Walt Whitman, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*

(1) BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

For biographical information on Walt Whitman, please refer to the “Song of Myself” Study Guide, or visit Wikipedia at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman), a host of other websites, or read the biographical note on Whitman in Radeljković’s “American Topics” (listed underneath in the Recommended Reading list).

(2) TEXT OF WORK

Read the poem with annotations at: [http://www.bartleby.com/142/212.html](http://www.bartleby.com/142/212.html)

(3) ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY (includes summary of poem)

This poem was written in 1859 and incorporated into the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It describes a young boy's awakening as a poet, mentored by nature and his own maturing consciousness. The poem is loose in its form, except for the sections that purport to be a transcript of the bird's call, which are musical in their repetition of words and phrases. The opening of the poem is marked by an abundance of repeated prepositions describing movement--out, over, down, up--which appear regularly later in the poem and which convey the sense of a struggle, in this case the poet's struggle to come to consciousness.

Unlike most of Whitman's poems, "Out of the Cradle" has a fairly distinct plot line. A young boy watches a pair of birds nesting on the beach near his home, and marvels at their relationship to one another. One day the female bird fails to return. The male stays near the nest, calling for his lost mate. The male's cries touch something in the boy, and he seems to be able to translate what the bird is saying. Brought to tears by the bird's pathos, he asks nature to give him the one word "superior to all." In the rustle of the ocean at his feet, he discerns the word "death," which continues, along with the bird's song, to have a presence in his poetry.

*This is another poem that links Whitman to the Romantics*. The "birth of the poet" genre was of particular importance to Wordsworth, whose massive *Prelude* details his artistic coming-of-age in detail. Like Wordsworth, *Whitman claims to take his inspiration from nature*. Where Wordsworth is inspired by a wordless feeling of awe, though, *Whitman finds an opportunity to anthropomorphize, and nature gives him very specific answers to his questions about overarching concepts*. *Nature is a tabula rasa* onto which the poet can project himself. He conquers it, inscribes it. While it may become a part of him that is always present, the fact that it does so seems to be by his permission.

The epiphany surrounding the word "death" seems appropriate, for in other poems of Whitman's we have seen death described as the ultimate tool for democracy and sympathy. *Here death is shown to be the one lesson a child must learn, whether from nature or from an elder*. Only the realization of death can lead to emotional and artistic maturity. Death, for one as interested as Whitman in the place of the individual in the universe, is a means for achieving perspective: while your thoughts may seem profound and unique in the moment, you are a mere speck in existence. Thus the contemplation of death allows for one to move beyond oneself, to consider the whole. Perhaps this is why the old crone disrupts the end of the poem: she symbolizes an alternative possibility, the means by which someone else may have come to the same realization as Whitman. In the end the bird, although functionally important in Whitman's development, is insignificant in the face of the abstract sea: death, which is the concept he introduces, remains as the important factor.

Thus although "Out of the Cradle" can be described as a poem about the birth of the poet, it can
also be read as a poem about the death of the self. In the end, on the larger scale, these two phenomena are one and the same.

(SparkNotes)

A fairly intimate analysis of Whitman's poetic use of rhythm in the poem:

The poem would address an unseen listener, an unseen audience. It does so through the rhetoric of address since the message in the bottle seems to be speaking to the poet alone, or to a muse, a friend, a lover, an abstraction, an object in nature. . . . It seems to be speaking to God or to no one. Rhetoric comes into play here, the radical of presentation, the rhythm of words creating a deep sensation in the reader. Rhythm would lift the poem off the page, it would bewitch the sounds of language, hypnotize the words into memorable phrases. Rhythm creates a pattern of yearning and expectation, of recurrence and difference. It is related to the pulse, the heartbeat, the way we breathe. [Connect with ideas of life and death mentioned in the SparkNotes analysis!] It takes us into ourselves; it takes us out of ourselves. It differentiates us; it unites us to the cosmos.

Rhythm is a form cut into time, as Ezra Pound said in ABC of Reading. It is the combination in English of stressed and unstressed syllables that creates a feeling of fixity and flux, of surprise and inevitability. Rhythm is all about recurrence and change. It is poetry's way of charging the depths, hitting the fathomless. It is oceanic. I would say with Robert Graves that there is a rhythm of emotions that conditions the musical rhythms, that mental bracing and relaxing which comes to us through our sensuous impressions. It is the emotion—the very rhythm of the emotion—that determines the texture of the sounds.

I like to feel the sea drift, the liturgical cadence [Remember that Whitman’s free verse is cadenced!] of the first stanza of Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.” It is one sentence and twenty-two lines long. It always carries me away.

[Here goes the first stanza of the poem]

The incantatory power of this is tremendous as the repetitions loosen the intellect for reverie. It seems to me that Whitman creates here the very rhythm of a singular reminiscence emerging out of the depths of mind, out of the sea waves and the rocking cradle, out of all the undifferentiated sensations of infancy, out of the myriad memories of childhood, out of all possible experiences the formative event of a boy leaving the safety of his bed and walking the seashore alone, moving “Out,” “Over,” “Down,” “Up,” “From,” exchanging the safety of the indoors for the peril of the outdoors, facing his own vague yearnings and the misty void, mixing his own tears and the salt spray of the ocean, listening to the birds, understanding the language—the calling—of one bird. He walks the shore on the edge of the world, the edge of the unknown. He has entered the space that Emerson calls “I and the Abyss,” the space of the American sublime.

In this region: out of all potential words, these words alone; out of all potential memories, this memory alone. It is the emerging rhythm itself that creates the Proustian sensation of being in two places at once, “A man, yet by these tears a little boy again, / Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves.” Whitman creates through the rhetorical rhythm of these lines the very urgency of fundamental memory triggered and issuing forth. He splits himself off and moves seamlessly between the third person and the first person. And as the bird chanted to him (“From the memories of the bird that chanted to me”) so he chants to us (“I, chanter of pains and joys”). This is a poem of poetic vocation.

It is telling that Whitman builds to the self-command, “A reminiscence sing.” He memorializes the memory in song. There is an element of lullaby in this poem, the lulling motion of the waves, the consoling
sound of the sea. But this is a lullaby that wounds (as García Lorca said about Spanish lullabies), a lullaby of sadness that permeates the very universe itself, a lullaby that moves from chanting to singing. Paul Valory calls the passage from prose to verse, from speech to song, from walking to dancing, “a moment that is at once action and dream.” Whitman creates such a moment here. He would spin an enchantment beyond pain and joy, he would become the poetic shaman who authors that reminiscence for us, who magically summons up the experience in us.
(PoetryFoundation.org)

(4) SOURCES CITED


(5) RECOMMENDED READING


(A short but interesting analysis discussing the poem as an elegy and focusing on its symbolism and language.)


(Includes the text of whole poem with analysis and commentary on specific parts. To access commentary, click on bold-faced words and expressions in poem. Also refer to main page on Whitman for more information about the author, his poetry, and the historical and cultural context in which he lived.)


(The essay includes a comprehensive analysis of Walt Whitman’s work with special emphasis on “Song of Myself” and ties in Whitman’s work well with his Transcendentalist/Emersonian influences. Also refer to page 360 for a more intimate account of Walt Whitman’s biography.)