



EMERGENCE OF WALT WHITMAN-BOTH AS A GREAT AMERICAN POETIC INNOVATOR AND A COMMENDABLE LANGUAGE EXPERIMENTER IN THE AMERICAN LITERARY SCENARIO: A BRIEF ANALYSIS.

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ABSTRACT



This paper focuses on a great American poetic innovator and a commendable language experimenter in the American literary scenario, Walt Whitman who breathed a view and grandiose life into poetry by which he exerted a lasting influence on modern poetry by aiming at being himself in his poetry and this required him stand out as poetry personified in solitary relief against the whole poetic achievement of the past. The paper also envisions the poetic revolution that he brought about in American poetry which crowned him as a liberator of poetry and the father of vers libre.

Keywords: *Language Experimenter, Poetry, Vers Libre.*

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Walt Whitman, generally hailed as the greatest American poetic innovator was universally acknowledged as commendable language experimenter not only heralding the dawn of modern poetry but also bringing about a revolution in the American literary scenario. He was born in a farming community, on May 31, 1819 in West Hills, Longland as the second of the nine children born to his parents.

When he was just four years old, the family moved to Brooklyn where he lived at the edge of a great harbor. A ferry ride took him to Manhattan

Island or New York where he became a great observer of men and women. This experience stood him as a poet and his love of the sea got deeply ingrained in him and his poetic vision. He published the first edition of his master piece namely *The Leaves of Grass* on July 4, 1855, which was hailed by Emerson as 'a strikingly original work'. Whitman's work as a nurse during the Civil War gave him an insight into the bloodcurdling brutalities of war which he expressed in a small volume of poems entitled *Drum Taps*. Whitman wrote many essays also,



especially on democracy, published in a volume called *Democratic Vistas* in 1871.

Whitman's parents, his mother being Dutch and father being English, are said to have expected a veritable influence on the young boy who unobtrusively grew into a remarkable poet for whom America itself is a great poem whose ample geography dazzled his swept beyond metre altogether, making him feel and think of himself as the poet of the city and the poet of nature. *Leaves of Grass* is singular in American poetry which was considered aptly by Thoreau, the Hermit of Concord, as "a trumpet note ringing through the American Camp" (Sampson 809). No doubt, no poet of a century before him exerted so great an influence on the development of modern poetry as Walt Whitman. Abe Capek rightly holds:

"Despite the oneness between poetry and language in which it is created-the frequently untranslatable element in poetry-Whitman's poetic influence has ranged far beyond the English language poets" (P1)

The entire realistic tradition in American Literature both in poetry and prose, got nourished by Whitman was hailed out and out a forerunner even by the so-called Democratic group of poets in Latin America, Germany, France, Spain, China, India, Turkey and Czechoslovakia writing in the most diverse languages and national literary traditions.

Being a highly conscious poet fully aware of his intention to achieve rhythmic metre in poetry, he did a wage a poetic war with the backward conventions and struggled against "art for the sake" and all forces that were found retarding the birth and development of modern realistic poetry. Breaking away from the regular rhythms of old poetry and breaking down the barriers of form between prose and poetry, Whitman was found to be strong in his view that the truest and greatest poetry 'can never again in the English Language be expressed in arbitrary' and rhyming metre; while picturizing Whitman's idea of a modern poet, the modern critic F. O. Matthiessen writes:

"He felt that the restrictions of formal verse could not fit the great modern themes, the enlargement

of the people's experience, the advance of science, the new facts of industry... the muse must resume that other medium of expression, more flexible, more eligible soaring to the freer vast, diviner heaven of prose" (P 580)

Walt Whitman did his best to break down the distinction between poetry and prose for what he wanted was nothing but freedom of his vision and he just wanted the poet to be equal to the reader because he imagined both figures to be identical to each other and envisioned himself as dying into his words and being reborn as the reader's voice. The Democratic vision impelled Whitman to go back behind both English and classical metres, to a Biblical past. He used a verse form which was at first a stumbling block to many readers. The nearest parallel to the verse form of *Leaves of Grass* is found in the poetry of the English Bible where the structure is based on symmetry of clauses called parallelism. His poetry is more like the "Psalms" than anything else.

Whitman imagined himself as a god incarnating the word which will in turn, embody his readers. He makes a special claim upon his readers, the claim of intimate presence, as if the poem were the outcry of a heart. It is not a text but an embrace:

"It is I you hold and who holds you,
I spring from the pages into your arms" (LG

505)

Whitman had justified his poetic innovation in his prefatory letter as:

"For grounds of *Leaves of Grass*, as a poem, I abandoned the conventional themes, which do not appear in it; none of the stock ornamentation, or choice plots of love or war, or high exceptional personages of old-world song; nothing as I may say, for beauty's sake no legend, or myth or romance, nor euphemism, nor rhyme. But the broadest average of humanity and its identities in the now ripening nineteenth century, and especially in each of their countless examples and practical occupations in the United States today" (P 564)



The solitary singer introduces the self-man as the central figure in the Universe. The 'self' becomes one of the principal themes. This self carefully absorbs everything in the universe and translates it. The perceptive reader finds himself deeply absorbed by all that Whitman persuasively presents. To present it in his own words:

"The known Universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet" (P 717).

In this process, the self evolves into a creative artist. The poet then identifies the self with all:

"And the first objective he look'd upon, that object he became

And the object became part of him" (P 394)

Then he reveals himself to the reader as the American poet whose aim is to incarnate America. He has glorified in his poetic creations America as the great mother and the states as her children, thereby emphasizing the pioneers who embarked upon the task of shaping and strengthening America and sang in such a way to celebrate working classmen placing focus on individualism and democracy and also advocating liberty with the spirit of recommendation for positivism. Placing a stress on themes of love, death and rebirth, he at last gave vent to his mystic experience all of which get more significantly and clearly blended in *Leaves of Grass*.

Walt Whitman is said to have heralded the dawn of a new era giving a new dimension and subject matter to the poets of his age by liberating the spirit of modern poetry from the ancient fetters and making it embrace a wide range of poetic grist thereby exploring at once cosmic and the commonplace: Randall Jorrel levels a glorified tribute on Whitman by saying thus:

"One Whitman is miracle enough.

Whitman is grand and elevated and

Comprehensive and real with an astonishing Reality and many other things..." (P 131)

The sense of reality makes itself felt in his poems. The essence of this quality is the effect of a living and moving world; it comes from the dominance of life metaphors in Whitman's verse, dialectic of nature appearing within the frame of affirmations. Whitman announces his three themes to be Love, Democracy and Religion. He is under the compulsion to teach

that love and democracy are the structural elements of his natural philosophy. The approach to these themes is quite innovative. For him, the body is a great democratic agent. He says:

"I sing the body electric

That of the male is perfect,

And that of the female is perfect" (LG 94)4

Then he equates the body to the soul:

"I have said that soul is not more than the body. And I have said that the body is not more than the soul" (Song of Myself 86)

And finally he sees the soul reflected in Nature. D. H. Lawrence saw in Whitman an integrated personality. In his essay on Whitman, he says:

"Whitman becomes in his own person, the whole world, the whole universe, the whole eternity of time" (Lawrence 617)

In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman achieves the great oneness, the experience of infinity, the triumph of the living spirit which at last includes everything.

Whitman's poetry is quite modern in the sense that he broke the fetters of conversations and hackneyed terminology of English poetry. His poetry struck a new and original note proving himself to be the pioneer in the art of *Vers Libre* i.e. he rejected the old, the traditional and wornout, giving voice to the new urges and aspirations of a man in an age of science and democracy. He is the first modern poet who dissolved forms and expressed new values in free verse. No doubt, his poems are marked by technical virtuosity and contextual excellence. On reading *Leaves of Grass* one can find in Whitman 'a technical innovator' and 'a language experimenter' advocating the use of common idioms, typical Americanism and new coinages. Whitman himself considered the book *Leaves of Grass* to be 'a language experiment'. Roger Asselineau holds:

"Language always loomed large in Walt Whitman's mind. In a way, *Leaves of Grass* was a deliberate and systematic attempt at enriching and renewing the traditional vocabulary of poetry" (P 225).



The language does reveal the same mixture of heterogeneous elements as his style. His poems abound in catalogues, parallelism, juxtaposition, images and symbols. Also he has a keen ear for alliteration, assonance, consonance and resonance. For him, each word is the soul of the thing which it reflects and in that way, expresses the spirituality of the world. Whitman goes to the extent of calling poets "the Sayers of the words of Earth" (P 322) and he is very sensitive to the music of words. A few of his poems are symphonic in character and each of his poems is marked by technical excellence and his role as a technical innovator is found to be a sort of poetic skill contributing a lot in making him a strong in the direction of modern poetry. He writes:

"Poets to come! Orators, singers
musicians to come!
Not today is to justifying me
and answer what I am for,
But you, a new boood
native, athletic, continental
greater than before known
Arouse! For you must justifying me.
I myself but write one or
Two indicative words
For the future" (Poets to come in LG, 14)

Walt Whitman universally acknowledged as the unofficial laureate of America, has been hailed as the first innovative modern poet for as the new poet of the new poetic world, he is said to have taken upon himself the task of creating a new literature and his primary aim was to bring about a revolution in the field of American poetry and American life. As W. M. Rossetti has put it, Whitman as a pioneer

"Thinks, sees, invents, excites and initiates entirely out of his own personality" (P 4)

Whitman as a liberator of introduced a new style. The diction used in his poetic realm enabled him to respond easily to the ambitious attempt to make a voice of the multitude. He writes:

"One's self I sing,
A simple separate person, yet utter the
world democratic,
The word En-Masse

The modern Man I sing" (One's self I sing 1)

Technically speaking, *Leaves of Grass* did significantly mark the beginning of a new era. Even the very first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was so much received as the Lyrical Ballads of Wordsworth and Coleridge. In the words of Carl Sandburg,

".....as to handling by critics and commentators,
It is the most highly praised and the most deeply
Damned book that ever came from an
American Printing Press" (P 5).

Whitman's versatile diction and style served as an excellent medium to communicate his ideas to his readers. It provided him with a scope to introduce both largeness and variety of expression. While Whitman's is not a conventional poetic form, it is far from lawlessness. Its cadence and rhyme are carefully wrought. Occasionally he uses rhyme as in the poem.

"O Captain! My Captain!" :

"O Captain! My Captain!
Our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather'd every rack,
the prize we sought is won" (P 337)

In Emerson's "Brahma", the object is lost in the thought. In Whitman, the thought is lost in the object. Whitman is the new Adam whose words become one with the things he named as he declares in:

"There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon,
That object he became,
And that object became part of him..." (P 364)

It would be interesting to note how much one can learn about Whitman by examining his diction. He clearly understood that language is not an abstract construction made by the learned, but that it had arisen out of the works and needs, the joys and struggles and desires of long generations of humanity. So he believed that the fresh opportunities for the English tongue in America were immense, offering themselves in the whole range of American facts. His poems cleave to these facts and release new



potentialities of expression for the native American character. Whitman speaks of him as being, 'like Adam in paradise' and almost as free from artificiality. There is a mixture of heterogeneous elements in Whitman's language. Archaic words are found side by side with neologisms, abstruse terms next to slang words and foreign words close to Americanisms. The varied American flora and fauna and all sorts of customs and institutions peculiar to the United States provide Whitman with a Picturesque and new vocabulary. "Poko-weed" 'cotton-wood', 'pecan -tree', 'prairie-dog' 'camp-meeting' quality in him. As Whitman found no difference incorporated into his poems the most colloquial words of everyday speech. Whitman did profusely celebrate words as follows:

"Great is language –it is the mightiest
of the sciences,
It is the fullness, color, form,
diversity, of the earth,
And of men and women, and of
all the qualities and processes;
It is greater than buildings, ships,
religious, paintings, music" (PP
495-496)

For, Whitman, words are not mere sounds or signs on the page of a book. They do interest, inspire and excite him as the expression and condensation of an actual experience either directly or indirectly in imagination. Each word is the soul of the thing which it reflects and in that way expresses the spirituality of the world. Being sensitive to the music and he describes his activity variously as 'singing' 'warbling' 'caroling' 'trilling' and 'chanting' to Whitman, the inspired genius technique was not a matter of instructed imitation. His point is that the form of his poetry should be "organic evolving free metrical patterns as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush" (Richard 15). The poetic rhythm is an organic feature of his verse marked by melody, movement and meaning.

Whitman's scores of description of men and women engaged in everyday occupations are the product of his fertile discovery of the physical grounding of rhythm which came to him first in the rising and falling of the waves. The musical cadence

of his songs can rival the sibilance of the waves rolling in without intermission and fitfully rising and falling. This unique aspect is well delivered in his poem, "on the Beach at night":

"on the beach at night
stands a child with her father
Watching the east, the autumn sky
up through the darkness,
While rave ring clouds, the burial clouds
In black masses spreading,
Amid a transparent clear belt.
Of other yet left in the east
Ascends large and calm the lord-star Jupiter,
And night and hand, only a very little above,
Swim the delicate sisters the Pleiades" (LG
258-59)

Whitman employs slow paced rhythm when he introduces rich thoughts, bulging rhythms for sexual imagery, dilating rhythm to affirm the variety and plenitude of existence. He employs the somber Old Testament rhythm to highlight a serious thought. Yet the rhythm is related to the life of humanity. The tug and heave of constructive labor is related to the rise and fall of the waves. Thus, he strikes a variation in the rhythm by shifting the poetic pattern as follows:

"As to the form of my poetry, I have rejected the rhymed and blank verse... I cling to rhythm, not the outward regularly measured, short foot, longfoot-shortfoot, long foot-like the walking of a lame man that I care nothing for. The waves of the sea do not break on the beach every so many minutes; the wind does not go jerking through the pine trees, but nevertheless in the roll of the waves and in the southing of the wind in the trees, there is a beautiful rhythm. How monotonous it would become, how tired the ear would get it, if it were regular! It is the under melody and rhythm that I have attempted to catch" (Bergan 166)

To Whitman, poetry meant a kind of musical utterance, the poem "out of the cradle Endlessly Rocking" resembles an Italian opera and it has the components of the Italian Opera like Overture, Recitative, Incantatory, Aria and Finale. It reveals the fact that Whitman's poetry is achieved due to the



fact that sprinkled his poems with neologisms. Whitman studded them with foreign words Latin, Spanish and above French. Often he used French words in contexts of democratic inspiration. He assured that he had to speak not merely for the Americans but for the workers of all lands. Out of great passion to identify the things as it is, Whitman uses French words. The mere sound of the words intoxicated him. This is observed in the line when he describes the movement of earth:

“O! vast Rondure, swimming in space” (P 414)

Whitman reaches the height of ecstasy when he sings:

“Give me to hold all sounds

Fill me with all the voices of the universe,

Endow me with their throbbings,

Nature's also

The tempts, waters, winds,

Operas and chants, marches and dances,

Utter, pour in, for

I would take them all” (LG B 409)

Whitman's resorts to rhetorical devices to provide musical quality and also to present continuity to the form. It is a pronounced characteristic of the style of Leaves of Grass. The use of parenthesis is a recurring feature technique. He often begins a poem or ends some section of a poem, with a bracketed paragraph. Thus, the 'Song of the Exposition' opens with a beautiful aside:

“Ah! Little recks the laborer,
How near his work is holding him to God-
The loving laborer through space and time”
(P 195)

The last poem in Calamus “Full of Life now” significantly ends with a parenthesis:

“Be it as if I were with you
Be not too certain but
I am no with you” (P 136)

Sometimes whole paragraphs begin with the same word or with the same group of words. Roger Asselineau remarks rather aptly:

“This is beyond all question, a technique devised for the eye-at least as much for the

ear-and the equivalent of which we do not find in the Bible” (P 243)

Thus Whitman breathed a new and grandiose life into poetry. He aimed at being himself in his poetry and this required him stand out as poetry personified in solitary relief against the whole poetic achievement of the past, in a nutshell, it may be said that being a technical innovator, Walt Whitman exerted a lasting influence on modern poetry and his innovative technical influence is particularly found to be noticeable in the poetical works of Carl Sandburg, Allen Ginsberg and Lindsay. The poetic revolution that he brought about in American poetry crowned him as a liberator of poetry and the father of vers Libre.

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