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**HOMO-SOCIAL FOUNDATION OF DEMOCRACY:  
 AN ASSESSMENT OF SELECT WALT WHITMAN POEMS**

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**Abstract:**

*Walt Whitman is often considered to be one of the foremost social champions in American literary canon. Whitman is politically, emotionally and ethically one of the most democratic poets of all times in the history of Anglophone literature, whose oeuvre negotiates the social, sexual and moral axes of democratic vision in a number of ways. He champions the cause of the oppressed classes and races, advocates an ethics of homo-social intimacy, postulates a sexual democracy beyond the hierarchic libidinal economies and criticizes the regressive, coercive ideologues of nineteenth century American stratified society. Out of all the groups of poems in Leaves of Grass, the "Calamus" group is the most autonomous one, attracted together by a sublimation of manly attachment, which Whitman termed manly "adhesiveness". "To a Stranger" is a lyric of hospitality, welcome and remote kinship between a man and a stranger, and, hence a representative poem belonging to this group. Walt Whitman's "I Sit and Look Out" was included in the Leaves of Grass group in 1860, but with the present title it was included in 1881 in "By the Roadside" group of poems. This paper assesses the concept of democracy and nation-building in Whitman's oeuvre through a study of his select poems.*

**Key Words:** *Walt Whitman, Democracy, Homo-sociality, American Literature, Nation-building.*

View'd today from a point of view sufficiently overarching, the problem of humanity all over the civilized world is social and religious, and is to be finally met and treated by literature . . . Never was anything more wanted than, to-day, and here in the States, the poet of the modern is wanted . . . a great original literature is surely to become the justification and reliance, (in some respects the sole reliance,) of American democracy

- Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (1871).

"I dreamed in a dream of a city where all the  
 men were like brothers,  
 O I saw them tenderly love each other I  
 often saw them, in numbers, walking  
 hand in hand;  
 I dreamed that was the city of robust  
 friends. . ."

- Walt Whitman, *Live Oak, With Moss*, No. IX

Walt Whitman is politically, emotionally and ethically one of the most democratic poets of all times in the history of Anglophone literature, whose oeuvre negotiates the social, sexual and moral axes of democratic vision in a number of ways. He champions the cause of the oppressed classes and races, advocates an ethics of homo-social intimacy, postulates a sexual democracy beyond the hierarchic libidinal economies and criticizes the regressive, coercive ideologues of nineteenth century American

stratified society. In his own words, democracy is the interface between the 'Self' and the 'Other' meeting co-extensively:

“One's self I sing, a simple separate person  
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masses”

(One's Self I Sing)

In “I Sit and Look Out”, Whitman assumes the status of a roadside watcher and catalogues a number of internal and external sufferings. He receives secret guilt of young people, observes the abject condition of the senile and neglected mothers, the abuse of wives by patriarchal husbands, the sexual exploitation of young women by treacherous seducers, the agonies of jealousy and not responded love. He also observes events of public shame and suffering like battles, epidemics, tyrannies, punitive systems violating human rights. He mentions the pathetic events like comrades drawing lots to decide who should be killed during a famine at sea. The bathos of human suffering is concluded in socialist and anti-slavery voice: “I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon labourers, the poor, and upon Negroes, and the like” (“I Sit and Look Out”).

By enumerating these apparently objective and passing images of human suffering, the poet actually diagnoses the unjust, stratified, oppressive social conditions that dehumanize the citizens. Gender, race, class, age different parameters of hierarchy damage the community's harmony and breed injustice. The poet eventually criticizes the “indifference” of the literator-figure or the observer of being passive, inert, unresisting to what he records: “See, hear and am silent.” (“I Sit and Look Out”).

The implied but unuttered clarion call is quite clear. For a proper democratic initiation of the society, the poet should get rid of his elitist neutrality and 'engage' actively and progressively into the project of a new Nation-building:

“My call is the call of battle I nourish active rebellion,  
He going with me must go well armed,  
The road is before us!”

(“Song of the Open Road”)

In “To a Stranger”, Whitman is more prognostic and remedial. He postulates “manly attachments” or male-male bonding as an essentially democratic politics of friendship in the entire “Calamus” group. Corporeal co-extension between the 'Self' and the 'Other', or more aptly, sexual relation, is posited as a democratic vista because the ethics of intimacy, welcome, hospitality etcetera can alone put the community's foundations on a liberal, egalitarian base. In many ways, the responsibility of the Self towards the Other's body as Whitman emphasizes it in “To a Stranger” anticipates Levinas' theories on meeting a meeting the Stranger/Other, as well as Cixous' notion of the “Jouissance” beyond the phallic cannibalism of hierarchic libidinal economy. In this poem Whitman does not want to possess or appropriate the Other's Jouissance but situates both the self and the other in a rhizome of mutual sharing:

“. . . your body has  
become not yours only, nor left my body mine  
only,  
You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as  
we pass you take of my beard, breast, hands,  
in return,”

(“To a Stranger”)

This permeable ego-boundary, so prominent in the sexual union in love, should be the first principle in the democratic structuration of society. Interestingly, Whitman chooses a “passing stranger” as a memory and a mirror of the self's relation to the other, thus expanding the scope of male-bonding into an altruistic solidaire humanity. The poem breaths in and out a deep respect for alterity, and the sexual morality of the “totality” as Levinas would argue: “to be for the other is to be good”. “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” is a longer



**Assessment of "To a Stranger"**

"as I pass, O Manhattan! your frequent and swift flash  
of eyes offering me love,  
Offering response to my own--these repay me;  
Lovers, continual lovers, only repay me."

- Walt Whitman, "City of Orgies"

"We two boys together clinging  
One the other never leaving."

- Walt Whitman, "We Two Boys Together Clinging"

Out of all the groups of poems in *Leaves of Grass*, the "Calamus" group is the most autonomous one, attracted together by a sublimation of manly attachment, which Whitman termed manly "adhesiveness". "To a Stranger" is a lyric of hospitality, welcome and remote kinship between a man and a stranger, and, hence a representative poem belonging to this group. The lyric ennobles the sentiments of male-bonding into an ethics of intimacy, which is suggestive of both a universal fraternity and a vision of a homo-social fabric of new America.

The poem begins with an address to a "passing stranger", whose gender is quite unsure in the beginning: "You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking" ("To a Stranger"). As in an oneiric vision, the poet roams through an unconscious memory of sharing an ecstatic togetherness with the stranger. As they pass each other in the civil society, the memory is triggered off. The poet recalls infantile moments of their intimacy, as if he and the stranger were very familiar to each other while growing up, indicating corporeal sharings:

"I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not  
Yours only nor left my body mine only."

("To a Stranger")

The bliss of such passionate bonding almost became a mutual interchangeability and co-extension between the 'Self' and the 'Other'. Even today as they pass each other, their mutual jouissance is re-climaxed:

"You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as  
we pass you take of my beard, breast, hands,  
in return,"

("To a Stranger")

The boundaries between the 'Self' and the stranger 'Other' dissolve as they constitute each other by the gifts of belonging and physical pleasure, even if unconsciously felt. The dissolution of difference means also the end of possessive desire of the cannibalistic self or the subject for its 'Other' or 'Object', because the poet decides not to appropriate the other's jouissance by the spoken desire to arrest the other in language, but to facilitate one's own fantasies with the freedom of the other:

"I am not to speak to you I am to think of you when  
I sit alone, or wake at night alone,  
I am to wait I do not doubt I am to meet you again,"

("To a Stranger")

This is almost what Cixous or Kristeva would label as the 'feminine' or 'semiotic mode', beyond the hierarchic and possessive libidinal economy the liberty of the 'Other' and not the forfeiture of the 'Other' in the process of language, sex and love, the destructive usucapion of the 'Other' gives birth to the 'melancholic subject', while the non-obtentive sharing of jouissance with the 'Other' gives birth to an ethics

of love beyond the sense of loss and mourning”

“ . . . I do not doubt I am to meet you again,  
I am to see to it that I do not lose you.”

(“To a Stranger”)

In this particular poem eros is not sex, i.e. Whitman does not name the gender of the 'stranger-intimate'. But read in the context of the whole group “Calamus” and Whitman's philosophy of manly affiliation between democratic individuals, and, hinted by the isomorphic corporeal exchange [“you take of my beard, breast, hands. . .”], we can assume that the ethics of *jouissance* is situated in the framework of male-bonding in this poem. The original design of the “Calamus” was a set of twelve Shakespearesque sonnets on male-male love affair, which later became the famous “Live Oak” sequence as the critics today call it.

Both in terms of psychological and political cohesion among men and in terms of the importance given to 'Cohort' of males-as-comrades in the 'nation-building' process, Whitman prefers and celebrates “songs. . . manly attachment” [“In Paths Untrodden”] elsewhere, he exults: “Who but should be the poet of comrades?”

(“These, I, Singing in Spring”)

Or

“For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,  
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,  
And his arm lay lightly around my breast and that night I was happy.”

(“When I Heard at the Close of the Day”)

Two things are significant in this ethics of male-bonding implied in the poem “To a Stranger”:

1. A celebration of physical love as an integral part of universal harmony as well as the democratic morality.
2. A validation of “friendship” and “amour” as what Levinas calls the moral urge toward the “stranger's face”.

Regarding the first 'telos', the following observation made by Havelock Ellis becomes highly relevant:

. . . there is one keen sword with which Whitman is always able to cut the knot of this doubt the sword of love . . . He discovers at last that love and comradeship adhesiveness is, after all, the main thing . . . deeper than religion, underneath Socrates and underneath Christ. With a sound insight he finds the roots of the most universal love in the intimate and physical love of comrades and lovers (*The New Spirit*).

Elsewhere Whitman expresses this fiery and passionate version of corporeal-spiritual universalism:

“I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,  
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,  
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,  
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.  
Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,  
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,”  
(Section V, “Song of Myself”)

In this poem also, the sexual images are integrated to the morality of merger: innocent memories, un-



aggressive passing of each other, and thinking about the beloved in lonely evenings lie side by side with the periphrasis of sex (“slept together”) and bodily contacts. And all that is elevated to a liberal humanist scale from the anatomical scale by keeping the amorous partner an ‘anonymous stranger’ an abstract Man or *solidaire* Humanity.

The coalescence of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ in a non-competitive, non-appropriative *jouissance* anticipates what Levinas would say long after the time Whitman has written. D. H. Lawrence remarks about Whitman’s sexual ethics with the following words:

He seeks his consummation through one continual ecstasy: the ecstasy of *giving himself*, and of being taken. The ecstasy of his own reaping and merging with another, with others; the sword-cut of sensual death . . . it is the great sacrament. . . (*Studies in Classical American Literature*, “XIII Whitman”)

Such sacrifice is made by the Self to its Other, by the lyric’s speaking ego to the ‘Stranger’ an act that Levinas would call “strangeness destitution as freedom” the “stranger” or the “other” appeals to the self’s responsibility not by power but by its “face”. In *Entre Nous* Levinas writes: “Love is the I satisfied by the thou, grasping in the other the justification of its being . . . the affective warmth of love is the fulfilment of the consciousness of that satisfaction, that contentment, that fullness found outside the self, eccentric to it. . .” and in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes: “Someone who expresses himself in nakedness the face is in fact one to the extent that he calls upon me . . . I must already answer for him, be responsible for him . . . the other individuates me in my responsibility for him”.

In “To a Stranger”, Whitman composes an ode to this intimate-other, to manifest an ethical statement of erotic engagement into friendship, comradeship, democracy and a homo-social nation-building process.

### **Critical Assessment: “I Sit and Look Out”**

“Here’s a good place at the corner I must stand and see the show.”

- Walt Whitman, “A Boston Ballad”

“The question, O me! so sad, recurring What good amid these, O me, O life?”

*Answer.*

That you are here that life exists and identity,  
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.”

- Walt Whitman, “O Me! O Life!”

Walt Whitman’s “I Sit and Look Out” was included in the *Leaves of Grass* group in 1860, but with the present title it was included in 1881 in “By the Roadside” group of poems. The entire group “By the Roadside” suggests the notion of “wayside” topics as they strike the mind during one’s passage through life, and also a poetic miscellany or a *mélange* held together by the common bond of the poet’s experience as a roadside observer passive but alert and sympathetic. “I Sit and Look Out” can therefore be considered the representative piece in this group of poems, both in terms of the title and the themes.

The poet records, presumably from his window which may imply his democratic and populist ‘imagination’; the “sorrow of the world” as they manifest in roadside events. He records the secret laments and guild-ridden anguish of young men after their injudicious or immoral deeds, the neglect of the dying mother by her offspring, the wife-bashing of the misogynic patriarch, the corruption of innocent women by seductive men, and the desperate attempts to conceal one’s jealousy or unrequited love. With these miseries of private or domestic life, the poet also observes larger, public issues of suffering and anxiety

wars, epidemics, tyrannies, martyrs' death and prisoners' human rights violations; equally moving and pathetic is the observation that sailors working in the same vessel have to draw lots to decide who shall be killed next to save food and water during a famine at the sea. The bathos of human sufferings comes to a conclusion with the oppressions of the proletarians and the blacks in a class-divided and racist society. The poet confesses at the end that he watches these plights and meanness without the zeal to resist these:

“All these All the meanness and agony without end, I sitting, look out upon,  
See, hear, and am silent” (“I Sit and Look Out”).

The poem is a strong critique of social injustice and oppression in the mid-nineteenth century America, including a self-critique of a poet who records but cannot challenge actively the causes and instances of human sufferings.

It is designed like a 'roadside observations' poem, but we do not have a detached phenomenon of life; instead, we have quite a focused discussion on individual and human sufferings and perils. Although the poet claims an objective and neutral role: “am silent”, he betrays his emotional and political “engagement” into the topics he refers to. Words like “shame” and “agony without end” betrays a sense of shared guilt and remorse in the mind of the observer too. Thus the use of the first person speaking subject “I” and the anaphora of “I see” and “I observe” become meaningful it is a lyric or an intensely subjective poem after all, although the described object is public strife from which the poet disclaims any apparent concern other than witnessing and recording: “See, hear and am silent” (“I Sit and Look Out”).

Whitman has been appreciated as the pro-democracy poet of America, whose voice has been hailed as a representative one in the American ideals of liberty, justice and populism. In *Democratic Vistas* (1871), Whitman diagnoses that elitist literature has always failed to justice to the “people”, because the “masses” appear so 'ungrammatical', 'untidy' and amorphous to the elitist, educated literator that “taste, intelligence and culture (so-called) have been against the masses”. In this poem as well as in many other committed and engaged pieces, Whitman tries to reverse the latent elitism of poetic art, by delineating the working-class life and also by a self-reprimanding confession of the poet's silence to these issues. He tends to assert that a poet's contribution to democracy should at least be an attempt to activate a social engagement of his own poetic self:

“I am the man, I suffered, I was there.”

Or

“I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,

I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself”  
 (“Song of Myself”).

The tendency to extend the poetic persona of the observer-speaker into public domains of mass existence is both political and spiritual. Havelock Ellis defines it as “the sword of love”; “his heart goes out to every creature that that shares the loved one's delicious humanity”. David S. Reynolds claims on the other hand that Whitman's affiliation to the Republican Party, his ideology of free labour and taking up the cause of the oppressed workers and slaves, and, his wish to wrest the word “America” from the partial definitions to seek the largest possible applications for the term have influenced his democratic poetics. In this poem we discover both of these tendencies merging into a powerful estimate of common men's strife. What is striking and praiseworthy is that Whitman is sensitive to all the parameters of hierarchy gender (abuse of mother and wife and sexual coercions of young girls), class, race, (the plight of Negroes), age (the neglect of senile and dying mothers). He is equally disturbed by the psychological turmoil guilt of youth, lust and perversion, treachery, arrogance, jealousy and hypocrisy. Interestingly Whitman uses the verb “see” more in cases of private sufferings and “observe” more in cases of public issues. Such variations guide the reader to “read” the poem both in terms of internal anxieties and uneasy emotions, and external and social ills.

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