

American first, mystic
second: whitman's
western patriotism in
"song of myself"



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Walt Whitman begins his poem, “ Song of Myself,” with: “ I celebrate myself /And what I assume you shall assume/For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (lines 1-3). In these lines, Whitman shows that everyone is equal. Equality is a quintessentially democratic and thus American ideal. But in the Editor’s Introduction, Malcolm Cowley does not believe the poem is American or democratic. Instead, he claims Whitman referenced Eastern texts, which tethers to the poem’s mystic and ecstatic qualities. However, considering Whitman’s patriotism, democratic beliefs, and his own rendition of spirituality, his poem is actually more Western than Eastern. Cowley fails to provide a concise criticism of “ Song of Myself” in his reference to Eastern ideas and texts, and in turn fails to acknowledge Whitman’s love for America.

Through his analysis, Cowley aims to shatter stereotypes of Whitman, but instead denies part of his identity. He writes: “ The poem is hardly at all concerned with American nationalism and political democracy, contemporary progress, or other social themes that are commonly associated with Whitman’s work” (xiv). Though Whitman is a revered American poet due to his patriotism. He truly believed in the potential of his country. In line 312, he writes vividly about the Fourth of July, a time where all Americans feel love and pride for their country. His praise is obvious: “ what salutes of cannon and small arms!” (313). Additionally, Whitman includes descriptions of all the states in chant sixteen, celebrating the diversity of the country. He calls America “ one of the great nations, the nation of many nations – the smallest the same and the largest the same” (330), further displaying his admiration for America. He refers to himself as a comrade of the citizens

which shows he is a common person just like them, connecting with the theme of democratic equality.

Even though Cowley denies the democracy of the poem, as stated in the previous quote, he attests to it. He writes: " Another point explained by Indian conceptions is the sort of democracy Whitman was preaching in ' Song of Myself.' There is no doubt that he was a democrat politically" (xxiv). Here, the editor contradicts himself, after stating earlier that the poem is " hardly associated with" political democracy. Another error in his statement is that democracy is not associated with Indian conceptions, as it is typically seen as an American belief. He classifies Whitman as " a Jacksonian democrat...then a liberal but not a radical Republican (xxiv), yet at first wanted to stray away from that part of the author's identity. Also, Cowley says the poem does not preach " rebellion or even reform," (xxiv) in associating those ideas with democracy, but those lean more towards anarchy. The democratic idea of equality is more relevant, serving as a theme of the poem. In chant fifteen, Whitman lists a myriad of people, such as " the prostitute [who] draggles her shawl" (302) to " patriarchs sitting at supper with sons and grandsons and great-grandsons around them" (319). Obviously, one is of higher social status and more respected than the other, yet Whitman disregards this notion by putting them in the same stanza. By placing these contrasting images together into one section, he reveals that they are equal because they are all the divine creation of God.

Though Whitman sounds religious at times, it is often confused spirituality with Eastern religion. Cowley says: " What he [Whitman] preaches

throughout the poem is not political but religious democracy, such as was <https://assignbuster.com/american-first-mystic-second-whitmans-western-patriotism-in-song-of-myself/>

practiced by the early Christians” (xxv). While he inserts an excerpt from *Philosophies in India*, he does not explain what religious democracy actually is. On top of that, he connects the practice to early Christians, yet Whitman did not agree with organized religion. In fact, the church would not approve of the poem due to its explicit sexual content. For example, Whitman writes: “ I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning/You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me/And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my barestript heart/And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet. (78-81). Such vivid imagery about the body goes against religious principles. Although his nature imagery can be likened to biblical symbolism, Whitman really had a deep appreciation for nature, as many Romantic poets of his time shared. Like Cowley, critics who make those connections forget his ideals. Whitman mentions God and Christ in the poem, yet he it is his own idea of what God should be, rather than the Christian God. When considering his opposition with Christianity, focusing on religion does not make sense. Even though the transcendental imagery bears similarities to Eastern concepts, Whitman creates his own personal spirituality separate from any religion.

By honing all of his analysis through Eastern texts, Cowley completely misses the point of the poem. Despite its mysticism, the author never confirmed his reference to Eastern texts or philosophies. What everyone does know is his love and hope for America and its democratic principles, through which he creates his own spirituality. He pins Whitman down, which is what he would not have wanted, and tries too hard to come up with a

profound meaning. In this process, he disproves some of his arguments.

Whereas Whitman may understand his misreading, for he also “ contains multitudes” (1315), he is a patriot before he is a poet.

Works Cited

Cowley, Malcolm. Editor's Introduction. *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*. New York: Viking Penguin Inc, 1959. vii-xxxvii. Print.

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