

Tension Between Obliteration and Regeneration in Walt Whitman's Selected Poems

Madhav Prasad Dahal

Lecturer, Department of English, Mahendra Multiple Campus, Dang
mpdahal076@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the poet's tension between his fear of environmental obliteration and a hope for spiritual regeneration in Walt Whitman's poems This Compost. To do so, it applies ecocritical perspective which studies about the relationship of man with the biotic and a-biotic world in the literary text. Walt Whitman, in his poems, unfolds his reverence to the natural world. He celebrates the beauty of everyday life and nature. In these poems, he glorifies nature for its amazing ability to transform every dead, diseased and sick matter into regeneration. He does not see death as an end of life. He finds it as an event to renew life to a beautiful one. In the poems, his mind wrestles with his inner fear of getting in touch with the nature and in the second part he glorifies nature with the faith that it has an amazing capacity of renewing every ugly matter into divine materials for a new life. This study concludes that human being's relationship with the earth is unbounded and maternal. It portrays how the poet's fears and apocalyptic visions are ultimately silenced.

Keywords: *obliteration, regeneration, transformation, divine, renew*

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Introduction

The present article explores the poet's intense fear of apocalypse of the entire biosphere due to human invasion on the one hand, and his faith in resurrection on the other. In doing so, it applies the ecocritical perspective that is "the science of relations between organism and their environments" (Hannigan, 42).

Whitman writes poems on multiple themes. His poems are often loaded with the themes of nature, life or death cycle and individualism. His poetry embodies the American spirit. He describes American natural life, rivers and lakes in his poetry. He tells us that all the things in the universe are perfect miracles, each as profound as any; that the "minutest thing upon the earth" is perfect, and that he "does not see one imperfection in the universe (Holmes, 26). He sees his country's spirit in the geography. He idealizes nature in his writings. Perlman, et al. in a comment about Whitman's poetry writes:

The idea that poetry above all else must be true to life is Whitman's first principle. He is deeply mimetic; a realist. Rhythms and forms, content, language, all must be drawn from life. Poetry should seek immersion in the real, never escape from the mundane into the romance of fairyland or the transcendent spirit. Whitman's sense of what life comprises is very broad. Life includes the homely realities of everyday existence in city and country, and also the facts of commerce, politics, war, the science and arts, religion, the intricate geography and demography of life (p. 142).

As a pantheist, Whitman idealizes nature not only in totality, not in the unity of her infinite life, but also in all the minute phenomenal existence (Holmes, 27). J.D. Schraffenberger narrates:

As I open Whitman's pages and reads the *Song of the Open Road* , *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* , *The Song of the Broad Axe* , *This Compost* , *Great are the Myths* , *Laws for Creation* , and scores of others, he seems to be present at the creation of worlds. He is in touch with primal energies. He is borne

along by a tide of life and power that has no parallel elsewhere. The large, free naked grandeur, the forthrightness and the power entice him. Not beauty alone, but meanings, unities, profundities; not merely the bow in the clouds, but the orbs beyond the clouds fill him with joy. (48)

These lines speak of Whitman's affinity with the nature.

Whitman's poem *This Compost* glorifies nature for its ability to take the diseased and sickly materials, corpses of human beings, other animals, birds, and insects and transform them into regeneration. Whitman wrote *This Compost* before ecological perspective began to be applied in literature, but Whitman's writing is from the deep ecological perspective when it is evaluated from ecocritical lens now. He recognizes the value of nature rather than its mere utility.

In another of his poem 'Continuities,' Whitman demonstrates that everything on earth is ever moving and it never stops. He sees life as continuity. His poem "Going Somewhere" expresses that life never ends and it is always onward, speeding slowly. It describes life as an endless march.

Literature Review

Though the Ecological criticism had not appeared as a theoretical lens at the time when Whitman wrote, we can clearly see ecological awareness in his writing. His writings have received critical attention from different Eco critics and other scholars. The word 'grass' is the recurring image in Whitman's writing. He uses the word in multiple meanings. His Poem "Leaves of Grass" (1855) has variously been interpreted. It can be interpreted as 'absence' or 'death.' Those seeking Whitman after his death should look for him in the grass, where he will be enigmatic and elusive but real. When folded into the dirt, Whitman anticipates his body transmuted and dispersed into grass (Gailey, 59). It stands for the immortal soul of the poet after the renewal of his old body. Maria Farland finds Whitman's concern is with the impact of waste and decay which should be considered a significant episode within the history of environmental health and we should treat urban sanitary reform as a part of field of ecological criticism (801). Farland regards that as *This Compost* was the result of the growing tension that had engulfed the city. The poet had a vision of impending apocalypse of the entire city due to the filth.

Whitman uses the word 'compost' symbolically. For him it is a sum of all raw materials. It is manure used for increasing fertility. Matt Cohen, in this context, remarks that for Whitman "all kinds of light reading, novels, newspapers, gossip, etc, serve as manure for the few great productions". And that manure is a positive term, for Whitman; his poem "This Compost" is a beautiful example, in which human beings themselves are the manure (p.12).

All creatures die one day and their dead bodies decay to make the compost. The soil has the power of transforming the dead bodies into something precious. The soil itself is the compost that is formed from the dead bodies of billions of visible and invisible living organisms.

For Whitman, there are forces he had to understand and accept in life. William M. White finds Whitman had something that startled him in the opening lines of *This Compost* as he describes "Something startles me where I thought I was safest". He finds it difficult to reconcile death in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and in "When the Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed." His anguished sorrow makes him accept death as something that leads to renewed life at a higher level (357).

The above literary reviews focus on different aspects of Whitman's poetry. But they do not explore about Whitman's struggle of the fear of apocalypse and his faith on regenerative power of earth/ soil. Different from the above criticism, the central focus of this study is on how the poet's skepticism is erased and how he ultimately embraces earth as holy.

Textual Analysis/ Discussion

This Compost by Walt Whitman is a poem that contemplates about nature, physical bodies, death, decay and renewal of the universal phenomena of earth. Reverence to nature is the basic impulse communicated in this poem. Compost literally is a fertilizer that is prepared by decaying the vegetables and dead bodies of different creatures. The poet uses it as the universal nutrient to transform and renew the earthly phenomena. But as the title of this paper suggests, the poet is found to be struggling between his fears of the environmental apocalypse and his faith on nature's power of regeneration. Whitman wonders at how nature transforms the

infectious and diseased bodies into fresh and healthy ones. He questions how things get renewed and the whole poem is an answer to this question. He takes the help of biblical resurrection to address his curiosity. In the beginning of the poem, the poet, in spite of his love for the nature, is startled and frightened with the earth, since in it, are buried so many deceased carcasses (Kinnell, 10). He is not confident about the purity of earth. For him it feels like an unsafe place to come to contact with the soil as it has been polluted due to haphazard human intervention. The earth is not only that a reservoir of beautiful things, there are also frightening and bad smelling stuffs around. These are, in part, because of anthropocentric behaviors. The poet is afraid of the fact that the ongoing exploitation of nature may lead the entire environment to its collapse. When the poet realizes how human beings are invading the environment, his belief is found to be shaken. If human invasions are not checked, Whitman feels that the earth will not be worth living. He expresses his shaken belief this way:

I withdraw from the still woods I loved;
I will not go now to the pastures to walk;
I will not strip the clothes of my body to meet my lover the sea;
I will not touch my flesh to the earth as to the other flesh, to renew me (Perlman, 459).

The poet is afraid of going to the still woods and the pasture land even for a walk because he feels that these places have become unsafe for a company now. The poet's attachment with the soil and trees has been made weaker. The poet shuns all physical contact between his body and the body of the earth (Farland, 799). The poem per se presents a pessimistic picture of landscape. The sea, that was once the poet's lover, is not worth embracing due to chemical and solid wastes running there. It sounds like William Cowper's melancholic note of despair after he visited the Poplar Field nearly after a decade and found no trees where the birds used to reside and sing in a melodious voice. Similarly, the earth where the poet could sleep with his clothes off earlier has become poisonous. He realizes the reason behind his withdrawal with the river and the soil is rooted in our anthropogenic idea. Human greed for accumulating power and property more than their real need has pushed the environment to its death bed. Excessive uses of chemicals, nuclear fallouts, and destruction of rain forest and pollution of water sources have threatened the human life itself. Glen P. Love, in this context alerts that the short sighted greed has caused:

[T]he threats of nuclear holocaust, or of slower radiation poisoning, of chemical or germ warfare, the alarming growth of world's population...mounting evidence of global warming, destruction of the planet's protective ozone layer the increasing harmful effect of acid rain, overcutting of the world's last remaining forests, the critical loss of top soil and ground water, over fishing and toxic poisoning of the oceans, inundation in our own garbage, an increasing rate of extinction of plants and animal species (225).

All these catastrophes mentioned in these lines are caused due to our failure to regard ourselves as an only member of this big universe. Because men keep themselves in the center of this universe, the above mentioned invasions were made. These human invasions ultimately keep the poet separate from river water and soil. The rotting decomposing matters haunt him with the "intimations" of "fevers," 'sour deeds" and "foul meat" (Farland, 800). He loses the attachment with the soil and feels uprooted. Therefore he shows his intense fear in the beginning. He declares that he will not be in touch with them anymore.

The poet was the New York City resident. It was a place that had a terrifying situation in terms of waste management. Walt Whitman might have written *This Compost* due to the growing terror that the dead carcasses everywhere had caused. About the then waste management problem of the city Jacob reports:

This city in 1840s and 1850s suffered from the waste management problem. For the medical community, it was all consuming problem. The struggle to keep diseases and pollution away from overtaking the city began in those decades of forties and fifties. Everything trash and manure cholera and pneumonia threatened the city to the verge of anarchy and collapse (314).

Viewing the infectious disease as uncontrollable just by small efforts like street cleaning, garbage collection, Whitman felt the illness was inevitable. Therefore he withdraws his intense desire of sleeping naked on the earth's surface and swimming in the sea. Regarding the medical philosophy, Whitman's idea was like that of naturopathy and herbal healing. He believed more on the emphasis on herbals, naturopathy and crystal healing rather than on allopath and homeopathy that attacked the body with chemicals and other measures

such as, bloodletting. He expressed his skepticism towards doctors mainly related to allopath. Jacob says, "People are so sick of being drugged- so convinced that there is a simpler and better plan that the old one - so shocked at the great portion which kills the bear to the cries that they are perhaps too ready to encourage innovation and accept doctrines not founded on deep through experience." (Jacob, 392)

Whitman mistrusted such killing cures of the homeopaths and hydropath cautioning readers against any medical orthodox system. For Whitman, medical care system has added the filth in the environment and made it terribly polluted. Therefore he is startled in the beginning of the poem. He is not only startled; his faith in regeneration has shaken. He is really troubled and he wrestles with his thoughts. His unresolved tension and revulsion against the growing environmental gloom leads him to contemplate about the nature of nature. He asks:

O how can the ground not sicken?

How can you be alive, you growth of spring?

How can you furnish health, you blood of herbs, roots orchards, grain?

Are they not continually putting distempered corpses in you?

Is it not every continent worked over and over with soul dead? (Perlman, et al. 459).

The poet's struggle against the fears of annihilation reaches the climax here. There are reasons why the poetic person is so haunted by such fears of annihilation. They are the result of indifference towards our responsibility to preserve nature and biological diversity. Our hedonic desires and the desire to accumulate property in an unfair way and irresponsive of the environment have pushed the earth to an unsafe position for all living creatures.

From here, the poem takes a shift in tone. The poet's deep contemplation on the nature of life and death leads him to think differently. The multiple questions asked here ultimately take the poet to the strong faith in spiritual regeneration because the proper questions asked in the proper context can satisfy our curiosity and form the belief. The major question the poetic persona asks here is about how the earth can give birth to a non diseased life from the infectious waste. When the poet finds the answer of this question, his fears of annihilation are addressed. He understands that in spite of human intervention, nature can tolerate it to a large extent and can transform all human filth, miasma and decay to give birth to new and fresh life. His tone changes to admiration of nature. His questions show that nature's renewal process is too complex for a man to understand. He exclaims saying "what chemistry!" He realizes the nature's capacity to decompose dead bodies to create a new life. This exclamation, according to Herold Aspiz, recalls Whitman's enthusiasm over Justus Liebig's 1846 textbook on chemistry, which defined "fermentation, or putrefaction" as metamorphosis" – the simultaneous breakdown and re-creation of matter (63-64). This chemical metaphor suggests nature's unique transformative power to continue universal phenomena and it helps the poet overcome his initial fear. He begins to glorify specific process that shows nature's renewal. For example, "The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its grave (Perlman, et al. L,460) brings about the image of crucifixion of Jesus Christ and his resurrection out of his blood collected in a bowl. The reference of the resurrection of wheat reminds of the vegetable cycle on the one hand and a spiritual immortality on the other. It alludes to the death and nature's power of giving birth to new souls. The poet continues ahead appealing to the sense of taste: "That is clean and clean forever, to the cool drink from the well tastes so good, that blackberries are so flavorful and juicy" (Perlman, et al. L, 461). The poet wonders at the charisma seen in the nature. He claims that the charismatic cleansing property of the soil is a strange chemistry.

The poet asks:

That the winds are really not infectious,

That cool drink from the well taste so good,

That blackberries are so flavoros and juicy,

T hat the fruits of the apple orchard and the orange orchard,

Those melons, grapes, peaches, plums, will none of them,

Poison me,

That when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease,

Though probably every spear of grass rises out of what was once,

A catching disease. (Perlman, et al., 460)

The poet records different objects which decay by the chemistry of nature. These observations point to the scientific process which invokes biochemistry to the transformative and cleansing power inherent in nature. The poet feels that the agricultural landscapes, orchards, fruits and grains are offering help to restore the environmental health of the city during the crisis. And the farming activities hold the key to the renewal and restoration of human health. The compost manure made out of animals' dead bodies, vegetables and other waste materials has widely been in use in farming since the beginning of Agricultural Age. Instead of viewing the decomposition of animals as a miasma or contaminant, Whitman believes that it would contribute nutrients and minerals to the soil. Writing in 1854, Bigelow explained the biochemical process by which new life arises out of decaying animal and vegetable life:

If we take comprehensive survey of the progress and the mutations of animal and vegetable life, we shall perceive that. The elements which have once moved and circulated in living frames, do not become extinct nor useless after death- they offer themselves as the materials from which other living frames are to be constructed. What has once possessed life is most assimilated to the living character, and most ready to partake of life again (Bigelow, 172).

In this view, life is a cyclic phenomenon in which there is no death. "All goes inward and outward, nothing collapses" (Bigelow, 8). Out of materials of the death come living frames converting everything into animate organic matter. In this context Whitman uses the word 'grass' which he borrows from Isaiah 40:6-7, "All flesh is grass. The grass witheth, the flower fadeth" (King James Version). This echoes to biblical figuration in which grass emblemizes human mortality. The First General Epistle of Peter 1:24-25 says "All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass, the grass withereth, and the flower therefore falleth away." In these sentences, grass evokes the transient nature of human glory and evils. But in contrast to it, Whitman uses 'grass' that figures human durability and survival. The smallest sprout shows there is really no death. The decayed grass gives birth to fresh and new grass. Out of the earth, comes the divine, beautiful, innocent and fresh material. When his body grows old, weak and stops functioning, he anticipates a simple burial for himself into the dirt, which would mix him with the miraculous chemistry of earth, and he, from the sour dead, would, turn into a sweet thing with her divine ability (Gailey, 61).

Whitman finds harmony even in the foul things of the earth. His graphic description is also equally powerful. He uses ecological linguistics (Ecolinguistics) to reflect harmony and appeal to our senses. He does so through the use of environmental vocabularies which according to Fill Alwin, go far beyond syntax, semantics and pragmatics which requires some new theorizing as well as innovative ideas concerning empirical investigation (Alwin, 12). In the case of Whitman, he offers a new perspective of looking at the biodiversity found on the environment. Many of us do not know the names of locally available animals, birds and plants. It is due to our indifference towards them and the ecological environment around us. But Whitman takes the names of mite, grass, beans, prairies, onion, apple bud cluster, wheat, willow tree, mulberry tree, s/he birds, poultry, hatched eggs, newly born animals, calf, cow, mare, hill, potato, maize, etc. It is his environmental consciousness. He sees harmony in this biodiversity. He has a capacity to find harmony even in the foul soul because it has an amazing ability to transform every carcass into something valuable. This amazing nature of soil reminds us of William Shakespeare's "Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lies" in which death can transform the bones into coral and eyes into pearl. Here, in this poem too, Whitman mentions the power of nature this way:

Behold this compost! Behold it well!

Perhaps every mite has once formed part of sick person- yet behold,

The grass covers the prairies

The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden,

The delicate spear of the onion pierces upwards,

The apple buds cluster together on the apple branches,

The resurrection of the appears with pale visage out of its graves,

Out of its hill, faithfully rise the potato's dark green leaves (Perlman, et al. 460).

It is not only the graphic description; it brings ahead the biblical allusion of the resurrection of crops like wheat, potato, maize, etc. It celebrates the bucolic harmony of nature. These lines firmly establish his faith

in spiritual regeneration. Whitman, who was afraid of coming to the contact of earth in the beginning, realizes this generative power and feels it healthy after all (Kinnell, 10). He affirms his own good health now. His skepticism vanishes with his realization of seraphic power of earth. There is both radiance and amazement in this realization.

Conclusion

Walt Whitman's poem *This Compost* moves, to some extent, along the common dramatic narrative structure: ecstasy, crisis and resolution. However the first part stands out in that as it begins with crisis. The first section begins with the line "Something startles me where I thought I was safest". There are disillusioning filths that threaten the poet's psyche. But from the second part, the poem takes a turn. The disillusionment that the poet faces in the first part makes him contemplative. He asks question and finds the answer that fills him with reverence. The image of grass makes an association with a short termed life that undergoes the process of decomposition and growth into divine materials of earth. The poet does not celebrate the death; he rather celebrates the amazing power of metamorphosis. He wonders at the earth's ability to grow sweet things out of corpses. In this sense he finds death to be beautiful as it is a point from which the transformation begins. It is the mother earth that is committing sweet action by helping the dead bodies to decay and to give birth to beautiful and fresh things out of them. Earth has been portrayed as a provider for humans and all other creatures. Furthermore the poet shows that the human being's relationship with the earth is unbounded and maternal. The poet's fears of apocalypse are ultimately silenced after he embraces the mother earth and her divine power of transforming all matters.

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