

# Passions of Bloom - Whitman, Melville, Dickinson

Libretto Assembled by Martin Bresnick

## PART I INTRODUCTION

### 1. Shine! Shine! Shine!

Chorus

*Shine! Shine! Shine!  
Pour Down your warmth, great sun!  
While we bask, we two together.  
Two together!  
Winds blow south, or winds blow north,  
Day come white, or night come black,  
Home, or rivers and mountains from home,  
Singing all time, minding no time,  
While we two keep together.*

*Whitman: Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*

### 2. I have aged into a firm conviction

Bloom

**I have aged...into a firm conviction that true criticism recognizes itself as a mode of memoir. Certain mornings in midwinter my wife asks me; Why at eighty-four continue teaching full-time? It is fifty-eight years since first we courted. Do I fear breaking the longest continuity of my life? Is that my deeper motive? What can I know? Visionary company transformed a changeling child into an exegetical enthusiast rather than a poet.**

**Falling in love seems the aptest analogue to the first discovery of aesthetic glory. You need to love a poet and a poem before your appreciation can transcend the accidents of your own nature.**

*Harold Bloom: The Daemon Knows*

Whitman & Chorus

*Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?  
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?*

*Whitman: Early Notebook Fragments, Song of Myself*

Bloom

**Poems, novels, stories matter only if we matter. They give us the blessing of more life...**

Whitman & Chorus

*Stop this day and night with me  
And you shall possess the meaning of all poems,  
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun  
(there are millions of suns left).  
Shine, shine, shine!*

*Whitman: Song of Myself*

## **PART II WHITMAN**

### **3. The New-Found America**

Bloom

**The new-found America of Whitman, of Melville and Dickinson is inhabited by American Adams and fiercely American Eves. Neither strangers nor exiles, they celebrate what is most familiar and near at hand.**

Whitman solo & Chorus

*There was never any more inception than there is now,  
Nor any more youth than there is now,  
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,  
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.*

*Whitman: Song of Myself*

### **4. Why Should I Wish To See God**

Whitman solo & Chorus

*Why should I wish to see God better than this day?  
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four  
And each moment then  
In the faces of men and women I see God,  
And in my own face in the glass,  
I find letters from God dropt in the street  
And every one is signed by God's name...*

*Whitman: Leaves of Grass*

Bloom

**Where am I, worn out exegete, in this conflagration? The presence of Walt Whitman overwhelms me, possesses me - in old Bloom becomes a transport to the sublime.**

Whitman

*The light picks out a bishop or a pope no more than the rest.  
A mouse is miracle enough to stagger billions of infidels.*

*Whitman: Early Notebook Fragments, Song of Myself*

## **5. And I Say To Mankind**

Whitman & Chorus

*And I say to mankind, be not curious about God,  
For I who am curious about each am not curious about God.  
And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand  
Cool and composed before a million universes.*

*Whitman: Song of Myself*

Bloom

**Walt is composing his New Bible for the American Religion.**

Whitman & Chorus

*I celebrate myself to celebrate you:  
I say the same word for every man and woman alive.  
And I say that the soul is not greater than the body,  
And I say that the body is not greater than the soul.*

*Whitman: Early Notebook Fragments, Song of Myself*

Bloom

**No man, no woman, can live in a continuous secular epiphany, though it is the enabling fiction that made possible Song of Myself. If our night journey is to meet an exit, we need a poet of our climate...Whitman stops somewhere waiting for us.**

Whitman

*I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.  
You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,  
And filter and fibre your blood.  
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop somewhere waiting for you.*

### **PART III MELVILLE**

#### **6. Where Is Melville The Man**

Bloom

**Where is Melville the man in Moby Dick?  
I write on a November 13, in New Haven when the outside air reminds me  
that our dreary town actually is a seaport.**

Melville

*Fronted I have, part taken the span  
Of portents in nature and peril in man,  
I have swum, I have been*

*Twixt the whale's black flukes and the white shark's fin.*

*Melville: In A Bye-Canal*

Melville & Ahab

*By heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world  
Like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike.  
And all the time, lo! That smiling sky, and this unsounded sea!*

Chorus

*Lo! That smiling sky, this unsounded sea!*

Ahab

*Oh! Time was, when as the sunrise nobly spurred me,  
So the sunset soothed. No more.  
This lovely light, it lights not me;  
Damned in the midst of Paradise!*

*I feel deadly faint, bowed and humped,  
As though I were Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since Paradise.*

*Melville: Moby-Dick, Ahab*

Bloom

**Melville's Ahab, the darkest of American Adams, causes us also to stagger beneath the piled centuries since our expulsion from Paradise. A creation that also was a fall.**

## **7. Ishmael Sketches His Playbill**

Bloom

**It startles me how little has changed when Ishmael sketches his playbill:**

Ishmael & Chorus

*"Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United States"*  
*"Whaling Voyage by One Ishmael"*  
*"Bloody Battle in Afghanistan"*

*There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke...and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own...He bolts down all events, all creeds, and beliefs, and persuasions, all hard things visible and invisible...*

*Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love the invisible spheres were formed in fright.*

*Melville: Moby-Dick, Ishmael*

Bloom

**“Seems” against “were”, love against fright, the visible less persuasive than the invisible...Prophets do not heal; they exacerbate. Moby-Dick is at the center of this American heretical scripture, our worship of the god within.**

Ahab

*Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein... But not my master, man, is even that fair play. Who's over me?*

*Melville: Moby-Dick, Ahab*

Bloom

**When Ahab adds “who's over me?” then he rejects, not the unknown God, but the tyranny of nature over man. I reread and teach Moby-Dick to uncover and appreciate the sublimity and the danger of American Promethean heroism. Are all Americans Ahab?**

## **PART IV DICKINSON**

### **8. The Saddest Noise, The Sweetest Noise**

Dickinson I

*The saddest noise, the sweetest noise,  
(The maddest noise that grows,)  
The birds, they make it in the spring,  
At night's delicious close,*

*Between the March and April line  
That magical frontier  
Beyond which summer hesitates,  
Almost too heavenly near.*

*It makes us think of all the dead  
That sauntered with us here,  
By separations sorcery  
Made cruelly more dear.*

*It makes us think of what we had,  
And what we now deplore  
And almost wish those siren throats  
Would go and sing no more.*

*An ear can break a human heart  
As quickly as a spear.  
We wish the ear had not a heart  
So dangerously near.*

Dickinson: #1789

## **9. The Only Kangaroo Among The Beauty**

Bloom

**Vast and subtle intellect in itself cannot make a poet... Dickinson has all these, as well as a mind so original and powerful that we scarcely have begun, even now, to catch up with her.**

Dickinson II

*Perhaps you smile at me. I could not stop for that.  
My business is circumference. An ignorance, not of customs,  
but if caught with the dawn, or the sunset see me,  
myself the only kangaroo among the beauty, sir, if you please, it afflicts me, and I  
thought that instruction would take it away.*

Bloom

**Hamlet-like, she thinks her way to the truth. She possesses her art lest she perish of the truth, and her truth is annihilation...**

Dickinson I & Men's Chorus

*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind —*

Dickinson: #1263

## **10. I Reason Earth Is Short**

Bloom

**Her power to un-name is something different, another way to see. To see feelingly, yes, but beyond the arrogance of the self and its stand against other selves...**

**Her interplay of perspectives is less an interpretation than a questioning...**

Dickinson I & II & Women's Chorus

*I reason, earth is short,  
And anguish absolute.  
And many hurt;  
But what of that?*

*I reason, we could die:  
The best vitality  
Cannot excel decay;  
But what of that?*

*I reason that in heaven*



*Somehow, it will be even,  
Some new equation given;  
But what of that?*

*Dickinson: #403*

## **PART V CONCLUSION**

### **11. Bloom's Daemon**

Bloom, Whitman, Chorus (Tenors)

**What remains to be done? Talking with my wife, our friends (the few surviving), my students, is endless and necessary but insufficient. What would suffice?**

**I cannot...believe that life can only be appreciated as an aesthetic phenomenon. But I wish to believe that, and perhaps Judaic tradition blocks me from it...Wisdom needs to be added to aesthetic splendor and cognitive power.**

**We have a need to heal violence, whether from without or from within. Our strongest writers can meet that imaginative poverty and help protect the individual mind and society from themselves. I have now come to see THAT as the highest use of literature for our way of life.**

**I am grateful to the obscure being I could call Bloom's daemon for teaching the classes, writing the books, enduring mishaps and illnesses, and nurturing the fictions of continuity that sustain my eighty-fifth year.**

*A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thoughtfullest,  
A novice beginning yet experient of myriads of seasons.  
I resist any thing better than my own diversity  
Breathe the air but leave plenty after me  
And am not stuck up, and am in my place.*

*Whitman: Song of Myself*

### **12. The Lesson Done**

Bloom, Whitman, Dickinson I & II, Melville, Chorus

**I have calmed down: My warfare is accomplished, my grudge ebbing with the ocean of life, bequeathed at last to an earthly shore.**

*This is thy hour O soul, thy free flight into the wordless,  
Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the Lesson done,  
Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing,  
Pondering the themes thou lovest best,  
Night, sleep, death and the stars.*

*Whitman: A Clear Midnight*