

Conference Paper

Learning Through Literature: Whitman's Concept of Democracy in Trump's America

L. Manggong

Department of Literature and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Padjadjaran University, Jalan Raya Bandung-Sumedang Km.21, Jatinangor, West Java, Indonesia

Abstract

'Song of Myself', by nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman, describes the concept of democracy, which is one of the foundations of the principle of freedom of speech in America. This essay discusses literature learning on the concept of democracy in the poem. The discussion becomes specific when the concept of democracy in the poem is linked with the current practice of democracy in America under President Trump's administration. This essay argues that in its practice, the principle of democracy that upholds the freedom of speech of every individual in a dilemmatic way brings America to today's controversial administration by President Trump. The essay will examine the pragmatic aspect of Whitman's poem by referring to Mack (2002), and it will also focus on the xenophobic aspect of the poem by referring to Price (2004). The conclusion is drawn that even a utopian concept such as democracy is not entirely ideal, because the practice of democracy today is leading American people into an era of protest. Finally, the essay proposes the idea that literature learning of the concept of democracy in the poem also contributes to adopting a more critical view of the concept of democracy.

Keywords: democracy, Donald Trump, literature learning, pragmatics, xenophobia, Walt Whitman

Corresponding Author:

L. Manggong

lestari.manggong@unpad.ac.id

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1. Introduction

Freedom of expression is a principle that bases the concept of democracy. In the poem 'Song of Myself' by the nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman, the concept of democracy is proposed and can be used as a reference to understand the concepts of democracy in which America believes. This article discusses the understanding of the concept of democracy within a literary framework as a medium of learning, in the sense that Whitman's poetry is studied to see the concept of democracy delivered

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therein, as a study of the concept of democracy underlying the principle of freedom of expression in America. The objectives of the discussion in this article become specific when the concept of democracy in the poem is associated with the democratic practices that occur in America today since America has been under the administration of President Donald Trump.

This article argues that in practice, the principle of democracy that promotes freedom of expression for every individual in a dilemmatic way leads to the America of today, at the time of the controversial Trump presidency. In addition to 'Song of Myself', this article also discusses and compares another of Whitman's poems, 'For You O Democracy', to see Whitman's further perception of democracy. The discussion is conducted by looking at the pragmatic aspect of Whitman's poem by referring to Mack in his book *The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy* [1]. In addition, the discussion will also focus on the aspect of xenophobia in Whitman's work by referring to one of Price's writings in his book *To Walt Whitman, America* [2].

The discussion of the two poems will lead to the idea that even a utopian concept like democracy is not entirely ideal. Because, as is the case in America today, the principle of practiced democracy has made its people enter an era of protest. Finally, learning about the concept of democracy globally can also provide a more critical view of the concept of democracy.

2. Methods

The discussion is conducted by looking at the pragmatic aspect of Whitman's poem by referring to Mack in his book *The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy* [1]. In his book, Mack explains that Whitman is a pragmatic thinker because, for Whitman, democracy is more than a political process; democracy is also a social and cultural process. On this basis, it is important to examine Whitman's poems pragmatically. In addition, the discussion will also focus on the aspect of xenophobia in Whitman's work by referring to one of Price's writings in his book *To Walt Whitman, America*. In his book, Price alludes to the fact that Whitman is considered leftist and socialist [2]. The book also mentions that the etymology of Whitman's name is the term 'white man', which means 'white people'. It is in this light that the study of Whitman's work needs to be seen in terms of white supremacy.

3. Results

3.1. The concept of democracy in 'Song of Myself' and 'For You O Democracy'

Many post-American Revolutionary poets have tried to write epic poems that define the life, culture, and values in which Americans believe. Whitman tried to write such poems, which focused on the theme of a democratic self. Whitman then decided to write the poem 'Song of Myself' using 'I' as his speaker, who spoke directly with the reader. His poem is designed to resemble a speech addressed to audiences. In his note, which is also the main source from which the idea of 'Song of Myself' originated, Whitman wrote: "I am the poet of the body and I am the poet of the soul." The critics of Whitman's work think that this is the statement that underlies the main idea of the concept of democracy and that it is the basis of the concept of democracy in 'Song of Myself'. When the poem began to be compiled in 1855 [3], America still legalized the practice of slavery, and this strongly contradicts the concept of freedom in the principle of democracy. In that statement, it is implied that what happened in America at that time was ironic, because on the one hand democracy is in the process of manifesting, but on the other hand, America still thinks that slavery is legal.

'Song of Myself' opens with the conventional pattern of an iambic pentameter line, which indicates that this rhyme begins just as the classic epic work begins. In the subsequent lines, the pattern is increasingly abandoned, and in ensuing lines, it is also increasingly apparent that the 'I' mingles with the poet. This indicates that the subject of the poem is Whitman himself. Here is the first verse of the poem:

*I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
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.
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 [4].

Whitman 'celebrates' his democratic self, and, if examined further, the etymology of the word 'celebrate' indicates the meaning of 'to return to' or 'to frequent'. 'Song of Myself' became a poem recording Whitman's self-immersion into the world, which, in its journey, widened and absorbed more experience, then shrank and conducted an evaluation that led to the understanding that it could accommodate and retain the diversity of continuous experience encountered in his journey in the world. He constantly extends his limits to be able to include his compatriots, the human race in the world, and finally, the universe.

Through this concept, Whitman questioned the extent to which the democratic self can expand its experience before the democratic self finally explodes into pieces. In the first three lines of his poem, Whitman eliminates two essential things that divide mankind – religious beliefs and wealth: 'Every atom belongs to you as good belongs to me'. At every stage of human existence, human beings constantly experience change and exchange of ideas, emotions, and affections. The atomic particles that used to contribute to the creation of living beings are now part of us all, in an endless cycle.

The 'I' 'loafs' and 'observes' a spear of summer grass, and the whole poem is based on this action. Contemplating where his hometown was and his ancestors came from, the 'I' realizes that every grassy sheet is the mark of the movement, like the grass that grows on the mound of graves, the atomic particles of a stiff body as if resurrected in another form. In essence, 'Song of Myself' invites its readers to free themselves from all the shackles embodied in the form of religious beliefs and assets that can limit us in our individual growth.

The use of 'me' and 'you' in this poem is very fluid in concept. In Section 5 of the poem, the 'I' points out that 'you' means his soul: "I believe in you my soul", but in Section 6, the 'I' is seen talking to strands of grass: 'tenderly I will use you curling grass'. From here the reader is increasingly led to the notion that Whitman presents the absence of difference, shown through the liquid of the 'me' and 'you' figure when the 'I' reads this poem, as if the 'I' is speaking to the readers who are positioned as the grass or the 'I'. The 'I' who is spoken to represent a figure who is not from the same period when the poem is written. Whitman speaks to audiences in the future, which is our present. Whitman repeatedly uses the words 'here' and 'now', which are often

sedentary. This style of delivery makes it seem like there is no wall that limits the past and present.

The more this poem is explored, the more it is seen that the ‘soul’ in question is the democratic imagination imagined by Whitman, who continues to evolve and move forward. The ‘soul’ in question is the self that exists today, now, at this moment. The democratic imagination that exists in Whitman’s shadow is that present figure, constantly evolving, and moving toward the future. This is parallel to the American Constitution, which is a document of continuous progress in its application, as well as the fact that Whitman repeatedly reread and revised his poems in *Leaves of Grass*. The revised ‘Song of Myself’ appears in the 1891–1892 editions, especially at the beginning of the poem. If it is juxtaposed, it will look like Figure 1. It can be seen that there is an addition of ‘and sing myself’ made by Whitman. This addition is considered to indicate the joy of the so-called ‘celebrating’ activity.

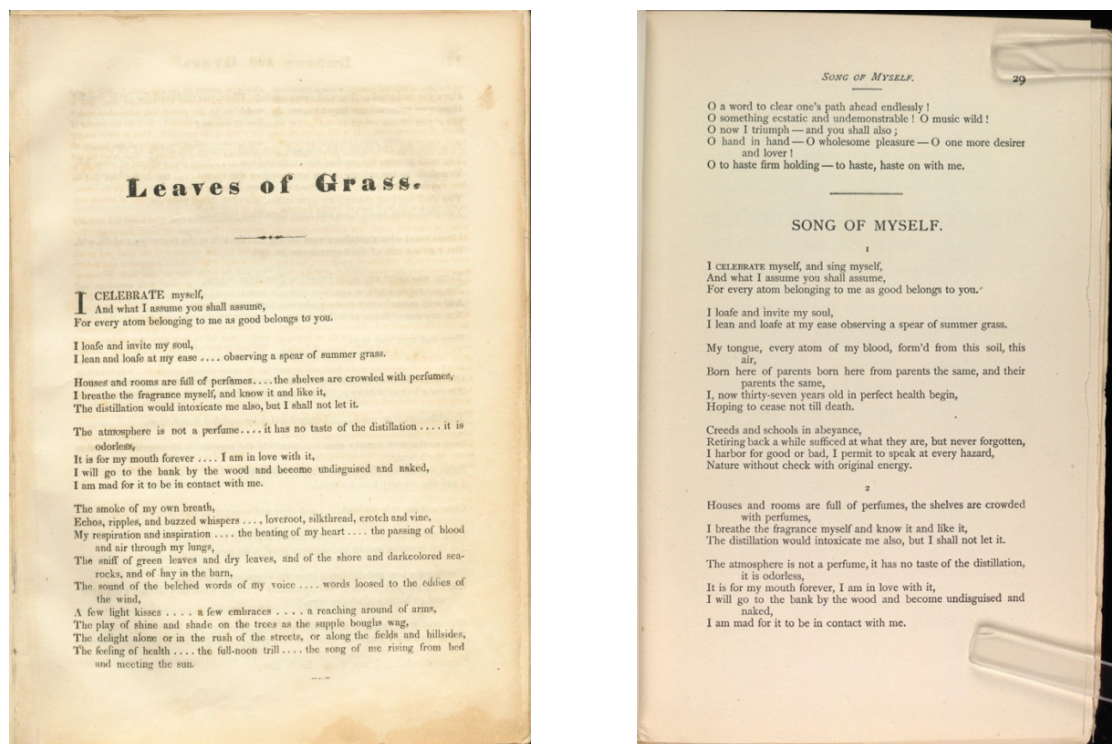


Figure 1: Original text. Juxtaposed poem *Leaves of Grass* and *Song of Myself*.

From the rendering of his poem, there are indications that in Whitman’s mind democracy does not manifest itself in the form of an institution, but as a way of thinking, imagining, and a way of life. Being able to have a democratic imagination means applying the concept of democracy in every aspect of our lives. At the end of Section 14, Whitman writes:

What is the commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me, Me going in for my chances, spending on vast returns, Adorning myself to bestow on the first that will take me, Not asking the Sky to come down to my good will, Scattering it freely forever [3].

It seems here that the 'I' is not the 'I' who is ambitious to ascend to the top of the hierarchy, but the expanding 'I', who constantly reaches out to enrich his experience. In his notes, Whitman writes:

As I speak, there are now existing in these States coming forward at the rate of over a million fresh recruits annually, an army, leaving out infants and grown persons of 15,000,000, counting both sexes from five to twenty years of age, inclusive. Think what this splendid mass of ductile humanity, each for his or own sake, under a schooling worthy of our time, were eligible to become [5].

And from that, it appears that what Whitman envisioned are not just individuals who are expanding into a richer self of the democratic culture, but also the entire population in America that is moving forward, as well as the evolution of future generations.

This poem can also be seen as an attempt to voice a democratic 'I', and show what a democratic 'I' is. America is designed to be the first country to apply the concept of democracy. In Whitman's mind, this has to do with politics but not as a whole with regard to politics. Democracy requires total improvement in every aspect of life. Mankind must be able to think in different ways, must be able to identify themselves in different ways, must be able to think about religion in different ways and think philosophically. In essence, everything will be changed by these things. When the poem opens with "I celebrate myself, and what I assume you shall assume, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," it appears that there is an attempt to articulate a radical democratic voice. In the next two sentences, Whitman breaks down all the barriers and divisions of human harmony: The choice of an atomic particle here can be understood in terms of both scientific and philosophical contexts. Scientifically, it is the atomic particles that form living things. The use of this concept in Whitman's poems shows that the advancement of science in the nineteenth century contributed significantly to the enlightenment of understanding the concept of democracy. We are all part of the fragments of atomic particles that have existed since the universe was formed. Philosophically, as described in the preceding section, these atomic particles are a metaphor for democratic self that continues to exist and evolve.

Slavery, which represents the background to the time in which this poem was written, underscores the fact that the concept of democracy in America is clearly not

applied, especially considering that America was built on the principle that “all men are created equal.” This poem expresses the idea that America is still in the process of applying the concept of democracy. Even though the manuscript of the declaration of American independence states that “all men are created equal,” no one can suppose that the phrase “all men” becomes problematic. Everything continuously undergoes a process, needs to be rethought, and it is shown in this poem that there are times when a concept needs to undergo a review, to then be resealed into a more solid concept.

In another democracy-themed poem, “For You O Democracy,” it can be seen that the spirit of togetherness in equality is also Whitman’s focus:

*Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands,
With the love of comrades,
With the life-long love of comrades.
I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and
along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,
I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other’s necks,
By the love of comrades,
By the manly love of comrades.

For you, these from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma femme!
For you, for you, I am trilling these songs [6].*

By focusing on a strong desire and a mutual trust, this poem offers an effort that can be made to ensure that democracy is sustainable. Again, Whitman included the singing element, as he did in ‘Song of Myself’.

3.2. The concept of democracy in the administration era of President Trump

Whitman believes that the practice of democracy in America has not been fully realized. Maybe Whitman would have taken his opinion if he had lived under today’s presidency. With the election of Trump, which is not a favorite and highly controversial figure, it is evident that democracy in America is indeed practiced. Without democracy, it would be impossible for such a figure as Trump to be elected as the President of

the most influential country in the world. Throughout his campaign, Trump used a lot of propaganda that brought down his rival, Hillary Clinton. His strategy was focused on promises that will make Americans more secure. One of Trump's keys was his promise to create jobs for Americans. He promised to allow coal mining companies in America to move the American economy back on track so that jobs can be created [7, 8]. Democracy enabled Trump, a figure whose capabilities were doubted by many even from his own party, to win the presidency. In a world that upholds democracy, anyone has the right to express their opinion and is entitled to be heard.

Appearing regularly throughout his campaign, Trump was elected as a Republican candidate because he was a popular figure. Many political analysts (one of which is Niall Ferguson, a professor in financial history) judged that Trump was a populist, one who knew how to manipulate his 'fans'. Many of his voters believed that because Trump was an entrepreneur, he would be reliable in terms of running the administration of his country. As a populist [9], Trump delivers what the American population wants: work and promises of freedom from acts of terror. Ferguson, in a television interview on MSNBC, stated that it is not surprising that Trump can easily win the election, considering that "he's so appealing to the authoritarian populists who are already in power around the world" [9]. In a visit to Russia, Ferguson stated that the Russia officials were not worried about Trump's win. What they were worried about was in fact Clinton, who regulates policies that do not benefit Russia. In terms of employment, Trump's first step was to boycott Chinese products [10], which later triggered the rift over the American-Chinese bilateral relationship. In terms of security guarantees against terrorist attacks, Trump issued a ban on entry for six Muslim-majority countries. With the election of Trump, the world can see that white supremacy still reigns supreme in America.

The various maneuvers that are carried out to win a campaign are often beyond reasonable limits. In a row between Obama and McCain in 2008, the Republican party chose the governor of Alaska at the time, Sarah Palin, because she was the right person to win the voters' hearts. Palin was deliberately chosen because it was predicted that she would be able to gain a lot of female votes. With all her limitations in terms of domestic and international political knowledge, Palin was trained to look more intelligent in public. The priority of the Republican party at the time was to win the campaign, not to seek a proper figure to become president as the leader of America. In the past, America has had unpopular presidents like George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, and Richard Nixon. But America can still maintain its integrity as one of the strongest countries in the world.

What Trump did was far from all the democratic concepts offered by Whitman. Under the administration of Trump, there is no application of togetherness in equality. There is a hierarchical system, with Trump being the top boss. There is no effort to reach the American people and be part of them. In the first week of his presidency, Trump issued many executive orders, which showed that he asserts his will as president. But the American people can still breathe a sigh of relief because the orders could not be implemented immediately executive order must be passed and approved by the Supreme Court. The executive order that bans entry into America for citizens of six Muslim-majority countries has not been passed by the Supreme Court and has been strongly opposed by the governor of the state of Hawaii. This shows, once again, that democracy exists in America. Democratically elected tyrant leaders are also democratically opposed by state law institutions with higher powers than presidential institutions.

To Whitman, loyalty to America is loyalty to democracy [1]. Mack calls Whitman a pragmatic thinker because for Whitman “democracy is more than a political process, that it is a social and cultural process as well” [1]. It can be argued that under the present conditions democracy as a political process resulted in the triumph of Trump. Looking forward, democracy as a social and cultural process has the potential to result in the impeachment of Trump. The social and cultural process in question is what Whitman describes in his poem: Its power is widening, reaching all parts, forming a network, and evolving into a different kind of democracy. Furthermore, Mack argues that Whitman believes the assertion that democratic values as a whole are not just an aspect of political life but also the manifestation of principles that operate throughout the cosmos. This statement underlines the concept that democracy exists in every aspect of life.

“Whitman’s legacy is entangled with contentious issues involving immigration, religious and ethnic diversity, and the nature of Americanism,” which means that Whitman’s legacy includes an understanding of issues related to immigration, religious and ethnic differences, and Americanism [2]. The Americanism in question here is, for instance, the effort to make a poem that is very characteristically American, as noted earlier in this essay. Whitman’s work has been banned from circulation and publication in America because Whitman is considered leftist. Langston Hughes, a modern African American poet, was one of the figures who saw Whitman as “the semi-miracle father figure” [2]. It is ironic that the cornerstone of the concept of American democracy is formulated by a leftist and a socialist, with the Whitman name being etymologically a composite of ‘white’ and ‘man’.

4. Conclusion

From the analysis, it appears that Whitman had confidence in the future. He saw American society as far-fetched individuals. But Whitman also underlined that the future of America is not clear. America may be heading on the verge of collapse. America experienced this during the Civil War, but it rose again, and this has happened repeatedly in history. Instability is the essence of democracy. Democracy in America has still not found its form; it is still in the process of evolving. The disadvantage of America having Trump as president might change along with the application of the concept of democracy formulated by Whitman. It can, therefore, be concluded that a utopian concept such as democracy is not entirely ideal, because, as is the case in America today, the principle of practiced democracy has made its people enter an era of protest. Furthermore, learning about the concept of democracy globally can also develop a more critical view of the concept of democracy.

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