose sexuality is not indecent, but beautiful. Venus compels H.D. to continue writing, to keep trying to transform our conceptions of female sexuality. Here the veil is obscuring H.D.'s vision, whereas for Whitman it had obfuscated the voices of "sexes and lusts." For both poets, the veil is an object that must be removed for the sake of art and life.

The removal of the veil has in Christianity and many other religions symbolized the consummation that will occur during a wedding night. The bride (or her father or groom) lifts the veil to indicate the passing of the sexual barrier that will later take place. The similar image in Whitman and H.D.'s poetry of the veil being drawn aside is intriguing, because the veil is often also representative of the silencing of women and of the clothing worn at funerals. By linking sex to silence and death, we can see that the removal of a veil was a significant gesture that showed that both poets wished to liberate women from outside forces. Jeremy Loving spotted the interest of Whitman's veil, writing, "What seemed to attract such female readers as [Fanny Fern] and Anne Gilchrist was the poet's lifting of the veil to reveal their feminine vitality, their desire to be co-equal lovers instead of objects of male sexual (and social) utility" (20). Whitman and H.D. both saw the beauty of "feminine vitality", and were both compelled to write and create. They longed to liberate women from the silence and lack of clarity of "veils." H.D. deeply connected with Whitman's methods, and the poets strive to transform crude into beautiful through writing.

To conclude this study of women who read and admired Whitman and used his poetry to inspire their own work, I will consider Adrienne Rich and the tributes she wrote to Whitman while also providing revisions of his statements. Rich was a 20th-century feminist writer who inspired Gilbert and Gubar's idea of the "lost foremothers," because in *When We Dead Awaken,* she lamented that she could not find many literary mothers who could inspire her. Rich was a feminist and was concerned with topics of gender equality and women in writing. She was also Jewish and often wrote about race in works such as *What I Found There*. She criticized Whitman's presentations of race in America, but also drew inspiration from his portrayals of democracy. Rich is an interesting addition to this conversation about women who read and were inspired by Whitman, because she paid tribute to Whitman but did not try to label him as her main predecessor because she found many faults in his politics.

Other critics have pointed to the similarities between the two author's writings: "Rich has followed Whitman and Emerson in the sense that she writes an oracular poetry… like them she conceives of the role of the poet as someone responsible for the soul of the American people" (Langdell 16). Rich was impressed by Whitman's presentation of "singing" with an American voice, and in her works she similarly strove to depict matters that are at the heart of the American democracy. She had ideal visions, as Whitman did, of the American future. Helen Vendler writes in *Soul Says* that Rich's "'most visible American' predecessor as a democratic visionary poet is Walt Whitman" (quoted in Langdell 125). In addition, Cheri Langdell argues that Rich blends the styles of Whitman and Dickenson, finding them to be the predecessors to her feminist singing voice (128). These critics show us some of the fundamental ways that Whitman and Rich can be linked by their writing themes.

In “Singing America: From Walt Whitman to Adrienne Rich,” Peter Erickson presents Rich as a “descendant” of Whitman. Female critics have praised male authors throughout literary history, so why is Rich labeled as Whitman’s “descendant?” The answer to this question seems to depend on Rich’s extension of Whitman’s beliefs in the form of her own work, which also is not afraid to confront Whitman’s politics. The majority of Erickson’s analysis focuses on Rich’s corrections of Whitman’s approach (or lack thereof) to the topic of race. Erickson strives in his essay to consider Adrienne Rich's treatment of race by way of Walt Whitman's, arguing, “The great value of Adrienne Rich's negotiation of her relation with Walt Whitman is that she offers a much-needed clarification of Whitman's limitations” (104). Rich both valued Whitman and offered powerful revisions to his writings, especially those concerning race. She fulfilled Whitman’s own hope that his readers augment his work. Whitman wrote that the person who most honors his style is the one “who learns under it to destroy the teacher" (Kaplan 955).

In chapter 13 on "Beginners" in *What Is Found There*, Rich pays tribute to Whitman, but she also registers a critical perspective, arguing that Whitman only represents "one paradigm of 'New World' masculinity, the stock of explorers, pioneers, frontiersmen, allowed, as a male of northern European/Anglo origins, the free expression of his personality in an expansive era" (92). According to Rich, “the problem with Whitman’s expression of race is that Whitman's exuberant, comprehensive national vision insufficiently examines the country's tragic origin in conquest” (Erickson). She confronts Whitman’s approach to race, and his limited understanding of white privilege. She wrote: “This is the fatal contradiction, the knowledge Whitman couldn't bear or utter (he was far more explicit and courageous about sex)-the great rip in the imaginative

fabric of the country-to-be: the extraordinary cruelty, greed, and willful obliteration on which the land of the free was founded" (122). Referencing the cruelty of colonizers to Native Americans, blacks, and many other peoples, Rich uses Whitman as an example of the many famous and distinctly American poets who fail to frankly address issues of colonization and white supremacy.

Rich offers revisions to Whitman's discussions of race; yet her approach to the topic of women's rights shows some ways the two authors' philosophies intersect. Rich wrote, "man will have to learn to gestate and give birth to his own subjectivity—something he has frequently wanted woman to do for him" ("When We Dead Awaken" 25). Rich felt male authors needed to "learn to gestate" words, and as this thesis has discussed, Whitman can be said to have fixated on mothers and his own desire to "birth" creative works. Topics of the mother and the significance of motherhood were vital to Rich. In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Institution and Experience*, she expresses her conviction that motherhood is but one physical dimension of a woman's being. Rather than being defined as mothers, or by their status as childless, women should be defined in terms of their humanity. This may seem to be a correction to people such as Whitman, who portrayed motherhood as glorious. However, Whitman arguably admired women whether they were mothers or not, and valued powerful women who knew "how to swim, row, ride, wrestle, shoot, run, strike, retreat, advance, resist, defend themselves" ("A Woman Waits For Me", *LOG* 106). Both Whitman and Rich question society's construction of childbirth and motherhood, and Rich does so very explicitly. Her work therefore became highly important for 20th century feminism.

In "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Rich expresses her frustration with her early life as a young reader and writer. While studying, she mostly

read poetry by men and had trouble finding her own style. She noted the ways male writers depict women: "there were all those poems about women, written by men" (22). Whitman falls under this category, though she does not reference him directly here. Whitman and Rich had the same goal, if we consider Rich's statements alongside Whitman's words: "It would seem about time something was done in the direction of the recognition of the women: for some of us to dwell upon the lives of noble big women. History teems with accounts of big men-genius, talent-of the he-critters, but the women go unmentioned. Yet how much they deserve!" (*With Whitman in Camden,* 7:440). Whitman and Rich believed that women had been mistreated by literary history, and they used their writing to express their opinions on this subject.

Rich says that "writing is re-naming," and she says that for writing to work, "there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality" (23). This corresponds with the previously discussed idea that Whitman's writing is an act of translation and transformation. Whitman and Rich both strove to transform literature into a landscape where women would be welcomed and praised. Furthermore, Rich's criticism of Whitman's presentation of race gives us an example of the ways Whitman's female readers challenged him. Rich did not necessarily try to imitate Whitman, and the authors had considerable differences; according to Erickson, "[Rich] has Whitman's ardor but not his invasiveness. She presumes less, not out of timidity but out of tact, restraint, and delicacy" (109). Because Whitman inspired Rich in many ways, and because his writing helped her create a platform from which she could present her feminist ideas, we can better understand the connection between these two authors, as well as begin to view the problems in Whitman's racial politics.

Many other women could be discussed in this section; women who were inspired by Whitman and who demonstrated their fondness for his work in their own writings. Willa Cather, Maxine Hong Kingston, and June Jordan have all been quoted about their love of Whitman, or have alluded to him in their works. Willa Cather's book *O Pioneers!* is a reference to Whitman's poem "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" and it confronts the topics of gender identity and the colonial longing for space and freedom. When asked whether Walt Whitman was an "empowering influence," for her writing, the 20th-century Asian American novelist Maxine Hong Kingston responded with "Oh, yes, yes, yes," then praised his representations of women (Fishkin). Kingston named the main character of her book *Tripmaster Monkey*, "Wittman Ah Sing," after Walt Whitman. Sherry Ceniza finishes her book *Walt Whitman and the Nineteenth-Century Women Reformers* with quotes from letters sent to Whitman by his female admirers. Some of the letters were striking:

> No man ever lived whom I have so desired to take by the hand as you. I read *Leaves of Grass*, and got new conceptions of the dignity and beauty of my body and of the bodies of other people; and life became more valuable as a consequence… I am proud of my feeling for you. It has educated me; it has done more to raise me from a poor working woman to a splendid position on one of the best papers ever published, than all the other influences of my life. (Helen Wilmans, Chicago. 5-21-82, quoted by Ceniza 240).

The quotes that Ceniza includes in her book from ordinary women who were inspired by Whitman show the expansiveness of his influence during and after his time. The woman quoted above felt that Whitman helped elevate her in life, and she is "proud" of her feelings for him because she sees him as an educator of intellect and the body. Whitman became an almost romantic object of affection for many of his readers, because he grew to represent a kind of physical liberty that few other poets embodied.

The women who energetically responded to Whitman's writing treated him not as if he were a "literary foremother," but as a male author who sympathized with feminist visions of equality. Whitman becomes a part of the metaphorical "lineage" of women writers who promote gender equality, not because he is a woman but because he is able and willing to perpetuate liberal democratic ideas. Female authors such as the ones discussed above demonstrate that a male author can significantly participate in a movement towards female liberation in literature. Furthermore, he can become a comfort to readers by compellingly demonstrating his belief in the power of womanhood and motherhood in his texts. The brilliance of female writers such as Gilman, H.D., and Rich does not depend upon Whitman; yet by considering the parallels between these authors' works, we can see the interconnectivity of some male and female authors from the late 19th to 20th centuries who wished to redefine conceptions about femininity and fight for female liberation.

Conclusion

The proactive feminist poet bell hooks wrote that poetry saved her life. In her autographical work *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (which she wrote in third-person), she recognized that Whitman in particular had a major effect on her life and her experience of poetry:

> Whitman shows her that language, like the human spirit, need not be trapped in conventional form or traditions. For school she recites 'O Captain, My Captain.' She would rather recite from 'Song of Myself' but they do not read it in school. They do not read it because it would be hard to understand. She cannot understand why everyone hates to read poetry…she eases her pain in poetry, using it to make the poems live, using the poems to keep on living (132).

hooks was a provocative poet who wrote about her experiences as a woman of color. Here she points to one of the most obvious, original characteristics of Whitman's poetry, but one that I have scarcely discussed: his unconventional form. For hooks, Whitman's free-flowing technique liberates the human spirit in poetry, and though others think it is "hard to understand," for hooks his complexity soothes pain.

Had I space enough and time, I'd continue to address the importance of Whitman's poetry to people of color, and the ways people of color interpreted his works. Whitman supported abolition throughout the Civil War, and his democratic ideals have shown to be appealing to people of color such as June Jordan, who wrote, "I, too, am a descendant of Walt Whitman" (4). When I began this project, I hoped to capture the vitality and significance of Whitman's skill at transcending boundaries, and show that this poetic ability is enthralling for many groups of people who have been marginalized by society. But while I wrote this thesis, it was difficult to avoid putting Whitman into categories such as "homosexual" or "feminist." Marking Whitman with labels fulfills a problem described by M. Jimmie Killingsworth: "Fitting Whitman into a category has

meant neglecting the power of his poetic language to transform categories, indeed, to overwhelm them" ("Tropes of Selfhood" 41). No person can avoid being categorized by scholars or society, and there are certain groupings, such as race and whiteness, that cannot be transformed. Hopefully by demonstrating the way Whitman inspired women writers has raised new ideas concerning his significance in other realms of American society, and suggests new readings of his significance for readers of color.

Finally we can tie the discussion back into the introductory chapter's discussion of "affiliation" and the literary mother. The questions I had when I began this project are still with me: where and how do we place male authors into women's literary history? I argued that the constructs of "literary mother" and "literary father," our predecessors in writing, are unnecessarily gendered and that literary traditions need not be divided into separate sexes. I claimed that Whitman is not a "literary mother," because he demonstrates that great writing can escape gender and gendered style. However, my original thoughts about Whitman grew from the emotion I felt while reading his poetry, and when I began this project I felt that there is something sensitive and akin to a mother in Whitman.

Perhaps I and other readers can be said to "affiliate" with Whitman as his literary children; the emotional connection to his poetry readers like myself feel seems to go beyond "influence." And mothers—Whitman as a "great mother-man," literary mothers, the Mother of All, and literal mothers such as Louisa Van Velsor— Whitman were of such great importance to this project. Do all these different kinds of mothers cohere, and how can we make sense of their relationship to Whitman and to feminist history? Does Whitman's connection to motherhood have anything to do with why women such as Gilman and H.D. responded to him so positively? I think so, though I might be biased

since I am fond of both Whitman and mothers in general. I feel that Whitman better understands women, is more sensitive to the expansiveness of the human spirit, and is hungrier and more passionate about life, than many other male writers of his time. Something about his respect for mothers played a part in the growth of my affection for his poetry.

In many ways the foundation of this thesis my wish to configure the ways Whitman and women writers such as Fuller, Fern, Gilman, and H.D. shape our understanding of American feminism and the "American identity." America in its entirety embodies the overarching context of this project. My epigraph, "If you are American, then Walt Whitman is your imaginative father and mother, even if, like myself, you have never composed a line of verse" (Bloom) was a quote I found early on, and one that sparked most of the ideas that became the structure of this project. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was an attempt to capture the American experience, and while of course it was not fully successful, it is important for us to remember his desire to speak for the silenced voices in America. He believed that "the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem," (*LOG* 411), and his poetry captures that belief.

Adrienne Rich's criticism of Whitman was notable because she understood that his glorious depictions of people of different races were not always useful; his idealism was too illusory to be applicable in real life. The American dream and American democracy depend upon colonization, and Whitman's desire to move West and be free in poems such as "Song of the Open Road," is problematic when we consider the silencing and subjugation of Native Americans. Something I could probably stand to acknowledge more often is that Whitman's approach to equality was problematically unrealistic for people of color, people who identified as queer, and women. Whitman was a supporter of

abolition, and he strove to celebrate people of all races in his poetry. He was greatly admired by black readers of his time and from the early 20th century (LeMaster). Yet now we see that his poem "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors," which praises the beauty of a black woman, is insulting: "What is it, fateful woman—so blear, hardly human?" (*LOG*: 188:1). Whitman was inspirational to women of many different races, because the overall messages of equality and the beauty of birth are so blatant in his work. Yet we should keep in mind that many of the female authors I discussed in this thesis were white. Whitman was not an activist, and his notions of perfect equality were often unsustainable.

But Whitman gave people hope, so I concentrated on the role of that hope in the lives of women writers. Beginning with an idealistic approach, Whitman's poetry created a fantastical world where people are not separated by boundaries and are all brought together by something as simple as a leaf of grass.

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