

Walt Whitman's Spirit of Democracy and His Quintessential Style
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Abstract

This paper tries to explore that how Whitman approaches democracy from a new angle. He is not only confirmed to the domain of politics but his democratic faith is also related to his conception of spiritual democracy. Whitman's purpose of democracy is the cultivation of individualism. This paper also manifests that Whitman is not democratic in his ideas but his poetic technique to reflect his democratic impulse. Keywords: confine, cultivate democracy, domain, impulse spiritual.

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Walt Whitman was the leading poet of American democracy during the nineteenth century. He was its poet both in form and in manner. His writings are full of stimulating and inspiring democratic ideals. His poetry has served as the most potent instrument of universal democratic education. In fact, Walt Whitman's faith in democracy and liberty was basic to his being. He inherited it from his parents. His mother was a Quaker and the Quakers were very fond of equality and liberty his father was an ardent democrat of the old school who hated priests and kings. He was filled with the spirit of patriotism and nationalism. He was chiefly concerned with America and the people who lived in it. Whitman was what may be called a 'spiritual democrat'. Whitman used a common man as the theme of his poetry and prose works. He was the first authentic voice to celebrate the average or common man, endeavored by the declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War. In his poem, he sings of the common American people engaged in homely tasks. For instance in his poem 'I hear America singing' he talks of the carpenter, the mason, the boatman, the shoemaker, the hatter, the woodcutter, the plowboy and even of the mother, the young wife and the girl. He talks of all these common citizens of America, enthusiastically involved in their respective work and all contributing in their own way for the progress of their nation. In democratic poetry such as his a heroic person is to be shown not doing any extraordinary job, he is to be presented as leading his daily life well, and from there soaring to spiritual heights.

Whitman identified himself with the common people he knew and trusted them. Even during his old age, he mingled with the sailors, bus conductors, laborers, farmers traders and newsboys. He called by their name and liked them and they returned their affection. In the catalogs of 'Song of Myself,' the common people doing their work are shown to possess health, dignity, independence, love, practicality and expertise in their work. In the following lines, notice all these qualities in a common Negro Coach-driver:

The Negro hold firmly the reins of his four horses, the block swags underneath on its tied-over chain,

The Negro that drives the long dray of the stone yard, steady and tall he stands poised on one leg on the string-piece.

His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens over his hip band.

His glance is calm and commanding, he tosses and slouches of his hate away from his forehead

The sun falls on his crispy hair and his mustache falls on the black of his polished and perfect limbs.

(Song of Myself, sec-13)

This is the picture of a healthy and handsome Negro, tall and broad-shouldered, in a commanding posture. Even when the picture of Common people is not as detailed as the present one, they are shown in their typical postures proudly doing their work. Whitman emphasizes that common people are the lifeblood of democracy but at the same time, he complains that literature has never recognized and appreciated people enmasse. They so far remained entirely uncelebrated and unexpressed. Whitman is very good at describing in his poetry everyday crowds or common people. 'When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed', longing recreates the picture of crowds along the streets mourning the death of America's most democratic President. Again, the poet hangs the picture of farms and homes in the burial house of Lincoln.

And the city at hand with dwellings so dense and stacks of chimneys,
And all the scenes of life and the workshops and the workmen homeward
and returning.

In 'Leaves of Grass', Whitman hits upon a perfect symbol of democracy as he defined it. Each leaf of grass is a miracle, Grass grows in clusters and every blade of grass has its significance, as every man has his importance in a democracy. As the grass grows everywhere even in the crevices of walls . It represents common people as Whitman says in section 6 of 'Song of Myself'.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic ,
And it means, Sprouting alike in the broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white.

Kanuck Tuckahoe , Congressman , Cuff , I give them the same , I receive
the same . (Section 6, Lines 18-24)

In this section , a child asks the question that generates the rest of the poem : "What is grass ?" The answer to this Question Occupies the poet through all the rest of the sections , leading him eventually to entitle his entire book 'Leaves of Grass' . Whitman seems to use coded language here, like 'a uniform hieroglyphic' indicates equality . He also seems to speak that grass grows equally among the broad zones and narrow zones and among the black folks and white folks.

Whitman seems to dramatize in "Song of Myself" the same idea of democracy. It means that one should maintain equality with others while preserving one's individuality. The 'I' in Whitman's poetry is not so much as a personal reference as a fusion of several characters, a composite character, who exists in no place other than in the poem. It signifies Whitman's acceptance of humanity as a whole for the poet is a complete lover of the universe. Whitman identifies himself

as the average American and in the common man. The 'I' is Everyman, a creature of contradictory impulses and Instincts both good and bad, the 'I' contains multitudes, embracing many minds and even many nations. The purpose of democracy is the cultivation of individualism, 'the divine pride of man in himself. He anticipates that in true democracy lies the possibilities of universal peace, tolerance and brotherhood. Whitman's democracy has a firm social base. It is concerned with salvation here. It not only deals with the salvation of the individual self but also the salvation of America and mankind. Whitman's democratic creed has very little of Christian doctrine. He, like Emerson, rejected original sin, atonement and the special authority of the Christian scriptures. Like Emerson, he did not recognize distinction between natural and regenerate, bad and good wrong and right low and high, inferior and superior. For Whitman the soul is limitless and this limitlessness itself speaks for equality.

Man occupies a unique position in Whitman's world. The development of the individual is his chief concern in his poetry. The care and culture of the individual must be the end of democracy. Everything should contribute to the spiritual power and expansion of the human self. For instance, in his poem. On the Beach At night, through the consoling of the child by her father, Whitman delivers an immortal message. He talks of the transientness of problems and worries and also the immortality of the soul , as he says.

The ravening clouds shall not long be victorious

They shall not long possess the sky, they devour the Stars only

Jupiter shall emerge, be patient, watch again another night, the Pleiades shall emerge

They are immortal.

So, in the above lines, Whitman is trying to enlighten man's spirituality and also wants to explain to him that the problems do not remain forever. They are like the passing clouds.

Here, the innocent child is the representation of the common man and through natural objects, he tries to explain the meaning of the condition in existing there at that time. To Whitman, individual liberty is the indispensable condition of democracy. It answers an immortal need of the soul. In all times, heroes and poets have called out for it, for the man whom despots had reduced to slavery. History, according to Whitman is the endless recital of the ever-renewed struggles of tyranny and liberty. It sometimes may seem that the tyrants win, but their temporary victory means nothing just like the ravening clouds in the poem on the beach at night. In fact, the

nineteenth-century America has not ready to respond to the ideal democracy but Whitman's poetry is in general hopeful, optimistic and undaunted. It pictures a great and growing America, a democracy working towards the ideal.

As far as Whitman's poetic technique or style is concerned, it too reflects his democratic impulse. It is significant that he rejects the conventional forms of poetry which he felt to be associated with its feudalistic and aristocratic past. His freedom with poetic form reflects his advocacy of freedom for the human soul. The free flow of words, the lines of uneven length, all express the sense of development inherent in democracy.

According to Whitman, a poet cannot make his poems beautiful by adding 'gaggery and gift' ; the beauty must come from his mind ; his purpose and his idea . Whitman even uses the mirror image in the preface to 'Leaves of Grass ' to suggest the relationship between poetry and life.

The poet says to the reader ,” You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me .” The figure does not mean exact imitation , however , as James E. Miller , JR. explains , “ The poet's task is to represent reality in his poem, the reader judges the poem by comparing it to the world “. Whitman emphasizes fidelity to nature , life and reality. The poet should be simple and organic in expression. In the preface, he says that the form of poems should develop like plants and trees . There should be organic relation between form and subject matter . It should not be marred by superimposing conventional ornaments . Whitman says that only “ornaments’ can be allowed that flow out of the nature of the work and come irrepressibly from it and are necessary to the completion of the work. Whitman deliberately forsook the conventions of definite rhythm and developed a free verse style suited to his subject matter. He maintained that the new style came welling up in him from nature.

The free flow of words , the lines of uneven length , all express the sense of development inherent in democracy . Whitman's poetry makes it effect largely by the repetition of thoughts , words and sounds and by the art of accumulation , but he does not simply collect together objects and images , he also builds up sounds. The result is that his poems have upon us something of the effect of symphonic music. Whitman's poems have been called hymns that create their mood of celebration by piling image up image , object upon object . They seem to be driven out of the poet by a compulsive inner energy.

Whitman's unit inverse is generally the line, not the sentence. All three lines are end-stopped ; there is a comma or a semi-colon at the end of each line. A run online is rare in Whitman . Parallelism brings his basic prosodic form , the second line balances the first completing or supplementing its meaning.

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

The poetic structure is truly equalitarian, in harmony with Whitman's democratic theme, there are no subordinates. All lines are equal as all people are equal. Whitman's parallelism is quite often reinforced by parallel wording and sounds. In 'Leaves of grass' there are many lines that begin with the same grammatical structure as in the first section 'out of cradle', the last section of 'passage to India' and 33 of 'song of myself'. Though the initial reiteration is most common, words and phrases are frequently repeated in other positions also. Final reiteration is used sparingly; whenever it is used, it is more for rhetorical emphasis than music as in section 24 of 'Song of Myself'. Where 'it shall be you' repeated in fifteen lines.

Another important aspect of style is the use of catalogs. Practically all of Whitman's poems reflect this tendency to catalog persons or things. The selection seems forbidden to him. For instance, if he mentions one trade or occupation, then all other trades and occupations follow, as we find in 'I hear America Singing'. Then, the symbols chosen by Whitman are from familiar life – the stars, the sea, the clouds, the birds, grass, calamus, lilacs, etc. The grass is the basic symbol of 'Leaves of Grass' and it represents Whitman's concept of democracy. The birds song in 'Out of Cradle' and when lilacs last represent the creative transfiguration of suffering and final acceptance. In the later poem, Whitman powerfully expresses grief and reconciliation to death by manipulating the three images of the lilacs, bird and star. The language used by Whitman in his works is truly democratic for it often makes use of slang which Whitman felt to be the common man's experiment with language and the effective use of American slang can be seen in several of his poems.

'In song of myself,' the picture of various people like the butcher boy, Negro driver, carpenter, etc. are made accurate by use of their own slang. Fields of study like astronomy, biology, chemistry, physics and the pseudo-science, phrenology were also contributed to his poetic vocabulary. Although Whitman's diction sometimes misfires, yet his successful language experiments far outnumbered his mistakes. One recognizes the rich and varied vocabulary of the 'Leaves of Grass'. Whitman had an extraordinary gift of description. Every poem is filled with vivid pictures. He can catch in a word or phrase the essential features of the picture he wants to present or the sensation he wants to convey and through his coherent structure in the poems, he conveys the idea of democracy. His concept of democracy is not a dream. It is not idealistic. He has boundless hopes for mankind. He has predicted a very bright future for America and mankind. His emphasis on the development of

man is quite convincing and justified. No nation can progress if it ignores the common man. Whitman's prediction has come out to be true for today as America is the most prosperous country in the world.

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