

Walt Whitman: The Representative of American people

Asst. Inst. Haifaa A. Ahmed

English Department

College of Basic Education/ Diyala University

E-mail: hayfaa_a@yahoo.com

Abstract:

This paper discusses the life of the modern American poet *Walt Whitman* or "*the poet of Democracy*" as they call him. The paper concentrates on the stages of his life as a man and his career before he publishes his first book (*Leaves of Grass*) in 1855.

The paper also presents his theory about the concept of democracy and what it means, in addition to his philosophy about the freedom of American people and the importance of individuality, equality and self respect in American society.

Whitman's life and career :

If we want to think about the philosophy of Americanness, the first one comes to our mind is Walt Whitman. One of the most read, most enjoyable writers of American Literature so much debated and gossiped about, preceding his own folk's and the world's age by light-years ahead, throwing himself in the face of his contemporary readers, at last knocking down all the remains of the long-suffered puritan establishments and values that the country has carried as a burden for far too long. One simply can not exclude Whitman without having made a comment about his poetry and art _ he simply cannot be ignored, for he and his art do not allow that.

Whitman or "*the poet of democracy*" as they call him was born near Huntington, Long Island, on the last day of May, 1819, and was named for his father, Walter Whitman, a local farmer and, later, carpenter and builder. There must have been some hereditary fault in the family, for two of his brothers were mentally defective and one of his sisters was decidedly queer. Walt himself, however, was growing strong, well-developed and handsome, with a remarkable mind and a rather unusual personality.

The family moved to Brooklyn in 1824 and soon afterward Walt went to school, but left it at the age of twelve to become a printer's apprentice. A

voracious reader, he took also to writing, an occupation remained, in various forms, permanent with him. Both in style and content of writing he was unorthodox, and consequently difficult to appreciate and easy to misunderstand. However, the publishers and editors he worked for found him too individualistic, rather unsociable, and stubbornly unwilling to get adjusted to ordinary requirements of literary works. He did not keep his jobs for long.

Whitman finally succeeded in getting a better position, that of editor of the conservative *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (1846-1848), then lost it for advocating abolitionism, only to be invited for the same anti-slavery views to take charge of the *Brooklyn Daily Freeman*. Just before he accepted the latter position, however, Whitman made a trip to New Orleans, to do some editorial work, but suffered a severe mental disturbance, and as a result his personality underwent a marked change, and he began to spend much time wandering about, associating and conversing with the great variety of 'simple' people. As an individual, he became lonesome, keeping company with few men and hardly any women at all.

In 1855 he set to type his own great book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, a product of many years' work, which he described as the "odoriferous classic" which celebrates "the proletarians who make the world almost uninhabitable by their vulgarity," but it was little appreciated by the public and much criticized, possibly because it was written in still unfashionable free verse and too profound for its readers. Nevertheless, he was immediately recognized for his talent by those who count:

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which must yet have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. 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. (Emerson, p: 525)

During the Civil War, Whitman came to Washington as a war correspondent and stayed to live in the national capital as a government clerk. In his spare time he worked on his book of social philosophy, *Democratic Vistas* (1871), in which he eloquently expressed his pride in the American past and hope for the American future.

In 1873 Whitman suffered a paralytic stroke, which left him increasingly incapacitated, and the death of his mother, whom he adored, was a further painful blow. The remaining years of his life were spent in Camden, N.J., where he died on March 26, 1892. (American authors, p: 422)

Whitman's philosophy:

To know Whitman's philosophy, we have to depend on two basic sources: on his poetry, and his theoretical writings, mainly criticism, which is most important one; *Democratic Vistas*. Our task is not very simple for the two are often contradictory, not at all coherent and carry a wide range of possible interpretations. We have what Lawrence rightly suggests:

Whitman is like a human document, or a wonderful treatise in human self revelation. It is neither art nor religion nor truth: Just a self revelation of a man who could not live, and so had to write himself.

(Lawrence, p: 72))

No poet of any century has exerted as great an influence on the development of modern poetry as Whitman did. Despite the oneness between poetry and the language in which it is created _ the frequently untranslatable element in poetry _ Whitman's poetic influence has ranged far beyond the English-language poets. As Waldo Frank pointed out in his article *The New York Times Book Review* on the 100th anniversary of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*:

In the century since the first, slim, privately printed volume of *Leaves of Grass* appeared, Walt Whitman has become throughout the world

America's most widely read, most deeply discussed poet. But the hundred years have not removed the ambiguities of his place in his own country. (...) By a consensus of intellectual opinion, he is our greatest poet, yet the fashionable critics and most of the others do not understand him, and in many cases actually dislike him. (Whitman, p: 17)

Actually it is the revolutionary phenomenon of Whitman in American literature and the revolutionary ferment that is still alive in his works to which American conservatism has not been able to reconcile itself. The literary conservatives, slowly and reluctantly, have accepted isolated parts of Whitman (and much of the interpretive literature on him is an attempt to whittle him down to his least vital parts) but it is the whole Whitman that they are afraid of, the Whitman who at one and the same time liberated American senses and sensibilities from the deep freeze of Puritanism, sang the beauty of everyday things and work, brought democracy and the common people into poetry, hailed the working people as the most important force in society, greeted the revolutionary events and developments of his time, dedicated himself to international comradeship, the liberty of nations and the affirmation of the human bonds that link the peoples of the entire globe, who loved and mocked his country, and praised the people and himself at the same time. (Tilak, p:13)

The battle in American literature for the acceptance of Whitman has a long tradition. Today important forces in American literature unequivocally identify themselves with the Whitman tradition and accept him fully without closing their eyes to his 'weaknesses' and contradictions which are outweighed a hundred times over by the strength and depth that he brought to American and world literature:

Only the great can afford to be ludicrous, and to share in the laughter on which experience floats. (...) In Walt Whitman's verse, too, we must learn to accept the ridiculous as well as the sublime, and to cherish the

note of absurdity as the mark of genius. (Geismar, p: 73)

Whitman, as he himself recognized, was an artist of many contradictions - therefore we must carefully observe him and explore the rich, complex and many-faced world of Whitman the poet, the man, the critic and political thinker. As a pioneer of the modern poet he is not always successful even in his mode of expression. He wrote some of the most magnificent lines of poetry as well as some of the clumsiest. Materialism and idealism, realism and romanticism, strains of mysticism contend with each other in his works, presenting us with a very complex, manifold philosophy of America, Americanness and *ars-poetica* that is often characterized as the "poetry of democracy", but more than that, it is the true liberation of the individual self, of all restrictions being political, racial, moral or spiritual:

In his very rejection of art Walt Whitman is an artist. He tried to produce a certain effect by certain means and he succeeded. . . . He stands apart, and the chief value of his work is in its prophecy, not in its performance. He has begun a prelude to larger themes. He is the herald to a new era. As a man he is the precursor of a fresh type. He is a factor in the heroic and spiritual evolution of the human being. If Poetry has passed him by, philosophy will take note of him. (Wilde, p:132)

Whitman's concept about Democracy:

The central point of Whitman's philosophy lay in his faith in the powers of Man. Man is the source of all potential goodness, beauty and truth; indeed, but to develop his creative inclinations, man needs freedom, freedom open to all, built on equality, tolerance, and self-respect. Each individual should be given a full opportunity to use freedom and prepared for it by the public acting in collaboration with the forces of law. This, in essence, was Whitman's idea of democracy:

I say that democracy can never prove itself beyond cavil, until it founds and luxuriantly grows its own forms of art, poems, schools, theology,

displacing all that exists, or that has been produced anywhere in the past,
 under opposite influences.....the idea of ensemble and of equal brotherhood,
 the perfect equality of the states, the ever-over-reaching American ideas,
 it behooves you to convey yourself implicitly to no party, nor submit blindly
 to their dictators, but steadily hold yourself judge and master over all of them.

(Whitman,p:4)

In all his life, Whitman lives with the sense of identity. This sense is not connected with human being but with everything in this life. The sense of "oneness of all" makes his democracy universal and pantheistic. *Schybery* refers to this aspect of democracy by saying "Whitman is directly led away from the political aspect of democracy towards transcendental, pantheistic, and democracy... The basic emotion in Whitman's lyricism is a feeling of kinship with all creation, evidenced in the little *Leaves of Grass*. This grass is the great democratic symbol in nature..." (Tilak, p:15)

In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,
 I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's
 name. And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er I go,
 Others will punctually come for ever and ever. (Tilak, p:75)

Whitman goes beyond establishing the universal idea of "democracy" - he proclaims himself the representative person of this new image. He identifies himself with freedom, with God, with limitless power. "I'm full of myself", as he has put it. Moreover he wants to have everything; flesh, food, earth, universe, men and women, everything. Even more - he is everything there is and everything there is not.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself, And what I assume you shall assume,
 For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (...)

(Tilak, p:77)

Be composed-be at ease with me – I am Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty as
 Nature, Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you, Not till the waters
 refuse to glisten for you and the leaves to rustle for you, do my words refuse
 to glisten and rustle for you (Whitman, p:439)

Divine I am inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch and am
 touched from; The scent of these armpits is aroma finer than prayer, This
 head is more than churches and bibles or creeds... I dote on myself... there is
 that lot of me, and all so luscious... (Tilak, p:93)

In his essay on Whitman in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Lawrence wrote of, "This awful Whitman. This post-modern poet. This poet with the private soul leaking out of him all the time. All his privacy leaking out in a sort of dribble, oozing into the universe."¹ Lawrence is again right in observing the basic pattern of the style that Whitman created, and therefore referred to as the founder of modernism. His usage of free-verse goes beyond the limits of the free-verse and is often called "the maker of great lists". He creates poems that consist of words related to one certain idea, presented in a kind of list, the only coherence making it a poem is the meaning and connection behind the words. Poetry for him is not a distinguished form of art. Everything is poetry and everything is himself. In the preface to the *Leaves of Grass* (1855) he claims: "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." Poetry that is country, politics, philosophy, feeling, soul, body and sex. Everything is invincible, lust for anything possible. There is only one law: preeminent freedom.

Sex contains all, bodies, souls, Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies,

results, promulgations, Songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal
mystery, the seminal milk, All hopes, benefactions, bestowals, all the
passions, loves, beauties, delights of the earth. (...) (Whitman, p:117)

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 will go out to
the bank by the wood and become undistinguished and naked, I am mad
for it to be in contact with me... (Tilak, p:78)

He is a missionary for humanity, to bring the new Testament of
"democracy", of equality, tolerance, self-respect, and freedom open to all.
Poetry is a mission, the mission of delivering the message to the people, the
people of the world. Poetry is America, therefore it is America and the people
of America, who are the new prophets of the forecoming era. It is them who
have the possibility to change for the better, to become utmost gods of
independence.

Their manners, speech, dress, friendships, _ the freshness and candor of
their physiognomy _ the picturesque looseness of their carriage – their
deathless attachment to freedom – their aversion to anything indecorous
or soft or mean _ the practical acknowledgment of the citizens of one
state by the citizens of all other states - the fierceness of their roused
resentment - their curiosity and welcome of novelty - their self-esteem
and wonderful sympathy – their susceptibility to a slight – the air they have
of persons who never knew how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors –
the fluency of their speech – their delight in music, a sure symptom of manly
tenderness and native elegance of soul - their good temper and open-handedness –

the terrible significance of their elections, the President's taking off his hat to them, not they to him - these too are unrhymed poetry. It awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it. (The Harvard Classics, p:1)

Conclusion:

For conclusion we can summarize that Walt Whitman is a great reformist of his own country as well as the world itself, for he presented us with the idea of absolute freedom, or as he liked to call it - 'democracy'. His philosophy expressed through his art and poetry as well as through his theoretical writings began a new era in America, and gradually in the whole world. His Americanness lies in his belief of mankind being principally good, and their natural condition being free and equal. Through this he not only did a philosophical and political argument, but made the individual a central objective free of sex, nationality, color, race and religion. His individuality is not an egoism, but an objective representative of the democratic idea carried to its uppermost limit. The other representative is his country, America, which is raised above all others, for the task of implementation is put forward to it. The American people are therefore to put this to reality_ Freedom of thoughts, speech, action and love.

The world is one big whole of equal elements, which can be brought together by the individual in himself. The unity of the universe is the furthest goal of the self, through self-respect and self-liberation: "One's-Self I sing, simple separate person, Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse."

Whitman, p:14)

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المستخلص

يناقش هذا البحث حياة الشاعر الامريكي (والت ويتمان) او كما يسمونه (شاعر الديمقراطية). يركز البحث على مراحل الحياة العملية للشاعر قبل ان ينشر اول كتاب له (اوراق العشب) في عام 1855 . يعرض البحث ايضا نظرية ويتمان عن مفهوم الديمقراطية، كيف يراها وما تعنيه، بالاضافة الى فلسفته عن حرية الشعب الامريكي واهمية الفردية والمساواة واحترام الذات في المجتمع الامريكي.