**ETHIOPIA SALUTING THE COLORS.**

WHO are you dusky woman, so ancient hardly human,

With your woolly-white and turban'd head, and bare bony feet?

Why rising by the roadside here, do you the colors greet?

('Tis while our army lines Carolina's sands and pines,

Forth from thy hovel door thou Ethiopia com'st to me,

As under doughty Sherman I march toward the sea.)

Me master years a hundred since from my parents sunder'd,

A little child, they caught me as the savage beast is caught,

Then hither me across the sea the cruel slaver brought.

No further does she say, but lingering all the day,

Her high-borne turban'd head she wags, and rolls her darkling eye,

And courtesies to the regiments, the guidons moving by.

What is it fateful woman, so blear, hardly human?

Why wag your head with turban bound, yellow, red and green?

Are the things so strange and marvelous you see or have seen?

Before reading the poem it is important to know about **slavery in America, the civil war**, and **the abolitionist movement**

1. **Historical Background:**

**Keep in mind that the civil war was fought between 2 sides:**

* **The Union: Northern states. Loyal to Lincoln’s Government and pro abolition of slavery**
* **The Confederates: Southern states, against the government and wanted to secede from the US. They supported slavery.**

In the 1860 presidential election, Republicans, led by Abraham Lincoln, supported banning slavery in all the U.S. territories. The Southern states viewed this as a violation of their constitutional rights, and as the first step in a grander Republican plan to eventually abolish slavery.

The causes of secession were complex and have been controversial since the war began, but most academic scholars identify slavery as a central cause of the war. James C. Bradford wrote that the issue has been further complicated by historical revisionists, who have tried to offer a variety of reasons for the war. Slavery was the central source of escalating political tension in the 1850s. Southern whites believed that the emancipation of slaves would destroy the South's economy, due to the large amount of capital invested in slaves and fears of integrating the ex-slave black population. The Republican Party was determined to prevent any spread of slavery, and many Southern leaders had threatened secession if the Republican candidate, Lincoln, won the 1860 election. After Lincoln won, many Southern leaders felt that disunion was their only option, fearing that the loss of representation would hamper their ability to promote pro-slavery acts and policies.

American Civil War, also called War Between the States, four-year war (1861–65) between the United States and 11 Southern states that seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America. The civil war began primarily as a result of the long-standing controversy over the enslavement of black people. War broke out in April 1861 when secessionist forces attacked Fort Sumter in South Carolina shortly after Abraham Lincoln had been inaugurated as the President of the United States. The loyalists of the Union in the North, which also included some geographically western and southern states, proclaimed support for the Constitution. They faced secessionists of the Confederate States in the South, who advocated for states' rights to uphold slavery. Of the 34 U.S. states in February 1861, seven Southern slave-holding states were declared by their state governments to have seceded from the country, and the Confederate States of America was organized in rebellion against the U.S. constitutional government. The Confederacy grew to control at least a majority of territory in eleven states, and it claimed the additional states of Kentucky and Missouri

The war effectively ended on April 9, 1865, when Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Union General Ulysses S. Grant at the Battle of Appomattox Court House. Confederate generals throughout the southern states followed suit, the last surrender on land occurring June 23. Much of the South's infrastructure was destroyed, especially the transportation systems. The Confederacy collapsed, slavery was abolished, and four million black slaves were freed.

1. **General Sherman:** William Tecumseh Sherman (February 8, 1820 – February 14, 1891) was an American soldier, businessman, educator, and author. He served as a general in the Union Army during the American Civil War (1861–65), receiving recognition for his command of military strategy as well as criticism for the harshness of the scorched earth policies he implemented in conducting total war against the Confederate States.
2. **Sherman's March to the Sea:** Also known as the Savannah Campaign or simply Sherman's March, a military campaign of the American Civil War conducted through Georgia from November 15 until December 21, 1864, by Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman of the Union Army. The campaign began with Sherman's troops of some 60,000 soldiers leaving the captured city of Atlanta on November 15 and ended with the capture of the port of Savannah on December 21. The purpose of Sherman’s March to the Sea was to frighten Georgia’s civilian population into abandoning the Confederate cause. Sherman’s soldiers did not destroy any of the towns in their path, but they stole food and livestock and burned the houses and barns of people who tried to fight back. The Yankees were “not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people,” Sherman explained; as a result, they needed to “make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war.”
3. **SIMPLE INTERPRETATION:**
4. **Setting:** The poem is set towards the end of the civil war when most of the confederate army has been defeated by the union. The narrator of the poem is a soldier of the union army and is marching with his fellow soldiers under General Sherman. This is General Sherman’s famous march towards the sea. It is during this march that the narrator spots this black woman whom he calls Ethiopia, probably a former slave who is now a free citizen after the defeat of the confederates.
5. **Meaning of the title:** Ethiopia is a woman who is seen saluting the American Flag. The narrator calls her Ethiopia, maybe because she looks Ethiopian or African. It might not be her real name.

**Stanza 1**

WHO are you dusky woman, so ancient hardly human,

With your woolly-white and turban'd head, and bare bony feet?

Why rising by the roadside here, do you the colors greet?

The first word is ‘who’. The black woman is mysterious and raises questions in the narrator’s mind. Words ‘ancient, hardly human, suggest she’s very old. Her clothing and appearance is described. The narrator asks another question;’why’. Why is the woman saluting the American flag?

**Stanza 2**

('Tis while our army lines Carolina's sands and pines,

Forth from thy hovel door thou Ethiopia com'st to me,

As under doughty Sherman I march toward the sea.)

The narrator tells about himself and the soldiers, how they are lined up in the state of Carolina and they are marching under General Sherman (look at the notes on Sherman’s march to the sea). It is during this march that the woman comes from her hovel (a small squalid or simply constructed dwelling) towards the narrator.

**Stanza 3**

Me master years a hundred since from my parents sunder'd,

A little child, they caught me as the savage beast is caught,

Then hither me across the sea the cruel slaver brought.

Now we hear the woman tell about herself. A hundred years ago she was snatched away from her parents and caught by slave traders like how hunters capture wild animals, who brought her as a slave to America. The simile is very interesting, The use of the words ‘savage beast’. That is how white colonialists referred to Africans, ‘savage beast’, wild, primitive, uncultured, uncivilised, etc, to further their views that the white man is superior, with his culture, civilisation, knowledge, scientific advancement, etc. It can also refer to how she was treated, like an animal, and not given the dignity owed to a human.

**Stanza 4**

No further does she say, but lingering all the day,

Her high-borne turban'd head she wags, and rolls her darkling eye,

And courtesies to the regiments, the guidons moving by.

The woman says only this much but stays there all day, watching the troops and greeting them.

**Stanza 5**

What is it fateful woman, so blear, hardly human?

Why wag your head with turban bound, yellow, red and green?

Are the things so strange and marvelous you see or have seen?

The poem starts and ends with questions. Some of the questions asked at the beginning have been answered. We know vaguely how the woman ended up as a slave. Look at the adjectives used for the woman in the first line; fateful, blear, hardly human. Maybe fateful because her whole life and fate were shaped by things beyond her control, being taken away by slavers as a young child and living her whole life as a slave.

Definition of fate: the development of events outside a person's control, regarded as predetermined by a supernatural power.

In this case the ‘power’ that determined her life was the white man. And they determine her life even then, It was the white man who made her a slave. It is another group of white men who’s giving her freedom from slavery.

The colours on the woman’s turban are described and they are the colours of the Ethiopian flag, so the narrator nicknames her Ethiopia. She shakes her head as she sees the passing soldiers. It’s a sight she likes to see. She knows that these soldiers are on her side, they fought for the union, which wanted to abolish slavery, Hence, when she salutes the American flag, she salutes it because she feels that now she will be a free citizen of the country. The poet wonders if these things are fascinating and marvellous for the woman.

We can interpret the many questions the poet asks about the woman. They signify the gulf, barrier, and separation there had been between the white Americans and the black former slaves, the narrator represents the white perspective. His questioning shows how little he knows of the black person, how everything about them is exotic, strange, mysterious, and confusing to him. He’s trying to understand the wpman’s perspective, why does she greet the soldiers, why does she seem so happy on seeing the soldiers, why does she salute the American flag.

1. **DETAILED ANALYSIS**

"Ethiopia" derives from the Greek for "burnt faces," and the term has been used since classical times to refer to blacks. "Ethiopians," though, or the more common shortened form of the name ("Ethiops"), had in the Western world by the mid-nineteenth century become synonymous with "Africans." The German comparative anatomist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach had, around the turn of the nineteenth century, divided humankind into five families--white, yellow, brown, black, and red--and named the black family Ethiopian. Blumenbach's nomenclature became generally accepted in studies of race, so, even in an 1864 travel book by a white anthropologist about his journey to West Africa, the author uses the term "Ethiopic character" to describe the traits of the natives of Sierra Leone. At least one widely reprinted mid-nineteenth-century map of Africa labeled the entire continent "Ethiopia," emblazoning the name from east coast to west, and calling the Southern Atlantic the "Ethiopic Ocean."

Originally written and accepted for publication (but never published) by the Galaxy magazine in 1867 as "Ethiopia Commenting," Whitman first placed this poem in Leaves of Grass in 1871 and revised it in the 1876 edition with the subtitle "A Reminiscence of 1864." It was placed in the "Drum-Taps" cluster in 1881.

"Ethiopia Saluting the Colors" (1915) is a dramatic account of an African-American woman, or Ethiopian (by the mid-nineteenth century, "Ethiopian" had become synonymous with "African" in the Western world), and her chance meeting with a Union Soldier.

In the poem, "Ethiopia" is the name given to an old black slave woman who salutes the American flag as she sees General Sherman's troops march by through her Carolina town on their way to the sea, all the while being watched herself by a soldier. The colors in her turban--yellow, red, and green--represent those found in the Ethiopian flag. Ethiopia is the name, of course, of an African country, but no American slaves came from Ethiopia (where the thriving slave trade was directed instead toward the Middle East, supplying Arabian countries with slaves).

As Betsy Erkkila notes, the woman's exoticism and exclusion from the dominant American culture is stressed as well as the racial hierarchy accepted by nineteenth-century society.

The soldier/narrator's characterization of the slave woman as "so ancient hardly human"; the soldier senses something both ancient (as opposed to "primitive") and noble (her "high-borne turban'd head") about her at the same time that he perceives her to be savage (her "bare bony feet"), animal-like (her "woolly-white" hair, the way she "wags" her head, the way she was caught "as the savage beast is caught"), and unknowable (she is seen as a "fateful woman" who provokes unanswerable questions about "strange and marvelous" things). The soldier's portrayal, in fact, is filled with blurring terminology-the woman is "dusky" and "blear," always just out of focus. The speaker questions what "strange and marvelous" things she has experienced.

The notation of the woman as "hardly human" suggests that the exotic woman remains for Whitman as the Other, the feared. In a brief stanza we are given a glance at what the speaker believes she is thinking; in Whitman's awkward attempt at dialect, she remembers her capture from Africa and the middle passage. The horrors of the middle passage and slavery's abuses are understated as the strangeness of her experiences are emphasized.

As one of the few comments on black liberation, the poem offers insight into Whitman's perception of blacks in the United States, suggesting that Whitman had not come to terms with a free black population.

By placing the poem in "Drum-Taps" in 1881, Whitman secures the connection between slavery and the Civil War which he first alludes to in the initial poem. The conventional form which Whitman uses—the standard three line stanzas, internal and terminal rhyme, and alliteration—indicates the difficulty of coming to terms with the black body and suggests a desire for containment.

If Whitman had chosen to title his poem "An Ethiop Saluting the Colors," he would simply have been representing an expected racist term for the slave woman: it would have made sense that one of Sherman's soldiers--all 62,000 of them were white--would have dismissed the old woman as an "Ethiop." But Whitman instead insists on the nation's name. One critic assumes that "Ethiopia" is actually the slave woman's name and that the name is also a generic one that "applied to Negroes of the Southern United States in the nineteenth century." But there is no evidence that the country name (as opposed to "Ethiop" or "Ethiopian") was generally used this way. In fact, Whitman's choice of the country's name suggests far more than a generic racial term.

By the mid-1850s Whitman, given his fascination with Egyptology, knew something about the history of Ethiopian culture, which was often portrayed as the seedbed of Egyptian culture. From Dr. Henry Abbott, proprietor of New York's Museum of Egyptian Antiquities (which Whitman visited often in the year or two before the first edition of Leaves of Grass was published), he learned of ancient Persians "finding monuments . . . with inscriptions and astronomical signs upon them" in Ethiopia (NUPM 1:138), and he found that "some antiquaries think the pyramids of Ethiopia the most ancient artificial structures now on the face of the globe": the country seemed to contain the dim origins of civilization itself. In his 1856 "Broad-Axe Poem," Whitman descends through a layering of cultures, down through the Greeks, Hebrews, Persians, Goths, Kelts, arriving finally at the bedrock: "before any of those the venerable and harmless men of Ethiopia" (LGC 184). In "Poem of Salutation," Ethiopia is one of the ancient fertile places Whitman imagines himself traveling to: "I see the highlands of Abyssinia, . . ./ And see fields of teff-wheat and places of verdure and gold" (LGC 143). Up to the final year of his life, Whitman was still evoking Ethiopia as the home of the "ancient song, . . . the elder ballads, . . . Ever so far back, preluding thee, America, / Old chants, Egyptian priests, and those of Ethiopia" (LGC 547); Ethiopia here furnishes the first entry in the catalog of human song that evolved into America. Whitman thus associates Ethiopia more with its Biblical heritage, and he would have been aware of Frederick Douglass's stirring evocation--at the end of his 1852 speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"--of Psalm 68:31: "There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery. . . . Africa must rise and put on her yet unwoven garment. 'Ethiopia shall stretch out her hand unto God.'" Here Ethiopia is again representative of all of black Africa and is appropriated by Douglass as a positive and spiritually charged appellation.

In "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors," then, the current displaced and degraded embodiment of Ethiopia--wearing Ethiopia's traditional flag colors (yellow, red, green) on her "high-borne turban'd head"--stands amazed and awed before a new mystery: an American flag that purports to liberate her from a long history of enslavement. Her head is not only borne high in pride for an ancient history she still contains, wears, and pays obeisance to, but Whitman's pun allows us to hear her as "high-born," born into a rich cultural tradition that those who see her in her current "hovel" with her "bare bony feet" cannot fathom. Ethiopia, in fact, is the only ancient state in Africa, the only nation that managed, as Sven Rubenson points out, to preserve "its independence throughout the era of European colonization," the one African country that never succumbed to European domination.

This rich past could no longer easily be imagined, because by the time of the American Civil War, Ethiopia was for most Americans a forgotten country, identified by those who knew of it at all as an ancient civilization that had declined over the centuries into a mysterious country of warring tribes. In the eighteenth century, Abyssinia (as Europeans and Americans usually referred to the country) was still the stuff of romantic legend: Samuel Johnson's History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia was published in 1759, and James Bruce's famous Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile appeared in 1790 (and inspired Coleridge's image of "an Abyssinian maid" who "on her dulcimer . . . played" in his 1816 poem "Kubla Khan"). Whitman's own mid-1850s notes suggest how distant this romantic Ethiopia had become: "Ethiopians," he notes, come from "a country doubtless of hot-breathed airs and exhalations cities, ignorance, altogether unenlightened and unexplored" (NUPM 1972).

Whitman's pre-Civil War composite impression of Ethiopians, then, was of an ancient and accomplished people, the originators of civilization, who were now inscrutable and unenlightened, but still fine physical specimens. This ambivalent impression is captured in "Ethiopia Saluting".

And in American newspapers in 1867 and 1868, Ethiopia was very much a dusky and blear country, but one that happened to be, for the first time, on the front page. An international incident had been brewing in Ethiopia since early in 1864 when the Ethiopian emperor imprisoned the British consul, in part because Queen Victoria had insulted him by neglecting to answer his letter to her asking for an Ethiopian embassy in London.

The significant background is this: in 1855, a few months before Leaves of Grass appeared, a major event had taken place in Ethiopia, one that would remain obscure to Americans for many years: Kasa, a well-educated Christian patriot who was almost exactly Whitman's age, culminated a long military campaign and was crowned "king of kings," the emperor of Ethiopia. Taking the name of Tewodros II (hearkening back to a legendary fifteenth-century emperor) and known in Europe as Theodore or Theodorus, he began a remarkable reign that would last more than a decade. A kind of Lincoln figure for Ethiopia, Tewodros worked to end a long civil war in his country, reunify it, abolish the slave trade, and usher the nation into the modern age. To help accomplish the latter objective, he approached Queen Victoria with a request to set up diplomatic relations with Britain. Victoria's failure to respond to Tewodros's letter led to his seizing of the British consul in Ethiopia. In a scenario not unlike some that have occurred more recently in United States history, Tewodros denied that he was holding the consul and staff hostage, claiming instead that they were his guests of state, but that they were not free to leave. These guests were held in chains, and Victoria eventually sent another emissary to negotiate their release. After an apparently successful negotiation, Tewodros summarily imprisoned the second group along with the first just as they were ready to leave Ethiopia in the spring of 1866. During the summer that Whitman was writing his "Ethiopia" poem, Britain decided to send a military expedition to Ethiopia to secure the release of the hostages. Regular reports of this expedition filled America's newspapers right up through the successful assault on the emperor's stronghold of Magdala, which resulted in the rescue of the hostages and the suicide of Tewodros, who shot himself with a pistol given to him by Victoria (and whose young son was taken to England to be educated at Rugby). Tewodros was almost immediately transformed into a legendary hero in Ethiopia, the subject of ballads still heard today, and Ethiopia returned to years of civil war and anarchy.

But it was during the summer of 1867, when Britain began its military incursion into Ethiopia, that the country first came to the attention of Americans, and Tewodros became a figure of international interest, a young and well-educated black African leader who had unified a country torn by civil war and who had taken steps to end slavery in his country. In the United States, the comparison to Lincoln was inevitable. Before 1867, Ethiopia was an unknown land: when the American Annual Cyclopaedia for 1866 opens with a discussion of the Ethiopian situation, it begins by noting "our little acquaintance with this country," and in the 1868 volume notes that "The difficulty between England and King Theodore of Abyssinia, during the past three years, directed the special attention of the civilized world . . . to the affairs of this country." By 1870, the country was quickly fading from the world's attention and memory: Ethiopia has "relapsed into entire obscurity," the American Cyclopaedia noted that year, "neither its relations to foreign countries nor its internal condition attracting the least attention" (American Cyclopaedia, 1870, 1). Ethiopia would in 1868 be forced to salute some foreign colors--the Union Jack--but in 1867 Tewodros responded to the British threat with self-assurance and firm resistance ("Let them come," he said in May 1867; "By the power of God I will meet them, and you may call me a woman if I do not beat them" [American Cyclopaedia 1867, 2]). In Whitman's poem, then, the slave woman's ancient pride in her country-her sartorial salute to Ethiopia's colors-is appropriate and would have made a good deal of sense at the time. Ethiopia-the real country and the degraded embodiment of the rich heritage that the country represented-was emerging from a long period of degradation and gaining some dignity, respect, and freedom.

And the news from Ethiopia in 1867 and 1868 played into the domestic news in America--Tewodros's charismatic leadership and his tough talk to mighty Britain hardly fit the racialist stereotype of the docile black that was so often being described in the Congressional debates on Reconstruction that Whitman spent his evenings listening to.