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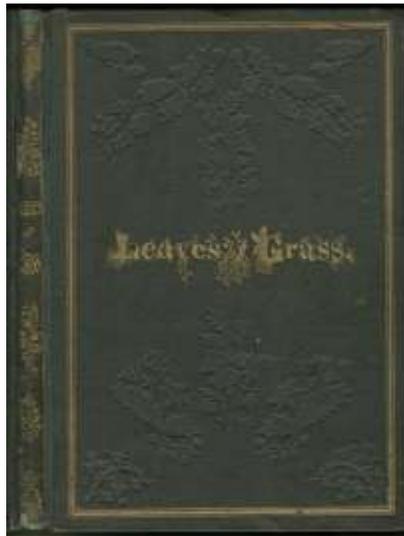
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Immortality in Whitman's Philosophy and Art

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Abstract

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12 : 9 September 2012

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Walt Whitman gives us much insight into himself and others in his poetry, and gives his readers a great deal to think about. His poetry resounds with echoes of freedom and integrity. Whitman believed in the individual and felt that the inner strength of a human being could be utilized and manipulated into something meritorious. Whitman's masterpiece "Leaves of Grass" is "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed" in the words of Emerson.



From <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1855/images/leaf003v.html>

Within each poem we find that Whitman portrays a heroic and national poet who can extract the essence of what he sees and experiences; who is a would-be mediator between the extremes and the contradictions that he beholds in his world, and who desires to become the inspired spokesman of his world and of his nation(Reynolds,2005). This paper attempts to explore the Immortality of Whitman's Philosophy, Transcendentalism, Democracy, and Individualism as seen embedded in the democratic framework of his Art—his Poetry.

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Key words: Whitman, Philosophy, Transcendentalism, Individualism, Democracy.

Introduction

Whitman's poems sound as if Whitman is speaking through them directly to the reader.

One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

(One's Self I Sing, lines 1-2)

In the above lines it is clear that Whitman acknowledges his own individuality and also remembers that he is part of the human race. The use of "I" the first person pronoun speaks of the 'I' as I and the "I" in each individual human being. No man is an island and this is remarkably expressed in the two lines that became his signature lines. This effect was one of Whitman's strengths and one of the reasons his poetry has remained forceful and engaging over the years. Whitman grows out of engaging in a dialogue with his poetry. Perhaps more than any other poet, Whitman's poetry speaks from Whitman's life and his experience of America.

Whitman's adult life was spent in experiencing America in its urban environment of Brooklyn and Manhattan. His journalism took him into the world of democratic politics. He was an earnest and strong believer in the power of democracy, but he was disillusioned when he noticed that politicians were unable to live up to their promises and this in turn was leading the nation towards political chaos. Perhaps more than any other poet, Whitman's poetry speaks from Whitman's life and his experience of America. His poetry would absorb all aspects of American life and transform it into something positive" (Reynolds, 1995).

Whitman took the vocation of the poet seriously. He did not believe poetry should be an academic activity, removed from the world. Rather, he believed the poet played a

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 9 September 2012

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Immortality in Whitman's Philosophy and Art

very public role and that poetry could serve the nation. He believed in the role of poet as healer, as one who can transform grief and loss into spiritual insight. He believed the poet could transform national and political problems and resolve them in and through poetry. Whitman's beliefs inform most of "Leaves of Grass". He chose the image of grass to express man's transcendent relation to the universe and to all things.

Whitman's Philosophy

Human philosophy is an inherent sense of what life honestly means to each one of us. Part of it is got from books and colleges and universities but most of it is how each individual perceives and understands the world around himself or herself. However, Whitman's philosophy on life is an almost perfect description of the poet. In his poetry, he expressed independence, interdependence with other living creatures and the conflicts that are dealt with by him and others in order to gain freedom. He strongly recommended that human beings had to stand up for the things they believe in. Every individual is individual and yet a part of the great cosmos. H/she possess the inner strength that can be manipulated into meritorious things.

Whitman creates a unified, democratic persona in the text. Whitman's poetry makes indirect references to American transcendentalism, as well as to European romanticism. Much of his work, for example, seems to address the thinking and the worldview of transcendentalists like Emerson. However, Whitman's main philosophical interests were twofold. First, he was deeply interested in civics and government, and second, he was deeply concerned with determining the meaning and purpose of art. From his poetry, readers are able to develop a great sense of freedom and integrity and avoid conforming due to the mass amounts of sameness among the rest of civilization. Through his writings, Whitman struggled with the rest of the world between the powers of "one's self" and "en masse", as he states in his poem, "One's-Self I Sing": "One's-self I sing, a simple separate person, yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse (Whitman 1)."

Transcendentalism

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 9 September 2012

Julia Devardhi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. and Deepika Nelson, Ph.D.

Immortality in Whitman's Philosophy and Art

Transcendentalism is a word which has been variously interpreted, and even misinterpreted, by various writers and critics. ‘Transcendent’ means ‘beyond’ and ‘above’, hence a transcendentalist is one who believes in the existence of a divine world, beyond and above the world of the senses. Transcendentalism flourished at the height of literary and aesthetic Romanticism in Europe and America. Romanticism was marked by a reaction against classical formalism and convention and by an emphasis on emotion, spirituality, subjectivity, and inspiration. Transcendentalism, inspired by English and European Romantic authors, was a form of American Romanticism.

Transcendentalism arose when it did for several reasons. First, it was a humanistic philosophy—it put the individual right at the center of the universe and promoted respect for human capabilities. The movement was in part a reaction against increasing industrialization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and against the dehumanization and materialism that frequently accompanied it. Secondly, in the early nineteenth century, in the period preceding the rise of Transcendentalism, dissatisfaction with the spiritual inadequacy of established religion was on the rise. A third reason for the rise of Transcendentalism was the increasing interest in and availability of foreign literature and philosophy after 1800. The Transcendentalists expressed their idealistic philosophy in a variety of ways.

Romanticism in the form of ‘*Transcendentalism*’ was communicated foremost through the writings of the faithful such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller. Romanticism permeated American literature between 1820 and the end of the Civil War in 1865. It was expressed not only in the writings of the Transcendentalists, but also by their literary contemporaries—James Fennimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and **Walt Whitman**—who worked in a variety of genres. Further, the intuitive philosophy of Kant influenced Romanticism.

The Romantic writers perceived literature as an outpouring of the inner spirit, and saw imagination as the means of summoning this spirit. They reacted against classical formalism and symmetry, against rationalism, and against other restrictions on individual expression and imagination. Further, they celebrated the freedom of the individual and placed the individual at the centre of life and art, and the expression of personal emotion. All physical objects were considered representative of spiritual, moral and intellectual reality. Thus, the flowering of Transcendentalism was only one American expression of Romanticism—albeit the strongest one—in the period between 1820 and 1865.

However, Whitman's transcendentalist beliefs came naturally to him. They arose out of his own temperament, even more striking and paradoxical than those of his predecessors. Whitman believed there was something more to the universe than could be conveyed in scientific proofs, something transcendental, which eluded exact measurement or quantification. Whitman finds evidence for the transcendental aspect of the universe in his own direct and unique personal experiences with the natural world, in which everything he experiences can be seen as performing the function for which it was originally intended. His poetry reflected the relativistic perspective in science that tells us that any subject can only be rightly understood in its relation to everything else. From this perspective, nothing in existence seems out of place to Whitman, but is instead justified in its very being, as we see in "Song of Myself" Section 16:

The moth and the fish eggs are in their place,
The bright suns I see and the dark suns I cannot see are in their place,
The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place.
(Song of Myself, 352-54).

In this way, his writing may be seen as reflecting the relativistic perspective in science, which holds that any subject can only be rightly understood in its relation to everything else. The simple fact that life renews itself, as symbolized by "the moth and the fish eggs," suggests to Whitman that all things "are in their place," or are as they

should be, as dictated by the design of nature. Whitman felt a strange sort of 'identity' with both the small and the great. This can be seen in a number of sections of the 'Song of Myself'.

In section 5 he tells us:

And I know that the hand of god is the elder hand of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own,
And that all men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters, and
lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love. (Lines 92-5)

In yet another section of the same poem the poet, early one morning, climbs a hill and looks at the paling stars and asks his soul:

When we become the enfolders of those orbs and the pleasure and
knowledge of everything in them, shall we be filled and satisfied then?
And my spirit said No, we leave that life to pass and continue beyond.
(Section 46, lines 1219-20)

From the above discussion we see that Whitman accepted the Darwinian concept of evolution but he never lost his faith in an intelligence or power at work behind the material, a power which referred to as God. He always believed in the divine act of creation and the divine ordering of the creation. He went beyond science and materialism, he went beyond them into the realm of the unknown, and these mystical experiences were conveyed in his poetry.

Whitman's beliefs vary from monotheistic to pantheistic and we can truly say that his poems are constantly exploring the realm that exists beyond human understanding. Nature, man and God all traveled through the great cosmos of space and time as one.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 9 September 2012

Julia Devardhi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. and Deepika Nelson, Ph.D.

Immortality in Whitman's Philosophy and Art

Whitman attempted to show that the things which he wrote were not exclusive of one and other, but were intertwined to the very core of each one's existence. It was that idea which stated the true ideals of transcendentalism. Above all, these things existed within the grand cosmic structure of the universe and all moved in harmonious conjunction. In this way, Whitman's transcendentalism differs from his predecessors.

Whitman's Individualism (Personalism)

Whitman also considered the practicality of his poetry. He believed the rhythm and sound of it would have the effect of bringing the listener back toward the Self. Whitman saw his *Leaves of Grass* as literally unifying his personality with his higher self. This union, he felt, acted as a model for the spiritual integration of both the individual and the nation. A strong perception runs through transcendentalist writings that Nature and human consciousness are not two separate entities. Whitman said that the main intention of *Leaves of Grass* was "To sing the Song of that law of average Identity, and of Yourself, consistently with the divine law of the universal" ("Preface," 1982, p. 1010). The greatness of the aesthetic experience is finally the transformative potentiality it has for the reader.

Whitman's "Personalism" and the Transcendentalists' self-culture together form a visionary model for the full development of the individual to fulfill the goal of democracy. However, that goal will forever remain unfulfilled without a pragmatic means to transform the individual—the kernel of society—through a verifiable method to experience the basis of life, the state of self-referral consciousness. The Transcendental Meditation technique and the advanced Transcendental Meditation-Sidhi SM program have been proven in countless scientific studies to bring a practitioner to self-referral consciousness, and Maharishi Vedic Science is the most complete and far-reaching intellectual elaboration on Self-knowledge in modern history (see Dillbeck, 1988; Wallace, 1986).

Whitman believed the fulfillment of both individual and society was by means of a spiritual democracy that could be achieved through language and poetry, through “competent readers” who could fathom the depth and unity of themselves as well as the diverse but unified text of their culture. In his theory of Personalism, Whitman predicted that a science would someday emerge that would expand its vistas to include the subtler forces of Nature, including God, and that such a science would be the true foundation of America (“Preface,” 1982, p. 1003).

The last major poetic element to discuss is the poetic persona of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman created a poetic “I” that is both individualistic and communal. Although autobiographical in structure, the “I” served as a fusion of the personal and the national so that the voice of the poet could switch between asserting individual authority and the national and political ideal that empowered individuals. There is a sense of reciprocity between the “I” and everything it encounters, an attempt to represent equality and balance. Betsy Erkkila (1989) described this strategy, arguing that “Whitman’s democratic poetics, his attempt to create a democratic language, form, content, and myth commensurate with the experimental politics of America, to embody in his poetic persona America’s unique political identity and to engage the reader as an active participant in the republican politics of his poem may best be understood in relation to the aesthetic thought that emerged from the American Revolution”.

During a lecture in 1907, William James said "the philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter; it is more or less dumb sense of what life honestly means. It is only partly got from books; it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos" (Bartlett 546).

Individuality has been a prevalent theme in every type of literature for quite some time. Whether it is a character discovering his/her individuality or the author expressing his, literature is full of distinctness. The term *individuality* changes meaning with each person it meets. That is what makes the dynamic word so great. Throughout many of his

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 9 September 2012

Julia Devardhi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. and Deepika Nelson, Ph.D.

Immortality in Whitman’s Philosophy and Art

works individuality has been the foundation for several of them. Walt Whitman takes his newfound ideas and Quaker background and introduces American Literature to a totally different meaning of individuality in "Song of Myself."

Whitman's "I" can be interpreted in at least five ways. The "I", in the first place, refers to the poet himself. In the second place, it includes all the Americans in their social context and with their heritage. Thirdly, it refers to the natural man who loafs and invites his soul to loaf with him, and who lies down with animals since they, like him, are guided by instinct. Fourthly, the "I" refers to everyman, represented by the poet. Finally, it symbolizes the biological race of man.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.
(Section 1, "Song of Myself")

Whitman burns with great sympathy and brotherhood for all, high and low, rich and poor, noble and vile, thief, drunkard, and others. He chants of evil and good alike or rather acknowledges them alike, feeling that everything which has the vitality to exist has therein the right to exist.

Whitman's Democracy

Whitman had a messianic vision of himself as the quintessential democratic poet who could help cure the many ills of his materialistic, politically fractured society.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 9 September 2012

Julia Devardhi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. and Deepika Nelson, Ph.D.

Immortality in Whitman's Philosophy and Art

Having absorbed America, he expected America to absorb him and be mended in the process. “The proof of the poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.” At his best, he was the democratic poet to an extent never matched, gathering images from virtually every cultural arena and transforming them through his powerful personality into art. By fully absorbing his time, he became a writer for all times.

Whitman believed democracy could be found in all of culture, not just in a specific political structure. Democracy was just as present in city streets or farmer’s fields as in the halls of Congress or the White House. His poetry sought to present the highest form of American ideals, purified of the strife that was dividing the American community. Whitman was a nationalist poet.

Whitman's political ideas can be traced from a rather standard artisanal position in the 1840s, to the rather stunning mix of liberalism and democracy evident in *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855, and to an increasingly stale and out-of-touch version of that same position in the early 1870s. His was always a balancing act on the razor's edge of liberal democracy. One pivotal force for this democratic pressure came from the artisan community of the day. Artisans, those who worked with skills, such as shoemakers, or bricklayers, stood socially above day laborers, who had to rely completely upon their brawn for a living. Politically, in the United States, artisans were the principal expositors of more radical visions of democracy. This was the culture Walt Whitman came from.

Whitman not only celebrated the people but celebrated them in all their magnificent diversity. He not only praised the individual, he sang of how the individual made him- or herself. And the manner in which we each make ourselves is the crucial link between the individual and the crowd. The democratic soul invents itself not by discipline, as the liberals hoped nor is it given to simple selfishness or sensuality. Instead, the democratic soul is born through a wondrous receptivity to other people and things.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 9 September 2012

Julia Devardhi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. and Deepika Nelson, Ph.D.

Immortality in Whitman’s Philosophy and Art

Democratic egoism happens by respecting the whole universe. It is an enormously attractive vision, generous, inquisitive, and respectful. One we can still learn from. Finally, we see that Whitman was led away from the ‘political’ aspect of Democracy towards transcendental, pantheistic democracy. He is also a spiritual democrat for he sees in democracy the possibilities of universal peace, tolerance, and brotherhood. In short, Whitman can be called the “voice of democracy”.

Conclusion

Much has been said and written on Whitman and his works, yet even after one hundred and fifty seven years after his *Leaves of Grass* has been published his poetry has not lost its mystery for those who are purely democratic and humane in their interaction with themselves and those around. Whitman is like an ocean that holds its secrets in its deep. The more we get to know him, the more there is to know about him. His philosophy of life and art is immortal. Whitman’s language and style of expression ascribes immense value to each individual and the world as a whole. His philosophy is simple and straightforward and compels all human beings to consider their individual place in the universe. He never loses sight of the underlying unity that exists among mankind. Whitman’s works emphasize the importance of the individual in accepting responsibility and accountability for his or her own choices. He emulates the Italian humanists in that each human being is endowed with an inherent intuitive wisdom to choose the right path that could lead the world into peaceful co-existence.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 9 September 2012

Julia Devardhi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. and Deepika Nelson, Ph.D.

Immortality in Whitman’s Philosophy and Art

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 9 September 2012

Julia Devardhi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. and Deepika Nelson, Ph.D.

Immortality in Whitman's Philosophy and Art