

To what extent is the
american literary self
a "representative"
self?



The opening line of Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* (1855) appears to present a celebration of individualism, by declaring: "I celebrate myself" (1).

However, through his free use of deictics, Whitman is arguably creating a universal "I", which represents both the people and the individual; the poet speaker and America. By using the first-person singular pronoun in his collection *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman blurs the boundaries between the I and you to portray an American identity which represents all individuals. This essay argues that Whitman's presentation of the American literary self is representative rather than literal. Within my essay I will assess the multiple interpretations of the use of Whitman's "I" and will query whether a national identity can ever be truly expressed by a white male in a nation which is facing increasing political tensions over slavery and ongoing radical religious transitions. The essay will question the notion of authorship and suggest that despite Whitman's American literary self being representative it remains a partial and subjective representation.

Whitman's "I", due to ambiguity of the poem *Songs of Myself*, is greatly debated with the question of who the "myself" is within Whitman's work continually resonating amongst critics. Stephen A Black states, "What begins as a celebration of the self becomes a troublesome question: who and what am I?" (77) This comment from Black can be interpreted in two ways. To interpret Black's "I" as autobiographical is to suggest that in response to Whitman, Black is questioning his own identity; "who and what am I?" (77). Perhaps Black is questioning where he, as the individual, fits in to this new national identity expressed by Whitman. With the original version of *Leaves of Grass* being published just six years before the outbreak of the civil war,

Whitman's *Song of Myself* can be viewed as attempting to place the individual within a national identity, yet Black is arguably challenging the success of this. Alternatively, Black could be questioning Whitman's presentation of the American literary self that is represented through the universal "I". The line "for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (3), confuses the ownership of these atoms. Therefore Black's response could alternatively be questioning who the "me", "myself" and "I" are in Whitman's poem. From this perspective Black is suggesting Whitman creates deliberate confusion surrounding the "me" of his work, as the poet wanted the identity of his "I" to remain ambiguous. He wanted it to be representative rather than literal. Therefore, Black's question of "who and what am I?" (77) remains unanswered. The "I" in Whitman's poem does not represent one identity but rather is a representative literary self and therefore Black's question should be read as rhetorical.

The dual interpretation of Black's "I", can be similarly applied to Whitman's work. Although many contemporary critics believe that Whitman's "I" is representative and rhetorical, some of his earliest critics viewed *Leaves of Grass* as demonstrating the actual "personality of Whitman" (Smuts). Smuts believed the main figure in the painting is Walt Whitman, while American nationality, civilisation and identity fade into the background of the poem (60). However, other critics argue that "it's impossible to separate the multiple identities depicted within the poem" (Wright), suggesting the personae of the poem co-exist and are inextricably entangled with one another. From the "cradle"(147), an image of birth, to the "red faced girl" (150), an image of love and finally to the "the suicide"(152), a morbid image

of death, Whitman presents the journey of life through multiple different characters. This “guided tour through the personages and scenes of mid nineteenth century America” (Marsh), displays the interplay of voices that Whitman believes create America’s “strong melodious song”(18). This suggests Whitman’s “I” is representative and not a “self-portraiture” (Smuts) as early critics argued. His “I” should be viewed as universal because, through the images depicted he presents an overview of life. The portrayal of life through multiple personae proves Whitman’s “I” must be viewed representative rather than literal.

To further enhance the argument against Whitman’s I as “the personality of Whitman” (Smuts), we can view Whitman’s work from a post structuralist perspective. As argued by Roland Barthes “the linguistic ‘I’ must be thought of in a completely “apsychological way” (Elliot, *The literary Persona*). In accordance with post structuralist thinking Whitman’s “I” should be decentralised; the author should be forgotten, and the reader should author the text. Barthes suggests that, “the death of the author...utterly transforms the modern text” (1324), and thus post structuralist thought suggests we should challenge the authority of the author and as a result the reader’s role as interpreter is elevated. With this view the “I” of Whitman’s “I am of old and young” (326), and the “me” in “through me many long dumb voices” (508), have no identity. They are inhabitable by the reader, which means that the merging of voices can be seen as inhabitable by all American identities. Through this Whitman can present his aesthetic vision of the American democratic, as all identities can identify with the “I” of “I celebrate myself” (1). This permits Whitman to suggest that people of all

race, gender and ethnicity make up the American democratic and thus should be celebrated. In this sense, the “ I” of Whitman’s poem must be representative and cannot be read as literal.

To create a representative literary self, Whitman presents the thoughts of various characters throughout his poem. Within his depiction of sexual desire, Whitman inhabits the thoughts of both subject and object; he presents the perspective of both the male and female. Whitman describes a very specific vision of masturbation stating “ where are you off to, lady? For I see you” (206), and thus initially adopts the voice of the male. However, he also inhabits the consciousness of the female, stating “ which of the young men does she like best? Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her” (204-5). Through defending the anonymity of a sexual encounter, Whitman is describing the pleasure of sexual experience regardless of partner. He is negating cultural and gendered limitations and presenting an anonymous experience of sexual desire. This experience could be extracted and transmitted any person of any sexuality, ethnicity, gender or race. By not asking questions of identity Whitman is presenting his democratic vision. Through conveying anonymous sexuality, Whitman is promoting the destruction of distinctions that defined American society such as race, ethnicity and class. In doing this Whitman is enabling his literary self to become representative of all.

However, although Whitman’s “ I” is representative, it is limited in its universality of representation. Within Harriet Jacob’s autobiography,

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) for example, sexuality is presented by an African American female as a tool - a prevention of rape. Jacobs
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chooses to have sex with a white man to prevent the threat of rape from her master. Sexuality for female African American slaves is in stark contrast to the female persona in Whitman's poem, who may choose; "which of the young men does she like best" (204). The "she" in Whitman's poem remains unidentified and therefore arguably universal. However, Whitman, in presenting a universal experience of sexual encounters that ignores race, ethnicity and gender in order to present a democratic vision, is ignoring the social misjustices that place African Americans as the inferior race. By ignoring race, Whitman is portraying an American identity that ignores the injustices that defined their nation. Therefore, it can be argued that Whitman's work is a partial and subjective view of the American identity written by a white privileged male and although Whitman's "I" is representative, it remains subjective. (Jacobs, Incidents in the life of a slave girl)

Whitman attempts to speak for the full range of American identities, and thus attempts to create a literary self which is representative. Whitman recognised that the voice must represent both master and slave, man and woman, white and African American or it would be partial and not representative (Whitman). Poet Hughes Langston wrote the poem *I too* in response to Whitman's work. Hughes became known as the voice of the Harlem renaissance and in his poem *I too*, he challenges Whitman's depiction of the American identity. He questions why he is expected to identify with a nation that has excluded him. Hughes' opening line "I too sing America" (1), parallels another of Whitman's Poems *I hear America's singing*. The universal "I" is reciprocated in Hughes' work, yet Hughes is

challenging Whitman's universal "I" and presenting the "I" that is the African American "I". Hughes' response identifies the flaws in Whitman's aesthetic vision. He is suggesting that despite Whitman's attempts to create a representative "I" that embraces cultural diversity, African Americans remain disregarded. Hughes is suggesting Whitman's work is limited in its representation as the African American identity has been defined by cruelties and oppressions, and this is an identity with which white Americans can never identify.

However, although Hughes appears to argue that Whitman's "I" does not represent all Americans in his depiction of the American identity, this should be challenged. The last line of *I hear America Singing* is significant: "singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs" (18). Whitman here is describing America as a chorus; this metaphor recognises the individual differences of each American citizen and suggests that they blend together to create a harmonious whole. The universal "I" that Whitman has created represents the collective and recognises that each individual identity collectively creates an entire nation. He recognises the importance of individualism and therefore it can be argued that he is, to an extent, encompassing all Americans within his "I". Thus, as argued by Sanford Pinsker, "Whitman gave concrete expression - and vivid imagery - to the abstraction at the very heart of American democracy." (Pinsker) The American ideal of "*e pluribus unum*" ("Out of many, one"), can be seen through Whitman's representation of the American literary self. His "I" represents the collective, and therefore must be seen as a representative literary self. (Funari)

Both Whitman and Dickinson were poets contemporary to each other and the contrast between their use of the personal pronoun can arguably prove that Whitman's "I" is representative. Seemingly unlike Whitman's rhetorical "I", Dickinson's poetry inhabits the domestic and internal space rather than creating a broad universal image. It has been argued that " Dickinson lies internally in her consciousness concerning questions about body politics and private truths", whereas " Whitman focuses predominantly on socio politics and American exceptionalism" (Gjata). However, despite this contrast, both Whitman and Dickinson create a representative literary self to allow their poetry to become universal. Both poets create a universal "I". The "I" of Whitman, as argued by R. C. Elliot, should " no more be identified with the actual poet living in history than the Bishop ordering his tomb to be identified with Robert Browning" (Elliot, *The Literary persona*). Similarly, the "I" in Dickinson's poetry, for example in " I heard a fly Buzz – when I died", should not be viewed as a personal I. The "I" in Dickinson's poetry is not literal but representative as it allows Dickinson to challenge gendered norms within the domestic sphere. She presents a personal experience but encourages the reader to view this "I" as representative of gendered restrictions within a male authority structure.

However, it is interesting that Gilbert and Gubar make the connection between these two contemporary poets in this way; " if we look at the lives and works of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman ... we find the pattern of female self-effacement and male assertion strikingly formulated." (554)

Despite both poets arguably creating a universal "I" that is representative, the critics Gilbert and Gubar view the poets as writing gendered poetry.

Despite Barthes's insistence that we must reject the notion of authorship, stating that "To give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text" (Barthes), Gilbert and Gubar's critical response is based on the gendered associations of the author to their text. This suggests that despite creating a representative "I" it will always remain partial due to the constraints of the identity of the author. With this view, Whitman's literary self must be viewed as representative but only as a partial representation as he is limited to the cultural truths that define his own self, such as gender, race and ethnicity.

Overall I would argue that the American Literary self, as presented in Whitman's work, is a representative self. Although the true existence of a universal "I" must be questioned, it remains that it is impossible to locate a single unifying voice within Whitman's *Song of Myself*. Whitman is encouraging the reader to view the various voices within the poem as cumulatively creating the new American identity and thus the American literary self must be seen as representative. However we should question perhaps question the existence of an American identity. The founding fathers of America are essentially immigrants themselves, and thus it can be difficult to attribute an 'identity' to the so-called 'United States of America' at all.

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