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Transformational Transcendentalism: Whitman's Progressive Perspective in "Song of Myself"

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Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" examines the spiritual indivisibility of life through the narration of an all-seeing poet character. The speaker, who calls himself "Walt Whitman" (Whitman 499), exposes himself to the perspectives of the living world in order to present his listener with the gift of unadulterated, empathetic consciousness. Throughout the free-verse poem, Whitman consistently employs direct address and the cataloguing of living personas in short vignettes. His use of these devices establishes a sense of transcendental unity for his audience and is intended to help his audience grow to be conscious in the way that the speaker is. However, Whitman's choice to directly transform the way his audience empathizes with the living world is not only evidence of his transcendental poetic perspective, but also shows his innovative intent to include as many as possible in his intended poetic audience, a goal that many of his transcendentalist peers did not have in mind.

Whitman directly addresses his listener 113 times in "Song of Myself." Each time, it is part of an explicit call for his reader to appreciate the unity and connectedness of life. In the opening lines of his poem, Whitman begins

his refrain by stating “what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (2-3). Next, he insists that if you “Stop this day and night with me ... you shall possess the origin of all poems,” (Whitman 33), but that “You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self” (Whitman 36-37). From these exclamations one can infer that Whitman intends this poem to be transformational, but he also does not elevate himself above his listener. This is quite similar to the transcendental belief that people should not have to access the glory of God through intermediaries like the clergy, but that He can be found within oneself and in nature. Historian Paul Reuben explains in his overview of transcendental belief that this attitude stems from transcendentalists’ insistence that “God can be found everywhere,” and that “God can be found in both nature and human nature” (4). In fact, he elaborates, transcendentalists upheld the notion that “One must have faith in intuition,” above all (Reuben 4). Thus, when Whitman states that after reading this poem the audience will “possess the origin of all poems” (33), he means that by allowing oneself to observe the glorious indivisibility of all life, one can transcend the need to seek out other’s interpretations of its mysteries. Whitman is not conflating himself with God, nor taking on a holier-than-thou persona; while it is clear that he reveres the ability to feel conscious of the world, he would like to help his audience access it in themselves.

The speaker - Whitman - is providing this poem to humanity in an effort to break down the artificial barriers created by an incorrect and limiting sense of separateness.

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Whitman continues: "I believe in you my soul" (82). With this assurance, Whitman reaffirms that the "I" with which he refers to himself is no different than the "you" that he is addressing. This line identifies Whitman's firm stance that he is no better than his audience; not only are all people one, but Whitman includes himself with those people. According to Reuben, transcendentalists like Whitman were incredibly devoted to the idea that "The unity of life and universe must be realized [and that there] is a relationship between all things" (4).

Whitman then begins to expand the definitions of the "you" he is addressing. First, he describes the "you" seemingly as a lover laying with him on a summer's day. Then, when he begins to contemplate the nature of grass, he refers directly to "you" as "curling grass" (Whitman 111). When he begins imagining the experiences of other living beings, he calls "you" a lonely spinster, an ox, and asks "are you the President?" (Whitman 431). In these ways he again blurs the meanings of "you," showing that it is not only you and he who are connected, but you and all other living beings. This connection, according to Reuben, is a product of the transcendental belief in the "Oversoul," which stands for the presence of God connecting all living beings (4). Because of this concept, transcendentalism expounds the idea that it is important to rid oneself of the notion that one life is more valuable than another because all life is connected by the same presence of God. Whitman translates this belief when saying that you are everything from a piece of grass to the chief executive, showing that the Oversoul unites all who exist in between the two. Whitman's firm and consistent exploration of the many "you"s who exist is not only

evidence of his transcendentalist perspective, but also lays the foundation for his innovative attitude toward including not just the literary elite in his intended audience, but all who live or have lived.

Whitman approaches this inclusionary transcendentalist ideal through his cataloguing of multiple and varied personas throughout “Song of Myself.” Whitman scholar Michael Warner refers to this technique as a “social montage and thumbnail characterization” of the public (xvii). Whitman observes this montage of life in two ways. First, he begins to insert himself in certain scenes as a physical observer, joining the action and affecting the outcome. At the beginning of his exploration, he himself lifts up the mosquito net covering a baby’s cradle to peer at it, watches two young children playing together and acts almost like a detective when looking at the body of a man who shot himself. He then joins in a farm’s harvest, physically being beside the working men:

I am there, I help, I came stretch’d atop of the load,
I felt its soft jolts, one leg reclined on the other,
I jump from the cross-beams and seize the clover
and timothy,

And roll head over heels and tangle my hair full of
wisps (Whitman 171-174)

By joining the men, Whitman both becomes an authority on their experience as well as an observer. With this approach, he continues to directly connect the role of poet to that of the listener. He also repeats this process by becoming a clam-digger, a hunter, and a white man who has tentatively taken in a fugitive slave. By cataloguing these experiences and inserting himself within them, he furthers his attitude that his audience should see them-

The Corinthian: The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College selves in his poetry. Author Robert Ruehl refers to this attitude as a vestige of the transcendentalist belief in the importance of building “self-culture” (1). By including the general public in this transcendentalist conversation of a poem, Whitman allows the audience to make this transformation their own. Later, Whitman begins to list more categorically vignettes of people’s lives that he is only observing from the outside looking in. In these, while he may state that he is present, it is always a passive presence that seems more imagined than truly experienced. He observes a duck-shooter, a black man whom he calls a “picturesque giant” (Whitman 230), and new immigrants, among many others. His audience is positively overwhelmed with short insights into other people’s lives. By bombarding his audience with these short peeks into the experiences of others, Whitman highlights the diversity of life and continues to promote the transcendental ideal of unity with other beings.

Whitman’s inclusionary approach to his subject matter was very much innovative for his literary era. Indeed, not only did his poetry make waves in transcendental literary spheres, but the fact that his words were able to reach anyone at all is in itself incredible. A self-educated man, Whitman did not come from a literary background or grow up having connections to the literary world. According to Warner, Whitman was raised by a carpenter father in working-class Brooklyn, New York (xvi). His first book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, was self-published (Warner xiv), although wildly controversial when it came into print (Warner xix). In this way, Whitman is a different type of poet than other, more traditionally educated members of the transcendentalist movement that came

before him. How far he had to propel himself to be noticed by the literary elite only speaks to his talent and self-determination. But can he be an authority on the perspectives of others? As a 19th century, white, male, middle-class poet, can his depictions of lives that he did not live be accepted? "Song of Myself" deals in the ideal: the workingman, the suffering slave, the fertile young mother. Whitman picks up and puts down these personas like costumes, only imagining them while others experienced them in even more multifaceted ways. Are the people in Whitman's poem afforded the respect that he calls on his audience to feel for all living beings? While it is fair to call into question Whitman's authority in telling the stories of others, it can be agreed that his push to acknowledge and include the experiences of the unspoken for helped begin to establish a greater, invaluable, progressive innovation in the American literary environment. Likely, Whitman's push to tell these stories was influenced by a transcendentalist passion for educating the masses. As a form of activism, according to Ruehl, transcendentalists believed "in a peaceful revolution by example" (1). However, the way many transcendentalist thinkers approached this was to speak out to those already among the literary elite. Ruehl writes that many transcendentalists professed their ideas through "journaling...and lecturing on the lyceum circuit" (1). In these two ways specifically, transcendentalists were really only speaking to other members of their philosophical circle. It is not as if a lay-person could be in the intended audience of an erudite literary journal or attend an exclusive lyceum lecture. In this manner, the typical expression of transcendentalist thought during Whitman's time did not include the general public within its intend-

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ed audience. And it takes no mental gymnastics to see how working-class Whitman, who Warner professes was “uncomfortable and silent” among the “literati” (xviii) might have noticed this discrepancy. With this in mind, Whitman’s “Song of Myself” is clearly written for the layman. In it, Whitman embodies an Americana overlooked by the literary elite and includes it in his transcendentalist conversation. By bridging this gap between those who are talked about and those who talk about them, Whitman progresses further than many of his contemporaries and applies transcendentalist thought in a way unparalleled by many of his peers.

“Song of Myself” marks a progressive watershed in American poetry. By exploring many perspectives of the experience of life, Whitman facilitated the acknowledgment of many voices America had never heard before. Urging his audience to broaden the boundaries of their empathy, compassion, and respect for living beings, he introduced to the country an accessible transcendentalism focused on uniting the masses. Whitman’s employment of direct address to his listeners allowed them, regardless of whether they were a members of the typical literary audience, to observe with him the many perspectives of the world. By inundating his audience with the catalogued stories of others, he opened them up to imagining the lives behind his vignettes, allowing them to be more fully conscious of other lives. Whitman’s “Song of Myself” offers up the revolutionary idea that stories that are not always told deserve to be imagined anyway. By exploring the concept of collective consciousness with his listener, Whitman proves himself to be a true leader in transcendentalist thought. But more than that, his accessible,

undeniably American poem embodies fully the transcendental ideal of, what Reuhl calls, “peaceful revolution by example” (1).

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