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Vanessa J. Ragusa  
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**Towards A Queer Aesthetic: Biographical Readings of  
Oscar Wilde, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman**

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters in English Literature from the City College of New York

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**Towards A Queer Aesthetic: Biographical Readings of Oscar Wilde, Herman Melville and  
Walt Whitman**

### **Abstract:**

What is a Queer Aesthetics? At first sight the term is a contradiction. Queer signifies a particular identity formation associated with same-sex love; it is a kind of politics and operates on a spectrum. Aesthetics on the other hand are supposed to be apolitical. Aesthetics refers to the study of beauty in the abstract. In this thesis, I will describe how these two, ostensibly incompatible terms come together in the work of the three 19<sup>th</sup> Century writers. Oscar Wilde, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman were all writers, connected by their philosophical love of beauty and their individual interest in same-sex/queer love. This thesis is designed as a comparative exploration between the two, connecting the beauty and the queer aesthetics of their work through the application of biographical readings. For each of these three writers, beauty and same-sex love have a mutual connection, and while the aim of this thesis is not to prove a larger point about how sexuality is generally expressed in 19<sup>th</sup> Century writing, it is to explore and expose the different ways in which the concepts of beauty within their writings, and how their individual same-sex desires are intimately intertwined.

I will further emphasize that an analytical biographical reading of these texts is a necessary component in understanding the same-sex sexual interest and personal desires of the authors, making them married to the work in a way that it is impossible to separate the two. I will prove that the space that exists between the text and the author is so limited that only through the work, is a reader able to receive the messages of beauty and sexuality that they are delivering; beauty in the form of style, language and content, and same-sex interest exposed through biographical readings. This thesis will be divided into three separate chapters, each concentrating on one author at a time. The first chapter will focus on the life and work of Oscar Wilde, in particular how The Aestheticism Movement served as his greatest influence on beauty and its affect on *The*

*Picture of Dorian Grey*. The chapter will break down how he expresses his views of beauty and same-sex love through the characters he creates and ultimately the story those characters are telling. The second chapter will focus on Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, primarily on the pseudo-sexual desires of his two central male characters, Queequeg and Ishmael, as well as his letters to Nathaniel Hawthorne. The third and final chapter will be on Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and how his relationship with Frederick Vaughn helped inspire the beauty and content of many of his poems. Additionally, incorporated throughout will be opinions and excerpts from Dr. Anne Anderson's lecture on "Oscar Wilde and The Aesthetic of Beauty," Joseph Bristow's, *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend*, and Mark Niemeyer's, *The Divine Magnet: Herman Melville's Letters to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, as well as Rictor Norton's, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual*. Each of these secondary texts will be used to support the theories presented.

Although, this is not a paper that will focus on the socio-political spectrum of same-sex love, various socio-political terms, such as "queer" will be referenced throughout, and it is important to note that while the term "queer" itself was not merged into the English language until the 16th century and then only to mean peculiar or strange, the way it will be used in this thesis is to regard sexuality or same sex desires. There will be a list of terms used attached and the way in which the terms apply to the readings will be explicitly addressed in each passage, as to not confuse the reader. Finally, any historical references to time will also be directly connected to the authors and their work, as this thesis is not a socio-political or historical one.

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## Key Words

The following is a list of terms that may present itself throughout the paper and while this is not a historical or socio-political paper, the terms used are sometimes regarded as such. However for the purpose of the paper, the terms will only be used in conjunction to the definition provided on this list and have been defined through Merriam Webster Dictionary.

**Aestheticism-** An intellectual and art movement supporting the emphasis of aesthetic values more than social-political themes for literature, fine art, and other arts

**Queer/ Same-Sex Love-** sexually attracted to members of the same sex

**Androgyny** – is the combination of masculine and feminine characteristics. Usually used to describe characters or persons which have no specific gender, gender ambiguity may also be found in fashion, gender identity, sexual identity, or sexual lifestyle.

**Cisgender** – (often abbreviated to simply cis) a person whose gender identity and biological sex align. Can also be thought of as, “biology matches psychology.” **Cisgender** may also be defined as those who have "a gender identity or perform a gender role society considers appropriate for one's sex"

**Closeted** – when a person is not open about their sexuality to others.

**Fluid(ity)** – refers to an identity, gender expression or sexual orientation that can change or shift overtime

• **Gender Expression** – the ways that a person externally expresses their gender through dress, demeanor, and behavior. This is independent of gender identity.

• **Gender Identity** – a person’s psychological perception of his or her own gender. Common labels include man, woman, transgender etc.

## **Towards A Queer Aesthetic: Biographical Readings**

### **Introduction**

At the intersection of the author's life and his writing, lay a corner of carefully crafted truths. As readers and scholars, we can select to expose them or disconnect from the messages the authors are trying to deliver to us, but choosing to disconnect from them, does not mean that the messages aren't there. Imagine if you will that literary aestheticism, the thing that makes art beautiful in works of literature, operates on a spectrum ranging from completely beautiful (Apolitical, aesthetically pleasing, art for art's sake) to biographical (completely personal, author influenced, conveying messages) and theories weren't imposed on where along the spectrum art existed. Could it be then, that art could exist with the flexibility of being both beautiful and meaningful? Could the works of Herman Melville and Walt Whitman convey messages that reveal sexuality, while being written stylistically beautiful, perhaps even as beautiful as that of Oscar Wilde? Does Oscar Wilde, as a proponent of The Aestheticism Movement, fall victim to his own contradictions because while it is aesthetically pleasing, it is also reflective of his personal life, thereby offering his readers an insight to his same-sex desires and revealing truths of his own? Could it be possible that the space that exist between the work and the artist, as mentioned earlier, clearly express a queer aesthetic as well as the authors own preoccupation with beauty? The answer to all of the above is an affirmative yes.

While all three authors are known for their beautifully crafted words of prose and poetry, making it impossible to debate that one was more talented in descriptive language than the other or that one is more aesthetically pleasing than another, each had a specific style when writing about their expressions of sexuality that plays on the various senses of their readers. Part of the beauty is that the expressions were directly influenced by personal desires. In order to fully demonstrate how deeply connected the authors are to their work, we must dissect the written

work and formulate the connection between each piece to the author's experiences. For example, in *Moby-Dick*, when Melville writes of the relationship between his sometime narrator Ishmael and the cannibal Queequeg, the description is filled with blatant queer imagery and the correlation can be easily made that upon his first encounter Ishmael is taken with Queequeg's physique, which is described in detail in the later chapters of this thesis, much in the same way as Melville himself was as taken by Hawthorne upon their first meeting. Similarly is the case when Whitman writes of a day that brings him many great accreditations but none excite him except that of the possibility of seeing his male lover in the evening. He writes, "his arm lay lightly around my breast-and that night I was happy." (Whitman, 283) We will explore, how much of that may be a memory of a moment he experienced with his young, Irish lover Vaughn. Additionally, when Wilde writes of a character so beautiful that everyone is obsessed with him, we explore just how much of that is about his own obsession with beauty-in art and in men.

There is very little room to interpret work when applying a biographical reading, as much of what is interpreted is done so through a lens that connects the character the author creates to the life they (sometimes) live. While Oscar Wilde's, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reveal contradictions it also marries his ideas on beauty and same-sex love, in much the same way that Melville and Whitman's work does. The collaboration of letters and novels, poetry and personal romantic relationships will expose the queer aesthetics, while style, form, and content exposes their preoccupation with beauty. In the chapters that follow there will be a particular focus on the way that the character relationships are established within *Moby-Dick* and how much of that relationship is an actual reflection of Melville's own sexual attraction to fellow writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne. This particular attraction will be explored primarily through his letters and main characters. Additionally, a biographical reading of Whitman's poetry will prove that his

relationship with Frederick Vaughn (and other same-sex desires) directly influenced his romantic description of nature, the body and the sensual language he choose to use.

## Chapter 1

### Towards A Queer Aesthetic: Biographical Readings, Oscar Wilde

#### **The Development, the Purpose and the Influence of The Aestheticism Movement on Oscar Wilde**

Authors and proponents of the Aestheticism Movement such as Oscar Wilde believed that there is a bold boundary between the art and the artist, as well as a bold boundary between life and art. To Wilde, all art is created to be admired and aesthetically beautiful and not created with the purpose of conveying a deep sentiment of morality or ethics, culture, sexuality or the political; it is simply “art for art’s sake.” One could argue that aestheticism affirms that literary art in particular is nothing more than words on paper, a combination of the creators imagination and the language used to make something aesthetically beautiful for the pleasure of those who select to read it, but it is not, nor can it ever be anything more. Aestheticism claims that art cannot serve as a lesson on morality and certainly nothing that is in any way intimately connected to the author and throughout his career, Wilde would repeat these sentiments. Oscar Wilde once wrote, “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.” (Wilde, 1) Such a statement proves him as a proponent of The Aestheticism Movement, believing that the connection between “well written” and aesthetically beautiful is mutually exclusive. A book for Wilde, is not well written because it provides the reader with a lesson or thought-provoking theme to guide a conflict- or because it reveals personal truths of the writer, but rather because of the aesthetic beauty it delivers alone. To aestheticism and Wilde especially, art divorces itself from needing a reason or specific meaning and has no intrinsic value and no moral or ethical obligation- because the author

himself is divorced from these concepts when creating the work, and therefore has no obligation to provide them through such. He writes, “No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style” (Wilde, 1) However, throughout much of Wilde’s life, as preoccupied with beauty as he may have been, his work coordinated with his own personal experiences, especially those that would later have him regarded “as a man martyred for his sexual intimacy with other men.” (Bristow, ix) It had become, perhaps unbeknownst to Wilde, not only his style of writing, but the intermingling of his personal same-sex desires that made the work he created, in particular “*The Picture of Dorian Gray*” beautiful.

The Aestheticism Movement seeks to clearly define the boundaries between the artist and their creation, without taking into consideration that aestheticism has the ability to operate on a spectrum and much can be revealed about an author through biographical readings, even though those works may be categorically fiction. Developed as a school of thought in the 19th Century and gaining most of its traction in Britain between the years of 1860 and 1900, The Aestheticism Movement had one aim: to disconnect art from meaning, thus promoting the idea that art is only meant to be beautiful and admired. For authors of aestheticism, anyone who sought subjective lessons in morality or ethics did so imposing personal biases upon it (i.e. they want to see it, therefore they do). The argument here is simply that the artist isn’t conveying these messages, but that the observer is stretching for an interpretation to receive it. Oscar Wilde asserts, “To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim. The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things...the moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium...all art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.” (Wilde, 1-2) This is

Wilde's most clear warning of the dangers of seeking anything other than refined beauty from art and as an artist himself is in turn disconnecting himself personally, stating that to dig beneath the surface of visual gratification and pleasure of the work is to do so at one's own risk. However, Oscar Wilde's own work proves his theory on art solely being meant to be beautiful contradictory because his work expresses more than such, it expresses Wilde's personality, his critiques of the world and his desires. Joseph Bristow once wrote that "everywhere we look in Wilde's writings-especially light of the life he led as a dazzling talker who learned at an early stage how to embody a memorable icons style-we can detect the fin-de-siècle origins of post-1900 fascination with dissident sexuality, critiques of the patriarchal family, the creative spirit of criticism, and the callous mindlessness of the British prison system." (Bristow, xii) All that Bristow mentions that Wilde incorporates into his work are all elements of Wilde's personal experiences. For example, we know he was a man who sexually engaged with other men, a man who served time in a British prison and one who openly criticized various schools of thought. These were among the things that Bristow meant when he mentions his fascinations with "dissident sexuality," "the creative spirit of criticism," and "the British prison system."

### **Oscar Wilde: The Man, His Theory and The Contradictions**

*The artist is the creator of beautiful things.*

*To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim...*

*...All art is quite useless. (Wilde, 2)*

Oscar Wilde was an Oxford educated man who came from an educated family, his mother a poet and a journalist and his father a renowned physician. With many prominent, intellectual figures around him, it was of no wonder that Wilde would go on to become a well-established

writer, admittedly one with a controversial reputation, but a well known writer nonetheless. However, it was long before the scandals and the illness, and while studying at Oxford, that Wilde was known to have spent his time “finding himself” and emerging into the person that would become so obsessed with beauty that he wouldn’t even leave his home unless he felt well suited and presentable enough to do so. To those that knew him, Wilde was a man as equally concerned with physical beauty as he was with his own intellect. It was well noted that while at Oxford, Wilde became “engaged in self discovery, through both intellectual and personal pursuits,” (Cauti, i) and it is during his time there that scholars believed he became intrigued and ultimately influenced by tutor, author and aesthetic philosopher, Walter Pater as well as his friendship with painter, James McNeil Whistler. Both men Wilde met were proponents of aestheticism and exposed Wilde to their very (contradictory) ideas-idea that Wilde would later promote. Whistler for example was known to sign his paintings with a butterfly that had a stinger for a tail and he, like Pater, opposed the notion that art had any sentimental, personal value and yet, much like aestheticism itself, these proponents contradicted themselves. For example, Whistler’s own signature was meant to symbolize his combative personality with a stylistic stamp that would help recognize his work uniquely. It was both aesthetically beautiful and personal because the very meaning behind his signature, much like Wilde’s novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, displays an immediate contradiction to the aesthetic position that art is not personally influenced and the artist and art itself operate as two separate entities. Pater’s influence proved more blatantly significant, as his own work displayed itself in Wilde’s novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In an introduction to the novel itself, writer Camille Cauti writes, “Wilde cannibalized two of the novel’s sources for near-verbatim citations in the text. The axiom ‘Nothing can cure the soul but the senses,’ for example is lifted from the 1885 novel

*Marius the Epicurean* by Walter Pater... Wilde also closely paraphrases the conclusion to Pater's era-shaping art-historical treatise, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, when he writes, 'New Hedonism's aim, indeed was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be.'" (Cauti, xvii) The contradiction on aestheticism here isn't as vague as it may originally seem, given that Pater's conclusion was said, "to have influenced many more young, impressionable people than it did art historians," remembering that Wilde was a young man when they met and possibly among those Pater regards in that statement. Wilde takes from Pater and Pater's writings are primarily influenced by his defense of aestheticism and yet his defense crumbles when he decides to edit out parts of his conclusion later because of the public displeasure it evoked. In an 1877 edition of the work, editors note that Pater's book could not have existed without the cultural elements that influenced it and was considered so controversial and un-Christian in its 1873 release, that Pater would be forced to remove sections of a conclusion that masses rebelled against. The man, who influenced Wilde, was not without his own contradictions and those very contradictions, while Wilde is guilty of them as well, are the very same things that disappointed Wilde. In a response to his mentor, Wilde once stated that Pater "lived to disprove everything that he has written," (Bristow, 279) but Wilde was not far from committing these inconsistencies himself.

Those who knew Wilde personally during his years at Oxford knew him as an individual who was an "eccentric and a foppish dresser who always has a flower in his lapel," (Cauti, ix) an interesting correlation between Wilde's concerns for his personal physical aesthetics and his development as a proponent of aestheticism within art. It becomes evident early on that Wilde is a man concerned with beauty and good taste. In fact, prior to any publication or artistic accomplishment, to his name, Wilde was said have professed himself as a "professor of

Aesthetics and an arbiter of taste,” (Brooks, 1) leaving one to wonder, if Oscar Wilde establishing himself as an early proponent of aestheticism was a strategic tactic simply to distance himself from the type of work he will eventually create. I argue that Wilde is no more separated from his work than his character Basil is from his admiration of his subject, Dorian. Reading his work biographically reveals that Wilde is in everything he creates and the work he creates lives within him and is born of his experiences. While, it is already evident that Wilde is concerned with beauty and there is no debating that in his 1891 publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the entire novel centers around this very idea, it’s the application of a biographical reading that sows Wilde himself into the characters of Basil Hallward, Dorian Gray and Lord Henry and exposes Wilde in the ways Bristow mentions above. Wilde becomes, not just an author of aestheticism, but a man who lives in violation of it as well, proving that art operates on a spectrum and is not simply “art for art’s sake” and that Wilde’s work is both beautiful and expressive of his same-sex interest.

### **The Picture of Dorian Gray and The Picture it Paints of Oscar Wilde**

“Is Oscar Wilde’s only novel...a homosexual allegory of doomed, forbidden passion? A cautionary tale about a soul’s corruption, meant to remind the reader of conscience, karma, politesse, and the dangers of excessive aesthetic glorification?” (Cauti, xiii) Prior to the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde had published his first verse of poems in 1881, but it is the novel form of *The Picture Dorian Gray* that “is considered to be Wilde’s most personal work” (Cauti, ii) and it is said that “the novel portrays the author’s internal battles and arrives at the disturbing possibility.” (Cauti, ii) Because the novel is centered around the beauty of one man in particular, while establishing in juxtaposition other characters that highlight the

issues of admiring something solely on the basis of being beautiful, the novel is flexible enough to exist on an aesthetic spectrum. It becomes the apolitical aesthetic philosophy that Wilde promotes, as well as a lens into the contradictions of the aesthetic agenda. Within the novel, Wilde becomes the author, the contradiction, the protagonist and every secondary character ranging on the spectrum from *completely beautiful* to *biographical*. Oscar Wilde is a man layered in Aestheticism:

**Wilde as the Novel, the Novel as Completely Aesthetic:** The novel, stylistically as an entire work, is aesthetically pleasing with a descriptive style that perfectly pleases the imagination of its readers. The language and almost poetic imagery that Wilde uses captures our senses and places us directly in the world of the characters he creates from the very first line of the very first chapter; “The studio was filled with the rich odor of roses and when the light summer wind stirred amid the trees of the garden there came through the door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.” (Wilde, 3) This is what I regard as “completely beautiful” on the spectrum of aestheticism, because almost everyone has experienced the pleasures of a summer day and its soft breezes that carry with it scents of a garden. This is not a personal experience of the author or one that coordinates exclusively to him per se, this is simply part of what makes this “a well written book.” (Wilde, 1)

**Wilde as Lord Henry, Lord Henry as Aesthetic:** Here, Wilde writes of a character that seemingly reflects his own views and where I believe, Wilde strategically executes his idea of aestheticism through a babbling, sometimes incoherent aristocratic socialite. He is a man who believes in hedonism, believing that beauty is the only pleasure worth pursuing and he becomes the character on the spectrum of aestheticism that places a hierarchy on the beautiful,

leaning closest to completely beautiful than a center combination of beauty and biographical. Lord Henry is the Oscar Wilde of the novel, the Wilde that is noted for his style of dress, for being beautiful, for having only one concern with how art should be perceived, etc. In the opening pages, he mocks his artist friend, Basil, who expresses to him that he is inside of the paintings he creates. In opposition, Lord Henry exclaims, “ beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face.” (Wilde, 5) This is an exact sentiment expressed by Wilde in his own words, when he writes “Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only beauty,” (Wilde, 1) and this is a sentiment that Lord Henry bestows upon the books impressionable beauty and main character, Dorian Gray.

With the application of a biographical reading one can easily conclude that it is through this character that Wilde exposes himself the most, not only because of his ideas on aestheticism, but on marriage as well-which in turn lead us to Wilde’s interest in same-sex love. Like Wilde, Lord Henry is a man dissatisfied in his marriage to his wife and often mentions of a “return to the Hellenic,” (Wilde, 20) but unlike his character (although his character did obsess over the beauty of one man in particular) engaged in many extra marital affairs with many young men. A deeper reading into Lord Henry’s interest in the Hellenic, clearly expresses Wilde’s own interest to a period in classical Greece where a love between men was not considered morally wrong. Lord Henry states, Oscar Wilde writes, “I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream-I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediaevalist and return to the Hellenic ideal-to something finer, richer, than the

Hellenic ideal, it may be.” (Wilde, 20) There are two items of interest happening in this passage, on the one hand, Lord Henry is being used to express Wilde’s views on same-sex love, while on the other Lord Henry, the character, is contracting himself on his views of beauty, previously stating that only beauty is worth admiring and now adding a sentiment, an emotional connection to just about everything. The very principles of the Hellenic ideals are in complete contrast to that of aestheticism, as they outline principles such as that to use ethics as a guide to everything, seeking value in truth, while emphasizing the importance of writing, philosophy and music. Later Wilde would go to trial for living out such an interest in men, when the father of his young, male lover attempts to prosecute him for gross indecency and sodomy.

**Wilde as Dorian Gray, Gray as Both Aesthetically Beautiful and Biographical:**

While the idea that applying a biographical reading to an author’s work means that correlations can be made, it is not a means to define the author as the character itself. What this means is that while Oscar Wilde did not model his character Dorian Gray after himself exclusively, or his life, as the novel is a work of fiction, much of him can be seen in the character of Dorian Gray. In the introduction of the novel Camille Cuati supports this theory by writing that “this book so fixates Dorian that begins to model his interests, decor, and behavior after its protagonist’s unusually obsessive activities and strange tastes, just as Wilde’s chapter-long tangent accurately imitates this mysterious book’s own style and preoccupations.” (Cauti, xxiii) Both men are of good looks with narcissistic convictions, behave slightly flamboyantly and whose philosophies were influenced by other men; Wilde by Pater and Dorian by Lord Henry, in many ways making Wilde the protagonist of this novel. Although Dorian isn’t introduced to the readers until the second chapter of the novel, his presence lingers throughout the opening pages and we know instantly that he is a spirit that will become the center of the work, even when

physically absent from scenes. Additionally, of all the characters, Dorian is also the most contradictory and that contradictory aligns itself with Wilde's life, which can be easily noted through a timeline of Dorian's development as a character and Oscar Wilde through his death. For example, although the novel was published long before the trials of Wilde, the ending of the novel and that of the life of Wilde seem parallel. In both cases the men are obsessed with the aesthetics of beauty, so much so that it leads them both to fall victim to sensualism. In the closing scene of the novel, Dorian has fallen from the ideals of beauty and the friends that once regarded him at higher standards are no longer doing so because the rumors that surround him lead to speculation and public disdain, very much in the same way they did for Wilde. Additionally, the way that Basil's admiration of his subject diminishes, foreshadows Wilde's own fall from prosperity as a respected writer.

**Basil as Wilde, Basil the Creator, The Creator as Completely Biographical:**

“In the center of the room, clamped to an upright easel, stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty, and in front of it, some little distance away, was sitting the artist himself, Basil Hallward.” (Wilde, 4) From the moment readers are introduced to Basil, he is in close physical proximity from the work he created, a scene that becomes representative of how closely tied to the portrait and his artistic creation he feels. On the spectrum of aestheticism, Basil's character, unlike Wilde, falls on the opposite end of the ideas of beauty, because almost immediately he admits that he is inside the work and therefore can not be separated from it; “I have put too much of myself into it... every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in

it the secret of my soul.” (Wilde, 4-7) For Basil, the object of the work created is an “accident” because regardless of what that something is; it is useless as simply art, without the interpretation of the artist and the sentiments behind its actual creation. The work cannot be separated from philosophy. When Basil claims that exhibiting the portrait of a man he admired would be exposing his soul, it is without doubt that Wilde wrote this as a metaphor for himself and his same-sex desires. This is explicitly revealed when Basil goes into details about his first encounter with Dorian and of how taken he was by his beauty, in a romantic, almost poetic description; “I turned half-way round, and saw Dorian Gray for the first time. When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself.” (Wilde, 8) Basil does not separate himself from his desires, he regards his art as himself and continues to assert, “that there is nothing that art can not express,” and this art, this portrait that he has created expresses and exposes his same-sex attraction to Dorian.

Oscar Wilde’s layered aestheticism and the stylistic beauty of his work correlates with an “art for art’s sake” aestheticism, but it is not altogether removed from the more personal delivery of sentiments sexuality-a biographical reading has proven that Wilde is as much in the novel as Basil is in the portrait. The novel, while it may have not been a conscious intention or mission of Wilde, provides lessons on the dangers of the sole recognition and admiration of beauty, thus proving Wilde’s inability to uphold the aestheticism ideology within his own work. Although Wilde is obsessed with the idea of beauty, his novel teaches readers that there is more to something than the superficial beauty it displays. The novel is itself a beautifully and aesthetically pleasing piece of literary art that is neither divorced from the philosophical or Wilde

himself. A biographical reading expose the queer aesthetics of a novel whose writer was himself a queer man, who claimed that his only interest in art was to appreciate it for its beauty, yet in contradiction, creates a world of characters whose own obsession with a beautiful work of art, of a physically beautiful man and the admiration of such leads to their demise. It provides readers with a lesson on morality and vanity, while exposing the sexual desires of its author through the subtle and suppressed sexual attraction Basil feels for Dorian. The same-sex sexual desires are very likely the reasons why upon its release “Wilde found much to defend him against when the harsh notices for *Dorian Gray* hit the streets. The novel was proclaimed ‘stupid and vulgar,’ ‘dull and nasty,’ ‘incurably silly,’ ‘poisonous,’ ‘coarse and crude,’ ‘a sham,’ and, strangely enough given its celebration of such things, ‘false art,’” (Wilde, xv) Lastly, it is likely this reaction that made Wilde feel exposed, admitting in the trial of the novel that the book was “against nature” (Cauti, xv) leaving those to speculate if “against nature” was an indication that Wilde’s own sexuality as observed in the 1800 was too “against nature.”

## Chapter 2

### Towards A Queer Aesthetic: Biographical Readings, Herman Melville

#### Herman Melville: The Man Behind the Whale

Herman Melville was born on Pearl St, New York on August 1, 1819, following the end of the American Enlightenment Period. The social and political effects of the Enlightenment Period would prove significant in Melville's life, as many of the ideologies that evolved during this time would notably influence much of his work. During the American Enlightenment, Puritan religious leaders restored the belief that disciplines in art, music and literature were professions worthy of study and representation of various types of people began to emerge through writers that were not consider to be among the literary elite. Although Melville would eventually take a break from writing, this school of thought gave him an entry into the literary world and can be seen in the work itself. This belief created the avenue that would stimulate the potential for Herman Melville's epic to be written, while the political and cultural stereotypes that formulated during this time are essential components in understanding the society that would become the demographic for Melville's work, and of how Melville himself is reflected in the work, most specifically, within the development of the perceived romantic relationship between members of the same sex. This is not to say that because tolerance was beginning to emerge socially, that same-sex love was widely accepted, because it was not, yet parallels between Melville's own life and the paradigms of homosexuality within his text and letters to Nathaniel Hawthorne, can yield for readers the conclusion that Melville was expressing personal desires of same-sex love.

## **Exposing the Hetero-Normalcy and Depiction of Same-Sex Love**

Accredited by scholars to be the author of social criticism, Melville often addresses class and racial divides more obviously so than he does sexuality or the sexual spectrum in which his characters occupy. A possible reason for this can be because unlike homosexuality, the topic of race and class were commonly debated, and conclusive. For example, one could discuss his opinions on the hardships of the lower class or the systematic discrimination of people of color without being considered either, yet homosexuality is not as easily conclusive, because an individual's sexual identity is more easily concealed than race or class, and the discussion of support for homosexuality alone can result in one's exclusion from society. Because homosexuality had not yet entered the political arena as a main area of concern or debate, it is important to note that socially such was considered taboo and often regarded as deviant and strange, in addition to sinful, this was best expressed in the mention of the trials of Oscar Wilde. For Melville, it seemed that life in 19th Century America was contradictory and consisted of two conflicting ideals: The newly constructed sentiments of the Enlightenment's ideals of freedom, equality and the pursuit to happiness, and the concepts of its historical counterpart; racism, sexism, homophobia and the patriarchy. As a result of this contradiction, Melville would straddle the line between these new ideals, developing characters and character relations that were not commonly represented, but leave it ambiguous enough for readers not to conclusively categorize his characters as homosexual. Unlike, Wilde or Whitman, Melville did not openly engage in sexual relationships with members of the same gender, thus making his own sexuality inconclusive and the application of a biographical reading all the more necessary. Even if Melville himself believed in equality and was outwardly ambivalent toward homosexuality, many of his readers, as well as his peers, remained, after all, religiously conscious—a principal

and awareness that likely inhibited Melville from candidly expressing same-sex relationships as something to “normalize” for fear of being considered “deviant” himself. Remembering how Wilde was treated and the accusations against him that led to his trials, makes it easy to conclude that the same could have been of Melville. However, much like Wilde, the subtle undertones of homosexuality in *Moby-Dick*, may have been a contributing factor as to why the work was considered a critical and commercial failure when published. In a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville writes that “I have written a wicked book and I feel spotless as a lamb.” (Melville, xv) It is likely that what he considered “wicked” of the book was his own subtextual expression and insertion of homosexual desires, while “feeling spotless as a lamb” could signify that Melville was exposing a part of himself in it, thus, much like the spotless lamb, leaving him naked in the telling of his own sexual truth. Could this be for Melville an admission, much like that of Wilde, when Wilde writes that his book was “against nature?” Could Melville, like Whitman and Wilde, be a writer whose work would begin with a telling of his own queer experiences, much in the same way that his work on a Merchant Ship, influenced to write *Moby-Dick* and *Billy Budd*? Can his marriage to wife and his relationship with fellow writer Nathaniel Hawthorne reveal truths about a man who unlike Wilde, didn’t go to trial for sodomy and unlike Whitman didn’t overtly express same-sex relations in his novel? The answer again, is yes, but because Melville’s work is much more allusive and complex, he is requiring of his readers a knowledge of history, geography, travel, religion, etc. He creates a world within his ships and between his characters that, while often are reflections of life on land, allow for the broadening of social boundaries where his characters (or Melville) are more freely able to express desire without fear of legal or social consequence. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville becomes as much a part of the story as the characters themselves, marrying his own experiences with the fictional stories he creates. When

regarding Wilde in an earlier chapter, the ability to highlight his contradictions helped expose the queer aesthetics of the work, ranging from one end to the other, however, on the same spectrum of aestheticism, Melville would be harder to place than his fellow writers.

*Moby-Dick*, whose unfolding events primarily take place on a Whaling ship, occupied only by men, epitomizes ambiguous homoeroticism while challenging the stereotypes of the attraction between men as unnatural. You will notice that as the relationship between two of his central characters develop, it does so without interruption. Notably, while *Moby-Dick*, is not transparently about queer representation or homosexuality, the ambiguous homoeroticism, definition of masculinity and the establishment of the male “brotherhood,” as well as Melville’s use of sensual language are all tools devised to undertone homosexual themes. Similar to Wilde and Whitman, Melville’s work is aesthetically pleasing to the senses, but unlike them it is vastly unclear. Through *Moby-Dick*, Melville invites readers into his own inclination toward homosexuality, most notably through the establishment of the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg. The use of the term queer or homosexual is not to imply that the characters were sexual partners, but that the desire is present, belonging to Melville, and that his characters are nothing more than vehicles used to express it. The application of an analytical reading is a fundamental requirement in exposing homosexuality throughout because without it, one would miss the undertones, as there is nothing about the text that is overtly homosexual or even sexual at all. I believe this is a technical strategy Melville used to keep the work from being considered a promotion of homosexuality. It is important to note that a common factor of 19th Century Literature is to allude to sexuality and sexual acts, rather than to use explicit language to describe them. Melville, similar to “all accomplished writers develop characteristic styles in which purpose and technique become one,” (Hooved, xxxi) and his use of strategic language and poetic

style of writing as mentioned earlier is the technique Melville uses for the purpose of providing readers with the representation of a growing intimacy between two men, without the need to write of them engaging in sexual activity. (Hovde, xxxi) This complexity of language presented throughout the work, marry his aesthetically baroque style writing with the telling of his own homosexual desires in a way that is so romanticized as the story of a brotherhood between men on a Whaling ship, that it can at times be overlooked, which seems a conscious effort on behave of the writer. Critics of the work have stated that while “sexuality is powerfully present” (Hovde, xxv) one must be cautious not to narrowly define the epic as *sexual*,” but as analytical readers we are free to yield a categorical definition of the work for ourselves, free to conclude that it is Melville’s presence in the work that reveal both him and his text as queer, while once again fracturing the idea of “art for art’s sake.”

While I agree that it is important to make the distinction that Melville is not always the voice of the narrator nor that of Ishmael himself, and that we are not actually reading a biography of Melville, a biographical reading reveals that the narrator does occupy a position between the two; Ishmael as well as Melville himself, and at times can be both. It is during those times that Melville reveals himself and his desires the most. In the introduction to the work, former Columbia University Dean and educator writes that “it is true that *Moby-Dick* is an opinionated work, and it is not surprising that the narrator sometimes expresses views that we assume to be Melville’s.” (Hooved, xxiv) Moments when the depiction of affection between men and the developing intimacy between Ishmael and Queequeg are present, one can argue that this is Melville’s own desire to establish such a relationship for himself, possibly even with Hawthorne. From the introductory lines of the novel, “Call me Ishmael,” (Melville, 27) the person speaking directly to the reader is assuming an identity by telling us what he wants to be called, instead of

providing an actual identity of who is he by saying instead, “my name is, and this is my story.” In doing so Melville is allowing himself to be purposefully vague or occupying this identity, while at times concealing himself as Ishmael. The concept here is similar to that of Basil as Wilde, representing the limited space between the writer and the work. Not dissimilar to his own life experiences, when Melville took to the merchant ship the *St. Lawrence*, Ishmael affirms that whenever *he* is broke and bored with life on land, takes to the sea; “Some years ago-having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought, I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world,”(Melville, 27) and becomes for the reader “completely biographical” on the spectrum of aestheticism as outline earlier. It is this initial meeting of Ishmael that leaves readers to connect for them this characters personal dissatisfaction and internal struggle to Melville’s possible struggles of homosexual desires because it was noted that when Melville wanted to escape his life he would journey to Hawthorne and spend several consecutive days as his guest. “ Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodical knocking people’s hats off-then, I account it high time to get to the sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical Cato\* throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship.” (Melville, 27) Immediately in the opening of the novel, we are given something to determine; is he being sarcastic or serious when he, like many who struggle with their own sexuality on the basis of “strong moral principles” regards suicide and if so, who is *he*? Is the ship a metaphor for Hawthorne’s home? If readers remove the concept of the Aestheticism

Movement altogether, the answer is less vague, the answer is simply Melville is Ishmael, but authors of the aestheticism movement would argue that there is no actual person the novel is based on, it is simply a work to be appreciated for the language and style. However that doesn't answer the question of what it is that Ishmael finds so dissatisfying and why is it something that can only be remedied with a position on a ship that is out to sea for months on end with only men on board? Why is Melville giving his readers a character in immediate search of something that would make his life less boring and worthy of change? How much of this is an expression of Melville's sentiments toward Hawthorne?

Through his use of sensual language and character pairing and formation, readers are able to see connections between the culture in which they reside and the one in which he creates aboard his infamous whaling ship, *The Pequod*. This becomes the first clear indication that the notion of aestheticism is fundamentally inconsistent in the novel. If you identify as a queer reader, you are more easily capable of identifying the homoeroticism or queerness of this text beyond the confines of the word's origin because you are applying a personal bias as mentioned earlier. The text is "queer" because there are two men who are inhibiting their same-sex desires, yet it is not yet clear where on the spectrum of aestheticism it lives. There is an "other" to the perception of queer in this work that falls more in alignment with the adoption of it as English slang for homosexuality that was introduced in the early 1900's than an inclusive term. This "other" could be what Melville and Ishmael are feeling when they get the urge to escape the life they have on land to another, far away on a whaling ship. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville writes to challenge the social stereotypes of homosexuality while simultaneously challenging what love and intimacy looked like for the 19th century reader. He does this throughout various scenes beginning with the one in which Ishmael is forced to sleep in a bed with then stranger,

Queequeg. Here, Melville deliberately writes a scene where the Spouter Inn does not have any more beds and Ishmael's only option is to sleep in a bed with a man he has never met before, but instead of it being written very matter of fact, Melville emphasizes Ishmael's fears, feelings of discomfort, a mockery of the Christian religious affirmation- a common practice of his readers at the time, followed by expressions of affection. He begins by stating that "no man prefers to sleep two in a bed" (Melville, 49) and notably not "no man prefers to share a bed with another man," followed by, "What's all this fuss I have been making about, though I to myself-the man's a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me as I have to be afraid of him. Better to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian....But I don't fancy having a man smoking in bed with me. It's dangerous. Besides, I ain't insured...I turned in, and never slept better in my life." (Melville, 51) There is an awareness that develops here for Ishmael and a message that is being delivered through him. By writing Ishmael as first afraid, rationalizing his fear and ultimately becoming comfortable enough to fall asleep in a way that allows him the experience of never having "slept better" in his life, Melville is conveying the homosexual trope of a same-sex experience without the actual sex. The following morning Melville keeps Ishmael in the arms of Queequeg and writes the scene in a way that is indicative of an intimacy shared between lovers, one under the protective grasp of the other, the way a husband might hold his wife as they lay in their marital bed, "Upon waking next morning about daylight, I found Queequeg's arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife...it was only by the sense of weight and pressure that I could tell that Queequeg was hugging me...My sensations were strange...For though I tried to move his arm-unlock his bridegroom clasp-yet, sleeping as he was, he still hugged me tightly, as though naught but death should part us twain." (Melville, 52-54)

There is no doubt that the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg extend beyond male friendship and brotherhood. He broadens this scope to remind readers who up until that point may not have known of such romanticism, that such exist. He (Melville) refers to Queequeg as a “creature in transition state-neither caterpillar nor butterfly,” (Melville, 55) an expression of sentiment that one may feel for themselves in a confused transition state of their own sexual awareness from straight, to confused, to homosexual, possibly what Melville may have been experiencing himself. This trope is yet another common theme for anyone who has ever had to grow into an acceptance of their own sexuality and an attack on hetero-normative superiority, showing that the American White Man’s superiority complex is not without fault and that intimacy can exist between members of the same sex, even without the confirmation of intercourse because romantic affection is not limited to husband and wife or man and woman only. Like Melville and Hawthorne’s own relationship, Melville establishes a common connection for Queequeg and Ishmael, the experience of life on the ship, while for Melville and Hawthorne, the connection was their writing. He makes it a conscious effort to hyperbolize the homophobic ignorance of his readers, with lines such as “ignorance is the parent of fear” (Melville, 48) when regarding Ishmael’s first encounter with Queequeg, noting that Ishmael whose sexual orientation is not affirmed, “might be cherishing unwarrantable prejudices against this unknown harpooner,” (Melville, 43) and behaving similarly to the prejudices that heterosexual individuals of the 19th Century may hold for those who did not identify as exclusively heterosexual. Melville makes his point without blatantly isolating what would have been his core demographic through insults that could have read more aggressively. For example instead of writing that “ignorance is the parent of fear,” Melville could have chosen to write that being afraid of something that isn’t worthy of fear, makes you ignorant. At times, I believe that

Melville expresses his own personal beliefs and desires about homosexuality through experimental style writing and forms a romantic, sexually subtle connection between Ishmael and Queequeg because Melville himself lives in a world that doesn't entirely allow him the freedom to express such a desire for himself. Providing readers with lines as the aforementioned and then scenes of sensual intimacy, such as the one in chapter three where Ishmael gives a detailed account of watching Queequeg underdress before getting into bed with him, is just one of many in which conclusively yields this work as queer. The way in which Melville chooses to write about the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg is his way of stating that attraction between members of the same gender exist, even if most select not to give it a platform or acknowledgement and in this particular scene, we are introduced to an Ishmael that at times recognizes his biases and addresses them with clarity and rationale, something that is omitted in homophobia. This can also be interpreted as a way in which Melville may see many of his readers of the time, thus using Ishmael to relay the message to those readers that holding firm to prejudices and biases are not only detrimental to oneself, after all it almost left Ishmael without a room to sleep in on a cold winters night, but also to the collective society as a whole. These moments throughout the text in which Melville gives Ishmael the ability to apply an empirical rationale, backed by logic are seemingly progressive for a 19th Century novel and a delicate introduction to the complexity of understanding sexuality. Melville writes, "all these queer proceedings increased my uncomfortableness, and seeing him now exhibiting strong symptoms of concluding his business operations, and jumping into bed with me, I thought, it was high time, now or never before the light was put out, to break the spell in which I had so long been bound." (Melville, 49)

While interpretation is often subjective, the set of circumstances that Melville creates for

Ishmael are done so with the intention of making the reader feel as though it is relatable. That is not to say that relatable is to mean exactness or accuracy of circumstance, but rather that it can be Melville himself that relates to the couple he creates because of the desires he has. *Moby-Dick* can be, for Melville a fantasy novel in which he explores his fantasy through a story because he may never experience the affection of his desire in real life. This concept connects the author and the reader, making the space between the work and the artist once again limited. For queer readers, Ishmael's recognition of his own discomfort with regards to sharing a bed with a male for what is assumed to be the first time is not an uncommon reality for many individuals who became aware of their same-sex attraction for the first time. When Ishmael regards his fear for his fellow bedmate, this sentiment is similar to one in which a queer reader felt during their first moments of intimacy with another. These become central to the many themes of homosexuality Melville is exploiting. His use of language and the selection of words are strategic and purposeful methods to encode the stereotypes of the 19th century and exploit a cultural value that is unsubstantiated. In these moments, there is a cultural exchange happening between Melville and his readers. He is using fear and discomfort that may appeal to them, with regards to same-sex relationships, and creating scenes that may seem to justify their prejudices, but then strategically turns it around to challenge them (i.e. Ishmael refuses to share a bed with a stranger, later decides to do so, jumps out of bed when he sees Queequeg for the first time, then rationalizes with himself and gives in). As the novel progresses, the relationship between Queequeg and Ishmael becomes more intimate. When Melville writes Ishmael as embracing his feelings for Queequeg, Ishmael, not dissimilar to queer individuals, becomes the "other" and readers, through their own trans-generational homophobia, will be given a brief moment to sympathize before Melville challenges them. What is being formulated through such is the

ability, as Greenblatt writes in his article, for readers to push “beyond the boundaries of the text, to establish links between the text and values, institutions, and practices elsewhere in the culture.” (Greenblatt, 226-227) I read this as Melville’s simultaneously asking the question to his readers “why is the feeling of desire for another man culturally unacceptable?” and then answering it by exploiting the readers ignorance.

The suggestions of the expressions of homoeroticism as linked to Melville and expressed through his work, are just that, suggestions, but ones that are not just evidenced by text but Melville himself. It is Melville’s own knowledge of religion that provided him the name Ishmael—a name that the Bible suggest as an outsider, and one that is purposefully given, it is Melville’s experience on ships that help him detail the experience for his readers and it is speculation of Melville’s own sexuality that provide the foundation for the application of homoeroticism to the text.

### **Same-Sex “Love” Letters To Hawthorne**

As analytical readers, we must conclude for ourselves if Melville is writing of a relationship between two men in his epic, to fulfill a fantasy in literary art that cannot be fulfilled in actual practice? Why purposely write a text in which the two characters that display private affection are notably absent of a wife and children, when doing so could easily anchor their sexual identities? Why write such explicit affection if the relationship between Queequeg and Ishmael does not change the trajectory of a story about Whaling? Are Herman Melville’s personal letters to Nathaniel Hawthorne further evidence of his homosexual desires? If so, how much of Melville’s obsession with Hawthorne is reflected in Ishmael and Queequeg’s relationship? In an essay by Rico Norton, entitled “Herman Melville,” Norton writes of Melville’s “closet

attachment” for Hawthorne and claims that Melville “felt for Hawthorne a powerful love that excluded consideration of both their wives” (Norton, 1) He goes on to claim that the letters Melville writes in response to Hawthorne, prove without room for doubt that the epic’s writer “cast himself as the woman to Hawthorne’s man,” quoting specifically one of the letter written by him to prove his point, “a man of a deep and noble nature had seized me in this seclusion...The soft ravishments of the man spun round about in a web of dreams...But already I feel that Hawthorne had dropped verminous seeds into my soul. He expands and depend down, the more I contemplate him and further and further shoots his strong New England roots ingot the hot soil in my Southern soul.”

In this letter he regards his peer as “a man of deep and noble nature” in the same rationale that Ishmael used to comfort his worries of Queequeg. The same sensual language is used and the poetic sense of romance is intensely scattered throughout, making it unquestionable the feelings that Melville had for Hawthorne. If one were to remove every word that would identify the recipient of these letters as a man, the conclusion of these as “love letters” would be undeniable, because the content of it is strong. It is only the insertion of the recipient as male that helps to substantiate the theory that Melville did indeed have homoerotic desires and that such desires were written in *Moby-Dick* as a reflection of it. In another letter, published by Yale University Press in 1960 from the collection of a book of letters entitled, *The Letters of Herman Melville*, Melville writes a letter that reads as an ode to Hawthorne with Shakespearean like rhythm:

Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my  
flagon of life? And when I put it to my lips-lo, they are yours and not mine.  
I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper,  
and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity

of feeling. Now, sympathizing with the paper, my angel turns  
over another page. You did not care a penny for the book.  
But now and then as you read, you understood the pervading  
Thought that impelled the book-and that you praised. Was it not so?  
You were archangel enough to despise the imperfect body,  
and embrace the soul. Once you hugged the ugly  
Socrates because you saw the flame in the mouth, and  
Heard the rushing of the demon, -the familiar, - and if the  
World was entirely made up of Magians, I'll tell you what I  
should do. I should have a paper-mill established at one end of  
the house, and so have an endless riband of foolscap rolling in upon  
my desk; and upon that endless riband I should write a  
thousand-a million-a billion thoughts, all under the form of a letter to  
you. The divine magnet is on you, and my magnet responds.  
Which is the biggest? A foolish question-**they are one.**

In every letter exchanged, Melville seems to submit himself to Hawthorne. In *Moby-Dick* this style of submission comes in the form of Ishmael giving into Queequeg and forcing himself to understand and allow himself to become close to a person he was conditioned to fear, but in Melville's actual life it comes in the form of poetic letters in which he defines himself as the "demon" that only Hawthorne can hunt and save. He is the demon because of his recognized homosexual desires, as Ishmael's own homoeroticism made him upon first encounter with Queequeg, and Hawthorne is the only thing that can save his soul of it, in the way Queequeg's coffin saved Ishmael from his own death. He describes himself and Hawthorne as two magnets,

because magnets have between them an uncontrollable force that drives them closer together, he questions which of the two of them has the biggest magnet, possibly questioning who has the stronger attraction, but ultimately ends by stating it doesn't matter because ultimately they become one. "You were the archangel to despise the imperfect body, and embrace the soul," as Ishmael did when he saw all of Queequeg's tattoos and imperfections, he looked past the body and into the soul. Herman Melville writes letter to Hawthorne that can read as sentiments of Ishmael's growing intimacy toward Queequeg, that can read as Ishmael is Melville because in both cases, homosexual desire is present.

### Chapter 3 Towards A Queer Aesthetic: Biographical Readings, Walt Whitman

#### The Man Behind Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman was a man of many words, a man who used language to develop a work that would read as a journal into the life, mind and heart of a great American poet and his experiences. As I write of Whitman I am reminded that his experiences are my own because his themes are universal, and whenever you read his poetry, you immediately become engaged in a conversation with a man who speaks to you through a style of language that transcends time. The development of his poetic voice is a voice of challenges, affection, sexuality, philosophy and politics. He is the socially sensitive poet of urgency, the democrat, the abolitionist, the lover, never and the hero and always the common man- Walt Whitman is all of us. The various traits of Whitman that are so ingrained in his poetry, and the way he records his observations and encounters, can easily make the 2017 reader feel as though they are observing an 1830's world through the same visionary lens, and through the same emotional state. Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is not only the reason why Whitman became the second most photographed writer of the Nineteenth Century, putting him on the literary map among other well known writers, but a collection of responses to an America that was far from his own idealized visions. He used *Leaves of Grass* as a way to communicate his experiences and express his criticism. Through each edition, Whitman remained conscious of the world around him and spoke to his audience in a way that urged them to be equally aware. In total there were four edits of *Leaves of Grass* over the course of 36 years, each incorporating new pieces of poetry when published or reworking one of the original twelve and ultimately resulting in over 400 pieces. However, by the time the final or "Death-Bed" edition was published, Whitman's reputation had remained such that the

collection, at times considered controversial, was still provoking extreme reactions. As Ph.D. Karen Carbineer writes in her introduction to *Leaves of Grass: Walt Whitman and the Promise of America*, “few writers have provoked such extreme reactions as Walt Whitman- America’s poet, but also America’s gay, politically radical, socially liberal spokesperson. And few books of poetry have had so controversial a history as Whitman’s brash, erotically charged *Leaves of Grass*.” (Karbniener, xvii) This gift that Whitman has provided to the literary community has been absorbed in the mainstream media and used as reference in major motion pictures such as *The Notebook* (2004) or *Love Story* (1970) proving that a stronger appreciation for the collection of poetry has emerged. However, today, more than 150 years later the things that have categorized the work as controversial is something that is still being diagnosed by scholars and in order to properly do so, one has to go back to the 1800’s world of Whitman. If language remains the ability to acquire complex systems of communication, a way to relay sentiments and invite another into your thoughts, then the written work for Whitman is the vehicle used to transport that communication. If the self-published, self-identified poet who, among his fellow citizens is considered controversial, it becomes the responsibility of the reader to determine why such is the case; is it the content of the work, is it the writer, or is it a marriage of both?

### **Leaves of Grass and The Inspiration Behind It**

When Walt Whitman’s first published *Leaves of Grass* in July of 1855, it was a volatile time in American history. It became a time when southern states were debating leaving the union because tensions between them and Northern abolitionist were so high that it created the recipe for a Civil War. This and other political unrest, served as the inspiration behind politically fueled poems such as “For You O Democracy” and if the connection between Whitman’s

political perspectives and his poetry can be made, then so can the very “thing” that made the work so very controversial, his sexuality. Through biographical readings it is obvious that what became the controversy was the sexual, more specifically homosexual content of several of his poems and the relationships he had with the Frederick Vaughn, as the inspiration behind them. Upon initial release, it had not received much notice, but this did not discourage Whitman. The original collection of twelve poems were not titled, the book did not bare his name, only an image of him and the 795 copies were typeset and paid for by Whitman himself. All of Whitman’s efforts and his belief in the pocket sized book was not enough to generate an interest that would result in sales, but more importantly to Whitman, it did not reach the masses and prevent a war, as he had hoped one book, his book would do. Any other writer may have conceded and marked this as a defeat, but Whitman seemed challenged by it and soon began working on a second edition. The constant revision is the only rhythm applied to the work, as the poems themselves do not follow any traditional patterns, they do not rhyme, they vary in length and did not categorically fit into any particular genre of poetry, nor did they abide by any rules of content, limiting the topics he would select to write about. Later this would become known as Whitman’s style and he became credited as the father of free verse. After failing to generate interest, Whitman anonymously began writing reviews of the collection that would be printed in papers to help drive interest in the book, but this effort too, had failed.

Walt Whitman lacked the pedigree that many of his fellow writers had. He was not educated through university studies or come from a family that required of him to carry the tradition of their ancestry, and it was this lack of pedigree that essentially offered Whitman the ability to choose who he would become and how he would become it. It was this very lack of confinement that enable him to find his voice and then use that voice to connect himself to his

readers through topics that were common experiences. As a young New York Journalist, Whitman was sometimes considered arrogant, because he was thought of as someone who was in constant opposition with the prevailing sentiments of society, another theme that often presents itself in his work. He was said to have picked fights with editors of major publications because he was equally as radical in his selection of topics to cover, as he was in his poetry. He was a journalist who observed the society he lived in and at his discontent would confront issues on Women's Rights, Capital Punishment, Slavery, Property Rights, etc. and place his frustrations in his poetry. His forward thinking and politically progressive attitude is a contributing factor as to why Whitman was fired from six newspapers within a four year time span; The Statesman, The Mirror, The Toddler, The Sun, The Democrat and The Sun. Although he was unable to maintain employment, the habits of the observing journalist did not leave him at their dismissal. In fact, the same consciousness for humanity that he had when he journaled their progress is the same he used to remain in contact with humanity as a poet. With pen and notebook always in hand, Whitman would ride up and down the New York City Streets on the Omnibuses, speak to drivers and befriend strangers. He became a witness to everything including the ships crowding the busy waterfronts and find beauty in all that the rising city had to offer. Unlike other genteel writers, who disliked the growing population of New York, Whitman found beauty in the chaos. He continued to observe all that was around him, slow down its pace and capture it in his writings. Whitman was harboring an urban affection before urban affection emerged and as affectionately as he spoke of Brooklyn and New York City, so did he of the human body. In every single poem, Whitman incorporated everything he felt, not excluding his sexuality. Because *Leaves of Grass* emerged from observations, simplistic language, and style it is not difficult to conclude that the very thing that deemed it controversial is the way in which

Whitman incorporates his same-sex sexual experiences into his poems. He writes, “I am the poet of the body and I am the poet of the soul” (Whitman, *Song of Myself*) and in January 1860, at the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, when Whitman was looking for a publishing company willing to take on the collection of poems, Thayer and Eldridge wrote to say that they wanted to be the company to do so. The significance of this offer was that Whitman had an offer from a publishing house after other publishing houses had dropped him because of the “grotesque” content. What was yet unknown to them was that in this Edition, Whitman had added two new “clusters,” that is categorical chapters that outlined the topics of the poems in that cluster. The first cluster was entitled “Children of Adam,” and this cluster, as the title would suggest had much to do with a more heterosexual love and topics of procreation. The second cluster, is entitled “Calamus” and radiated a very different sensation. It is within this cluster that Whitman worked in his romantic relationships that made him one of the first American poets to openly discuss his same-sex interest in a way that did not regard this type of love as pejorative. In a discussion with friend and fellow writer Ralph Emerson, Whitman was advised by him to “tone down” the sexually charged passages, to which Whitman didn’t even consider, but responded that “the dirtiest book in all of the world is the expurgated” (Karbiener, xi) Of all the clusters, it is this where we see a man portraying an honest image of himself with a nakedness and sexuality that is raw, fluid and celebrated, without being pornographic; Calamus is linguistically erotic and beautifully formed.

### **The Collection in Calamus and Frederick Vaughn**

Much in the same way that we can chronicle Whitman’s earlier life events through his work, we can do the same in the development of his sexuality, concluding that the collections

within Calamus is as much a reflection of his relationship with Fred Vaughn and Peter Doyle as “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is about his daily journey home on the Brooklyn Ferry. In 1859, as he is preparing his third edition, Whitman begins to frequent an underground New York bohemian salon called Pfaff and it is said that this is where he met and eventually began his romantic relationship with a young Irishman named Fred Vaughn. Because Pfaff was a club that was commonly known as a place where men would go in search of other men, a type of 1850’s version of Studio 54, the intention of the individuals who would frequent such a place was not indefinite and scholars can conclude with a great deal of certainty that Whitman’s intentions fell along similar lines as that of his queer counterparts. Pfaff’s was a place with a theatrical atmosphere, where cross dressers and other “edgier” individuals would go without fear of judgment. It is also the place that Whitman may have become more aware of himself, as it was known that it was around this time that he also began to wear bloomers, the first pants designed for women, though tucking them into his boots. Although by today’s standards one’s style of dress does not correlate directly to their sexuality, such was not the case in the 1800’s. A man who would wear women's clothing was not a man whose sexuality remained uncertain for long.

There is little known of Fred Vaughn, no images have been taken of him and he did not contribute anything of significance that would place his name alongside some great historical accomplishment. In fact, the only reason why he is vaguely carved into literary history is because of his relationship with Whitman, of which we are grateful for because without it, “Calamus” may have otherwise not existed. Within this cluster Whitman exposes the intimacy that exist between lovers and the heart break and confusion that it created by its demise and does so in an obvious way. When Whitman uses the term “you,” he really means YOU, the reader, and when Whitman used “I” he means to regard himself, and none is the difference when he uses

the male or female pronoun. In a poem, that I believed was particularly inspired by his same-sex relationship, entitled “When I Heard At The Close Of The Day,” Whitman discusses going through the motions of an ordinary day, and while there are accomplishments and occasions that should excite him throughout, none do, that is until he hears that the day will bring to him the presence of his male lover:

When I heard at the close of the day how my name had been  
receiv'd with plaudits in the capitol, still it was not a happy  
night for me that follow'd,  
And else when I caroused, or when my plans were accomplish'd,  
still I was not happy,  
But the day when I rose at dawn from bed of perfect health,  
refresh'd, singing, inhaling the ripe breath of autumn,  
When I saw the full moon in the west grow pale and disappear  
in the morning light,  
When I wander'd alone over the beach, and undressing bathed,  
laughing with the cool water, and saw the sun rise,  
And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way  
coming, O then I was happy,  
O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food  
nourish'd me more, and the beautiful day pass'd well,  
And the next came with equal joy, and with the next at evening  
came my friend,  
And that night when all was still I heard the waters roll slowly  
continually up the shores,  
I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me  
whispering to congratulate me,  
For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover  
in the cool night,  
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined  
toward me,  
And his arm lay lightly around my breast-and that night I was  
happy.

With lines such as “and when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on *his* way  
Coming, O then I was happy,” Whitman is explicit in what and who he is talking about and  
because it is published around the time of his relationship with Vaughn, it is a fair assumption to  
conclude that he is the man whose “arm lay lightly around my breast” as they slept under the

same covers. Eventually Vaughn decides that he wants a life with a wife and children and moves out of the attic apartment he and Whitman shared.

In another piece within the same chapter, entitled “To A Stranger,” Whitman speaks of the possibility of two lovers or intimate strangers. This becomes the first piece where his sexuality is expressed as something fluid, rather than completely fixed. Toward the end of Whitman’s life when questioned about his sexuality, Whitman would respond that he was not homosexual, and that he had fathered several illegitimate children-to this day that has not been proven as factual. Poems such as the one referenced below, where the gender is undefined and sexuality remains ambiguous establishes a closer connection between the reader and Whitman because the “he I was seeking or she I was seeking,” becomes anyone without the boundary of approved sexual identity.

Passing stranger! You do not know how longingly I look upon  
you,  
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes to  
me as of a dream,)  
I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,  
All is recall’s as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste,  
matured,  
You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me,  
I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not  
yours only, nor left my body mine only,  
You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass, you  
take of my beard, breast, hands, in return,  
I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone or  
wake at night alone,  
I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again,  
I am to see to it that I don’t lose you. (To A Stranger)

### ***Leaves of Grass, The “Death Bed” Edition***

By the time Whitman passes away in 1892, there were at least three known relationships that he was in with men and while there is a small portion of a collection of works that represents

individuality and independence both socially and sexually, they are significant in understanding not just Whitman, the man behind the poems, but the actual poems themselves. *Leaves of Grass* became a work known for “questioning the accepted or unquestionable, pushing every known limit or boundary” and a book about all Americans that could have been written by any American” (hence the absence of an authors name upon initial release) (Karbiener, XLII) While it did not, in the lifetime of Whitman, receive the credit and recognition it deserved, it will remain one of the best contributions to the literary world that has ere existed.

## Conclusion

Within the works of all three authors, beauty is not just a theme or style but an inspiration and through the application of a biographical lens, their individual interest in same-sex love and beauty isn't just connected but a necessary ingredient and becomes the only common element that connects these three. In the introductory paragraphs I imposed several questions that would need to be answered in order to adequately expose the authors two main interest that are beauty and same-sex/queer love. Below, I will reintroduce those questions and determine if the answer provided through this thesis is enough to support having exposed the queer aesthetic and the author's interest in beauty. The questions were as follows:

1. Could it be that art could exist with the flexibility of being both beautiful and meaningful?

Answer: While beauty is subjective and each of the authors used, provide their own definitions and value of it, all of their art is in some way connected to their sentiments, even when they, themselves do not think so. Oscar Wilde for example does not think that art should be considered for anything more than it's aesthetic value and yet in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* it's this emphasis on beauty alone that leads to the demise of the main character, Dorian. Through such, Wilde is providing a lesson on the very dangerous of a superficial admiration of beauty and using a beautifully written book to do so. Herman Melville writes in such a poetic and visually detailed way, that the romanticized same-sex love that undertones the work is overshadowed by its beautiful language, while Walt Whitman, who similar in his use romanticized language, is the more explicit in his same-sex love affairs, making both of their work a message of beauty

and love as simply love. Additionally, in all of the examples provided, the authors developed work in a way that is flexible enough to live on the spectrum of beauty and meaning, while expressing their interest in same-sex love.

2. Could the works of Herman Melville and Walt Whitman convey messages that reveal sexuality, while being written stylistically beautiful, perhaps even as beautiful as that of Oscar Wilde?

Answer: Each of the characters' obsession with Dorian Gray's beauty, combined with the fact that they are all men as well as the known facts about Oscar Wilde's personal life, Walt Whitman's poems in *Calamus* that summarize his affection for his male lover and Herman Melville's romantic letters to Hawthorne, combined with the expression of love between his two male characters are all examples that uphold that each author's sexuality is revealed. The answer to the work being stylistically beautiful has been addressed in the previous Q&A.

3. Does Oscar Wilde, as a proponent of The Aestheticism Movement, fall victim to his own contradictions because while it is aesthetically pleasing, it is also reflective of his personal life, thereby offering his readers an insight to his same-sex desires and revealing truths of his own?

Answer: Oscar Wilde was a man concerned with beauty and beauty in both the physical and figurative are expressed throughout his work. As a proponent of The Aestheticism Movement Wilde is promoting the idea of "art for art's sake" but does not do a well

enough job of separating himself from his creations, therefore making him victim to the contradictions of aestheticism.

4. Could it be possible that the space that exist between the work and the artist, as mentioned earlier, clearly express a queer aesthetic, as well as the authors own preoccupation with beauty?

Answer: They are the work they create, so much so that as mentioned early in this thesis, it can become impossible to separate the two. To summarize, each of the three authors are interested in beauty and same-sex love, themes that are constant in their work and their personal lives, leaving readers to apply the biographical lens in order to connect the life to the artist.

There is no one particular way to write about beauty as beauty is a subjective topic and operates on a spectrum, such is also the case for sexuality.

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