

**Walt Whitman's Democracy:
Between Transcendentalism
and Realism**

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Abstract

This paper aims at tracing the development of Walt Whitman's conception of "Democracy" from the period of the transcendental impact to the rise of Realism in the postwar era. Whitman's "democracy" has never been static; it changes in accordance with the cultural, social and political atmospheres. He begins his "democratic" motifs under the direct impact of the American Transcendentalism. This period is characterized by an ideal optimism clearly reflected in "Song of Myself" 1855. But after the American Civil War (1861-65), he reconsiders his conception of democracy. He realizes the sufferings and tragedies of war the fact that gives him a full awareness of the American ethnic and multi-cultural idiosyncrasy. These ideas are expressed in *Democratic Vistas* 1873. He concludes that democracy is to be worked for in future as it is difficult to achieve in the present.

Walt Whitman is widely known as the poet of democracy and his masterpiece *Leaves of Grass* (1855) is considered the "Bible of democracy."¹ His conception of democracy is multi-faceted, varied and universal. Democracy, according to Whitman, is not merely a socio-political system but a spiritual, philosophical and humanitarian message. With such a comprehensive and all-inclusive conception of democracy, Whitman "could take flight into the vaguest undifferentiated generation about Democracy".² Having been under the direct influence of the Emersonian Transcendentalism, Whitman incorporates a vast scope of dreams, ambitions, aspirations and mystical experiences into his conception of democracy. Yet after witnessing the atrocities of the Civil War (1861—65), Whitman reconsiders his highly optimistic attitude to the notion of

'democracy' and begins to think more realistically about its status quo.

This paper is an attempt to analyze Whitman's understanding of 'democracy', as exhibited in his poetry and prose; besides, the changing modes that American literature witnessed vis-à-vis the development of his thought from the Emersonian optimistic Transcendentalism to the rise of materialistic realism in the Gilded age in postbellum America .

Whitman was very much inspired by the ideal optimistic patriotism that dominated the American rising nation in the first half of the nineteenth century. He was influenced by the Young American Movement that attempted to free the American heritage, particularly literature, from the British domination. The Movement shaped his democratic principles and his sense of equality and freedom. The democratic spirit haunted his masterpiece *Leaves of Grass*. The Whitman's reader "who would get at the spirit and meaning of *Leaves of Grass* must remember that its animating principles is Democracy".³ Whitman establishes democracy as a dominant theme in *Leaves of Grass* from the very beginning. In his 'Preface' to the 1855 edition, he clarifies his ideal concept of the poet as a new Adamic hero in the paradisaical Utopia. Besides, he states directly the democratic message of the poet:

The message of great poets to each man and woman are,
Come to us on equal terms, only then can you understand us,
We are no better than you. What we enclose you enclose,
What you enjoy you may enjoy. Did you suppose there
could
be only one Supreme? We affirm there can be unnumbered

Supremes, and that one does not countervail another any more than one eyesight countervails another. .⁴

This is the essence of the Whitmanian democracy. According to him, the poet is the patron of democracy. It is the American "melting pot" where everybody is an equal to the other. There is no difference between men and women; they have the same rights. There should be no authoritative domination or 'Supremacy.'

In the "Inscriptions" Whitman begins "Oneself I sing, a simple separate person/ Yet utter the word Democratic Brooklyn Eagle" the word En masse."⁵ Symbolically, "Grass" stands for equality, similarity, huge number and above all the optimistic spirit that continued to dominate American literature in the antebellum America. Whitman political conception of democracy is identical with Abraham Lincoln's words regarding democracy as "The Government of people, by the people, for the people".⁶ These words echo the modern familiar sense of democracy "government in which all adult citizens share through their elected representatives".⁷ He lost his position as an editor in the democratic "Brooklyn Eagle" as a result of his political views and for his support of the Free Soil Party which opposed the extension of slavery to the new states that would join the union.

In his "Song of Myself", a poem that is an exemplary here, Whitman transcends Lincoln's "political" democracy expressing an absolute faith in equality, freedom, humanity and the universe in general. He removes the barriers among people not only in America but worldwide. He rejects racial discrimination all over the world. He equalizes men and women and preaches a religion that unites all human beings

under the shade of a universal spiritual faith, an over-soul in the Emersonian words. "What is a man anyhow? What I am? And what you are? All I make as my own you shall offset it with your own, Else it were time lost listening to me."⁸ Here Whitman tries to bridge the gap between the addressee and the addresser. It is the identification of man with man. Later, the poet identifies himself not with a particular individualistic person, but with people in general: "In all people I see myself, non more and not one a barley-corn less, and the good or bad I say of myself I say of them."⁹

Eventually the situation depicted here is profoundly democratic. The poet associates himself with all people. The idea of whites' superiority, or master/slave antithetical existence is totally rejected. Yet Whitman is aware of the segregation between the two races in America. He tries to show sympathy with the slaves who have been victimized in his country. He believes in equality in citizenship and the need to transcend these prejudices:

The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside

I heard his motions cracking the twigs of the woodpile
Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him
limpsey and weak,

And gave him a room that entered from my own, and gave

him some coarse clean clothes,
And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his
awkwardness,

And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck
and ankles,

He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and
 passed north,
 I had him sit next me at table My firelock leaned in the
 corner.¹⁰

The description of the runaway slave sheds light on the tragedy of the slaves in America. Although the poet treats the slave as an equal; sheltering, feeding and nursing him, he does not transcend totally the negative attitude towards slavery. There is inherent inequality in his approach. It is evident that the slave is moving from the south where slavery is a prosperous trade to the north where slavery is an illegal practice. Within this emphasis on American social idiosyncrasy, Whitman's notion of democracy, as suggested earlier, transcends the American society. He preaches a universal democracy which, like grass, grows every where: This is the grass that grows wherever there is, and the water is,

This is the common air that bathes the globe.

This is the breath of caws and songs and behavior,

This is the tasteless water of souls ... this is the true sustenance, ...¹¹

Thus the grass, as James E. Miller suggests "becomes a graphic representation of Whitman's central concept of democracy – individuality in balance with the mass, distinguished singleness in harmony with massive grouping".¹²

Moreover Whitman's conception of democracy is spiritual: "My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, / Enclosing all worship ancient and modern, and all between ancient and modern."¹³ He does not believe in a particular religion but he has faith in all religions. Whitman

seeks a world free from ethnic and religious conflicts. As is exhibited in his "Songs of Myself", it seems that Whitman has been guided by sympathetic, humanitarian and spiritual impulses. Therefore, democracy, in such a sense, has become a kind of absolute freedom and equality for him; it is a kind of ideal Utopian existence.

Whitman's conception of democracy was reshaped and refined after the war. That paradisaical image of the American Adam begins to disappear. A new attitude characterized by doubts and sometimes despair is to be seen in the post-war era. The war puts an end to the social organism and the code of values of that time. While the abolition of slavery was a major cause of the war that brought about a new life style characterized by disequilibrium and inconsistencies it war puts an end to Whitman's "ideal of democratic universalism."¹⁴ The war scenes have taken deep roots into his memory and later he realizes that time is not ripe for real democratic practices. Consequently, he laments democracy as something to aspire for in the future. However, Whitman gives a realistic comprehensive and matured notion of democracy:

Did you, too, O friend suppose democracy
was only for elections and for party name?
I say democracy is only for use there that it
may pass on and come to its flower and fruits in manners,
the highest forms of interaction between men and their
beliefs – in religion, literature, colleges and schools—
democracy in public and private life, in the army and navy.
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While nursing young men of both sides in Washington, Whitman was exposed to the horror of the wartime bloodshed. He called himself a "wound dresser."¹⁶ Thus the war added a new mythical dimension which is known as "healer- hero" adding a humanitarian aspect to his character known as "great tender mother man"¹⁷

The realization dawned upon him that time has not come for the kind of democracy that he has been preaching. The political propaganda is only one facet of democracy which ought to be a daily practice among the Americans with disregard to ethnic or religious background. He realizes that America is a multi-cultural society in which every community has its own idiosyncrasy. With much awareness of the subject of religion, Whitman confirms the fact that, "the core of democracy is the religious element. All the religions old and new are there."¹⁸

Democratic Vistas (1871): "say that democracy can never prove itself beyond cavil, until it founds and luxuriantly grows its own forms of art, poems, schools, theology, replacing all that exist, or that has been produced any where in the past, under opposite influence."¹⁹

Since *Democratic Vistas* was published after the Civil War, the terrible and catastrophic outcome of the war brought about a drastic change in Whitman's attitudes towards American immature democracy. He asserts the fact that democracy ought to have deep roots in the culture of society; to be a part of the educational system; and to be a part of the spiritual practices of people. Democracy of the past is no longer appropriate. He warns people that democracy does not mean a "throwing a side of law and running riot", but "it is the superior law".²⁰

Whitman states that democracy is not only a national end in itself but it is a means to "bend all nations, all men, of however various and distant lands, into a brotherhood, a family".²¹ Thus democracy becomes an international motto that unites humanity. Later, this argument is mingled with feminist ideals:

Democracy, in silence, binding its time, ponders its own ideals, not of literature and art only – not of men only, but of women. The idea of women of America ... developed, raised to become the robust equals, workers, and, it may be, even practical and political deciders with the men, greater than men, we may admit, through their divine maternity, always lowering, emblematical attribute – but great, at any rate, as man, in all departments ...²²

Eventually, Whitman reconfirms his opposition to gender violations. Women's segregation and marginalization cannot build a solid foundation for real democratic mansion. Yet, these aims of democracy have not been achieved as the United States were incompatible after the war. Whitman "submits" that "the fruition of democracy on ought to like a grand scale, resides altogether in the future."²³

To conclude, Whitman's conception of democracy passed through changes. Before the Civil War, it was so optimistic that it transcends the boundaries of politics and society. Whitman preaches a kind of spiritual transcendental democracy that should prevail the world over. He pleads for equality, demolition of classes and racial discrimination. He wants the whole world to live in peace as one family. He asks for equal rights between people, men and women and among nations. He is the prophet of democracy. But after the war he realized that democracy was not applicable for

the time being and consequently he began to belief in future when democracy would work out in the American society.

Notes

*If not specified, all line references are to A. Norman Jeffares *Whitman's Selected Poems and Prose*, London: Oxford UP, 1966.

1. R. M. Buck, "Walt Whitman", *The Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1949), p.1022.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1165. M. V. Poren, "American Renaissance".
3. *Ibid.*, p. 1031. John Burroughs, "Whitman : A Study".
4. R. M. Buck. p. 221
5. *Ibid.*, p. 75. Walt Whitman, "Inscriptions".
6. _____, *Democratic Vistas*, in Untermeyer, p. 808.
7. A. S. Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, (New Delhi: Oxford UP., 1986) p. 229.
8. Jeffares. pp. 390—92.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 401—2.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 182—192.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 358—61.

12. James E. Miller, JR, *Walt Whitman*, (New York : Twayne Publishers, 1962) p. 115.
13. Jeffares. p.p.1093--94.
14. Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, Penguin Books: New York, 1991. p. 166
15. *Democratic Vistas*. p. 803.
16. Ruland. p. 166.
17. Harlod Aspiz, *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980. p. 19.
18. Madeline Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty*, Harper Collins Publisher, New York, 2006. p. x.

19. *Democratic Vistas*. p. 808.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 828.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, p. 829.

23. *Ibid.*, p.830.

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