

A Psychological and Philosophical Reading of Human Discourse in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"

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Received: January 6, 2022

Accepted: March 2, 2022

Online Published: March 11, 2022

doi:10.5430/wjel.v12n1p294

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v12n1p294>

Abstract

Walt Whitman's Song of Myself can be looked at as a psychological and ontological personal experience for the poet. In fact, having thoughtfully read and critically analysed the poem and with much attention to the philosophical and psychological implications which prevail throughout the song, we see that the poem is teemed with condense thematic observations about the existential self and the individualistic sense embedded through a universal and unified human discourse beginning from the micro-self and ending with a macro and collective sense, referred to as "transpersonal". We argue that "Song of Myself" can be viewed in light of its psychological and/or individualistic experience, especially from the side of the poet. We further assume that the title of the poem has both the reader and the poet's perspectives, thus contributing to more indulging in a personal and psychological state of mind and individualistic journey. While the poem demonstrates a self-revealing image about the internal structure of content as it significantly reminds the reader of himself/herself, it is found that such a psychological and cognitive reminder adds a special kind of framework that brings its borders so close to the readers' cognitive and existential consciousness which asserts a universal human discourse.

Keywords: existence, human discourse, individual, Walt Whitman, consciousness

1. Introduction

The current paper reviews Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" in light of its psychological and ontological personal experience from the poet's side. Resorting to a close-reading strategy, we see that the poem is loaded with condense thematic meanings with reference to both the existential and the individualistic sense embedded through a universal and unified human discourse beginning from the micro-self and ending with a macro and collective sense. Due to the mutual and shared perspectives and the flux of emotions and feelings, the poem can be read as a psychological and an individualistic experience for both the reader and the poet, as well. The title, assumingly, contains both the reader and the poet perspectives which contribute to more indulging in a personal and psychological state of mind and individualistic journey. Starting from this magically well-woven, expressive title, the poem can show a self-revealing image about the internal structure of its content as it significantly reminds the reader of himself/herself. Such a psychological and cognitive reminder adds a special kind of framework that brings its borders so close to the readers' cognitive and existential consciousness which asserts a universal human discourse.

The title suggests a profound psychological experience written for all and suits all. The poet's experience as an individual and personal sensation of the world can be similarly seen as a celebration of the reader's feelings of his/her own identity. This special combination between the reader's world and the poet's is tremendously suggestive as the poem opens in the first line of the first stanza signalling both the reader and the poet together. It is the reader's song as an individual and an essential part of the poet's world. It is the reader's personal sensation and celebration of the world as an individual. On this basis, the study will focus on the psychological and philosophical aspects of this

masterpiece, bearing in mind the importance of the title as a starting point or as a suitable angle from which we can begin our research.

The title itself is a crucial constituent of the poem that sheds light on the concept of the individual as an independent entity and paves the way for a more critical analysis of the poem. In the opening lines of the first section of his poem, "Song of Myself," Whitman establishes a sense of spiritual connection between himself and others. In brief, it is a sense of universal brotherhood engulfed in a common human discourse. His individual life is part of the universal discourse embedded in his overflowing poetic feelings. Such feeling comes to his mind as he gets relaxed in the lap of nature, "I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (1, p. 62). This kind of individual connection with other humans, males and females, represents an essential humanistic tenet of universal brotherhood that is further substantiated as Whitman establishes a hierarchical relationship between the individual and all humans both males and females, "And that the men ever born are also my brothers... / and the women my sisters and lovers/And that a keelson of the creation is love" (V. p. 66). So, the common ground that gathers all creation together is love which is again an essential principle for individuals to have in order to achieve humanity as a vision.

The poem significantly activates, motivates, and stimulates the spiritual as well as the ontological role of the individuals an autonomous entity owning an independent self which is capable of free thinking and contemplating through the profound routes of nature and the natural soul. No doubt that the poem conveys vital human messages through its universal discourse that addresses the minds of the readers and intellectuals who constantly keep nature as their eternal teacher and an everlasting source of divine inspiration. Such universal messages sprung from an internal drive surrounded by a beautiful sense of an external natural world. It is intended for everyone who comes as a counterpart of the poet.

2. The Conception of Self

Much literature was written on the way Whitman sees his self in light of its embedded thematic ideas. However, most views have agreed on the notion that Whitman refers to his self as a distinctive marker of fragmentation, isolation and life shocks. Cool (2017) views "Song of Myself" as an extensive combination of biography, sermon and poetic medication. He believes that the shift in title from "poem of Walt Whitman, an American" into "Song of Myself" reflects some significant notions about the self of the author and explores the possibilities for communication between individuals (2017). Kurraz (2015) looks at "Song of Myself" as a "web of references and implications to the poet's fragmented self and confused identity. For Kurraz, Whitman hints at a set of unsaid messages of life shocks, fragmentation, depression, uncertainty and disappointment" (p. 1577). Similarly, Zeb and Qasim (2015) present an insight into Whitman's quest for the self-discovery, which, in Whitman's words, is nothing but the other name of a journey that is interrupted as a movement from intrapersonal to interpersonal, thus leading to a transpersonal experience (p. 39). They further argue that while attempting to explore himself, Whitman was trying to discover America, as representation of his self, especially that there was a trend then when the Americans were trying to solidify a national identity (ibid). Al-Nehar (2017) quotes Thomas (2007) who explains how Whitman, throughout exploring the concept of self with its chaotic fragmentation, openly yet extensively talks about the declaration of ego-centred self: How he looks a great ego, an ego that is not prouder than nature itself, when he calls himself a "kosmos" and "T moisten the roots of all that has grown (qtd. In Al-Nehar 2017).

3. The Discussion: The Conception of Human Discourse in Whitman's "Song of Myself"

Walt Whitman's vision of the organized and modern society is based on one's recognition of their relationship to themselves, to other individuals, and to nature. This individual relationship to humanity, if well-conceived, can reach an ideal existence in which all humans and nonhumans can enjoy and appreciate life in the full sense of the word. Man, according to Whitman, needs to value his individuality as holiness. Whitman gives this divinity to man as a composite of matter and spirit. He says: "I believe in the flesh and the appetites, / Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle. / Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from" (24. P. 83). Valuing the spiritual and the physical components that maintain balanced individuals represents the first stone in the creation of humanity itself. In addition, striking a balance between the realm of the soul and that of the matter, reaching into a synthesis that brings binaries together in a complementary relationship, creates a healthy individual and a healthy ecosystem. Whitman says, "I am the poet of the body and I am the poet of the soul" (XXI. P. 79).

From the very beginning of the poem, the poet asserts that he celebrates himself and that he reveals and expresses himself but, at the same time, he expects the reader to share emotions and feelings with him. The poet asserts his spontaneous request when he says, "what I assume you shall assume", and then he continues to emphasize the fact

that we belong to the same origin, therefore, he anticipates the reader to celebrate and share with him his own existential feelings about the internal self and the external universe. Such feelings can be described as spontaneous as they embody his personal feelings and his flowing sense of love to nature. The poet establishes a sense of intimacy towards the reader and wants to show the reader a profound affection and his sense of belonging. That said, we agree with Anderson (1991) who views “what I assume, you shall assume,” as an attempt by Whitman who tries to prove that he encompasses and also is indistinguishable from the universe. He further says,

I celebrate myself, and sing of myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,

I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air.

Born here of parents born here from the same, and their parents the same,

I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health again,

Hoping to cease not till death. (Whitman, p. 33)

The above stanza shows us that the poet managed to build a trustable dialogue pulsing with a current of psychological and ontological flow of spontaneous feelings through which the reader and the poet alike can communicate and exchange emotions and read their own psyche and interpret the psychological implications inspired by the influential power of nature. The poet draws a thrilling and unified picture based on human understanding and universality shared by the two worlds of the reader and the ecstatic poet. Such mutual human bond reinforces the positive side of the contemplating mind of the reader which, in turn, brings about the feelings of unity and solidarity. For a surface reading of the poem, we sometimes see it as a personal experience which has to do with the poet only, but, for a deeper reading of the poem, we reach the conclusion that it is a combination which can be approached from two dimensions: a personal dimension which pertains to the poet, his ramified and deep experience of suffering and happiness, and the other one is a universal dimension which pertains to the whole humanity and which embodies the psychological and ontological aspects of human beings.

It seems that the poet employs his imagination in order to dig out the latent images that represent various themes and perspectives on the existential axioms of life and death when hidden deep in his subconscious. The portrayal of life and death images add brightness and gloominess at the same time. It is mingled with bright and mosaic depiction of natural images that signify freedom and individualism sprung from the beautiful and inspirational scenes of nature. All these symbolic images encounter one another, and they are sometimes conflicting against each other as they represent the real contradictions in life. This conflict generates new meanings that relate to the core issues of humanity. Furthermore, these conflicting images create a deep and overlapping sense of conflict within the reader which, in turn, creates within the self a strong response of confusion and bewilderment. This conflicting nature of the poem also leads the reader's meditating mind and soul to resort to nature and escape the world of reality in order to seek a new restful and comforting world of fantasy and imagination. Thus, it is not strange to describe the poet as being fanciful and speculative. From a romantic perspective, nature and fancy meet together and collaborate with each other to take the poet away from his tiring and exhausting world of reality to the world of ease and comfort in which the poet delves in his fancy and dives deep into our souls to discover the unconscious treasures of our minds. It is a reciprocal relation that is deeply rooted in the unconscious realm. Richard Chase (1961) notes in *Walt Whitman* that the powers of Whitman's unconscious mind appear vividly in his poetry. It is “more instinctively aware of the powers of the unconscious, he was gradually able to free the latent powers of his unconscious mind and through poetry endow the self with these powers, so that the self-became for him not merely a moral or mystical entity as it tends to be in Emerson” (p.13). The unconscious mind of Whitman is seen as creative and unfettered as it shows his attachment to nature. His senses are immersed deeply into the fantasy of nature,

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes,

I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,

The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odourless,

It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,

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*I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
 I am mad for it to be in contact with me.
 The smoke of my own breath,
 Echoes, ripples, buzze'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,
 The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loss'd to the eddies of the wind,
 A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,
 The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,
 The delight alone or in the rush of streets, or along the fields and hill-sides,
 The feeling of health, the full moon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun.
 Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned the earth much?
 Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?
 Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems? (Whitman, p. 34)*

As we see in the above stanzas, it is observed that one of the most vital aspects of the poem is the element of imagination. The poet tends to use his wide and broad power of imagination as a way of escaping from the real world. His fantasy and speculation move him to a world that he really wishes to exist. His deep contemplation and speculation of nature makes him fly unconsciously and navigates the oceans of the imaginative world of his own unconscious mind. He sees life in every atom of the universe, and he injects life into the imagination of the reader as well. He says:

They are alive and well somehow

The smallest sprout shows there is really no doubt (Whitman, p. 33)

His poem is a continuous flowing sense of life which makes him aware about the axioms of life. It is the pulse of life which made him cling and insist on it. It is the influence and the fascination of nature, which made him an inseparable part of nature as he implies in the following stanza when he considers nature an indispensable part of his mind and body. It is his continuous flowing sensation of survival and existence, which flows in his arteries, makes him feel the beauty of life and his existential being. He says:

*My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart,
 the passing of blood and air through my lungs, (Whitman, p. 34)*

The reciprocal or mutual sense of belonging and intimacy is seen as part of his existential self. The poet hopes that his poem will be celebrated and cherished as it pertains and belongs to humanity at large. His potential and conspicuous view about his individual self appears to be strong and visible in this work. The poet asserts that his psychological whims and insights are seen within a chain between himself and the reader. The sense of intimacy and belonging comes as a bond between them. Additionally, it is quite essential to note that the theme and style of the poem indicate its universality as a global poem even though we encounter the individualistic and personal sense right from the outset which entails a sense of separation and isolation. On the surface, the sense of individualism appears to oppose universalism. However, for a deeper level, the poem cherishes an individual psychological experience of the poet himself, but it also proves to be a universal one. It's a universal image which relates to everyone. Thus, we see that the poet tries to explicitly indicate that his sensation about the world does not belong to him. Rather it is a shared feeling of everyone. This entails that the poet wishes his work to be the song of all human beings. Such poetic personal experience reveals his hidden emotions and sentiments and embodies his own view and vision about life in a universal persuasive discourse.

In addition to the tremendous amount of hope and positivity the poet introduces to the reader since the very beginning of the poem, it is quite evident that feelings of despair and frustration are also introduced just as a realistic representation of life itself that represents a mixture of intertwined feelings of hope and despair simultaneously. The symbolic images of the dark grass, the dead mouths, and tongues all represent and symbolize the agony and suffering of human beings who are struggling to live in harmony with nature. In fact, Whitman reveals his sense of frustration and melancholy when he says in his poem:

*This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of men,
Darker to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths
O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they don't come from the roofs of mouths for nothing
I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women (Whitman, p. 40)*

In fact, the above quotation shows us a profound sense of frustration and disappointment. The image of the grass which is assumed to represent the bright side of life appears here as dark and gloomy. This image is also associated with death. It is a horrible picture through which the poet wants to show us the horrible feelings associated with the concept of death. It is a contradictory picture in which we see a lot of ambivalence where horror of death is mixed with the energy for living, and where life is conflicting with death. In fact, it is the poet's power of imagination which made him turn the lovely picture of the grass into a horrible and stifling image that symbolizes death. Thus, the poet's dreams appear to be gloomy through the shadows of those symbolic signs of nature.

The poet has an urgent wish and an insatiable desire for a source of hope and spiritual inspiration which can quench his raging desires for life; this source of hope is inspired by nature that endows him with the vigorous psychological vitality and strength. The disappointing thing is that the prevalence of death symbols in the poem diminishes the feelings of happiness for the poet as they constantly remind him of the faint end of life. As the poet implies in his poem, the idea of death puts a limit for the aspirations and wishes one makes about life. Thomas Crawly (1970) referred to the idea of life wish in Whitman's poetry in *The Structure of Leaves of Grass*. He states that "the majority of the poems are given to beautiful and earnest expressions of his faith in death as the only complete reality – the final fulfilment of life" (p. 15).

Celebrating the grass in his poem is an example of balance representing human nature as soul and matter. The grass connects the living with the dead. It acquires sanctity as it mediates between the two realms, whereby the dead "are alive and well somewhere, / The smallest sprout [of grass] shows there is really no death" (VI. 67). The same grass undermines all racism based on color or origin as it grows "among black folks as among white" (VI. 66). In this sense, Man and nature are brought together in one balanced complementary ecosystem from one side. On the other side, Whitman embraces Emerson's idea of America as a melting pot in which all immigrants acquire a new national identity that is constructed on their nationalism and equality. Argues that "in Emerson's famous journal passage on the 'Smelting Pot' (1845), unity and diversity are linked more clearly in a temporal succession, as a multiplicity of ethnic ingredients that enriches the American substance by its diversity" (p. 225)

Such images that the poet draws reflect the broad imagination the poet has as being immersed in the moments of contemplating nature. The green and the dark grass not only refer to death, but also reflect the unified human world. Chase noted in *Walt Whitman Reconsidered* that "As every poet does, Whitman asks us to accept the imagined world of his poem. It is a fantastic world in which it is presumed that the self can become identical with all other selves in the universe, regardless of time and space" (p. 63).

Through the inspirational power of nature, the poet wants to understand his own existential being by contemplating the human side of himself as a representative for the whole humanity. He deeply knows that life is painful in its real and sheer truth. Thus, he tries to build his own world despite the pain he goes through. As Laura B. Stoutenburg (1968) refers in *Listen America* that "Whitman remained outwardly cheerful, but inwardly some old wounds were festering" (p. 128). In fact, Whitman declares his painful feeling of lack directly in his poem saying: lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen:

Nature here is a source of pleasure, happiness, compensation, fulfilment, admiration, comfort and, splendour. Thus, the poet tries to find an alternative source for his hidden and suppressed emotions. The poet mediates his existence and his life and reflects upon his own existence and the physical tangible nature and that he melts in nature as every part of his body belongs to nature and seeks to resort to nature. The element of escape to the world of nature is a very notable psychological feature. The poet says in the poem, "I loafe and invite my soul, I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass"

Whitman brings the notion of harmony and peace one can find and enjoy in the realm of nature. His swimming in the river is seen by Whitman himself as an act of harmony with nature as he says, "I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and / naked, I am mad for it to be in contact with me" (II, p. 63). This relationship is envisioned as reciprocal. Nature here, in Whitman's words, initiates the action and invites him to be in contact with her.

For example, in section eleven, Whitman speaks of the twenty ninth bather who was able to break through the social strictures after twenty eighth years of being “so lonesome” (11. P. 70) in her house watching men bathing in the nearby sea. At last, though unseen by them, she is successful in establishing a communion with nature as well as with the twenty eighth young men in the sea, “the young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to / the sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them” (11. P. 71). In this sense, Whitman makes it clear that men and women are equal. His vision of gender is iconoclastic as he abolishes all male-female hierarchies and binaries. He says, “I am the poet of the woman the same as the man, / And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man, / And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men” (21. P. 79).

Whitman finds nature as a good outlet for his emotions and feelings. As John Bailey notes in *Walt Whitman* that “The poem is, in fact, for ever escaping to the open air, as all his poems do, and as the poet himself and Wordsworth did” (Bailey Whitman, p. 141).

It seems that nature works as a considerable source of energy for the poet. It reinvigorates and vitalizes his exhausted mind. It works as a fuel for his mind and his unconscious energy. It provides him with spiritual and psychological relief and grants him with a sense of hope. Throughout the poem we see that nature inspires him with the feeling that he is endowed with spirituality and good health to an extent that he says:

*I, now thirty -seven years old in perfect health begin,
hoping to cease not till death (Whitman, p. 33)*

From an internal perspective, nature adds a sense of joy to the poet and the reader as well. The poet starts to mention some beautiful aspects of the surrounding nature which adds a big deal of amusement for his soul. The sense of hope contributes to the meaning of freedom and individualism as a common feature which distinguishes humanity. This idea is supported and proved in *The Critical Heritage—Walt Whitman* (1997) “He had expressed certain things better than any other man who has gone before him. He talks well, and largely, and tenderly of sea and sky, the men and trees, and women and children. His observation and his imagination are both large and well-developed.” (edit. Hindus. p. 72)

This mutual communication between the poet and the reader creates a sense of affinity that helps to develop a sort of interaction. This strong interaction creates a sense of purity and spirituality which is a significant theme in the poem. As we see in these lines:

*clear and sweet is my soul,
and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul. (Whitman, p. 36)*

The elements of spirituality and purity of the soul appear to relate to the soul and the psychological status of the poet. In fact, Walt Whitman is considered an influential and spiritual writer whose writings and poetry influenced the minds of intellectuals and thinkers, as Richard Chase (1986) suggested in *Walt Whitman* that “Whitman likes to say—the future and for democracy. His aim is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots, but he is a spiritual reader” (p. 14). Democracy as an essential principle for the success of the nation is well based in Whitman's poem. It is to practice your freedom without devaluing others ‘freedoms and rights. Ed Folsom points out that “If the events themselves would not have been familiar to Whitman, the dynamics of American life that they manifest would have because it is, in fact, the dynamic on which he built *Leaves of Grass*, the great tension on which he knew democracy is so precariously based: a valuing of the individual but an equal valuing of all individuals and the society that joins them” (p. 2).

All in all, nature in this poem appears as a source of inspiration and revelation within a more unified human discourse that addresses the mind and the soul of the individual. Nature also inspires the poet and strengthens his power of imagination. This faculty of imagination is instigated by his delicate sense of the surrounding nature. It activates and awakens all powers of sensation in him. The poet starts smelling and sniffing the surroundings around him. He starts smelling the fragrance of the green and dry leaves even the hay in the barn. He starts sniffing the little tiny or trivial things as beautiful constituents of nature. All these beautiful sensations make him enjoy having good health and happiness. Nature for him means the sense of freedom and the sense of individualism. The poet could build a sense of unlimited way of exploration and unfettered sense of imagination and fantasy through which he uses his spontaneous flow of expression that goes smoothly and straightforwardly as he explores his own imaginative world of fantasy.

4. Conclusion

A major conclusion the current researchers have come up with is that Whitman, overtly and covertly, reflects on some

aspects of fragmentation, chaos and shock through highly and spiritually delving into his egomaniac self. Having thoughtfully read and critically analysed Whitman's "Song of Myself", we further observed how the poem is teemed with condense thematic observations about the existential self and the individualistic sense embedded through a universal and unified human discourse beginning from the micro-self and ending with a macro and collective sense. We argued that "Song of Myself" can be viewed in light of its psychological and/or individualistic experience. We further assumed that the title of the poem has both the reader and the poet's perspectives, thus contributing to more indulging in a personal and psychological state of mind and individualistic journey. While the poem demonstrates a self-revealing image about the internal structure of content as it significantly reminds the reader of himself/herself, it is found that such a psychological and cognitive reminder adds a special kind of framework that brings its borders so close to the readers' cognitive and existential consciousness which asserts a universal human discourse.

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