

## Poems Of Whitman: A Complete Reflection Of American Consciousness

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### Abstract

The first step of Walt Whitman in the field of American literature has passed two hundred years. Obviously, it is a long time but still fresh, alive, and vibrantly young. He is, in fact, one of the great poets who is not just a poet but also a great man who has become a symbol of national consciousness by his pursuit and courage. In his poetry, the philosophy of American great independence has become an idol. He exerts his vitality, innovative style, and national mindset in his poetry so much that any discussion on American literature cannot proceed without reading his poetry. A literary critic, Harold Bloom, at the inaugural ceremony of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Leaves of Grass wrote "If you are an American, Walt Whitman is your psychological father and mother" (Harold, 2005, p.12). His personal zeal and conscious attempt to break the tradition has made him one of the leading American romantic poets. To him, the role of common people is important to build America. In other words, American consciousness is the main content of his poetic philosophy. This paper focuses on showing how his American consciousness is reflected in some of his poems while analyzing some specific lines of those poems.

**Keywords:** Compromise, conservatism, consciousness, contemporary, democracy, disappointing, freedom, humanitarian, illusion, individualism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Romantic Movement in Europe reached its perfection. The self-declaration of a human being with immense potentiality was one of the important characteristics of this movement. The French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution in England played a vital role behind this. The declaration of the Human Rights Charter, after the French Revolution, recognized the release of individualism from religious confinement and feudalistic obstacles. It immediately affected the contemporary art, literature, and philosophy. We cannot say that all of this change was good, but the welfare of the collective people was also linked to the possibilities of the individual. The Enlightenment campaign has continued behind it for nearly 200 years. The wave of this movement also took place in America, and the consciousness of some sensitive persons was hit by this forcible wave. Many people started to think that with the freedom of individual, the freedom of human is necessary in the land. They started to find out a way to equate the two. Walt Whitman is one of the persons who depicted common people in his literary works in the light of democratic thoughts and philosophy based on American consciousness. He did not want to go ahead taking the steps of an organizational democratic activist. He, however, wanted the release of feeling for individual as well as the entire society. Nevertheless, there was a lot of conflict between individual and the contemporary society, and Whitman tried to dissolve this conflict into the romantic upheaval of his dream. His dream was only to build America as a developed nation. To make his dream come true, he made an unprecedented call by his poetry along with humanitarian sympathy covered with patriotic consciousness. He uttered:

*"Camerado, I give you my hand!*

*I give you my love more precious than money,*

*I give you myself before preaching or law;*

*Will you give me yourself? Will you come travel with me?*

*Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?"* (Leaves of Grass, 1855)

## II.METHODOLOGY

This study uses the qualitative method based on "what" people think or say about Walt Whitman and also "why" they think or say so.

### III. WHITMAN'S LIFE, WORKS, AND LITERARY REVIEW

Whitman was born in 1819 in Long Island. His family had been living there for almost 200 years. Three of Walt Whitman's brothers were named after three historically famous US presidents - George Washington Whitman, Thomas Jefferson Whitman, and Andrew Jackson Whitman. Although Walt's family had moved to Brooklyn a few days before he reached the age of four, his love for Long Island still knew no bounds. The Long Island influenced his poetic mind a lot. He was often inspired by the beauty of blue sky, sea, and sunshine of the Island. As a young man, he often used to swim there, collect oysters, and go fishing. The future poet used to recite Shakespeare and Homer for the waves of the sea, walking alone on the deserted coast of Coney Island.

The influence of the family on Walt Whitman was minimal. His mother, on one hand, used to read religious books. On the other hand, his father was a simply a laborer who often considered himself deprived. He was also an alcohol addict. Amongst the seven children his parents had, three had some type of mental problem. School was never an important matter to them. Walt stopped attending school at the age of eleven, though he borrowed books whenever he had the chance to read the novels of the *Arabian Nights*, James Fenimore Cooper, and Sir Walter Scott. He was thrilled and overwhelmed by these writings. One of the vital influences in Walt's life was the daily ferry which was operated between Brooklyn and Manhattan. Millions of passengers used ferries a year as a modern way of transportation during his period.

At the beginning of his life, Walt Whitman worked as a newspaper correspondent and editor for Fowler and Wells. These men were familiar to him and they could assess a man's future just by seeing his skull. While he worked there, he wrote about crime, news about fire, local politics, and slavery which, in his language, was a horrible crime. These were good jobs but none measured up to the level of intelligence of Walt Whitman. In his early life, he wrote some short stories. He even wrote a novel titled "*Franklin Evans*". His early poems were published in various newspapers of New York. However, these were just his spontaneous over flow of emotions as shown in the example below:

*"The grave will take me; earth will close*

*O'er cold dull limbs and ashy face;*

*But where, O, Nature, where shall be*

*The soul's abiding place?"* (Time to Come, 1842)

Several newspapers dismissed him for work-related misconduct. According to one colleague, "Walt was so lazy that he had to regularly exercise two people to open two jaws to talk"! On the other hand, as many say, we can also guess that he was quite aware of the condition of the workers and the corruption of the government. Thus, this could be a major reason he lost his jobs in several places. From 1842 to 1845, in these four years, he was seen working in at least five New York newspapers.

In 1855, Whitman published *Leaves of Grass*. There were twelve poems on 83 pages, some of which he typed himself. There was no author's and publisher's name in the book, but he gave a small photograph of his hand at his waist, trembling in ecstasy. Bronson Alcott described it in a journal in 1856, "broad-shouldered, rouge-fleshed, Bacchus-browed, bearded like a satyr". The poet's absence only reinforces Whitman's perception that the leaf's voice spreads everywhere.

Although disappointing news came too quickly about *Leaves of Grass*, later on it became a master piece. His brother, George, uttered "didn't think it worth reading" (Callow, 1992.). Due to its content, very few shops agreed to keep the book. According to Whitman, the poor are just as important as the rich and the women and men are equal! He praised human bodies at the age when the piano's legs were covered in packets! According to one critic, "he appeared in a beauty parlor with a pot full of piss! Fowler and Wells, agreed to keep the book in their shop. Although the sales were not mentionable, it did not disappoint Whitman at all. According to his brother, George, he was "more stubborn than a brick wall" (Callow, 1992). Moreover, *Leaves of Grass* was highly praised by Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of leading American poets and essayists, who wrote to Whitman in one of his letters on receiving the poems that it was "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America had yet contributed" (Emerson, 1855). The interesting part of it is that they had never met; they had no friendship. As such, Walt had no reason to expect such a warm praise.

Furthermore, Emerson wrote to Whitman in Concord, Massachusetts, "I rubbed my eyes a little, to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging". *Leaves of Grass* is a combination of the finest life-giving knowledge and sharp sense of humor in America to date. He says, "It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy nature, as if too much handiwork, or too much lymph in the temperament, were making our western wits fat and mean" (Emerson, 1855). According to D.H. Lawrence, "Whitman, the great poet, has meant so much to me. Whitman the one man breaking a way ahead. Whitman the one pioneer . . . Ahead of Whitman, nothing. Ahead of all poets, pioneering into the wilderness of unopened life, Whitman. Beyond him, none."

Whitman described *Leaves of Grass* in this way: "Love the earth, the sun and all creatures, not just the rich, but give to everyone who wants, stand up for the fool and the apathetic, hate the monsters, do not argue God, have patience and dreams for human beings. Show respect, feel confident, go with powerful fools, young people, family friends, whatever you have learned in school, what you hear in church. Read them to check again, Re-examine what you read in any book, leave everything that hurts your consciousness, after all this, you will become your own poem". The poet also suggested the way to read the book, "Under the open sky"! Pickering said that Whitman had written great poems about things that were never considered poetic at all. He further suggested taking some time to understand the world around us. In general, how much extraordinary his poems are!

Even though, in 1850, very few people gave *Leaves of Grass* for five minutes, the poet devoted himself to writing new poems. His visiting to Broadway continued as before, especially, at Plaff's Beer Bar. At that time, New York's literary lovers used to get the taste of poetry, arguments, and chat on the huge table of beer. That storm of poetry readings was often up to the last appearance of daylight for the audience's cheering sound and acceptance. The poet would often go to the bars for labor class people for whom he felt that he was deeply in the spirit of writing.

Meanwhile, a civil war broke out in his beloved country, America. He also stood in the queue of the people who were ready to make sacrifices. On December 1862, after two months of bloody war, the poet saw in the newspaper that his brother, George Whitman, a soldier of the New York Regiment, was wounded in the battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia. Although Whitman did not feel very united with his family, he immediately left to look for his wounded brother.

There were at least thirteen hundred dead soldiers on the battlefield. Thousands of wounded soldiers were covered by the extreme snow. Many have been down in the open sky for 5 days, with the lucky ones getting a little escape from the glacier above the pine. Surgeons who were working to separate the hands and feet of the injured are still working. Stack of amputated hands and feet were reporting that there was an outdoor surgery going on.

Whatever the poet was visualizing, it changed him forever. He returned to Washington DC with the war wounded soldiers. The number of wounded patients in the hospital was more than the total population of that place. After renting a room, he also took up a temporary job of copying the paper. Two years later, he got a job as a government clerk, which was largely replaced by government officials who loved poet's poetry. In a letter to one of his brothers, he wrote, "I have taken a simple life. The rule is to come in at 9am and go in the afternoon, but I don't come in at 9am, and stay until 4pm when I want to stay".

During his leisure time, he usually visits the military hospital. Injured, diseased soldiers lay beside a pile of blood-soaked bandages where they use on dirty blankets. "Cut", yeah, the cut wound was a regular occurrence there. People were screaming throughout the area. According to the poet, he wandered among the wounded soldiers of the hospital like a wild buffalo dressed in a gray suit, hat, clean floral shirt, Army boots, and Moroccan leather on the head. He was the one who spoke with the wounded soldiers, sometimes overnight. In a letter to his mother, he said: "The wounded soldiers were so thirsty for a little attention that without them there was no way to reach them." For many lonely, homesick soldiers, Whitman's companionship and reinforced speech were more beneficial than the doctor's. He felt the wounded in this way:

*"The hurt and the wounded I pacify with soothing hand,  
I sit by the restless all the dark night — some are so young;*

*Some suffer so much — I recall the experience sweet and sad;  
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested,  
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)*". "The Dresser" 1867 (later titled "The Wound-Dresser")

There was no official post of the poet. From the experience gained in the Crimean War, several civilian organizations were providing necessary nursing assistance to soldiers. Most of their volunteers were middle-aged or older women. Like others, Whitman was also at a risk of infections such as typhoid, pneumonia, diarrhea and all other diseases. The risk of mental illness was also very high. The poet could not sleep through the night. With the burden of all the grieving heavy experiences on his head, his weight increased to thirty pounds and at that time he could not write anything (Meier, 2015).

After the war, the poet stopped going to the hospital regularly. Sleeplessness and anxiety had taken him to the state of what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder. At age 46, he looked like an old man. Once he wrote, "I would probably be blind with my own eyes and write". At that time, the famous English poet, Lord Alfred Tennyson, with whom Whitman had contact, wrote all the famous poems about war. Nevertheless, for Whitman, a true war could never be brought to book, "war business is about nine hundred and ninety-nine parts diarrhea to one part glory" (Horatio, 1914, p.293).

The poet also wrote simple prose to describe the cruelty in war. In *Specimen Days*, he wrote about the horrifying situation of the Colombian war in Tennessee. At this point, Whitman continued to add new poems to *Leaves of Grass*, adding old poems in a new way, and campaigning on his own without any distraction. After studying poetry at Dartmouth College in 1872, an anonymous reviewer compared the poet to Homer and Shakespeare.

Unfortunately, the state authority, the censor board, used their scissors on *Leaves of Grass*! In 1882, the District Attorney of Boston asked him to delete several lines of poetry from the book especially from the poems: *A woman waits for me*, *To a common prostitute*, and *the dalliance of the Eagles*. The critics and the censor incompetently tried to focus on certain lines of other poems too, for an instance:

*"I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with the bride myself,  
I tighten her all night to my thighs and lips"*. (Whitman, 1855)

Emily Dickinson wrote in a letter to a friend that she had never read Whitman's poem, but heard that they were very "offensive". Moreover, some lines of his letters and poetry created an image in the mind of his audiences and readers that he had a special fascination for homosexuality. People still have a great interest in Whitman's sex life. In this context, can I compare him with Michael Angelo or Mark Twain? To me, in fact, in general, we must be inquisitive about his verses, not for his biological pleasure.

The controversy over censorship of that period brought Whitman to the center of discussion, and the writers continued to evaluate his book. Shortly, after *Treasure Island* had been published, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote that his known world had completely changed after reading *Leaves of Grass*. In his essay "The Books Which Have Influenced Me", he expresses:

*"a book of singular service, a book which tumbled the world upside down for me, blew into space a thousand cobwebs of genteel and ethical illusion, and, having thus shaken my tabernacle of lies, set me back again upon a strong foundation of all the original and manly virtues"* (Robert Louis Stevenson, 2015).

While painting *Starry Night*, Vincent Van Gogh read a French version of *Leaves of Grass*. Vincent wrote to his sister:

*"He sees in the future, and even in the present, a world of healthy, carnal love, strong and frank- of friendship- of work- under the great starlit vault of heaven a something of which after all one can only call God- and eternity in its place above this world."* (The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh, 1981)

Although Whitman wrote to establish humanity in American society, he couldn't deny his time. He did not campaign to accept the newly released black slaves as full citizens. Throughout his life, we had been led to believe that the shape of our brain fits our character. His brain was sent to the Anthropometric Society of Philadelphia in 1892, after his death, at the age of 72, in the hope that after examination he would know why he was so extraordinary.

Hundreds of years have passed. Whitman's influence is unique. His personality, his confidence, his friendship with the neglected, the triumph of equality, and the love of nature are all integral parts of our lives. The author of the book, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, Professor Roger Asselineau thinks, "Whitman is beyond the reach of most American's thinking. That's all they need. Women's equal rights Freedom of sexuality. Freedom of expression" (Asselineau, 1962).

In the poem *A Song for Occupations*, Whitman focuses on different occupations – blacksmiths, glass blowers, nail makers, copper craftsmen, tin-roofers, shingle dressers – and delivers the message of equality for all. At the same time, it is shown that American democracy is a new illumined invincible force.

*"Unscrew the locks from the door!*

*Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!*

*I speak the password primeval*

*I will give the sign of democracy,"*

Although the poet Whitman wanted to have his book in the pocket of general people pocket, it would still be in our newspaper store, in this case the poet still failed. In fact, he wrote his poetry for the general people who lived hand to mouth and led a simple life with a great struggle. Hence, they rarely read or never touched them. Anyway, two hundred years have passed; Walt Whitman is re-appearing to the reader for his unique poetry, bold word-choice, modern psyche, sensuality, romantic consciousness and sophistication. If America is to be identified with

Just one poem, it must be *The Song of Myself* by Walt Whitman.

Whitman never married. He was open- minded, intimate, and passionate to all men and women equally. But he did not want to make a permanent relationship with anyone. However, don't think he was a saint in nature. He accepted both the nature and instinct. Report says that he became a father when he was in his twenties. A European descent, an unknown woman, is the mother of his child. Later, he became close to many other women. Some were ready to leave their homes and showed interest in getting married with him. But he did not agree. He, on the other hand, didn't behave indecently with anyone too. In 1873, he was paralyzed. He recovered slowly. He was alive about 20 years more. He didn't stop his pen, but the previous spontaneous enthusiasm came to a halt. He was not aware of the exact formula for the democratic settlement. He was also unaware on personal matters too. Emotional bias has shown him no path, neither was he apathetic nor aware of life. He was completely naive. We realize his presence in the pursuit of beauty and in the enjoyment of it. In one of his poem, he says:

*"Be composed – be at ease with me – I am Walt*

*Whitman, liberal and lusty as Nature" (To a Common Prostitute, 1860)*

The utterance of honesty and humanity in his poetry catches our attention. The colorful picture of hope and progress which was America's dream before the civil-war, like many other places, at the end of the war, maintaining peace in the land was very challenging. The trail of conservatism cuts off the spot. Whitman also couldn't escape from this difficulty. Nonetheless, he didn't compromise with conservatism. He didn't seek for any shelter of hypocrisy. Thus, he expresses his regret:

*"I feel the measureless shame and humiliation of my race,*

*it becomes all mine*

*Mine too the revenges of humanity, the wrongs of ages,*

*baffled feuds and hatreds,*

*utter defeat upon me weighs – all lost – the*

*foe victorious!" (The Mystic Trumpeter, 1872)*

Consequently, frustration was not his last. His optimism about his dream land, America, was reflected to the insane tune of *Mystic Trumpeter*:

*O glad, exulting, culminating song!*

*A vigor move than earth's is in the notes,*

*Marches of victory - Man disenthral himself - The Conqueror at last,*

*Hymns to the universal God from universal man - all joy!*

*A reborn race appears - a perfect world - all joy!*

*Women and men in wisdom innocence and health - all joy!*

*Riotous laughing bacchanals fill's with joy!*

*War, sorrow, suffering gone - the rank earth purged -*

*Nothing but joy left! (The Mystic Trumpeter, 1872)*

Here we can see how Whitman has raised his voice to warm up the mass people of America. He sang his song for women, in the same way for men too. The song was sung by a developed man who lived a life with immense passion, pulse and power, free and pleasing in his laws of nature:

*"The Muse, I say the Form complete is worthier far,*

*The Female equally with the Male I sing.*

*The Life immense in passion, pulse and power,*

*Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,*

*The Modern Man I sing". (One's Self I Sing, 1867)*

Walt Whitman was an unknown name in the forties of the nineteenth century. However, his thought was beginning to take shape. We found his reflection of thought and philosophy in a small notebook. Our eyes get stuck in this place – *"I never know yet how it felt to be in the presence of my superior."* More clearly, He informed, *"If the presence of God were made visible immediately before me, I could not abase myself"*. His sense of freedom associated with it - this freedom belongs not to one, but to everyone. Furthermore, dignity is equal to them. His godly imagination was: *"He has the divine grammar of all tongues, and says indifferently and alike, how are you friend? To the President in the midst of his cabinet and good day my brother, to Sambo among the hoes of the sugar field, and both understand him and know that his speech is right"*. (The Thomas Biggs Harned Collection of the Papers of Walt Whitman, 1842–1937)

His God does not make any difference between the head of the state and the Negro slave. From this moment of self-realization, he wrote:

*"I am the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves,*

*I am the poet of the Body and I am .... (Section 21, Song of Myself)*

*In this poem, the poet, Walt explains himself and clears his position to the audience. He says:*

*I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul*

*The pleasures of heaven are with me*

*and the pains of hell are with me,*

*But first I graft and increase upon myself,*

*the latter I translate into a new tongue."*

All these feelings came out from his inside mind. No meanness was there. He matched his sense of humanity with patriotism in a bold and strong voice where American consciousness prevailed.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, if America is to be identified with few words, it must be the verses from the poems of Walt Whitman. Walt Whitman not only introduces himself in his works as an American, but America as a whole. In the words of Ezra Pound, "Walt Whitman is America" (Pound, 1962). In his poem *I hear America Singing*, the American democratic tradition is uplifted. Whitman celebrates democracy by referring to Americans of all classes. Whitman's vision of democracy, his love of Manhattan, his sense of the future, and of the community of peoples of this earth proves his optimistic feelings towards the American society. In his poems, he depicts America as an energetic nation that is progressing with mirth. He has matched his sense of humanity with patriotism in a bold and strong voice where American consciousness has prevailed. He writes:

*"I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,*

*Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,*

*The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,*

*The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,"*

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