

WALTER WHITMAN, "THE CHILD AND THE PROFLIGATE" (1844).

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Introduction

In 1841 Walt Whitman became a resident of New York City. The occupational journey he was destined to travel began in printing and eventually led him to journalism. Over the next several years, Whitman would work for various newspapers and present many short stories and poems for publication. Between 1841 and 1848, nearly two dozen of Whitman's short stories were published, many of them undergoing various alterations with each publication. Among these narratives was "The Child and the Profligate," which originally appeared in *New World* as "The Child's Champion." This original publication took place in November of 1841. Three years later, in 1844, a new version of the story appeared in *The Columbian Magazine* under the revised title, "The Child and the Profligate." According to Micheal Moon, who discusses both versions of the story in his book, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (1991), the first version of the story displays homoerotic overtones while the later version presents the narrative as more of a temperance tale.

In his biography, *Walt Whitman's America* (1995), David Reynolds comments that "The Child and the Profligate" was published more often than any other Whitman story beside "Death in the School-Room" (76). The small pool of criticism on this particular tale, however, has centered on a consistent range of topics which are identified by Patrick McGuire in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (1998) as regeneration, temperance, and homoeroticism (114).

Jerome Loving briefly mentions "The Child and the Profligate" in his biography, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (1999), identifying it as "clumsy in plot and stiff in narrative" (53). Reynolds' criticism focuses on the violence between the youth and the adult male sailor, suggesting that the story shows the "underside of homoeroticism" (77). It is Michael Moon, in his quest to examine elements of self-censorship in *Leaves of Grass*, who delves into the homoerotic nature of "The Child and the Profligate." Moon argues that the story represents an "encoding of one kind of discourse," homoerotic love, "within another in the period," the temperance movement (57). Moon suggests that Whitman uses the theme of flowing liquid to signify the flushing away and purification of cultural norms. He also points out that Whitman subdues the bold

homoerotic overtones in revised editions of the story, choosing instead to focus more on the elements of temperance.

A close reading of this temperance tale reveals it is a sense of duty that thwarts the dissipation of the profligate and guarantees the child a brighter future. The 1828 version of Noah Webster's Dictionary defines duty as "that which a person owes to another; that which a person is bound, by any natural, moral or legal obligation, to pay, do or perform." Examining the sailors, Langton, and Charles reveals a cast of characters that present a spectrum of duty, ranging from no sense of duty at all to a deep sense of duty to one's mother and one's word.

Toward the genesis of the story we find Charles, the youth who is the narrative's voice of change, complaining to his mother about his hard life as an apprentice to a greedy taskmaster. Charles declares that he is on the cusp of running away "to sea or somewhere else," claiming he would rather "be in his grave" than endure his current circumstances (150). Thus the story lends its first introduction to the sea as the place you go when you are no longer willing to perform the duties assigned by a cruel employer. This detail prepares the reader to meet the sailors that will spend most of the narrative "engaged in a drunken frolic" (150).

The story implies that the life of a sailor provides a man with a span of time on land that is not driven by any purpose but man's willingness to fulfill his own desires. Whitman does not reveal that the sailors have any homestead or family obligations, as he does for the other characters of the story. The sailors are presented as men who have no other purpose than to spend their afternoon getting soused. Indeed, the boy has worked a full day when he encounters the group of sailors that are "quite drunk," intimating that they have been drinking for some time (150).

The sailors are characterized as intemperate individuals who influence others in a negative manner. Their intemperance is displayed when they all gather in the center of the room for a drink. Whitman notes that "a goodly amount of the fluid was spilled upon the floor" (151). It seems that the sailors are so lost in their reverie, they are unable to transfer the liquid from the cup to their mouths without much of it ending up on the floor. Their lack of any duty has led them to spend the day in a bar; their day in the bar has led them to this degenerate

state, exemplified by their inability to control themselves.

It is a sailor who "put his brawny hands under the boy's arms and lifted him into" the public house (151). He is brought into a place where he is encouraged to engage in a practice his mother has asked him to eschew. The sailor attempts to force the boy to partake of his own inebriation. When the boy thwarts the attempt to make him consume alcohol, the sailor grabs the boy and begins to kick him, in an irrational display of anger. Reynolds suggests that this assault scene has "overtones of rape" as the boy is "assaulted on the backside by an overeager man" (76). Whether one agrees with Reynolds' analysis of inappropriate sexual activity, Reynolds is correct to characterize the man as "overeager" or so eager that control is not viable. Even when the sailor is brought to his senses after accosting the boy, he encourages the cavorting to continue, and the narrative reveals that soon everything was "upon its former footing" (152). Clearly, even when the sailors witness the consequences of their detrimental behavior, their course does not change. The sailors are void of the sense of duty that is a driving force in Charles's life.

Charles's first actions display a commitment to filial duty. When the reader is introduced to Charles, the narrator reveals that his mother is waiting for him, as he usually comes and spends time with her "after finishing his daily task" (149). As Charles enters the narrative, he is soaked with his own sweat after a day of hard labor, yet, his commitment to his mother has compelled him to walk the distance to her house. After conveying his discontentment with his life and his job, Charles's mother says what she needs to say to enable him to continue on with the duties he has been contracted to perform. When Charles leaves his mother, it is not a mistake that he "bent his step's toward his master's house" (150). There is a relationship of duty between the mother and the son. The mother feels the duty to soothe Charles and to give him the tools he needs to perform the labor that would one day enable him to "be his own master" (150). Charles feels a duty to his mother that is exhibited by his coming to see her, by his listening to her counsel in time of distress, and by his willingness to follow her advice and proceed back to his place of employment. Finally, he also shows a resolve to respect his duty as an apprentice to his hard and ungenerous master.

It is when Charles wanders from the path of duty for a moment that he finds himself in trouble. "Half a dozen footsteps" from the road he was traveling took him to the window of the public house and would propel him into the midst of the sailor's scene. This is the only time in the story that Charles actively steps away from his sense of duty. And by its outcome, the narrator reveals the dangers of shirking our sense of duty, even for a moment.

Charles kindly refuses the alcoholic drink he is offered by the sailor. When the sailor continues to urge him to partake, however, Charles's words illuminate his sense of duty, "my mother has often prayed me not to drink, and I promised to obey her" (151). This is a literal statement of filial duty. Charles owes it to his mother to keep his promise. Taking the drink would be to reject the duty that he feels toward his mother and fulfill nothing of merit, as he feels no duty toward the sailor. Not only does Charles politely refuse the alcohol offered to him, he is also willing to defend his sense of duty with force, striking the arm of the sailor who is trying to make him drink the liquor (151).

Charles represents a stark contrast to the rest of the characters occupying the public house. His unwillingness to dishonor his word to his mother and the scene that follows evoke different responses from different characters. It is no mistake that the sailors, who have no sense of duty, respond to Charles with laughter and an increasing sense of merriment as the intensity of the encounter between the sailor and the boy escalates. The sailors hear Charles proclaim his sense of filial duty, but they are only able to respond with merriment instead of respect.

There is one character, the profligate of the story, to whom the words of the boy become life changing. Whitman allows the reader to survey the public house through the eyes of the boy before he is yanked in through the window. After noticing the sailors, Charles turns his eye toward a man who is "enjoying the spree" but "in every other particular seems to be out of his element" (159). This man, later named as Langton, is oscillating between two worlds. The boy observes that his apparel is fashionable and his demeanor "had the air of city life and society" (150). Yet it is also clear that he is comfortable with this particular crowd as he regales them with his dirty jokes. Whitman presents the profligate as a man who has allowed his life to decline into a state of dissipation.

It is not only apparel or presentation that sets Langton apart from his companions. It is also his response to Charles's display

of duty. While the sailors respond with a sense of merriment, Langton is moved by Charles's words that remind him of "a period when he was more pure and innocent" (151). Reynolds comments that Langton's "conscience has been aroused by the boy's exemplary virtue" (76). Langton has lived a life in which a sense of duty is central, but he has shirked his sense of duty for a life of dissipation. He is able to recognize the pure sense of duty that the young boy displays. Langton is able to remember a time when his mother advised him against drinking, and the wound of walking away from his filial duty is felt strongly. Indeed, Langton's central problem seems to be that he has lost those to whom he felt a sense of duty. The narrative reveals that he is now "parentless" and that he "lived without any steady purpose, that he had no one to attract him to his home" (152). Langton's profligate nature seems to extend from a lack of accountability and honor that a sense of duty brings to the life of a young man. Langton is able to recognize in Charles something that he once had and would like to have again.

At the close of the story, the reformation of the profligate is presented by the revelation of several details: his new commitment to care for Charles and Charles's widowed mother, "how he enjoyed his home again," and how "he became the head of a family of his own" (153). Whitman could have just as easily wrote that Langton's renewed sense of duty brought on his restoration. Indeed, it is Charles's display of duty in the public house that moves Langton, sending him to sleep at night with "thoughts of a worthy action performed," his duty to his fellow man. As Langton's process of restoration progresses, he begins to connect himself to people to which he now owes something. He first aligns himself with Charles and Charles's poverty-stricken mother. Langton now owes it to them to keep his word and take care of them. Then we find at the close of the story that Langton has acquired his own family and must be the head of his own household.

Note on the Text

"The Child and the Profligate" has been faithfully transcribed from *The Columbian Magazine* 2 (October 1844): 149-53. In the original, semi-colons are often evenly spaced between parts of the sentence, and exclamation points can stand away from the final word of the sentence. For this edition, however, the spacing about such punctuation marks has been standardized according to the convention of the present day. Finally, the text preserves two typo-

graphical errors ("heard-wrung" for "hard-wrung" and "thralldom" for "thralldom").

The Child and the Profligate.

By Walter Whitman, Author
of "The Merchant's Clerk."

"They say 'tis pleasant on the lip,
And merry on the brain—
They Say it stirs the sluggish blood,
And dulls the tooth of pain.
Ay—but within its gloomy deeps
A stinging serpent, unseen, sleeps."
Willis.

Among the victims of the passion for strong drink the greater part become so, I have observed, not from any ignorance of the danger of the path they pursue, but from weakness and irresolution of mind. To the abstemious it is almost impossible to convey an idea of the strength of the desire, formed, after a while, in a habitual drinker. No one can know, except him who has realized it himself. The world points with contempt at the inebriate, and laughs him to scorn that he does not turn from the error of his ways. But oh, if the agony of his struggles could be seen—if the vain and impotent efforts he makes to disentangle himself from the thralldom of his tyrant—if the sharp shame, the secret tears, the throes of mortification and conscious disgrace—were apparent to those who condemn so severely, one little drop of sorrow might certainly be mingled with their anger.

Now and then, though rarely, it does happen that something occurs which turns the tide and converts the drinker into a reformed man. And it is strange to observe how small and trivial are frequently the causes of this change. A word merely, or an unimportant action, or a casual incident not out of the ordinary routine, forms the starting point whence the hitherto miserable one commences a reformation which ere long presents him to the world with a clearer head and a purer soul. Such a word, it may be—such an incident—stirs up the fountains of thought, brings back memories long passed away and awakens the man to beautiful and pathetic recollections of an earlier and more innocent age. Thus fully awakened, and with the genial influence of the time in all its sway over him, if the crisis turns for good, it will surely be consummated for good. But should it turn to wickedness again, God have mercy on the fated being!

The incidents of my little narrative are simple and unromantic enough, and yet I hope they will not be found without interest.

I tell no tale of fiction either. There are those now in this metropolis who will peruse the tale and acknowledge in their own minds' consciousness of its unadorned truth.

Just after sunset, one evening in summer, that pleasant hour when the air is balmy, the light loses its glare and all around is imbued with soothing quiet, on the door step of a house there sat an elderly woman waiting the arrival of her son. The house was in a straggling village some fifty miles from New York city. She who sat on the door step was a widow; her neat white cap covered locks of gray, and her dress, though neat, was exceedingly homely. Her house—for the tenement she occupied was her own—was very little and very old. Trees clustered around it so thickly as almost to hide its color—that blackish gray color which belongs to old wooden houses that have never been painted; and to get in it you had to enter a little rickety gate and walk through a short path, bordered by carrot beds and beets and other vegetables. The son whom she was expecting was her only child. About a year before he had been bound apprentice to a rich farmer in the place, and after finishing his daily task he was in the habit of spending half an hour at his mother's. On the present occasion the shadows of night had settled heavily before the youth made his appearance. When he did, his walk was slow and dragging, and all his motions were languid, as if from great weariness. He opened the gate, came through the path and sat down by his mother in silence.

"You are sullen to-night, Charley," said the widow, after a moment's pause, when she found that he returned no answer to her greetings.

As she spoke she put her hand fondly on his head; it was as wet as if it had been dipped in the water. His shirt, too, was soaked; and as she passed her fingers down his shoulder she felt a sharp twinge in her heart, for she knew that moisture to be her heard—wrung sweat of severe toil, exacted from her young child (he was but thirteen years old) by an unyielding task master.

"You have worked hard to-day, my son."

"I've been mowing."

The widow's heart felt another pang.

"Not *all day*, Charley?" she said, in a low voice; and there was a slight quiver in it.

"Yes, mother, all day," replied the boy; "Mr. Ellis said he couldn't afford to hire men, for wages are so high. I've swung the scythe ever since an hour before sunrise. Feel of my hands."

There were blisters on them like great lumps. Tears started in the widow's eyes. She dared not trust herself with a reply,

thought her heart was bursting with the thought that she could not better his condition. There was no earthly means of support on which she had dependence enough to encourage her child in the wish she knew he was forming—the wish not uttered for the first time—to be freed from his bondage.

"Mother," at length said the boy, "I can stand it no longer. I cannot and will not stay at Mr. Ellis's. Ever since the day I first went into his house I've been a slave; and if I have to work there much longer I know I shall run away and go to sea or somewhere else. I'd as lieve be in my grave as there." And the child burst into a passionate fit of weeping.

His mother was silent, for she was in deep grief herself. After some minutes had flown, however, she gathered sufficient self-possession to speak to her son in a soothing tone, endeavoring to win him from his sorrows and cheer up his heart. She told him that time was swift—that in the course of a few years he would be his own master—that all people have their troubles—with many other ready arguments which, though they had little effect in calming her own distress, she hoped would act as a solace to the disturbed temper of the boy. And as the half hour to which he was limited had now elapsed she took him by the hand and led him to the gate, to set forth on his return. The child seemed pacified, though occasionally one of those convulsive sighs that remain after a fit of weeping, would break from his throat. At the gate he threw his arms about his mother's neck; each pressed a long kiss on the lips of the other, and the youngster bent his steps toward his master's house.

As her child passed out of sight the widow returned, shut the gate and entered her lonesome room. There was no light in the old cottage that night—the heart of its occupant was dark and cheerless. Love, agony, and grief, and tears, and convulsive wrings were there. The thought of a beloved son condemned to labor—labor that would break down a man—struggling from day to day under the hard rule of a soulless gold-worshipper; the knowledge that years must pass thus; the sickening idea of her own poverty and of living mainly on the grudging charity of neighbors—thoughts, too, of former happy days—these racked the widow's heart and made her bed a sleepless one and without repose.

The boy bent his steps to his employer's, as has been said. In his way down the village street he had to pass a public house, the only one the place contained; and when he came off against it he heard the sound of a fiddle-drowned, however, at intervals, by much laughter and talking. The windows

were up, and the house standing close to the road, Charles thought it no harm to take a look and see what was going on within. Half a dozen footsteps brought him to the low casement, on which he leaned his elbow and where he had full view of the room and its occupants. In one corner was a room and its occupants. In one corner was an old man, known in the village as Black Dave—he it was whose musical performances had a moment before drawn Charles's attention to the tavern; and he it was who now exerted himself in a violent manner to give, with divers flourishes and extra twangs, a tune popular among that thick lipped race whose fondness for melody is so well known. In the middle of the room were five or six sailors, some of them quite drunk and others in the earlier stages of that process, while on benches around were more sailors and here and there a person dressed in landsmen's attire, but hardly behind the sea gentlemen in uproar and mirth. The individuals in the middle of the room were dancing; that is, they were going through certain contortions and shufflings, varied occasionally by exceeding hearty stamps upon the sanded floor. In short, the whole party were engaged in a drunken frolic, which was in no respect different from a thousand other drunken frolics, except, perhaps, that there was less than the ordinary amount of anger and quarrelling. Indeed every one seemed in remarkably good humor.

But what excited the boy's attention more than any other object was an individual, seated on one of the benches opposite, who, though evidently enjoying the spree as much as if he were an old hand at such business, seemed in every other particular to be far out of his element. His appearance was youthful. He might have been twenty-one or two years old. His countenance was intelligent and had the air of city life and society. He was dressed, not gaudily, but in every respect fashionably; his coat being of the finest black broadcloth, his linen delicate and spotless as snow, and his whole aspect that of one whose counterpart may now and then be seen upon the pavé in Broadway of a fine afternoon. He laughed and talked with the rest, and it must be confessed his jokes—like the most of those that passed current there—were by no means distinguished for their refinement or purity. Near the door was a small table, covered with decanters and with glasses, some of which had been used, but were used again indiscriminately, and a box of very thick and very long cigars.

One of the sailors—and it was he who made the largest share of the hubbub—had but one eye. His chin and cheeks were cov-

ered with large bushy whiskers, and altogether he had quite a brutal appearance.

"Come, boys," said this gentlemen; "come let us take a drink! I know you're all a getting dry. So, curse me if you sha'n't have a suck at me expense."

This polite invitation was responded to by a general moving of the company toward the table holding the before mentioned decanters and glasses. Clustering there around, each one helped himself to a very handsome portion of that particular liquor which suited his fancy; and steadiness and accuracy being at that moment by no means distinguishing traits of the arms and legs of the party, a goodly amount of the fluid was spilled upon the floor. This piece of extravagance excited the ire of the personage who gave the "treat;" and that ire was still farther increased when he discovered two or three loiterers who seemed disposed to slight his request to drink. Charles, as we have before mentioned, was looking in at the window.

"Walk up boys! walk up! Don't let there be any skulker among us, or blast my eyes if he shan't go down on his marrow bones and taste the liquor we have spilt! Hallo!" he exclaimed as he spied Charles; "hallo, you chap in the window, come her and take a sup!"

As he spoke he stepped to the open case-ment, put his brawny hands under the boy's arms and lifted him into the room bodily.

"There, my lads," said he, turning to his companions, "there's a new recruit for you. Not so coarse a one, either," he added as he took a fair view of the boy, who, though not what is called pretty, was fresh and manly looking, and large for his age.

"Come, youngster, take a glass," he continued. And he poured one nearly full of strong brandy.

Now Charles was not exactly frightened, for he was a lively fellow, and had often been at the country merry-makings and at the parties of the place; but he was certainly rather abashed at his abrupt introduction to the midst of strangers. So, putting the glass aside, he looked up with a pleasant smile in his new acquaintance's face.

"I've no need of anything now," he said, "but I'm just as much obliged to you as if I was."

"Poh! man, drink it down," rejoined the sailor; "drink it down—it won't hurt you."

And, by way of showing its excellence, the one-eyed worthy drained it himself to the last drop. Then filling it again, he renewed his efforts to make the lad go through the same operation.

"I've no occasion. Besides, *my mother has often prayed me not to drink*, and I promised to obey her."

A little irritated by his continued refusals, the sailor, with a loud oath, declared that Charles would swallow the brandy, whether he would or no. Placing one of his tremendous paws on the back of the boy's head, with the other he thrust the edge of the glass to his lips, swearing, at the same time, that if he shook it so as to spill its contents the consequences would be of a nature by no means agreeable to his back and shoulders.

Disliking the liquor, and angry at the attempt to overbear him, the undaunted child lifted his hand and struck the arm of the sailor with a blow so sudden that the glass fell and was smashed to pieces on the floor; while the liquid was about equally divided between the face of Charles, the clothes of the sailor, and the sand. By this time the whole of the company had their attention drawn to the scene. Some of them laughed when they saw Charles's undisguised antipathy to the drink; but they laughed still more heartily when he discomfited the sailor. All of them, however, were content to let the matter go as chance would have it—all but the young man of the black coat, who has been spoken of.

What was there in the words which Charles had spoken that carried the mind of the young man back to former times—to a period when he was more pure and innocent than now? "*My mother has often prayed me not to drink!*" Ah, how the mist of months rolled aside and presented to his soul's eye the picture of *his* mother, and the sound of an injunction conveyed in almost those very words! Why was it, too, that the young man's heart moved with a feeling kindness toward the somewhat harshly treated child? Was it that his associations had hitherto been among the vile, and the contrast was now so strikingly great? Even in the hurried walks of life and business may we meet with beings who seem to touch the fountains of our love, and draw forth their swelling waters! The wish to love and to be beloved, which the forms of custom and the engrossing anxiety for gain so generally smother, will sometimes burst forth in spite of all obstacles; and kindled by one who, till the hour, was unknown to us, will burn with a permanent and pure brightness!

Charles stood, his cheek flushed and his heart throbbing, wiping the trickling drops from his face with a handkerchief. At first the sailor, between his drunkenness and his surprise, was pretty much in the condition of one suddenly awakened out of a deep sleep, who cannot call his consciousness about him. When he saw the state of things, however, and heard the jeering laugh of his companions, his dull eye, lighting up with anger, fell upon the boy who had withstood

him. He seized Charles with a grip of iron, and with the side of his heavy boot gave him a sharp and solid kick. He was about repeating the performance—for the child hung like a rag in his grasp—but all of a sudden his ears rang, as if pistols snapped close to them; lights of various hues flickered in his eye, (he had but one, it will be remembered,) and a strong propelling power caused him to move from his position, and keep moving until he was brought up by the wall. A blow, a cuff given in such scientific and effectual manner that the hand from which it proceeded was evidently no stranger to the pugilistic art, had been suddenly planted in the ear of the sailor. It was planted by the young man in the black coat. He had watched with interest the proceedings of the sailor and the boy—two or three times he was on the point of interfering, and when the kick was given, his rage was uncontrollable. He sprang from his seat, and assuming, unconsciously however, the attitude of a boxer, he struck the sailor in a manner to cause to unpleasant sensations which have been described. And he would probably have followed up the attack in a manner by no means consistent with the sailor's personal safety, had not Charles, now thoroughly terrified, clung round his legs and prevented his advancing.

The scene was a strange one, and for the time quite a silent one. The company had started from their seats, and for a moment held breathless but strained positions. In the middle of the room stood the young man, in his not at all ungraceful attitude—every nerve out, and his eyes flashing brilliantly. He seemed rooted like a rock; and clasping him, with an appearance of confidence in his protection, hung the boy.

"Dare! you scoundrel!" cried the young man, his voice thick with passion, "dare to touch this boy again, and I'll thrash you till no sense is left in your body!"

The sailor, now partly recovered, made some gestures of a belligerent nature.

"Come on, drunken brute!" continued the angry youth; "I wish you would! You've not had half what you deserve!"

Upon sobriety and sense more fully taking their place in the brains of the one-eyed mariner, however, that worthy determined in his own mind that it would be most prudent to let the matter drop. Expressing therefore his conviction to that effect, adding certain remarks to the purport that he "meant no harm to the lad," that he was surprised at such a gentlemen being angry at "a little piece of fun," and so forth—he proposed that the company should go on with their jollity just as if nothing had happened. In truth, he of the single eye was not

a bad fellow at heart, after all; the fiery enemy whose advances he had so often courted that night, had stolen away his good feelings and set busy devils at work within him, that might have made his hands do some dreadful deed had not the stranger interposed.

In a few minutes the frolic of the party was upon its former footing. The young man sat down upon one of the benches, with the boy by his side, and while the rest were loudly laughing and talking they two conversed together. The stranger learned from Charles all the particulars of his simple story—how his father had died years since—how his mother worked hard for a bare living—and how he himself, for many dreary months, had been the servant of a hard hearted, avaricious master. More and more interested, drawing the child close to his side, the young man listened to his plainly told history—and thus an hour passed away.

It was now past midnight. The young man told Charles that on the morrow he would take steps to relieve him from his servitude—that for the present night the landlord would probably give him a lodging at the inn—and little persuading did the host need for that.

As he retired to sleep very pleasant thoughts filled the mind of the young man—thoughts of a worthy action performed—thoughts, too, newly awakened ones, of walking in a steadier and wiser path than formerly.

That roof, then, sheltered two beings that night—one of them innocent and sinless of all wrong—the other—oh, to that other what evil had not been present, wither in action or to his desires!

Who was the stranger? To those that, from ties of relationship or otherwise, felt an interest in him, the answer to that question was not pleasant to dwell upon. His name was Langton—parentless—a dissipated young man—a brawler—one whose too frequent companions were rowdies, blacklegs and swindlers. The New York police officers were not altogether strangers to his countenance; and certain reporters, who notice the proceedings there, had more than once received a fee for leaving out his name from the disgraceful notoriety of their columns. He had been bred to the profession of medicine; besides, he had a very respectable income, and his house was in a pleasant street on the west side of the city. Little of his time, however, did Mr. John Langton spend at his domestic hearth; and the elderly lady who officiated as his housekeeper was by no means surprised to have him gone for a week or a month

at a time, and she knowing nothing of his whereabouts.

Living as he did, the young man was an unhappy being. It was not so much that his associates were below his capacity—for Langton, though sensible and well bred, was by no means talented or refined—but that he lived without any steady purpose, that he had no one to attract him to his home, that he too easily allowed himself to be tempted—which caused his life to be, of late, one continued scene of dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction he sought to drive away (ah, foolish youth!) by the brandy bottle, and by mixing in all kinds of parties where the object was pleasure. One the present occasion he had left the city a few days before, and was passing his time at a place near the village where Charles and his mother lived. He fell in, during the day, with those who were his companions of the tavern spree; and thus it happened that they were all together. Langton hesitated not to make himself at home with any associate that suited his fancy.

The next morning the poor widow rose from her sleepless cot; and from that lucky trait of her nature which makes one extreme follow another, she set about her toil with a lightened heart. Ellis, the farmer, rose, too, short as the nights were, an hour before day; for his god was gain, and a prime article of his creed was to get as much work as possible from every one around him. He roused up all his people, and finding that Charles had not been home the preceding night, he muttered threats against him, and calling a messenger, to whom he hinted that any minutes which he stayed beyond exceeding a short period would be subtracted from his breakfast time, despatched him to the widow's to find what was her son about.

What was he about? He had a beautiful dream—and thus it was in seeming.

With one of the brightest and earliest rays of the warm sun a gentle angel entered his apartment, and hovered over him, and looked down with a pleasant smile, and blessed him. And the child thought his benefactor, the young man, was nigh, sleeping also. Noiselessly taking a stand by the bed, the angel bent over the boy's face and whispered strange words into his ear; it seemed to him like soft and delicate music. So the angel, pausing a moment, and smiling another and a doubly sweet smile, and drinking in the scene with his large soft eyes, bent over again to the boy's lips and touched them with a kiss, as the languid wind touches a flower. He seemed to be going now, and yet he lingered. Twice or thrice he bent over the brow of the young man—and went not. Now the angel was troubled;

for he would have pressed the young man's lips with a kiss, as he did the child's—but a spirit from Heaven, who touches anything tainted by evil thoughts, does it at the risk of having his breast pierced with pain, as with a barbed arrow. At that moment a very pale, bright ray of sunlight darted through the window and settled on the young man's features. Then the beautiful spirit knew that permission was granted him; so he softly touched the young man's face with his, and silently and swiftly wafted himself away on the unseen air.

In the course of the day Ellis was called upon by young Langton, and never perhaps in his life was the farmer puzzled more than at the young man's proposals—his desire to provide for the widow's family, a family that could do him no pecuniary good, and his willingness to disburse money for that purpose. In that department of Ellis's structure where the mind was, or ought to have been situated, there never had entered the slightest thought assimilating to those which actuated the young man in his benevolent movements. Yet Ellis was a church member and a country officer.

The widow, too, was called upon, not only that day, but the next and the next.

It needs not that I should particularize the subsequent events of Langton's and the boy's history—how the reformation of the profligate might be dated to begin from that time—how he gradually severed the guilty ties that had so long galled him—how he enjoyed his own home again—how the friendship of Charles and himself grew not slack with time—and how, when in the course of seasons he became head of a family of his own, he would shudder at the remembrances of his early dangers and his escapes. Often, in the bustle of day and silence of night, would be bless the utterance of those words, "*My mother prayed me not to drink!*"

Loved reader, own you the moral interwoven in this simple story? Let your children read it. To them draw forth moral—pause a moment ere your eye wanders to a different page—and dwell upon it.

Annotated Bibliography

Cohen, Matt. "Short Fiction, Whitman's (1841-1848)." *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings. Vol. 1. 1877. New York: Garland, 1998.

According to Matt Cohen Walt Whitman wrote nearly two dozen short stories that were published between 1841 and 1848 in news and literary publications. Many of the stories, like "The Child and the Profligate," underwent alteration over the years as they were republished. Cohen, importantly, notes that these particular writings

of Whitman reflect “the mass-market reading taste in the America of Whitman’s youth” (635). This is relevant to understanding why Whitman would have downplayed the homoerotic nature of an early version of “The Child and the Profligate” and emphasized more heavily the temperance motif. Cohen also explains that one part of the “popular taste in magazine fiction” was stories about the “conversion of guilty consciences,” which is an explanation of the transformation undergone by the character of Lankton in “The Child and the Profligate” (635). This article also notes that there is a tension present in Whitman’s early fiction between the need to write pieces that would be economically viable and pieces that would be considered artistic by the literary world of his day.

Loving, Jerome. *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Jerome Loving mentions the short story “The Child’s Champion” briefly in his biography, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*. Whitman’s early writings seem to be in keeping with the general motive of the nineteenth-century press to “instruct as well as to inform” (52). Loving explains that two thematic elements Whitman used over and over again were that of unloving fathers and preferred older brothers. Neither of these two themes appear in “The Child and the Profligate”, however. Loving suggests that the character of the drunken sailor who accosts the young boy in “The Child and the Profligate” could have been modeled on his older brother Jesse, a sailor who struggled with alcohol. Loving writes that “The Child’s Champion” is “clumsy in plot and stiff in narrative” (53). He also notes that the piece is moralistic enough to serve as a temperance tale in its 1844 version that appeared in the *Columbian Magazine* (53).

McGuire, Patrick. “Child and the Profligate, The.” *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings. Vol.1. 1877. New York: Garland, 1998.

“The Child and the Profligate” originally appeared in *New World* under the title “The Child’s Champion” on 20 November 1841. Several years later in 1844 the story resurfaced in *The Columbian Magazine* under its revised title. This article points out that the didactic purpose of the story is to show the reformation of a degenerate character, the defenselessness of the poor, and the greed of the task master. The elements of temperance that are in the story, according to the article, also surface in other works by Whitman, including his novel, *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate*. The article also hints to a “gentle” homoeroticism that is present between the young boy and his rescuer (115).

Moon, Michael. *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

In his quest to examine elements of self-censorship by Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*, Michael Moon analyzes the differing homoerotic

overtones displayed in Whitman’s short story “The Child’s Champion” and a later publication of the same story, “The Child and the Profligate.” In contrasting the two versions it becomes clear that Whitman exercised considerable self-censorship after the story’s original publication in 1841. Moon asserts that the many liquids which stream through the original story—the sweat, tears of crying, alcohol, Hudson River, and the fountain of Langton’s emotion “take on the function in the text of eroding and dissolving for Whitman and his reader the . . . cultural boundaries along which the official prescription of erotic love between males is maintained” (29). Put more plainly, Moon is arguing the Whitman uses the theme of flowing liquid to signify the flushing away and purification that needs to take place concerning the cultural norms that are in place in society in terms of relationships. However, in later versions of the story Whitman removes references to the young sailors liking Charles, to the one-eyed sailor attacking Charles’ backside, to the overflowing of Langton’s love-filled emotions, the reference of Charles and Langton holding communion, and the circumstance of Langton and Charles spending the night in the same bed. Rather the 1844 version, “The Child and the Profligate,” takes up more of a temperance cause and presents the concept of redeeming friendship in its closing lines. Moon proposes that Whitman downplayed the homoerotic nature of the first version to cater to “increasing homophobia in his society and of an increase in his own awareness of widespread hostility to make homoerotic behavior” (34).

The later version of the story can be read as a temperance tale. Moon explains that the temperance movement in New York City was the first to “declare its independence from the middle-class, missionary-style Christian-evangelical temperance movement and assert its commitment to lower-class autonomy” (56). These men were concerned that alcohol had become a destructive force to the lower classes, who were suffering from poverty and poor working conditions. Therefore, Moon suggests that Whitman’s later versions of the story example an “encoding of one kind of discourse”, homoerotic love, “within another in the period”, the temperance movement (57). This concept would play into other critic’s analysis that Whitman was torn between writing for the purchasing audience and writing for literary value.

Reynolds, David S. *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1995.

In his biography, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography*, David Reynolds asserts that the four short stories Whitman produced after arriving in Manhattan marked a “whole new tone in his writings” (74). All four stories contain some kind of confrontation between an adult figure and a male youth. Three of the four stories couch the “psychologically suggestive violence” in the coat of moral reform (74). Reynolds notes that Whitman is writing in a time where readers are hungry for sensationalism but find it appeases them better in a format that also feeds them moralistically. He seems to be suggesting that readers can justify their desire for sensationalism if the

story comments on subjects like temperance or discipline in the classroom. Reynolds notes that “The Child’s Champion,” which later became “The Child and the Profligate,” was reprinted more often than any other tale except “Death in the School-Room.”

In his analysis of the story, Reynolds notes that in “The Child’s Champion” Langton and Charles sleep together “according to the common custom of the day” (76). He notes that there are overtones of rape in the sailor’s assault on Charles and that Langton’s interference could be seen as an act of penetration. At the close of the original story the two characters sleep together in the same bed. Reynold’s concludes that this “common nineteenth century practice” allows Whitman to reconcile his “private desires with his reformist instinct toward virtuous conduct” (77). Whitman is able to meet his homoerotic need in the form of an activity between two characters that would seem customary to his readers.

Willis, N.P. “Look not upon the Wine when it is red.” *The American Common-Place Book of Poetry, with Occasional Notes*. Boston: Carter, Hendee and Babcock, 1831.

In his story “The Child and the Profligate,” Whitman offers six lines of a poem before beginning the introduction to his narrative. The poem is titled by its first line, “Look not upon the Wine when it is red” and is by N.P. Willis. The subject of the poem is alcohol and its destructive forces. The poet is counseling readers to not be swayed by the pleasures alcohol seemingly offers, promising that they will lead to destruction. This is significant because it further helps to classify this story as a temperance story and is a perfect introduction to Whitman’s comments on the victims of strong drink.

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