

## Romantics in Whitman

Walt Whitman was an American poet who wrote the masterpiece “Song of Myself” which is included in his work *Leaves of Grass*. “Song of Myself” was included as one of the twelve controversial pieces included within Whitman's initial release of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Both *Leaves of Grass* and “Song of Myself” went through several revisions throughout Whitman's lifetime. “Song of Myself” reached it's final permutation in 1881. Whitman spent his entire life writing *Leaves of Grass*.

I celebrate myself, and I sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you (Whitman, 1-3).

“Song of Myself” throws shock at its audience, especially a segregated audience of the 1800s, immediately in the first sentence. Whitman lets you understand his intent right from the beginning, his intent to redefine what the reader had previously known to be poetry. In the first sentence, Whitman shows the reader that the piece is about himself, the piece is going to contradict the normal order of a proper poetic piece, and that the reader will be forced to assume that everything is created equally, whether it be black or white, human or natural. The audience will only get increasingly more uncomfortable as Whitman progresses the eristic point he has just introduced.

Whitman's poetry is a significantly different structure than previous Romantic poets', however the structure it takes seems to be far more affective due to its intense honest. Perhaps this is why it was received so harshly when it was first written. “Song of Myself” takes the

reader on an excruciatingly detailed and honest journey that connects on some level with anyone that reads it.

A child said *What is the grass?* Fetching it to me with full hands;  
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he  
(Whitman, 98-100).

The reader is thrown into Whitman's world, forced to examine every bit of it with a childlike wonder. This is known as abandonment, the technique Whitman uses in all of his works that the culture at the time considered to be going too far. Abandonment is safe for something like a piece of grass, but when applied to the entire world, especially the provocative and sexual as Whitman does throughout "Song of Myself," it begins to make people uncomfortable.

The end of Poetry is to produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure; but, by the supposition, excitement is an unusual and irregular state of the mind; ideas and feelings do not, in that state, succeed each other in accustomed order. If the words, however, by which this excitement is produced be in themselves powerful, or the images and feelings have an undue proportion of pain connected with them, there is some danger that the excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds  
(Wordsworth, 26-32).

Whitman certainly knows how to produce excitement in the reader, to grip them. Though he's discussing and describing himself in "Song of Myself," the reader is constantly forced to reflect upon themselves as well with everything that Whitman says. It's not only an unusual and irregular state of mind, as Wordsworth says, but also a bit uncomfortable for Whitman to be so easily and clearly describing the thoughts that he is also at the same time forcing the audience to form in their own heads.

The smoke of my own breath,  
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,  
My respiration and inspiration the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air  
through my lungs,  
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color'd sea-rocks, and  
of hay in the barn (Whitman, 21-24) ...

Walt Whitman also holds dearly to this idea of transcendentalism; the idea that he and all nature, all beings, all races, all sexes are equal. The idea is laced throughout the entirety of *Leaves of Grass* and especially “Song of Myself.” While self reflection and personal conviction may have been prevalent players in the Romantics prior to Whitman and Wordsworth, declaring everything as equal was certainly not. This was a new concept in America that caught on with Whitman, but it had been introduced to an extent with Wordsworth fifty years prior.

Nature be thus cautious to preserve in a state of enjoyment a being so employed, the Poet ought to profit by the lesson held forth to him, and ought especially to take care, that, whatever passions he communicates to his Reader, those passions, if his Reader’s mind be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure (Wordsworth, 33-36).

Wordsworth and Whitman both hated segregation and wanted to use their poetry to convince the world that it wasn't the way the world was meant to be. Wordsworth was largely unsuccessful during his lifetime, but Whitman managed to catch on somehow. Whitman became the leader of a drastic shift in the Romantic style. He was the leader of the Americanization of Romanticism. His poetry was still full of surreal feelings and expression, visions and tales, but the images painted weren't that of what used to be the sublime. Whitman's word pictures weren't of a world that no one had ever seen or, in all reality, never could see without doing drugs. Whitman wrote about the ordinary world as sublime.

Not only is the imagery different in Whitman's poetry from the old Romantics, but the structure is completely different. There is still structure, to be sure, but it is entirely different and was not understood when Whitman or Wordsworth first released their works.

Where structure, word pictures, and descriptive feelings used to dominate the content of Romantic poetry, now the reader must seek out the feeling in the poetry. Instead of being told how to feel, the reader chooses how he or she is going to feel towards the particular piece

because the reader has some experience with the content itself. Whitman enjoyed writing this way because, instead of writing cryptically about experiences no one could ever know except the prophets that were poets, he could explicitly describe something that everyone sees in everyday life in such detail, and the person would feel about that thing however they truly felt about that thing in real life.

On top of these feelings, Whitman also introduced his controversies, concepts that people in the culture were familiar with but were certainly not comfortable with. Ideas of equality, specifically in races, sexes, ages, and choices in lifestyle. Whitman considered all equal; no one was better than he, and he was no better than anyone else.

Through his works, Walt Whitman has completely changed what the world accepts as poetry. With the honesty and vulgarity of his poems, he introduced a shocking new genre that caught on due to the self-reflective power it had. Because of his influence in the foundation of this genre of Romanticism in poetry, Walt Whitman can easily be labeled the father of American poetry. Whitman was the culmination of the thoughts and ideas that Wordsworth had fifty years earlier.

## **Works Cited**

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