

Whitman's Transcendentalism: An Analysis of "Song of Myself" by Comparing with Emersonian Thought

Rui Liu^{1,*}

¹ School of Humanities and Social Science, Xi'an Polytechnic University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710600, China

*Email: rliu0807@163.com

ABSTRACT

Whitman's "Song of Myself" shows his transcendentalist thoughts, greatly influenced by Emerson while also having his distinguished understanding. The paper mainly focuses on "Song of Myself" to analyze the similarities and differences between Whitman's and Emerson's transcendentalism. Fundamentally, both Whitman and Emerson emphasize the power of nature, human agency, and equality. Meanwhile, they hold different views towards the physical body and the realization of transcendental experience.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, Whitman, Emerson, Song of Myself

1. INTRODUCTION

"I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire. I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start." [1] In July 1855, Emerson wrote a letter to Whitman after the young poet sent his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* to Emerson. From then on, Whitman always quoted these words in the preface to the sequential editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Apparently, Emerson, the founder of the New England Transcendentalism, had a significant impact on Whitman's career track as well as creative production. Whitman borrowed a lot from Emerson's conceptions of transcendentalism while he maneuvered, revised, and recreated these ideas in his own works.

Transcendentalism is an intellectual movement that flourished in the nineteenth century, which had a significant influence on the formation of American spirit and literature. The term transcendentalism derives from the Latin word "transcendere" which means to rise above or pass beyond limitation. It is the process of transcending physical form into metaphysical form.

Emerson's essay "Nature", published in 1836, has been regarded as the Bible of Transcendentalism. Later on, he developed the notion of transcendentalism in a series of essays such as "The Divinity School Address"

(1838), "Self-Reliance" (1841), and "Experience" (1844). Elements including nature, self, and spirit, are highlighted in Emerson's construction of transcendentalism. He deems the physical world as the symbol of the spiritual world and views nature as the symbol of God's spirit. By feeling nature, man can gain the truth of the world. Doctrines, rules, and traditions are burdens for humans to realize the true self and understand the world. Therefore, individuality is prioritized, rather than traditions, as a method to approach the truth. While Emerson emphasizes the power of individuality, he sees all individuals as equal. Since every individual is a unique and significant human being, they should all enjoy equal rights and deserve to be treated without discrimination.

Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855) is riddled with transcendentalist imageries echoing Emerson's emphasis on the power of nature and individuality. While their thoughts and language constantly find resonance in each other, Whitman and Emerson have different attitudes towards the human body. Emerson holds a relatively restricted view of the human body, while Whitman praises the human body. Moreover, Emerson and Whitman have a different view of how to gain a mystical union of nature and one's soul. For Emerson, it is from the sight, while, for Whitman, this union comes from the sense of touch.

This paper will focus on Whitman's "Song of Myself" to analyze how Whitman was inspired by Emerson's thoughts of transcendentalism and redefine his own view, which differs from Emerson's narrative. I will first

analyze the similarities between the two, followed by a discussion of their different views on the human body.

2. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN WHITMAN'S AND EMERSON'S CONCEPT OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

Emerson and Whitman both embrace and celebrate the power of nature, the importance of agency, and the ability to think independently, which are three elements closely connected with each other. In the opening of "Nature", Emerson writes: "The foregoing generation beheld God and nature face to face; we through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe." [2] Here Emerson says that people shape their view of nature and God according to their forebears' knowledge and tradition. It worries him because unlike the preceding generation, who built their knowledge by self-experience, his contemporaries neglect the first-hand observation and overly rely on the tradition.

"Why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? ...There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship." [2] Here, again, Emerson emphasizes intuition and criticizes the over-reliance on doctrine and tradition. It is worth noting that what Emerson criticizes is not the history or knowledge per se but the abuse of them which prevents individuals from thinking independently. Whitman agrees bluntly with Emerson in "Song of Myself", where he champions human beings' agency and sees it as the essence for feeling nature. In the first section of "Song of Myself", he writes:

Creeds and schools in abeyance.

Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but
never forgotten,

I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every
hazard,

Nature without check with original energy. [3]

"Creeds" may refer to the church's religious doctrine, and "schools" indicate established knowledge. Abeyance, meaning a temporary pause, suggests Whitman's cautious attitude towards tradition. Since he calls for a temporary cessation, which is not permanent, Whitman presents a subtler argument than simply denying or taking in all the traditions. That is, people should not be unduly influenced by doctrines and schools.

Whitman then celebrates the agency of human beings in the following lines. "I harbor the good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard." These two short sentences both begin with the capital "I". Whitman foregrounds his own

agency and makes him the subject of this line. The two verbs following "I" present the vibrant energy of the subject. The word "harbor" evokes the imagination of the sea, a broad, inclusive cradle to countless lives. "Harbor" thus suggests a motion that is strong and powerful. Whitman, through this diction, claims the power and energy of his agency. The verb "speak" accentuates that Whitman has his own voice. Speaking is an action that shows an individual's self-thinking ability and freedom of expressing his thoughts. He is going to say whatever he wants to say regardless of the so-called "good" or "bad" differentiated by the doctrine and knowledge, even though his speech might offend churches and schools. Established traditions are less important than the power of nature and agency for an individual, for nature has "original energy", and agency enables one to feel the energy. "Original" echoes Emerson's "original relation to the universe" (Emerson 181). Here it would be fair to argue that Whitman is offering his own understanding of the way of enjoying an "original relation to the universe".

In the following section, Whitman pushes his arguments about agency and traditions to a further stage by the juxtaposition of four imperative sentences.

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun,
(there are millions of suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at second or third
hand, nor look through

the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in
books,

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. [3]

This stanza follows the style of free verse like the rest of the poetry. The free verse used in "Song of Myself" is a manifestation to break the tradition. Primarily inspired by Emerson, who thinks meter does not make the argument yet the argument or poetic ideas or vision makes its own meter, Whitman uses free verse, which jettisons the poetic tradition and introduces the idea of "open form" poetry. [4]

The above lines use anaphora that begin with "you shall". The first and fourth lines are affirmative imperative sentences, while the second and third lines are negative imperative sentences that form a symmetrical structure. These rhetorical devices give the above lines musical beats and rhythmical beauty. By using the second-person pronoun "you", Whitman addresses his readers directly to give them the advice of gaining the truth. These imperative sentences reveal a strong sense of command between lines, which shows Whitman's

determined attitude and urgent wish of all human beings to search inside through their intuitions.

This urge to celebrate independent thinking is reminiscent of Emerson's "Self-Reliance". In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson writes: "Insist on yourself; never imitate." [5] He demonstrates that men should trust themselves, and there is nothing more sacred than the integrity of one's mind, for it helps one have the suffrage of the world. [5] It is obvious that Whitman has followed Emerson's thought and repeatedly emphasized the necessity for one's personal experience.

In addition to valuing individual agency, Emerson sees every individual as equal regardless of race, gender, and social status, advocating the brotherhood of all human beings. He thinks each individual is equal in the eyes of God and have sufficient spiritual power to intuit God. [6] Emerson is against the principle of Calvinism, which overly emphasizes the doctrine of the Bible and neglects human kinds, and believes in the divinity of human beings.

Similar arguments can be found in "Song of Myself." In section 17, Whitman writes:

These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages
and lands, they are not original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mine they are
nothing, or next to nothing,
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the
riddle they are nothing,
If they are not just as close as they are distant they
are nothing. [3]

In this section, Whitman uses brief and straightforward words that differ from his former long catalogue-style sections to make a straightforward claim to his readers. "These" in the first line refers to his poems and thoughts. He tells his readers that "all men in all ages and lands" possess these and "they are not original with me", suggesting that the thoughts in his poems are inborn in all human beings even though they are not aware of such existence. Therefore, everyone is equal since all individuals possess truth and knowledge intuitively inside. Whitman's emphasis on individuals and equality is a resonance of Emerson's thought of the divinity of human beings. In the next part, Whitman continues to say that his poem is of all people, containing riddles and decoding riddles, and can pass through the time regardless of how ancient it might be. In this section, Whitman also uses anaphora. The second line to the fourth line begins with the phrase "If they are not", and the last two lines begin with the word "This". The repetition of words can catch people's attention and create the rhythm of the poem. The rhetorical device brings a musical beat that makes the poem catchy.

In addition to seeing every individual as an equal agent to access the truth and the spirit of God, Emerson and Whitman also criticize slavery and see slaves as equal to everyone else. That an individual could be sold, bought, controlled, and taken away from freedom is unacceptable for Emerson and Whitman. During his lifetime, Emerson delivered many addresses on antislavery, for instance, "Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies" in 1844 and "Lecture on Slavery" in 1855. According to Emerson, the recognition of a shared human nature of black slaves have been ignored for a long time. [7] Like Emerson, Whitman expresses his antislavery statements in "Song of Myself." In Section 10, Whitman depicts a scene of "I" and a runaway slave:

The runaway slave came to my house and stopt
outside,

I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the
woodpile,

Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw
him limpsy and weak,

And went where he sat on a log and led him in and
assured him,

And brought water and fill'd a tub for his sweated
body and bruise'd feet,

And gave him a room that enter'd from my own, and
gave him some coarse clean clothes,

And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and
his awkwardness,

And remember putting plasters on the galls of his
neck and ankles;

He staid with me a week before he was recuperated
and pass'd north,

I had him sit next me at table, my fire-lock lean'd in
the corner. [3]

Here the poet narrates a story of encountering a runaway slave instead of just using catalogue rhetoric by listing many items. By creating a narrative scene, Whitman wants to depict a complete story and make a specific description of this runaway slave. This slave is an epitome that reflects the harsh reality of all the slaves in that era. The poet uses the first-person point of view to narrate this scene. "I" is playing the role of observer and protector of the slave. "I" heard and saw the runaway slave. "I" then led him to the house, assured him, brought him water, filled a tub for him, and gave him room and clothes. These verbs indicate that "I" is in a favorable position and leading role, while the slave is in a passive

position. The slave is being led by "I". It reflects the lack of freedom of this slave while also indicates the slaves' overall deprivation. He is being observed and taken care of by "I". He is limpsy, weak, sweated, and bruised. All these adjectives imply his unwell physical condition. During his escape, he probably has already encountered some perilous conditions, as implied by his wound. From the story, it is evident that Whitman shows his empathy for slaves and his abhorrence of slavery. He demonstrates his attitude from the reaction of "I" after encountering the slave. The descriptions such as "putting plasters on the galls" and "the fire-lock lean'd in the corner" show that "I" took care of the runaway slave, protected him from being caught, and helped him escape to the north instead of bringing him to the slave owner. However, if the person he confronts is who wants to catch him, it would be a different story. Like Emerson, who describes the harsh reality of slaves and advocates for abolishing slavery, Whitman, in his poem, shows his antislavery attitude and sympathy towards slaves.

3. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WHITMAN'S AND EMERSON'S CONCEPT OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

While Whitman's "Song of Myself" reveals many thoughts of Emersonian Transcendentalism, Whitman has developed his own perception, which differs from Emerson significantly. One distinguished difference between Whitman and Emerson is their view of one's body. As Howard points out, for Emerson, the transcendental experience is purely spiritual, engaged in an escape from the physical body to the spirit. [8] In Chapter I of *Nature*, Emerson depicts this spiritual experience. "I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." [2] By feeling the "currents of the universal being", Emerson gets rid of the physical body's limitation and gains the spirit of God by the union of the individual soul with the over-soul. For him, the soul is of a higher level than the physical body, while Whitman advocates body and soul's equality and defines himself as the poet of the Body and the poet of the Soul. [3] He clarifies his attitudes towards body and soul in Section 48, "I have said that the soul is not more than the body, /And I have said that the body is not more than the soul." [3] For Whitman, to gain the transcendental experience and feel the over-soul does not mean escaping from the physical body with the complete obedience of the individual to the dictates of the over-soul as championed by Emerson. [9]

He is willing to praise the human body and claim the divinity of the human body. There are many descriptions related to the body in "Song of Myself". Here is what he writes in Section 24:

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,

Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part
and tag of me is a miracle.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy
whatever I touch or am touched from,

The scent of these arm-pits aromas finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the
creeds. [3]

In the first line, Whitman directly expresses his positive attitude toward flesh and appetites. The "flesh" refers to the human body signifying lust, and "appetites" make people think about greed and gluttony. All of these are the original sins according to the Christianity creeds. Moreover, the 19th-century era in which Whitman lived was typically known for its repression of sexuality. As Foucault says, "On the subject of sex, silence became the rule." [10] Most intellectuals, including Emerson and Thoreau, feel shameful to talk about this topic and avoid writing about it in their works. Therefore, Whitman's undisguised appreciation of the human body and appetites is very bold at that time. The relatively daring discourse demonstrates Whitman's rebellion against creeds and traditions. He will not let them restrict his thoughts.

In the next line, he writes, "Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles." These series of actions are all verbs about sensations and in the present tense. The present tense shows that these actions are a continuous process. By the sensation of sight, sound, and touch, his body unites with nature. "Divine am I inside and out", he thinks both his soul and body are holy and divine. "I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from" is a description of Whitman's transcendental experience. Through touch, Whitman unites his body with nature and makes each part of his body a miracle. The strong visuality of the body forms a sharp contrast with Emerson's "transparent eye-ball", whose color and form tend to disappear.

In the following line, he says, "The scent of these arm-pits aromas finer than prayer,/ This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds." Here he provides a more specific description of a particular part of the human body, which seems obscure in others' eyes since arm-pits in most people's recognition are odorous, disgusting, and in extreme contrast with aromas. Whitman uses this contrast to show his intense admiration of the human body. Even those unspeakable and seemingly disgusting parts of the body are more pleasant and divine than creeds in churches in his eyes. The corporeal language in Whitman's poems makes him deviate from the mainstream writers in his era and distinguish him from other transcendentalists.

The realization of transcendental experience for Emerson and Whitman comes from different senses. For Emerson, through the sense of sight, while for Whitman, through touch. [11] In Emerson's essays, he shows that

the sense of sight is predominant above other senses to feel nature. In "Nature", he says, "the eye is the best of artists" and "to the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty." [3] Emerson's emphasis on sight probably derives from his interest in abstract fact rather than concrete elements. As F.O Matthiessen points out, Emerson's delight in eyes overshadowed other senses because eyes could reach into the realm of inner light, aspired to the disembodied. [12] In the description of his transcendental experience, Emerson's "transparent eyeball" demonstrates that during the transcendental experience, sight is the only sense that needs to be involved in the process of gaining the spirit of God. Thus, just as Reynolds and Lynch point out, for Emerson, sight is more like a mode of thought than a kind of sensation.[11]

For Whitman, the most powerful sense during the transcendental experience is touch. Moreover, as opposed to Emerson, who is more interested in the abstract, Whitman pays attention to the specific and concrete elements in daily life. In "Song of Myself", many stanzas use a catalogue style narrative that lists a series of items depicting the elements that appear in everyday life. Section 5 in "Song of Myself" is a specific example to show his differences from Emerson.

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not
abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.
Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your
throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom
or lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.
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,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the
fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones,
elder, mullein and poke-weed. [3]

In this section, Whitman personifies his soul, depicts the union between himself and his soul, and provides a specific description of his transcendental experience. In the first two lines, Whitman maintains that his soul shall not abase to "the other I", indicating the poet's physical body, and vice versa. This affirmation shows the equal position between the two. The following three lines resonate with the description in Section 1, "I loafe and invite my soul", and provides a more detailed depiction. The sense involved here is hearing. He is neither interested in "words", "music", "rhyme", for all the above things are anthropogenic, nor the "custom" or lecture" since he has pointed out that "creeds and schools in abeyance" in the previous section. What he enjoys is the non-formalized hum produced by the soul, for it is the spontaneous flow from the intuition.

The following lines depict his mystical experience totally from the sense of touch without any auditory description. The poet presents it as a symbolic sexual scene between his body and his soul. The soul set its head across the poet's hips and turned over, then open the poet's shirt and tongue to his heart, and finally touch the poet's beard and reached his feet. The series of actions are leading by the soul. The soul caresses the body, while the physical body is touched by the soul passively. Through the sense of being touched, the poet gets the truth that transcends the earthly world and gains God's spirit. He illustrates his revelation of this transcendental experience by saying: "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".

This mystical experience also makes him realize that all creatures are limitless. In the last lines, the poet ends this section by listing a series of concrete little creatures such as leaves, ants, scabs, mullein, and poke-weed and implying their inner energy. Whitman's attention to detail and concrete things and eagerness to observe their inner power is different from Emerson's interest in the abstract.

4. CONCLUSION

Whitman's "Song of Myself" reveals his transcendentalist thoughts, which share many similarities

with Emersonian transcendentalism. They both believe in the power of nature, individuals' agency and advocate equality among human beings. While Emersonian transcendentalism has a significant impact on Whitman, Whitman and Emerson have several essential differences. They have different attitudes towards the physical body and hold various views of the way to gain the transcendental experience, which implicates that while absorbed the thoughts of Emerson, Whitman has developed his unique understanding of transcendentalism.

REFERENCES

- [1] Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Letter to Walt Whitman. July 21, 1855." *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*. Ed. Edwin Haviland Miller. New York: New York University Press, 1961. p.41.
- [2] Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Nature." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 9th ed., B, W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, pp. 181–210.
- [3] Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 9th ed., B, W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, pp. 1312–1356.
- [4] Levine, Robert S. "Ralph Waldo Emerson." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 9th ed., B, W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, pp. 178–181.
- [5] Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 9th ed., B, W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, pp. 236–253.
- [6] Ladd, Andrew, and Karen Meyers. *Romanticism And Transcendentalism*. Chelsea House, 2010, p. 34.
- [7] Halliwell, Martin. "Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emerson's Antislavery Writings, (Eds.) Len Gougeon & Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, £20). Pp. Lvi + 232. ISBN 0 300 05970 1." *Journal Of American Studies*, vol 30, no. 1, 1996, p.164. Cambridge University Press (CUP), DOI:10.1017/s0021875800024658. Accessed 26 Nov 2020.
- [8] Howard, Leon. "For a Critique of Whitman's Transcendentalism." *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 47, no. 2, 1932, pp. 79–85. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2913693. Accessed 26 Nov. 2020.
- [9] Holloway, Emory. *Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1926. Print. P.74.
- [10] Foucault, Michel. *The history of sexuality: An introduction*. Vintage, 1990. p.3.
- [11] Reynolds, Larry J., and Tibbie E. Lynch. "Sense and Transcendence in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman." *The South Central Bulletin*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1979, pp. 148–149. DOI:10.2307/3188500.
- [12] Matthiessen, F. O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. Literary Licensing, 2013.