

Analytical Study on techniques involved in poetry of Walt Whitman

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ABSTRACT

This study throws light on Walt Whitman's experimentation with poetic technique and the language of poetry with special reference to his major work *Leaves of Grass* particularly "Song of Myself". The attempt aims at exploring the various aspects of the innovation in poetic technique and the language used in the work. I also contend that Whitman rejected the traditional way of writing poetry by using vernacular language for poetic expression, and dispensing with gaudy poetic diction, meter, rhyme and stanza form used by his predecessors and the English Romantics.

1. Introduction

Whitman took a bold intellectual step in deviating from the traditional mode of writing poetry or what James Parrin Warren calls Whitman's "an absolute discontinuity with the traditions of English verse". He completely rejected the time-hollowed and stereo-typed language used by his predecessors and dispensed with cramping limitations of poetic meter, rhyme-scheme, stanza-pattern, elaborate similes and puerile drapery in his poetry. He preferred the use of the vernacular language of the common Americans over the complex and artificial one of the elite class. Adopting colloquial style and deliberately avoiding complex Biblical and remote classical allusions, myths and parables, he brought the language of poetry closer to reality and made it easily comprehensible to even common readers of poetry. No doubt that the English Romantic poets i.e. Wordsworth and Coleridge took the first step in liberating English poetry from the cramping limitations of its techniques, its artificiality, inane phraseology and gaudy poetic diction used by their 18th century predecessors, and pleaded for the "language really spoken by men {common people}" (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*), yet Whitman left no stone unturned in freeing American poetry from the technical chains and bringing its language closer to the real language of people instead of using a specialized literary language of 18th century poets of the neo classical age. Not that the technicalities or structural embellishments are not important; but it too is a fact that to be over conscious of technicalities retard the natural flow of poetic creation. Wordsworth's well-known definition of poetry as "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, emphasis mine) perhaps points to this situation. Both language and structure of "Song of Myself" in *Leaves of Grass* Whitman seems to have taken the message of technical change from Wordsworth in letter and spirit and further pursued it daringly to the extent of extinction of stylistic boundaries between prose and poetry. This contributory step of Whitman has given a touch of freshness and novelty to American poetry. It also implies that Whitman, in the over throw of technical compulsions in writing poetry, expresses, like Wordsworth, a revolutionary spirit which was a part of his romantic temperament in particular and a romantic tradition in general. In his Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855) Whitman says, "The art of art, the glory of expression, and the sunshine of the light of letters is simplicity. Nothing is better than simplicity...." This implies that simplicity of language and

expression is the very luster and charm of his poetic creation; and avoidance of complex and riddled expressions are the hallmarks of his poetry. Nothing is simpler in language, but profound in thought, than the opening lines of "Song of Myself" from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. He says:

"I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you"

Since the traditional way of writing poetry was inappropriate for Whitman; its structural limitations did not go well with his temperament. To convey his ideas and emotions in an effective and emphatic way, the employment of vernacular language was a powerful tool with Whitman to use which added immense vitality to his poetic expression. What is most striking is that it conveys an extraordinary sense of immediacy and familiarity and freshness which we do not find elsewhere in the poetry of his contemporaries. This sense of nearness, simplicity and closeness to personal experience are the result of his use of vernacular language which ultimately led to become prominent features of Whitman's poetry.

Doubtless to say that in British literature Wordsworth took the initiative in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to emphasize on the use of language really spoken by common people and declared meter to be "adventitious" that has led him to blur the boundaries of prose and poetry. Subsequently, the French poets like Rimbaud and others in their revolt against the strict observance of versification, established the *VERS LIBRE* movement from which the name free verse came. In American literature Whitman is first poet who thought that it was the right time to break down the barriers of form between prose and poetry. He wrote prose with poetic qualities and poetry with the prominent qualities of prose. His Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1850) is the best example of his poetic prose. In conventional verse the unit poetic metre is foot or syllables in a poetic line. In free verse used by Whitman the units are much larger. In his poetry the unit of line is determined by qualities of rhythm and thought rather than feet or syllables. His whole art of poetry is based on cadence; and the *Leaves of Grass* is a major experiment in the cadenced verse. For example he says:

"All truths wait in all things,

They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it,
They do not need obstetric forceps of the surgeon."

"Song of Myself" is referred to as "Song" henceforth

Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855) modernizes the vision of a powerful American poet on human universal self and individual identity. Its poetic identity and self are presented in a fresh condensed discourse directly related to the realities of the American people. Poetically, Whitman captures the sight and soul of the cosmopolitan self and defines his nation as his own self by referring to daily life ideals and rituals, using a new surprising poetic way. "Song" also explores how Whitman adapts a poetic motif of metamorphosis by using the image of nature and society as two driving forces for his transformation. It presents intimacy in self-expression and privacy in association with the relationships with modern humans in various aspects of life. Moreover, "Song" presents a set of the most prominent features of Whitman's poetics: the open form of free verse, prose-like language, and musicality, all of which are derived from the language of everyday speech with a sort of internal harmony. In this light, Josep Armengol (2013) argues that Whitman is a new born American hero qualified with "American ideological values of independence, autonomy, individualism, and self-sufficiency".

"Song" embodies a web of condensed and displaced images of Whitman's self, fragmented but hopeful to change for better. Being self-fragmented and confused, Whitman experiences a state of being "apart, watchful, detached, amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary," a thing that arouses his national and human intimacy to change negative feelings in reality through poetry. Whitman stresses the manners by which "individual lives constitute the very circumference of democracy," where the self is the central unit of democracy and freedom. Whitman expects to live in a world of stability and uniqueness; a world that harmonizes with his psyche, for "One world is aware and by far the largest to me, and that is myself ... I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheerfulness I can wait". Thus, his poetic cognitive self develops in vision and thinking.

Apparently, one can notice the main three themes as mentioned in the poem: the idea of the self, the identification of the self with other selves, and the poet's relationship with the elements of nature and the universe. Whitman describes his true inner self shining through as "the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun". Thus, the poetic self-comprises various ideas, expressions, psychological states, and spiritual insights. The self is the spiritual entity that Whitman reshapes in it a permanent form through a set of logical ideas and realistic experiences. Admittedly, Whitman has a ramified self that may include other human selves who share with him similar confusion, fragmentation, uncertainty, disappointment and disorientation that characterize modern man's case. In this respect, Whitman embodies the human self and soul that make other selves attainable and unified. The aftermaths of wars certainly cause psychological, social and cultural changes; the result is a fragmented human self-unable to tolerate such breakdown of the moral and spiritual systems. Robert C. Sickels (2000) argues that Whitman's poetic and realistic observations underlie "a basic motivation to provide a model

for those wishing to engage in a similar activity of transcendence" on human divided self. Certainly, readers can share with Whitman his vision on the relationship between the self and the universe in the light of the common dilemmas and fragmentations of modern life. Whitman's poetic soul is both a single or public soul bearing a flavor of a universal one, a soul that "transcends from egotistical existence to a more sublime and expansive existence" displacing itself from "the contracting to the expansive".

Technical Innovations in Whitman's Poetry

In the above passage the length of the poetic lines varies. The march of the lines in his free verse resembles the ocean waves with their sonority and liquid grandeur. The natural fluidity, largeness, ease and spontaneity perpetually run throughout his verse. Parallelism is one of the conspicuous techniques which Whitman has employed throughout his poetry. This technique conveys a greater sense of equality based on spiritual relationship, which connects "fish, fowl and flower" in his poetry—making the whole cosmos highly valuable and meaningful even to the extent of a "grain of sand and the egg of the wren". The image of a spider that symbolizes connectivity in the following poem helps us realize that instead of building walls between us we need to make bridges in order to connect humans into interlocking relationship and bonds so essential for a peaceful and healthy society. He says:

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding'
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.
And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless ocean of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the
spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile
anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O
my soul.
("A Noiseless Patient Spider")

Similarly the sound patterns, alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia are used so effectively as integrating literary devices to produce music in his verse. For instance, in his "Song of Myself" there is alliteration of the letter "b" and "t" respectively: "At eleven o'clock began the burning of bodies/
That is the tale of the murder of the four hundred and twelve young men" (895-96). At another place the same device has been very effectively used in "Song of Myself": "The houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes".

Cataloging is one of the prominent characteristics of Whitman's poetry, though it was used in epic poetry as a prerequisite. Whitman employed this method effectively particularly in the "Song of Myself", coordinating his material as if to reflect equality of all things or the complex miscellaneity of modern life. His listing and cataloging of things, people or attributes draw the reader to peep in and to discover the true

meaning behind his words. He weaves a web of things in such a way that it impels the reader to feel that all things of the cosmos are the diverse faces of one being, and that essentially we are different parts integrating one another into one bigger whole. One of his most impressively extended catalogues makes the Section 15 of the "Song of Myself. Following are the last lines of this section which show the poet's movement from individual to a cosmic or holistic vision as if making a bridge between the self and the other:

The city sleeps and the country sleeps,
 The living sleep for their time, the dead sleep for their time,
 The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young husband sleeps by his wife;
 And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
 And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
 And of these one and all I weave the song of myself

2. Conclusion

Keeping in view the whole technical get up of the poem, "Song of Myself," one can confidently say that "To the bold, independent mind of Whitman, this stylized romantic verse seemed anything but an inevitable expression of modern democratic America. Sticking rigidly to the rules of versification and rhyming keep us stay closer to rigid classical restrictions which further encourage feudal, non-liberal and non-democratic systems. Perhaps that is why Forester states that rhyming, for example, which is "venerable and humanly form of chiming versification" Whitman "regarded as fitting for the feudal order, not for the democratic". Whitman felt as he declared in his preface to *Leaves of Grass* that the genius of the United States lay in the "common people". To simplify his medium of communication a new and free form of expression was needed. Therefore, he adopted a mode of free verse, and dispensed with all conventionalized forms of writing poetry.

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