



## Contextualizing Whitman's "Live-Oak"

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## CONTEXTUALIZING WHITMAN'S "LIVE-OAK"

An examination of Whitman and the South would be incomplete without a consideration of the live-oak (*Quercus virginiana*), a tree indigenous to the southeastern region of the United States and, in Whitman's late-1850s manuscripts, the predecessor to the calamus plant as the predominant symbol of adhesiveness or "manly love" within *Leaves of Grass*. In those manuscripts, Whitman crosses out "Live Oak, with Moss," his original title for the sequence of poems about male-male affection, and replaces it with "Calamus." Having spent part of 1848 as an editor in New Orleans, Whitman could truthfully claim, as he did in the final titling of Calamus 20, "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing." But even for those who had never ventured to the southern states, the live-oak had a life in print during the 1850s. The two examples discussed in this note—"Live-Oaks of Louisiana," an illustration by J. W. Orr (1815-1887), and "The Live-Oak," a poem by Henry Rootes Jackson (1820-1898) written before his service as a major general in the Confederate Army—precede the publication of Whitman's "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" and help us understand some broader cultural associations with the live-oak during the mid-nineteenth century.

Published in the November 1853 issue of *Harper's Monthly*, J. W. Orr's illustration "Live-Oaks of Louisiana," reproduced on the back cover of this issue, depicts a field of several live-oaks with two men on horseback in the foreground. Though the image is relatively simple, Orr manages to simultaneously evoke the themes of isolation and "manly love" Whitman would later explore in "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing." "All alone it stood," Whitman writes of the live-oak, "and the moss hung down from the branches, / Without any companion it grew there uttering joyous leaves of dark green." A glance at the Orr cut suffices to note the correspondence between the periodical illustration and Whitman's verse. Expressing his need for companionship, Whitman's narrator wonders at the tree's survival "in a wide flat space . . . without a friend a lover near" and brings away a twig from the tree, a "curious token," as a symbol of "manly love." Orr's scene likewise juxtaposes the isolation of the live-oak with the companionship of two, presumably male, horsemen, thus offering a tempting invitation to read the *Harper's* illustration as a possible source for Whitman's memorable meditation on solitariness.

Orr's image accompanies T. B. Thorpe's article entitled "Sugar and the Sugar Region of Louisiana." Thorpe describes Louisiana's Bayou Têche as lined with live-oaks: "Along its shores the magnificent live-oak rears itself in all the pride of vigorous 'ancient youth,' and gives to the gently undulating landscape, the expression so often witnessed in the lordly parks of England." This "ancient" quality of the live-oak, the trace of a lifetime, at least in Whitman's imagination, spent "uttering joyous leaves," was also the subject of Georgia writer Henry Rootes Jackson's poem "The Live-Oak." Published in 1850 in Jackson's *Tallulah, and Other Poems* and popular enough to be included within Evert A. Duyckinck's *Cyclopaedia of American Literature* by 1856, Jackson's verse is yet another predecessor to Whitman's live-oak. Jackson's poem chronicles the "generations [that] come and go" during the live-oak's long life. The poem con-

cludes on a decidedly nationalistic note recalling the live-oak's role in military history where the tree figures prominently in the evolution of the United States shipbuilding industry. The U.S. Navy's first frigates (like the USS *Constitution*) were constructed out of live-oaks, the kind of "live-oak kelsons" Whitman sings of in "Song of the Broad-Axe." Jackson's poem, in its entirety, is printed below:

*The Live Oak*

With his gnarled old arms, and his iron form,  
Majestic in the wood,  
From age to age, in the sun and storm,  
The live-oak long hath stood.  
With his stately air, that grave old tree,  
He stands like a hooded monk,  
With the grey moss waving solemnly  
From his shaggy limbs and trunk.

And the generations come and go,  
And still he stands upright,  
And he sternly looks on the wood below,  
As conscious of his might.  
But a mourner sad is the hoary tree,  
A mourner sad and lone,  
And is clothed in funeral drapery  
For the long since dead and gone.

For the Indian hunter beneath his shade  
Has rested from the chase;  
And he here has woo'd his dusky maid—  
The dark-eyed of her race;  
And the tree is red with the gushing gore  
As the wild deer panting dies;  
But the maid is gone, and the chase is o'er,  
And the old oak hoarsely sighs.

In former days, when the battle's din  
Was loud amid the land,  
In his friendly shadow, few and thin,  
Have gathered Freedom's band.  
And the stern old oak, how proud was he  
To shelter hearts so brave!  
But they all are gone—the bold and free—  
And he moans above their grave.

And the aged oak, with his locks of grey,  
Is ripe for the sacrifices;  
For the worm and decay, no lingering prey,  
Shall he tower towards the skies!  
He falls, he falls, to become our guard,  
The bulwark of the free,  
And his bosom of steel is proudly bared  
To brave the raging sea!

When the battle comes, and the cannon's roar  
Booms o'er the shuddering deep,  
Then nobly he'll bear the bold hearts o'er  
The waves, with bounding leap.  
Oh! may those hearts be as firm and true,  
When the war clouds gather dun,  
As the glorious oak that proudly grew  
Beneath our southern sun.

When Whitman's earliest print version of "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" first appeared within the 1860 *Calamus* cluster, a different din of battle was soon to be "loud amid the land." Published in the early 1850s, both Jackson's poem and Orr's engraving invite us to consider the cultural life of the South's live-oak—the tree's joint ties to isolation and brotherly service—in a nation soon to be divided by civil war.

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