

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 8 : 7 July 2008

ISSN 1930-2940

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Meaning and Technique in Walt Whitman's Poetry

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Walt Whitman

Taken from Wikipedia www.wikipedia.com

Abstract

This article attempts to elucidate the meaning and technique of Whitman's poetry. For this purpose, the paper uses evidence from a few selected poems taken from Whitman's book *Leaves of Grass* (1855 edition) to show that ultimately, the poems should be read as part of the collection to be appreciated. *Leaves of Grass* has a marked architectural quality and has for its chief aim the stimulation of a personality.

Further, Whitman's poems reveal that the Universe is alive, not dead. They are organic—living and growing and speaking to us directly through the creative mind and its senses. His poetics do not appear to be didactic but they are illustrative and reveal Whitman's innovations.

The meaning of his poems occurs on two levels---the plain sense level and on the level of metaphor. The subtlety of his poems lie not in ideas or emotions, but in the aesthetic form, that is, artistic technique. This is well illustrated in Whitman's use of figurative language, symbolism, imagery, metaphor, repetitions, parallelism and catalogs. Thus, this paper endeavors to explicate the meaning of the poems that is latent in different surfaces of the lines and also to lay emphasis on Whitman's use of exuberant phrases and images that govern the concept and form of his poetry.

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Introduction

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) is one of the Western poets/creative writers whose writings had been greatly influenced by Vedantic and Upanishadic thinking. Walt Whitman has also been described as an *American Sadhu*! What we really see is an interesting cyclic impact: Eastern thought influenced modern Western writers whose understanding and interpretation of it, in their turn, impacted Eastern philosophical thought.

Ever since its first publication in 1855, *Leaves of Grass* has been a puzzling collection of poems. It inspires, it entralls, and it tantalizes the reader. *Leaves of Grass* has the kind of unity the world or man has. Whitman believes that truth and beauty are attributes of man's experiences and of the universe. He has so completely identified himself with 'Leaves' ("This is no book, /who touches this touches a man") that most critics have tried to find reflections of Whitman's life in all the imagery and symbolism of the poems.

Two Principles of Organization in *Leaves of Grass*

There are two principles of organization in *Leaves of Grass* closely related and simultaneously operative. The first is analogous to the organic process of thought by which bits of experience are progressively united in larger and more complex integrations. The second is the organic growth seen as a pattern of death and rebirth. Both mean the same and work well. The second suggests a stronger recognition of the principle that in order to register a change the organic structure must be totally reconstructed; it does not grow by addition but by emergent states of complexity, each one radically different from the preceding one. The assimilation of the fact of death, the transcendence of the feelings of sorrow at the loss it involves, is one of the greatest changes the growing organism of the human personality can undergo.

Nature and Spirit

Whitman's poetics is constructed around the organic principles of nature and her symbols of spirit. In essence, the organic principle states that form takes its origin from within and that "poetic expression will find its own natural rhythms in the act of expression" (Wilson, p.37).The organic form,

. . . is innate, it sleeps as it develops itself from within and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as life is, such is the form. Nature the primal genial artist inexhaustible in diverse powers is equally inexhaustible in forms . . . (Coleridge, Pp. 77-9)

Considering all these ideas, the theory of the organic growth of *Leaves of Grass* is a growth that reflects psychological changes in the poet resulting from an ebbing of the libido.

In its simplest terms *Leaves of Grass* may be said to be the creation of an individual. This creation or delineation first portrays an expanding awareness of the self and its relation to all

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else, next shows the impingement of a specific time and a particular place or self, and finally engages the self with the fundamental and all encompassing law of spirituality.

Meaning in Whitman's Poetry

The main concepts on which Whitman builds his poems are those connecting the polar opposites of the individual and society, man and nature, body and soul, matter and spirit, and life and death. His aim is to suggest a complex of relations embracing all the elements and implying many more. The object then is to integrate the universe in the reader's mind by persuading him to see, that is, to originate for himself, relationships between himself as an individual, and the mass of individuals in society, between himself and nature or the universe, between his body and his soul, between his own life and death.

The meanings of the poems are latent in different surfaces of the lines. Inside the shifting shimmering surfaces of Whitman's poems is a system of articulation that gives them strong, though not solid shapes. It proceeds by the method of reconciling opposites, which Coleridge (1969), recommended. The meaning is unraveled with a vast number of individual observations or units of disconnected experiences and ties them together, dialectically in a progressively tighter and more comprehensive synthesis. This is a unique spiritual perception.

Whitman's poetics does not appear to be didactic but is illustrative. He does not dictate terms to the child on how to live well, instead, he reveals the possibilities of life with an indiscriminate, often totality of images that express the complete realm of phenomenal manifestation of the universe. His task is not to make the child 'do' but to make him 'see'. His verse is a poetry of perceptions, seeing, hearing, feeling, all merged into one, all of which is to say that there is a consistent attitude and a

. . . motion that there is nothing static, nothing abiding, but only the flow of a relentless process, with everything originating, growing, decaying, vanishing . . . a wholly dynamic view of life of the individual and of the universe. (Zimmer, Pp. 130-1)

Nature's Effect on Whitman

Nature had a stirring effect on Whitman. Therefore, as a poet he repeatedly refers to the sea and the wild and open spaces of Paumanok. It is these nature symbols that Whitman turns into symbols of eternity and transcendences and incorporates in the 'thrush's song' and the 'sea rhythms', the true meaning of which is revealed to the groping child. It is through these 'songs' that the child is able to comprehend the meaning of life. The child closely observes nature and gradually absorbs the world around him which enables him to identify his soul with objects and hence turn the material world into a symbol of eternity. *Leaves of Grass* meditates on the nature of the isolated self.

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These meditations originating in deep personal dissatisfaction and cultural inhibitions take the form of literal or symbolic journeys in search of a unifying principle that will simplify and harmonize the disparities of . . . life . . . these journeys are regressive in nature and constitute a return to the peace and security . . . in short, a return to the womb like state . . . (Miller, p.19) .

Speaking and Seeing the World

The “I” speaks of Whitman’s poems ‘speaks’ the world that he sees and ‘sees’ the world that he speaks and he does this by becoming the reality of his visions and of his words. Therefore, most of his poems are voyages in this ‘metaphysical sense’. For Whitman, life appears to be a ‘continual journey’ and man is the ‘eternal journeyer’. He emphasizes the experimental nature of life and poetry, and with each step and each poem there is a new beginning. This ‘journey’ is best seen not as a linear movement towards some ‘fixed goal’ but as a ‘stance’, an attitude - - ‘an image’. The ‘journey’ is also seen as a ‘symphonically recurring image’, as omnipresent as the ‘grass’ itself. It is an image used at various levels of meaning, to express the questing exploratory nature of Whitman’s discovery of America and of himself.

The Journey on Two Levels

This ‘journey’ of life is developed on two levels. The first is the vision of life as a journey that Whitman developed for ‘public consumption’. This projected journey, a journey which takes place at the public level or ‘surface level’ of Whitman’s poems, has a didactic function; through this, Whitman desires to instruct his fellow Americans as to the proper approach to life in the New World. Beyond this public journey, however, lies the second journey; a private voyage of discovery which takes place in the poet’s psyche. This is most evident in poems dealing with the maturation process, (*Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking, There Was A Child Went Forth, As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life*, and others) or with the dream states, (*The Sleepers*).

This psychic voyage often provides an effective structure for the poems. In it, the poet who really never leaves ‘home’, that is, ‘the womb’, still effects a heroic, even triumphant accommodation to his world.

The voyaging ego of the child–poet leads him to the farthest reaches of both the physical and the spiritual world. By employing this ‘leitmotif’, Whitman portrays the gradual initiation of the child into a full grown and mature poet. Just as life grows or say a mind grows so also did his *Leaves of Grass* grow and the poet of those “Leaves” also grow. The process is one from chaos to order. The persona of the poet identifies with all aspects of life and helps to explain the fragmentary and discontinuous sequence of images and events.

Poetry Shaping Life – Nature *Is* the Only Complete Poem

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Whitman is convinced that poetry has the power not just to describe but to shape life. The reader no longer is graciously admitted as a privileged observer into the poet's presence: he is seized ("My left hand hooking you around your waist") and forcefully shown the landscape of continents and universes and this poet will not take 'no' for an answer. This was revealed in *Song of Myself*. He believes that 'nature' is the only complete actual poem.

The principal objective of his poems is a centrality and totality of observations and expression, a yearning for immensity. Whitman has stated in his Preface (1855) the perception of beauty of "dumb real objects" is open to all men. Whitman creates an artistic form as a vehicle for the mythopoeia experience of the poet. Here his themes are birth, death and resurrection. He begins on the 'conscious' level but associations carry him to the fringe of the 'unconscious'. Whitman is good at portraying convincingly the kind of dawning of elemental consciousness since it is very much like the half-matured feelings he habitually lived. Therefore, the poet's experiences are less intellectual and more emotional and his growth spiritual and universal.

Artistic Technique

Nature, acting as the primary 'instructor' gives the child-poet, intuitive sight and with this identification the universe becomes apart of him and he a part of the universe. The 'child' of *Leaves of Grass* is a prototype personality of the New World. The subtlety of his poems lays not in ideas or emotions, but in the aesthetic form, that is, artistic technique.

With a child-like enthusiasm in life, he is not merely a simplifier and evader of ambiguities but he also retains in maturity much of the child's over-excited interest in trivialities, which are wonderful to the expanding consciousness of youth. Whitman's cosmos is one of the process in which the forms of life once realizing their individual potential perish into dimness, and image of the eternal flux of energy. Yet perpetual perishing does not make the end of things because as Whitman says in *Song of Myself*, "all goes onward and outward, nothing collapses". In this poem Whitman expresses his dedication to the simultaneously growing and dissolving process of life, the music that swells and recedes in endless cycles of existence and repose. His verse is linked to natural processes because he celebrates and is the voice of the larger and for evermore behind divine "I" manifested in all phenomena.

I celebrate myself;
And what I assume you shall assume;
For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you.
(*Song of Myself*, lines: 1-3)

These lines indicate the world of nature and the world of man are to be apprehended anew, a direct apprehension unperfumed by artificial essences and undistorted by conceptions inherited from the past and so vividly and intensely understood that the poet is elevated to ecstasy to a conviction of mystic union with God. At the beginning the child beholds 'God' in every object. Later, however, when the ability to experience this vivid, sensual apprehension fails, when it ebbs with the ocean of life, "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life, / As I wended the shores I know.

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When the poet sits at the window and “sees” but cannot “experience” the sufferings of others, then he feels that he has not really understand anything, not a single object.

I perceive I have not really understand anything, not a single object, and that no man ever can . . . (Section 2, line 32)

Yet the memory of the growing vision remains fading slowly and as it fades, the poet works out in individual poems elements of the philosophy which he had intuited in the total vision. Finally, with the earth cold, impassive and voiceless, the poet dreams not of a new path but a launching forth into the unchartered and pathless seas where no marines has yet dared to go.

As I wend to the shores I know not,
As I list to the dirge, the voices of men and women wreck'd,
As I inhale the impalpable breezes that set in upon me, . . .
(As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life, lines: 18-20)

Psychological Coherence versus Intellectual Logic – Song of Myth

Most of Whitman’s poems contain a psychological coherence rather than an intellectual logic. The meaning does not evolve around concepts and philosophical ideas but around the poet’s shifting and ambivalent attitudes towards ideas and concepts and towards his relation to external objects and internal images. Once again, we see this well illustrated in *Song of Myself*. Here we notice that the development of the poem occurs in the changes of attitudes towards recurring ideas and issues. These changes mark the child’s growth. Whitman’s intention is not to fix for himself an unchanging sense of order. His poetic method teaches him to value the process of poetic exploration as much as any vision of order yielded by the exploratory journeys. To understand this psychological integrity of *Song of Myself*, we must pay attention to the way the catalogues change between the beginning and at the end. Leo Spitzer calls Whitman’s catalogues:

‘Chaotic enumerations’. This poetic device consists of lumping together things spiritual and physical as the raw material of a rich, but unordered civilization which is made to resemble an oriental bazaar. (p.240)

At the beginning Whitman organizes the catalogues according to the logic of free association, mingling popular myths, his objective perceptions and the unconscious sense of himself and his place in the objective world. In the last phase (Section: 39-52) he recognizes the material as more coherent and orderly sense of experience. The reader of *Song of Myself* feels that the poet has found the meaning of physical existence. This meaning is not presented in a systematic exposition; rather it must be apprehended by each individual and the experience of apprehension “is” the meaning itself. However, there is an ability to apprehend, and thus there is a loss of meaning. Whitman is bound to seek a new clue to the understanding of life. Such a search is one of the themes of the poem, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*.

Whitman uses a triad of images (boy, bird and sea) in the poem *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* to develop his theme by means of dramatic colloquy. While identifying himself with the bird, his “sad brother”, Whitman sees his own sense of vocation in the bird’s frustration and he hears the “thousand responses” of his heart and the “myriad thence-aroused words”. There is a suggestion of the ultimate release from the tension of individual existence (partially resolved through art) is ‘death’ whispered to him by the “sea”. The poet is identified as the “uniter of the here and the hereafter” in accordance with Emerson’s definition of the poet as the integrating seer in his essay on “The Poet” first published in 1844 edition of *Essays*.

Meaning in Two Levels – Sense and Metaphor

For Whitman, meaning exists on both the plain sense level (events of child-experience are recorded) and on the level of the metaphor where both thought and feeling are involved. The theme involves not only the ‘maturation process’ as the boy is introduced to the experience of love and death but also a strongly regressive motive as well. The experience of frustration turns the poet’s thought first to the idea of art as sublimation, then to the ideas of ‘death’ as ‘release’ from tension.

The child’s voyaging ego travels through the many phases of human existence. Whitman’s poem *Passage to India* stresses the different stages of the voyage which is both physical and spiritual at the same time. The actual passage is transformed into an intellectual one (or understanding) and then into a religious one (or faith) and finally into another “actual” one, the passage of the individual from life to death. The poem *Passage to India* also identifies a return to the world of “primal thought”, the original Eden of man’s childhood. Here man will be able to re-establish a primitive and harmonious relationship with nature. It is the voyage of the mind’s return to innocence and primitive powers.

Ultimate Reconciliation to Death

Finally in the poem *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d* we find the expression of grief at the loss of Lincoln and a dramatization of the reconciliation of that loss becomes ultimately a reconciliation to all ‘death’. Like Milton’s elegy *Lycidas*, the poem is only incidentally about its subject (Lincoln). The real subject is that of ‘death’. The other poems that have a similar theme are, *O Captain, My Captain!* and *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* (some of the finest elegies in the English Language). Whitman’s preoccupation with the theme of ‘death’ links him with the graveyard school of poets. However, his genius is far too original and he never allowed himself to be influenced by any particular school of poetry. Further, we perceive that Whitman had definite views as to what poetry is and what the function of a poet is. Everywhere in Whitman’s poems we come across the poet’s attempt at a complete blending with the richness of the universe, with everything in it. Thus, it can be seen that *Leaves of Grass* had grown with his own emotional and intellectual development. Additionally, Walt Whitman has left a very great mark on early American literature through his free verse poetry and somewhat controversial themes that mirror his own experiences and beliefs.

Techniques in Whitman's Poetry

The appearance of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was a ground-breaking enterprise in the establishment of a significant era in the history of American Poetry. It was at a moment when the 'language that poetry should wield' was under serious discussion. It is at this point of time that Whitman revealed his definite ideas about the poet and poetry in his Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855). He had two contradictory ideas, one was that poetry is something spontaneous and the other was that the poet was one who had his note book crammed, and who spent his life in revising and rearranging his poems.

With regard to the form of poetry, Whitman opined that the artist had to develop a form that closely resembled the organic growth of a tree. His verse is full of spontaneity and a rich reflection of the fullness and variety of nature. As a result of this aspect of his poetry, we have the long catalogs that evidence the "fullness and variety of nature". *Leaves of Grass* has many fine poems strung together and can be perceived as a long epic covering Whitman's life and identity as a proud American.

Most of his poetry was "free verse" which was an assault on the very structure of the poem itself. The subject matter of his poems was unique, unusual and daringly original. To express his ideas, Whitman needed diction and a technique equally daring and equally free from the chains of conventionality. Thus, we see that he uses innovative methods and it is these techniques that help to keep the steady flow of an epic poem. There is a liberal use of metaphors, symbols, imagery, catalogs, parallel structures, line breaks and repetitions all of which emphasize a constant beat or sound of the poems, and a very descriptive type of imagery. In addition, he was a master in the use of language. He had great knowledge of 'language' and its 'use'. Thus, Whitman used many words and details that were not commonly used.

A close and critical study of a few selected poems helps us to appreciate Whitman as a technical innovator and to recognize his influence on the 'new poetry' of the second decade of the 20th century in America, of which he had been the 'prophetic voice'. Moreover, he maintained that a poet's style should be simple and natural without orthodox meter or rhyme. The central themes of his poetry arose from Whitman's pantheistic view of life and from the symbolic identification of regeneration in nature.

The second part of this paper focuses on and examines the following selected poems from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, in order to provide an insight into the technical innovations he has employed to intuitively comprehend the great mysteries of life, birth, and resurrection—thus playing the role of a priest and a prophet for mankind.

Imagery and Metaphor

To begin with let us discuss Whitman's use of 'Imagery' through the variety of figures of such as the metaphor, symbol, parallelism, repetitions and catalogs. Whitman's imagery reveals his imaginative power, and the profound understanding of sensory perceptions and his unique

capacity to capture reality instantaneously. There is a sort of logical order on the conscious level, but at the same time, it probes into the subconscious, into the world of memories and produces a stream-of-consciousness of images. For instance, in the poem *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* from “Calamus”, we notice the major image of the “ferry”. This symbolizes the continual movement, backward and forward, which resembles the universal motion in space and time. The “ferry” moves from one point on land to another point on land through the medium of “water”. “Land” symbolizes the physical world and the “water” symbolizes the spiritual world.

In sections 1 up to 4 (*Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*) Whitman puts forth his desire to transcend time, place, and distance in order to establish contact with future generations. He identifies himself with persons who will cross the river “a hundred years hence”. He portrays the men and women on the ferryboat as the eternal “impalpable sustenance” of the poet. He thinks of “the simple, contact, well-join’d scheme” of the universe and believes himself to be “disintegrated yet part of the scheme”. The journey on the river is vividly described. There is a parallelism between the movement of the day from morning until midnight and the movement of the poet from one side of the river to another and from the physical to the spiritual. Thus, there is a prophetic voice to be heard as Whitman anticipates the growth of spiritual kinship between the poet and the reader.

In section 5, the core of the poem, Whitman uses the metaphor of a chemical solution: “the float forever held in solution”—which is the vast ocean of spiritual life that contains the “potential” of all life. The last section is very significant because Whitman uses the language of incantation. Images of his experiences are invoked to suggest the flowing of time. The physical existence of man is similar to that of a ‘ferryboat’ plying between the two shores of ‘mortality’ and ‘immortality’. Through this image, Whitman expresses the idea of the search for the eternal beyond the transient. This function of the imagination is illustrated by the ferry ride which moves from a point in the physical world to a destination in the spiritual world. For example, in line 104- “Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!” And in lines: 131-2, “You furnish your parts toward eternity, /Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.”

Whitman’s major metaphor is the unique significance that is given to a blade of “grass”, used as a formal structuring device throughout the poem *Song of Myself* which is a good example of the stylistic features of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman considered each of his poems to be a separate leaf blade of grass because they were divine, symbolic of life and cycles of birth, death, and rebirth and they were significant both individually and in the mass. In section 6 of *Song of Myself*, Whitman introduces the central symbol. A child appears and asks “What is the Grass?” The grass becomes a symbol of ‘divinity’ that is ‘dormant’ in the ordinary life of the common man and it is also the symbol of ‘continuity’ which is inherent in the cycle of life.

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to
arrest it,
And ceas’d the moment life appear’d.
And goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what may be supposed and luckier.

(Lines: 126-30)

The nature and significance of “grass” unfold the themes of death and immortality. “Grass” is the key to the secrets of man’s relationship with the Divine. Whitman contemplates the meaning of grass in terms of mystical experience, and understands that all physical phenomena are as deathless as the “grass”.

In Whitman’s famous elegies, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, *O Captain, My Captain!* and *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d*, we find the image of ‘death’ portrayed to its fullest. The first one is an exquisite lyrical expression of grief caused by the thought of ‘death’ in general. However, the second and the third were inspired by the death of Abraham Lincoln. Whitman does not mention the name directly but it can be comprehended through the symbols and imagery used. In *O Captain, My Captain!* Whitman describes Lincoln as the great and beloved leader (Captain) who after having steered the vessel (The American nation) through storm and stress to victory and glory lies dead and cold on the deck.

O Captain! My Captain! our faithful trip is done,
The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The poet is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
But O heart! heart! Heart!
O the bleeding drop of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies
Fallen cold and dead.
(Lines: 1-8)

The poem *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d*, the focus is on the presentation of the poet’s mind at work in the context of Lincoln’s death. Even though, Lincoln’s name is not mentioned, when we read the description of the imagery used such as: “And the great star early dropp’d in the western sky in the night,” “Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,” “And thought of him I love” - all this imagery enriches the poem and Whitman shows a taste that is entirely American.

The first section of the poem identifies three main symbols—the star, the lilac, and the bird. The ‘star’ (the planet Venus) symbolizes Lincoln and the poet’s grief for the dead. The Lilacs represent the ever returning spring and are a symbol of resurrection (rebirth). The purple color stands for the passion of the Crucifixion and the heart-shaped ‘leaves’ symbolize ‘love’. The bird symbolizes reconciliation with ‘death’ and its ‘song’ is the ‘soul’s voice’.

Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.
Song of the bleeding throat,
Death’s outlet, song of life . . .

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(*When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, Lines: 20—24)

In the second cycle of the poem we have the imagery of the journey of the coffin, the funeral procession and the traditional offering of the gifts by the mourners. Whitman has not only men and women but even natural objects saluting the dead man as the body was sent by train from Washington to Springfield, Illinois. In this imagery, we perceive the exquisite way in which Whitman blended the three symbols. First, the spring, the constant process of rebirth is threaded by the journey of the coffin. Next, the thought of love merges with the fallen star and finally the lilacs and the star are united in the song of the thrush and the potentiality of the poet's thought is identified. The song of the bird and the thought of the poet unite life and death.

In the third cycle of the poem, the description of the natural objects indicate the vision of Lincoln and the "purple" dawn, "delicious" eve and "welcome" night represent the continuous endless cycle of the day and in turn, Lincoln's immortality. Finally, Whitman realizes 'immortality' through the emotional conflict of personal loss and this leads him to his ultimate reconciliation with the truth of life and death.

Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever to keep, for the
dead I loved so well
For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands—and this for his
dear sake,
Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.
(*When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, Lines: 203—6)

Second, we notice that Whitman's metaphors associate the physical and the mental. He does not differentiate between inner and outer, knowing and doing, reasoning and feeling, working and dreaming. His work is a continuum in which cosmos, poet and poem all are combined into one. In section 8 of *Song of Myself* we have a good example of Whitman's use of metaphor in the following lines:

The little one sleeps in its cradle,
I lift the guaze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies
with my hand.
The youngster and the red-faced girl turn aside up the bushy hill,
I peeringly view them from the top.
The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom . . .
(Lines: 148—52)

In the above lines, we see the representation of everyman moving from birth through all the picturesque and grotesque scenes in the American way of life (Dudding, 1967). Yet another example is found in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, when we see Whitman interweaving the temporal and the eternal as he shows us that neither is independent of the other. The poet uses the "ferry"

as a metaphorical vehicle to symbolize the journey of the man (the poet) from the present into the past and into the future. In section 5 of *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, he talks of the “float”—(“I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,” . . .). The word “solution” is the source of one’s being. This metaphoric usage signifies the merging of man’s existence with his spirit. Spiritually, he is united with the future generations and with the whole of mankind. From event to metaphor, the crossing on transit, seem to relate both the life of the individual and to the lives of separate generations.

Symbols and Symbolism

Whitman’s use of symbols and symbolism plays a major role in all his poems. He selects his symbols from the everyday objects around him and attributes to them unusual connotations, and thus, makes them thought provoking. Whitman’s use of the symbol was governed by the objects he saw: the sea, the birds, the lilacs, the Calamus plant, the sky, and so on. In the poem, *The Sleepers*, Whitman’s symbolism creates a cohesive and meaningful pattern. The poem grows from the condition of sleep and of sleepers. In Freudian terms, the poem symbolizes the sexual maturation of a young boy as he grows into manhood. In addition, the restorative power of ‘sleep’ and ‘night’ is unfolded and shows the poet disturbing but truthful visions of the processes of life and death.

Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking is one of Whitman’s great poems because of his use of image and symbol. The title of the poem symbolizes ‘birth’. Here, the poet is in search of the mystery of life and when he questions the “sea”, it whispers to him the word “death” which is “delicious” because it is a ‘pre-requisite’ for ‘rebirth’.

Whereto answering, the sea,
Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whisper’d me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak,
Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word death;
(Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking, Lines: 165-8)

We find an echo of the above mentioned symbolism of ‘death’ in the poem *When Lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloom’d*. Here too the ‘bird’ is the symbol of reconciliation with ‘death’ and its song is the soul’s voice. “Death’s outlet song of life” symbolizes that out of death will come renewed life (rebirth). Moreover, the continual recurrence of the spring season symbolizes the cycle of life and death and rebirth. Another echo of the meaning of ‘death’ is found in section 49 of *Song of Myself*. Whitman reveals his fearlessness of death and he addresses it: “And as to you Death, you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me.” We sense a belief in reincarnation, as Whitman comprehends that there is no real death, for men die and are reborn in different forms – (“Believing I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years.”). We also find an implication that ‘death’ too is a creation of God and a means to unite with God. Life is neither a pandemonium nor finite; it is in harmony with nature and God and in turn, reflects the union of the poet’s individual (everyman) soul’s with the Divine Soul.

Do you see O my brothers and sisters?
It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is
Happiness.
(Song of Myself, lines: 1315—6)

Other notable and innovative techniques are Whitman's catalogs, parallelism, repetitions, rhythm and meter and his most famous 'aria'. The innovative use of the catalog of people and places was Whitman's method of lending a universal scope to his poetry. They also gave expression to the fullness and variety of nature. In most of his poems we find the poet identifying himself with every being and every object he comes across. *There Was a Child Went Forth* is one of the best examples of catalogs. The theme of the poem is the process of 'becoming' that is indicative of change and development. One of the essential elements in the Whitmanite thought – the interpenetration of the child's consciousness and physical phenomena is revealed in this poem.

The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass and white and red morning- glories, and white and red-clover, and the
song of the phoebe-bird,
And the third month lambs, and the sow's pink-faint litter, and the mare a foal and
the cow's calf, - - -
(There Was a Child Went Forth, Lines: 5-7)

The child in its pointed moments of consciousness is able to perceive the crystallizing details of the "grass" the "white and red morning-glories", the song of "phoebe bird" etc. Attention is therefore focused on the 'becomingness of life'. Each object the child communes with stands out as a "sharp particular, a kind of Blakean particular" (Ranchan, p. 87).

Parallelism and Repetitions and 'Aria'

Whitman's parallelism and repetitions add a balance and melodious effect to the central theme of all his poems which is both individualism and universalism. This sense of unity is developed by the use of the pronoun "All" twelve times in the poem, *On the Beach at Night Alone*.

A vast similitude interlocks all,
All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns, moons, planets,
All distances of place however wide,
All distances of time, all inanimate form,
All souls, all living bodies though they be even so different, or in different
worlds. . . (lines:4-8)

Whitman's poems are filled with such repetitions that enable the reader to focus on the element of eternity and universalism. These innovative devices make his poems sound like a 'chant' that has spiritual connotations. Moreover, such devices expose Whitman's bubbling energy that made his poetry grow organically like a tree.

The musical cadence of Whitman's language is brought out by his devotion to the Italian opera. To Whitman, poetry was a kind of musical utterance and this is exemplified in his use of the 'aria' and the 'recitative'. In *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, the bird's lament, or "aria", affected the boy (the Poet) deeply:

O past! O happy life! O songs of joy!
In the air, in the woods, over fields,
Loved! Loved! Loved! Loved! Loved!
But my mate no more, no more with me!
We two together no more.
(Lines: 125—9)

Thus, the above mentioned poem is very melodious and rhythmic and can be compared to an 'aria'—which is an elaborate melody sung by one voice, in an opera. This brings us to Whitman's use of rhythm and meter. The lines in his verse, look like prose sentences but they do have a character of their own. Whitman experimented with meter and rhythm and form because he felt that experimentation was a part of change and change was a part of development and he intended his poems to grow organically. He chose the 'trochaic movement' (a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one) since he wanted his poems to have an oratorical style and also as he liked to be innovative. We find this in *Song of Myself* in section three---"Urge and urge and urge, /Always the procreant urge of the world. . ." The first line of trochees is followed by a line of dactyls representing the creative "life force of the world". From the above discussion, we can comprehend that though Whitman had vowed to break free from conventional methods of poetry, yet at times, he would follow the regular metrical pattern. This he did to suit his techniques to his unique and daring themes.

Conclusion

Throughout the above discussion, this paper has tried to focus on the unique expression of meaning and techniques that Whitman uses in all his poems. Everywhere we notice the poet's attempt at a complete blending with the richness of the universe, with everything in it. Whitman's poetry has had profound influence in the twentieth century poets and modern poetry as well. His processes of symbol and symbolism, his freedom in the use of rhythm and meter, and his intellectual and intelligent manipulation of language has added a fullness and variety to the subject matter of his poetry. The loose form, the free verse, the linguistic audacities, the long catalogs all have been imitated by many poets, but Whitman's originality and sincerity have remained untouched: "Comrade/ This is no book/ Who touches this touches a man". Thus, we can confidently conclude that Whitman has achieved the Olympian stature and the rare distinction of a 'world poet'.

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