

A Look into Walt Whitman's Transcendental Vision in "The Sleepers" in *Leaves of Grass* (1855)

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Abstract

This paper aims at foregrounding the reciprocity and (meta)physical unity between the self and humanity in Walt Whitman's "The Sleepers," which shapes up Whitman's ontological and spiritual experience of humanity. Importantly, Whitman's views about what humanity *should* look like and the way it must be conceptualized are premised upon his microcosmic self that can transcend all (im)material boundaries to a cosmological level. This transcendental process brings nature and culture together and harmonizes them within one unified system where biological, racial, ethnic, and ideological differences cease to exist. The new world prophesized and heavily stressed by Whitman in "The Sleepers" becomes thus free of antagonism, cruelty, and prejudice. Notably, what makes Whitman's prophetic vision possible in the poem is the way this vision is filtered through the symmetrical relationship between the body and soul and the way this relationship echoes the perfection of the universe and the complementary aspect of its natural cycle.

Keywords: transcendental, prophecy, humanity, conflict, Sleepers, Leaves of Grass

1. Introduction

1.1 A Transnetadal and Ontological Perspective

The fluid nature of Walt Whitman's poems in *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and the multitude of the rich thematic implications they represent provide the reader with insightful perceptions about the present consciousness of the realities of today's modern life. Therefore, Whitman's prophetic insight about humanity reflects his profound ontological experience entailed in *Leaves of Grass*. To explore this transcendental and highly suggestive theme, it is quite important that we define the term first. Transcendentalism is a movement that was primarily concerned with the spiritual, non-material side of human life. To find out this theme, this study mainly deals with "The Sleepers," a poem from *Leaves of Grass*. The poem teems with profound themes and sophisticated thoughts, and it is one of the most developed poems in *Leaves of Grass*. Indeed, Michael Reynolds states that "Whitman critics have consistently singled out 'The Sleepers' as one of the more mature poems in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*" (406). Through accepting the self as an ontological being, the poet embraces humanity as his voice and extends his ontological perceptions as being an essential part of his humanity that cannot be separated from the essence of culture and individualism. Throughout the poem, Whitman draws parallels between his own life and the voice of humanity as a whole, which is seen as a unified unit that makes the real world of his own. The voice of humanity in "The Sleepers," however, is embedded in a multilevel structure of ontological and philosophical experiences that not only meet the dynamic symphonies of nature or the natural flow of sound and music expressed in his poem but also harmonize the natural scenes and images of life that keep injecting hope for a better world throughout the poem.

1.2 Individualism in Whitman's "The Sleepers"

Whitman makes every line in each stanza reverberate with life and motion as we consistently feel the voice of

humanity echoing strongly the inner self of the collective unconscious. Even though individualism is a key question in the poem, Whitman makes it more than a resonance to an imaginative self or “Whitman’s self.” Rather, he makes it ontological as much as an individual’s experience, and then he connects it with a broader sense of humanity, especially when he poetically describes the scenes of unity and harmony. Indeed, Whitman reshapes his psychological, political, social, and personal views of humanity through his new prophetic scheme of how humanity should be and the way it should be looked at. Additionally, Whitman does not restrict himself with the classical modes of philosophical boundaries as patterns that govern his inspirational flow throughout the poem, but he rather lets his imagination go far away as much as the voice of humanity is released. Through his understanding of the human voice, Whitman makes every word harmonize with the voice of individualism.

2. A Multicultural Look into Whitman’s “The Sleepers”

Moreover, in his poem “The Sleepers,” Whitman parallels the natural sleep cycle of human nature with the unifying system of humanity. Through Whitman’s poetic lens, the racial and ethnic differences fade away, and the conflicts are gone, signaling a steady movement toward a common culture. He calls upon the voice of humanity with a unifying mechanism away from the stereotypical and archetypal impediments in the process of human communication. Whitman poses a logical argument about the existence of human beings through his philosophical contemplations and observations of human nature and the environment emphasizing the natural and biological nature and structure of human beings. At this level, Whitman addresses the human being on a cosmological or universal level by undermining the discrepancies or barriers based on race, ideology, or culture. According to Kerry Larson, Whitman efficiently uses the communicative style between himself as an individual and the reader as the whole representative of humanity, through using the personal pronoun “I,” and the “union” (62). He builds a harmonizing and unifying technique in his universal dialogue about humanity and human existence through raising thought-provoking questions that deeply touch the reader’s rational mind. Whitman’s “The Sleepers” has much in common with Emerson’s “Melting Pot” because both foreground the voice of humanity and assimilate and accept humanity with all its ramified forms as a universal voice. Interestingly enough, Whitman generates a series of natural examples transcending superimposed boundaries limiting natural interaction. As demonstrated by the stanza below, Whitman underscores this universal mode of speaking to humanity calling for unity:

*The sleepers are very beautiful as they lie unclothed,
They flow hand in hand over the whole earth from east to west as they lie unclothed,
The Asiatic and African are hand in hand, the European and American are hand in hand,
Learn’d and unlearn’d are hand in hand, and male and female are hand in hand. (2011, 114)*

The above lines figure out the normal biological condition of sleeping as a shared characteristic among all human beings whether they are in the Far East or the West. He bridges the racial divides among cultures and between the two genders. This tendency of going beyond gender-based paradigms is manifested when the poet says, “And male and female are hand in hand.”

The use of biological factors to call upon the unified voice of humanity is a clever and logical technique encompassing all humanity because it exceeds the limited stereotypes of gender, race, ideologies, and culture. It touches on the basic fact of the “human body”, signifying the irrelevance and insignificance of spiritual and cultural ideologies that differ among people. In essence, the “human body” is all the same, and this is how the human voice can just address these differences.

In line with the rest of the poems in his collection, Whitman’s “The Sleepers” essentializes ethics of love, sharing, and participation with the other, subverting self-other barriers and ethics of love. For example, looking at Whitman’s self-admiration represented by the *Song of Myself* is not egotistic esteem of the self, but rather an invocation to humanity. Integrating his bond with humans regardless of race, gender, or class, Whitman states, “What I assume you shall assume.” Paying equal attention to all human beings, Whitman celebrates his humanity as a miniature of human existence. Cognizant of this reality, he anticipates that his assumptions are much like those of other people. In this regard, Lorelei Cederstrom explains in “A Jungian Approach to the Self in Major Whitman Poems” that Whitman’s psyche goes through long developmental stages as it moves from the self to the other when he states:

From a Jungian perspective, *Leaves of Grass* traces the process of growth in the psyche as it moves from youth to age and expands through confrontation with, and assimilation of, inner conflicts made consciously. The development of the self begins with the assertions in “*Song of Myself*” of a healthy youthful ego, which has intuitively identified with the transpersonal dimension of the self. Next, the psyche encounters the realities of the “other” (male and female) in *Children of Adam and Calamus*” (81).

Cederdtom continues to show Whitman's Jungian archetypal collective unconscious as embodied in his poem "The Sleepers." When Whitman's personal conscious meets with the collective unconscious that represents human archetypes, "the poet explores the unconscious, and the expansion of the psyche through the union of the personal consciousness with the archetypal unconsciousness is completed. Once individualism has been achieved, the psyche changes its focus" (Cederdtom 81).

3. Discussion and Analysis: The Prophecy about the New World

The idea that Whitman makes a prophecy about a new world governed by humanity is obvious and repeated throughout the poem. Whitman prophesizes a new world system free of enmity, oppression, or injustice. Part of this future vision is his insight on the new role that English will take in ruling the world of humanity, referring to the power, universality, and influence of English on the new generations. Seemingly, Whitman's prophecy of the new ruling language is not a one-sided look, but it is more stemming from his patriotic and contemplative impression of his tongue, so the poet could envision the efficiency of English as a language. This idea is most conceptualized in his poem "Great Are the Myths," where he states:

*Great is language..It is the mightiest of sciences,
It is the fullness and color and form and diversity of the earth..
And of men and women,,and of all qualities and processes;
It is greater than wealth..it is greater than buildings or ships or religions or paintings or music.
Great is the English speech..What speech is as great as the English?
Great is the English brood..What brood has so vast a destiny as the English?
It is the mother of the brood that must rule the earth with the new rule,
The new rule shall rule as the soul rules, and as the love and justice and equality that are in the soul rule.*
(2011, 104)

Whitman points out the supremacy of language to other fields of knowledge. He views language as the most influential means of uniting all human beings under the umbrella of humanity. To him, language starts first from his understanding of the verbal and poetic power of speech and inspiration. He commends and lauds the English language as a major tool to convey the human voice, one without which humanity would not be fully understood. He praises English for helping him to send his vocal messages to humanity, anticipating the new status English will behold in the future. Along with his prophetic voice of humanity and the role English will undertake to unite humanity, Whitman refers to justice and the love of humanity in the same way he perceives the human body:

The new rule shall rule as the soul rules,

and as the love and justice and equality that are in the soul rule ("Great Are the Myths," 2011, 114)

For Whitman, the soul and the body are unifying factors, rather than being dispersing. He refers to the goodness of the soul in the same way he refers to the goodness of the human body. He celebrates the body as much as he does the soul for rendering all humans equal. Interestingly enough, Whitman stresses the fact that human beings are all good simply because the soul is good. He says:

*The expression of the body of man or woman balks account,
The male is perfect and that of the female is perfect* ("I Sing the Body Electric," 2011, 109)

In addition to the beauty and the perfection of the body, he refers to the perfection and the beauty of the soul when he says, "The soul is always beautiful" ("The Sleepers," 2013, 485)

Whitman sees in the symmetry of the human body and soul the perfection of the natural environment and the universe as a whole unified global system. He brings the images of natural systems to show the same systematic balance in the human soul and body, and then, to show the unity of humanity as much as he shows us the unity of the natural balance of nature. He emphasizes,

*The soul is always beautiful, the universe is duly in order..
Everything is in its place, what is arrived in its place,
And what waits is in its place;
The twisted skull waits...*

***The watery or rotten blood waits,
The diverse shall be no less diverse,
But they shall flow and unite...they unite now*** (“The Sleepers,” 2011, 113).

Cmiel Kenneth explains in *Whitman the Democrat* that Whitman’s conception of the soul goes in line with his view about the human body asking for the love of humanity. He argues, “Whitman’s fluid self is another of his ideas very attractive in the late twentieth century. On the one hand, this is a corporeal, sensuous self. In Whitman, the soul is never removed from the body. And in our postmodern age of dissented selves and multiple identities, Whitman’s call for us to make ourselves again and again as we go on, to joyously embrace our contradictions, remains a source of inspiration.” (221).

Whitman’s cosmic view of humanity is built on his structured observations about science, biology, psychology, and nature which are all put in a universal inspirational poetical mode of his imagination. He brings varied images of diverse structures that all shape his prophetic view of humanity and human life. More importantly, Whitman’s observations rise above the physical world to encompass the metaphysical and the spiritual through employing a new perspective about the human existence which he could find in himself as a human being and sharing it with the rest of humankind. For example, Betsy Erkkila in *Walt Whitman Among the French*, notes this new kind of scientific and cosmic spirit in Whitman’s poetry which is clearly shown in *Leaves of Grass*. He claims, “It is to the vast reaches of time and space opened up by scientific exploration that Whitman attributed the new ‘Kosmic Spirit,’ which he regarded as an underlying impetus to the poetry of modern life. Because his poetry includes the scientific and cosmic spirit, the themes and imagery of his poetry are more truly metaphysical than those of Baudelaire” (55).

Whitman brings Emerson’s melting pot in a lively manner through his deep reflection of natural elements engulfed with a communicative monologue within his deep self. Further, Whitman’s feeling of responsibility towards humanity is beautifully illustrated in his consistent view about peace and the harmony of generations and cultures. The fact that Whitman is an anthropic and humanity-loving is shown in his provocative and logical invitation for peace and serenity. His human touches not only approach his existence but leave a huge impact on readers through his overwhelmingly powerful philosophical discourse that is based on contemplations about the body and the soul shared by all living creatures. For example, in “The Sleepers,” Whitman sees everything as beautiful, peaceful, and calm. In Whitman’s eyes, everything that enjoys the sleep quality is beautiful because it is a normal and biological process that all living things must do to maintain their existence. Whitman brings attractive images about sleep as a unifying sign of peace, tranquility, and love. He says:

***Peace is always beautiful,
The myth of heaven indicates peace and night
The myth of heaven indicates the soul;
The soul is always beautiful...It appears more it appears less...It comes or lags behind,
It comes from its embowered garden and looks pleasantly on itself and encloses the world;*** (“The Sleepers”, 2013, 485)

Whitman correlates the peace of the soul to the peace of humanity. Whitman’s ontological experience is extended to the voice of humanity, reviving new terms and perspectives on human philosophy, and thus shaping the new dream about the new world, the new nation that fills the whole universe with rules by which humanity should abide. He refers to cultural pluralism and globalization in a highly poetic sense and honors the cultural diversity of his American society. This diversity echoes the primordial and spontaneous diversity that already exists in nature, bringing a harmonious life and a peaceful image of coexistence. He praises and commemorates his cultural diversity because he could see how this could bring him happiness, optimism, joy, and more importantly humanity. He approves of the way his cultural diversity brings him peace, satisfaction, and love. Whitman admits his egotism when he says, “I know perfectly well my egotism” (“Song of Myself,” 2011, 94). However, he could see how his individualism makes him realize the humanity within. It is his non-stop reflection on humanity that gives him this invigorating power. Trying to see within, Whitman reflects deeply on his own soul:

***O my soul! If I realize you I have satisfaction,
Animals and vegetables! If I realize you I have satisfaction,
Laws of the earth and air! If I realize you I have satisfaction.*** (“Sleepers,” 2011, 104)

Through his deep self, he can only see the humanity of others, and only through nature he could realize the harmony

of life, and this is the only way that would make him satisfied with his being. While Whitman sings his soul and his body, his egotistical journey of the self does not alienate him from where he belongs, but he rather realizes that he could only be part of this universe if he realizes the humanity of others. Whitman calls upon humanity, and thus he calls for freedom and antislavery. He refuses the human boundaries not just on the body, but also on the soul because he sees nature as the ultimate freedom to which human beings belong. From his point of view, slavery is a deviation from the norms of nature and the natural balance. He says,

Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest ignorant?

Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has no right to a sight?

Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffuse float, and the soil is on the surface, and water runs and vegetation sprouts,

For you only, and not for him and her? (“I Sing the Body Electric,” 2011, 113)

4. Conclusions

A similar ontological conception can be found in other poems in *Leaves of Grass*. In his poem “To Think of Time,” Whitman also uses the concept of “Time” to express his optimistic view of justice. He believes that life and death are equal because they both complement the natural cycle in the universe. He sees time as the judge of humanity and the most foundational element in maintaining the complete sense of humanity. To him, time is equal, fixed, and powerful, but the human conception continues to change as time takes them to their death. Whitman’s conception of time is also cosmic in the way he illustrates time and death. He draws his contemplations of time as he watches the cycle of life through the changing time of the year and the alterations of seasons, but he also compares the decrease of the plants and things with the decrease and perishing of the human body. More importantly, Whitman refers to the immortality of the spirit and makes it the same for all creatures. He concludes, “I swear I think there is nothing but immortality” (“To Think of Time,” 2013, 493). Thomas Edward Crowley refers to the organic unity of Whitman’s poem, stating that “Whitman wanted *Leaves of Grass* to be organic, he wanted to grow it as nature grows things; believing in the sanity of nature, his teacher, he believed that there was a logic in her ways” (225). Such an organic unity in his poem is not different from other poems in the *Leaves of Grass*. The poet is deeply inspired by nature, and thus he considers it as a real inspirational teacher.

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