

Democratic individualism in walt whitman poetry

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Democratic Individualism in Whitman's Poetry Walt Whitman will remain as a well-known, superb poet. Clarence Brown stated, the words of someone speaking on Walt Whitman, " He is the only one of the conventionally recognized American poets who is worth reading" (37). Walt Whitman is a poet that writes with purpose. His poetry seems to attempt to teach the more desirable behavior and traits for Americans. It depicts the ideal American democrat, peace maker, and a well-rounded person, in general. Not that Walt Whitman is only about democracy.

He focuses on an important end result which is the happiness and function of the overall body of people. This happiness can be achieved efficiently through democracy and democratic behavior, according to Whitman and his beliefs. John Macy wrote, in *The Spirit of American Literature*, " Only one day in the century of American literature is marked by the birth of a ' marker of poems, an Answerer'-the day when Whitman was born" (210). Walt Whitman was born May 31, 1819 to Walter Whitman and Louisa Van Velsor. Walt was the second of nine children in his household.

One can imagine that his life, surrounded by many siblings, was indeed hectic. Their family resided in New York, mostly Brooklyn, during the 1820s and 1830s. Peace and equality could be things that a young boy with eight other siblings would want. His household may have influenced values that would stick with Walt for his entire life, values that would shape his career. At a very young age, twelve years old, Walt Whitman was introduced to the printing trade. This was seemingly the point in his life that influenced his love of words and literature.

He taught himself to read and did so very often. His favorite literature or the literature that was frequently available to him was that of Shakespeare, Dante, and Homer. Walt also was fascinated with the Bible. From these pieces of literature, Walt could have taken ideas of love, tragedy, trials and triumphs. This time in his life seems to be most influential to the distinguished events and lifestyle that would take place later (“Walt Whitman Biography”). Walt took jobs as a printer and a teacher before he chose journalism as a more permanent career.

During his time as a journalist, Whitman founded and edited many popular newspapers. Then, the Civil War came along and placed Whitman in chaos. He was devastated by the many that were wounded, including his brother, and he vowed to live a simple life. He purged his life as a way of cleansing out any negativity. He seemed to be a peaceful and serene person. Whitman stayed at hospitals in Washington to care for the injured. While doing so, he accepted a job as a clerk for the Department of the Interior until he was fired for his controversial work in *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poems written by Whitman.

There were many versions and poems in the collection. From this title alone, one can infer the theme of individuality while being a part of a group. *Leaves of Grass* would be the citizens of Grass, America (“Walt Whitman Biography”). Walt was a generous man. His success, as stated by Alice Henderson, could be contributed to his “[...] comradeship with all nature and all men” (Brown 35). He lived happily through the joy of others. He was democratic, not just seeing the benefits for himself but how he could help others. A clerk’s salary, at that time, was less than extravagant.

However, any extramoneythat Walt Whitman had was charitably given to anyone that needed the money, usually his patients. George Kateb stated, “ I think that Walt Whitman is a great philosopher of democracy” (545), I agree. Walt Whitman could be one’s ideal democratic American. As stated by Kateb, even one of the greatest poets of all time, Henry Thoreau, stated that Whitman “[...] is apparently the greatest democrat the world has ever seen” (545). Democracy is about people helping each other. It embodies individuals and their role in the entire group or society.

Democracy gives each individual the right to have a role in the world around them. Walt Whitman made his mark in society as a democratic man by giving back to the people that helped serve the country when it was at war. Walt Whitman’s fame is not just about his passion for democracy. Van Wyck Brooks stated that the real reason that Whitman is so relevant is that “ for the first time [he] gave us the sense of something organic in American life” (112) and “ precipitated the American character” (118). However, democracy is about social equality, fairness, and choice.

A democratic body is one that works together to achieve things that are beneficial to all. To Walt, the goal that was worth working for was the preservation of those who are ill or injured, especially due to the war. George Kateb wrote about Whitman and the purpose of democracy. “ Whitman tries to draw out the fuller moral and existential significance of rights. There are rights that individuals have as persons, and that the political system of democracy exists in order to protect, and also to embody in its workings” (546). We appreciate Walt Whitman for explaining the riches of life while reaping the benefits of democracy. As Kateb stated, individuals have their

own identity within the overall body but they also work towards preserving and benefiting the overall body as well. So, when citizens are injured or weak, it is our job to be a support system just as Walt Whitman did many years prior. According to Kateb, “ This responsiveness or receptivity can also be described as a way – a profoundly democratic way – of being connected to others and to nature” (546). Democracy, equality, and choice are all demonstrated in many of the poems that were written by the great Walt Whitman.

He was a proud and patriotic man. His love for America is depicted in his work. According to Jason Frank, “ Just as the institutions of democratic contest provide arenas for forming robust individuality, provoke the reader’s own democratic and poetic potential” (“ Aesthetic Democracy”). For example, in “ One’s Self I Sing” and in “ I Hear America Singing,” Whitman showed the importance of equality, democracy, and individuality in his life. Those are obviously values that he held close to his heart. In “ I Hear America Singing,” Whitman painted a glorified picture of America.

According to Zimmer, “ Walt Whitman's ‘ I Hear America Singing’ receives an invigorating revival in this poetry collection that illuminates the pressures and pleasures of work” (“ STEADY HANDS: Poems About Work”). His America consisted of different types of people in all different walks and social classes of life. He told of the carpenter, the mother, the mason, shoemaker, and many more. When Whitman says, “ Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else” (line 12), he means America does not mention one race or age; it just consists of different types of people that perform their job.

One could say that the job is to be an American. Their jobs are to perform their tasks proudly to help the country run smoothly. In line 15, Whitman said that the Americans are “ Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs. ” They are singing with open mouths and perhaps open hearts. Singing is attributed to celebration and happiness. The Americans that Whitman wrote about could be those that are joyful because they live in America and because they are doing whatever job makes them happy. They are strong, caring, and joyful just as Americans should be, in Whitman’s eyes.

Out of the two poems, in my opinion, “ One’s-Self I Sing” is the most powerful of the two. It is the one that exemplifies Whitman’s love for America and democracy the most. In the first few lines of the poem, Whitman made a huge impact with few words. “ One’s-Self I sing, a simple separate person, yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse”(lines 1-2), tells us that it is okay to be an individual but to always remember to be democratic. “[...] utter the word Democratic,” in all things be yourself but remember to uplift your country, be considerate and think of the well-being of others.

In line 5, “ The Female equally with the Male I sing. ” Whitman praises both the female and male as he would like to see those both equal. The last stanza of the poem speaks of “[...] Life immense in passion, pulse, and power” (line 6). It means the passion for one’s country, the pulse and the energy to live one’s life freely, and the power to do anything through freedom. Ultimately, Whitman demonstrates his love for America. From reading a couple of his poems, one can see the importance of democracy in the upkeep of the country.

Democracy is the soul of the country; it gives people a sense of individuality while still being a part of an enormous group. Walt Whitman was not only a poet but also a great example for all Americans. Works Cited Brooks, Van Wyck. *America's Coming-of-Age*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958. Print. Brown, Clarence A. "Walt Whitman and the 'New Poetry'." *American Literature* 33. 1 (Mar, 1961): 33-45. JSTOR. Duke University Press. Web. 22 Mar. 2012. Frank, Jason. "Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman And The Poetry Of The People." *Review Of Politics* 69. 3 (2007): 402. MasterFILE Complete. Web. 22 Mar. 2012. Kateb, George. "Walt Whitman and the Culture of Democracy." *Political Theory* 18. 4 (Nov, 1990): 545-71. JSTOR. Sage Publications, Inc. Web. 22 Mar. 2012. . Macy, John A. *The Spirit of American Literature*. Kessinger, LLC, 2010. Print. "Walt Whitman Biography." *Bio. com*. A&E Networks Television. Web. 22 Mar. 2012. . Zimmer, Tracie Vaughn. "STEADY HANDS: Poems About Work." *Kirkus Reviews* 76. 24 (2008): 1313. AcademicSearch Complete. Web. 22 Mar. 2012.