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The Dynamics of Language in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*

Mr. Suhail Mohd Baba
Department of English
School of Social Sciences & Languages
Lovely Professional University
Phagwara-144411, Punjab, India

Dr. P. Durga Rao
Associate Professor in Sociology
School of Social Sciences & Languages
Lovely Professional University
Phagwara-144411, Punjab, India
E-mail: drpdurga@gmail.com

Abstract

Walt Whitman was a prominent American writer, journalist, and essayist, widely acclaimed for his collection of poems, titled Leaves of Grass, which he continued to revise, expand, reorganize, rewrite, and edit until his death. Written in free verse and after the Romantic tradition, the lyrics of Leaves of Grass demonstrate Whitman's bold perception of American life and his philosophy of celebrating the human body and the material world. Described as an American epic, the compositions in the compendium deviated from the earlier use of an elevated hero, and instead tried to assume the identity of the common people. The present paper aims at a point-by-point consideration of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass for understanding the times of the poet and the dialectics of his metaphors. As Whitman is a celebrated American poet and is being read the world over in American Literature, so it is important to know about him and his compositions in depth.

Keywords: lyrics; soul; humanity; symbolism; etymological

Walt Whitman was born on May 31, 1819 in West Hills, Town of Huntington, Long Island, in New York to parents with interests in Quaker thought. As the second of the nine children of the Democratic family, Whitman finished his formal schooling at eleven and started looking for work to support his family. Starting as an office boy for two lawyers, Whitman got apprenticed at the printing press of a weekly newspaper - the *Patriot*, where he learnt about the printing press



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and typesetting. Here, he may have written occasional filler material for some issues. At the age of fourteen, he could extend his insight into composing by working under Patriot's foreman editorial manager, William Hartshorne.

From the beginning, Whitman felt that the quality of the country lay not in the pioneers but rather in the persevering energetic nationals. The Civil War is supposed to have the biggest effect on Whitman's composition.

Published on July 4, 1855, the first release of *Leaves of Grass* consisting of twelve poems received acclaim from Ralph Waldo Emerson. This 95 page edition subsequently evolved to the 'death bed edition' (1892) which consisted of 400 poems and was intended by Whitman to supersede all earlier versions.

Composing Style of Walt Whitman

Whitman characterized his composition as "outdoors" verse, since it transgressed the typical limits of tradition and convention. Whitman breaks the limits of graceful shape as he utilizes surprising pictures and images in his verse. He is straightforward in expounding on death and sexuality including prostitution. He trusted that there was a harmonious connection between the artist and the society, because of which his works are considered to be a mirror to the America of his times.

Walt Whitman was an ardent pursuer of word references, which he understood were the manure pile of all English-dialect writing. It was where every one of the components of writing were protected, and additionally the place out of which all future writing would develop. The country's unwritten sonnets lay torpid in that monstrous stack of words. Whitman's own particular ballad, "This Compost," played on the etymological importance of "compost" with "structure". The denotative significance of both of these words is "to place or set together". To make is to assemble



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in another shape. To compost is to dismantle what was assembled, and to separate an old shape with the goal that it would supply the parts for another frame (Folsom 15).

Whitman was living amid a period when it was conceivable to watch the development and extension of the American dialect, and to see the expanding separation amongst it and its British source (Allen 53). Whitman was most comfortable with the 1847 release of Webster's Dictionary. He relied upon this one as he built up his ideas of dialect and as he composed the principal lyrics of *Leaves of Grass*. It is in this form of the lexicon that we most obviously discover the meanings of words that would progress toward becoming keys for Whitman's idyllic ventures (Folsom 14).

Leaves of Grass: Language Experiment by Walt Whitman

It is a verse accumulation by the American Poet Walt Whitman distributed in 1855. Whitman spent the vast majority of his expert life composing and re-stating "Leaves Of Grass" amending it numerous circumstances until his death. The lyrics of *Leaves of Grass* are approximately associated, each demonstrating Whitman presentation of his rationality of life and humanity. The established verse was significantly more in light of symbolism, moral story and contemplation on religious and otherworldly, *Leaves of Grass* lifted up the body and the material world.

One region of especially fruitful experimentation, in the 1855 and 1856 versions of *Leaves of Grass*, is beautiful style. Whitman makes a rich blend of words acquired or adjusted from remote dialects, idioms, Americanisms, land put names, and slang articulations. Some of Whitman's trademark outside borrowings in the 1855 "Melody of Myself" incorporate omnibus, promenaders, experient, savans, embouchures, vivas, venerealee, amies, foofoos, as a group, kosmos, eleves, promulges, accoucheur, and debouch. Indeed, even this concise rundown recommends a scope of expressive decisions, from the usually acknowledged obtaining to the astonishing adjustment or instituting.



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Whitman's intriguing and well-known words exist close by a large group of standard English words utilized as a part of linguistically amazing ways. In this manner the procedures of word arrangement in the English dialect turn into an asset for Whitman's tests. Specifically, he utilizes the procedures of suffixation, change, and intensifying in amazing ways. He makes new words by joining the - ee and - er postfixes to lexically settled words, by changing over verbs into things, and by combining mixes from impermanent, specially appointed relations. The aftereffect of these linguistic examinations is a dynamic, verbal style in which operators and exercises mix.

The most evident elaborate quality of Whitman's verse is the long queue, written in free verse. Whitman deserts, totally, the metrical convention of accentual syllabic verse and grasps rather the prosody of the English Bible. The most essential procedures in Whitman's prosody are syntactic parallelism, redundancy, and inventorying. These expressive developments consolidate to make a broad, obscure, and regularly incantatory impact.

Syntactic parallelism has appropriately been viewed as the essential procedure of Hebrew verse, and Whitman's inventive free verse owes a major obligation to the rhythms of the Bible. That being stated, the nature of the artist's obligation stays a long way from clear.

Whitman's style features the persistent irregularity of stanza length. In this respect, Whitman's practice with stanzas parallels his treatment of the poetic line. The stanzas tend to form units of expression, elaborating on a figure or theme that is announced in the first line of the stanza. The length of the stanza is thus a function of the poet's expressive thought, not a formal requirement. The stanzas vary from one line to dozens of lines, and at these two extremes the word "stanza" hardly seems descriptive. Between the two ends of the spectrum, however, Whitman displays great artistry in the play of stanza form.

In the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman begins to show his concern for larger units of poetic form. Always conscious of the printed format of the poems, Whitman numbers stanzas in



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the 1860 edition, and in the 1867 edition he first uses section numbers (as well as stanza numbers) in the long poems. By 1881, in the sixth edition, he deletes stanza numbers but preserves the section numbers. The fifty-two sections of "Song of Myself" are thus a post war revision of the poem.

A second and perhaps more important concern also appears in 1860: Whitman begins to organize poems into special groups he calls "clusters," and this technique of arranging poems persists through the remaining editions of *Leaves*. Although many poems occupy a rather stable position in a given cluster, Whitman goes through a long, complicated process of arranging and rearranging the poems into thematic, figural, or topical clusters. The titles and contents of a particular cluster go through a constant process of experimentation, and in many cases the cluster disappears altogether, its contents dispersed to form some other arrangement. Although Whitman claimed that the cluster arrangements of the 1881 edition are definitive, the annexes that appear after 1881- "Sands at Seventy" and "Good-Bye my Fancy"- suggest the same method of organization and the same restless spirit of experimentation. Indeed, in the preface to the second annex (written in 1891) Whitman calls it "this little cluster, and conclusion of my preceding clusters" (Whitman 537), as if he recognizes a formal similarity between the patterns of the definitive edition and those of the two later additions.

The idea that there is stylistic and thematic continuity between the poems of 1855 - 1865 and those of Whitman's last twenty-seven years has remained a minority view throughout the twentieth century. The general tendency of criticism has been to tell a tragic story of decline and failure, seeing the three post-war editions of *Leaves of Grass*, the *Deathbed* edition of 1891-1892, and the voluminous prose of *Democratic Vistas*, *Specimen Days*, and *Prose Works* 1892 as somehow inescapably tinged by Whitman's life of illness, depression, and artistic isolation. The problem with the tragic narrative is its implied value judgment concerning Whitman's post-war style, for there is certainly a palpable change in the style. For instance, Whitman employs archaic forms of direct address much more frequently in the post-war poems than in the first three editions of



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Leaves: "thou" and "thee" abound in such poems as "Proud Music of the Storm" (1869), "Passage to India" (1871), "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood" (1872), "The Mystic Trumpeter" (1872), and "To a Locomotive in Winter" (1876). Perhaps the only poem to escape censure in this regard is "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865), and its date troubles both the neatness of the stylistic paradigm and the negative evaluation of archaisms themselves. The new style of address parallels, in most cases, Whitman's focus on the soul's "[p]assage to more than India" ("Passage to India," section 9). He often addresses abstract, spiritualized entities, such as democratic America or an idealized past, as if his poems were an attempt to call them into being.

A stylistic corollary to this form of address is the withdrawal of the poet from the physical, material world he describes so luxuriantly in the 1855 - 1865 poems. In "Proud Music of the Storm," for instance, the speaker is less an active participant or dynamic observer, more a passive receiver of sonorous, otherworldly intimations. A fine dramatic monologue like "Prayer of Columbus" (1874) dwells more on the abstract, general memories and meditations of the speaker than on the physical, concrete situation itself.

The final stylistic change in the post-war poetry is the increased number of short lyrics. It should be noted, however, that from the very beginning of his career Whitman writes both long and short poems, and it could be argued that a masterpiece like "Song of Myself" is, in some ways, more aptly described as a sequence of short poems than as one single poem. The cluster arrangements of the 1860 edition feature many short lyrics, and the texture of *Leaves of Grass* from 1860 to 1892 owes a great deal to the mixture of long poems with clusters of short lyrics. The poems of Whitman's last decade tend to run to fewer than twenty lines, and they often run to fewer than ten lines. Because of this reduction in length, Whitman engages in significantly less artistic manipulation of stanza forms. Finally, the subjects in the last decade tend to create an effect of occasional verse, whether the occasion is public or private. Although these facts suggest a waning



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of poetic power, it is well to note that the long line remains a prominent feature in the late poems, as do the characteristic techniques of Whitman's unconventional prosody.

Whitman's innovative experiments with language extend beyond the rather permeable boundary separating poetry from prose. In this regard, Whitman's prose style is at its best, for many readers, when it most nearly approximates his poetic style. Thus the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* employs the very same techniques that mark Whitman's free verse, and the poet cannibalized the Preface for poems in the 1856 edition, especially "By Blue Ontario's Shore." The 1856 "Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson" and the unpublished pamphlet "The Eighteenth Presidency!" resemble the 1855 Preface in style and technique, and in all three texts the effect is that of language threatening to expand beyond the borders of sentence and paragraph. Some readers have described this effect as the presence or voice of the speaker resisting the confines of written language.

Conclusion

Leaves of Grass is an accumulation of verse composed over Walt Whitman's whole lifetime sorted out specifically into segments. Whitman modified and added to the book for the duration of his life, the last release being distributed just months previously his passing in 1891. He was deliberate in not sorting out the book in any sequential way. Rather, he was worried about the excursion of the verse. He wanted that the pursuer would see a self-frame through the words and subjects of the book.



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