Kenneth M. Price

WHITMAN'S INFLUENCE ON HAMLIN GARLAND'S *ROSE OF DUTCHER'S COOLLY*

Although much attention has been paid to the Whitman tradition in American poetry, it has been largely overlooked that novelists, rather than poets, were the first to make significant use of *Leaves of Grass*. Ironically, it may have been the attempt to ban Whitman's poetry in Boston in 1882 that moved novelists to draw on Whitman's work. The suppression controversy brought renewed attention to Whitman's sexual themes and thus, by contrast, emphasized the reticence and evasiveness that marked the conventional treatment of sex in literature. Until the final decades of the nineteenth century, as Henry James noted, novelists regularly neglected "whole categories of manners, whole corpuscular classes and provinces." Most respected English and American fiction was marked by an "immense omission," what James called "a mistrust of any but the most guarded treatment of the great relation between men and women, the constant world-renewal."[1] At the turn of the century, Whitman helped several writers overcome the limitations of gentility and revitalize the novel. Repeatedly, writers drew on Whitman's ideas when criticizing conventional marriage based on polarized gender roles and the submission of wives to husbands. Even before Kate Chopin's extensive use of Whitman in *The Awakening* (1899) and E. M. Forster's more oblique use of Whitman in *A Room With A View* (1908), Hamlin Garland illustrated how writers dissatisfied with the prevailing marital ideology could gain inspiration from Whitman's candor, his free love themes, his questioning of gender roles, his democratizing of relationships, and his focus on companionship.

In *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895), Garland created one of the first American novels to depict the developing sexuality of a young girl as she matures into a woman. Rose becomes a "new woman" of the 1890's intent on self-development and on establishing a companionate relationship rather than a traditional marriage. Garland's feminism cannot, of course, be attributed only to his reading of Whitman. At the most general level, as Robert Bray argues, Garland profited from "development stories" including

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-1872), and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1873-1876). More specifically, in helping James Herne produce the realistic drama *Margaret Fleming* in 1890-1891, Garland sharpened his thinking on the double standard of sexual morality. Further, Garland's close association in the 1890's with B. O. Flower and the *Arena*, a radical journal dedicated to social and religious reform, kept him immersed in the debate concerning the "new woman." When Garland published *Crumbling Idols* in 1894, his interest in the role of women and in innovative literature appeared in his remarks on Ibsen:

> Ibsen's treatment of woman stamps his radical departure from old standards more clearly, perhaps, than any other point. . . .
>
> Dramatically, Ibsen's women are centres of action; not passive dramatic "bones of contention," but *active agents in their turn*. Indeed, they take the play in their own hands at times. They . . . are out in the world, the men's world. . . . They are grappling, not merely with affairs, but with social problems.[2]

Of all the influences on *Rose*, however, Whitman was probably the most important. Garland had admired Whitman since 1884 when he first read *Leaves of Grass* in the Boston Public Library (where it was double-starred to indicate restricted circulation). During the late 1880s and early 1890s, Garland wrote essays and lectured about Whitman, corresponded with the poet and members of his circle, interviewed the bard in Camden, taught *Leaves of Grass*, wrote a memorial poem, "A Tribute of Grasses," and, in general, promoted Whitman's verse with great energy. Indeed, in his history of American literature, "The Evolution of American Thought" (unpublished but delivered in lecture form), Garland argued for Whitman's central place in the nation's literary development.[3] By the early 1890s when Garland began *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, he was ready to explore Whitman's theme of "healthy" sex in a full-length novel.

In *Rose* both the frank treatment of sexuality and the praise of companionate relationships ("comrades") owe much to Whitman. Rose's

sexuality is an issue throughout the book: in the opening pages, John Dutcher, a Wisconsin farmer, worries about raising his daughter alone after the death of his wife. A curious child, Rose asks her father how she came to be born. Dutcher feels awkward at even the thought of discussing reproduction with his daughter. Although he lacks intellectual sophistication and conversational skills, Dutcher is the first of four kind and sensitive older men in Rose's life. Father and daughter develop a companionate relationship that will later serve as a model for other alliances: "Her comradeship was sweet to John Dutcher" and he found himself "completely . . . companioned by Rose."[4]

Like one of Ibsen's heroines, Rose establishes herself in "the world, the men's world." In general, Garland is at pains to create Rose as a character free from prescribed gender roles. As a child, she pursues gophers and bugs and beetles, leads her schoolmates in building a stove, excels in sports, dresses in an untrammelled fashion, and thinks nothing of having dirt and warts on her hands. Her "heart rebelled" the few times she encountered "sex distinction," once in the winter classroom in which the boys had established the right to segregate the room and to sit nearer the fire, and again when the boys drive the girls away from the swimming hole. Like Whitman's famous twenty-ninth bather, "she looked longingly at the naked little savages running about and splashing in the water. There was something so fine and joyous in it." It seemed unfair that the boys could "strip and have a good time, but girls must primp around and try to keep nice and clean."[5]

As if to underscore Rose's freedom from prescribed societal norms, Garland entitles the second chapter "Childlife, Pagan Free." A type of pastoralism contributes to the depiction of Rose's sexuality. Garland's pastoralism, like that frequently employed in Edwardian and Georgian literature, is "less a matter of shepherdesses and sheep than a mode by which the civilized imagination exempts itself from the claims of its own culture."[6] Garland evades many of his culture's assumptions about women by lifting Rose out of time. Occasionally, when Rose was alone

> she slipped off her clothes and ran amid the tall corn-stalks like a wild thing. . . . Some secret, strange delight, *drawn from ancestral sources*, bubbled over from her pounding heart, and she ran until wearied and sore with the rasping corn leaves, then she sadly put on civilized dress once more. [emphasis added]

Again, after picking berries one June day, Rose and her friends become "carried out of themselves" as they respond to the "sweet and wild and primeval scene." They play games "centuries old" and enact mock marriage ceremonies. Rose, paired with Carl, has "forgotten home and kindred" as she lives "a strange new-old life, old as history, wild and free once more." When Carl puts his head in Rose's lap, she feels her first surge of passion and yearns "to take his head in her arms and kiss it. Her muscles ached and quivered with something she could not fathom."[7] Garland attempts to gain perspective by placing sex in a primitive context, by moving "beyond culture" and the particular mores of time and place.[8] This, of course, was precisely what Garland's contemporaries had seen Whitman accomplish. (Willa Cather wrote in 1896 that Whitman is "sensual . . . in the frank fashion of the old barbarians"; John Burroughs wrote in the same year that "Whitman has the virtues of the primal and savage"; and George Santayana argued in 1900 that Whitman possesses "the innocent style of Adam.")[9] Garland followed Whitman in employing one of the central strategies of modernism: the revitalizing and reassessing of the present by means of the primitive.

Garland, however, is inconsistent in his treatment of sex: sometimes he presents it in light of primitive purity and at other times he displays ambivalence about sex and the changing role of women. Garland waxes Whitmanian in his praise of "the healthy, wholesome physical." For example, Garland describes Rose's "fine and pure physical joy" when, in the secrecy of her room, "she walked up and down, feeling the splendid action of her nude limbs." Yet after arguing that the "sweet and terrible attraction of men and women towards each other is as natural and as moral as the law of gravity," Garland goes on to say: "Its perversion produces trouble. Love must be good and fine and according to nature, else why did it give such joy and beauty?" It is not clear whether Garland regards Rose's one

significant mistake as a perversion. Rose's experience, before the age of fifteen, of youthful petting with Carl is something she must "live down." The daring introduction of this theme is somewhat offset by Garland's brief, vague, and decorous treatment of it. Rose is generally victorious over passion because of her "organic magnificent inheritance of moral purity." The descendant of "generations of virtuous wives and mothers, [she is] saved . . . from the whirlpool of passion."[10] As these last two passages suggest, Garland was a product of his time. Despite his attempt to move "beyond culture" and despite his ostensible acceptance of sexuality and freedom, Garland remained partly bound by conventional notions of purity and restraint.[11]

Rose moves beyond her physical attraction to Carl when she encounters William de Lisle, one of the circus performers, in the chapter entitled "Her First Ideal." Sexuality and spirituality, the real and the ideal, are not antithetical: these performers had "invested their nakedness with something which exalted them." Rose formulates her first "vast ambitions" when she dreams of "being his companion." William de Lisle "did her immeasureable good" because he moves her to yearn for comparable greatness as a scholar or writer and because he enabled Rose to escape "mere brute passion" and an early marriage.[12] It may seem incongruous that Garland links lofty aspirations to what is largely an erotic response. Yet for Garland the real and the ideal were not to be separated but united. Genteel writers failed, he believed, because they habitually divided life into exclusive spheres: love, art, and the ideal were opposed to sex and everyday experience. Garland, regarding himself as a "follower" of Whitman, attempted to break down restricting divisions. As he remarked in "The Evolution of American Thought," "the *idealization of the real* . . . underlies the whole theory of Whitman."

> He is master of the real, nothing daunts him. The mud and slush in the street, the gray and desolate sky, the blackened walls, the rotting timbers of the wharf — the greedy, the ragged, the prostitute — vulgarity, deformity, all — no matter how apparently low and common, his soul receives and transforms.[13]

Garland was committed to illustrating that Rose's sexual knowledge, experience, and fantasies produced neither personal nor social catastrophe. Instead, sex contributed to her overall development. No genuine understanding of Rose is possible, Garland argues implicitly, unless one perceives the difficulties and mistakes, the joy and general "healthiness" of Rose's sexual life.

William de Lisle stands alone as Rose's ideal until she encounters Dr. Thatcher. When she attends the University of Wisconsin, Rose lives with the Thatcher family, and Dr. Thatcher becomes an ideal more "substantial" though "less sweet and mythical" than de Lisle. William de Lisle was a vision in the distance; Thatcher, as a married man, is also distanced from Rose but at least she can regard him as "an uncle and adviser." Though Thatcher struggles with his more than avuncular attraction to Rose, he treats her with concern for her well being, her intellectual development, her growth as a person. William de Lisle had (unknowingly) helped her avert an early marriage by the power of his image; Thatcher tells Rose explicitly "you will do whatever you dream of — *provided* you don't marry." Thanks to these men and Mrs. Spencer (a female role model who recommends marriage only after thirty), Rose leaves Madison alone and eager to embark on the "open road."[14]

Garland's reference to Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" is appropriate because the buoyant optimism of that poem matches the hopefulness of Garland's novel. (To reinforce this allusion, Garland entitles a later chapter "Rose Sets Face Towards the Open Road.") Like Whitman, Rose has ordained herself "loos'd of limits and imaginary lines"; she goes where she chooses, her "own master total and absolute." When Rose moves to Chicago after college, she impresses nearly everyone with her talents. Only Warren Mason is critical. This brilliant middle-aged newspaperman and frustrated novelist sees great potential in Rose, but he understands that her poetry thus far is derivative, that it does little more than echo English classics.

Through Mason, Garland expresses many of his own ideas. With regard to marriage, Mason has little faith in "sentiment and lovelore." Moreover, as he tells his friend Sanborn, he is troubled by the

"possible woman." He "can't promise any woman to love her till death" because "another might come with a subtler glory, and a better fitting glamour, and then—." As Mason becomes increasingly attracted to Rose, he realizes that marriage might hinder her development. Eventually, by letter, Mason makes a proposal indebted to Whitman's ideals and language:

> I exact nothing from you. I do not require you to cook for me, nor keep house for me. You are mistress of yourself; to come and go as you please, without question and without accounting to me. You are at liberty to cease your association with me at any time, and consider yourself perfectly free to leave me whenever any other man comes with power to make you happier than I.
>
> I want you as comrade and lover, not as subject or servant, or unwilling wife. . . . You are a human soul like myself, and I shall expect you to be as free and sovereign as I, to follow any profession or to do any work which pleases you.[15]

In describing the Mason-Rose relationship, Garland draws on the spirit of "Song of the Open Road":

> Camerado, I give you my hand!
> I give you my love more precious than money,
> I give you myself before preaching or law;
> Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
> Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?[16]

Garland informs the reader that Mason's word "comrade" pleased Rose. "It seemed to be wholesome and sweet, and promised intellectual companionship never before possible to her."[17] However, the concept was far from pleasing to Garland's contemporaries who, because of Mason's stress on personal freedom, feared that he was proposing a free love union or a trial marriage. In fact, Garland may have had a marital experiment in mind, though he hastily retreated from any radical suggestion when he revised the book in 1899

and ended it with an explicit mention of a civil wedding (never mentioned in the 1895 edition) and with a glimpse of domestic bliss.[18]

Apparently, Garland changed the ending of *Rose* in response to the many negative reviews of the novel. Reviewer after reviewer deplored his "repulsive lack of reticence concerning . . . sex." One indignant reviewer concluded that what Garland presented was about "as true as the picture of a woman with cancer on her face would be to the true feminine countenance of our country."[19] Opposition was so severe that the book was barred from public libraries, and there was talk of banning it in New York and of excluding it from the mails.[20] Critics have argued that the harsh reviews of Garland's novel contributed to his "decline" from realism. If, however, Whitman was as central to Garland's conception of *Rose* as I have argued, two letters from John Burroughs, author of *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person* (1867), may have cut deepest. Garland probably looked for support from this close associate of Whitman. Instead, after reading the first chapter of *Rose*, Burroughs informed Garland that he found "disagreeable" the "little girl's curiosity about offspring . . . and the father's embarrassment." After claiming that "you know I go W.[alt] W.[hitman] entire," believing in "perfect candor or silence on such matters," Burroughs informed Garland that his chapter was not "true to life — the father would have turned the child off playfully, or with a little parable." After finishing the novel, Burroughs wrote again, offering insightful criticism about Garland's characterization of Rose *and* chastizing him for his "too pronounced" sexual theme:

> Some parts of [*Rose*] impressed me much. The Chicago portions are much the best. My criticisms of it would be that Rose does not justify your account of her by anything she says or does, — that you make too dead a set at her & do not let her exploit herself, that the reader does not feel that he is getting any authentic picture of Western life till your heroine reaches Chicago. Then I think you make the sex of Rose too pronounced: one expects her to turn out a regular man devourer. I think all prurient suggestion in a story is to be avoided, especially when the hand of the author is so conspicuous as in this story. This morbid sex-consciousness is one of the diseases of the age. . . . It is extraneous & plays no part in the story. In such a master as Ibsen the sex problem is vital & plays a part & one is not offended. It must be inevitable or not at all. I do not think Zola a safe guide in such matters. In one of his books a man gets up in the morning, puts his head out of the window for a sniff of fresh air, when his nose is regaled with the stink of human excrement. Why put that in even if true? The nasty, the stinking, the obscene are not to go in unless they are vital & the action demands them; then I never flinch. I do not think young girls are ever lecherous: young men have a vague attraction for them but it is only the perfume of sex as it were.[21]

When even those who claimed to go "W. W. entire" responded in such fashion, one begins to understand why Garland turned to writing Rocky Mountain romances.

Burroughs notwithstanding, the problem in *Rose* is not "prurient suggestion" — of which there is little indeed — but Garland's failure to integrate fully Whitman's themes with his own unconscious assumptions. The idea of comradeship is undermined because Garland too frequently depicts Rose as subservient. We are told that her father functioned as her "hero and guide," that William de Lisle was "a man fit to be her guide," that Dr. Thatcher's "dominion [over Rose] was absolute," and that Mason "always . . . dominated her."[22] Unwittingly, Garland further weakened his praise of equality by presenting Rose as a character who really seeks another father rather than a comrade. The oedipal warp in her affections is unmistakable: de Lisle, Thatcher, and Mason are all significantly older than she is, and the men her own age are regarded as dull. Finally, Garland weakens his theme of equality by suggesting that Rose finds fulfillment and identity not in her self but in her union with Mason.

Some of the inconsistencies in *Rose* can be attributed to intellectual failings, but others probably resulted from Garland's unresolved psychological conflicts. There is a strong autobiographical element in *Rose*, and although Garland has reversed the sexual roles, one might speculate about the analogies

between Rose's strong link to her father, movement to the city, development as a poet, and late marriage and Garland's own strong attachment to his mother, removal to Boston, growth as a writer, and long bachelorhood. Just as Rose's search for a comrade is undermined in so far as she regards men as heroes and guides, so too is Garland's use of Whitman — his literary father — damaging to the extent that he accepts Whitman's ideas uncritically and fails to make them his own. In many places the novel illustrates the accuracy of Henry James's harsh verdict on Garland: he was the "soaked sponge of his air and time."[23] Garland endorsed Whitman's ideas in *Rose*, but because he had not sufficiently internalized these ideas, the novel —for all its power — is at odds with itself.

NOTES

[1] *Theory of Fiction: Henry James*, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1972), pp. 342-43.

[2] See Robert Bray, "Hamlin Garland's *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*," *Great Lakes Review*, 3 (1976), 5 and Garland, *Crumbling Idols*, ed. Jane Johnson (1894; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 90-91.

[3] See Kenneth M. Price, "Hamlin Garland's 'The Evolution of American Thought': A Missing Link in the History of Whitman Criticism," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 3 (1985), 1-20.

[4] Garland, *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, ed. Donald Pizer (1895; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1969), p. 25.

[5] *Rose*, p. 17.

[6] Linda Dowling, "The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890's," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 33 (1979), 449.

[7] *Rose*, pp. 19 and 29-31.

[8] The quoted phrase is from Dowling, p. 450.

[9] Cather's comment first appeared in the *Nebraska State Journal* for January 19, 1986; it is reprinted in *Critical Essays on Walt Whitman*, ed. James Woodress (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), p. 177. For Burroughs, see *Walt Whitman: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Milton Hindus (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 251. For Santayana, see "The Poetry of Barbarism" in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 178.

[10] *Rose*, pp. 310, 63, 128, 83, 127, and 120.

[11] Donald Pizer, "Introduction," *Rose*, p. xviii.

[12] *Rose*, pp. 55, 61, and 62.

[13] Price, "Hamlin Garland's 'The Evolution of American Thought,' " p. 14.

[14] *Rose*, pp. 151 and 143.

[15] *Rose*, pp. 309, 380.

[16] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1965), p. 159.

[17] *Rose*, pp. 382-83.

[18] For differing interpretations of what kind of marriage Garland had in mind in the 1895 version, compare Pizer "Introduction," pp. xxxii-xxxiii and Bray, "Hamlin Garland's *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*," p. 14 n. 11.

[19] See William Morton Payne, *The Dial*, 20 (February 1, 1896), 80 and the anonymous review in *The Independent*, 48 (February 6, 1896), 189. Both pieces are reprinted, in *Critical Essays on Hamlin Garland*, ed. James Nagel (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), pp. 61 and 64-65.

[20] Donald Pizer, *Hamlin Garland's Early Work and Career* (1960; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1969), pp. 166 and 196 n. 60.

[21] John Burroughs to Hamlin Garland, January 7, 1896 and February 14, 1896 in the Hamlin Garland Papers at the University of Southern California Library.

[22] *Rose*, pp. 24, 60, 113, and 303.

[23] The remark by James is quoted in B. R. McElderry, Jr., "Hamlin Garland and Henry James," *American Literature*, 23 (1952), 435.