



CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY IN THE POETRY OF WALT WHITMAN

Vishal Agarwal

Research Scholar

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Abstract

Walt Whitman is said to be the voice of democracy among the prominent figures in American literature. His work, even in his prolific Leaves of Grass, displays that strong vision of democracy so far off from political mentality. The core realities he exhibits are liberty, equality, and human dignity. He declares ordinary men great heroes and claims them to be the true heroes of the earth. His poetry reflects an inclusive, spiritual democracy that promotes interconnectedness of the sacredness of every individual in collective human unity. Free verse, Whitman uses unassuming language to speak of a democratic vision that speaks of people. His work challenges readers to embrace democracy not only as a political ideal but as a principle based on compassion, individualism, and mutual respect. This paper examines Whitman's idea of democracy through his poetry, reflecting on unity, freedom, and equality in showing how his works offer a framework of living by democratic ideals, forever. Whitman's poetry has the power to inspire a future generation on individualistic and societal levels.

Keywords: *Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, Whitman's poetry, Political Doctrine, Civilization and Democracy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest writers in American history, Walt Whitman is frequently recognized as the 19th-century democratic poet. His poetry reveals a deep comprehension of democracy as a concept



that encompasses social life, personal identity, and interpersonal connections, rather than just as a form of government. During a time of profound social and political upheaval, including the Civil War, the abolitionist movement, and waves of industrial revolution, Whitman believed that democracy was crucial to the creation of a fair and cohesive society. He aimed to produce a literary vision that would not only honor these values but also encourage readers to act out these goals in their own lives because he firmly believed in liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Whitman's most well-known composition, *Leaves of Grass*, which was produced in a unique free-verse style that mirrored his revolutionary approach to poetry, is a monument to his democratic ideals. By rejecting traditional forms and frameworks, Whitman's use of free poetry reflected his values of individualism and freedom, allowing a variety of American identities to be expressed and dismantling societal barriers. Writing in an approachable and straightforward style, Whitman sought to produce poetry that would speak to everyone, from laborer's and farmers to academics and politicians. He saw America as a "melting pot" where people from different walks of life could come together and improve each other's lives while also making a positive impact on society, and his poetry reflects this idea.

The core of Whitman's democratic philosophy is his dedication to the "common man." In order to honor the dignity of each person's distinct path and the interconnectivity of all lives, he frequently concentrated on common people and everyday situations. Poems like "Song of Myself" and "I Hear America Singing" highlight his ideals of self-worth and group cohesion, demonstrating that democracy is about more than simply political representation—it's also about respecting one another's differences. Whitman's poetry celebrates the hardships and goals of people from diverse backgrounds and emphasizes their contributions to the larger democratic fabric. Through encapsulating the essence of varied American perspectives, he develops a vision of democracy based on empathy and inclusivity. Whitman's view of democracy was also spiritual and transcendent by nature, frequently obfuscating the distinctions between the individual and the universal, the personal and the collective. He saw democracy as a holy thread that bound people to one another and to a greater good. This sense of interconnectivity runs throughout his writing, implying that democracy is a cosmic concept that unites all life in addition to being a social structure. His poetry encourages readers to identify with others and to view each individual as a



vital component of a more harmonious whole. As a result, Whitman's writings promote a profoundly compassionate view of democracy in which acceptance, love, and understanding are fundamental.

This study will analyse Whitman's definition of democracy as it appears in his poetry, looking at the ways in which he conveys his ideas through the themes of equality, solidarity, freedom, and individualism. Through an examination of Whitman's poetic language, structure, and use of free verse, we will discover how his writings provide a model for democratic living that is not limited by space or time. Whitman's poetry is still relevant today as a literary masterpiece and as a call to action for the next generation to accept democratic values in their most basic form, which are based on empathy, solidarity, and respect for the individual spirit. Through his writings, Whitman urges us to see democracy as a manifestation of human potential and connectivity rather than just as a political goal.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Redding, P. (2010) examined what occurs when the power of Whitman's poetic example is separated from his notion of democratic poetics. This essay argues that by doing this, modern literary academics will be able to go beyond *Leaves of Grass* as the accepted definition of what it means to be "democratic" in poetry. Reversing the typical critical focus on Whitman's practice's effects by framing the issue as a theoretical one diverts our attention from conventional enquiries about Whitman's "influence" on succeeding thinkers like Carl Sandburg, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and Allen Ginsberg. In order to demonstrate how modernist critics implemented Whitman's theory in ways that deviated from his original ideas—or, in some cases, how they outright rejected his views—this article instead follows a particular period in American literary history, the 1910s and 1920s. Two surprising facts about American literary history and its theoretical underpinnings are brought to light by Whitman's uneven reception during these years: first, that there were already alternatives to Whitman's theory of democratic poetics in American literary discourse as early as 1912; and second, that a subset of the literary movement known as modernism, which is frequently associated with fascism, authoritarianism, or aristocratic elitism



in politics, was actually quite interested in establishing a link between poetry and political democracy.

Mangong, L. (2018) claimed that in reality, the democratic ideal that protects each person's right to free expression in a perplexing manner is what led to the contentious Trump administration in America today. The nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" explains democracy, which is one of the pillars of the American ideal of free speech. This essay explores literary analysis of the poem's depiction of democracy. When the poem's idea of democracy is connected to the way democracy is currently practiced in America under President Trump's leadership, the conversation becomes more focused. By using Mack as an example, the article will analyse Whitman's poem's pragmatic elements. It will also use Price to highlight the poem's xenophobic elements. Since democracy is currently causing the American people to enter a period of protest, it is concluded that even an idealistic concept like democracy is not totally ideal. The essay concludes by putting forth the theory that reading about democracy in literature helps one to develop a more critical perspective on the idea.

Pajović, S. P. (2016) studied the theme of democracy in Walt Whitman's writings from the perspective that it is fundamental to humanity. The paper's first section discusses how Whitman's conception of democracy and the poem's titular motif were derived from human nature rather than the established political systems. As noted in the essay's second section, his poetry is therefore focused on the individual and detached from democratic institutions. Since democratic sensibility is innate to all people, regardless of their location, ethnicity, or religion, Whitman views the building of the democratic ability as a natural process. The word "sympathy" runs throughout Walt Whitman's discussion on democracy.

El, E. (2021) sought to illustrate the ways in which Whitman and Henri helped to democratize literature and the arts. Walt Whitman, who lived from 1819 to 1892, was a very significant poet and essayist whose writings impacted numerous other poets, authors, and even painters. His writing for and about marginalized people was the primary characteristic that set him apart from his peers. By addressing individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic groups, and cultural traditions, he has made literary contributions. Because he wanted everyone to be able to



understand his writings, he preferred using simple language and emotion. His book *Leaves of Grass*, which outlines his conception of democracy, was widely criticized upon its release. But other artists were inspired by his imaginative literary comprehension and were able to follow him. Robert Henri, one of his most significant disciples, concentrated on common people in his writings, such as Whitman. In opposition to the popular perception of art that was centered on the wealthy, aristocrats, and elites, Whitman and Henri's perspective became a pillar in the democratization of literature and the arts.

Najdek, C. M. (2013) examined the democratic political thought of Walt Whitman. It exposes a thinker who used his artistic and intellectual talents to rejuvenate democratic ideas in reaction to the turbulent events of mid-nineteenth century, in contrast to popular interpretations that portray him as an enthusiastic but largely uncritical democrat. It moves chronologically through Whitman's mature work, starting with *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, exploring his ideas as they evolved in his later poetry and prose, particularly in *Democratic Vistas* in 1871. The research looks at three important aspects of his thinking: identity, political renewal, and internationalism. It does this by closely examining his political writings, letters, and unpublished manuscripts. Whitman's portrayal of democratic culture serves as the foundation for each of these issues. He saw this culture as the emotional glue that might keep democracy together by establishing democratic values in the people's daily lives and laying the groundwork for a common national and eventually global identity. Whitman's political philosophy offers contemporary democratic thinkers both insight and motivation as modern democracy spreads around the world.

3. WHITMAN'S NOTION OF DEMOCRACY

The democratic goal that Woodsworth outlined in the "Prelude" is still the aim of a visionary. Even Shelley's conception of democracy is still, at most, a theoretical ideal. Whitman's idea of democracy, however, cannot be written off as a pipe dream. For the English liberals of the first decade of the twentieth century, his "Democratic Vistas" served as a kind of contemporary Bible. The "Democratic Vistas" are undoubtedly a timeless declaration of liberal democracy's ideal as well as its core values, which democracy ceases to be if it violates them. Therefore, Whitman's art



praises both the tensions that unite people in a multi-coloured community and the variety of individuals that comprise a society. He writes,

"I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,

Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong, in "I Sing of America."

As he measures his beam or plank, the carpenter sings.

As he gets ready for work or leaves work, the mason sings his song.

The steamboat deckhand singing, the boatman singing what is rightfully his in his vessel...

The sweet singing of the mother, the young wife at work,

The girl doing the laundry or sewing, each of them singing what is exclusively theirs ..."

3.1. Whitman, America and Democracy

Whitman's poetry about democracy in America became poetry about democracy at the same time because he recognised America's democratic values. "From an American point of view, I will report all heroism," he declared. Yet his vision of America is neither narrowly nationalistic nor provincial. Whitman's discussion of the unique locations in America adheres to Goethe's poetical principle that the universal is the particular. The universal of which these states were the particulars in Whitman's poetry is democracy, and Democrats, in Whitman's unusual and reflective sense of the word, i.e., those who think that the only path to corporate progress towards the good is a self-governing society of free and responsible individuals, have had no trouble viewing Whitman's America as the city of their own souls. Whitman considered democracy to be the natural order; in reality, it was a universal law. It encompassed all possible human life circumstances. It used the justification that love extends in a way that is universally just. For Christians, it was the earthly manifestation of Heaven's kingdom.



"The poet is the equable man of these States," claims Whitman. One who perceives and behaves justly is considered equable. Whitman claims that the reason the poet performs this better than the politician is:

"[The poet] gives each thing or quality the appropriate amount, not too much nor too little,

He supplies what needs supplying and checks what needs checking;

He is the key; he is the arbitrator of the varied; and he equalizes his age and country.

From him emanates the spirit of tranquilly; he is vast, wealthy, and frugal;

He builds communities full of people;

He promotes agriculture, the arts, and commerce; he lights the way to knowledge about man, his soul, health, immortality, and governance.

When he looks into the distance, his trust is unwavering, and

He judgements not like a judge but like the sun setting on a defenseless object.

People are not just ideas or random specks to him; rather, he perceives eternity in them."

3.2. Democracy not mere Political Doctrine

Democracy was not more political doctrine in Whitman's view. Whitman intended liberty by democracy. It welcomed freedom from more than just the tyranny of literary tyrants. "The brilliance of all foreign literature is clipped and cut small compared to our genius, and it is basically insulting to our usage and to the organic compact of these states," Whitman stated.

Whitman saw that writers could only produce great works if they were freed from Aristotle's apron strings. His time no longer adhered to the past masters' norms. Indeed, "the air was too strong" to support the continuation of conventional models and forms.

4. WHITMAN THE POET OF ALL MEN

Whitman decided to sing for all men and women because he was a natural believer in democracy and the equality of all men in American society, whose representation he held. In addition to



elaborating Whitman's own self, "Song of Myself" speaks about the self of every other human being. He states:

*"I go down and chant my own praises,
What I assume, you will assume as well,
because you are the rightful owner of every excellent atom that is mine."*

Whitman associates himself with both noble and ignoble, good and bad, high and base. He sings of both good and evil because he believes that everything that is alive has the right to exist.

Whitman thinks the greatest hope and security for the States will be found in this growth of America and comradeship, which he views as a certain growth from seed already in the soil. He sees in it a force that can spiritualise the lives of American men and balance out the materialism, greed, and vulgarity of American democracy. Whitman understands that many may consider this certainty to be a fantasy, but he believes that a democracy's very existence implies this kind of loving camaraderie, "without which it will be insufficient, pointless, and unable to reproduce itself."

4.1. Whitman and the Self-Esteem of Common Man

Wordsworth stated in the "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" that "the poet is a man speaking to men." Whitman appeared to share this belief regarding the function of a poet. He thought that the era of feudal lords, monarchs, and queens was permanently over. The new heroes were regular people in regular occupations. Whitman regarded all individuals as equals and all occupations as equally respectable because he believed in the dignity of the average person. Supermen, the embodiment of the human being who is the fundamental norm of all humanity, existed; there was no such thing as a superman. The average person, also known as "the illustrious everyone" or "divine average," was the most authentic example of true humanity.

The supreme authority and the average person are equally blessed. According to him, every man is surrounded by a "nimbus of gold-coloured light." "The human body is sacred if anything is," he



declared. He extols the virtues of each and every human being in his poetry. Even though he witnessed lousy manners, poor health, and low morals everywhere he looked, he firmly felt that most people were nice. His poetry is for everyone, both then and now.

"The United States' greatest and brightest minds are not to be found in its presidents, senators, diplomats, writers, universities, churches, parlors, or even its inventors or media. nonetheless the majority of the time among regular folks," Whitman states later in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*.

Despite "hopelessness, mismanagement, defeat," his faith in the "unnamed, unknown rank and file" was validated by his experience in the Civil War. "Democracy is more of a grand experiment for the development of the individual than it is a political system," he stated. Despite all of its frightening drawbacks, American political democracy provides a training ground for creating first-class men.

5. PROGRESS OF CIVILIZATION AND DEMOCRACY

It was the democratic structure of society, not the world's huge libraries or the brilliant theories of great philosophers and historians, that held the key to the cyclical advancement of civilization. Whitman also thought that all men were created equal. He believed that the only way to evaluate a piece of art was based on how much it advanced the cause of humanity as a whole. His abundant vitality makes everything around him a source of the greatest joy; he doesn't look to antiquity for brave men and lovely ladies; "What is most common, least expensive, closest, and simplest is me. I'm not pleading with the heavens to grant me goodwill; I'm just freely dispersing it eternally." Here are few excerpts that demonstrate Whitman's joyful empathy for men: -

*"So far, I've thought that spending time with the people I care about,
enjoying a meal with friends in the evening, being in the company of lovely,
inquisitive, living, laughing flesh, walking among them, touching anyone, and briefly resting my
arm around their neck are all enough.*

So, what is this?"

5.1. Leaves of Grass as a Chronicle of Democracy



Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" is a democratic tale. Whitman stated in the 1855 Preface that "the United States themselves are the greatest poem." In this poem, "One's self I sing, a simple separate person, you utter the word democratic, the word enmasse," the common man—the quintessential poet—is the protagonist.

The spirit of expansion is personified by this epic democracy's hero. This spirit of expansion signifies unity with the rest of the globe and has nothing to do with imperialism or territorial aggrandisement.

“Ready and waiting are the large doors of the rural barn;

The harvest-time dried grass fills the sluggish waggon;

The brown, grey, and green intertwined surfaces sparkle under the bright sunlight;

The bags are strapped to the drooping mower.

As I stretched out on top of the burden,

I could feel the gentle jolts as I leaned one leg on top of the other.

I was there, and I helped.

From the beams that support the ceiling, I leap to grab the timothy and clover.

And I'll spin around on my heels, twist my hair with wisps.”

5.2. Democracy and Religion

According to Middleton Murry, Whitman's distinctive contribution to the democratic movement is that he established democracy based on religious principles. According to him in "Democratic Vistas," democracy is the advancement of social structure and material opportunity, as well as the teaching of Christ that the soul's nature is not so transcendent that it places all people on an equal footing. The application of Christ's teaching on the equality of souls is democracy.

5.3. Whitman’s Poetry Democratic



Whitman's poetry is democratic in addition to his democratic thoughts and concepts. It is straightforward and unassuming, which makes it democratic. Whitman disobeys every conventional prosody and rhythmic structuring device. Whitman uses the simplest language possible so that the majority of readers may understand it. Coleridge once said, "Poetry is the best words in the best order." He does not believe this. He employs everyday language in everyday contexts. He considered poetic devices to be a barrier between the author and his audience. He uses poetry as a means to build relationships with everyone. Whitman claims that anybody who reads his poems gets moved.

6. CONCLUSION

Walt Whitman's poetry bears testament to his vision of democracy, with core elements focused on individual freedom, equality, and the oneness of all humankind. His democratic ideals transcended the political and social constructs in which he lived, going well beyond them into a broader and more embracing notion of what is understood by democracy as a philosophy of unity, respect for individuality, and collective progress. By such works as *Leaves of Grass*, he could exalt and consecrate the common man; thenceforth, by this exaltation, Whitman viewed each individual as an integral part of a greater, harmonious whole. In roughly parallel fashion, his belief in the sanctity of the individual, his rejection of the forms others considered necessary, and his embracing of free verse parallels his democratic vision. He advocated the perfect space in his poetry that gave every voice - the labourer's as well as the intellectual's - the voice a true democracy romantic. His unique twist of spirituality and democratic thought termed democracy as a transcendental principle where as it relates all men to a final purpose cosmically. This vision brings the reader to democracy not merely as a political system but as a way of living: based on sympathy, love, and appreciation for the dignity of every human. In short, Whitman's poetry is a blueprint for democracy as highly relevant today. His works keep challenging us to live by the principles of democracy – equally equal, free, respected, which have to celebrate diversity and set the common good above all. Being a poet of the people, Whitman's legacy stands as a timeless call for a more inclusive, just, and one world.



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Vishal Agarwal
