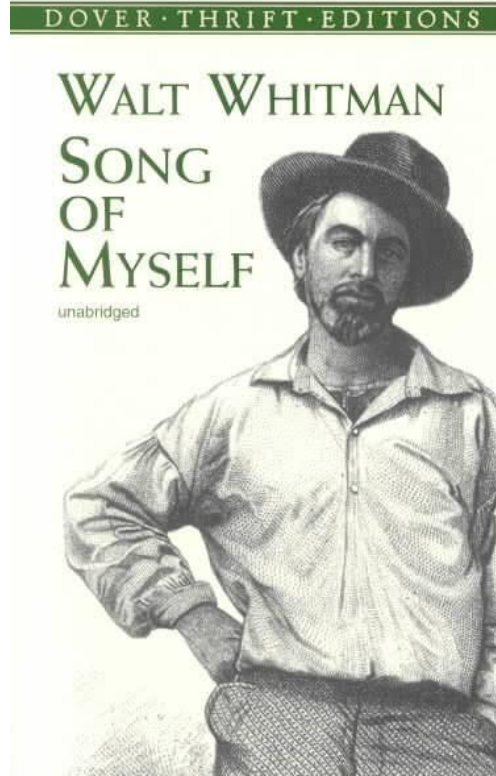


Critical Analysis of Walt Whitman and Philip Larkin as Modern Poets

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Abstract

The following research paper deals with the claims of Walt Whitman and Philip Larkin to be regarded as modern poets. In this research paper we will discuss what is modernism and to what extent Walt Whitman and Larkin's poetry be called modern poetry whether it contains modern elements and what's the dilemma of a modern man. We will highlight the different

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important themes of modernism like displacement, disillusionment, nostalgia of old England, pre and post war fears and the most important is the man's tussle for his identification and his place in the society.

Keywords: Modernism, agnosticism, shallowness of life, Identification of self

Introduction

Modernism is a movement that occurred towards the end of the 19th Century and lasted until roughly the middle of the 20th Century. Modernism rejected the previous movements in literature and art. Previously, literature and art followed strict standards and traditional methods in which the writer or artist expressed his or her artistic nature. Modernism rejected these concepts. Modernism allowed writers and artists to find their own artistic voice and appreciated the individualism of the artist. While the Romantics may have focused on some aspects of individualism, they did so within the context of nature as an overriding force within the artist. Modernists rejected this worship of nature.



Philip Larkin

Courtesy: Philip Larkin. (2016). *The Famous People website*. Retrieved 06:10, Sep 5, 2016, from www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/philip-larkin-199.php.

The author Philip Larkin was one of the first poets of modern times to reflect new attitudes to both society and to poetry in his writings. Society was changing - no longer were all

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the gems kept by the same crowd - in the war women had proved their worth and laborer's had become educated. Class was like shifting sands and it was now possible to become a self-made man to rival any impoverished aristocrat in terms of earned wealth. Many countries were on their way to independence and the power of empire and colonialism was waning fast. Suddenly the middle classes looked mediocre and non-descript, the establishment seemed blinkered and uncreative and Larkin (along with Wain, Auden and Amis) wasn't afraid to write about it. By the time he published his poetry collection 'The Less Deceived' Larkin had stripped himself of this shell himself and recreated a new, fresher more honest writer's persona for himself while others languished in the more quintessentially Romantic English tradition .

The modernist poetic movement in brief was inspired by Walt Whitman, who is recognized as the first to throw off the formality of the Romantic poets (who threw off the formality of their predecessors who rigidified the formality of their predecessors). Modernists became devoted to the pure meaning of words without overlays of metaphor and simile. This means that if a poem spoke about three white rabbits running, it was about three white rabbits running; no metaphor was intended nor could legitimately be found or assigned. A new pessimism entered poetry with the modernists because of the devastations, personal, social, and planetary, of World War I and then World War II, which was particularly demoralizing psychologically because it followed World War I, which was to be "the war to end all wars."

Methodology

In this research work the researcher may apply the discussion method and particularly one must discuss that what the term modernism means In this research work the themes of modernism like displacement disillusionment Nostalgia of old England and self-identification or the dilemma of a modern man can be discussed by the researcher in view of Larkin and Walt Whitman's poems.

Analysis of Larkin's Poems in view of Modernism

Church Going

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Church Going, written in 1954, is a monologue in which the speaker discusses the futility and the utility of going to a church. It clearly reveals the social context of the time when it was written. It was a time of general decline in the attendance in churches which had begun to take place in 1945.

The poem expresses a view that faith and belief in religion must die but that the spirit of tradition represented by the English church cannot come to an end. Larkin's agnosticism becomes more understandable if we look at this poem in the national and the international context of the post-war years. The poem refers both to the erosion of the Church as an institution and to the perpetuation of some kind of ritual observance. In other words, the poet here explores different perceptions of the same event (the event being the decline of attendance in the churches). Some readers take this poem as a religious poem but Larkin strictly contradicts to this idea of interpretation. He says, "It is of course an entirely secular poem. I was a bit irritated by an American who insisted to me it was a religious poem. It isn't religious at all. Religion surely means that the affairs of this world are under divine supervenience, and so on, and I go to some pains to point out that I don't bother about that kind of thing, that I am deliberately ignorant of it—'Up at the holy end', for instance".

Important Themes in *Church Going*

- 1-Demise of the church /religion
 - 2-Secularism and agnosticism
 - 3-Ritual superstition and post war sentiments
 - 4-Nature and religion
- "Belief may die but not the superstition "

Criticism of Modern Christianity

The theme of agnosticism is reflected in the following lines
"The echoes snigger briefly Back at the door I sign the book 'denote an Irish six pence Reflect the place was not worth stopping fore yet I stop I often did; in fact I often do."

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Mr. Bleaney

The poem is about an individual who is living a very shabby life full of shallowness and another visitor's life is also void of interest.

An individual who is constantly in a struggle to find the meaning of his life.

Major Themes in *Mr. Bleaney*

In this poem the poet reflect the basic dilemma of human beings and that basic dilemma is the Quest for self identification.

Mr. Bleaney is the classical example of shallowness of modern life.

Materialism and Superficiality

“And at the age having no more to show than one hired box should make him pretty sure . He warranted no better, I don't know.”

MCMXIV

1914 is based, to a greater extent, on the contrast between the social and cultural picture of English society in pre and post war conditions.

The poem records post-world war 1 impression.

“Pre war fears

Post war destruction

“Never such innocence before/ Never before or since

As changed itself to past /without a word _ the men

Leaving the gardens tidy / thousands of marriages

Lasting a little while longer/never such innocence before

Urban and ruler response towards war

Conservatism

Nostalgia of old England

“And the countryside not caring:

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The place names all hazed over
With flowering grasses, and fields
Shadowing doomsday life

Critical Analysis of Walt Whitman's Poem *Song of Myself* in view of Modernism

Song of Myself by Walt Whitman is the longest poem in *Leaves of Grass*. The poem is a joyous celebration of the human self in its most expanded, spontaneous, self-sufficient, and all-embracing state as it observes and interacts with everything in creation and ranges freely over time and space. The bard of the poem, speaking in the oracular tones of the prophet, affirms the divinity and sacredness of the entire universe, including the human body, and he asserts that no part of the universe is separate from himself — he flows into all things and is all things.

Major Themes in *Song of Myself*

American Democracy

Song of Myself was first published in 1855. You'll remember from history class that this was a tumultuous period in America. A lot of things were looking great - the railroads were starting to connect people and goods from all around the country, commerce and technology were booming and new waves of immigration were bringing never-before-seen religious and ethnic diversity. At the same time, the country was already sharply divided on the issue of slavery, and the Civil War was looming. Like many people, Whitman was excited about what the U.S. could be - a place of freedom for all - and concerned about what was actually happening - a lot of injustice and internal division. 'Song of Myself' is part vision, part plea for a democratic society where all are equal.

The Democratic Self

Whitman celebrates the common man by creating a unified, overarching concept of the self that applies to individuals as well. Whitman often casts himself as the main character in his poems, but the Walt Whitman he refers to is only partially representative of Whitman's own opinions and experiences. He also uses "I" (or himself) to represent the archetypal American man. This technique, known as "an all-powerful I," allows Whitman to draw all Americans into a

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unified identity with the poet himself as the figurehead. The idea of the Democratic Self is common in the work of Transcendentalist writers like Henry David Thoreau.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And I assume you shall assume.

He says "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." Whitman believes that nature and people are connected.

Three Important Themes

These include the idea of the identification of the self with other selves, and the poet's relationship with the elements of nature and the universe. Houses and rooms represent civilization; perfumes signify individual selves; and the atmosphere symbolizes the universal self. The self is conceived of as a spiritual entity which remains relatively permanent in and through the changing flux of ideas and experiences which constitute its conscious life. The self comprises ideas, experiences, psychological states, and spiritual insights. The concept of self is the most significant aspect of Whitman's mind and art.

Spirituality and Self Knowledge

The poet wants to have a contact with himself "The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless ,It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it, I am mad for it to be in contact with me."

War

Whitman's career coincided with the Civil War. Therefore, many of his poems address themes of war and the loss of humanity that results from physical conflict. Although Whitman was a patriotic man, he was also a pacifist. He believed that war was useless and that fighting was never an effective solution. He worked as a nurse during the Civil War and during that time, he developed many personal relationships with wounded soldiers. He felt that it was his personal responsibility to humanize these brave individuals and honor their sacrifice. "Ashes of Soldiers," in particular, was inspired by soldiers that Whitman met during the war. Through the war was

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over, he wanted his readers to pause their celebrations and remember the individuals who enabled the victory.

Concern for the Present

Whitman says that he has heard “what the talkers were talking, the talk of the / beginning and the end,” but he refuses to talk of either. Instead, he rejects talk of the past or future for an experience in the now. This is the “urge” of the world which calls to him. Whitman sees all the things around him – “The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old / and new,” but he knows that “they are not the Me myself.” He remembers in his own past that he once “sweated through fog” with fashionable arguments. He no longer holds these pretensions, however.

An Encounter between Soul and Body

Whitman then describes an encounter between his body and soul. He invites his soul to “loafe with me on the grass” and to lull him with its “valve voice.” He tells his soul to settle upon him, “your head athwart my hips and gently turn’s / over upon me.....” He invites his soul to undress him and reach inside him until the soul feels his feet. This will bring him perfect peace “that pass all the argument of the earth....” This peace is the promise of God and is what allows all people to become his brothers and sisters.

The Soothing Effect of Nature

The poet is against all ages and all periods because they are not concerned with his self and with the self of others.

These are really the thoughts of all men and in all ages and lands, they are not original with me, If they are not yours as much as mine or next to nothing, If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water

This the common air that bathes the globe

The Dilemma of Confusion and Frustration of Modern Man

The poet is against all ages and all periods because
I think I could turn and live with animals; they are so placid and self-contained,
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition they do not lie awake in the dark and weep
for their sins
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

Accepting of Reality

Endless unfolding of words of ages! and mine a world of the modern the word En masse
of the faith that never balks, Here or henceforward it is all the same to me, I accept Time
absolutely.
It alone is without flaw; it alone rounds and completes all,
That mystic baffling wonder alone completes all.
I accept Reality and dare not question it, Materialism first and last imbuing.
Gentlemen, to you the first honors always!
Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling,
I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling.”

Stylistic Features in *Song of Myself*

Song of Myself is a good example of the stylistic features of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's style reflects his individualism. He once wrote to Horace Traubel, his biographer: "I sometimes think the *Leaves* is only a language experiment." Words, for Whitman, have both a "natural" and a "spiritual" significance. Colloquial words unite the natural with the spiritual, and therefore he uses many colloquial expressions. He is also fond of using foreign words. The catalog is another special characteristic of Whitman's poetic technique. He uses numerous images, usually drawn from nature, to suggest and heighten the impression of a poetic idea. These images appear to

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have no clear organization; yet, in effect, they have a basic underlying unity, usually involving a spiritual concept, which gives meaning and coherence to the apparently disconnected images or scenes.

Conclusion

In a nutshell we can say that undoubtedly Larkin and Walt Whitman belongs to the genre of Modernism. In their poetry one can see the modern poetic elements. They are truly representative of the modern age with all its conflicts and upheavals .In their poems we can see the effects of modernism on an individual who is suffering with all the dilemma's of the modern world The person represented in their works is undoubtedly the product of modernism.

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