

Theoretical perspective of factors influencing writing style of Walt Whitman

Dr. Jaspal Singh Saharan

Principal, Colonel Degree College for Women Chular Kalan, Sangpur, Punjab (India)

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ABSTRACT

Whitman's work breaks the boundaries of poetic form and is generally prose-like. He also used unusual images and symbols in his poetry, including rotting leaves, tufts of straw, and debris. He also openly wrote about death and sexuality, including prostitution. He is often labeled as the father of free verse, though he did not invent it. As a political movement, this reaction was reflected in the new democratic ideals that opposed monarchy and feudalism. In art, it meant a turning away from Neoclassicism and the ancient models of Greek perfection and classical correctness. Romanticism asserted the power of the individual. Romanticism marked an era characterized in the idealization of the individual. Walt Whitman had a strong belief that nature was the root of all beautiful things, whether it was the smell of a flower, or the light of the moon anything that was natural had internal beauty and thereby had the possibility to make humanity beautiful. Walt Whitman's writing were all in themselves different styles of Romanticism though they all used common themes of nature, and solitude. Whitman's goal in his writing was to get the people of the world to change in their belief.

1. Introduction

Whitman claimed that after years of competing for "the usual rewards", he determined to become a poet. He first experimented with a variety of popular literary genres which appealed to the cultural tastes of the period. As early as 1850, he began writing what would become *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poetry which he would continue editing and revising until his death. Whitman intended to write a distinctly American epic and used free verse with a cadence based on the Bible. At the end of June 1855, Whitman surprised his brothers with the already-printed first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. George "didn't think it worth reading". Walt Whitman was a great Romantic poet. From the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, in both Europe and the United States, an artistic and intellectual movement called Romanticism became a dominant force in politics, religion and the arts. Although the term 'Romanticism' means different things to the poets, minister, philosopher, political theorist, or artist yet some basic principles apply to them all. Romanticism was a reaction against convention. As a political movement, this reaction was reflected in the new democratic ideals that opposed monarchy and feudalism. In art, it meant a turning away from Neoclassicism and the ancient models of Greek perfection and classical correctness. Philosophically, romanticism would contend with rationalism – the belief that truth could be discerned by logic and reason. Romanticism asserted the power of the individual. Romanticism marked an era characterized in the idealization of the individual. Politically the movement influenced democratic ideas and the revolutionary principles of social equality. Philosophically, it meant that the idea of objective reality would give way to subjective experience; thus all truth became a matter of human perception. In the art world Romanticism marked a fascination with the individual genius, and elevated the artist, philosopher, poet and scholar above all other people.

Poetic theory

Whitman wrote in the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it." He believed there was a vital, symbiotic relationship between the poet and society. This connection was emphasized especially in "Song of My-self" by using an all-powerful first-person narration. As an American epic, it deviated from the historic use of an elevated hero and instead assumed the identity of the common people. *Leaves of Grass* also responded to the impact that recent urbanization in the United States had on the masses.

Leaves of Grass

Whitman paid for the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* himself and had it printed at a local print shop during their breaks from commercial jobs. A total of 795 copies were printed. No name is given as author; instead, facing the title page was an engraved portrait done by Samuel Hollyer, but 500 lines into the body of the text he calls himself "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos, disorderly, fleshly, and sensual, no sentimentalist, no stander above men or women or apart from them, no more modest than immodest". The inaugural volume of poetry was preceded by a prose preface of 827 lines. The succeeding untitled twelve poems totaled 2315 lines—1336 lines belonging to the first untitled poem, later called "Song of Myself". The book received its strongest praise from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote a flattering five-page letter to Whitman and spoke highly of the book to friends. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was widely distributed and stirred up significant interest, in part due to Emerson's approval, but was occasionally criticized for the seemingly "obscene" nature of the poetry.

During the first publications of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman had financial difficulties and was forced to work as a journalist again, specifically with Brooklyn's *Daily Times* starting in May 1857. As an editor, he oversaw the paper's contents,

contributed book reviews, and wrote editorials. He left the job in 1859, though it is unclear whether he was fired or chose to leave. Whitman, who typically kept detailed notebooks and journals, left very little information about himself in the late 1850s.

Civil War years

As the American Civil War was beginning, Whitman published his poem "Beat! Beat! Drums!" as a patriotic rally call for the North. Whitman's brother George had joined the Union army and began sending Whitman several vividly detailed letters of the battle front. On December 16, 1862, a listing of fallen and wounded soldiers in the New-York Tribune included "First Lieutenant G. W. Whitmore", which Whitman worried was a reference to his brother George. He made his way south immediately to find him, though his wallet was stolen on the way. "Walking all day and night, unable to ride, trying to get information, trying to get access to big people", Whitman later wrote, he eventually found George alive, with only a superficial wound on his cheek. Whitman, profoundly affected by seeing the wounded soldiers and the heaps of their amputated limbs, left for Washington on December 28, 1862, with the intention of never returning to New York.

In Washington, D.C., Whitman's friend Charley Eldridge helped him obtain part-time work in the army paymaster's office, leaving time for Whitman to volunteer as a nurse in the army hospitals. He would write of this experience in "The Great Army of the Sick", published in a New York newspaper in 1863 and, 12 years later, in a book called *Memoranda During the War*. He then contacted Emerson, this time to ask for help in obtaining a government post. Another friend, John Trowbridge, passed on a letter of recommendation from Emerson to Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury, hoping he would grant Whitman a position in that department. Chase, however, did not want to hire the author of such a disreputable book as *Leaves of Grass*.

The Whitman family had a difficult end to 1864. On September 30, 1864, Whitman's brother George was captured by Confederates in Virginia, and another brother, Andrew Jackson, died of tuberculosis compounded by alcoholism on December 3. That month, Whitman committed his brother Jesse to the Kings County Lunatic Asylum. Whitman's spirits were raised, however, when he finally got a better-paying government post as a low-grade clerk in the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the Department of the Interior, thanks to his friend William Douglas O'Connor. O'Connor, a poet, and an editor at *The Saturday Evening Post*, had written to William Tod Otto, Assistant Secretary of the Interior, on Whitman's behalf. Whitman began the new appointment on January 24, 1865, with a yearly salary of \$1,200. A month later, on February 24, 1865, George was released from capture and granted a furlough because of his poor health. By May 1, Whitman received a promotion to a slightly higher clerkship^[81] and published *Drum-Taps*.

Effective June 30, 1865, however, Whitman was fired from his job. His dismissal came from the new Secretary of the Interior, former Iowa Senator James Harlan. Though Harlan

dismissed several clerks who "were seldom at their respective desks", he may have fired Whitman on moral grounds after finding an 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. O'Connor protested until J. Hubley Ashton had Whitman transferred to the Attorney General's office on July 1. O'Connor, though, was still upset and vindicated Whitman by publishing a biased and exaggerated biographical study, *The Good Gray Poet*, in January 1866. The fifty-cent pamphlet defended Whitman as a wholesome patriot, established the poet's nickname and increased his popularity. Also aiding in his popularity was the publication of "O Captain! My Captain!", a relatively conventional poem on the death of Abraham Lincoln, the only poem to appear in anthologies during Whitman's lifetime.

2. French revolution and its impact on romanticism

The French Revolution of 1789 created a torrent of romantic ideals across Europe. Unlike the American Revolution and the struggle for independence from an outside, imperial power, the French Revolution marked an internal struggle within one of Europe's great nations. The conflict was over social class and competing political ideologies, ideas that were indeed threatening and revolutionary. Because of the French Revolution, all the principles of Romanticism suddenly became a basis of government. The cry of the French Revolutionaries for fraternity, equality and liberty shook the foundations of European monarchies. Common people had come to believe in the rights of man. The European world tried to understand the causes of the French Revolution and what its greater implications for the human kind. The French Revolution inspired many romantic writers to think of history as an evolution to a higher state. The French Revolution seemed to herald a rebirth of human possibility. In the old way of thinking, history was a static pyramid. It was a hierarchy, a great chain of being, that flowed from God, down to kings, to common people and then to the natural world. It was viewed as a purposeful, moral voyage. It told the story not of kings and heroes, but of democracies, the will of the people, and the triumph of the individual.

Musical traditions and audio recordings

Whitman's poetry has been set to music by a large number of composers; indeed it has been suggested his poetry has been set to music more than that of any other American poet except for Emily Dickinson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Those who have set his poems to music have included John Adams; Ernst Bacon; Leonard Bernstein; Benjamin Britten; Rhoda Coghill; Ronald Corp; George Crumb; Frederick Delius; Howard Hanson; Karl Amadeus Hartmann; Hans Werner Henze; Paul Hindemith; Ned Rorem; Robert Strassburg; Ralph Vaughan Williams; Kurt Weill; and Roger Sessions. *Crossing*, an opera composed by Matthew Aucoin and inspired by Whitman's Civil War diaries, premiered in 2015.

In 2014, German publisher Hörbuch Hamburg [de] issued the bilingual double-CD audio book of the *Kinder Adams/Children of Adam* cycle, based on translations by Kai Grehn [de] in the 2005 *Children of Adam* from *Leaves of Grass* (GalerieVevais), accompanying a collection of photography by Paul Cava. The audio release included a complete reading by Iggy Pop, as well as readings

by Marianne Sägebrect; Martin Wuttke; Birgit Minichmayr; Alexander Fehling; Lars Rudolph; Volker Bruch; Paula Beer; Josef Osterndorf; Ronald Lippok; Jule Böwe; and Robert Gwisdek. In 2014 composer John Zorn released *On Leaves of Grass*, an album inspired by and dedicated to Whitman.

Works

- Franklin Evans (1842)
- Life and Adventures of Jack Engle (serialized in 1852)[35]
- Leaves of Grass (1855, the first of seven editions through 1891)
- Manly Health and Training (1858)[37]

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- Drum-Taps (1865)
- Democratic Vistas (1871)
- Memoranda During the War (1876)
- Specimen Days (1882)

3. Conclusion

For Walt Whitman, the complete 'self' is both physical and spiritual. The self is man's individual identity, his distinct quality and being, which is different from the selves of other men, although it can identify with them. The self is a portion of the one Divine Soul. Whitman's critics have sometimes confused the concept of self with egotism, but this is not valid. Whitman is constantly talking about 'I,' but the 'I' is universal, a part of the Divine, and therefore not egotistic.