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## Exploring Latent Homoeroticism Theme in Whitman's Song of Myself based on Section 11

Song of Myself is a poem of bold declarations that egotistically assert Walt Whitman's place and purpose in the context of a world of immense scope and romantically instilled vigor. And yet located within this chaotic unfurling of identity there is one piece of the poem that stands out as a conspicuously reserved, reflective fragment. This moment of breath in Whitman's otherwise energetic tirade is located at the opening of section 11, which deals with Whitman's repressed homosexual longings. The quiet repetition and connected lines of questioning in this section flow together to create a latent persistence to the sexual urges being described. Towards the end of the section Whitman introduces erotic imagery and a careful interplay of terse and soft, sensual sounds to convey a striking edge to his desires. These desires are not expressed in first person, but instead they manifest themselves into imaginative action in the mind of the section's female character. Thus the poet manages to weave vivid sensuality into the section while removing himself from the scene in order to create a poetic puppet show of his own sexual dilemma.

The repetition in the first three lines of the section serves to immediately establish its separateness from the rest of the poem. The "twenty-eight young men" that open these lines are unlike Whitman's other repetitions - they do not carry the charged momentum of assertion, but rather reflect a progressive contemplation by virtue of their brevity and simple, connective language. The first line merely states the presence of the men. The second line hints at the woman's attraction towards them by highlighting their "friendliness". The third line adds a melancholy response that places this attraction within the context of the woman's sexual repression. By describing her life as "all so lonesome" the speaker plainly expresses sympathy for her need to remain trapped in her house in a disguise of "fine clothes". The bizarre obviousness of calling her life "womanly" is Whitman's first acknowledgement that her condition represents his own. The wording is strange for a description of a repressed woman, but makes perfect sense when describing the femininity of the poet's own sexual desires. He, like her, is forced to shutter in his desires behind metaphorical window blinds. By placing this revelation at the end of three repetitive lines Whitman manages to capture the persistence of these desires, thus further evoking an air of sympathy around his condition of repressed homosexuality.

Following the establishment of the woman's imprisonment as representing sexual repression the poem presents two couplets that open with questions. These four lines are both inquisitive and declarative in their progressive exploration of repression. By asking, "Which of the young men does she like the best?" and then answering "the homeliest" Whitman is fully establishing

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the sexual attraction hinted at in line three. The second set of questions elaborates on the disparity between the onlooking woman's mental state and her active state. In her mind, and in the mind of the poet, the attraction to the men compels the onlooker to wander down to the bathing site. The long, blithe vowels of the phrase "splash in the water there" unravel into the kind of carefree sexual expression that the poet desires. Yet, the terse, rigid vowels and accusatory consonants of "yet stay stock still" follow with an undercutting of this sexual fantasy. This harsh return to reality mirrors the poet's captive actuality and inability to fulfill his desires.

The entrance of the twenty-ninth bather into the poem allows the poet to sever his fantasy from the anchors of reality that inhibit his sexual exploration, thus allowing thought to manifest itself in action. The numerology belying the number twenty-nine symbolizes the kind of newness and "original energy without check" that Whitman strives for throughout *Song of Myself*. The starting count of twenty-eight bathers connects to natural femininity by virtue of its connotations with the menstrual cycle. The introduction of the alien number twenty-nine disrupts the naturalness of this cycle but at the same time creates something new that transcends conventional boundaries of male and female sexuality.

The poem's response to this newness is a paradoxical mixture of guilty concealment and erotic release; the twenty-ninth bather is rendered invisible in the presence of the young men, but still allowed to sexually engage them. This interplay of latent eroticism and anxiety over discovery manifests itself in the language and sounds used to describe the new bather's interactions with the men. Whitman's own agonizing sexual longings emanate from the stretched "n"s and long vowel sounds used to describe the motion of the invisible bather as he "declines with pendant and bending arch". The caressing "s"s and playful "t"s of the description "glistened with wet" and the softness of the ejaculatory metaphor "souse with spray" dance above darker, subterranean "r" sounds describing the motion of an invisible hand that moves "tremblingly from their temples and ribs". All the while the invisibility of the new bather is emphasized by the poem's exclusive focus on the remaining twenty-eight. This effect is achieved through Whitman's repetition of the word "they", which not only conceals the twenty-ninth bather from view but also once again emphasizes his separateness from the world of conventional sexuality that the other bathers represent.

The fact that Whitman chooses to deal with the issue of sexual repression through a set of characters in section 11 constitutes an unusual departure from his poetic style in the rest of the poem. Outside section 11, *Song of Myself* openly embraces the corporeal and the sexual in an often-arrogant first person. Even the title of the poem is an unambiguous statement of egotism. Yet despite his overconfident poetic voice, Whitman was uncomfortable in dealing with his alleged homosexuality in the public sphere, and section 11 is an expression of this individual discomfort. It is additionally feasible to extend interpretation of the section to address the condition of homosexuals in America as a whole. As with the rest of the poem, the section deals

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not only with the poet's identity, but also with exploring the identity of the American national character. Thus the fact that section 11 feels disjointed from the dynamic of Song of Myself speaks strongly of the alienation of all homosexuals during Whitman's writing period. The fact that this feeling of alienation could divert even Whitman's bold poetic style into cryptic poetic masquerade is a strong testament to its persistence and strength. Like his woman in the house on the rise, and like countless closet homosexuals in America, Whitman could never openly embrace true sexual freedom, but was rather forced to wander in secret fantasy beyond boundaries of stigma and alienation that he could never actually traverse.

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