

# *The Semiotic Interpretation of Leaves of Grass: The Sea Image in Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*

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**Abstract:** Walt Whitman has mentioned the image of the sea many times in *Leaves of Grass*, and the sea has complex meanings in his writing. *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* is a distinctive poem that links the story of two subjects in an operatic form. The sea is the key link between the elements, therefore, the image of the ocean in this poem is particularly worthy of further exploration. This study focuses on the relationship between symbols and the elements in the system from the perspective of semiotics. In this poem, the sea, as a symbol, interacts with the two elements of the birds and the child. From this point of view, it can be found that the sea in this poem is different from the generalization of the sea by previous researchers. It symbolizes the power of nature, including its two sides of kindness and cruelty.

**Keywords:** Walt Whitman, sea, semiotics, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*.

## 1. Introduction

Since its independence, America and its literature has long been influenced by English literature and culture. By the 19th century, Walt Whitman, the architect of the American Renaissance (Matthiessen called the transcendentalist and romantic movements the American Renaissance [1]), has finally swept away the heavy dust of history. In *Leaves of Grass*, a subject of American culture has been emphasized, and an epic of individual has been written. Nature, self, and democracy are the most concise generalizations of the spirit of *Leaves of Grass*, while oratory, Italian opera, and the surging sea are the condensed versions of Walt Whitman's poetry. Just as the European Renaissance affirmed the value of man, Walt Whitman has used his special writing to make the human mind shine. *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* is a very comprehensive and special poem in the series called *sea-drift* which condenses author's personal thoughts. It has both the description of nature and the exploration of the spirit in depth, both opera-like expression and a special status of the sea image symbol. It can be said that the poem reveals Walt Whitman's personality and the semiotic significance of the sea in the poem is largely the most noteworthy point.

The essentiality of the symbol of sea to Walt Whitman's poetry has been the focus of relevant research. Some researchers believe that Walt Whitman's poetry has a sea-like character in its form. The style of poetry is free, with movement and change. Related to this feature, Abrams argued that there were peculiar and strange rhetoric, surprising uses of words and magical syntactic structures in *Leaves of Grass*, and the puzzling usage of words might be the result of Walt Whitman's deliberate efforts. This fact was also thought to be the result of Walt Whitman's desire to subvert the

epistemological dualism [2]. The research of Fabb provided a comprehensive analysis of the poetic form of *Leaves of Grass*, including the detailed features of text lines, word syllables, language rhythms, and sound patterns. The author of this paper argued that the form of the poetry had a close relationship with the meaning of the text, and that Walt Whitman's poetry was in line with this phenomenon, which meant that, Walt Whitman's poetry did not have a particular fixed form but belonged to the content of his text. Taking the specific content of the poem as an example, this paper summed up the characteristics of the form of Walt Whitman's poetry: in most cases, the rhythm of the poems in *Leaves of Grass* was given rather than inherent; the parallel structure of Walt Whitman's poems was longer and less repetitive, and took on a form of attribute as well, as was the use of punctuation [3]. Therefore, Walt Whitman's form of poetry is relatively free, always in motion, just like the ever-changing currents of the sea.

The complicated meaning buried deeply under the sea is also one of the hot topics of researchers. Kalita used the theme of the sea and the circling globe in *Leaves of Grass* as a subject for symbolic meaning analysis, both opposing and unifying, represents the unity of body and soul [4]. Which showed similarity in the conduct of comparative study was the research of Zeng. The author made a contrastive analysis of the various sea images in the works of different writers in the three periods: the Romanticism period, the Naturalism period and the Modernism period. As a representative writer during the Romanticism period, Walt Whitman described the sea from the perspective of animism, so the image of the sea in *Leaves of Grass* is usually inseparable from the soul and the spiritual world [5]. In a Chinese version of *Leaves of Grass* written by Chu Tunan, the image of the sea was given special attention, thus it was clearly classified in three different kinds: "the sea of hope", "the sea of freedom", and "the sea of life." Hu and Zhang delved into the relationship between the metaphorical connotations of these three seas and the historical environment. In this process, they deepened the understanding of what Walt Whitman meant by the sea [6].

The analysis of this paper will mainly focus on the hidden meaning of the sea as an image symbol in the poem *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, there is a tendency to associate the particular meaning of the sea in Walt Whitman's poetry with history and reality, and extrapolate the meaning of the ocean as a broad whole, while this paper will focus on *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* to make a concrete semiotic analysis of the multiple sea meanings.

## 2. The operatic expression and the trio of main characters

According to some researchers, the sea in *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* is the metaphor of love. The combination of the image of the sea and the image of sex can make the love more romantic, and after the love suffers the twists and turns, the sea naturally becomes the object of the lyric subject to confide in [7]. Such a view may be based on the tragic story of a pair of birds in the poem, but such a judgment is biased, superficial, and incomplete.

Ferdinand de Saussure argued that the units of language are members of a system, and the meanings that they refer to depends on their place in the system, that is, on their relationship to other elements. As Barthes notes in *S/Z*, "Meaning arises from the interplay of symbols, and the world in which we live is not a fact but a symbol of fact, which we code and decode from one system to another [8]." Walt Whitman is a poet who pays great attention to the content of his works. For him, the artistic quality of his works is not above the content, he is very careful in his choice of words, but what he sought is the content, not the music of the words. Walt Whitman's idea of writing makes the concept of every word in his poems deliberate, which makes it possible to analyze the concepts of words and symbols in *Leaves of Grass* in depth. The symbols in Walt Whitman's poem have a certain depth that is worth examining, and it is not just in one symbol, but almost all words are not chosen at random, therefore, symbols with the same meaning must have an impact, if we want to identify the meaning of one of the symbols, it is necessary to pay attention to other elements of its impact. Ferdinand de

Saussure's other point is that in both synchronic and diachronic languages, he placed special emphasis on synchronic studies because the value of a language unit depends on its place in the system rather than its history. Synchronic linguistics is a static observation and study of the language system from a certain historical period. It uses the method of intersection to distinguish whether two languages or phonetics are the same, or whether two words in the same language are the same. When applied to the analysis of literary texts, it means to study the differences in the meanings of the same elements in the same system. Perhaps Walt Whitman's other poems need an American historical context to make an accurate analysis, but this is a poem is not a straightforward reflection of reality, but Walt Whitman's personal thoughts, therefore, it is the most suitable method to study synchronic language by semiotics, that is, to analyze it from the perspective of the system of poetry. So, to really grasp the meaning of the *sea* symbol, research perspective should be put back into the system of *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, and the view must combine those various elements of the poem, which point to the poem's three main opera characters: The bird, the child, and the sea.

## 2.1. The opera

*Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* is a poem which has applied the form of an opera. Opera is a kind of stage art, mainly in the way of singing, assisted by music, to complete the expression of the plot. The structure of opera usually includes overture, intermezzo, chorus, duet, solo and so on. This poem has a similar structure. Early Baroque Italian operas often incorporated tragic elements into their comedies, or "Play-within-a-play" with comic elements was inserted into the opera. Although it was not an intersection of tragicomic elements, the poem also composes of parts like "Play-within-a-play". In this poem, Walt Whitman not only made structural use of opera, but also used related expressions and words to imply that the poem was an imitation of opera. Here are the proofs of Walt Whitman's imitation.

The story of the opera is about a child, he observed the life of a pair of birds, and it turned from happiness into a tragic love. The love tragedy of the two birds is part of "Play-within-a-play". After the two birds settled on the island of Paumanok, they had a blissful time. Then, a short song is used to show the feelings of the birds, just like the intermezzo in the opera. And again, a short song depicts that he-bird (That's what author called the male bird) was waiting for she-bird. These two short songs consciously form a contrast of felicity and sorrow, reflecting the plot and emotional changes.

After his mate suddenly disappeared, he-bird began an endless search, he kept calling his mate. After a while, the children choose to substitute for he-bird and sing for him, and this part is the aria. At the end of the long song, Walt Whitman succinctly describes the role of the long song with the sentence "The ARIA sinking." The use of the word in the "aria" position will not affect the delivery of the literal meaning, even if it's replaced with the word "song". And the application of the specific word ARIA with opera-like meaning aims to connect with the opera. Aria is a song sung by one person. It often appears in the key moment in the plot of an opera, and it is the section when the character's sentiment is most emotional and full of changes. This long song shows he-bird's desperation in calling to she-bird, from not believing that his mate was missing to finally realizing that his search was in vain and that his mate was gone. It's a twist of emotion. There is no doubt that this long song is set against the opera's aria.

Behind the aria, the author has not used any inserted song to describe the plot, which means the finish of "Play-within-a-play", and this is indeed the case with the storyline. Instead of the birds, the child took the lead on the stage, and became the real main character, and the singer who express his own inner voice finally.

When finish reading the whole poem, the features of the first part of the opera will be highlighted as "overture". The overture of opera always hints at the plot, and Walt Whitman has left several

questions to be answered here. The last sentence, “A reminiscence sing”, seems to say through the narrator's voice that “the play is about to begin”.

Structurally, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* is basically an opera, and some of the details in expression can be supplemented by evidence, such as the word “scene” in the sentence “From such as now they start the scene revisiting”, which makes an association with “stage”, or the choice of the word “trio” in the sentence “The colloquy there, the trio, each uttering”.

## 2.2. The trio of main characters

Now that the operatic of *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* has been amply demonstrated, the poem will be analyzed as an opera. First, we can know the time, the place, and main characters from the overture, that is the midnight, the coast and those three main characters: the bird, the child and the sea. It is the symbol of the sea that we need to analyze, then the point to focus on is the link between two elements (birds and children) of the system and the sea.

The he-bird is the subject of “Play-within-a-play”, and the child is the real subject of the poem. The sea first appeared in the story of two birds after she-bird suddenly disappeared, it pointed to something worth noting.

*And thenceforward all summer in the sound of the sea,  
And at night under the full of the moon in calmer weather,  
Over the hoarse surging of the sea,  
Or flitting from brier to brier by day,  
I saw, I heard at intervals the remaining one, the he-bird,  
The solitary guest from Alabama. [9]*

There are two conjectures about the appearance of the sea symbol. The first is based on “the word stronger and more delicious than any”, which is proved to be “Death”. There were no sea-related symbols as those two birds flew over the island and lived happily, but as soon as she-bird disappeared, the description of sea appeared, hinting at she-bird's fate by utilizing the emblem of “Death”. And she-bird's true ending was death, which was also a reverse response to the sea symbol representing the “Death”. The second is based on the modifier “hoarse surging”, which is also based more on current information. After all, when we haven't seen the later paragraph, it is not clear that “Death” is closely related to the sea. In this case, “hoarse” is obviously a response to he-bird's incessant calling for companionship, so the sea here is a representation of he-bird's emotions. There is also the same function for the following paragraphs: “*The winds blowing, the notes of the bird continuous echoing, / With angry moans the fierce old mother incessantly moaning [9]*”.

The second noteworthy area is in aria:

*O madly the sea pushes upon the land,  
With love, with love.  
O night! do I not see my love fluttering out among the breakers? [9]*

The sea rushed madly to the land with love, and the sad he-bird imagined that his mate was in the waves. Therefore, the sea was the spokesperson and stand-in of she-bird at that moment. Resulting from it, the image of the sea changes from death and sorrow to love. Something which is also likely to merge she-bird with the sea is:

*Hither my love!  
Here I am! here!  
With this just-sustained note I announce myself to you,  
This gentle call is for you my love, for you. [9]*

“Hither” is an ancient usage, in sharp contrast to “here”. The only appropriate use of “hither” is the ancient role -- the sea. And the content is to express love, so it is more fitting that the sea once again takes on the role of she-bird in response to he-bird's calling. Going back to “*madly the sea*

*pushes upon the land*”, we can see that the sea also means he-bird's strong desire, because he-bird asked for his mate from “land” in the following passage and the collision of “sea” and “land” here.

For the child, the sea is a role of connection and dialogue. “With his bare feet the waves”, the bird, the sea, and the child began a conversation among three characters -- the trio. In this process, the child developed a deeper connection with the bird and the sea, no longer as an outsider, but as a writer of the bird's story, a successor and a resonator of the bird's emotions, become the listener of the sea and the perceiver of nature. Thus, he heard the whisper of the sea -- “death”.

To sum up, the symbol of the sea in the whole system is not only associated with love, under a closer look, the sea has a complex symbol, its overall deep meaning needs further interpretation.

### 3. The symbolic image of the sea: the power of nature

By synthesizing the meanings of the sea as a symbol appearing in various parts of the poem, I attribute the sea symbol to “nature”. This is not the nature of the natural scenery, but closer to “the power of nature”. In the force of nature, I will divide it into two branches, one is “Old mother”, the other is “Death”.

#### 3.1. “Old mother”

Whether from the information out of the text, considering Walt Whitman being born on Long Island and growing up on the beach, or from elements within the text, such as the title of the poem -- *Out Of the Endless Cradle Rocking* -- we all know that the sea is the cradle of life, we can all feel the author's admiration for the sea as a member of the living. Mother is often a symbol of love and kindness, and so it is in this poem--she grieves for all things when they grieve and is persistent for them when living beings are persistent. Undertaking he-bird's grief, pain, struggling emotions, the sea is he-bird's mate incarnation, giving a temporary comfort at the same time. This is the gift of the sea, and this gift is nature's compassion for the livings.

#### 3.2. “Death”

The word “Death” is the eye of the poem, the answer to the last revealed riddle, the whisper of the sea, the counsel of nature. Nature has its ups and downs, death is the end of the natural development of life, and the unexpected end of life as well. When the sea takes off the clothes of the “Old mother” and takes up the authority of “Death”, the sea is the embodiment of the natural order and the ruthless law enforcer. She would neither scold any living creature, nor play favorites with her own child, just like he-bird and she-bird. She will awaken the spirit of livings from their delusion and make them realize the truth of nature ultimately. That's why “Death” is “strong and delicious”, so irresistible and so sobering.

#### 3.3. Staged summary

From the point of view of “child”, or poet, or author, the interpretation of the symbols of the sea as one of “the power of nature” can also be justified. If the theme of “Play-within-a-play” is he-bird's hopelessness in the search for his missing partner, the theme of the poem is that the child grows from “peaceful” to “an outsetting bard”.

*Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,  
And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer, louder and more sorrowful than yours,  
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die. [9]*

Truly understanding nature, recognizing its kindness and cruelty, survival and death, means truly knowing about the value and meaning of life. So that the child's final realization is entirely focused

on the imprint of life, he will become “bard”, and he wants to pass on history and story. And “the sea whispered me” these insights, taught to him by nature.

#### 4. Conclusion

As is said earlier, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* is a very comprehensive poem that has much to offer, both in its content and its form. There are many studies concerning the role of “Sea” in the poem, and most of them relate it to the information outside the text of the poem, or to the life of the author, or in conjunction with other sea-related poems in *Leaves of Grass*. However, the complexity of the sea to Walt Whitman requires detailed analysis in combination with relevant elements in a specific system, that is, the structuralism semiotic analysis used in this paper. In the poem, that is the system, bird and child are the elements closely linked with the sea and must not be ignored. From the relationship between the three, we see that the sea as a symbol of “the power of nature” is the key to poetic interpretation. In contrast to previous interpretations of the image of the sea in Walt Whitman's poem, the sea in *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* shows the compassion and cruelty of nature. The image of the sea is not isolated, but interactive. This is the conclusion that can only be reached by taking into full account the relationship between the sea and other elements.

The complex meanings of the sea in *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* give a glimpse of the multiple meanings of the sea in *Leaves of Grass*. This reading may also serve as a reference for other poems whose themes related to the poet's spiritual thought. In the *sea-drift*, the sea has a changing role, but in general it often appears as an energetic image, which is related to the interpretation of “Nature”. Considered that *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* implies that the sea is the engine of the poet's consciousness, the sea may be seen as a source of inspiration for a spiritual dimension that is always emotionally charged. In American maritime literature, the fate of the characters in the stories is always uncertain, and the stories often expressing some kinds of great love or great hatred [5], we can see some of this feature in the *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*. As a part of American marine literature, the image of the ocean in this poem will surely enrich the understanding of the sea in American literature, more consideration will be given to the interaction of the ocean with other elements of the text and to the variation of meaning within one text.

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