

Showing Their Condition: Walt Whitman and Ethical Aesthetics in “The Sun-Down Papers”



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By 1836, the seventeen-year-old journeyman printer Walter Whitman, Jr., had set type for three newspapers, visited circulation libraries in New York City, read Sir Walter Scott and James Fennimore Cooper, attended the theater, loved Shakespeare (especially *Richard III*),¹ and heard public lecturers like Frances Wright, the Scottish emancipationist and women’s rights activist. Two years earlier, his first signed article had appeared in the *New York Mirror*.² He still remembered this publication fifty years later: “I used to watch for the big, fat, red-faced, slow-moving, very old English carrier who distributed the ‘Mirror’ in Brooklyn; and when I got one, opening and cutting the leaves with trembling fingers. How it made my heart double-beat to see *my piece* on the pretty white paper, in nice type.”³ Unfortunately for the journeyman, a fire destroyed much of the publishing district on August 12, 1836, and put master printers out of work. Thereafter, Whitman moved back with his family who had already returned to rural Long Island because of his father’s inability to find steady work in the city. This early setback marked the end of Walt Whitman’s piecemeal education; thereafter he mostly supported himself.

Whitman’s education in the print shop taught him to move easily among the political and ideological debates of his era.⁴ He knew and worked among artisan republicans, conservative Whigs, Tammany Hall Democrats, anti-Tammany Loco-focos, National Trades Unionists, and, at least vicariously, reformers as diverse as the labor radical, Thomas Skidmore, the Whig politician, Daniel Webster, and the Quaker preacher, Elias Hicks. This jumble of contradictory influences mixed easily in him. He apprenticed with a Quaker and a Whig and identified with Loco-foco Democrats.⁵ Following his mother’s religion, he

¹It was probably during these years that Whitman saw Junius Booth, father of John Wilkes Booth, play the part of Richard.

²The piece, entitled “The Olden Time,” is a retrospective on the growth of New York City. It can be found in *Collected Writings* 3.

³Walt Whitman, “Starting Newspapers,” *Prose Works* 287.

⁴Later in life, Whitman recalled his days in the print shop: “you get your culture direct: not through borrowed sources—no, a century of college training could not confer such results on anyone” (Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 195).

⁵The Loco-focos were a short-lived reform wing of the New York Democratic Party (see below).

admired the famous Quaker rebel, Elias Hicks, who himself claimed to be a conservative against the theological innovations of the Second Great Awakening.⁶ His father quoted anti-slavery Paine and named one of his sons after slave-holding Jefferson. His parents raised him to believe in a republic that proclaimed equal rights and individual autonomy, but eschewed economic leveling and social hierarchy. He learned that the American Revolution was a radical break with the past; he was taught to venerate this event.

However, at seventeen, Walt Whitman also lived in a nascent industrial and consumer economy that threatened to break this diversity into a rift where one either embraced social hierarchy or demanded economic leveling. This shift forced artisan sons to choose sides between those who accepted the turn from an economic order of masters and journeymen to an industrial economy of employers and employees and those who saw this change as ultimately exploitative. Appropriate for a young man on the cusp of adulthood, young Whitman engaged these debates in terms of self-definition. Whereas in the artisan economy a person's identity was tied to occupation, location, and church, by the late 1830s early consumerism offered an alternative means to self-definition; a person could become what he or she had the economic ability to consume. In this new world, identity was mutable and subject to personal creation. This mutability, coupled with the new rhetoric of "equality of opportunity," implied that those unable to maintain appearances caused their own degradation. Young Walt Whitman, an unemployed journeyman printer in the rural Long Island countryside, turned to print as a way to negotiate these changes and seek a portable identity that would maintain its integrity in the midst of the new consumer economy. Ironically, he did so through his first constructed literary persona.

⁶ Ingle, *Quakers in Conflict*, 184-200. Hicks, like Whitman, was a Long Islander; Whitman's maternal grandfather, Cornelius Van Velsor, was an acquaintance of Hicks. Whitman, himself, remembered seeing Hicks preach: "I can remember my father coming home toward sunset from his day's work as a carpenter and saying briefly, as he throws down his armful of kindling-blocks with a bounce on the kitchen floor, 'Come, mother, Elias preaches tonight.'" In the late 1880s, Whitman claimed that he was "half Quaker" and wrote a short biography of Hicks (*Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* 1232-1233); see also Cummings, "Placing the Impalpable," 73.

In the fall of 1836, Whitman took a job as a schoolteacher in rural Long Island. He continued in this capacity until the spring of 1841 and changed locations seasonally throughout these years.⁷ A picture taken soon after shows Whitman, with cane and hat, posing in dandy garb appropriate to a man-about-town without the “rough” persona so important to the later poet of *Leaves of Grass*. With no sense of irony, Whitman played the urbane New Yorker among rubes in the country. Whitman taught classes of up to eighty students from ages five to fifteen for nine hours per day. Communities hired teachers for three-month terms and, as was typical, Whitman boarded with the parents of his students.⁸ His charges remembered him as both “careless of time and the world, of money and of toil” and as “always musin’, and writin’, ‘stead of ‘tending to his proper dooties.”⁹ Whitman felt equally ambivalent toward his students. In a letter to his friend Abraham Leech he described Woodbury, one of the towns in which he taught, as “Devil’s den” and “Purgatory Fields.”¹⁰ The citizens of this rural village fared not much better: “I believe when the Lord created the world, he used up all the good stuff, and was forced to form Woodbury and its denizens, out of the fag ends, the scraps and refuse.... [I]gnorance, vulgarity, rudeness, conceit, and dullness are the reigning gods of this deuced sink of despair...[h]ere in this nest of bears, this forsaken of all Go[d]’s creation; among clowns and country bumpkins[,] flat-heads, and coarse brown-faced girls, dirty, ill-favoured young brats, with squalling throats and crude manners, and bog-trotters, with all the disgusting conceit of ignorance and vulgarity.”¹¹

Whitman clearly had had enough by the time he reached his fifth academic year: “O, damnation, damnation! thy other name is school-teaching and thy residence Woodbury.... Time, put spurs to thy leaden wings, and bring on the period when my allotted time of torment here shall be fulfilled.”¹² In Whitestone the next year, he found little more to recommend its citizens: “The principal feather of the

⁷East Norwich (Summer 1836), Babylon (Winter 1836-37), Long Swamp (Spring 1837), Smithtown (Fall-Winter 1837-1838), Little Bay Side (Winter 1839-1840), Trimming Square (Spring 1840), Woodbury (Summer 1840), Whitestone (Winter-Spring 1841).

⁸See Cremin’s *American Education* and *The American Common School*, and Kaestle’s *Pillars of the Republic*.

⁹Freedman, *Walt Whitman Looks at Schools*, 30.

¹⁰ Whitman to Abraham Leech (August 11, 1840; August 19, 1840), quoted in Golden, “Nine Early Whitman Letters, 1840-1841.”

¹¹Ibid. (Whitman to Leech, August 11, 1840; July 30, 1840).

¹²Ibid. (Whitman to Leech, August 11, 1840).

place is the money making spirit, a gold-scraping and a wealth-hunting fiend, who is the foul incubus to three fourths of this beautiful earth."¹³

However, in the same letters to Leech, Whitman expressed an abiding interest in Democratic politics. In one letter regarding the election of 1840, he asked, "is hard cider in the ascendant; or does democracy erect itself on its tiptoes and swing its old straw hat with a hurrah for 'Little Matty?'"¹⁴ and in another,

Down in these parts, people understand about as much of political economy as they do the Choctaw language. I never met with such complete, unqualified, infernal jackasses, in all my life.—Luckily for my self-complacency they are mostly whigs [sic].—If they were on my side of the wall, I should forswear loco-focoism.¹⁵

Whitman saw no incongruities between his politics and rhetoric. According to the young teacher, his students and their parents needed chiding for their pedestrian tastes; however, as a Democrat, he claimed to be a friend of the common people. Whitman's Democratic Loco-focoism had an overtone of ideological snobbery and begs the question, What accounts for this strange melding of democratic politics and overwrought disdain of the farming communities around him?

Loco-foco Democrats, themselves, were no social radicals. Beyond their claim to hold a "noble impatience" with "palsying conventionalism," William Leggett and Loco-focos acted more as bastions of the Jacksonian ideals of the free market and equality of opportunity than as radical levelers.¹⁶ They were friends of the rising artisan or entrepreneur more than the struggling farmer or the wage-earning mechanic. Loco-focos concentrated on monetary policies against state banks, paper currency, and monopolies. Their rhetoric celebrated an honest and unaffected economy and social order. By the late-1830s, when the Van Buren administration adopted many of the policies of the Loco-focos into the mainstream Democratic Party, these breakaway Democrats returned to Tammany and the Party proper. In the fall of 1840, Whitman served as a Democratic campaign worker against banks, money power, and

¹³Ibid. (Whitman to Leech, March 25, 1841).

¹⁴Whitman here is referring to the "Hard Cider Campaign" of the Whig presidential candidate William Henry Harrison. "Little Matty" refers to Martin Van Buren, the Democratic Party candidate and incumbent. For an interesting look at the logistics and ironies of this campaign, see Watson, *Liberty and Power*.

¹⁵Walt Whitman to Abraham Leech (August 26, 1840), quoted in Golden, "Nine Early Whitman Letters, 1840-1841."

¹⁶William Cullen Bryant as quoted in Widmer, *Young America*, 9.

monopoly.¹⁷ As a city artisan and former journeyman for New York newspapers, he brought both an urbane sensibility and contemporary arguments over the labor theory of value and the status of “mechanics” to the countryside. This sensibility justified (at least according to him) his disdain toward the farmers of Queens County.

Though probably unconscious of the contradiction between his politics and his attitude, Whitman understood the possibilities of a schoolmaster persona in print. As both a community member and a resident alien, he invested in the future of the community and brought expertise and skill from the outside world. Whitman utilized the role of schoolteacher in his writing as a means to legitimize his attitude toward the citizens of rural Long Island. A schoolteacher’s outsider/insider status made him a useful observer of the people’s habits and shortcomings. Starting in the winter of 1840, Whitman began to publish a series of editorials entitled “Sun-Down Papers—From the Desk of a Schoolmaster.” In these ten essays, which Whitman published in three different newspapers until July 1841, the future poet played the role of the Schoolmaster to a population of “students.” In this capacity, he portrayed himself as one of the people, yet one who knows them better than they know themselves. The title of these essays points to Whitman’s conscious construction of the Schoolmaster persona. By referring to the setting sun and the desk of a teacher, he created an image before even making an argument. In this case, Whitman imagined himself as a thoughtful educator spending a quiet hour at the end of a day. Still at his desk (probably in the schoolhouse), with the silence of the early evening replacing the din of the children, the Schoolmaster sits down to reflect on the little world around him. This self-referential quality marked Whitman’s personas throughout the 1840s and early 1850s. As Schoolmaster, he actively sought to utilize the commonly understood characteristics of this occupation to lend credence to the arguments he made. By calling himself “Schoolmaster” and setting the time and place for his ruminations, Whitman provided his readers with a pre-packaged identity for their consumption.¹⁸

¹⁷Loving, *Song of Himself*, 49.

¹⁸For an analysis of the ways in which Whitman did so visually with the 1855 edition see Miller, “The Cover of the First Edition of *Leaves of Grass*,” and Genoways, “The Picture of the Perfect Loafer.”

Where Emily Dickinson constructed personas out of feminine social roles prominent in the mid-19th century and Mark Twain utilized a certain self-referential humor to bridge different settings and voices, Whitman inhabited professions (the Schoolmaster, in this case, later, Editor and Bard) and, in doing so, expected the reader to accept his arguments based on a shared understanding of the role these professions played.¹⁹ In the case of the Schoolmaster, Whitman rhetorically inhabited this role because he was, during its creation, a schoolteacher. However, Whitman never let this profession speak for itself. Instead, he took hold of it and tied his profession to his arguments as if the inclinations of the author and the author's profession were necessarily the same. In doing so, Whitman embraced very early the idea that one is what one does.²⁰ By inhabiting this profession on paper (rather than just doing it in the world), Whitman took this job and turned it into a rhetorical identity. In return, this professional identity gave credence to his arguments.²¹ This self-conscious professionalism lent Whitman the power to view, define, and reform America in the midst of vast economic and social change.²²

For Whitman, the Schoolmaster was like a secular missionary who saw the people's better natures beneath their immaturity and confusion.²³ In this capacity, he portrayed a kind of democratic didacticism that translated into a loose reform ideology. Though unhappy with the reality of teaching, he established a persona useful for presenting a reform program that negotiated the social and economic landscape around citizens in the new market economy and defined their place within it.

¹⁹ The personas of "Little Girl" and "Lover-Wife-Queen" allowed Dickinson to "speak...her mind much more openly than she could otherwise do" because, according to Todd, these pat personas were familiar to her small group of readers (both of her poetry and her letters). This familiarity allowed Dickinson a low-stakes honesty as all controversy came packaged in a voice not necessarily her own. John Emerson Todd, *Emily Dickinson's Use of the Persona*, 1-9, 31-52; Twain used his authorial persona to weave "fact and fiction [into] ...fictive truths, or better yet, true fictions" (Florence 3).

²⁰ "[W]ork—the occupational roles that men and women carry—is potentially and often actually a potent force in sustaining and stabilizing...the young adult's personality.... [T]heir work role is the chief means by which they define and know themselves" (Perlman 61-63); see also Weber.

²¹ Andrew Lawson has analyzed Whitman's petit bourgeois voice in *Leaves of Grass* in his book *Walt Whitman and the Class Struggle*.

²² Reynolds explains Whitman's role playing as "part of the participatory culture, [where he] was to a large degree an actor, and that his poetry was his grandest stage, the locus of his most creative performances" ("Walt Whitman and the New York Stage," 8). As I argue below, Whitman's "acting" in this sense began many years before the generation of his Bard persona.

²³ Whitman was not the first to see schoolteaching as a means to social reform. Henry David Thoreau for example, opened a grammar school in 1838 with his brother, John that eschewed corporal punishment and sought to replace the rote pedagogy of the time with practical experiences in the world (forest hikes, visits to local businesses, etc.). Ralph Waldo Emerson and Herman Melville also taught school for a time, though neither seemed to view it as a means to social reform.

Ethical Aesthetics

While exploring Whitman's reform theory in the "Sun-Down Papers," it is important to remember that Whitman was only twenty-one when he wrote them. Driven by a youthful understanding of the debates around him, he had no coherent economic or political reform program. Even at this young age, however, Whitman exhibited an interest in social issues, specifically in areas of class and power, through aesthetic theory.

In the "Sun-Down Papers," Whitman presented injustice as ugly. Individuals were beautiful because they were just and just because they were in their natural place. Here, Whitman subtly co-mingled conservative and radical reform ideology. He envisioned no leveling of class, but equalized everyone within an organic social order. Those who refused to embrace this natural order degraded the democracy; one knew them by their ugliness. Though not entirely nostalgic, this order resembled the idealized version of the artisan republic. In this way, Whitman used the "Sun-Down Papers" to celebrate individuals by showing their native beauty in the modern economy.

The "Sun-Down Papers" have been portrayed as "oppressively moral,"²⁴ "sentimental,"²⁵ "didactic,"²⁶ and "prudish."²⁷ There is some truth in these criticisms. In the context of Whitman's later prose and poetry, they appear rather heavy-handed and simple. However, this style proved common in an age when, after 1820, Ralph Waldo Emerson recalled "a certain sharpness of criticism, an eagerness for reform, ... showed itself in every quarter."²⁸ In an era when art could unabashedly serve the goals of reform, these essays proved rather subtle and modest.²⁹

Whitman used the "Sun-Down Papers" as an extended exhortation against affectation and consumerism. The first four "Sun-Down" essays critiqued pretense in the working class. According to the Schoolmaster, the softening of class-based etiquette and the advent of conspicuous consumption in the consumers' market caused an identity crisis for the worker. Natural law determined status and, by

²⁴ Allen 37.

²⁵ Stovall, *The Foreground of Leaves of Grass*, 29.

²⁶ Loving 46.

²⁷ Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 74.

²⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," quoted in David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 61.

²⁹ Compare, for example, Mason Locke Weem's *The Drunkard's Looking Glass* (1818).

extension, aesthetics. Any blurring of this aesthetic was bound to be immoral. Essays six through eight established Whitman's vision of the beauty, purity, and wholesomeness of the authentic individual regardless of class.³⁰ In these three pieces, the Schoolmaster turned from a critic of consumerism to a champion of the citizen unaffected. Essays nine and ten presented a subtle blueprint of a "loafer" republic where this unaffected beauty ruled the day. This allowed the Schoolmaster to put reform in the hands of the citizen, rather than in the realm of economic forces beyond his control. By choosing to be himself, the citizen improved his lot.

Pride, Arrogance, Superciliousness, and Effeminacy

Taken individually, the first four "Sun-Down Papers" are as appealing as the wagging finger of a youthful prude. In the first essay, published on February 29, 1840, Whitman described himself sitting in his "elbow chair" and "casting a backward glance ... among the mazes of old scenes and times." For the Schoolmaster, "there is something very delightful in using the beautiful power of memory"; it "passed into axiom, that the old know few occupations of the mind more agreeable than retrospection."

In this vein, Whitman traced "backwards to the originator of ... all [ideas]" and marveled at the "wondrous quality ... of thought in the human mind!" At the stylistic turn of the essay, the Schoolmaster remembered "actual life around me" and says "a saddening influence fell upon my soul." Upon recognizing the "golden hours of youth" passing him by, the author awoke from his reverie rather depressed. However, his mood lightened when he remembered that "it was Sunday evening," a time for "visits from forlorn bachelors to expecting damsels," and left to call on "pretty little Kitty Denton." Thereafter, the author's melancholy dissipated.³¹

Beyond the contrary evidence that Whitman ever courted a woman during his time as a country schoolteacher, this first "Sun-Down" essay presented the beginning of a consistent aesthetic theory.³² For

³⁰Number five of the "Sun-Down Papers" has never been found.

³¹Walt Whitman, "Sun-Down Papers: From the Desk of a School Master no. 1," from the *Hamstead Inquirer*, February 29, 1840, in *Collected Writings* 13.

³²"The girls did not seem to attract him. He did not specially go anywhere with them or show any extra fondness for their society." Former Whitman student, Charles Roe, as quoted in "Walt Whitman, Schoolmaster: Notes of a Conversation with Charles A. Roe" (Traubel, *Walt Whitman Fellowship Papers*).

the author, old age and the memories that delight it endangered youth as it sapped one's vital strength; life was to be engaged in the present. On its own, this first "Sun-Down" essay read like a call for the reader to seize the day; when considered in conjunction with essays two through four, a more coherent aesthetic vision appeared.

The next three "Sun-Down Papers" rose ever increasingly in didactic tone. "Sun-Down Papers no.2" (published March 14, 1840) told the story of the Schoolmaster's two friends: Homer (who Whitman affectionately called "Hom") and Tom Bepirim (whose surname told just about all the reader needed to know). Both were bred in the city; both went to "good schools" with "good masters" and kept "good company." Whitman described both as "good looking" with frock coats, straps on their pantaloons, parted hair on the side, and "neither [with] whiskers." Here, Whitman presented two individuals, probably of the middle or upper class, neither of whom seemed very different from the other. Also, it is important to note that he wrote this piece for the rural audience of *The Hampstead Inquirer*; Whitman intentionally presented two individuals "bred in the city" who reflected urbane options for his country readers.

Hom was natural and unaffected, "open, generous ... and frank," whose laugh sounded "like a discharge of small artillery." He was "a total despiser of any thing in the shape of pride, or arrogance, or superciliousness, or effeminacy," and "no foppish pastime ever finds favor in his eyes." In fact, Hom "can swim like a fish; and on horseback ... sits as easily as if he were part of the animal itself." Also, Hom enjoyed playing "ball" and "leaping and running." Effortlessly, Hom acted like a gentleman "particularly towards the ladies" and proved "proficient both in music and in dancing."³³

Pretense, on the other hand, infected Tom Bepirim. According to the Schoolmaster, Tom was "all ... forms and ceremony." His reading habits ranged from the "Laws of Etiquette" to "The Youth's Guide to Polite Manners," and he knew the mundane rules of appropriate behavior in all social situations common in the works of authors like William Alcott.³⁴ He danced "like an automaton ... yet never misses a step, never brings down his foot in the wrong position" and, in his perfect dancing, ruined the idea of dancing

³³ Walt Whitman, "The Sun-Down Papers: From the Desk of a Schoolmaster, no. 2," *The Hampstead Inquirer*, March 14, 1840 in *Collected Writings* 14-16.

³⁴ Alcott, *The Young Man's Guide*; Graham, *A Lecture to Young Men*.

itself. Whitman related a "sight" of Tom at an exhibition ball where the other dancers lost their step and stopped dancing while the music continued. Tom, however, "who, with the features as solemn as a mummy ... kept moving on, taking the steps in their proper places and doing everything as seriously as if he had been sentencing a criminal to the gallows." Whitman concluded, "there are many who resemble in some degree...Tom [and make themselves] ridiculous in the eyes of all sensible people." This scourge of pretense was deadly serious; Tom's attitude was "dangerous" and "cumbersome," as authentic action was always more profitable than a "glittering and flimsy bubble."³⁵

Whitman's story of Tom and Hom began much like "Sun-Down Papers no. 1," namely, with a recollection and musing. However, by the end of the tale of Tom's silly formality, it turned to a darker lesson: an unnatural devotion to etiquette and pretense sapped away life itself. Whitman presented Tom and Hom as equal on the surface. However, this surface was not hollow; it was, in fact, a mark of their essential moral nature. Hom did not seek to be anything that he was not. For this reason he was a hearty and forthright friend as well as a good dancer, gentleman, and ladies' man. Any citizen could achieve this easy nonchalance as long as he did not take himself too seriously. Tom, however, was a fraud. He took on the empty pretense of "etiquette" and, in the end, not only made himself the fool in the dance hall, but also lived a life that was untruthful and "dangerous."

By creating a cursory equality between Tom and Hom, and then presenting an essential difference between them based on their "etiquette," Whitman considered the *pretense* of class immoral rather than the existence of class itself. Hom and Tom came from the same, seemingly "good," background. Hom, however, acted ethically because he acted unaffectedly. Tom, on the other hand, proved ugly and dangerous because he did what no one should: he *acted* superior. Anyone could be Hom regardless of class or upbringing; all stand in danger of falling into the trap of Tom's foppery.

In his essay on Tom and Hom, the Schoolmaster echoed the "sentimental culture" of the period, best exemplified in works like James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* or in the Davy Crockett

³⁵ *Collected Writings* 14-16.

legends.³⁶ Accordingly, heroes emerged from the wilderness and distinguished themselves by their integrity and character. Middle-class Americans during the 1830s and 1840s idealized this easy grace and sought to cultivate manners that showed an “index of [a man’s] soul” rather than the supposedly decadent etiquette of Europeans and con-artists.³⁷ In “Sun-Down Papers no. 2,” the Schoolmaster reflected this ethic and, in the form of Hom, transplanted the natural gentleman like Natty Bumppo or Davy Crockett to the streets of an idealized New York and to the readership of rural Long Island. Instead of bringing the unaffected ethics of the wilderness, Hom exemplified the loose grace of a man comfortable in his own skin and honest with those around him.³⁸

Whitman began “Sun-Down Papers no. 3” with a damning statement: “Among the things calculated to depreciate mechanics, none is worthy of greater reprehension than the effort to be fashionable ... or what is sometimes called ‘living genteelly.’” According to the author, the attempt to “keep up” with the “town style” made mechanics “feel the bitter pangs of insult, and, in cases not a few, have brought on bankruptcy and ruin.” Though not overtly equating this pretense with Tom, Whitman drew a subtle connection with his last editorial by claiming that living beyond one’s station bred mechanics who lost the “keen sense of self-respect” and “noble feeling of independence” that mark the “true gentleman.”

What did Whitman mean here by mechanic? By the publication of this editorial, in March 1840, the term had endured a decade of change. In the first quarter of the 19th century, “mechanic” worked interchangeably with “freeman,” “artisan,” “member of the working classes,” “tradesman,” and “workingman.” In this regard, it blurred the lines between employed and employing artisans.³⁹ However, by the time Whitman wrote in 1840, the term mechanic no longer encompassed the rift between employer

³⁶ Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 56-59, 101. For examples, see James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* (1823); *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826); *The Prairie* (1827); *The Pathfinder* (1840); *The Deerslayer* (1841); Anonymous, *The Life and Adventures of Col. David Crockett* (1833), *Col. Crockett’s Exploits and Adventures in Texas* (1836).

³⁷ Eleazer Moody, *The School of Good Manners: Composed for the help of parents in teaching their children how to behave during their minority*, quoted in Halttunen 99.

³⁸ According to Halttunen, “The broadest significance of sentimental culture between 1830 and 1870 lay in the powerful middle-class impulse to shape all social forms into sincere expressions of inner feeling,” xvii. Andrew Lawson notes that *Leaves of Grass* is marked by this middle-class impulse. The “Sun-Down Papers” imply that Whitman had been expressing these impulses fifteen years before his career as a poet.

³⁹ Roediger 51.

and employee.⁴⁰ By the 1830s, the term “boss” applied to a master craftsman who owned a shop that employed artisans permanently assigned to wage earner’s status.⁴¹ In using the term “mechanic” here, the Schoolmaster meant someone young, employed and impressionable.

Whitman’s mechanic, however, did not lose in a grand economic shift from an artisan to an industrial economy. If he had, the Schoolmaster could logically seek the origins of his degradation in economics or politics. Instead, the danger lay in “living genteelly.” Accordingly, the “ambition to be fashionable” tormented the mechanic and set him down a path that led to “disgrace and death.” This ambition, born of the “extravagant ideas of children and wives,” forced the mechanic to be “ashamed of his calling” and “totally at war with every thing in his proper habits and legitimate sphere of life.” Here, Whitman exposed a dilemma that artisans faced with the advent of the Cult of Domesticity. This shift in the nature of the household created an economic paradigm where the ideal family consisted of a producing husband and a consuming wife who devoted her time to rearing children.⁴² Whitman, perceptively citing the acute aesthetic dilemma faced by a laborer unable to uphold early-Victorian appearances, argued that in this new context the mechanic became “ashamed of his calling” because “he cannot acquire that hundred little refinements which are necessary to acquitting one’s-self with credit in that society whose good will he is so anxious after.” This aesthetic crisis had social and economic ramifications as it forced “the loss to a workingman of all personal dignity” and threatened his natural identity.⁴³

Significantly, nowhere in this article did Whitman uncover any political, social, or economic shift that brought the mechanic to this state. When the young artisan freely chose to move fashionably beyond his station, he fell into debt, disrepute, and danger. Middle-class Hom (“a gentleman in ... manners”) and the working-class mechanic (a “true gentleman”) achieved a natural grace because they eschewed pretense and affectation. Both exhibited noble traits when each maintained the integrity of his status. Here, then, the Schoolmaster presented an egalitarian ideal achieved through a conservative social structure. For

⁴⁰Dawley,20-32.

⁴¹Roediger,54.

⁴²See, for example, Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860”; Ryan, *The Cradle of the Middle Class*; Warner, *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth*; and Hirsch, *The Roots of the American Working Class*.

⁴³Walt Whitman, “The Sun-Down Papers: From the Desk of a Schoolmaster, no. 3,” *The Hampstead Inquirer*, March, 28, 1840, in *Collected Writings* 16.

Whitman, the mechanic oppressed himself when he sought, through consumption, to appear to be something more than what he was.

The most didactic and seemingly prudish of the "Sun-Down Papers" is number four. One scholar even dubbed it "a little sermon."⁴⁴ Here, Whitman lectured on the ills of tobacco and caffeine. However, when considered within the context of Whitman's first three "Sun-Down Papers," it is clear that these pieces, all published within eight weeks of each other, formed part of a broader argument regarding aesthetics and ethics. Also worth noting, the *Long-Island Democrat*, a Democratic paper, which opposed the Whig, and later Republican, *Long Island Farmer* throughout the 19th century, published "Sun-Down Papers no. 4." However, Whitman later published the tenth and final of the "Sun-Down Papers" in the Whiggish *Long Island Farmer*. The Schoolmaster, unlike Walter Whitman, Jr., eschewed partisanship.

Whitman began this fourth essay with a dismissal of the "excitement ... with regard to the evils created by ardent spirits" and demanded that his audience remember a more "injurious form of intemperance": tobacco. By the fourth paragraph, when he claimed that "the excessive use of tea and coffee, too, is a species of intemperance much to be condemned," Whitman seemed to have become an ardent devotee of Sylvester Graham.⁴⁵ However, he justified his critique of tobacco and caffeine in terms akin to those that mark his discourses on aesthetics in essays two and three. Tobacco use should be condemned because "boys, like monkeys, are generally ambitious of aping their superiors": a "segar generally has a *smoky fire* at one end, and a *conceited spark* at the other [Whitman's emphasis]." Likewise, the absurd taking of "hot liquid into their stomachs" showed "what ridiculous lengths can people be led by fashion." Whitman denied damning "any sensual delights, because I think it is a sin to be happy." On the contrary, the author appreciated only what he called "rational gratification[s]...placed here for two beneficent purposes; to fulfill our duty, and to enjoy the almost innumerable comforts and delights which [God] has provided for us."

⁴⁴ Allen 37.

⁴⁵Sylvester Graham (1794-1851) was a prominent health reformer and Presbyterian minister who advocated temperance and sexual abstinence.

The Schoolmaster's call for a return to natural luxuries echoed the ethics of his upbringing. For example, the artisan republicanism of his father's generation celebrated the "middling" status of the craftsman as representing the urban version of the Jeffersonian farmer. Accordingly, these two types of "freeman" exemplified the republican ideal of citizenship. They were unencumbered by poverty and luxury, both of which proved dangerous to one's freedom; poverty required a freeman to depend on the good will of others; wealth softened the freeman's vigilance that earned him his status in the Revolution. Whitman's "conceited spark" at the end of a cigar gave up this freedom by attempting to be something he was not. A cigar allowed the young smoker to play a role (dandy, aristocrat, or even adult) and to do so with the ease of a few puffs. Contrary to the goals of the act, smoking debased the young man and ultimately led to physical and psychological degradation.

These assumptions also reflected Quaker beliefs. The influence of Quaker theology on Whitman's poetry has been well established.⁴⁶ However, few scholars have noted Friends' influence on Whitman's ethics and aesthetics. Hicksites, following the theology of their eighteenth-century brethren, believed in "that [of] God in everyone."⁴⁷ This belief shaped Friends' practice of simplicity and pacifism. At the Byberry Meeting House in Philadelphia in December 1824, Elias Hicks presented a sermon that expressed this understanding of the Inner Light and its moral effects: "We should, therefore unite, with the operation of this divine principle of God in the soul. It is a living principle, it is the light and life, by which all the children of men are enlightened, and shown their condition."⁴⁸

Whitman echoed these sentiments in his "Sun-Down Papers." For Hicks, the truthful and unchanging part of a person was the spirit of God that resided within. This made individuals essentially the same. Though appearances might differ, inside dwelt an abiding element that was true and unchanging. When people appealed to their inner godliness, they represented the will of God. Likewise, for Whitman, an

⁴⁶See Fulghum, "Quaker Influences on Whitman's Religious Thought," and Templin, "The Quaker Influence on Walt Whitman."

⁴⁷Fox observes, "[B]e patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone; whereby in them you may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you."

⁴⁸See Hicks.

individual's essential nature was like that of any other. This explains both his assumption that there were "rational gratifications" that appealed to all individuals and his argument that, though of different classes, both Hom and the mechanic could be "natural" gentlemen. For both Whitman and Hicks, one found an inner wisdom and stable identity in quiet reflection rather than in the "exertions and buzzing about" of the world.⁴⁹ Through truthful and unaffected acts, one showed their inner ethical condition.

There are other connections between Quaker sensibility and the Schoolmaster's critique. In the 1840s, Quakers consciously dressed "plain." Men, for example, dressed in black or grey, with straight coats without collars and buttons and with traditional, broad-brimmed Quaker hats. This plain dress made Quakers appear more and more distinct through the 19th century as fashion trends accelerated with the advent of mass-produced textiles.⁵⁰ In 1840, the Quakers provided a *de facto* critique of the rise of consumerism by their dress and testimony to plainness. According to the Society of Friends, plain dress worshipped the Inner Light of God in one's self. Ostentatious display rejected God's truth.

Whitman's diatribes against cigars, coffee and books of etiquette make sense in this context. These consumable, fashionable goods lent a means by which individuals made something of themselves that they were not. Misguided citizens, through purchasing, owning, and consuming, attempted to find an identity in the world rather than in the self. These goods allowed the mechanic to join an imaginary consensus of consumers rather than embrace his natural place as a producer. Accordingly, the mechanic had no one else to blame but himself for his loss of identity. So, the Schoolmaster scolded him. Whitman ended these three essays by arguing that "nature, ... experience, and enlightened reason" all established the danger of tobacco and caffeine. They were bad for the body, but most importantly, they were bad for the soul because they held out the false promise of an easy identity founded on ephemeral goods.⁵¹

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰By the end of the century, most monthly meetings gave up their tradition of dressing plain.

⁵¹Walt Whitman, "Sun-Down Papers: From the Desk of a Schoolmaster no.4," *Long-Island Democrat*, April 28, 1840, in *Collected Writings* 19.

Prettier Customs

In August 1840, the "Sun-Down Papers" turned to an exploration of the ideal aesthetic that Whitman hinted he knew in essays one through four. Essays six through eight, taken individually, seemingly had little to do with each other. He wrote on subjects as diverse as the use of flowers for burying the dead, the evils of wealth, and the inability of individuals to envision the "Truth." However, as he wrote them all over a relatively short period, published under the same persona of the Schoolmaster, and developed arguments hinted at in the first four essays, a reading of all three reveals an aesthetically just alternative to the dire warnings of February-April 1840.

"Sun-Down Paper no. 6" began with a tone similar to essays one and two;⁵² Whitman returned to the pleasant rhetoric of idle rumination. Accordingly, he found "no prettier custom, than that ... of strewing the coffins of young people with flowers." The author described the way in which flowers cause "our painful sensations [to] have much about them of gentleness and poetic melancholy." Thereafter, our "grief is not gross, but delicate, ... it more resembles the scent of a thick and full blown rose." According to the Schoolmaster, families buried the young with flowers not to comfort the living, but to symbolize the dead: "We are well aware that men who have lived a length of time, must ... have had the fine bloom of simplicity and nature nearly rubbed off." Here, Whitman coupled contemporary theories about the innocence of childhood with his theory of unaffected virtue. The simplicity of the flowers symbolized accurately the innocent nature of the dead themselves. Therefore, burying an aged person with flowers strewn on the coffin made no sense.

The corpse of a person long-lived already had lost its native simplicity in that he "respected custom" and "honored the government," "followed fashion" and avoided "glaring transgressions," "stood up or bowed down" at appropriate times and, in the end, lived with a heart that would cause the reader to be "sickened and amazed." These gestures, seemingly of a good man, quietly symbolized his degradation.

⁵²"Sun-Down Papers no. 5" is missing. It was probably published in the *Long-Island Democrat* between April and August 1840. No description of the topic of this essay has been found in the author's research. One scholar has labeled Whitman's anti-tobacco essay "No. 5" (Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 74), as it is the fifth "Sun-Down Paper" of the ten in existence. However, as two "Sun-Down Papers" are labeled no. 9 (*Long-Island Democrat*, November 24, 1840, and *Long-Island Democrat* July 6, 1841), the author has preserved their original, albeit confusing, labeling.

The Schoolmaster forgave childhood errors because “we know that the worst deeds they ever committed were but child’s follies,” but the sins of adulthood were the sins of inauthenticity. Though children committed “follies,” an adult degraded himself when there appeared a lack of consistency between his internal mechanisms and his external actions. Tom’s crimes and the crime of the misguided mechanic mirrored each other. The children, like Hom, acted in a natural and unaffected manner that justified all of their “worst deeds.”⁵³

Scholars often cite the next essay, “Sun-Down Papers no. 7,” as Whitman’s first implication that he “would compose a wonderful and ponderous book.”⁵⁴ Though perhaps a prophetic statement of what became *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman more likely imagined a collection of moral essays based on his “Sun-Down Papers.” This “ponderous book” aspired to teach its audience one lesson: “[it] is a very dangerous thing to be rich.”

The first signs of wealth’s danger were aesthetic: “See the sweat pouring down that man’s face. See the wrinkles on his narrow forehead. He is a poor, miserable, rich man.” Here, the pursuit of material wealth and social status produced ugliness and deviancy. Wealth also made people unhappy. Whitman related the story of a “friend” who described life as a long journey by “steamboat, stagecoach, and railroad.” This friend noted, “We hardly had fairly and comfortably adjusted ... when we are obliged to stop and get into another conveyance.... We are continually on the move.” This constant motion required people to travel lightly. Anyone who made “pretensions to common sense” avoided carrying along “a dozen trunks, and bandboxes, hatboxes, valises, chests, umbrellas, and canes innumerable” because when “the Grand Engineer” appeared, he admitted “no luggage therein.... Money and property must be left behind.”

Here Whitman implied his ideal aesthetic. At the end of life’s journey, “the noiseless and strange attendants gather from every passenger his ticket, and heed not whether he be dark or fair, clad in homespun or fine apparel.” Providence rewarded those who lived as they began life’s journey both in the

⁵³Walt Whitman, “Sun-Down Papers: From the Desk of a Schoolmaster no. 6,” *Long-Island Democrat*, August 11, 1840, in *Collected Writing*, I, 20-21.

⁵⁴See Allen 38; Loving 48.

end and in transit: “happy is he whose wisdom has purchased beforehand a token of his having settled satisfactorily for the journey!”⁵⁵ Instead of expressing an anxiety over the acceleration of life in America in the 1830s and 1840s, Whitman presented this hurly-burly existence as elemental. Through the modern metaphor of the train, he made a point about eternal reality: life has always been about rush and flux. The wise understand that there is no need to catch up; integrity and unaffectedness guaranteed poise and inner peace. The “Grand Engineer” promised that in the rush of life there was a universal ethic that rewarded neither money nor fashion, but, instead, judged the integrity of a passenger’s unaffected inner condition. This inner condition proved portable through life’s tribulations and travels, even after death. Whitman’s egalitarian ideal put the means of success in the hands of the individual, but turned the rhetoric of the equality of opportunity inside out. All people held the possibility of success and happiness; they needed only to reject the temptations of the consumer economy to actualize it.

On October 6, 1840, Whitman published a “card” in the *Long-Island Democrat*. Individuals wrote cards as open letters, paid for like advertisements, and published in newspapers often as responses to public challenges. Used commonly in the early 19th century, their origins lay in the masculine culture of dueling and prize-fighting. By the 1840s, they became a common public means of answering perceived slights, almost exclusively among men.⁵⁶ This card, signed by “Walter Whitman” and published in reaction to an article in the Jamaica Whig organ, *The Long-Island Farmer*, exposes just how consciously Whitman constructed the Schoolmaster for the “Sun-Down Papers.” Whitman’s “card” answered an article in the *Farmer* that threatened him with “severe ... chastisement” for statements he made during a political rally on September 24 where Whitman, serving as the Democratic electioneer for Queens County, debated John Gunn, who represented the Whigs. During the debate, Whitman charged Charles King and other “eminent whigs [sic] with falsehood” for claiming that the Democratic Party and President Van Buren upheld “the doctrine of a ‘community of goods, wives and children.’” Unlike the

⁵⁵Walt Whitman, “Sun-Down Papers: From the Desk of a Schoolmaster no. 7,” *Long -Island Democrat*, September 29, 1840, in *Collected Writing* 21-23.

⁵⁶Gorn 99.

Schoolmaster, who wrote with a bemused distance about his fellow Long Islanders, Walter Whitman Jr., New Yorker, Democrat and Loco-foco, willingly engaged local Whigs in partisan debate.

In defense of the Democrats and his verbal assault on King, Whitman rejected any implication that his politics or party supported leveling of the economic order. Though King exaggerated when he accused the Democratic Party of hoping to share “women and children,” the inclusion of “goods” in his critique implied that Democrats had leveling designs on property. In response, Whitman claimed that King “uttered a *lie* and acted as *no gentleman* would act.”⁵⁷ With his “card,” Whitman attempted to defuse a potentially violent situation and still defend his partisan attack on King during the debate. Though Whitman’s political virulence in this case reflected the heated political rhetoric and the masculine culture of politics, competition, and debate that shaped campaigns in this period, the Schoolmaster eschewed this kind of partisanship. Between February 1840 and July 1841 he appeared in three newspapers: one not clearly partisan,⁵⁸ one Democratic,⁵⁹ and one Whig.⁶⁰ In this regard, Whitman affected an apolitical tone to reach the broadest audience possible and to construct an objective position from which to make his arguments. As the Schoolmaster, Whitman began to hone a voice that claimed to speak for all citizens.

The eighth “Sun-Down” paper, published on October 8, 1840, was Whitman’s longest and most mystical. It began with the Schoolmaster strolling thoughtfully down a lane and reflecting “on the folly and vanity of those objects with which most men occupy their lives.” Upon sitting down on a grassy bank, the Schoolmaster slipped into a “tranquil sleep” during which his mind went “wandering over the earth in search of TRUTH.”

Thereafter, he heard a “voice” which directed him to a vision of paradise, replete with rolling fields, bubbling brooks, flowers, and a Greco-Roman temple. For the Schoolmaster it was “more lovely than the dreams which benignant spirits sometimes weave around the couch of youth and innocence.” In fact, the “voice” which led him to this vision demanded that “he seek not ... to discover that which is hidden by an

⁵⁷Walt Whitman, “A Card,” *Long-Island Democrat*, October 6, 1840, in *Collected Writing* 23.

⁵⁸*Hamstead Inquirer*.

⁵⁹*Long-Island Democrat*.

⁶⁰*Long-Island Farmer and Queens County Advertiser*.

all seeing God from the knowledge of mortals" and directed him to "a country different entirely from the one ... just described."

In this new country, Whitman saw all the people of the earth straining to see the temple of paradise. Each one held in his hand an "optical glass" and never gazed at the temple except "through this medium." The Schoolmaster noted the different shapes of these optical glasses, the details of which symbolized diverse epistemologies. Some saw the temple with glasses "narrow and contracted." Others had glasses "of one colour, and others a different." Many had optical devices "gross in texture" that hid the temple "completely ... from view." It is easy to relate each of these "observers" to certain social, theological, and philosophical types: the philistine who views beauty narrowly; the philosopher whose convoluted theories overshadow the simple contours of truth; the bigot who sees truth in only one color. Some even came "nigh" to seeing the temple unadulterated, but could not because of their useless optics. Only a few of the observers, at the risk of persecution by the others, viewed the temple "without the false assistance of some glass or other." When the voice returned, it explained, "the great light of Truth ... can be most truly ... contemplated by the plain eye of simplicity." Here, Whitman further expanded his social ideology into a universalist ethic.⁶¹

Accordingly, the unpretentious had the stamp of legitimacy from the hand of the Almighty. Simplicity and a lack of affectation generated a natural egalitarianism. The persecuted "few" who observed the temple unadorned by newfangled theories or prejudices appeared different on the surface, but their unaffected observation of the divine exposed their essential equality. No one was better than anyone else. Quakers understood their relationship with God in this light. As in the case of Hom or the honest mechanic or the youthful corpse strewn with flowers or the boy who rejected the fashions of smoking and coffee drinking, equality and difference went hand-in-hand. Fashionable encumbrances of the consumer economy and the limiting ideas of new-fangled theorists divided people. God himself justified those who acted with integrity in their proper social space.

⁶¹Walt Whitman, "Sun-Down Papers: From the Desk of a Schoolmaster no. 8," *Long-Island Democrat*, October 20, 1840, in *Collected Writing* 25.

The Loafer Republic

"Sun-Down Papers no. 9," published on November 24, 1840 revealed Whitman's disappointment over the loss of the presidency by Martin Van Buren to the Whig William Henry Harrison.⁶² This represented the first example of a trend in Whitman's editorials; at first, Whitman's personas exuded an amused confidence born of an objective stance. Later, however, one-sided partisan rancor pulled the personas apart. When politics offended Whitman's sensibilities, his anger undermined his affected objectivity.

Whitman's post-election essay of November 1840 began with a statement that was probably meant to shock: "How I do love a loafer!" "Loafer" had only existed in American English since the early 1830s and probably had negative connotations as a derivation of the German word for tramp or vagabond.⁶³ For the Schoolmaster, the loafer was not "lazy in fits and starts," but a true "philosophick [sic] son of indolence." The Schoolmaster claimed that loafing had an ancient pedigree; both Diogenes and Adam before the fall were loafers,⁶⁴ and, because of their essential nature, loafers had "no material difference" between each other. They represented the most static and unchanging element of humanity. A world ruled by loafers would be a paradise; there would be a good deal of sunshine "for sunshine is the loafer's natural element," and there would be "no hurry, or bustle, or banging, or clanging." Best of all, politics did not exist: "your ears ache no more with ... the noisy politician ... no wrangling, no quarreling, no loco focus, no British whigs." The recent election, completed only two weeks before, and the local political wrangle in which Whitman found himself in the late summer and early autumn, caused the persona of the Schoolmaster to slip a bit.

Nevertheless, he could not resist turning his story to didactic ends. He argued (hopefully ironically) that "we loafers should organize." Accordingly, "at all events our strength would enable us to hold the balance of power, and we should be courted and coaxed by all the rival factions." Again, Whitman

⁶²Harrison won 53% of the popular vote to Van Buren's 47%.

⁶³Probably from the German noun *Landläufer*, tramp (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/loafer>).

⁶⁴The way in which Whitman uses the verb "to loaf" in this essay of 1840 only existed since 1838 according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1937). Whitman used "loafing" in an editorial published in the *Brooklyn Evening Star*, October 10, 1845, but in a more critical manner (*Collected Writing* 222).

referred cryptically to the recent election: "stranger things than that have come to pass." The Schoolmaster concluded this essay with a dark warning--"mysterious intimations have been thrown out...dark sayings uttered, by those high in society, that the grand institution of loaferism was to be abolished." People talked "sneeringly" and "frowningly" of "us." Powerful, "overbearing men" spoke in "derogatory terms" about loafer "rights and dignity." The Schoolmaster warned these individuals to be "careful." If they irritated their mellower brethren, the loafers may "come out at the next election and carry away the palm before both your political parties."⁶⁵

It is easy to imagine that Whitman's interest group of "loafers" was nothing more than the fantasy of a young Democrat in a community controlled by the Whig parents of his students. Even with his sour grapes, the Schoolmaster's "loaferism" ethically echoed previous essays. These loafers did not smoke, drink, or waste the day dancing in perfect form and so fulfilled Whitman's ideals of Hom, the righteous mechanic, and the unaffected youth by living without the constant effort of self-creation. The loafer exhibited the ultimate integrity because his actions reflected his inner nature. He did not seek to get from one place to another; life led, ultimately, only to the place where it began and allowed the individual only the objects with which he started. Loafers lived in a world timeless and unchanging, egalitarian and static. The loafers' republic existed wherever people recognized this truth.

This ideal also exhibited Whitman's ambivalence toward the idea of larger social forces at work in the new market economy. The loafer shared with the noble mechanic and Hom an unaffected grace, but not necessarily the same identity or social position. Each embraced the harmonious order of equality and difference. No social engineering was necessary when individuals embraced their unaffected natures. Loafers only became political when threatened; otherwise, they left well enough alone. In this light, partisan politics were themselves an affectation and symptomatic of something amiss in the Republic.

The "Sun-Down Papers" disappeared for seven months after the publication of the ninth essay in November 1840. Some scholars have speculated that this break stemmed from Whitman's disillusionment

⁶⁵Walt Whitman, "Sun-Down Papers: From the Desk of a Schoolmaster, no. 9 bis," *Long-Island Democrat*, July 6, 1841, in *Collected Writing* 27-29.

with rural Long Island in the aftermath of the Election of 1840,⁶⁶ or with a disagreement with a local family.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, by March 1841, Whitman had relocated to Whitestone, Long Island, and, in a letter to Abraham Leech dated March 25, remarked that he was "quite happy."

"Sun-Down Papers no. 9 *bis*" read like a response to the virulence of essay nine.⁶⁸ In his celebration of loaferism, the Schoolmaster warned specific individuals and threatened a loafer revolution that would sweep away both American parties. Number nine *bis*, on the other hand, started where number nine ended, namely, with conflict, and sought to overcome this state. Recalling a walk one evening, the Schoolmaster recounted his meeting with "a man with whom I was bitterly at variance." This bitterness, which broke his pleasant mood, forced him to realize "how evil a thing it is to be at enmity." Thereafter, Whitman meditated on the futility of anger as people were but "the insect of an hour" and that "down in every human heart there are many sweet fountains, which require only to be touched in order to gush forth." Hereafter, the Schoolmaster reconnected with the elemental good nature of all people: "[T]here are hundreds and thousands of men who go on from year to year with their pitiful schemes of business and profit, and wrapped up and narrowed down in those schemes, they never think of the pleasant and beautiful capacities that God has given them." The Schoolmaster, warming up to his former didacticism, "pit[ied] such people" because they "enjoy no true pleasure; ... they are all gross, sensual, and low." Forgetting his enemy and the new benevolent feeling he felt toward him, Whitman returned to his former arguments as to the origins of all evil: "I would have men cultivate their dispositions for kindness." This disposition made everyone "disdain to be hemmed in by the formal mummeries of fashion" and proved "all pleasures of dollars and cents are dross to those of loving and being beloved." Here he revisited the Schoolmaster's original argument: When we find ourselves through politics, money, fashion, business or the market, we lose our way.⁶⁹

⁶⁶Loving 49.

⁶⁷Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 74. Reynolds, more than any other biographer of Whitman, delves extensively into these "lost" seven months.

⁶⁸"bis" is typically used in music to mean "again" or as a direction to "repeat" (*Mirriam-Webster Dictionary*, <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>).

⁷⁰Walt Whitman, "Sun-Down Papers: From the Desk of a Schoolmaster, no. 9 *bis*," *Long-Island Democrat*, July 6, 1841, in *Collected Writing* 29.

In "Sun-Down Papers no. 9 *bis*," Whitman attempted to stabilize the Schoolmaster persona that he had nearly set askew in number nine. When temperate, this persona offered a means by which to prove all conflicting parties were essentially one. Walter Whitman, the country schoolteacher from burgeoning New York, railed against the perceived idiocy of the villagers around him. As Walter Whitman, he competed within a factionalized social order. However, as Schoolmaster, he played above the fracas. From this "neutral" ground he could silence debates by "seeing" the Republic in its singularity. In this respect, the Schoolmaster acted like a very early version of the transcendent Bard in *Leaves of Grass*. It is perhaps too obvious to again note the irony of an author railing against affectation through a constructed persona, and some scholars have pointed out that this dilemma was endemic to sentimental culture itself.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the Schoolmaster allowed Whitman, at least on paper, to play a role that claimed political impartiality and universal good tidings in a social and political environment where faction and partisanship increasingly became accepted as normal.

The Great Clam Excursion

Whitman published the tenth and final of the "Sun-Down Papers" in July 1841 after he returned to Manhattan and gave up a career in schoolteaching altogether.⁷¹ The historical record is silent as to why he published this last piece in the *Long-Island Farmer* (which was the same newspaper that attacked Whitman less than a year before), why he published it after he quit teaching, and why he wrote this last essay still in the persona of the Schoolmaster. Whitman did not publish editorials again until February 1842 and, by then, had left this persona behind. The tone of this last in the series of "Sun-Down Papers" reflected a shift in Whitman's circumstances and formed a bridge to his new position as an editor of a city newspaper.

The tenth of the "Sun-Down Papers" centered on the story of a clamming trip to the South Bay of Long Island. This recollection raises some question as to Whitman's location during this experience. A scan of the map of Long Island reveals that the distance between Manhattan and the South Bay coast

⁷⁰Halttunen 122-123.

⁷¹Loving 50.

would force Whitman and his crew of fifteen to traverse a distance that makes a day trip unlikely. Therefore, the timing of Whitman's excursion in this final editorial is in question. The essay could reflect a daytrip taken when Whitman taught in the South Bay town of Babylon in the winter of 1837-1838, making the essay a recollection of events nearly four years before. Whatever the case, Whitman sought to uphold his persona of the Long Island country schoolteacher in this final essay.

For the first time, Whitman introduced characters in short sketches. Bromero had a "narrow-brimed straw hat." "Senor" Cabinet wore a "sedate face." Captain Sears had his "usual pleasant look." Kirbus brought his gun and breathed "destruction to snipe." Unlike in his previous essays, the Schoolmaster's didacticism never surfaced. Instead, the narrative unfolded into subtle symbolism. The diverse party of men hoisted the American flag on a "clam-rake handle ... very much to our own pleasure, and the edification no doubt of all patriotic beholders." In this way, the gaggle of men represented the masculine American republic writ small.

Mishaps and incidents abounded on the trip: Kirbus came close to shooting a wild duck. Senor Cabinet got the back of his black coat wet in the salt water. The crew sang "Auld Lang Syne" and "Home Sweet Home" to "great taste and effect." Some of the party swam in the water. Others "valorously" searched for clams. One member of the group, Smith, rowed out into the water and "hauling and pulling there nearly an hour" caught only a single clam "and ... was contented to return from whence he came." According to the Schoolmaster, this effort upheld the truth "of the old maxim: 'Let well enough alone.'" The high points of the day included the "astonishing appetite of Cabinet," Bromero's "laughable stories," a hat lost in the water, only to be recovered by Smith at the loss "of a short necked pipe which had for many days before been safely kept," and the cutting up of the very few clams caught into bits "in the vain hope of nabbing some stray members of the finny tribe." The Schoolmaster passed over these "and other important matters" to relate to the reader that, though empty handed, "we returned home perfectly safe in body, sound in limb, much refreshed in soul, and in perfect good humour and satisfaction with one another."

Through the clam excursion, the Schoolmaster reconstructed his vision of the aesthetically just. The men of this little republic, with their American flag and clam rakes, left the ambitions of their lives and wives behind them. Likewise, they left behind the social hierarchy of the town and allowed their underlying and unaffected qualities to come to the fore. Some sang. Some shot. One member of the "Spouting Club" quoted "specimens of Shakespearian eloquence" and, thereafter, his friends jokingly called him a "whaler." Some things were lost and others found. The hoped-for clams only justified the experience of fraternal good times. To make this point, the Schoolmaster, in a postscript to the essay, informed the reader that the married men of the crew "bought several shillings' worth of eels and clams, probably in order to ward off the danger that would inevitably have followed their return empty-handed." The Schoolmaster implied that wives could not know the joys of an excursion devoid of profit; as natural consumers, they did not understand that work had its own intrinsic fraternal value.⁷²

The clam outing proved to be the beginning of a change in Whitman's style, though not a shift in his message. Formerly didactic in the first nine "Sun-Down Papers," the Schoolmaster became subtle in his last essay. Where he previously stated his thesis in no uncertain terms, the truth now unveiled itself. One's identity was in-born and material. Each identity, though different, had equal value. The difference manifested itself in what one did (professionally and socially) and, therefore, one's natural identity determined one's role in the Republic. Some people were "whalers," some dedicated seekers, some storytellers, some swimmers. Sometimes people lost their hat only to find it at the expense of a valued pipe. Sometimes the goal of an excursion proved secondary to the excursion itself. Affectation was both silly and dangerous because it sought to cover what was simple and obviously true and wring value from things that were essentially worthless. In the miniature republic of clam hunters, Whitman did not have to describe his compatriots' true qualities. The facts spoke for themselves.

When Whitman returned to New York City and the printing business in 1841, he had ten "Sun-Down" articles in his portfolio. Instead of re-entering the craftsman side of printing, he joined the burgeoning and economically precarious profession of journalism. The "Sun-Down Papers" created a

niche for Whitman that helped him get a job as an editor. In 1842, the owners of the *New York Aurora*, a Democratic paper, hired him specifically because of his “bold” and “original” writing.⁷³

At the *Aurora*, Whitman built a new persona of editor upon the foundations of the Schoolmaster. In this new persona, he avoided the didacticism of his former essays and, ironically for the unhappy schoolteacher, made public education one of his hallmark topics.

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⁷³“The publishers of the *Aurora* would respectfully announce to their friend and public that they have secured the services of Mr. Walter Whitman, favorably known as a bold, energetic, and original writer as their leading editor” (*New York Aurora*, March 28, 1842).

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