
A Study of Whitman's Thematic Drift in 'Leaves of Grass'

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ABSTRACT:

Walt Whitman's work is very controversial in nature because of his sudden emergence as a poet from a journalist after a disappearance of few years. The work produced by him seems to have plenty of drift from nature to freedom to death. The themes keep on changing on the same topic. The concept on the same theme changed from one edition of the book to the other. But a closer look of his original Leaves of Grass in 1855 has all the seeds in it which are explained, explored and elaborated upon in his later works.

Walt Whitman, the poet of America and Champion of Democracy emerged a very controversial poet with his *Leaves of Grass*. He was born in a family of patriots which enforced a fierce sense of justice from the very childhood encouraging him to be a journalist and voicing his opinion through the print media, taking it as his contribution in what he thought was good for the nation. But, the sudden transformation from being a journalist to a poet was itself a matter of ponderance for the literary circle. The change of genre of writing was itself a big drift in the personality of Whitman. It visibly expresses the drift in the philosophy of the poet making him a poet of substance from an aware journalist of his times. His publishing of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 started a mysterious controversy about his sudden conversion into a poet. He converted from a newspaperman, 'practical printer', unoriginal, conventional and occasional poet into the author of *Leaves of Grass*, a radical writer who abruptly abandoned conventional rhyme and meter and ... exploited the odd loveless of homely imagery, finding beauty in the commonplace but expressing it in an uncommon way.ⁱ They were abounding in questions as to whether Whitman had some sort of spiritual illumination or was his poetry a result of calculated strategy to blend journalism, oratory, popular music, and other cultural forces into an innovative poet. Very few manuscripts of the poems are available during the first edition of the *Grass*. A pragmatic view holds that he devoted himself in the five years before the publication of *Leaves* to a disciplined series of experiments that led to a gradual and intricate structuring of his singular style. The manuscripts that remain also indicate that Whitman meticulously worked and reworked passages of his poem, cleverly constructing itself according to Emerson's formula. But few critics are of the opinion that Whitman seems to have been both inspired poet and skilled craftsman, at once under the spell of his newly discovered and intoxicating free verse style while also remaining very much in control of it, adjusting and altering and rearranging as he issued six distinct editions of *Leaves of Grass*.ⁱⁱ

The odd joining of the scripture and the vernacular, the transcendent and the mundane, effectively captures the quality of his work, which most readers experience as magical and commonplace, sublime and prosaic at the same time. It was produced by the poet who was a

sage and a huckster, who touched the gods with ink-smudged fingers, and who was concerned as much with the sales and reviews of his book as with the state of the human soul.ⁱⁱⁱ

He was strongly of the opinion and believed that “American poetry like the nation should be different from any kind written previously. It should look different, sound different and deal with different subject matter if it was to guide the development of a radical new American democracy. So he designed his book unlike any previous book of poetry.”^{iv}

The book received its strongest praise from Emerson, who wrote a flattering five page letter to Whitman and spoke highly of the book to his friends calling it ‘a mixture of Bhagvat Ghita and New York Herald’.

In the times when Whitman’s creative work was being crafted by him, the currents of transcendentalism had gained strength in the literary field through the works of Emerson and Thoreau. The interest in India, its trade and rare books in Sanskrit popularly known as the ‘Hindoo poetry’ was making way for the deeper impact on the Western shores. On the other hand, Whitman as a journalist was unable to voice his opinion for the change he felt was necessary to see America as a true democratic nation. He was trying to figure out an exact formula of success for his nation as he revered the greatness of ancient eastern cultures. “Still, the relationship of Walt Whitman to Vedic thought is considerably complex,” as expressed by Dr. Kamath in his article.^v In reminiscing essay, “A Backward Glance over Traveled Roads,” (1889) Whitman claims to have read “the ancient Hindu poems” and there is enough evidence to show that in 1875 he had received a copy of the *Gita* as a Christmas present from an English friend Thomas Dixon.

Various critics have identified three main drifts in the poetry of Whitman of whom Floyd Stovall is one. He states that the first period covers the time approximately from 1855-1859, where his key poem is “*Song of Myself*”. In its amorphous structure and its arrogant tone it exemplifies the dominant principle it incorporates: love of freedom. Freedom in nature-nature which is perfect in time and place and freedom in expression leading to the expression of love in its sensuous form. In this period he expressed that since all natural things are equally good, the body is for him as much an object of reverence as the soul, and every part and function of the body shares in this holiness. In theory he was the poet of the soul. The supernatural he held of no account and though he said, “I know I am deathless,” he also said that immortality was no more wonderful than eyesight or any other fact in nature, thus indicating the materialistic basis of his conception of immortality. His poetry of this time also conceived the idea of principle of equality amongst all which can be traced back to the pre *Leaves Of Grass* period when he was an active journalist where his ideas of equalitarianism and individualism were philosophical rather than political.

In the second period of Whitman’s poetical development which extending from 1859- 1865, the theme of love and melancholic chant of death predominates in poems like “*Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*”, and “*When Lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloomed*.” The poems had an elegiac tone. The change from the joyous to the pensive mood is evident in this period. The loss by death is lamented; death is seen as a permanent separation. Death is a consoler, the clue to man’s destiny, because it is the divine complement of human

imperfection, through which love is made complete and immortal. He began to perceive that the individual cannot escape the law of the group. But he attains this view only after passing through a period of spiritual upheaval and profound dejection. He was in 1855 an untamed egotist, joyous and sensual who become humble, melancholic and perplexed. He recognized two kinds of love- one which is benevolent and is for all without condition and the other a jealous love which he reserves for those who love as he himself is capable of loving, and its symbol is the calamus root.^{vi} He dreamt of America engaged in a crusade to establish the institution of the love of comrades as he proclaimed it.^{vii}

In the third period of Whitman's development, from 1866 to his death, all the principal ideas introduced in the *Leaves of Grass* in the second period were retained and expanded. Poems in praise of death led to the making of poems on immortality, which became the dominant theme of this last period. Love, already national in scope, now reached out to include the entire world. The poet grew more conservative, but remained fundamentally a democrat. In the early *Leaves* he had declared the good and evil of human nature equally acceptable, but now he desires the triumph of the good. According to him life has a meaning only when viewed as a God's plan and in nature nothing is lost or is in vain, for all things move imperceptibly through infinite cycle of growth and decay to some ultimate goal, certain yet undiscerned. It is clear that law now becomes the more important word than freedom in his philosophy of life. Only the soul dares to be free. Thus, death is for the soul a joyful release, frequently compared by Whitman to the launching of a ship for a long –awaited voyage to some wonderful unknown land.^{viii}

Thus, we see that Whitman in his old age turned even more definitely to thoughts of the spiritual side of life. Even his great pride in America's "proudest material civilization," is in vain, until it attains the greatest gift of all- the gift of "beauty, health, completion."^{ix} Floyd Stovall writes that, "The main drifts in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* covered most of the interests of human life and thought in the America of the 19th century. Some of the more important of them may be summarized as follows: 1. In politics, the drift from individualism to nationalism, with strong tendencies towards internationalism, 2. In general philosophy, the drift from love of freedom towards love of law; and, 3. In religion, the drift from materialistic pantheism towards a highly spiritualized idealism."^x

Even after elaborate critical analyses of Whitman's work after the lapse of centuries, the poet has still been able to evoke nostalgic analyzing of his work by the modern critics and researchers again and again. His work from the first edition to the last creates a chaotic scene for many, partly due to the limited understanding and notions prevalent during those times and partly due to his own lack of transparency regarding his life. Not much of clear cut life of Whitman is known by the contemporaries or his biographers, especially during the making of the *Leaves* and the publishing of the first edition in 1855. Whitman has not spoken much about that time apart from telling that he was working upon his edition. The change in Whitman from a man of prose, busy with journalism and problems of the country, to a man of poetry with a purpose, getting review from the established poet of the time Emerson, with no identifiable event in his life creating a ripple in the society. Since no clarity on this subject matter has been expressed by the writer so he has been the subject of criticism from all quarters- some with accolades but many with brain storming criticism. History of American

Literature mentions the fact that whatever might be said about Whitman's work that stands true for the extended editions, rather than to the original poem out of which all the *Leaves* grew, and which was crudely outlined and partly written in 1847 notebook. *Song of Myself* by no means is Whitman's greatest poem, though probably his most characteristic. It is a true microcosm and one of the most self-revealing poems of English Literature^{xi} This statement in the history itself records that the drift which critics have tried to find in his work needs a closer critical review. This closer look impartial look into his times and environment prevailing points towards the *The Bhagwad Gita* popularly known as 'the Hindu Bible' and its impact on his work throughout his life. A closer look into his initial poem *Song of Myself* splits the beans as all poems are having their seed implanted in *Song*. The thematic drift in Whitman's poetry is superficial as the deeper meaning again and again take the reader to the basic theme of *The Gita* which talks about the general and specific at the same time. The life a human being ought to lead on earth as a harmonious whole. The concept of immortality, rebirth and eternity of *The Gita* do not leave the side of Whitman ever whether articulated into poetry on the surface or expressed as an undercurrent but all poems directly or indirectly point to the understanding the concept of *Gita* by the poet.

Still, in spite of avid criticism from many quarters and his work being revisited by many in the hope of finding answers to unresolved mystery of emergence of *Leaves of Grass*, it can still be said with a sense of surety that Whitman was a man of his times who like a sponge absorbed the currents and the undercurrents of his time . This absorption of ideas and made him a more matured and a sensible person who was looking for a system which was permanent in nature, which benefitted all and which was an example to the others. Somehow the threads of his philosophy expressed in the original *Leaves of Grass* kept on growing upon him and his later versions were a mere elaboration of the seeds sowed in this text. As expressed earlier how this transformation of higher nature came in him is still debatable. Whether he genuinely believed in it or had absorbed the idea from the current of transcendentalism prevalent in those times? This question stays unanswered. But the drift in his themes as the critics have found and mentioned are nothing but a self exploration of views and finally coming to a point where the self exploration of various ideas gave way to the reconfirming of his views and philosophy expressed in the original *Leaves* with his basic theme about his nation where he envisioned the complete supremacy of his nation and people in his work. He tried to pronounce a final word on how America as a nation can achieve greatness beyond measure. Thus, the thematic drift which the critics see in Whitman was a mere reading of the words but the undercurrent had a different story. It speaks of him as a champion of democracy who wished for complete freedom for his nation and supremacy of a kind which was unchallengeable in the true sense.

ENDNOTES:

ⁱ Folsom.Ed. and Price.Kenneth (2005)M. Re-Scripting Walt Whitman, Many Manuscript Doings and Undoings: The Road Towards Leaves of Grass,Blackwell publishing Ltd. p.17

ⁱⁱ Ibid.p.25

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid. p.42

^v Kamath, Dr. M.V. (1976) The United States and India (1776-1976), The Embassy of India, Washington DC ,p.51

^{vi} “These I sing in spring” (1860) ,pp.99-100

^{vii} “States”, published in 1860, later rejected, though most of its original lines are retained in other poems. Holloway’s Leaves,p.22.

^{viii} Horace Trubel,Walt Whitman in Camden, III,p.45

^{ix} With all thy Gifts, (1876), p.335

^x Stovall, Floyd, (1974) Drifts in Whitman’s Poetry, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, p.19

^{xi} Spiller, Robert E., Thorp, Willard, Johnson H., Thomas, Canby, Henry Seidel (ed.) (1960) Literary History of the United States, Walt Whitman.The Macmillan Company. New York, p.477