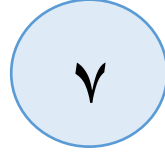


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# The Search for the True Self in Walt Whitman's *The Song of Myself*

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## Abstract

This research handles how the American poet Walt Whitman (1819 -1892) is much concerned with the quest for the true self in his great poem, *The Song of Myself*. In fact, Whitman derives his search for the true self from diverse sources: personal, national, and mystical. The poem is a symphonic celebration of Whitman's vision of how a true sense of the self must be formulated in a way as to feel jubilant about his life. Hence, this paper is an attempt to shed light on Whitman's approach to the archetypal American and human self in his great epic, *The Song of Myself*. The paper concludes that Whitman strongly believes in a multitude of voices which are necessarily conducive to the formulation of a true self as adroitly portrayed in *The Song of Myself*.

**Keywords:** Self, identity, Whitman, *Song of myself*, American poetry

البحث عن الذات الحقيقية في قصيدة والت ويطمان اغنية نفسي

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## المخلص

يتناول هذا البحث كيف أن الشاعر الأمريكي والت ويتمان (1819-1892) مهتم كثيرا بموضوع البحث عن الذات الحقيقية في قصيدته العظيمة " اغنية نفسي. " وفي حقيقة الأمر ، يستمد ويتمان بحثه عن الذات الحقيقية من مصادر متنوعة وهي مصادر شخصية، ووطنية وصوفية. وتعد القصيدة احتفالا سيمفونيا بروية ويتمان لطريقة خلق شعور حقيقي للذات بأسلوب يجعله مبهجا في حياته. وعليه، يحاول هذا البحث القاء الضوء على مقارنة ويتمان للذات الأمريكية النموذجية في ملحمة الكبيرة اغنية نفسي. " ويخلص القول أن ويتمان يعتقد اشد الاعتقاد بتعدد الاصوات التي تفضي إلى تشكيل ذات حقيقية كما وصفت ببراعة في قصيدة " اغنية نفسي. "

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذات، الهوية، ويتمان، اغنية نفسي، الشعر الأمريكي

## Introduction

There is almost unanimous agreement among critics that Walt Whitman(1819- 1892) is one of the greatest poets America has ever seen. Such a prominent poetic status is fundamentally attributed to his treatment of how the American nation attempted to formulate a typical independent identity. Such a search for identity is clearly reflected in his great poetic achievement, *Leaves of Grass*. In the last decade, *Leaves of Grass* has been widely studied, and it has presented a significant challenge to both supportive and critical reviewers since its initial publication. Whitman intensively prospered in detecting *himself* in this book letting the readers

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feel urged to reveal out the mysteries and the hidden insight about life within the imagery, concepts, and even the structural elements of his poems (Allen, p.1). Kenneth Burke states that Whitman has accomplished a task of personalization in *Leave of Grass*, especially in the second edition(p.27). In addition to that, the major theme of his book is “en mass” (Maitra, p. 15). However, Whitman has demonstrated two basic dimensions in *Leave of Grass*: himself and the *self of America and the Americans*. He is much concerned with the construction of a democratized American self or identity, and by extension, a universal self. "This concept of a universal self that permeates all things and all beings solves the crisis of belief by embracing all beliefs, however contradictory, in one vast unity " (Strandberg, p. 479).

Three remarkable points are needed to be discussed regarding Whitman’s personal life: the first is that his sensual feeling which was affirmative Emersonian; the second is, as an editor, his experience of writing which made him think, know, and analyze the prior political events and the contemporary life (Maitra15). The third point is that Whitman's personal and public problems had a massive impact on writing *Leaves of Grass* which appeared in different editions. In fact, Whitman lost his job in the government Clerkship in the Department of the Interior on 30 July 1865( Jeffares, pp. xiii- xiv), a matter which exacerbated his situation, thereby driving him to search for a truer and safer self. He further suffered from a depressing emotional problem whose details were never openly divulged. (Golden, p. 8). On a very general level, the American civil war (1861- 1865) left indelible marks on writing this masterpiece, *Leaves of Grass*, an event which changed the course of his life in his feverish quest for the self.

Walt Whitman's fascination with the subjective facets of his search for the self is transparently shown in his *Leaves of Grass* in general and *The Song of Myself* in particular. Arguing for what he calls “the rhetorical ethico-politics of subjectivity operating in Whitman’s text” , Bertolini explains:



*[E]ven as the author of *Leaves of Grass*, who has his speaker name himself “Walt Whitman,” continually tempts the reader to identify the speaking “I” of his lyric with him, he also repeatedly deflects those identifications, inviting the reader instead to see the self-gaining expression in the poetry as “being realized” – being instantiated, rendered real, brought into being – through the reader’s participatory agency ( qtd. in Kummings, p. 95).*

So, there are two selves, as Bertolini explains, but they are compounded – the abstract “you,” which is the reader, and the “lyric persona,” which is the speaker. The two selves are brought together into one, nonetheless, through “hinting,” “reminding,” and “translating.” Bertolini quotes from Robert K. Martin’s *Introduction to The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life After the Life*: “[T]he response to Whitman is mediated through a host of factors including race, history, class, nationality, gender, and sexuality” (Kummings, p. 95). Martin concludes that “[w]hat Whitman seems to have provided for readers of varied backgrounds and allegiances is a sense of enablement” (xvii). The language, asserts Bertolini, is abstract, by which he does not mean “in the familiar agglomerative and ‘kosmic’ sense . . . but in the sense of Whitman’s attempting at moments to vocally perform a lyric self-devoid of embodied, historically marked concreteness, to be understood as empty form to be filled with content by the reader” (Kummings, p. 95).

In other words, these are abstract bodies. “As Whitman’s conjunction between abstract bodies and empty styles indicates, the curious status of poetic communication in his text has much to do with the notion of his speaker being metaphorically rematerialized in the embodied subjectivities of his readers” (Kummings, p. 95).

*The Song of Myself* is an exemplar of the idea of the search for the true self. However, the interrelating connection of three main bedrock parts in this poem:

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himself, readers, and the self of America has formed a shape of communication in the sense of completing each other searching for their true self . The “unitary, idle, monological” self, Carlisle states is isolated one in the beginning of the poem, meanwhile it governs the rest of the poem(LL.177-178). In other words, Whitman asserts his self-dilation as a unique identity separated from the surrounding which celebrates the Americanness being, but in a way or another he melts this solid entity seeking for a chemical reaction with variety of the outer world in which he finds himself merely an image of it.

Whitman always repeats the pronoun "I" to give an explicit clue to his hoped-for self-identity. "His statements about the self are obvious, declaratory, but the self is anonymous. The nature of the self that represents remains mysterious but the nature of representation itself is transparent." (Kummings, p. 134). His song of the ideal self is that of himself, of the modern man (Kummings, p. 95) , or the "En-Masse" as he calls it his poem *One's Self I sing*:

*One's Self I sing, a simple separate person*

*Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse (LL.1-2).*

Whitman seems possessed by the universal self which expresses itself working out in his epic. "This One's Self', as Tilak maintains, may be taken as his own self, anybody else's self, and ultimately the 'self' of America " (Tilak, p. 74).

This Americanized self is shown in Section 16, which is branded as the model of the Whitmanesque dream of the American self. In his character as a poet, he moulds such an ideal self. Besides he states the American ethos that advocates the idea of equality regardless race, gender, life history, religion, rank, color, ethnicity, etc. In this sense, the persona of the poem “I” involves and portrays out him/herself as a small cosmic that could embody all Americans. In addition, Whitman views an insightful



gaze in picturing the new land which has comprised the variety with acceptance to form a universal self "America."

*I am of old and the young, of the foolish as much as the wise*  
*Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,*  
*Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,*  
*Stuffed with the stuff that is coarse and stuffed with the stuff that is fine,*  
*One of the Nation of many nations the smallest the same and the largest the same,*

.....

*A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thoughtfullest,*  
*A novice beginning yet experient of myriads of seasons,*  
*Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,*  
*A farmer, mechanic, artist, a gentleman, sailor, quaker,*  
*A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.*(LL.321-340).

The self embraces many selves and many voices; therefore, Whitman can utter the famous lines: "*Do I contradict myself ?/ Very well then I contradict myself;/ I am large, I contain multitudes*"(LL.1321-1323). The self is dynamic; it is ever enlarging, ever grasping, ever conflicted, and ever changing. Death is simply the final, inevitable change of the self, as the other selves(Burns, p. 172).

The mystical experience is a jumping-off point to the formation of the true self. Man has to go through the dark night of the soul in order to reach the spiritual illumination needed in life. A closer examination of *The Song of Myself* underscores Whitman's interest in the mystical sublimation of the self. In his view of the poem as an embodiment of different stages of, James Miller divides the poem into seven sections which can be summarized as follows:

1. Entry into the Mystical state (Section 1-5).
2. Awakening of the Self (Section 6-16).
3. Purification of the Self (Section 17- 32).
4. Illumination and the dark night of the soul (Section 33- 37).
5. Union: emphasis on faith and love (Section 39- 43).
6. Union: emphasis on perception (Section 44- 49).
7. Emergence from mystical state (Section 50- 52) (Tilak 72-74).

This veil of mysticism pervades the whole texture of the poem. The mystical union of the ego is, undoubtedly, conducive to the spiritual poles of "peace" and "knowledge" and "love" (Saroya, p. 24). In this connection, Whitman expresses his mystical preoccupation:

*And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,  
And I know that the spirit of God is the 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,  
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping  
in the fields,  
And brown ants in the little wells beneath  
them,  
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd  
stones, elder, mullein and poke- weed. (LL.85-90)*





In the above-mentioned lines from section 5, Whitman uses synecdoche that articulates as a reference to the whole contextual true self in section 5 in which he shows a holy deity consisting of a unified mystical vision. Hitherto, this shows the relationship between himself and the outer spiritual world: Tilak asserts that as a consequence of this mystical unity along with the divine of the persona's soul is pervaded with wisdom and knowledge along with peace, then the poet figured out his soul and body are made by God, and both of them are sacred (83).

Whitman's mysticism brings to mind the same mystical experience contained in Eliot's *The Four Quartets* which culminates in the Eliotian concept of the still point where the soul becomes serene. Being the poet of the soul and the body, Whitman extols the personal and universal self in a mesmeric manner.

In section seven, there is a slight inclination toward awareness to recognizing the *Self*. The “*I*” appeals to the uniqueness of the persona in referring others' resemblance creating a tagged image of an unseen *Self*. Using negation is another remarkable grammatical use which shows a substantiation of the true self of the speaker. Carlisle claims that Whitman has assumed he is not an adjunct of the earth, but he insinuates that the truth is this relation is intermediate and reciprocal (186). In the other side, Tilk comments that the persona's self encompasses until it approaches the entire self-verification with embracing all humankind (86). He adds that “*I*” in this section is likely separated eyewitness and is not bond to others' deeds yet participating all experiences but from distance observing the exhibition of life (87). The traditional mystics, the poet's ego or *self* extends heading outside and approaching the real identification (87):

***I am not an earth, nor an adjunct of an earth; I am the mate***

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and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as  
myself; (They do not know how immortal, but I know.) (LL.128-130)*

In understanding the real encompassing and manifold identity of the *Self* In section 24, Whitman uses a highly cosmic reference by stating his own name. Right here, the persona makes a question to grasp the readers' attention dragging them to a circulated zone of meditating their transcendental beings. In this context, the poet implicationally reveals his democratic and nationalist exhibition stimulating the American identity. John Kinnaird, in his essay "*Leaves of Grass and the American Paradox*" , mentions that it is an operational celebration of matrimony within Whitman (p.30). A proxy "Walt Whitman," within "I" and "soul" had figured out a more than personal, a more than public, "identity"; an expressed idea of himself which is self-dramatic illustration, but it is still solitary (p.30). This reflects a global mythical notion (p.30):

***Walt Whitman am I, a Kosmos, of mighty Manhattan the son,*(L.492)**

Kinnaird further adds that this line gives three remarkable dramatic phases as Whitman himself indicates: the first is it might be identified as the Whitman Manhattan, the second is associated with the poet's inclination masculine representation of himself, and the third is that "Kosmos" is the most useable mythical reference of the speaker of the poem. Whitman settled in this image the paradoxes of his conscious identity to a liberal, divine, conventional, rebellious unity of contradictories (p.30).

Approaching and deconstructing the contextual meaning of the question in this line that thrives a psychological insightful interpretation of the persona in order to encapsulate the *true self* in the poem needs a confinement on the real identity features. Whitman's usage of a highly and broad symbolic phenomena gives an inclination to



the readers to dive into finding out who the speaker, self, even the readers themselves are. Kosmos, as an allusion, functions in this context as a new cosmic world which is stated as a signifier and a reference to America praised in this elevated language. The second part of the line advocates the national ethos of America by referring to Manhattan that embodies the whole land.

All in all, it has become increasingly obvious that Whitman's sense of the American democratic self works itself quite clearly in the whole texture *The Song of Myself*. This is so, because he firmly holds the view that American self could be fully realized on the condition that there is an understanding of the self and the other in the American homeland.

## **Conclusion**

Walt Whitman in *The Song of Myself* places much emphasis on the construction of a true self in challengingly turbulent times. *The Song of Myself* contains at its nucleus the universally much- desired self which accepts other's selves and to be

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accepted by others. Whitman creates an invaluable work of art which appeals to vast individuals and nations, no doubt. "The poem... is operating within an esthetic frame in which the vision of the self is shown not as philosophical or mystical, but as a lyrical drama of an epic proportion on the theme of the self " (Saroya 24). Whitman's answer to the crisis of belief lies in his opinion that " When perplexed by not knowing what to believe, one should respond by believing in everything- " *I hear and behold God in every object* " (Strandberg 480 ).

As a matter of fact, Whitman's inclusive inclination toward his nation is a massive entity of thoughts that gather every sect of America in which he tries, in his poems, to mirror both: himself as a citizen and his surrounding environment. Trying to find his *self-realization* by stating controversial self-statements to have others indulged while reading *Leaves of Grass* has left an appeal of all-encompassing in his poetry.

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