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# Walt Whitman's Reverence to Nature: A Way of Developing Social Harmony

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## Abstract

Walt Whitman has established his perception about nature through his minute observation. For him, nature's activities are meaningful and he desires all the human beings to be aware of these activities so that they can develop positive thoughts and attitudes towards her. For him, the relationship between nature and people can guide the latter to foster proper and acceptable behavior towards other fellow beings. Whitman communicates the essence of nature through his writings dealing with her management as shown in this universe. He minutely watches her activities and begins to play with appropriate words and expressions to display their contribution to human civilization. His consciousness regarding the nature not only makes people engage in her preservation but also demonstrates her immense manifestation of possibilities about social harmony.

**Keywords:** Observation, Universe, Consciousness, Civilization, Ecocriticism

## Introduction

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was born in Huntington, New York. He spent nearly six years in Brooklyn to study in the beginning. But he could not continue his study and when he was eleven, he formally stopped his further study. Whitman, then, spent his life as a journalist, a teacher, and a government clerk. In the 1840s he engaged himself in writing fiction and poetry for different periodicals. In 1855, he got his *Leaves of Grass* published. Justin Kaplan finds Whitman's determination to become a poet after this publication (185). Later, "Song of Myself", which consists of *Leaves of Grass*, was published. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt\\_Whitman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman))

## Methodology

The present article tries to depict Whitman's perception of nature in response to human beings' attitude towards environment and ecology. In such context, therefore, ecocriticism is an appropriate theory to deal with the concepts of Whitman's literary works. His consciousness regarding the presence of nature and her significance to

human beings will be studied from the point of view of ecocriticism. This theory speaks about how we can create harmony between human and non-human worlds. It tries "to find the grounds upon the two communities-the human, the natural-can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere" (Rueckert 107). It is an analytical study of literary texts. Therefore, I have used qualitative research method as a tool to deal with some selected literary works of Whitman.

## Analysis

Whitman occupies the space as one of the prominent American nature writers. His works communicate how human beings have been dealing with natural world and how they are supposed to treat her to make their life meaningful and create harmony paying reverence to her for better life. He carefully observes the seasons, universe, plants, water, mountains animals, birds and other creatures of the universe along with human activities and collects them to give the shape of literature. "In the collection of Whitman's prose writings entitled *Specimen Days and Collect*, he shows his alertness to the weather and the life of sky and fields as well as to the varieties of human experience" (*Nature Writing* 223). He deals with the natural elements from the earth to the sky. Whitman shows his keen observation and appeals the audience to be kind and respect the nature's activities happening in this universe.

Whitman's description of nature displays as if he is perfectly able to communicate with her. He engages himself with the environment and goes along with it. He watches the scenes of nature and begins to equalize them with the activities performed by the people. Readers visualize celebration of nature in his works. Priya Patel comments, "Whitman celebrates elements of the natural world," in his writings "because he believed that human beings were already a part of nature and they would continue their journey with nature after death" (1). He obviously establishes close affinity with nature and natural elements. In *Specimen Days and Collect*, he speaks:

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Nature marches in procession, in sections, like the corps of an army.

All have done much for me, and still do. But for the last two days it has been the great wild bee, the humblebee, or “bumble,” as the children call him. As I walk, or hobble, from the farmhouse down to the creek, I traverse the [...] lane, fenced by old rails, with many splits, splinters, breaks, holes, etc., the choice habitat of those crooning hairy insects. Up and down and by and between these rails, they swarm and dart and fly in countless myriads. (225)

Walt Whitman does not differentiate the humblebees from human beings. Their flight appears as an extraordinary “procession” of “the corps of an army” for him. He gets fascinated with their flight and enjoys the scene to watch them.

Whitman gets peace and feels that he is improving his health while being with nature and praises his natural surroundings. He thinks as if he is “enveloped in the deep musical drone of these bees, flitting, balancing, darting to and fro about [him] by hundreds.” Their sound is heard like “symphony” and he gets being “nourishe[d].” He, ultimately, explains change in his life, “The last two days have been faultless in sun, breeze, temperature, and everything; never two more perfect days, and I have enjoyed them wonderfully. My health is somewhat better, and my spirit at peace” (225). He enjoys healing power available in the sounds of the bees and expresses his gratitude to them for their benevolent act to him. He further explains:

Another jotting, another perfect day: forenoon, from 7 to 9, two hours enveloped in sound of humble bees and bird music. Down in the apple trees and in a neighboring cedar where three or four russet-baked thrushes, each singing his best, and roulading in ways I never heard surpassed. Two hours I abandon myself to hearing them, and indolently absorbing the scene. (225-26)

Whitman explains surpassing beauty bestowed upon him by the bees and singing birds. Because of their musical sounds, he perfectly enjoys his two hours of time abandoning his daily works and concentrating on nature and her activities seen in front of him.

“Even as a boy,” Whitman recollects his bygone days, “I had the fancy, the wish, to write a piece...blending the real and ideal, and each portion of the other.” Therefore, he was fond of spending “[h]ours and, days, in [his] Long Island youth and early manhood,” visiting “the shores of Rockaway or Coney Island, or away east to the Hamptons or Montauk” (226). Thus, his encounters with several natural scenes and actions had obviously inspired him to produce the excellent pieces of writings, such as, “A Song of Rolling Earth,” “Song of Myself,” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “The World below the Brine,” “The Dalliance of the Eagles,” “A Noiseless Patient Spider,” and the like that explore about the values of nature and natural surroundings.

Whitman’s significance as a lover of nature lies in his capacity to completely understand the voice of nature and communicate it to other ordinary people. He clearly comprehends “[n]ature’s mighty whisper” and asserts, “[I]n solitude I have been musing over my life – connecting events, dates, as links of a chain, neither sadly nor cheerily, but somehow, today here under the oak – sturdy, vital, green – five feet thick at the butt: I sit a great deal near or under him” (227). Louise Collier Willcox, in his article “Walt Whitman,” has rightly proclaimed:

His way of feeling life and humanity was large, patient, far-seeing and loving, but his method was definitely to descend into the midst of natural life and spread cheer and good-will. There is another method, which is, living above the general level of righteousness, gradually to exalt that level. This seems to have been the method of such masters of living as St. Francis and Buddha and, above all, of the Supreme Human Pattern. (296)

His keen interest and selection of natural life do not allow him cross the boundary of understanding “life and humanity.” His powerful feeling of humanity is guided by his several or even uncountable encounters with natural elements and nature’s benefits bestowed upon him free of cost. Therefore, he too carries the attitudes of St. Francis and Buddha, the symbols of unselfishness.

Whitman’s thoughts apparently appear to be as innovative and dynamic as nature. As nature always gets renewed and promotes dynamism in this universe, Whitman too invites the dawn of the new ways of

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thoughts and writes accordingly. In his "Preface" of *Leaves of Grass*, he opines:

America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions . . .

accepts the lessons with calmness . . . is not so impatient as has been supposed that the slough still sticks to opinions and manners and

literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms . . . perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house. (189)

Whitman consciously desires to march ahead through the paths and surroundings of new "opinions and manners and literature" and pleads not hang over with the "past" happenings and attitudes, rather they should be modified using them for the formation of the solid present and future. His hope on "the corpse" is significant to create new ideas and outcomes. He perfectly visualizes the new systems of expressing and communicating the beliefs and operating the inputs in the life of human beings.

Whitman's firm belief in nature and natural elements is best expressed in his famous poem entitled "A Song of the Rolling Earth." He clearly hears the sounds of the earth when it rolls on its axis. He has developed an acute sense of hearing to the sound of earth's movement. He sings:

A son of the rolling earth, and of words according, Were you thinking that those were words, those upright lines? those curves, angles, dots? No, those are not the words, the substantial words are in the ground and sea, They are in the air, they are in you. (1-4)

He clearly hears the sound of "the rolling earth" and tries to communicate about its sound to other people. He imagines them as "the substantial words" spoken by "the ground and sea" giving human attributes through the rhetoric of personification. He finds the sounds of the moving planet everywhere and people can hear them if they develop the power to comprehend them. Therefore, he attempts to confirm:

The earth does not argue,  
Is not pathetic, has no arrangements,  
Does not scream, haste, persuade, threaten,  
promise, Makes no discrimination, has no conceivable failures, Closes nothing, refuses nothing, shuts none out, Of all the powers, objects, states, it notifies, shuts none out. (31-36)

As the songs are melodious, no matter about what subject matters they are, the song of the earth is in the same line and it does not make people suffer but pleases them whenever and wherever they are. It carries soothing melodies because it is free from any persuasion, threat, cry, hurry and promises. Furthermore, it does not discriminate anyone and opens the door for everyone to enjoy it.

Whitman's love for nature evokes the spirit of democratic principles and his composition of free verse justifies his democratic views that he carried throughout his life. As democratic values do not discriminate any individual and they promote every individual's right and happiness, nature too displays the same spirit and characteristics to all human beings. Whitman, through his poems, speaks nature's benevolent attitude towards any kinds of people who approach her. He, in his poem "Song of Myself," enjoys her presence:

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 parents the same, and their parents the same, I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin, Hoping to cease not till death. (4-9)

He doesn't care anything but the presence of nature and her surroundings. He not only surrenders his physical body to her but his "soul" too into the lap of nature and tries to enjoy her blessings bestowed upon him. His invitation to his soul to participate with him signifies his desire for meditation to reach his destination. He gets fascinated with "a spear of summer grass" and pays his homage to "soil" and "air" for their perfect and great contribution to his vitality.

Whitman's philosophical and innovative thoughts are perfectly related to his affinity with natural world. His thoughts are generated through his connection with nature her surroundings. When he sees the growth of the grass, he begins to think philosophically and associates his imaginations with the growth of the human beings:

What do you think has become of the young and old men?

And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,

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The smallest sprout shows there is really no death, And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it, And ceas'd the moment life appear'd. (123-28)

He wonders at different stages of life and situations of human beings. And immediately comes to the conclusion that all "are alive and well." Previously he had seen the life of the grass and its "smallest sprout" makes him comprehend over all scenarios of the people who are in troubled situation in vain. They unnecessarily get into problematic situation, whereas the grass grows and survives in spite of getting care from no one but from nature.

Nature is ample source of everything for Whitman. It is even more than religion and any other beliefs that human beings all over the world think and accept in their life and practice accordingly ignoring the intrinsic value of nature blessing them every moment in any circumstances. He accepts, "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from, / The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer, / This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds" (524-26). When he wholeheartedly observes the natural activities around him, he begins to marvel at her blessings that appear to be beyond the religion.

Whitman's famous poem "Passage to India" beautifully evokes his reverence to nature and her deep impression experienced by the world. In this poem, readers explicitly observe Whitman's effort to universalize the function of nature to inspire the people:

I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the world, I cross the Laramine plains, I note the rocks in grotesque shapes, the buttes, I see the plentiful larkspur and wild onions, the barren, colorless, sage-deserts, I see in glimpses afar or towering immediately above me the great mountains, I see the Wind river and the Wahsatch mountains, I see The Mountain monument and the Eagle's Nest, I pass the Promontory I ascend the Navadas[.] (52-55)

He has the capacity to hear the repeated sounds produced by the magnificent scene of nature. He beautifully portrays the different scenes of "plains," "rocks," "larkspur," "onions," "deserts," "mountains," "river" and "Eagle's Nest." He doesn't miss to visualize any sceneries of the natural world. While watching the natural scenes, Whitman imagines the sounds produced by them in their

own ways. Eventually, he connects his feelings with universal appeal, "Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel, / Trying the Eastern to the Western sea, / The road between Europe and Asia" (62-64).

Walt Whitman extensively carries his ecocentric views throughout his poem "Passage to India" encompassing the virtues of strong relationship between nature and human beings. He cannot see human beings being separated from the lap of natural world. Therefore, he, passionately, anticipates:

Nature and man shall be disjoin'd and diffused  
no more, The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them.  
[...]

I see O year in you the vast terraqueous globe  
given and giving all, Europe to Asia, Africa join'd, and  
they to the New World, The lands, geographies, dancing  
before you, holding a festival garland, As brides and  
bridegrooms hand in hand. (114-15, 120-23)

He cannot imagine the situation of human beings being separated from nature and his expectation is to see both being united and support each other to make their existence meaningful. He visualizes whole world being in the same condition and dreams of "the New World" that can lead the life of overall happiness like the life of "brides and bridegrooms" walking together celebrating their joys.

Whitman attempts to establish lively affinity between people and everything in the universe so that there would be no problems and misunderstandings that hinder their progress in their life. He seems intending to wipe out any possible threat between nature and human beings. He sings:

O secret of the earth and sky!  
Of you O waters of the sea! O winding creeks  
and rivers!  
Of you O woods and fields! of you strong mountains of  
my land!  
O you O prairies! of you grey rocks!  
O morning red! O clouds! O rain and snows!  
O day and night, passage to you!  
O sun and moon and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter!  
(235-41)

Whitman sees a profound achievement being deposited in nature. There are enormous benefits with the planets and

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“stars,” “sky,” “waters of the sea,” “creeks and rivers,” “woods and fields,” “mountains,” grassland, “sun and moon” along with “morning,” “day,” “night,” “clouds,” “rain and snows.” He believes nature holds every possible achievement secretly and tries to humbly communicate with every aspects of nature to receive them. Thus, Roger Asselineau is seemingly right to comment, “[Whitman] was quite aware of the existence and importance of the four elements [air, soil, water, and fire]” (33).

Whitman associates himself with nature in every aspects of life – in happiness and misery both. Nature, for him, inevitably brings happiness and joys of life. He exhibits his capacity of hearing, smelling, seeing and feeling nature. Moreover, he uses pastoral elegy to get relief from painful condition at the time of losing some loved ones. In “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd,” Whitman tries to console himself and urges others to move forward calmly and patiently comparing Lincoln with the flower lilacs and other natural elements. He, passionately, unfolds his feelings:

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,  
And the great star early droop'd in the western  
sky in the night,I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-  
returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you  
bring,Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the  
west,And thought of him I love. (1-6)

At the demise of Lincoln, Whitman undergoes painful experience and he finds no way to console him but nature. He attempts to convert his grief to some significant things or moments and begins to think about flowers, seasons, stars and the like. He decides to mourn until the arrival of “spring” signifying Lincoln’s rebirth. It is, according to M. Thomas Inge, a kind of “insight into the spiritual meaning of death as rebirth in nature” (375).

Abraham Lincoln’s death brings unbearable pain for Walt Whitman and he expresses his agony recollecting his different images that had deep impression on him. He remembers:

O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I  
hear your call,I hear, I come presently, I understand you,  
But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has  
detain'd me,The star my departing comrade holds and  
detains me. (67-70)

Whitman is frequently haunted by Lincoln’s companionship and he remembers his speech that proved his shyness and self-consciousness with delicacy in speech and behavior. Due to his soft and delicate voice, Whitman takes Lincoln as a “singer” and he still remembers his “call” comparing him with shining “star.”

Whitman, eventually, decides to surrender himself into the lap of nature and tries to get relief from the ocean of grief brought by the death of his “comrade.” He begins to console:

To the tally of my soul,Loud and strong kept  
up the gray-brown bird, With pure deliberate notes  
spreading filling the night.Loud in the pines and cedars  
dim,Clear in the freshness moist and the swamp-  
perfume,And I with my comrades there in the night. (163-  
68)

Whitman’s grief suddenly makes him realize the ground reality of life after he hears the sound of “the gray-brown bird” at night while he was mourning Lincoln’s death with his friends. As the high pitch sound of the bird passes through “the pine” trees, Whitman realizes the significance of the spiritual world and “soul” and his sadness starts to find the ways to be easily released in the presence of the “long panoramas of visions” (170).

**Conclusion**

Whitman, thus, treats nature as his fellow beings and desires to lead his life along with her. It is almost impossible for him to be detached from nature. He takes nature as a permanent source of happiness to achieve during adverse situations. Such happiness is due to underlying truth expressed by her every moment no matter whether the circumstances are favorable or unfavorable for her. His "method of writing," indirectly, "reflects nature’s dynamics" (Patel 2). Whitman tries to follow such concept in his practical life so that he can engage himself with happy moments without being disappointed at any unfortunate conditions. The activities shown by nature make him enjoy any sorts of experiences which he encounters in course of his life. When we develop such habits from nature, we, ultimately, begin to accept any happenings around us and move ahead without being disturbed in our life. Consequently, our happiness helps us maintain social harmony in the society where we reside.

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