

# On Whitman's Thanatopsis

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## Synopsis :

This is an English version of my former work which had the same title and was written in Japanese. It was my first work on Whitman and was issued in our Tomakomai Technical College Memoirs in March, 1967.

In writing this version, I have attempted some simplifications, additions, and also naturalizations of the styles to make the original version more systematic and more understandable.

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This article intends to clarify the thanatopsis of Walt Whitman, focusing our attention on *Leaves of Grass* which was both his life work and the sustenance of his living.

The life of Whitman as a poet, is usually divided into three periods, the middle period including the time of the Civil War (1861-'65). His thanatopsis developed also through three phases corresponding to these periods as following ;

(1) transcendental phase (2) tragic phase (3) philosophic phase

His characteristic attitude toward Death is to confront it with Life first and then find, dialectically the second Life—New Life, as the synthesis of the two. He accordingly welcomes Death in the end, in his distinguishably dynamic and optimistic way, as the harvest coming from Life, the tillage and sowing. This thanatopsis is entirely his own, and at the same time the essence of Whitman, the American National Poet ; it was projected from his grand humanism and comradeship, which together produced his unceasing vitality.

In 1892, when Walt (Christian name, Walter) Whitman was 72 years old, he passed quite peacefully away from this world, with his right hand in the hand of his intimate friend, Mr. Horace Traubel. Since he had been attacked by an ague, he successively suffered from pleurisy and consumption, and was confined in bed for more than three months. He did not lose his consciousness till the very last, when he received his own death like a peaceful sleep. It was on the evening of Saturday, March 26th. They could hear the gentle rain outside the window in the fading sunlight, as if singing a dirge for this distinguished Popular Poet.

How did this great Whitman think of Death through his life and expressed it in

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his single poetical work, *Leaves of Grass*? This *Leaves of Grass*, which had included only twelve poems in the first edition, in a little 95-page book, grew into a large volume with 290 odd poems in the 9th, Death-bed Edition. This poetical work is, as it were, the annual ring of his mental history. It was the heritage of Whitman, who never enjoyed matrimonial life, for posterity in general.

In Japan, when Whitman was born in 1819 (the second year of the Japanese Bunei Era), a famous haiku-poet of humanism, Issa Kobayashi, issued his poetical work titled *Ora-ga Haru* (My Spring) as if to congratulate the birth of this future Democratic Poet. And in the year 1892, when Whitman died, Kinnosuke (Soseki) Natsume, an eminent novelist, then a student at Tokyo University, introduced the invaluable presence of *Leaves of Grass* for the first time in our country.

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Whitman could not only get rid of the dark image of death, taking it calmly, but he even felt the glory of death. For an example of this fact, we will take up his poem, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” in the canto, *Memories of President Lincoln*. This canto followed *Drum-Taps* which was printed in September, 1865.

Nor for you, for one alone,  
Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,  
For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you O  
sane and sacred death.

Whitman is usually regarded as the father of free verses that “tally Nature” and disregard prosodical restrictions, in American literature.

His grand ideas, eddying like whirlpools among the lines, and his forceful current of emotions influenced Carl Sandburg and also the free verse movement in France. Especially, this Lilac poem is thought as one of the greatest elegies in American poetry.

We can find three important symbols in this poem, namely, (1) the star falling in the western sky with a mighty strength—Lincoln, (2) lilac—the youth, the renewing nature, the life, and (3) hermit thrush—the susceptible mind, the ability of expression. Let us read the following lines in the eighth stanza as the example of the symbol (1);

O western orb sailing the heaven,  
Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I  
walk’d,  
As I walk’d in silence the transparent shadowy night,

As I saw you had something to tell as you bent me night after  
night,

. . . . .

Here we can notice the oriental mystery, shown in his understanding of the revelation of the evening star, Venus, after walking for a month with the background of President Lincoln's death. This heavenly body is none other than the soul of his late great comrade.

We also hear the bleeding song of the hermit thrushes as "victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying ever-altering song," everywhere in this poem. Here Whitman's thanatopsis is revealed—the belief in the immortality of the soul, and in the eternal life after the transient death. It expresses to us a kind of spiritual beauty accompanied by his comradeship and humanism, which prevail everywhere in *Leaves of Grass*. The poet, who praised this spiritual beauty, fulfilled a great role to America which was filled up with rampant vulgar taste and fervent adoration of the material civilization, with a consequent disregard of human life. It was the period when the trans-continental railway was completed and the concern for the Western resources, especially gold, was increasing day after day. He expects his mother country to show herself as a free society which enables the birth of not a few, great individual characters.

Whitman's connection with the idea of Death is traced back to the time when he was just ten years old, according to his *Specimen Days*. He was then watching the navy funeral of the forty-three sailors who died at the explosion accident of Frigate Fulton; he felt an ineffaceable impression at the muffled drum sounds and the solemn march dedicated to the dead.

From the summer of 1836 (Whitman was then 17 years old.) to the spring of 1841 (He was then 21 years old.), he was a tactful teacher, trying an educational game of Twenty Questions, and planning to give his pupils interesting homeworks. His principle of education always stressed the effect of persuasion much more than that of blows. During this time he wrote a parody after the 'graveyard tradition' of the English lyrical poets in the 18th century, which started with the following lines;

O mighty powers of Destiny !  
When from this coil of flesh I'm free—  
When through my second life I rove,  
Let me but find one heart to love.

Here again we can see his peculiar idea to connect Death—the second life with

Love—the effort to live and grant the former an eternal life. The “coil of flesh” in this poem is depicted as the “excrementitious”—the corpse left in this world, in another poem, “To One Shortly to Die” (written in 1860) in the canto, *Whispers of Heavenly Death*. In his first novel, “Death in the School-Room,” which appeared in the *Democratic Review* in August, 1841, a cruel teacher, Mr. Lugare, is depicted to be so merciless as to thrash the dead body of Tom Baker, his poor pupil, who could not clear himself of the suspicion that he had stolen fruits from a certain garden. In the eerie atmosphere we see the victory of the resistless Death over the slander, threat, cruelty, and other ugly human feelings. This work shows us that Whitman had already the resolution, at the starting point of his life as an author, to confront Death and to find in it a bright prospect leading to the eternal Life.

In March, 1842, when Whitman was 22 years old, he contributed to the *Aurora* a parody of “The Burial of Sir John Moor at Corunna,” the poem by Charles Wolfe. It was titled “The Death and Burial of McDonald” and was dedicated to McDonald Clarke, an eccentric Manhattan poet, who closed his life unknown to fame. In this poem, Whitman addresses the poor man at his burial, without the attendance of either friends of his or his relatives, and naturally with no shedding tears and no expression of sorrow, blessing him with an undying fame and the glory in Heaven.

In the spring of the next year, 1843, he participated in the compilation of the *Statesman*, the Democratic Party bulletin, and published a poem, “Death of the Nature-Lover,” in the paper. This poem appeared four years before, when he was twenty years old, in the *Long Island Democrat*, with a different title, “My Departure.” The last two stanzas of this poem run as follows;

To the wide wind I'd yield my soul,  
     And die there in that pleasant place,  
 Looking on water, sun, and hill,  
     As on their Maker's very face.

I'd want no human being near;  
     But at the setting of the sun,  
 I'd bid adieu to earth, and step  
     Down to the Unknown World—alone.

In the later poem, “Death of the Nature-Lover,” the word ‘alone’ in the last line of the above poem was not seen and the phrase ‘that pleasant place’ was changed to ‘that fragrant place.’ Then also, the objects of his appreciation in the poem were

changed from 'water, sun, and hill' to 'blossom, field and bay.' Nevertheless, the conditions of starting alone to the Unknown World in the dusk, surrounded by the delightful nature, are just the same in these two poems, and we find the same praise of sacred Death in them.

According to his "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads," Whitman took up the works of Walter Scott at the age of sixteen. When we think of this Scott's witty remark, that Death is not only the last sleep but also the last awakening, we notice there is a similarity there to Whitman's thanatopsis. Later he spent his summers and falls in the country and on Long Island's shores, reading earnestly Old and New Testaments, Shakespeare, Ossian and the translated works of Homer, Eschylus, Sophocles, the old German Niebelungen, the ancient Hindoo poems, and Dante's masterpiece.

When he was ten years old, he heard with his parents, the preaching of Elias Hicks, the Quaker separatist, given in a hotel, which was quite impressive to the sensitive boy, Walter. We can actually trace back the origin of both his flashing of profound religious light and his oriental revelation of metempsychosis to the above-mentioned extensive reading. When we think of the majestic scale of his thanatopsis, we must admit the great role of the Greek writer of tragical poems and the German hero, Siegfried, together with his natural surroundings—the fish-shaped Paumanok and the endless ocean which he called "a continuous miracle."

Literature is nothing other than the means to connect all of mankind with love, for Whitman, with his philosophy of democratic metaphysics. His *Leaves of Grass* is a hymn of the friendship of human beings. At the same time it has the central theme of "deathless self" to symbolize the new life, regeneration, in nature. These aims of his have been accomplished successfully through the creative impulse working on his readers, and the reactive impulse coming from the readers themselves.

In the preface of *Leaves of Grass* (1855 edition), Whitman tells us minutely about the characters of a great poet. His explanation is that a great poet is the man who sets his position where future corresponds to present, and who can find eternity in the phases of his time. He is the Answerer who thinks "there is nothing but immortality!"

According to his idea of time, past and future are not to be separated but to be united together in harmonious sequence. So a great poet finds consistency among the past, the present, and the future, especially facing the future first of all. He drags the dead out of their coffins and shouts to them again.... He says to the past, "Rise and walk before me that I may realize you." So a real poet, with his ability to express

the past vividly in his imagination, can hint to us of the ideal-to-be of the future and can even realize it before us. Floyd Stovall quotes Whitman's idea as follows; "Every moment is a consummation developed from endless past consummation and preparing for endless consummation in the future."

Setting our visual point on *Leaves of Grass*, the life of Whitman as a poet can be divided into three periods, which are also the periods of the growth of *Leaves of Grass*.

1st period: The prime of life (36—41 years old)... *Leaves of Grass* (1st—3rd edition)... before the Civil War ... 1855—60.

2nd period: Middle age (42—53 years old)... *Leaves of Grass* (4th—5th edition)... after the Civil War started ... 1861—72.

3rd period: Old age (54—72 years old)... *Leaves of Grass* (6th—9th edition)... after being attacked by a serious illness ... 1873—92.

Referring to his thanatopsis, we can also find some peculiar characters in each of these three periods. In the first period, we can see the figure of death depicted in amateness, and also in the praise of sound body and spiritual universe. These are all colorfully expressed in his poems such as "Song of Myself," a long poem of 1436 lines, and "Children of Adams" and others. Although this Death shows itself as being a little morbid, accompanied by some worldly troubles, we can see the trace of efforts so far tried to project lights to Death from the transcendently high altitudes of his own philosophy.

In the second period, we can find his representative pieces in the canto, *Drum-Taps*, "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" (1865) for instance, and also some poems in *Whispers of Heavenly Death*.

In the Civil War time, he followed the army as a volunteer nurse. During those days of hard trials, he attended innumerable dead and heavily-injured on the battle-fields; all those experiences gave him a profound lesson to watch the figure of Death still more objectively than before. There came to him the realization that the private Death of each of the soldiers and officers together bring forth the birth of the higher self, the Union of the North and the South. Man's own thanatopsis is formed only by what he has really recognized, looking at the actual deaths of his related persons, and by analogizing his very death in these. In the case of our Whitman, such miscellaneous war deaths vividly impressed themselves on the sensitive mirror of his mind, and naturally deepened his way of thinking about Death more than we can conjecture.

In the Lilac elegy, we took up before, we saw the ode to Death, sung adoring the death of Lincoln whom he deeply respected. Reading his *Specimen Days* we find a chapter, "Death of President Lincoln," written on April 16 th, 1865. Here he adores the President as the great benefactor who made the Union of America possible, and he ends, "... but the Union is not assassinated." As long as our history lasts, and the patriotic mind stands, there, the name of Lincoln remains forever. Death will visit both the soldiers and also the President—"but the Nation is immortal."

In this *Specimen Days* we read also the record on June 14 th, 1868, that he attended the funeral service for Bryant, his intimate friend for thirty years, with whom he walked together, observing natural beauties. At the end of this chapter, "Death of William Cullen Bryant," he quotes the second stanza of Bryant's poem, "June," which extols the joy of death and the eternal rest, surrounded by the beautiful nature in June.

In the third period, we see his thanatopsis is brought to completion religiously and philosophically—with the ideology of metempsychosis and circling lives. The true self is nothing but Soul and it progresses endlessly toward the Nature Soul and the holy genesis.

We see the poem with such awakening in "A Persian Lesson" (1891), where a greybeard sufi spoke to his young priests and students under an ancient chestnut-tree, that Allah is the whole creation. This poem belongs to the canto, *Good-Bye My Fancy*, which together with the other canto, *Sands at Seventy*, completes his Annexes that we know represents his poetical work in this period. The poem ends as follows;

"It is the central urge in every atom,  
(Often unconcious, often evil, downfallen,)  
To return to its divine source and origin, however distant,  
Latent the same in subject and in object, without one exception.

The image of Night with sleep, death, and stars for Soul are "the themes thou (=Soul) lovest best." In the same way he takes up Night in his poem, "A Clear Midnight" in the canto, *From Noon to Starry Night*. In the first and second edition, Night was regarded as Woman, the sex to originate growth and development. It then comes up as Mother to embrace everything with benevolence, and after the third edition, it becomes the opportunity to think of Death. The expression, "A haze—nirwana—rest and night—oblivion," which we see in the poem, "Twilight" (1887), in the canto, *Sands at Seventy*, comes out of the anxious shadow of his own death.

In “Reconciliation” (1881), in *Drum-Taps*, the sisters, Night and Death, gently and restlessly wash and clean the battlefield which was defiled utterly with bloody struggles.

We may have another period-division besides the one we thus far have based on. It is as follows;

1st period: 1855—58... transcendental phase

2nd period: 1859—65... tragic phase

3rd period: 1866—92... philosophical phase

In this division, the four years of the Civil War (1861—65) belongs to the second period just in the same way as in the previous division but the third period becomes quite long to add the seven years, from 1866 to 1873.

Looking through his works in the two divisions, we notice only one poem, “Quick-sand Years,” is common to their second periods from among the eighteen poems of the canto, *Whispers of Heavenly Death*, which is certainly exemplary work of his second period. Only the poem, “Assurances” (1856), of this canto expresses his view of death, that Heavenly Death is ready to soothe the sorrow of the lads, the lasses, and the little children, who all died unexpectedly at a miserable shipwreck to bury their corpses deep under the sea. This poem belongs to the first period exceptionally.

My present work aims to clarify Whitman’s thanatopsis concentrating on *Leaves of Grass*, and so the former division we will use hereafter. We are going to take up his typical works in each of the three periods and see how his thanatopsis was growing all the time.

(To be continued)

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