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Growth and Development of Individualism and Universalism in Selected Poems of Walt Whitman (Pp. 85-102)

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Abstract

Whitman's poetry is a rich subject for psychoanalytic interpretation and this has always had a unique appeal to literary critics as well as research scholars. This study is a critical and psychoanalytical study on a few selected poems of Whitman. The poems have been selected from the 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass that featured Whitman's most famous poem Song of Myself which is the main poem used throughout. Other poems were selected as a support to identify Whitman's belief that every individual is born with a unique identity and the individual strives continuously to realize this individuality that is hidden in the various challenges of life, both the darker and the lighter aspects of life. A critical analysis together with the psychoanalytical approach has been used to establish Whitman's profound interest in the exploration of the growth and development of the 'child or individual's' journey through chaotic conditions in the natural world. This study has thus, helped the author to comprehend the fact that this unquenchable desire for an individual's growth and development is not epiphanic, but is the final act of the emergence of the 'child or individual' into a full-fledged 'poet' after facing the various challenges of life.

Keywords: Intuitive wisdom; Individual or individualism; Surrealism; Transcendentalism; Whitman/Whitmanite child.

Introduction:

Individuality has been a prevalent theme in every type of literature for quite some time. Whether it is a character discovering his/or her individuality or the author expressing his/her views, literature is full of distinctness. The term individuality changes with each person it meets. For Emerson (1980), it meant “Trust Thyself” which motivates a person to rely on his conscience—to guide him in the right direction. We also see that Melville’s (1980) views on individualism have found an echo in Whitman’s works. Emerson and his contemporaries had made positive affirmations about spiritual values implicit in American individualism. These had been negated by Hawthorne and Melville, (1980) who advocated a shallow and unrealistic optimism. However, with Whitman there was a return to the positive, but with a keener awareness of what was lacking in the individualist ideal and what was needed for its consummation. These different perspectives of individualism are what make the dynamic word so great. Walt Whitman takes his new found ideas and Quaker background and introduced American literature to a totally different meaning of individuality and universality in his poems. He praises the spirit of innovation, individuality and progress of the Americans that always remained unchanged despite the challenges the country faced. Whitman, the father of free verse, embodies these values in his life and works, and he was a man who truly reshaped literature. His ambition was to articulate his ambitions uncompromisingly in literary or poetic form. In this paper, the author attempts to discuss Whitman’s emotional, moral, intellectual and aesthetic personality through his search for his ‘own identity’ and his expression of the ‘growth and development of individualism and universalism’ in a few selected poems.

Materials and Methods:

Primary and secondary sources from American Studies and Research Center, Hyderabad, India (ASRC) were used. All the poems under discussion have been taken from “An Anthology of American Literature of the Nineteenth Century”. Additionally, different web-

paged sources were also accessed and used. The methods used were a close, critical reading of Whitman's poems selected for the study and the psychoanalytical approach which helped acquire an in-depth and profound understanding of the significance of his poems. Such a critical approach based on Miller (1970) has helped the author identify Whitman's views about the development of individualism and universalism in his poetry.

Discussion:

Intellectual Development of the Adolescent:

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) considered by many to be the greatest of all American poets, celebrated the freedom and dignity of the individual and sang praises of democracy and the brotherhood of man. Whitman's poetry is filled with the ideas of the development of individualism and universalism as an integral phase of human life. Like all poets, he presents 'man' as curious, inquiring, and investigating creature. This projection of "curiosity" of the child prepares him for his development. Man's own nature, his physical growth and constitution, his mental and emotional development, his relationship with self and others, have absorbed the attention and energy of men from the beginning of history as they strove to know and understand themselves. In considering the nature of himself as a developing person, man looked on and treated the child as a "little man", a homunculus. Adults required of the young, the attitude, the emotional responses, a sense of responsibility and self direction of a mature person, indeed sometimes asked of the child more self-control than they themselves exercised.

In poetry, the perspective is that, an individual's progress through life is marked by many varied and complex changes. Thus a psychological study of Whitman's poems deals with the mental growth or the development of behaviour pattern up to adolescence, the transitional phase marking the entrance of the individual into adult society (Miller, 1968). The pre-adolescent is intensely interested in the world about him. The child at this stage enjoys pooling information; he is

intrigued with the extent of the external world, and as a result a vast field of information is open to him. Growth in learning in pre-adolescence signifies growth in accumulated ideas and with his intellectual development now moving at a fast rate, he is able to perceive relationships and understand the world better.

From the days of the Pilgrim Fathers to the present day, the image of the child has shifted from that of an insignificant being to an adult in all but stature, through various modifications to that of being in his own right, with his unique place in society. It has always been true from the beginning of life that every child enters into a unique social setting and cultural environment since the child receives at the time of his birth an identity and this identity is his 'soul'. Hence, he immediately becomes an active participant within that setting. Tracing this development about the child and his nature is the most interesting pursuit of Whitman.

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 for the day or a
certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.
(There Was A child Went Forth, lines 1—4)

The Dilemma of the Adolescent:

The growing adolescent finds himself caught between two worlds, the world of childhood and the world of adulthood. Not firmly established in these two classes, the child frequently vacillates between behaviours appropriate to a younger stage and those expected of him as a more mature adult. Thus the growing adolescent finds himself confronted by situations in direct opposition to a value system he is striving for and expected to make his own.

The poems of Whitman, including the Leaves of Grass, (1855) narrate adolescent experiences. For the young person growing through adolescence, these contradictory influences give rise to problems and difficulties. The poems portray the adolescent period as a state of continuous “storm and stress”, and certainly it is a critical period in an individual’s psychological development. It is during this stage that he needs to arrive at a definition of ‘himself to himself’, to acquire what Erikson (1963) refers to as the critical work of this period, a sense of identity to answer the question satisfactorily for himself, “Who am I”, and “What am I?”. Seeking and finding an answer to the question of identity is one of the major accomplishments of adolescence. Failure to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion causes the youth to enter adulthood with a self concept still hazy and poorly shaped. This means that adolescence is a life stage where romanticism and idealism are confusingly mixed. In Section 6 of Song of Myself we notice the confusion as follows:

A child said *What is the Grass?* Fetching it to me
with full hands,

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it
is any more than he,

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of
hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord
(Lines 99—102)

And again in Section 20:

What is a man anyhow? What am I? What are you?
(line 391)

The poems attempt to show that romantic thought is revitalistic and pluralistic. It welcomes novelty, originality and variety and rejects absolute values, formal classification and exclusive judgments. A romantic artist like Whitman or Wordsworth strive not to imitate an

ideal perfection of form which has always existed, but to originate one which has never existed before and which will uniquely express what he alone feels and knows. This enables him to recognize the character of the creative idea within him and by lifting it out of time to create an eternal archetype.

Intuition of the Child:

As a universal, individual and romantic poet, Walt Whitman affirms a new exalted view of the child. He elevates the child to the status of a teacher since the child possesses an intuitive wisdom that often eludes most grownups. Whitman is aware of this capacity and in Song of the Banner at Daybreak reveals how it is the child who brings the poet to his senses. "My hearing and tongue are come to me, (a little child taught me)". (1.124, p.290)

Another instance is found in "A Child's Amaze"

"Silent and amazed, even when a little boy,
I remembered I heard the preacher every Sunday put
God in his statements,
As contending against some being as influence."
(p.275)

In the above lines, the child senses the absurdity in the preacher's statements of a dualistic universe. This in-depth understanding of the child is portrayed in A Child's Amaze, which is the key to all other poems. Universal unity is the truth that the poet endeavors to convey to his less clear-sighted men. Children seem to understand this truth intuitively. They possess intuitive wisdom and are able to teach adults certain significant truths –an intuitive grasp of the unity in the universe. This is the key insight which the poet strives to express and an intuitive grasp of this insight raises the position of the child to that of a potential poet. Wordsworth's saying that "the child is the father of man", is illustrated by Whitman in the poem quoted above.

Revelation of Universalism:

Universalism in children is revealed in their intuition. This intuitive perspective of the universal unity in a child has to confront the challenge of life's terrors and pains. If, after experiencing these as well as the joys and beauties of life, the child is able to emerge into an even deeper sense of the universe as a uniting force, then his chances of becoming a poet are increased. But even beyond this, the darker experiences would have the power of loosening his tongue. The individual who profoundly experiences the universe's unity and is able to articulate this experience becomes a poet. During this period of realization we notice that 'Nature' exerts a primary and major influence on the childhood of a maturing poet. To Whitman, nature is divine and an 'emblem of God' since the universe is not dead matter, but full of life and meaning. The lessons of nature are not just passively received but felt and experienced. They must be actively worked upon by the young mind, for it is a dual process of mental passivity and activity that enables the future poet to recognize unity in the universe and his poetic mission. This poetic epiphany appears only after the darker as well as the lighter shades of life have been experienced. Thus, in tracing the poetic growth and individualism in the child, Whitman was able to create Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking. This poem was first published under the title "A Child's Reminiscence" (1859), was later called "A Word out of the Sea" (1860), and the present, highly symbolic title was given it in 1871. The present title Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking suggests "a word from the sea," and that word is death, which is the second phase in the process of birth- death-rebirth. Here we find the child has set out on a search of the mysteries of life and death. The child is the "chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter", who not only uses all his experiences but goes beyond them. The following lines from the poem quoted above exemplifies Whitman's stand that a child possesses intuitive wisdom that enables him to grow and establish his own identity.

A word then, (for I will conquer it,)

The word final, superior to all.
Subtle, sent up—what is it? --I listen;
Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you
sea-waves?
Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands? . . .
(Lines 160—64)

Roles of the Poetic “I”:

A close reading of his poetry demonstrates and reflects the various roles the poetic “I” assumes in his journey from darkness to light. Song of Myself is about everyone who reads it. The “me” that is a book is also a human held like a child in the reader’s hands. Whitman’s “I” is both masculine and feminine, adult and child, actor and receiver. But, sometimes we notice that Whitman’s critics have confused the concept of ‘self’ with ‘egotism’, but this is not true. Whitman’s ‘I’ is universal, a part of the Divine and, therefore, not egotistic. The progression to serene old age does not follow a straight path, nor does compensation through artistic expression assuage the poet’s longing for human relationships. The spiritual sensibilities of the poet are depicted with the wondering freshness of a child. Just as the child exults in the details of the commonplace, Whitman also develops a microscopic vision in the way he glorifies the common things in nature that are normally not noticed by most of the adults. This can be found in Section 2 of Song of Myself:

The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves and of the
shore and dark-color’d
sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,
The sound of the belch’d words of my voice loos’d to
the eddies of the
wind, (line 24-25)

The lines portray the exuberance of the poet in his child like attitude towards nature. He expresses the joy he feels through his senses. He is enthralled by the ecstasy of his physical sensations. He can enjoy each of the five senses—tasting, hearing, smelling, touching, and seeing—and even more—the process of breathing, the beating of his heart, and “the feeling of health.” He invites the reader to “stop this day and night” with him in order to discover “the origin of all poems” (line 36, Section 2). Further, Whitman conceives the self as a spiritual entity that is relatively permanent as opposed to the changing flux of ideas and experiences which constitute its conscious life. This poem is a really long one wherein he meanders from the micro to the macro, from atom to the whole earth. He uses three important themes: the idea of the self, the identification of the self with other selves, and the poet’s relationship with the elements of nature and the universe. To Whitman, the self is both individual and universal. While wishing to maintain the identity of his individual self, he has a profound desire to merge his self with the universal self—in other words, the mystical union of the poet with God, the ‘Absolute Self’—an echo of Emerson’s view. However, at times, despite his sincere longing, he is tempted to allow himself to be submerged by other individual selves, but he still wishes to maintain his own basic individuality.

In Section 17 of the same poem, Whitman refers to the universality of the poet—his thoughts are “the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands”. Sections 18 and 19 also salute all members of humanity. The primary aim of these sections is to expose the nature of the poet’s journey through life and the spiritual knowledge that he wishes to acquire. Whitman’s Song of Myself is a portrayal of the poet’s belief that it is possible to achieve communion with God through contemplation and love, without the help of human reason. Thus, this communion with God is something achieved through intuition, and this leads to his own awakening to his own universality. This intuition, to Whitman is based on intuitional philosophy which he calls “Transcendentalism”. This is a word that has varied meanings, but for Whitman it meant to transcend or go beyond ordinary experiences of

life. Human reason can deal with natural phenomena, but there is a world beyond phenomena and that world can be reached through faith and intuition alone.

The Journey of the 'Child' into a 'Poet':

The creative process of the poet as Whitman describes in the Preface of the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass proceeds in two stages. First, the poet floods himself with his immediate age, with every variety of sensory stimuli. It implied that the true reality is the spirit which lies beyond the reach or realm of the senses. The area of sensory perceptions must be transcended to reach the spiritual reality. Whitman's Passage to India demonstrates this approach. In this poem he considers the physical journey to India as a prelude to the spiritual pathway to India, the East, and finally, to God. In Section 1, he describes the world of physical reality as an antecedent to the world of spiritual reality. Throughout the poem, he envisages the passage to India as "a worship new", a spiritual passage to India (Section 9, line 233). He pays tribute to the courage and adventurous spirit of the West in seeking a passage to India. This insight leads Whitman to the feeling that now it is the responsibility of the poet to bring about the unity of East and West in the realm of the spirit too. The poet is the "true son of God" because, in conceptualizing the union of man and nature, he answers to the divine call within him and becomes a true explorer and a discoverer of spirituality. Such an approach would lead to an upsurge of spiritual thought and an ecstatic experience for the soul. The poet uses the words "passage" and "India" with a symbolic meaning—the journey of man through the seas of God in search of a mystical experience of union with God in the realm of the spirit. Secondly, he experiences an opening to eternity such as revelation the soul made to him on that memorable June morning in Song of Myself. Such experiences give "similitude to all periods and locations and processes and animate and inanimate forms, and which is the bond of time" (Leaves of Grass p.26). In simpler language while in rapport with his soul Whitman learned this spiritual fact that "a kelson of the creation is love" (Song of Myself, p.33). Whitman communicates in

his Song of Myself the sense of being uplifted or absorbed into something that Whitman indicates by “float”.

The subject matter of Leaves of Grass is vast. No single person is the subject of Whitman’s poems, nor can be; the individual suggests a group, and the group a multitude, each unit of which is as interesting as every other unit and possesses equal claim to recognition. Hence the recurring tendency of his poems to become catalogues of persons and things. His method of naming and framing things and pressing them into catalogues is similar to that of a child naming excitedly the things it sees with awe and wonder for the first time. For example, in Beginning My Studies, Whitman says that:

. . . the first step pleas’d me so much

The mere fact consciousness, these forms, the power
of motion,

The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,

The first step I say awed me and pleas’d me so much,

I have hardly gone and hardly wish’d to go any
farther,

But stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic
songs.

Thus, a long procession of living forms passes before him; each special form, keenly inspected for a moment is then dismissed. Men and women are seen en-masse and the mass is viewed not from a distance but close at hand, where it is felt to be a concourse of individual (One’s-Self I Sing, line 2). In this nine lines poem, Whitman praises all physiology, for neither the physiognomy (outward appearance) nor the brain is worthy of being celebrated independently. Furthermore this has sensuous suggestions. The child moves through a world of sensuous imagery, thronging troops of

pictures pass before him, vivid, vital, transcripts of reality, the sharp impress of some experience of fleeting observation, his own and no one else's and therefore authentic. Whitman delights and believes in the cosmos or universe he sees, reflecting its myriad phases in the mirror of his own ego and sinks into the experience joyously. He says that the cosmos is filled with life and the spirit of God. The cosmos is God and God is the cosmos. As an Emersonian, Whitman is content to receive his sanctions from within. As he yields to the stimulus of the environing present his imagination expands, his spirits rise, and his speech falls into lyric cadences, and from the exalted abandon of egotistic experience, there issues forth a strong, rich note of the universal:

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four,
and each moment then,

In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my
own face in the glass,

I find letters from God dropt in the street, and
everyone is sign'd by God's name,

And I leave them where they are, for I know that
wheresoe'er I go,

Others will punctually come forever and ever.

(Song of Myself, Section 48, lines 1282—86)

Whitman's poetic mode is characterized by an unquenchable thirst to explore the unknown territory of his unconscious world and the interaction between internal fantasies and external reality. Most of his poems are like those of the surrealists, that is, spontaneous utterances emanating from the unconscious. Surrealism methodology emphasizes on dreams and on automatic writing as ways to allow the unconscious to speak freely and without interference from the rational faculty. These utterances arise from within, with such freedom that conscious concern about form and structure is greatly de-emphasized. However,

finally in spite of such freedom, Whitman like the surrealists exercises a certain minimal amount of conscious direction, namely, that amount which is required to organize the spontaneous utterances of the unconscious into a poem.

The first edition of Leaves of Grass (1855) begins with Whitman (like the child in the poems) unable to connect his feelings directly to external objects as events. Here, Whitman completely identifies himself with 'Leaves'.

Camerado, this is no book,
Who touches this touches a man...

The poet explores and expresses many aspects of his personality. He creates the illusion that he and his poems are identical because he considered his book to be himself. He cherished a close intimacy between himself and his reader. Thus, it was through these works that Whitman found full expression as a poet, and as a man. The free associative and projective aspect of the Leaves of Grass helps him establish a tentative communication between his conscious self and suppressed feelings and fantasies hitherto inexpressible.

Establishing the Individualism and Universalism:

The best of Whitman's poems are of the journey type. This journeying quality represents his impulse to explore the unknown regions within himself. This was another Whitmanite way of establishing his "individualism and universalism". The search begins in Song of Myself and continues in most of his poems written before 1860. In the poem As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life, Whitman goes directly to the identity crisis, "I have not once had the least idea who or what I am" (1.26, p.254). The poet is portrayed as a child standing at the tide line where land and sea meet. His inability to identify himself gives him a feeling of nothingness and he sees himself as a stillborn child thrown up by the waves (Stephen 1970).

He continues this search in Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking. The poet recalls that as a child, he left his bed and “wander’d alone, bareheaded, barefoot” in search of the mystery of life and death. Whitman re-creates the childhood experience of the child and shows how the boy becomes a man, and the man, a poet. The following lines exemplify the transition of the boy to the man and finally to a poet:

.....

A man, yet by these tears a little boy again.

Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,

I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,

Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them

A reminiscence sing. (lines 18—22)

This time sequence symbolizes the growth of the consciousness of the poet and we notice that memory plays an important role in this progress and growth. With renewed determination, the child tries to comprehend the secret emanating from the sea by combining the theme of the bird’s song to it. The male bird who had lost its mate was moaning and waiting for the return of the female word which was impossible since it was dead. The notes of the bird are echoed by the moaning sea, “the fierce old mother”. After sometime the sea, like the “old crone rocking the cradle”, whispers the keyword into his ears, which is “death” that is a prerequisite for rebirth. Thus, the child is able to get the secret of life from the sea that is the recurrent pattern of birth-death-rebirth. At this juncture the poet awakens into a new realization that ‘death’ is not the end of life, rather it is a new awakening or passage into another new life and it also indicates a completion and fulfillment all at the same time. This understanding reminds us of V.K. Chari’s (1960) critical analysis of Whitman’s poetry where he says that Whitman’s concept of self is of major significance in his work. It is the ‘organizing principle’ of his poetry.

Furthermore, Chari maintains that to Whitman, the self was the true meaning and center of all existence, and that reality was not separate or different from the self. Thus, in light of the above discussion, we are able to understand that Whitman's notion of the self is something that contains elements of the individual and the universal. Finally, we hear two voices, the first "I" is small and individual, and the second "I" is large and universal. Furthermore, we find that Whitman's sensitive reactions to his varied experiences are emotional rather than intellectual. He takes impressions as sharply as wax from the etcher's hands and these impressions, he transcribes with the careful impartiality of the modern expressionists. He is a pagan, a romanticist, a transcendentalist, a mystic and above all a curious child—all at the same time. He is an unconscious embodiment of the American aspirations in the way he harmonizes romanticism and realism. His buoyant nature floats easily on the turbulent stream of natural beings, and his songs are defiant chants in praise of life, strong, abundant and procreative. As Hans Reisiger (1955) says:

Whitman was one of those particularly gifted human beings, who from childhood into old age remained secure in the strength and warmth of a maternal world in the midst of all his visions and passions of a world free and multiform seizing his lonely breast there remained warmth in him at all times, the invisible smile of a child belonging to the essence out of which it was born. . . . The pale magic translucence of childhood never faded. Thus from all sides of his poetry unrefracted rays shoot forth back to the dim beginning of his youth--the inexplicable tears of his childhood. . . Profound, rich and passionate such is the imagination of every child. (p.7)

This statement about There Was A Child Went Forth is a German analysis and perception of Whitman. It indicates a positive and psychological understanding of a poet who is universal and perceives

the individuality of a growing child. The individual becomes something or grows into something and this is the process of becoming, of change and development. This interpenetration of the child's consciousness and physical phenomena is one of the most profound elements that exist beneath Whitman's thought.

Conclusion:

The unique appeal of Whitman's poetry lends itself as a rich subject for psychoanalytical interpretation. Thus, throughout this paper, the researcher has endeavored to explore and comprehend the profundity of Whitman's thought of Individualism and Universalism in the context of the growth and development of the "child's journey through chaos".

We realize that we move through a world in which the child is an accepted part of the landscape. There he is, his eye to the key hole, his ear to the crack in the door, peering, listening, observing, trying to comprehend the realities of the world. Whitman creates and uses the child as a means to convey to the readers the complexities of life; hence the individualization of the child from the dark abyss of his childhood to the final illumination of him as a 'poet and 'seer'. The child knows that he has a mission to recognize and realize; he has to comprehend a series of phenomena; manifest a series of ideas and transmute the result to others who have a similar mission. In the garden of the world the child is the growing flower.

The voyaging ego of the child journeys from chaos to creativity, facing all the challenges of life and finally emerges forth into the light. This result is definitely not epiphanic. The voyage is slow and painful at times but at each stage the child realizes and experiences a new fact. This journey or the crossing of the bridge from childhood to manhood results in deep psychic changes. The child sees creation as one continuous growth and not as a work that is begun or finished. He learns that in the eternal scheme of creation, each part, regardless of how seemingly trivial, is equally important and equally immortal. The child also comprehends that there is no actual termination of life or

existence but only a change or transition from one condition to another. Consequently his poems are filled with symbols of resurrection, from fish eggs to sprouting grass, to Adam propagating the human race.

The Whitmanite child habitually lives in a dream world of twilight. The hypnologic hallucinations make the child's withdrawals in his poetry into surrealistic dreamscapes. Thus the personality of the child in Leaves of Grass is a whole, acting as a unitary being. The child possesses a highly developed mental system through which he becomes aware of the world around him, and realizes both sensory and intellectual experiences. With this ability to reason out things for himself, the final act of the emergence of the child into a poet is achieved. The poet, Whitman revels in the changes that occur during the maturation of the child. Hence we can confidently conclude that the "Whitmanite child and man" offer realistic and naturalistic considerations making his poetry truly immortal.

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