

## ANALYSIS

“Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” (1859)

Walt Whitman

(1819-1892)

“At night, a boy steals out from his Long Island farm home to listen to the calls of a pair of mockingbirds by the sea. One night the female is gone, and her mate, from the nest to which she will never return, issues his plaintive call. The solitary singer becomes a symbol of the poem’s daemon, and his mysterious aria is interpreted by the whispering current of the sea as ‘Death.’ The sea, symbol of the spiritual world, thus shows the boy that physical love is spiritualized through death for poetic creation, and the poet says, ‘my own songs awaked from that hour.’”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 563

“‘Out of the Cradle’ is one of Whitman’s most considerable poems. Its pre-eminence is due in part to the poem’s well-known musical form—its intermixture of recitative, aria and chorus—which allows the poet an unwonted variability of tonal effects. It is equally due to the closely packed metaphors...The poem is to be a revisiting of childhood scenes and experiences, and it is to be a search for the origin of the poet’s song, of the ‘myriad thence-arous’d words.’ The poem is not to be an elegy or a dirge for a lost friend, at least so far as we can learn from the overture....”

It is possible, as has often been suggested, that this poem was written in response to some bereavement in Whitman’s life which may have taken place in or just before 1859. The ‘mock bird’ calls pathetically for its lost mate and, as the poet says, ‘pour’d forth the meanings which I of all men know’... The main subject is the ‘word’ and ‘Out of the Cradle’ is one of those works, like Yeats’ ‘Byzantium’ and certain Books of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, which has to be read as a poem about the origin of poetry.

It must be observed, however, that Whitman’s procedure, like Wordsworth’s, is naturalistic, since it traces the roots of imagination to the experiences and psychic dispositions of the poet himself. He does not speak metaphysically of the transformation of experience into symbol as does Yeats. The accent is entirely original.... In ‘Out of the Cradle’ Whitman represents the demonic or automatic impulse of poetry by means of the solitary bird—‘Demon or bird,’ he is called. His song is a dirge for the lost mate. But this is merely the literal or narrative occasion of the poem. It is a type of a more general bereavement, a meaning suggested by the image of the maternal sea, the ‘savage old mother’ who is at once so immeasurably attractive and so terrible, who manifests herself as ‘white arms out in the breakers tirelessly tossing,’ and as ‘some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet garments, bending aside’ and incessantly whispering with a ‘drown’d secret hissing’ the ‘low and delicious word death.’

The idea of loss is thus converted from water to mother and then generalized by way of the symbolic connection of mother and sea as well as by the poet’s memories of his early love and fear of the sea, to include that inconceivable but sublime sense of loss incident to the emergence of life itself from the all-encompassing waters. In this manner Whitman grasps at the most poignant center of experience, and it is characteristic of him that where other poets would be likely to derive the meaning of life and the origin of imagination from God (or God manifested in nature) and man’s relation to Him, Whitman, like Emily Dickinson, derives them from death. Implicit in the work of both poets there is the recognition that death may be taken as the ultimate metaphor of democracy, that only this metaphor can perfectly express the principle of equality; and what was a tragi-comic conceit for Emily Dickinson in those of her poems which play with this idea was for Whitman the lyric mode in which he made his most profound utterances....

Whitman in ‘Out of the Cradle’ is trying to discover where, for him, the poetic power originates. It begins with the first full childhood sense of having irrevocably lost some marvelous and beautiful but also

dangerous and threatening person or state of being. It begins with the sense that all life is a mode of death, and flowers with the perception that all imagination is a mode of our sense of death.... It all makes an amazingly beautiful composition. If one has any reservations about the poem, they arise from a sense that rich as the interweaving of melodic lines is and luxurious as the imagery is there is sometimes an effect of turgidity. The poem adequately exists, at any rate, in its simplest terms—the verbal music, the pathos of the bird, the lilac scent, the boy on the beach, the white arms in the breakers, the lyric, or aria, passages that achieve so much unwonted intensity by being related to but free of the dark subsoil of the poem.”

Richard Chase  
*Walt Whitman Reconsidered*  
(William Sloane 1955) 120-24

“He establishes his relation to cosmic process by developing in an argument a series of carefully defined, clearly symbolic, ego-centered relationships. In ‘Out of the Cradle,’ the adult makes a poem which is his means to understanding a childhood experience. The firm control in the poem (it is extraordinary here, especially for Whitman, but nonetheless it is not always a sign of the highest achievement of his poetry) is managed through the manipulation of this double point-of-view. Initially we are told of the range of experiences out of which this poem comes: the song of the bird, the place, the time, the memory of the dead brother, and the as yet unnamed ‘word stronger and more delicious than any’ which gathers unto itself the meaning of the whole; this is an introductory overview. Then we are presented with the story of the birds, the loss of the beloved, and the song sung to objectify this loss and perhaps make it bearable. Always we are aware that the poet-as-adult, the creative center of the poem, seeks the ‘word stronger and more delicious’ which will be his means finally to understand his reminiscences....

The points of view are hypnotically merged. In the ‘boy’s soul’ the poet discovers a child’s potentiality for adult knowledge. Having discovered the potentiality, he can work toward its realization, confident that the one will follow automatically from the other. He asks for ‘the clew,’ ‘The word final, superior to all,’ which will once and for all precipitate the meaning he has willed himself to create. And it comes as he recalls that time when the sea, manifesting the rhythm of life and death itself... ‘Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word death...’ The merging of the points of view occurs as not only past and present, child and adult, but subject and object...are fused. The poet now knows the word, because he has contrived a situation in which he can control its use, having first re-created himself as both boy and man, and having then fused the two phases of his life into one.

If the end of the poem is to understand cosmic process as a continual loss of the beloved through death and a consequent gain of a positive sense of life-in-death and death-in-life—if this is the end of the poem, nonetheless it is an end gained through a creative act, an assertion of life in the face of death. This act is that of the very person, the poet, whom death would deprive of all that is beloved in life.... ‘Out of the Cradle’ is typical of those poems of Whitman’s we tend most to admire, ‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d’ being the other chief example. Most of all it is structurally typical of such poems. The structure is one of relationship, in which the poet, through his control of two or more points of view, manages to pull his world together. Yet the relationship is of a particularly limited sort. The points of view are always aspects of the poet’s creative self and are manipulated as such; they are in no sense dramatic, much less novelistic. Whitman has little or none of that final sense of ‘otherness’ which makes for major fiction. In the end his poems always return to him as maker.”

Roy Harvey Pearce  
*The Continuity of American Poetry*  
(Princeton 1961) 170-72

“Many critics find the poem to have at least three levels: a memory of childhood, a mature expression of love, and a philosophical discovery. The poem describes how a child, walking the beach on Long Island, hears the call of a bird, a ‘visitor from Alabama,’ mourning his lost mate, and ends with the poet being given the ‘word out of the sea,’ the word ‘death.’ The moment of the revelation from the sea becomes a turning- or maturation-point for the poet, who can never again be the child he once was, having come to an understanding of the real meaning and beauty of death. The poem is highly melodious, and is considered

one of Whitman's best. It is thought to have provided the inspiration for the brief scenes of the cradle in D. W. Griffith's classic film, *Intolerance* (1916)."

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962) 841

"'Out of the Cradle' is a private love poem, directed not outward but inward, in on itself and the poet's soul. 'Out of the Cradle' is also heavily symbolic, removed from the immediacy of 'Ferry' by projection backward in time to a boy's experience, and outward in space to the birds' love drama. It is a 'reminiscence' of the crucial semimystic experience which made a poet out of a boy and gave him a central theme. The whole effect of the opening lines is by their very frenzy to sweep the reader into the experience of overwhelming memory that takes possession of the poet and carries him back—'by these tears a little boy again, / Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves.'

The 'curious boy.../ Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating,' first hears the love carol of the happy birds as they bask in their nest together: 'Shine! Shine! Shine! / Pour down your warmth, great sun!' But after the she-bird disappears, 'maybe killed,' the he-bird begins his song of longing, a sad carol of the night: 'Carols of lonesome love! Death's carols! / Carols under that lagging, yellow, warning moon!' The listening boy becomes ecstatic as his ears 'swiftly deposit' the 'aria's meaning' into his soul, and a colloquy begins among a 'trio'—the bird, the sea, and the boy's soul—a colloquy directed at the boy as 'outsetting bard.'

In the rhapsodic soliloquy of his soul, the boy recognizes the origin of poetic inspiration—'A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die'—and makes a direct identification with the bird: 'O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me.' Although the boy's soul takes as its own the theme of 'unsatisfied love,' the 'sweet hell within,' there seems still to be something lacking: 'O give me the clew! (it lurks in the night here somewhere).' In answer to this plea, the sea answers from its 'liquid rims and wet sands,' 'hissing melodious' the 'delicious word death.' The boy's ecstasy reaches its climax: 'Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me / softly all over, / Death, death, death, death, death.'

The boy 'fuses' the song of his 'dusky demon and brother,' the 'thousand responsive songs' of his soul, and adds to them 'the key, the word up from the waves.' As the outsetting bard he has discovered the 'clew' to his themes, given him by the sea—'(Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet garments, bending aside,) / The sea whisper'd me.' The poem thus ends, as it begins (Out of the cradle endlessly rocking'), with the sea represented by the metaphor of birth: the 'delicious word,' as the boy has intuitively apprehended in the ecstasy of his soul, is the 'clew' to life, the 'key' to rebirth and eternity. 'Lonesome love' is transfigured by it into imaginative and spiritual fulfillment."

James E. Miller, Jr.  
*Walt Whitman*  
(Twayne/College and University Press 1962) 98-100

Michael Hollister (2015)