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**LEAVES OF GRASS: THE POLYMORPHOUS AESTHETICS-  
A POLITICS OF THE SELF, THE BODY AND THE MATERIAL IN  
WALT WHITMAN’S POETRY**

**-SUMMARY-**

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## Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	3
REQUIEM FOR AN IDENTITY: ANALYZING REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SELF IN <i>SONG OF MYSELF</i> .....	9
1. Perspectives of the Self Apparel: Building Identities in Song of Myself.....	9
1.1. Foundations of the ‘Self’ Apparel and the Knit of Identities .....	11
1.2. Stances of the poetic “self”.....	13
1.3. The “self” as voicing of the “other” random American.....	23
1.4. The “Self” as split between the heroic and the bohemian.....	37
LOVING THE BODY: WHITMAN’S SEXUAL POLITICS OF THE CORPOREAL AND THE CARNAL READING OF IDENTITY.....	49
2.1. Pursuing Sex? Corporeal Intentionality and the Scope of Ars Erotica.....	51
2.1.1. Possession of the Body: a Corporeal Transcendence Delineation.....	52
2.1.2. Corporeality as Cathartic Relief of the Soul in Song of Myself.....	57
2.2. A Desire Apparatus: Whitman’s Classification of Sexuality.....	62
2.2.1. The Erotic Mask: Adhesiveness and Amativeness as Filters of Corporeal Identification.....	64
2.2.2. The Autoerotic Identity: a Negotiation of Autosexuality through the Bachelor Persona.....	82
2.3. Writing the Body Dialect: Whitman and the Language of Sexuality.....	90
WHITMAN’S SPATIAL IMAGINATION AND THE REPRESENTATION OF MATERIAL LOCUS.....	100
3.1.A Romantic Saga of Nature: Ecocriticism and Whitman’s Grass.....	103
3.2.An Eco-poetic Aesthetics: the Good, the Bad and the Ugly in Whitman’s Edenic space.....	110

3.3. Playing Nature: Tropes of Identity in Whitman’s Songs of Eco-poetic Imagination.....	119
3.4. Whitman’s Cultural Discourse of Earth: the Imaginative Use of Language and the Eco-poetic Sense of Place.....	126
3.4.1. The New World Earth in the light of Whitmanian historicization.....	127
3.4.2. Whitman’s tropes of association to Nature- the image-making faculty of language.....	133
3.4.3. Spacing the Earth: Whitman’s Symbolic and Sensorial Writing as a Sense of Place....	138
3.5. Rambling the City: Whitman and the Cosmopolitan Channel of Self-Expression.....	148

REVISITING WHITMAN THROUGH THE AMERICAN CANON LENSES-A CULTURAL LEGACY .....160

A Reading of the Whitmanesque Identity Odyssey through Ginsberg’s Spectrum .....	160
4.1. The Whitmanesque Renaissance at crossroads: an American love-story of Personalism ...	160
4.1.1. The Poetic Identity at Crossroads: between Prospectual Romantics’ Trend and the Ideology of Americanism .....	161
4.1.2. Experiencing Poetic Democracy- a Bilateral Communication.....	165
4.1.3. The Odyssey from Rejection to Appraisal: a Critical Journey of Whitman’s Poetry.....	170
4.2. From Personalism to Democratic Identity- a Bilateral Communication between Whitman and Ginsberg.....	177
4.2.1. Ginsberg’s Moloch vs. Whitman’s Mother Nation- a Clashing Perspective on the Idealization of America.....	179
4.2.2. Coining the Self Representation: Personalism and Expressive Individualism.....	185
4.2.3. Linguistic Devices- a Third Connection Pillar in Whitman and Ginsberg’s Poetry.....	198
4.2.4. Whitman’s Splitting of Identity- a Mirroring Process of Catharsis in Ginsberg’s Poetry.....	203

CONCLUSIONS.....211

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....215

ANNEX 1.....222

ANNEX 2..... 223

**Keywords:** self, other, identity, identification, representation, Romanticism, sexuality, addressability, cathartic atonement, power exertion, ecocriticism, ecopoetics, aesthetics, politics, urbanism, reader-self, corporality, gender identity, bohemian self, sygyzial unity-in-duality, metaphorization, metamorphosis, dehistoricization, disembodiment, amasiveness, adhesiveness, singlism, personalism, autoeroticism, collective identity, expressive individualism.

In many respects, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* can be read as a miscellaneous Noah's ark, in which the embarkment of both poet and reader becomes at some point a blind abandonment. Given the multifarious universe of perception that Whitman builds and the permanently expanding thematic discourse, choosing one single direction of interpretation might be seen as a paucity of representation. Yet, on the other hand, a tackling of the overall Whitmanesque poetic field is undoubtedly doomed to reaching a no-man's land, functioning then in the detriment of the complex poetic arena. Then, the inevitable question that occurs is: in sketching the aesthetics of such a literary giant what is the suitable channel of representation? And, if such means is to be identified, how does it encompass the adjacent phenomena that render the Whitmanian complexity?

The multifaceted analysis centred on reading identity in Whitman's poetry, through the spectrum of selfhood, the corporeal and the material, also comes to support the idea that one's identity cannot be solely defined as affiliation to a group, as gendered constituent or sexual orientation, but, rather that one must be defined in terms of several criteria. Such an attempt also functions in view of establishing the coordinates of referentiality that Whitman follows in building "Myself", as it allows a permanent recontextualization of his themes in the chosen direction of identity.

The purpose of this thesis, entitled *Leaves of Grass: the Polymorphous Aesthetics- a Politics of the Self, the Body and the Material in Walt Whitman's Poetry*, was to explore the potential of using identity and the self apparel, to decipher Whitman's aesthetics and to establish an empirical decentring route in the plurifaceted analysis of the Whitmanesque corpus. In coalescing the corporeal representation, the material artifact and the consciousness-forming self, the intent was to observe the manner in which the American legacy and society functioned as valid sources for the poet and analyze the poetic corpus in terms of acceptance and renunciation of referential canonical schemes. At the same level, the endeavor was also based on locating the

premises of identity formation for the “self”- that Whitman rendered as a mysterious construct- and mirroring them, by association and disparity, into the later assimilation of the Whitmanian legacy.

From the methodological perspective, the thesis was conceived based on a hermeneutical approach of the text in the theoretical spectrum provided by American poetry, and written using the conceptual instruments of identity, otherness, corporeality, ecocriticism or urbanism. In using these concepts to provide a unified perspective upon Whitman’s poetry, there was also the interest of discussing the means in which the poet wryly escaped the American Romantic canonical delineations and forged a new insight into a poetic representation of the individual.

Apparently a blatantly contradictory word play, the association aesthetics-politics has its own function within the thesis, aiming for a reconstruction in the reading of Whitman’s poetry via the partition of the “sensible” throughout the multifarious community of selves. If, according to Jacques Ranciere in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, aesthetics stands as a “system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience”, politics can only occur as an eruption of a distinct aesthetics. As politics accounts for a strenuous attempt to insert equality in social recognition and, on the other hand, aesthetics casts a battle over society’s building of a sacred space for itself, the juxtaposition of the concepts drafts the guiding principle of this thesis, namely, the analysis of the division between the visible and the invisible, the speakable and the unspeakable or the audible and the inaudible.

The primary sources used in the composition of the thesis are Whitman’s poems amassed in the volumes *Leaves of Grass*, *Drum-Taps*, *Memoranda During the War*, *Specimen Days* and the comparative politics and letters *Democratic Vista*, along with several secondary sources that served as comprehensive work terrains. The thesis consists of four chapters designed to sequentially cover the elements in Whitman’s aesthetics of identity and respectively to provide an overview of the canonical positioning of the Whitmanesque poetry and its implicit mirroring one century later.

The first chapter, constituted as an experimental endeavor to establish the conceptual skeleton of the thesis and to test the concepts’ validity, uses *Song of Myself* as working material and introduces the structuring coordinates necessary for the subsequent empirical development. Prevalent terminologies such as “otherness”, “identification”, “self apparel”, “you addressability” or “cryptic identity” will serve in the analysis of rendering “myself” and the

omnipresent “I” in Whitman’s poetry through a pseudo-lens. Using the theoretical frameworks of Lacan, Levinas or Ricoeur for the identity construction, the chapter, divided in four subsequent sections, aims at establishing a self apparatus consisting of the poetic self, the reader self, the heroic self, the bohemian self and the random other self.

That Whitman’s poetry comes attached to a biased and nonconformist label is no longer a novelty in the arena of criticism, but, rather, it has become a theme for continual reiteration of poetic intentionality. It stands out particularly due to its subliminal reading: as experimentation in form and style, as a celebration of the mystical experience, as merge of spirituality and sensuality and respectively as exploration of the limits of human knowledge. In this respect, an experimental analysis of *Song of Myself* becomes a salient step in the overall thesis, and, perhaps even more importantly, such an interpretation will serve as prerequisite for drawing a more actualized profile on the literary canvas of nineteenth century American literature. It is also at this level that the conceptual skeleton of the paper will be constituted, enabling later use of the self as vehicle of identity formation through the spectrum of distinct other media

The self apparatus that is located at the basis of the Whitmanesque identity is, in this respect, a multifarious entity, comprising oppositions, be them gendered-based, ideological-based or textually-driven. In reading the self oppositions as such, the self apparel fairly accounts for the occurrence of the “sygyzial unity-in-duality”, a concept that defines a preliminary stage in the identity pyramid, as made of opposing, yet conciliatory selves that cannot survive independently. This sygyzial unity counter-attacks nonetheless this all-inclusive identification, proving that the all-encompassing permission is firstly based on duality. In confronting this problem of duality Whitman constructs an illusion endemic to absolute selfhood, validated by the acts of passing through and with others. Consequently, the “myself” identity becomes more than a mere juxtaposition of these four self couples and rather an accumulation of reconstructive experience for “I”.

The introspection into the selfhood experience, bound to establish the premises for Whitman’s rampant ideology in the field of representation, will accomplish the difficult mission of setting into motion the identity of “I”, adding, throughout the analysis, the corporeal framework and the larger contextual material. In showing that identity can be deconstructed in specific and independent identifications of the self with figures of the American society and imaginary, there is another implicit premise. Namely, despite their independence, the selves

cannot individually comply to a full construction of “I”, as they require the rest of the fragmented puzzle to be rendered valid. Nonetheless, the typology of identity that Whitman sketches is a resembling form of Personalism, a prerequisite in the deployment of the collective identity, which organizes the performative contradictions and translates each self into individual “blades of grass”.

Focusing on the sexual politics representation of identity, the second chapter exposes the body as counterpart of the self in the battle for identity assumption, following the premise that it is salient to exclude the Cartesian split between body and soul. The issue of corporeality in Whitman’s poem is as poignant as the quest for the self is, primarily because it attributes the lyric discourse a sense of authenticity. In order to use as premise for the analysis the idea that corporeality is a construction material in the shaping of identity in Whitman’s poetry, some amendments need to be made. The main intention, therefore, is to acknowledge how the body can influence experience and representation in such a way as to avoid biased associations of the poetic persona with the identity of “myself”.

The bodily experience, then, allows access to knowledge through tangible identification and respectively through communion with others as a form of binding together personas and their private experiences. The sexualization of experience becomes more than a mere channel of interaction, but rather a bridge that is constructed upon the desire apparatus as form of introspective knowledge of the carnal. The chapter outlines the bifocal perspective of the corporeal and the self by means of reciprocating and interchangeability, thus, by the spiritualization of the body and the materialization of the soul. Consequently, the two poles of referentiality used in conducting the debate will be the *power exertion* as guiding principle in a sexualized identity versus the *cathartic atonement* as embodiment of the self in a liberation corporeal vehicle.

Furthermore, following the dislocation of a desire apparatus and the emergence of a Whitmanesque cathexis poetics, sexual identity becomes a matter of representation spanning between the three territories of adhesiveness, amativeness and the autoeretical clothing of the self. At this level of interconnecting the self and the body, the self engages in two separate paths, both determinant for the sexual construction of identity. Consequently, by exerting possession over the corporeal and respectively by engaging in a bodily experimentation to pursue cathartic atonement, the self reaches a significant identity crossroads. This crossroads, analysed in the

thesis as the desire apparatus, is bound to confer the self a sexualized pattern identity in accordance to the preliminary choice over the purpose of engaging in an erotic act.

Accordingly, if *ars erotica* is pursued due to the self's desire to possess the body, the arena of identity is expanded by the corporeal politics of *amativeness* and adhesiveness, which are more than constituents of the love poetics. Adhesive love, representing the equation of same-sex love and the comradeship concept, confers sexual identity a pre-established differentiation, both in language referentiality and erotic affiliation. Moreover, the concept of *amativeness* is rendered as a sexualized entity, as it builds identity following the corporeal intimacy on a terrain infringed by desire/possession inequalities in heterosexual relations. Using an act of dehistoricization and disembodiment, the poetic persona in Whitman's poetry retrieved the fragmented units of gender identification by sequential experimentation. In doing so, identity gains a significant strength, by distancing from a conceited primordial self-centeredness towards a more accepting persona, encapsulating the selfhoods of various and different others.

The erotic mask of identity is also constructed on a second vital path -the cathartic atonement, achieved through an act of autoeroticism and ideological singlism. Since the pursuit of desires is not necessarily an act of communion, autoeroticism establishes then another level of identity reading, one that, nonetheless is incomplete-bachelorhood as representative of the self stuck at the desire crossroads. The framework of sexuality in the identity conundrum is, apparently, a step forward toward the odyssey finale, highly amplified by the epiphany created by a customized language and the heteroglossia artifact, liable for moving the Symbolic determinant forward or backwards in the self's liberation.

The purpose of the third chapter is to present how new poles of identity are sustained and delimited by the imaginary of space, projected through the filters of Nature and respectively of the urban artifact. Whitman's America, and for that matter, the entire projection of imagined and existent loci, surpasses the boundaries of the representation of democracy and instills new poles of identity by using the imaginary of space. It is thus on account of imagining space through the instances of natural and urban that Whitman renders the other self in his poetry: all odyssey upon which the poet embarks is under the print of the divine natural and the wandering urban.

Using ecocriticism as a discourse filter, identity enters a new domain of representation, aesthetically delimited by the self's referentiality to nature's embodiments of the good, the bad and the ugly, which also function as boundaries of the Whitmanian Edenic space. Accordingly,

the self's identification with objectified nature casts the tropes of identity in a new eco-poetic imagination, bearing implications over the structure and metaphorization of the lyric discourse. Incorporated in Whitman's cultural discourse, nature, as well as its artifact urban opponent play salient roles: they instill a sense of place for both self and poet, allowing through a mechanism of historicization to fully benefit from the image-making faculty.

As a supportive mechanism of the self, the eco-poetic essence pertains to a focus on confluences rather than exclusions, calling space and the inherent sense of place into action. Accordingly, Whitman's identity craftsmanship becomes the metaphor of a simulated fairytale "about what happens to the places and beings of the earth" and about the transformations to which selves are submitted by language. Furthermore, the simulated communication halo imposes nature to cast the self into aesthetic identifications, by using an objectification of aesthetic categories such as the ugly, the bad and the good. Such a metamorphosis of the self enables the development of identity through the "square deific", a quaternary structure in which the fourth item-identity, in this case- is always exerting power over the other three. Whitman shifts the power according to the evolution of space from house to home and, at a larger scale, from locus to place, conferring identity a suitable material territory of embodiment. The corollary, therefore, is that eco-poetics, aligned to the multiple identifications of the self with objectified nature confers identity an Adamic authority to be used in an Edenic place, a remapped and rehistoricized version of America.

The second section of this chapter discusses the cosmopolitan channel of self-expression, focusing on the urban epitome of identity-the bohemian, who, submissive to the force of the Bakhtian chronotope, confers an urban larger identity to "myself". Toying with the meaning of "home" and "house" also adds to the bordering of the vertical sense of place necessary in the identity skeleton, whereas the bestiary in the Whitmanian catalogues accounts for a horizontal reading of the self. Accordingly, identity may escape the trap between the apprehension of an other-referencing and the narcissistic awareness of the self's uniqueness, by reconciling the fragmentary but patterned in the panoramic urbanism, an unbreakable construct of reality.

Eventually, the aim of the final chapter is to present the legacy that Whitman left in terms of democratic identity and American identity. The first part refers to the critical reception of the Whitmanesque corpus and the main delineations the poet construes from the poetic identity and its status in the American canon. Having thus set the boundaries of interpretation, the latter part

engages a comparative mirroring of Whitman's identity pyramid in Ginsberg's writing, which might function as verifying exercise for the entire endeavor. Thus, the prospect of building a "genuine" authorial stance that was actively militant in the readers' net of mediation becomes Whitman's personal brand in poetic manifestation of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the locus of authorial experience becomes a central piece in the poetic puzzle, as it instills new rules for the poetic establishment.

Anchored in a pseudo-reality filled with Americanism, sexuality, altered linguistic devices, democratic representation and structural novelty, Walt Whitman's poetry is still somehow at crossroads in a no man's land, as it accepts pluralist valences of interpretation. If there is any correspondence between the cultural cleavages( high and low culture) and the social differences that occur between readers, on the one hand, and distinct time-span criticism, on the other hand, remains a debatable issue. Ginsberg used the Whitmanian legacy in order to create one of the most wonderful cross-century literary connections, not only through the dialogues he enables in his writings, but, essentially through putting "a queer shoulder to the wheel" of American selfhood. Consequently, his politicizing of the desire apparatus generated the image of what Whitman dreamt that a future democratic America would be.

Whitman's poetry is, above anything else, transformative for the individual-that often cited recipient of the self- and equally for the entire world culture, primarily because it manages to reconcile the disparities of iconic identity for any random American other. Bearing such relevance in the identity conundrum, Whitman's lyric discourse is nonetheless a pseudo-transparent speech, as the "you" and "I" dialogue spans far beyond the duality of addressability. In fact, this vowel-"I"- might conceal more meaning than other documented and argumentative works aim to establish, primarily because Whitman conducts a vortex movement in drawing the baselines of identity, with the core always focused on the self unit.

The odyssey that Whitman's poetry engages in is certainly not a Homeric one, given the circumstantial stances that either promoted or rejected the creative weapons of the poet in the battle with criticism. It might be, however, assimilated to a gesture of bravery and unbound courage with respect to the generated profile of authorship and poetic responsibility. In the end, if the completion of identity is a thorough or rather an unthrodden path becomes a matter of choice, just as the entire Whitmanesque poetry and the manner of building identity reaches less

the great expectation finale, and more a wishful thinking direction. After all, Walt Whitman's poetry is, above everything, an acquired taste that needs cultivation and effort in understanding.

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