

## **Optimism and the Poetry of Whitman**

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### **Abstract**

This article prove and to illustrate the dominating presence of optimism in the poetry of Walt Whitman. The optimistic thought of Whitman has been established through the poem “On the Beach at Night”.

The immortality of that something is possibly an indication towards the nature of God. Whitman’s optimism is also displayed through his acceptance of the theory of the transmigration of the soul.

This he could do probably because he was acquainted with the Indian sculpture.

It’s Whitman optimism which conceives of a universal brotherhood and a free democratic world.

### **Introduction**

A close study of the poetry of Whitman illustrates the presence of optimism in his literature.

“Leaves of grass” contains hundred of poems which speak about the optimism of Whitman.

“On the Beach at Night” is one them. He was a poet with a healthy vision and optimistic approach. He wrote what he realized after undergoing his own experiences and exercises of thought.

No poet, as a matter of fact, is a pure artist. He simply can not be because poetry is an expression of the poet’s vision of life.

Whatever may be the themes of a poet but a stage comes when the poet becomes the spokesman of what he thinks about life, about society, about religion and even about God. Although extremely dignified and majestic, Milton ultimately had a tragic view of life which is

best illustrated by his drama Samson Agonistes and his sonnets. William Wordsworth was a great votary of Nature but his two best odes Tintern Abbey and Ode on the intimations of Immortality present him as a person who was not happy within himself. Shelley has been considered a revolutionary but at heart he was a great pessimist and there are reasons which went to make him a pessimist. Keats, in spite of his lofty vision and devotion to Beauty and truth, was a defeated man which is best illustrated by his Ode to the Nightingale and La Belle Dame Sans Merci.

The optimism of Robert Browning is deceptive because merely thinking and living in a dream world can not make a man an optimist. Matthew Arnold is best known as an elegiac poet. Hardy was a pessimist and so was A.E Housman. The modern poet Philip Larkin was also governed by despair and depression. As such we see that every poet, in one way or the other, comes out with his vision of life which is the total result of his observations, experiences and readings. If we look at Indian English poets, Tagore sublimated his faith otherwise he too would have been a poet with a tragic view of life. Among the post-independence poets, Jayant Mahapatra and Kamla Das are poets with a tragic vision. The latter is a poet with, her stories of personal agonies. Bibhu Padhi and Gieve Patel have also written poetry which tells us about the vision of their lives. O.P. Bhatnagar was an illustrious Indian English poet. He always claimed to be a courageous man believing in fighting and struggling but his poetry, on the whole, is the poetry of a man who was lost somewhere in the miseries of life. The scene of India after Independence appeared so much nauseating to him that he wrote poetry which is an expression of his anger and anguish.

It is a misfortune or misfortunes which drive people to sadness, but Whitman was philosophical enough to have concluded that a misfortune is short-lived and so there is nothing to be sad or depressed if a misfortune comes in the life of a man. This thought of Whitman which he developed is best illustrated by his poem On the Beach at Night.

In this poem the child is sad on account of the disappearance of the stars. They become invisible because of the presence of the clouds. It is through the symbol of Jupiter, the Pleiades and the clouds that the father teaches the child that a misfortune appears to be dreadful but since, by its very nature, the misfortune does not last long, the arrival of the misfortune must not cause a great concern. The child portrayed in the poem is ignorant and thinks that the clouds have permanently devoured both Jupiter and the Pleiades. The father tells the child

Weep not , child  
Weep not, my darling  
With these kisses let me remove  
your tears  
The ravening clouds shall not long  
be victorious  
They shall not long possess the sky  
They devour the stars only in apparition  
Jupiter shall emerge, be patient  
watch again another night  
The pleiades shall emerge  
They are immortal, all those stars  
both silvery and, golden shall shine  
out again  
The great stars and the little ones  
shall shine out again, they endure  
The vast immortal suns and the  
long—enduring pensive moons shall shine again  
Then dearest child mournest thou only  
for Jupiter?  
Consider thou alone the burial of the stars?<sup>1</sup>

The father goes one step ahead and says  
Something there is  
More immortal than the stars  
Something that shall endure longer  
even than lustrous Jupiter  
Longer than sun or any revolving satellite  
or the radiant sisters the Pleiades.<sup>2</sup>

This is pure optimism, unconditional optimism which reflects through these lines. The immortality of that “something” is possibly God that gives the poet the firm ground to stand on. It is in this manner that Whitman contrasts the Short-livingness of a misfortune against the

immortality of what he calls something more immortal even than the stars. The poet's description of the appearance and disappearance of clouds suggests that he does not attempt to explain why misfortunes visit a man.

This optimism is akin to the optimism of the Indian seers and mystics, of the Indian philosophers like Gautam Buddha. Whitman's treatment of the subject of death fully illustrates his optimism with which he lived. The poet is not afraid of death because it is never the final end of life. The poet says :

As to you Death , and you bitter hug of  
mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me  
To his work without flinching the  
accoucheur comes, I see the elder hand  
pressing receiving supporting  
I recline by the sills of the exquisite doors  
And mark the outlet, and mark the  
relief and escape.<sup>3</sup>

The Whitman scholar is of the view that he was an extra—ordinary poet gifted with the instrument of hope and faith. The critic says :

Walt Whitman, more than any other  
American poet till his time, found  
his strength in optimism. He, with  
his own conclusions reached the fact  
that there is more hope than despair  
in the world provided one is able to see  
into the mysteries of life. Nature is  
very secretive and one will have to  
go deep into the moods of nature to find  
out that ultimately it is futile to  
complain or whine at the invasion  
of a misfortune.<sup>5</sup>

Whitman's optimism is displayed through his acceptance of the theory of the transmigration of the soul. This he could do probably because he was acquainted with the Indian

Scriptures like Upanishads and Gita. He has written “No doubt, I have died myself ten thousand times before”. In the same connection, Whitman says:

We have thus far exhausted trillions  
of winters and summers.  
There are trillions ahead  
And trillions ahead of them.<sup>6</sup>

Whitman thought that man is evolving towards greater and greater progress. In such a context, death is not an end but a preparation for rebirth in a better life. It is his optimism which conceives of a universal brotherhood, a free democratic world. He says “a reborn race appears- a perfect world, all joy!” “Whitman sees the discoveries and inventions in the field of science and geography as part of evolutionary, progress of man This conviction has been expressed in the poem Pioneers ! O Pioneers and also in the poem Passage to India.

A great evidence or the optimism of Walt Whitman is the broadness of his outlook, his great faith in human companionship his dedication to the feeling of oneness with all. The following lines from Leaves of Grass illustrate this attitude adopted by Whitman:

And I know that the spirit of God  
is the eldest brother of my own  
And that all the men ever born  
are also my brothers  
And the women my sisters and lovers  
And that a kelson of the  
creation is love.<sup>7</sup>

Whitman had developed a considerable confidence to fight the calamities and to face the ordeals of life that ordinarily terrify a man. This was on account of his breathing optimism. This is why he said:

I resist anything better  
than my own diversity  
And breathe the air and leave  
plenty after me  
And am not stuck up, and am in my place.<sup>8</sup>

It was in the third period of the development of his mind and understanding that the element of

hope and optimism became a permanent portion of the intellectual properties of Whitman. Floyd Stovall has very correctly observed:

Though he is now never so terribly depressed as he had been after his first great sorrow and disillusionment in 1859, he is keenly aware of the perpetual struggle by which alone one may hope to release his higher impulses from the lower. In the early Leaves he had declared the good and evil of human nature equally acceptable, but now he desires the triumph of the good and pins faith upon it.

..... Thus we see that Whitman in old age turned even more definitely to thoughts of the spiritual side than poets ordinarily do in old age. It is the more remarkable because of his early materialism.<sup>10</sup>

The greatest evidence of Whitman's optimism can be traced in his most important poem Song of Myself. The poem can be considered a composition which is very much rich in the mystical element. The very title of the poem indicates that it is something quite different from the poems normally written by the poets. The deep analysis present in the poem, the elevation of thought present in the poem, the enlightened explanation of the different things as a given in the poem make it a mystical poem of a very high order. The relationship which Whitman establishes with God (the relationship of a brother) in the poem further indicates the mystical nature of the poem and also the optimistic vision of Whitman. As such, there is no denying nor any need to deny that Song of Myself is a poem with a mystical note that runs in the poem from the beginning to the end.

The optimism of Whitman had reached such a stage that he had no complaint against anybody. He found goodness present everywhere, goodness even in things that are considered evil. There is a conviction in what he says :

All seems beautiful to me  
I can repeat over to men, women  
You have done such good to me  
I would do the same to you  
I will recruit for myself and you  
as you go

I will toss a new gladness and roughness among them  
Whoever denies me, it shall not trouble me  
Whoever accepts me he or she shall be  
blessed and shall bless me.<sup>17</sup>

All optimism melts when a person thinks about death. It is such a phenomena of life which drives a man to pessimism. Whitman was an exception in this regard. In a number of his poems, he teaches his readers that death is not what it appears to be. It does not bring the existence of a person to its end. Whitman has written extensively on the subject of death in his poem Song of Myself The poet says that death is not to be dreaded because it is the friend of man and takes the soul from one body to the other

This simply implies that the poet Whitman had belief in the theory of the transmigration of the soul. This is why he said “No doubt, I have died myself ten thousand times before “. In the same poem, the poet says very optimistically

We have thus far exhausted  
trillions of winters and summers  
There are trillions ahead and  
trillions ahead of them.<sup>19</sup>

Not only this, the poet goes one step ahead and says that it is as fortunate to die as to be born:

Has any one supposed it lucky  
to be born?  
I hasten to inform him or her  
it is just as lucky to die and I know it.<sup>20</sup>

This optimistic view presented by Whitman that the soul never dies is his very significant contribution to the philosophy of life based on the theory of transmigration of the soul.

By asserting that births bring us “richness and variety”, Whitman suggests that the worldly life is not to be shunned . It has to be used in the fullest possible sense in order to acquire richness and variety.

Whitman tells how to be happy and optimistic. He suggests the ways and means to be happy and optimistic. He suggests the change of attitude towards life .

The optimism of Whitman has been considered to have been influenced by the Indian Vedantic thought.

The Indian Vedantics like Shankaracharya consider it to be troublesome to be born again and again to die again and again and to pass the troublesome period inside the womb of the mother . Hence, they have talked of liberation or mukti from this process of birth and death.

Whitman, on the contrary, has never talked about the liberation or Mukti. He is happy with the process of birth as , he is of the view, that births enrich one increasingly and he says in Song of Myself " Births have brought us richness and variety! And other births will bring us richness and variety.

The entire Leaves of Grass is replete with valuable exhortations of Walt Whitman and these exhortations tell us about his optimism, h his joy and his concern with hope. The following lines are significant enough to suggest that there is a clear message given by the poet :

The soul is very perfect judge of  
her own motions, If your mind does  
not dictate to her. Because the  
mind always says Charity ! Charity!  
you don't have to force your soul

Such a person as Whitman was, inspite of sudden flashes of sadness, remains full of faith and hopes, in the betterment of mankind. Whitman, as a poet of hope, also laid stress on fraternity and brotherhood. He believed that without fraternity and brotherhood, democracy can not survive. Whitman never felt depressed inspite of the sordid atmosphere in which he lived. His mystic awareness also largely contributed to his optimism. He was firmly of the view that man is evolving towards a greater and greater progress. In such a condition, death is not an end but a real preparation for another birth into a better life. It is Whitman's optimism which conceives of a universal brotherhood and a free democratic world.

Conclusion:

The optimism of Whitman is best illustrated by his poem "on the beach night". The optimism of the poem is pure and unconditional. Whitman had developed a considerable confidence to fight

calamities and to face the ordeals of life that ordinarily terrify a man.

This was on account of his breathing optimism.

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