

A Skeptical Moment In Walt Whitman Laves Of Grass

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Abstract: This paper aims at investigating the ways in which Walt Whitman incorporated and grappled with the issue of the Civil War in his poetry. Throughout his life and work, he promoted himself as the poet of American democracy. However, this sense of joy and celebration was temporarily disrupted by the Civil War and its ugly aftermaths; Whitman's optimism was blighted for a while, but his boundless faith in human goodness enabled him to transcend the evil of the Civil War. He soon realized that the atrocities and horrors of the Civil War and the corruption he witnessed during the Reconstruction Era were only transient phases in American history and that America will rise from the ashes into something more beautiful and regenerate.

Keywords – democracy, optimism, Civil War, Reconstruction Era, corruption

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I. INTRODUCTION

On the very first page of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman expresses his intention to be the voice of America, which he associates with democracy, a mission that consists of exalting the values he believes in:

“I heard that you ask'd for something to prove this puzzle the New World And to define America, her athletic Democracy, Therefore I send you my poems that you behold in them what You wanted” [1] According to Whitman, the average man had been outlawed from the realm of poetry; he decided to dedicate his songs to him and liberate him: “None but has found you imperfect, I only find no imperfection in you None but would subordinate you, I only am he will never Consent to subordinate you” [1]

Whitman's indiscriminate spirit is manifested in his address to humanity at large, including its inferiors. To a common prostitute, he says: “not till the sun excludes you will I exclude you”

Whitman and his fellow transcendentalists' confidence in the goodness of human nature is a departure from the puritanical concept of innate depravity. Unlike the puritans who drowned the world in tears, Whitman tried to restore hope and confidence in human perfection. Nonetheless, when the country was torn apart by the Civil War, Whitman experienced some moments of doubt and sadness because he realized that all those ideals of the American democracy had not yet deepened their roots in the hearts of the American people. This realization was confirmed to him by the corruption and greed of the Reconstruction Era.

II. ANALYSIS

Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman has gained for Whitman the title of the champion of American democracy. Its opening lines “I celebrate myself, the word democratic, the word ex masse” not only announces the advent of America's long awaited bard but also encompasses America's most cherished ideal: Democracy. The first part of *Leaves of Grass* exhibits a sense of jubilation and elation at all the opportunities the New World has to offer. The New World is painted as a second chance for humanity to make a fresh start and establish a new model society where values such as freedom, equality, brotherhood prevail. However, a sense of cynicism and doubt begin to creep in as the threat of a civil war loomed large on the horizon: democracy, the destined conqueror. Yet the treacherous lip smiles everywhere And death and infidelity at every step” [2] The Union Walt Whitman sang about and trumpeted was on the verge of being unravelled. The sense of chaos and confusion almost confused Whitman's mind to a point where he did not even know what to think:

“I see oppression, the working of battles, pestilence, tyranny, martyrs and prisons how sailors are casting lots who shall be killed to preserve the others All these – all the meanness and agony without end I sitting Look out upon See, hear and I am silent” [3]

Whitman's faith and hope for American democracy to flourish were dampened by the Civil War; his faith in human goodness was shattered by the evil depravity of the Civil War. On a very despondent tone he says:

“Alas, America have we seen, though only in the early youth, already to hospital brought. There have we watched these soldiers, many of them only boys in years – mark’d their decorum, their religious nature and fortitude and their secret affection; they are defeated yet full of unquenchable resolution” [4]

Nonetheless, and true to his title as the bard of optimism and hope, Whitman was not daunted by the grim reality of the Civil War. Now, he realizes, is the time to change tune and sing songs that would glorify the Civil War; this war he claimed, was waged for a noble cause, that is, the extirpation of slavery (which he called a disgrace). “Must I change my triumphant songs? Said I to myself? Must I learn to chant the cold dirges of the battlefield And sullen hymns of defeated” [5]

Whitman’s decision to bolster the Civil War was founded on the moral grounds that it was a cleansing war; it was a war against the reactionary idea of slavery: “Turn from lands retrospective recording proofs of the past from the singers that sing the trailing glories of the past from the chants of the feudal world, the triumphs of kings slavery, caste Turn to the world, the triumphs reserved art to come – give up that backward world” [6]

Whitman’s eulogy of the Civil War stems from his confidence that the outcome of it will be the triumph of good over evil, and that America will rise from carnage, phonexlike, into something beautiful; the corpses that litter the battlefield will serve as good manure for ‘sweeter roses to grow’:

“The grass of spring covers the prairies the bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden the delicate spear of the onion pierces upward the apple buds cluster together on the apple branches the resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out – of its grave” [7]

Nonetheless, Walt Whitman was not at all insensitive to the pain and suffering inflicted by the Civil War; his poem “Come up from the field father” clearly displays his capacity for love and compassion for those who had lost their loved ones.

In order to boost the morale of the young soldiers, Whitman tried to rekindle hope by establishing the link between the war of independence and the Civil War. Both wars were fought against old-fashioned ideas: monarchy and slavery:

“And is this ground Washington trod? And these waters! Listlessly daily cross, are these the waters he crossed, As resolute in defeat as other generals in their proudest triumphs? I must copy the story and send it Eastward and Westward nI must preserve that look as it beam’d on you rivers of Brooklyn” [8]

It is worth-noting that both Washington and Abraham Lincoln were revered by Walt Whitman: the first led the country towards freedom from the tyranny of England; the second spear headed the abolition movement. There is perhaps no better eulogy for Abraham Lincoln than “When Lilacs last in the dooryard bloom’d”.

No sooner was the war over than Whitman’s hope and faith in American democracy suffered another blow; he was struck by what he saw as the rampant greed in the post Civil War era. The Reconstruction Era, as it is often dubbed, witnessed a surge in excessive materialism:

“Once the war was over, the victors hastened to enjoy the fruits of the victory, defending the causes of the lower class, calling attention to the horrible conditions of the unemployed and saying that these are greater reforms needed here than in the Southern States” [9]

The country witnessed an economic prosperity as manifested by the building of the railroads, telephone lines and what not, creating new job opportunities, but hidden underneath its shining and glittering surface was the bleak truth that society was divided between the haves and have nots. No wonder Mark Twain referred to this era as the Gilded Age. Worried that his fellow Americans would stoop so low, Walt Whitman urged them not to fall prey to greed and materialism. On his “Story of the Open Road”, he warns them against material temptations: “Allons! We must not stop here, however sweet these laid up stores, however convenient This dwelling, we cannot remain here” [10]

The horror he had witnessed during the Civil War and the period of the Reconstruction appalled Walt Whitman; however, his belief in the ultimate goodness of man kept his dream alive; neither the atrocities of the Civil War, nor the ugliness and the flaws of the Reconstruction Era impaired his faith: “I observe shallow men are put in the greatest offices, even in the presidency – and yet with all that I know underneath all putridity of presidents and Congressmen that have risen at the top, lie pure waters of one thousand fathoms deep they make the real ocean whatever the scum maybe on its surface” [11]

III. CONCLUSION

Finally, through *Leaves of Grass* Whitman indeed managed to produce a poetry that reflected the growth of the United States. He sang songs of praise and ecstasy when the nation was at the zenith of its hopes, felt agony and pain when it was convulsed by the Civil War and finally opened up future possibilities for his people. Neither the Civil War nor the failings of the Reconstruction Era prevented him from continuing to repose a great deal of confidence in the potentialities of the average.

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