



The Impact of Bohemianism in Walt Whitman's Poetry

(A Critical Study of *The Song of My Self*)

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to explore the connection between Walt Whitman and Pfaff's members, and their influence on him and thence his compositions. It attempts to propound Whitman's attribution to Bohemianism in regard with his writings. The researcher aims to propose a critical study of "The Song of Myself", one of the prominent poems in the 12 poems collection published in *Leaves of Grass*, which is remarkable for its candid themes and expressions, that orients Bohemianistic attitude. The attempt also emphasizes on the simple style to celebrate the idea of sublimity evident in the poems. Notwithstanding, Walt Whitman was highly productive before the Civil War, in which he composed many distinguished poems. For several years before and after writing his poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*, the poet used to visit a secret bar called Pfaff. This bar is the center of the activities of the Bohemian movement in the middle of the nineteenth century. It was supported by many geniuses, poets, artists, musicians, and revolutionaries such as Henry Clapp. Pfaff witnessed many political and literary ideals; the Bohemians had two weekly publications *Vanity Fair* and *New-York Saturday Press*. In the light of such environment, Whitman found many supporters of his poetic vision, including competitors, critics, and close friends. Furthermore, his bohemian participations during his frequent visit to Pfaff won the acceptance of the American critic and poet Edmund Clarence Stedman, who was later identified as one of the makers of literary taste.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, Bohemianism, sexuality, sensuality, mysticism, transcendentalism.



During 1850s and 1870s the American political scenario underwent many challenges and faced turmoil. Precisely, it was during the civil War, Whitman, like most of his contemporaries, expressed a strong nationalistic response towards the country. He advocated the phenomenon of some republic figures such as Jefferson and Washington (Frank, 2007, p. 405). His early publications have huge influence wherein, he expresses outright rejection of the past and repudiates the transformation from urbanization.

Moreover, the poet's childhood, crucially impacted in creating some political ambience for him. Walt Whitman emerged from a working-class family, a son of "an ardent admirer of Jefferson and Paine" father (Frank, 2007, p. 405). However, his publications during the period do leave an impact of showing a little departure from this political background. Most of his publications between 1850s and 1855 are reactive towards the social and political crisis. Distinctively, the political and social crisis was characterized by identifying discrimination between poor and rich, also the rise in immigration and the widespread of southern slavery contributed to his early compositions. Apparently, all these factors played key roles in poet's advocacy for democracy. He turned apprehensive towards institutional politics. Eventually, he departed himself from the blurring inherited political organizations. In the preface of *Leaves of Grass*, he propounds: "[u]nscrew the Locks from the doors/ Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs" (LG, 50) where he responds against the political and societal crisis with a concern. Consequently, this indifference to political organizations and institutions led the poet to embrace Bohemianism.

Nevertheless, one of the most distinguishing characteristics of American bohemians is their uncertain stance on contemporary societal and political concerns. These bohemians, moreover, while immersing in the groups of artists and courtesans had serious debates about word games, spontaneous performances, and alcohol-lubricated sarcasm. One may notice that Whitman had a little to say about social and political organizations, like other bohemians, he is not concerned for them. Furthermore, Pfaff as a crucial place as a meeting centre for artists and critics challenged the Victorian



prudery, formality of the official discourse leading to the sexual experimentation. In an interview in the Brooklyn Eagle, 1866, July 11, Whitman, narrated his experience of mingling with the bohemians and Henry Clapp:

“I used to go to Pfaff’s nearly every night...after taking a bath and finishing the work of the day. When it began to grow dark, Pfaff would politely invite everybody who happened to be sitting in the cave he had under the sidewalk to some other part of the restaurant. There was a long table extending the length of this cave; and as soon as the Bohemians put in the appearance, Henry Clapp would take a seat at the head of the table. I think there was as good talk around that table as took place anywhere in the world.” (“The Brooklyn Eagle”, 1866)

American bohemians vacillated between sub-evasiveness and conformity, which had reflection not only in their gender perceptions, but also in their political, economic, and socially reformed beliefs. Whitman’s writing is characterized by ambivalence, as he mentioned it to a friend when he said, “Be radical, be radical, be radical- but not too damned radical!” (Price, 2004, p.129). According to Allen Ginsberg (1959), the poet laureate of the Beat generation, proposes “Pfaff’s was a bar he used to go to, a Bohemian hang-out, a downstairs beer hall, sort of like a German *bierstuben*. Bohemian friends used to meet there, probably like a gay gang, plus a newspaper gang, plus a theatrical gang, and the opera singers, and some of the dancers, a Broadway crowd sort of, way down, downtown though. And that was his hang-out” (p.660). Moreover, Whitman was portrayed as a decadent rebel by the Pfaff group but, this was a misrepresentation of him.

According to Karen Karbinier, in her essay “Bridging Brooklyn and Bohemia,” she postulates: “Whitman never felt entirely comfortable with or accepted by the bohemians with whom he kept company at Pfaff’s. He was not considered a radical



by the rest of the group; he was never a socialite; he was not even a “Manhattanese”, though he gave himself this title in several poems” (2019, p.14). Whitman had little discussions on revolutionary means, instead he embraces other means in advocating democracy and equality. However, the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861 completely shattered the Pfaff's bohemian society. Since, some of them joined the Army or other local and national duties, the group disbanded itself. Whitman, who was 42 at that point in time, travelled to Washington and served wounded patients in different hospitals. Apparently, he considered himself as a societal healer with a higher mission during this time.

Whitman saw himself as a server with a larger social mission. However, he used to hang around with the bohemian gang which impacted his creative skills and genius due to the discussions on candid topics. But the spirit of nationalism, mysticism and democratic ideals proclaimed his universal comradeship. His country has affectionately accepted him in it as he also imbibed in his country. On the contrary he rejected traditional rhyme schemes and meter in favor of free poetry. Whitman's direct and forthright attitude surprised many critics, and his work was reprinted several times. It was the pinnacle of the Romantic Era. Emerson, Melville, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman all developed their own distinct American style in the mid-nineteenth century. The American Literary Renaissance was the name given to this period.

Precisely, self-interest is one of the most promoted ideas that bohemian favors. Specifically, ‘self’ is something that Whitman enjoys and discovers. “Song of Myself” is dedicated to self-expansion. He could enclose the entire globe and owns it too. The poem contains transcendental overtone as well. He could incorporate world's experiences in his composition. In his democratic self, he could explore immensity. jealousy, enmity, and war all that has been abandoned by him. The poem, “Song of Myself” is a celebration of the ‘self. Whitman's goal in this poem is to explore and discover himself. The poet ponders as what it means to be human. Humanity entails being free of all ties, shackles from the past, superstitions, and colonial legacies. The



poem starts off with an authoritative and generous tone. It is a vehemence and matter of pride since it is obtained through freedom as America has sprung from the harsh clutches of European Colonialism. According to the poet, the poem is written in favorable spirit of America. Most prominently, the theme, structure, tone, and content are all written in an American style.

Inclusively, Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* (1855) expands his horizons. He has the ability to confine the entire universe, and he owns the entire universe. In addition, the poem has transcendental implications. He has meticulously absorbed universe's experiences in him. In his liberal self, he can ponder vastness: "What I assume you shall assume, For every atom belonging to you as good belongs to me." (lines 1-3). He aspires to be organically one with his body and soul. He feels more guided and wiser since he believes in God's divinity and that whatever God does, is right for everyone. With a strong sense of brotherhood and fraternity, he emphasizes his belief in the Divine-tie between man and man. He affirms: "[a]nd that all the men born are also my brothers, and The women and my sisters and lovers, And that a keelson of the creation is love." (5, lines 1-17). He wants the readers to feel his poetic power thinking that through his songs, he can situate himself among his readers. His poems will encourage his reader to move forward with the idea of freedom. Therefore, this new form of democratic sensibility is more important than democratic politics. The poet's discovery of himself is a common factor. His self means "you" and "I". He writes: "believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,/And you must not be abased to the other (4,lines 1-2). It is directed not by political institutions but by their presence.

The poet is insisting on the idea of plurality even if he uses "I" or "my" or any pronoun that indicates singularity for instance: "[h]ave you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd the earth much?/Have you practis'd so long to learn to read? (2, lines 17-18). This is because he believes that he and the readers are one soul sharing the same same feelings. Subsequently, an idea of relativity is emphasized by poet. He, moreover, explores the notion of empathy. He cannot imagine isolating himself from others because he invokes love of comrades. His poems proposes an



invocation of love and association: “make divine magnetic lands,/with the love of comrades, I With the life long love of comrades”(For You O Democracy, lines 3-5. However, seeking readers attention a little on diversion and emphasizing on Bohemian attitude which is quite crucial in Whitman’s composition. Bohemianism was characterized by sociability and promoted the same. Bohemians love proposed pious social relationships. Bohemian literature is characterized by depicting the lives of several people who are practicing many professions. Among them are the writers, the poor, the rich and the wanderers. And that feature in Bohemianism was evident in these songs.

Consequently, Whitman discusses his idea of welcoming all individuals he meets while travelling in sections 12 to 19. His liberal ideology is evident in uninterrupted acceptance. He’s all set to: “[i] am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing;” (3, line 23). He takes in the lives of people from all walks of life of United States. He also discusses grass’ endless and all-encompassing growth. For instance, grass grows anywhere there is land. The grass is a metaphor of limitless spirituality that lasts forever. Even in water, it thrives. As a result, in Whitman’s mind, grass is a symbol of perpetual and limitless nature. He exemplifies his egalitarian viewpoint through the select text. He does not only appreciate the victorious, but also encourage the victims. He is adamant about not abandoning anyone because that is not, he perceives. He stands for all and has a profound kinship with all in his wider liberal approach, emphasizing the oneness of all. Nussabaum propounds that Whitman, in this poem, seems to be “a barrier of full equality and mutual respect of all criticisms” (2007, p.127). He describes himself as a seeker of truth in songs 40 to 43. He ponders upon the mysteries of life and love. He provides assurance to the world’s clerics throughout that he believes in the greatest of faiths. He also believes in and trusts society’s goodness. He believes in humanity and oneness. There is no separation between a person’s innate and intrinsic self. It keeps an inclusive attitude towards life and world.

F.O Matthieson argues that Whitman is “the central figure of our literature affirming the democratic faith” (1998, p.90). And George Kateb described Whitman as “perhaps



the greatest philosopher of the culture of democracy” (1992, p. 24). Whitman is brimming with democracy to celebrate fullest. Every citizen of the United States should participate in the celebration of ordinary life. America’s history may be tragic and pitiful. Humanity has suffered greatly as a result of racism, indignities, and inequality, but now is the time for everyone to focus on building their present so that they can move forward to construct their future. Apparently, supporting these ideals of democracy, he utilizes the image of a trapper marrying a “red girl”. He talks about the regular people of America, such as boatmen, clam-diggers, and fugitive slaves. However, every American, man or woman, must work hard for their self’s freedom. Every American should strive to live in a loving environment. Whitman emphasizes on the concept of self, as well as self’s relationship with others. He uses the term “I” to referring to a greater cosmic and universal “we” as well as himself. He embraces equality and democracy in his own mysterious manner. He is fortunate to possess a democratic mindset as the select text orients. He has such a strong feeling of equality that he includes “hounded” slaves, martyrs, top class people, and even persons from the lowest social strata.

The poet shows the breadth of his lyrical realm in sections 33 to 39. Whatever he is wearing, including his ties and ballasts, is a foot with his enormous vision. He understands the anguish of the martyrs, sailors, and “hounded slaves” who gave their life. He also recounts the events of the American Civil War and the Texas Revolutionary War. He abruptly awakens from a dream in section 38 and begins talking to himself as a third person. He says: “[w]herever he goes men and women accept and desire him,/They desire he should like them, touch them, speak to them, stay with them.” (39, lines 6-7)

He also sounds a little pompous in sections 21-24 of the select text. He will not accept anything else than democratic thought, and anything that stands in his way is nothing more than a roadblock. He propounds: “[i] speak the pass-word primeval,/I give the sign of democracy,/ By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.” (24, lines 10-11). He concludes in sections 25-29



that he has spoken too much and that now is the time to listen: “[a]ll I’m going to do now is listen” (25, line 2) He shares his expressions with his people by observing and speaking: “What about these veiled expressions?” (29, line 6).

Notwithstanding, the fact that his voice paves a path towards something he can’t see with his eyes. His speech is the vision but can’t quantify it because speech keeps him provoked indefinitely. His conscious decision is to just listen to for time being. Every American may access eternity since, it is within his or her reach. Whitman starts with “[i]” and ends with “you,” or “[i]” becomes “We” in Whitman’s words. This song is a tribute to Americans considering them as one - unity. As a factual interpretation the poem takes a metaphysical approach as the human-nature bond. The poet tried to portray a kind of democratic ambience which is completely away from political organizations, trying to move away from portraying political life and its details, directing the reader towards liberal spiritual milieu.

Although the song is dedicated to America as a whole, it does have a universal appeal in it. Thus, this universal approach relates with the idea of sublimity in it. Therefore, poem takes a metaphysical approach to the human-nature bond. Precisely, the poet promotes equality, nature, and goodness in part one. Natural surroundings make the poet feel at peace. He has a great sense of connection to the natural world. He sees divinity in the tiniest strand of grass. Nature allows him to connect with his soul. “form’d from this soil, this air, Born here of parents born here from parents the same...” (1, line 7). Nature is instrumental in bringing its Godliness which celebrates peace. This idea is supremely celebrated by Whitman.

In this poem, he is 37 years old and in excellent physical condition. He is made out of the same soil as his parents. He represents truth that can be discovered in natural things in sections 30-32. The stars are the same size as a single blade of grass. They have seen the stars travel through the sky. However, after exhaustion and a frantic travel, it is occasionally necessary to rest. As if he were a saint, the poet uses a sublime and calm language, the language of the seer, a far sighted seer. He often



praises natural objects, such as animals, for their tranquilly. Animals know how to live in harmony with one another. Because of their quiet and tranquil nature, he wishes to change himself into another being to live with animals. They are self-satisfied and self-sufficient. They have no sense of competition with one another. Whitman's bohemian idealism connects man to nonhuman to form a kind of sympathy which is more naturalistic and may be adapted soon into empathy. That nature forgives human offenses such as murder and adultery. And people accept their sins without the issuance of earthly punishments. Bennett proposes that the reader witnesses "Whitman's shift from Sympathy as moral sentiment to a more naturalistic" (2016, p. 612).

Moreover, it seems that Whitman is a mystic poet who deals with the concept of "oneness of all". In this reality, he perceives no division, divergence, or duality. His intellect, body, and soul are all intertwined with nature's divine soul. He encourages his readers to appreciate the infinite space and time. No one can accompany one in his journey. To find his inner self, everyone must travel on his destined route. He attempts to coach his readers and wants to encourage them to savor every moment of their journey because time must be paced together.

In sections 6 and 7, he attempts retrospective behaviour: "What is the grass?" (6, line 1), through the eyes of a child. He was stumped as how to respond to the child. He doesn't know anything more than a child does. Moreover, the poet highlights the aspects of democracy, brotherhood, and fraternity by reinforcing the emblem of grass. He emphasizes that everything will continue to flourish if you believe in the eternal emblem of grass. Death is merely a link between life and new life. Death is not the end of life; rather, it is a new beginning. Even death has a chance to be called as fortunate. It is as fortunate to die as it is to be born, because the birth of the new self is contingent on the death of the preceding self. Whitman expresses a metaphysical reflection in section 20 of his poem. He is interested in mysticism. He ponders esoteric topics such as: "[w]hat is a man anyway? What exactly am I? What exactly are you?" (line 3). He continues by answering himself, saying that he sees himself in



everyone: “[i] know I am solid and sound.” (line 8). The poet sees God in everything in sections 48 - 52. He has no fear of death because he knows that it will provide him with relaxation and a long slumber. He will finally welcome death after all of the tension of temporary world. It will be a re-awakening of sorts. “Happiness” is the word. He's keen to keep learning new things and meeting new people: “[i]t is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness.” (50, line 10)

Whitman's “Song of Myself” exemplifies his transcendental state of mind. Whitman's poem invites a metaphysical discussion. He continues by answering himself, saying that he sees himself in everyone: “none more and not one a barley corn less.” He thinks the same way about himself and his people. He is one of them. He considers himself a body and soul poet. He notices similar characteristics in his people. He bears both the delights of paradise and the pangs and anguish of hell within himself. As a matter of fact, he provides his readers with a road map. Moreover, he dwells on the idea that the soul is pious, unpolluted, pure, chaste, and devoid of any malignancy. All human beings are blessed with soul. It is constantly happy and does not concentrate on “unfortunate situations.” In order to attain happiness and tranquilly, the poet aspires to disclose his soul. Whatever is present is important to everyone. With dancing, laughing, singing, hugging, and loving, he is content with his body. He says: “As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night.” (3, line 24) Even in the tiniest grain of grass, he sees the heavenly visage. He “loafs” on the grass and sees the significance of even a small particle of grass in terms of transmission. The poet speaks of the human soul's eternal journey, which is inextricably linked to nature. In life's journey, one must liberate himself completely to celebrate the idea of eternal joy.

Section 5 of the select text emphasizes the relationship between “I,” “You,” and “Myself” by using the reflexive pronoun “myself.” The poet employs language in a very sensual approach in a very surreal tone. For instance he says: “[I]oafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your/ Throat,/Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not



custom or lecture, not even the best,/ Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.” (4, lines 3-5) The poet merely wants to hear “hummed voice,” not words, symphony, music, or rhyme. The poet highlights the oneness of mind, body, and spirit with the sensual description. Whitman’s sensuality is portrayed through an intimate relationship of his mind and body. In the poem, he uses a lot of sensual imagery. At times, his vocabulary appears to be excessively bizarre. He also depicts intimate moments with his partner with bizarre and sensual pictures. The poet conjures up the picture of the twenty-nine bather, a female observer who longs to leave her proper spot and join the twenty-eight youthful bathers on the beach. He insists on his proposal, that one must experience a sense of belonging to the entire world, whether by living in it or being removed from it, but not by intervening and interfering in it. The woman’s voice, hidden behind her house’s blinds, that appears to be extremely youthful.

However, Whitman’s poetry is recognized for its sexual candor. But in this new society, he also wants women to be together. They are, he believes, connected with men. By depicting the males washing and becoming one on the pure unison of body and soul, the poet is undoubtedly utilizing highly sensuous language. He employs bizarre notions, and his poetry goes out to the structure, creating sensual imagery in the process. He also looks for himself through sexual stimulation. In song 28, the poet says: “you villain touch! What are you doing? My breath is tight in its throat,” (line 21). He believes that being nude equals being honest. He notices simplicity in nature everywhere he goes. Everything is natural and unaltered. “[i]’ll go to the wooded bank and strip down to my underwear.” (28, line 4). He continues to enjoy his ‘self’- and soul’s-celebration. He also expresses the body’s and soul’s miracles. This combination of soul and body brings joy to the soul as well.

Whitman’s language was highly reflected as it seems it is greatly influenced by the brutal realities of contemporary times- slavery, industrialization and westward expansion. In the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, he declared his ambition and aspiration



to be the “American Bard”. As Gates (1987) propounds in her article, “Forging and American Poetry From Speech Rhythms”, Whitman’s new poetic style was a “larger theme of American democracy and westward expansion, with American principles expanding into the wilderness in natural forms that never exactly duplicate the settlers’ previous culture, but rather incorporate and grow out from there” (p.503). Moreover in terms of formation, in his poems, there is no standard verse, no stanza pattern. His style appears to be journalistic and encyclopedic. The use of repetition and variation in rhythm stimulate his form of writing creating a dialogue form between the narrator and reader.

His poetry repudiates traditional form and in the words of Gomez in “Whitman’s America and “Song of Myself”, Whitman’s poetry “recreates a multi-cultural, varied, and often conflicted nation into a unified whole.” (1991. P. 24) His rejection of traditional form and meter and the inventive use of language create a pivotal moment which reflects a desire for unification of all- a pivotal moment of equality and egalitarianism in American history. Ginsberg’s adoration for Whitman is beautifully reflected in his poem, “A Supermarket in California”, published in *Howl* collection in 1956, as a tribute to Whitman, while getting in a supermarket and asking himself questions: “What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down the street under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the full moon.” (Ginsberg, 1956, p.660)

One of the most remarkable observations in his compositions is the influence of Bohemianism on Whitman’s poetry. He linked democracy in ideas to the refusal to restrict meter and rhyme. Because he believes that honest poetry cannot be restricted to an arbitrary scale, such as a poetic scale restricted to meter and rhyme. Therefore, he scorns the rules of the poetic scale because it impedes free and independent expression. Besides rejecting the restriction of meter and rhythm, Whitman also rejects the limitation of artificial diction in a poem. The poet cannot be identified as liberal one if he does not use the local dialect in his works to transcend the borders of the nation and give his poetry the idea of cosmopolitanism. In “Song of My- self,”



Whitman praises “words simple as grass, uncomb’d head, laughter, naivete, / Slow-stepping feet, common features, common modes and emanations” (39, lines 8-9). Whitman identifies the mode of poetic speech that employs a poor registration of diction and a syntax than avoid hierarchal construction like subordinate clause. Furthermore, poetry for Whitman should enact reality and exist the tongue of the people; also take a departure from poet: “swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome What I tell I tell for precisely what it is What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me” (LG, Preface, p.14). Whitman defends the plain style of expressing ideas through poems to embody equality: “The plain style embodies the principle of equality and transparency that are emphatically linked to the ideals of modern democracy” (Redding, p. 672).

Thus, one may look at the compositions of Whitman and probably others to not only appreciate the imaginary ideas but also to achieve sublimity and celebrate it through and through.

Conclusion

“Song of Myself” is embedded with American ideals- democracy, nationalism, freedom and equality because the poet was disillusioned with the contemporary failure of the Americans to sustain these ideals. It is dominated by sexual and sensual metaphors, homoerotic expressions which can be found anywhere. After taking a closer look of all songs, one can observe that Whitman’s language, parts of speech, syntax, sexual metaphors, symbols of grass and images of men and women work as the organs of the body to create a unified whole. His rejection of the traditional themes and form with his eloquence of speech and potency of words, he is able to create a grand magnitude of spiritualism as a great potential of the American society. His democratic ideals are based on sexual equality between men and women.



Whitman is a bohemian in his unconventional language, disordered structure, in his spiritual pursuits, transcendental journey towards happiness, and mystical vision.

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