

Themes and Symbols in the Selected Poems of Walt Whitman

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Abstract

Walt Whitman is arguably the most critical poet in American literature. He could be regarded as the national poet of America. The influence that Walt Whitman has had on American poetry, in particular, and on American literature, in general, is something that is still being evaluated; there have been many people who have written on Walt Whitman, but I believe that still not enough work has been done on what has happened on his poetry. Walt Whitman's importance lies not only in nineteenth-century America when he lived but also in the context of America, the country it has become. As Emerson says, an American scholar should be somebody who would liberate American literature from European influence. Through this, he was talking about a kind of American literature that would be independent of European power and would be a kind of literature that would be recognizably American. According to F.O.Matthiessen, Walt Whitman is part of the American renaissance.

Keywords: Nature images, Individualism, Adhesiveness, Human body, Democracy

Introduction

Walt Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, in West Hills, Long Island, New York. The Whitman family had moved from Connecticut to Long Island in the seventeenth century and, at one time, owned a large tract of land. In 1823 the family moved to Brooklyn, where Walt Whitman attended public elementary school; in childhood, he was influenced by the Quakers. Later, he used Quaker terms and references in his poems and expressed a mystical individualism resembling the Quaker approach. He began his career as a teacher and soon became a journalist, launching his journal, the Long Islander, in 1839. His published works also included the novel Franklin Evans in 1842, but the book of the poem Leaves of Grass has entirely overshadowed his reputation. He made his debut as a poet from 1853 onwards by publishing the first edition of Leaves of Grass in 1855. This first edition of the book was little appreciated in literary circles. However, Emerson warmly praised it in a personal letter to Whitman: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career." The second edition of Leaves of Grass appeared the following year, proving a financial failure. From 1857 to 1859, Whitman

edited The Brooklyn Times, which he had to leave because of Church opposition to his frankly expressed ideas on the several problems on the unmarried; abortion, prostitution, and slavery. He continued to earn his livings mainly from unshed back-work, and whatever craftsmanship he learned had little relation to his poetry. He said his great work Leaves of Grass resulted from his Life in Brooklyn and New York from 1838 to 1853, absorbing a million people; for fifteen years with intimacy.

Fundamental ideas of Whitman's poetry:

- a.Celebration of America as an ideal democratic nation
- b.Idea of adhesiveness
- c.Glorification of the human body, irrespective of gender or race
- d.Opposition to slavery
- e.Combination of transcendentalism and realism

And the technical features of his poetry:

- a.Use of free verse
- b.Use of natural images
- C.Unconventional writing style more akin to prose
- D.Conversational style as he directly addresses his readers

Whitman's notion of democracy is profusely realistic. It is far from being an idealistic philosophy. It mixes with it all the down-to-earth realities. Hence, his vision of democracy is immersed in his time's cultural, political, and social inclinations. It bears with it the social problems of the people; it carries the pressures of political involvement and tends to give a cultural change to the psychic progress of American democracy in particular and American society in general. As a bard of America and as the poet of democracy, Whitman takes upon himself a heavy responsibility with a social conscience. He feels that the American bard should be ready to serve society with generosity imbued with a cosmic outlook.

Whitman's social responsiveness and sentimental attachment to the nation are best expressed in his emotions toward the American president. The death of Lincoln is a heavy blow to American sentiment. It is more than a shock to Whitman. He is strongly influenced by Lincoln's regard for the people of America and the doctrines of democracy. Therefore, it would be unjust to avoid Whitman's regard for Lincoln in any discussion of his regard for democracy and the people of America. He has vividly brought out his feelings and the feelings of the people of America in his elegiac poems: "O Captain My Captain" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Whitman, the poet of democracy, admired Lincoln, the Captain of American democracy, because of the president's strong regard for the principles of democracy. He is taken up by the role of Lincoln in the Civil War. He considers Lincoln the embodiment of democracy and the most significant figure on the canvas of nineteenth-century democracy.

Whitman's appreciation for Lincoln developed as an outcome of their shared love for and dedication to the cause of American democracy.

His poem "Song of Myself" is not intended to be a poem of self-glorification. In it, the Self is viewed as an American bard, prophet, and democrat. In the opening lines of "Song of Myself," Whitman celebrates every person. It is not, in any case, limited to the glorification of the poet's Self. "I celebrate myself," sings Whitman, and the longest poem in *Leaves of Grass* is named after his name, but the self-celebration throughout is the celebration of himself as a man and as an American; it is what he acquires in general with all others that he tastes glory and worth of song, not that which distinguishes him from others.

I Hear America Singing; in this poem, he depicts America as an energetic and progressing nation. The verse emphasizes American society's notion of equality; that is, he wants an equal America; where everybody is free; where nobody is enslaved to anybody; where men, women, black and white everybody lives in harmony. In Whitman's other famous poem, *I Sing the Body Electric*, where he gives equal importance to the body and soul when he talks about the body being electric; he is not interested in the body but enjoys the body. Here, he regards the body as an embodiment of certain spirituality. In this poem, he gives a detailed description of both the male and the female body and their unique qualities; he also protests against the exploitation of colored bodies; was a critique of prostitution asks his readers to pay attention to the human body that is the vivid and minute description of the human body.

Conclusion

Walt Whitman exerted a more significant influence on the development of modern poetry than any other poet a century ago. Walt Whitman has great importance in American literature, and his influence has lasted over all these decades over all these centuries. The result has primarily been not only at the level of the style of poetry but because free verse is something that Walt Whitman made his own and he celebrated. And the entire realistic tradition in American literature in prose and poetry has been supported and strengthened by Whitman. He used poetry to make very fundamental points not only about relationships but also gender, sexuality, the human body, and democracy which is one of the most cherished ideals of the American people.

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