

The Theme of Death in Whitman's Poetry

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Abstract: Death seems to have a peculiar charm for the mystic, the philosopher and the poet. All have endeavoured to tackle and explore it in various ways. According to Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The event of death is always astounding, our philosophy never reaches it, never possesses it." According to him the men of letters have had better understanding and insights in the problem of death. According to D.H. Lawrence, Walt Whitman is a very "great post-mortem poet"- "a very good poet of the end of life". It has been stated that death remains the central concern of Whitman's poetry. George Sainsbury has noted Whitman's "great devotion to death". Whitman's understanding of death and death experience is very deep and thorough. The general atmosphere in which Whitman was brought up and lived greatly contributed to this attraction for and interest in death.

Keywords: Death, Whitman.

Date of Submission: 21-02-2019

Date of acceptance: 08-03-2019

Death and suffering afflicted every aspect of his life. He grew up amidst disease, despair and dejection. His family was engulfed in poverty, neurosis and misfortune. The American Civil War (1861-1865) had a very deep impression on him. It was the greatest shock of his life and it found him amidst the cruel realities of the aftermath of a battle. He found himself among the wounded, the dying, the death... He hated war but accepted its tragic consequences. The instinctive hatred of war and ecstatic acceptance of death have been celebrated in poem after poem by Whitman. Death remained an obsession with Whitman right to his last day.

Treatment of Death Whitman's concept of death is that it is a part of cyclical, cosmic dance of life. Whitman sees this rhythm- the cosmic dance of life- everywhere- even in a dung heap. The dung heap is refuse; it is also new life. The concept of the rhythm of life is both elegiac and optimistic. It is elegiac because we have to learn to lose **our selves** in that sea, in that flux, in that rhythm but only to find ourselves reborn in it. Whitman dealt with death on two levels- the conceptual and the experimental. As a consequence we come across two modes of expression in his poetry- the rhetorical-philosophical and the poetical-symbolical. According to G.S. Amaer: "The duality does not disturb Whitman's transcendental vision of death because there is no conflict between the conceptual and the experimental mode that Whitman adopts to realise it. On the contrary, they re-affirm and reinforce each other."

Whitman's Death Vision It is defined in the Preface of his two-volume centennial Edition of the "Leaves of Grass". Whitman's aim of writing poems is "estimating death, not at all as the cessation but as **somewhat I feel** must be the entrance upon by the greatest part of existence, and something that life is as much, for it for life itself." This death vision is also outlined in the poem "Death's Valley". The poet welcomes death:

"... Holiest minister of Heaven- envoy, ushered, guide at last of all.
Rich, florid, loosened of the stricter-knot call's life,
Sweet, peaceful, welcome death."

Walt Whitman deliberately cultivated a new kind of elegiac mood addressing oneself at death a part of life itself.

Death and the "Leaves of Grass" Death is no doubt an ever-recurrent theme in the poetry of Walt Whitman. No wonder, then, it (death) haunts the "Leaves of Grass" in all its phases. It is for this reason that Whitman is often called the 'great poet of death'. Death is the central theme of two of his masterpieces: "Out of the cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "When lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed". In the poem, "Out of the cradle Endlessly Rocking", Whitman traces the moment of his birth as a poet to his mystic communion with the sea who whispered in his ear "the low and delicious word death". Ever as a boy Whitman was hounded by the mystery of death and one of his earliest ambitions was to solve the mystery of death. The experiences that are there in the web if these two great poems are the Civil War and the personal losses suffered by the poet:

"I found that every place was burial place;
The houses full of life were equally full of death."

- "Of Him I Love Day and Night"

"Come loudly and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death.
Praised be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love-sweet love- but praise! Praise! Praise!
For the sure- enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death."

Whitman is in close touch with death and vividly portrays it. But to him death is not the end of life. He is a poet of eternal progress. Death is simply a part of a progressive universe, a renewal, a part of the evolutionary movement in creation. According to him death is a phase of the cycle of more life. Death only brings some change. It is another beginning, a re-involvement in the generative forces of the world that is continually evolving. Whitman has an immense faith in the immortality of man i.e. immortality implies exemption from extinction. Whitman said: "If there is not immortality then the universe is fraud". He exposes immortality everywhere:

"All, all for immortality:
Love like the light, silently wrapping all."
"All goes outward and outward; nothing collapses,
All to die in different from what anyone supposed,
All luckier.
He has faith in spiritual immortality:
"I know I am deathless,
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept away by a carpenter's compass,
I knew I shall not pass like a child's caslacue cut with a burnt stick at night."

Death, according to Whitman, is not a uniter. She cannot unite a person either to a man, or a star or God. Death can, at best, deliver the soul of man into the realm of beauty, which is immortal. This concept gains utterance in the elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd". According to Walt Whitman, death and life are intermixed; they are part of the same reality, of the same cyclic reality- "Death, like the sea, is the cradle out of which all life and love are continually reborn". In the universe of Whitman, life, love and death are inseparably joined to one another. To Whitman, death is a period of transition and not an end of life. Whitman's faith in immortality is limited to the level of speculation of individuals only. In an anonymous review of his "Leaves of Grass" he observed: "He (Walt Whitman) is a true spiritualist. He recognises no annihilation, or death or loss of identity. Thus we can conclude that Whitman must have at the back of his mind the theory of transmigration of soul. Whitman's works do suggest his knowledge of it." It is, however, futile to seek any philosophy in his utterances about death is singularly his own and bears no affinity to Oriental or Occidental mystic of death.

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Dr.SuchitraVashisth. "The Theme of Death in Whitman's Poetry." IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 24 no. 03, 2019, pp. 14-15.