

Walt whitmans song of myself a review of critical evaluation

Literature



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Walt Whitman's ' Song of Myself' – A Review of Critical Evaluation

Walt Whitman's ' Song of Myself,' the free verse poetry in which he celebrates " Mother Nature" and " his own nature as a representative of all humankind in its endless variety" [Loving, p. XI] is considered Whitman's best poetry, containing the " essence of nearly all his poems" published in 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* [Chase, 58]. While ' Song of Myself' serves as a useful premise for understanding the life and ideological thinking of the author, the poem for its transcendental vision of life and death, the simultaneously naturalistic and mythical visualization, paradoxical political and religious insinuations, profuse use of symbolism and imageries, the unconventional poetic technique and versification is considered one of the most difficult poems to understand and appreciate. The poem has produced abundant critical evaluation; the present review shall focus on three evaluations that may help in appreciating the poem and the poet.

' Song of Myself' presents a multitude of paradoxical perceptions, at the centre being the paradox of democratic vision versus individualism. While Whitman's democratic vision -- that he sees himself in equal terms with any other being, is perceptible to a discernible reader, the profuse use of symbolism and the interweaving of a transcendental vision of life and death, with the apparent focus on physical body and existence, add to complexity of the poem, making it a difficult read. Taylor Hagood in " Hair, Feet, Body, and Connectedness in Song of Myself" exemplifies how Whitman applies the image of human body, positioning it along " horizontal and vertical axes" to simultaneously signify democracy and individualism. Hagood explains that " horizontal orientation . . . carries democratic significance," while verticality

implies individuality, hair being the image of “ connectedness” [Hagood 26-27]. Explaining Whitman’s transcendental vision, his concept of the circular nature of progression from death to birth and its relation to his democratic vision, Hagood remarks: “ Death and birth thus become not merely negative and positive, respectively, but also part of a process in which horizontalness can be extended” [Hagood, 29].

Whitman’s modern conception of religion in ‘ Song of Myself’ with its biblical allusions is more often perplexing to a naïve reader. In “ Song of Myself as Whitman’s American Bible,” Herbert J. Levine suggests an understanding of the poem as Whitmans effort “ to provide a religious foundation for American democracy foundering on the verge of disunion” [Levine, 145]. He traces the “ biblical basis” of the “ generic and narrative patterns” of the poem and claims that the writing of the poem marked the moment of Whitman becoming “ his own religious tradition” [Levine, 145]. According to Levine, even as the poem resounds with biblical allusions, Whitman presents a “ new religion,” an all-inclusive, self-reliant one, guided by what he calls “ an inner-directed law” [Levine, 158]. He concludes that this inner-directed law is the “ new rule”, the “ new religion” which Whitman proclaims to America [Levine, 158].

Richard V. Chase presents an unusual introduction to Song of Myself, explaining how one can read it as a “ comedy of human thought” [Chase, 97]. He states that the poem appeals in its “ comic aspect” even as the feeling in many of its passages does not seem comic at all [Chase, 97].

Chase explains that though its effects are universal, the comic spirit of the poem is characteristic of the “ American humour,” “ providing expression for

a realism at once naturalistic and transcendental” [Chase, 97]. According to him Whitman, who keeps introducing his “disconcertingly eccentric selves” is not in a position to “utter morality,” as his poetry turns out to be just “a profound and lovely comic drama of the self” [Chase, 97].

Works Cited

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Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘The Scarlet Letter’ – A Review of Critical Evaluation

A story of love, sin, guilt and redemption set in the bleak background of centuries-old Puritan New England, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance* is considered a timeless classic in American literature. Despite being a straightforward story- a tragic love story of a woman who bears an illegitimate child- the novel has produced a wide variety of critical approaches and review, in terms of theme and content, characterisation and setting as well as literary form and narrative perspective. The present research shall review three critical evaluations of the text, which may enhance the appreciation of the novel.

Whilst Hawthorne himself categorised the novel as a romance, critics have long approached the story as a story of sin and sinners; the perspective, as

Sandeen claims, has “hardened into a convention”. [Sandeen, 425] In his review “The Scarlet Letter as a Love Story”, Sandeen illustrates how shifting the viewpoint, to see the novel as a love story – “as a tragedy of the grand passion rather than a tale of sinful passion” --can significantly change “the whole composition” of novel. [Sandeen, 425] In that perspective passion becomes a “fixed reality”, entering an interesting phase with the opening of the novel, and sin turns to be the “shifting ambiguous term”, which according to him is often “refracted in the many-sided ironies of the plot and of the narrative commentary.” [Sandeen, 425] Tracing the central characters to the last speech of Hester to her lover, Sandeen explains his perspective illuminating the moralistic value of novel. The review offers a more classic appreciation of the story, the psychology of human passion and the strength of the human spirit.

John C. Gerber diverges from the usual approach of focusing on the theme and setting of the novel to analysing the structure of the novel in his review “Form and Content in The Scarlet Letter.” Gerber explains how the novel’s form arises from the ‘basic division of the whole into four parts’, and how each of the part in that order, gains its distinctiveness from the character who is responsible for the action in each part. [Gerber, 25] His review explicates Hawthorne’s choice of focusing on community for directing action in the first part (Chapter I-VIII), Chillingworth in the second (XI-XII), Hester in the third (XIII-XX) and Dimmesdale for that in the fourth (XXI-XXIV). Tracing the development and transition of each part into the next, and the “division between cause and effect” within each part, Gerber illuminates “how content creates form,” for the novel and how the respective characters

direct action in each part. [Gerber, 26-55] The review is one of the best analyses in understanding and appreciating the structure of the novel, as its content, enhancing the reader's appreciation of the work as a literary creation.

In his review "The Scarlet Letter: A Twice-Told Tale," Sacvan Bercovitch compares the 1850-novel with its 1995-film adaptation to understand shift in cultural context, the context of analysis being "the function of the New England Puritans as a symbol of national origins." [Bercovitch, 1996] Even as his central focus remains Hawthorne's novel, Bercovitch examines the plot and action of the 1995 movie to see how its extra-textual explanations, with its focus on liberation, functions as a commentary on contemporary culture. He remarks that the contrast between the two "represents two alternate routes of the American Way, then and now." According to him, the route taken in the film leads toward individual fulfilment, where as the one taken by the novel, leads toward the good society. Bercovitch claims that both the routes are "foundational to the very meaning of America." His review offers an appreciation of the novel as a "cultural document--both in its own right, aesthetically, and as a commentary on [the contemporary] conflicted decade" in America. [Bercovitch, 1996]

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