

Freedom and Joy: Walt Whitman's "We two boys together clinging"



WE two boys together clinging,
One the other never leaving,
Up and down the roads going—North and South
excursions making,
Power enjoying—elbows stretching, fingers clutch-
ing,
Armed and fearless—eating, drinking, sleeping, lov-

ing,

No law less than ourselves owning—sailing, soldier-

ing, thieving, threatening,

Misers, menials, priests alarming—air breathing,

water drinking, on the turf or the sea-beach

dancing,

With birds singing—With fishes swimming—With

trees branching and leafing,

Cities wrenching, ease scorning, statues mocking,

feebleness chasing,

Fulfilling our foray.

Walt Whitman's "We two boys together clinging" is a moving embodiment of love and rebellion. In this poem from his Calamus sequence, which he composed in the late 1850s, Whitman describes what today sounds like erotic passion, but in his own day was read, with his encouragement, as ardent friendship. But this ambiguity is only one of the tensions that give the poem—only ten lines long—its uncanny depth.

Whitman strove to compose his poems in the "gush of the moment," scribbling them quickly on scraps of paper, often while strolling or riding about town. But he nearly always revised his drafts later—often painstakingly. In keeping with his sense of having multiple selves, this process allowed one self to hear another self thinking and offer a different point of view. In writing "We two boys," Whitman made a crucial change. His manuscripts include a draft, titled "Razzia" (an Arabic word for a raid or foray), which is nearly identical to "We two boys" except that it portrays the poet alone, not with another. In revising the draft, Whitman turned a static portrait of self-reliance into an exhilarating love poem by changing pronouns and adding two lines, "We two boys together clinging, / One the other never leaving."

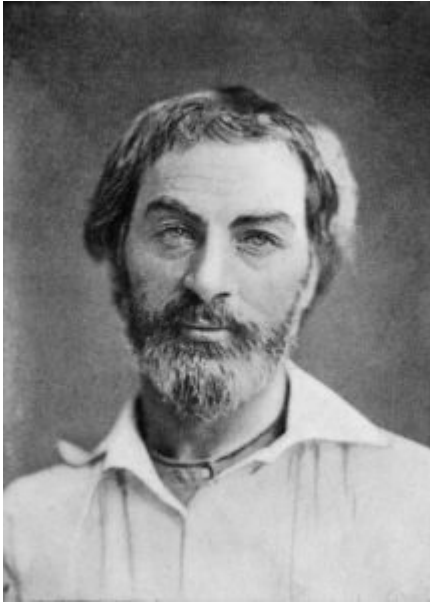


Figure 1: Walt Whitman at 36. *Published by Dodd, Mead and Co, NY, 1898, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

Whitman surprises the reader by portraying himself as a boy, despite the fact that he turned forty in 1859 and had long sported a gray beard. The word “boys” does many things in the poem. It signals that the poem is a poignant dream, a wish-fulfillment, a foray into the imagination. It makes the lovers fully equal—not prophet and acolyte, or poet and reader. It makes the armed thieves less menacing, suggesting that their excursions are more playful than destructive. It makes the lovers less erotic—more “innocent” of lust—than if the poem read, “We two men together clinging.”



Figure 2: Walt Whitman, 1849. *Between 1849-1850 Photograph. [Library of Congress](#).*

Whitman creates a beautiful tension between the images of marauding lovers,

armed and fearless, and two boys clutching each other's fingers and clinging to each other. To cling is to hold together, to adhere as if glued firmly, or to have a strong emotional dependence. When people "clutch fingers," it is often because they are afraid. In "We two boys," love is aggressive and yet frail. A "foray" can mean a raid, a sudden invasion, but also a tentative attempt to do something in a new field.

If the boys are fragile, they are, nonetheless, outlaws who mock statutes, wrench cities, and alarm priests, menials, and misers. It is interesting that Whitman disdains "menials," given his lifelong embrace of working men. Perhaps he associated menials with feudal serfs, rather than with democratic workers. Whitman seemed to love certain types of working men—young, white firefighters, drivers, mechanics, sailors, and farmers—more than menial laborers stuck in factory jobs, domestic service, and other less autonomous roles.

Whitman wanted to "alarm priests" and become the prophet of a new religiosity, centered on American democracy and loving camaraderie; he wanted *Leaves of Grass* to be something of a new Bible. The Book of Genesis, in describing the creation of Eve out of Adam's rib, has Adam say, "This is now bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh," and then editorializes, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." The Hebrew word for "cleave," *dabaq*, can also be translated as "cling." The Book of Deuteronomy uses the same word in demanding that people cling to God, as in the command "Him shalt thou serve, and to Him shalt thou cleave." Instead of clinging to a wife or to God, Whitman is clinging to a fellow "boy"—fervently, deeply, and spiritually.

But if "We two boys" evinces Whitman's spirituality, the lovers' physicality—the clutching, eating, drinking, sleeping, loving, and dancing on the beach—gives the poem an erotic and antinomian charge. To wrench means to twist violently, injure with violent twisting, snatch forcibly, cause to suffer mental anguish, or change, especially distort or pervert. As with Whitman's other images of twisting in the Calamus poems, his word choice hints at violence and even depravity, indicating, perhaps, a lingering uneasiness with his own homoerotic rebellion.

Although he wanted passionately to be "natural," in his poetry and in his life, Whitman feared sometimes that he might be "unnatural." Nature plays a dual role in the poem. Associating the boys' love with birds singing, fish swimming, and trees leafing makes it more natural and less alarming. Unlike much of Whitman's nature imagery, these three images are not particularly sexual, and yet they emphasize that the boys' love is wild and free from artificial social conventions. The singing birds and "leafing" trees also link the love to Whitman's poetry, his wild "leaves."



Figure 3: Walt Whitman, 1819-1892. *Hollyer, Samuel, 1826-1919, engraver, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

Whitman specifies that the armed, soldiering boys are making their excursions “North and South.” John Brown made his famous foray to Harper’s Ferry, Virginia in October 1859 and was executed that December. Clearly, the two boys are not like John Brown—a puritanical rebel whose scorn for American statutes came from his sense of higher, sacred laws. They own no law less than their selves; they are seeking their own freedom, not anyone else’s. But by writing “North and South” Whitman creates a fantasy world in which North and South are united, not by laws and morals, but by amoral adhesion and passion.

Whitman wants love among men to become our primary civic virtue, the glue that holds the nation together—stronger than laws or government—but he also recognizes that passionate love can be exclusive and lawless. The loves of Antony and Cleopatra, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and Thelma and Louise are thrilling because, even though the lovers are inevitably defeated by law and order, they free themselves for a few glorious moments. To be great means to be greater than something else; and love, they make us feel, is greater than virtue.



Figure 4: Walt Whitman and Peter Doyle, circa 1869. *M. P. Rice, Washington, D.C., Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

Several of Whitman's great contemporaries, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Herman Melville, were, like Whitman, moralists with strong anti-moralistic streaks. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson praises the "nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one." He claims that "society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members." In response, he vows to follow his own god-like genius and conscience. It will not be immoral, he claims, because he will be obeying his own higher law, even if it appears like sin to others:

[M]y friend suggested, – "But these impulses may be from below, not from above." I replied, "They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil." No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature.

Thoreau, too, claims freedom from conventional morality, and links freedom to youth, gladness, and nature. As Whitman says admiringly, "One thing about Thoreau keeps him very near to me: I refer to his lawlessness—his going his own absolute road let hell blaze all it chooses." Thoreau writes in his notebook:

Methinks that these prozers, with their saws and their laws, do not know how glad a man can be. What wisdom, what warning, can prevail against gladness? There is no law so strong which a little gladness may not transgress. I have a room all to myself; it is nature. It is a place beyond the jurisdiction of human governments. Pile up your books, the records of sadness, your saws and your laws. Nature is glad outside, and her merry worms within will ere long topple them down. There is a prairie beyond your law. Nature is a prairie for outlaws.

Thoreau sometimes feels that he owes his success to his vices, and if he

repents of anything, it is his good behavior. The so-called wisdom of elders is mainly an impediment: "I have lived some thirty years on this planet," he writes, "and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors."

Like Emerson, Thoreau emphasizes that the self-reliant man must be prepared to spurn even familial duties. Emerson says, "I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me." Thoreau adds friends to the equation: "If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again . . . then you are ready for a walk." To walk is to learn "sauntering," the American art of going on the road or into the woods to escape from oppressive society. Thoreau needs to spend at least four hours a day sauntering through the woods, and he marvels that mechanics and shopkeepers who have to sit at work all day long do not commit suicide.

For Melville, the equivalent of sauntering is setting out to sea. As Ishmael says in *Moby Dick*, "I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts." For Emerson and Thoreau, escaping convention is at its root a solitary venture, much as they prize their walks with each other. For Melville, part of sailing's allure is camaraderie and the alternative society furnished by the shipmates (or, in *Typee*, a tribal society on "barbarous coasts"), but in *Moby Dick*, tragically, that alternative society falls prey to Captain Ahab's tyrannical mania, and Ishmael ends up as he started, alone. Melville may have valued friendship more than Emerson and Thoreau, but he was no more sanguine about its powers of salvation. Ishmael and Queequeg cling together for a time, but then Queequeg vanishes into the abyss.

Whitman values his solitude, but when he sets out on the open road or strolls the city's streets, he often wants a friend or lover to hold his hand. His rebelliousness stems from individualism, but also from passion. Because he partially suppresses the eroticism in his Calamus poems, the theme of antinomian love appears more powerfully in another sequence from the late 1850s: the *Enfans d'Adam* poems, which announce their theme as heterosexual love, rather than love among men. In "O furious! O confine me not," for example, he longs to "drink the mystic deliria:" to find a "new unthought-of nonchalance;" to have the "gag removed" from his mouth, and to "court destruction," if need be, for "one brief hour of madness and joy."

The three poems that follow "O furious! O confine me not" in *Enfans d'Adam* are some of Whitman's most powerful love poems. All three seem directed at men and could have been placed in the Calamus section, had he chosen to more fully eroticize it. "You and I—what the earth is, we are" is particularly reminiscent of "We two boys together clinging." Whitman uses a long list to characterize the lovers, beginning 19 of the 21 lines with "We." As in "We two boys," the freedom of the lovers is linked closely to the freedom of nature: he compares them to plants, rocks, oaks, fishes, blossoms, suns, and clouds. Again, he uses aggressive images: predatory hawks soaring and four-footed animals prowling and

springing on prey. The lovers are equal, even identical; at no point does he differentiate them (which, given Whitman's usual patterns of language, strongly suggests that they are both male). In many of the images, the lovers are parallel—oaks growing side by side, fishes swimming in the sea together—but in one crucial line they mingle: "We are seas mingling—we are two of those cheerful waves, rolling over each other, and interwetting each other." As in "We two boys," love achieves liberation by spurning society; as he writes in the triumphant last line: "We have voided all but freedom, and all but our own joy."



Figure 5: Walt Whitman and Bill Duckett, 1886. *Public Domain*, via [Wikimedia Commons](#). Courtesy Ohio Wesleyan University, Bayley Collection.

Perhaps because "We two boys" is explicitly about male love, Whitman does not imbue it with quite the electrifying, erotic physicality of "You and I." In some ways, that seems a distinct loss, but the fact that "We two boys" can be read to encompass friendship and camaraderie, and not just romantic love, creates additional meanings and tensions; the poem has an electricity all its own, and, in its perfectly realized cadences, its own kind of prophetic freedom and joy.

Further Reading

Betsy Erkkila, ed., *Walt Whitman's Songs of Male Intimacy and Love: "Live Oak, with Moss" and "Calamus"* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011).

Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, *Rescripting Walt Whitman an Introduction to his Life and Work* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

Jason Stacy, editor, *Leaves of Grass, 1860: the 150th Anniversary Facsimile*

Edition (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009).

This article originally appeared in March 2022.

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