



ISSN: 1817-6798 (Print)

Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities

available online at: <http://www.jtuh.tu.edu.iq>
JTUH
 مجلة جامعة تكريت للعلوم الانسانية
 Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities

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Keywords:

American poetry
 civil war
 identity
 nationalism
 Whitman

ARTICLE INFO**Article history:**

Received 9 Mar. 2019
 Accepted 27 Mar 2019
 Available online 5 Oct 2019
 Email: adxxx@tu.edu.iq

Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities

The Construction of National Identity in Walt Whitman's "Pioneers! O Pioneers!"

A B S T R A C T

Walt Whitman is internationally reputed to be the spokesman for the national identity of America during the throes of the American civil war which represented a shocking experience for the people there. He found that his country was being broken into pieces before his eyes, a matter which moved him to reflect on the American national identity. Such a national concern is exemplarily embodied in his great work *Leaves of Grass* which celebrates in totality the spirit of American nationalism. This paper explores how Whitman examines the representation of national identity in his poem "O Pioneers! O Pioneers!". In this poem, he encourages and reminds the American people of their past in an attempt to inseminate the sense of social and national solidarity in his war-afflicted country.

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.25130/jtuh.26.7.2019.37>

تكوين الهوية الوطنية في قصيدة والت ويتمان يا الرواد!

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الخلاصة

يشتهر الشاعر الامريكي والت ويتمان عالمياً بوصفه المتحدث عن هوية امريكا الوطنية اثناء الحرب الاهلية الامريكية التي مثلت تجربة صادمة للشعب الامريكي حينذاك، ووجد ويتمان ان بلاده تنفتحت امام عينيهِ ، وهو امر دفعه لتناول موضوع الهوية الوطنية الامريكية. ويتجسد هذا الاهتمام الوطني في عمله الرائع اوراق العشب والذي يتناول روح الوطنية الأمريكية. ويبين هذا البحث كيف ان ويتمان استكشف مفهوم الهوية الوطنية في قصيدته "يا الرواد! يا الرواد!". وفي هذه القصيدة ، يشجع الشعب الامريكي ويذكره بماضيه، في محاولة منه لزرع شعور التعاضد الاجتماعي والوطني في بلده الذي

It is a question beyond dispute that Walt Whitman's poetic reputation is ascribed to the universality of the ideas he discusses in his poetry. Whitman's personal and public crises contributed considerably in writing *Leaves of Grass* which was written in different editions. On the personal level, Whitman was dismissed from his government as a Clerkship in the Department of the Interior on 30 July 1865(Jeffares, 1966: xiii- xiv). He also suffered from an emotional crisis whose details remained unmasked. (Golden, 1974: 8) . On the public or national level, the American civil war (1861- 1865) had a tremendous impact on this masterpiece and the ideas contained in it.

In his Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman undertakes to present the distinctive features of the ideal America he dreams of, and those of the representative of her voice, the poet. He starts his preface by glorifying America and Americans, affirming that:

The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States are essentially the greatest poem... Here is not merely a nation, but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied string necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. (Jeffares, 1966: 211)

Whitman firmly believes that poetry should serve the national ambitions and concerns. It seems quite transparent that the Whitmanic view of poetry and its national tone finds its practice in *Leaves of Grass*, and the poem in question is

a case in point. The national spirit is, indubitably, one of the most crowning qualities that color Whitman's poetry.

Whitman, in his poem, invokes the spirit of nationalism through dedicating 26 stanzas each of which focuses on different classes and varying objects to sing for the national solidarity. Alf J. Mapp argues that "[Whitman] glorified in the spaciousness of America and in its exciting combination of races and nationalities. He found joy in the pulsing life of New York, but he thrilled too, the excitement of the American people's western movement" (44). Elsewhere, Mapp adds : "Whitman had worked almost as a great artist painting with sweeping strokes on a huge canvas the outline of a whole nation" (46).

"Pioneers! O Pioneers!" , first published in *Leaves of Grass* in 1865, shows how Whitman paid a tribute to the great Westward expansion in the United States, an expansion which presents the best of the American race (Oliver, 2007: 152). Whitman's democratization of America is embodied in the relationship between the body and soul. In this connection, D. H. Lawrence in his famous study *Studies in Classic American Literature* argues that the true democracy is where the soul meets the soul in an open road, and this is Whitman's eternal message touching the meaning of democracy (Lawrence, 1964: 168).

Whitman tries to draw the attention of his readers by calling and describing the American people as pioneers. He thinks that the elite people are the most qualified to respond. However, he regards all the American people as equal to one another. He chooses the word "pioneers" because it refers to the open-minded people, though it is used as an apostrophe. The present pioneers are challengingly confronted with the fact that they need to protect the national unity they achieved after the horrifying experience of the civil war.

In his essay "The Social Function of Poetry" (1945), T.S. Eliot strongly avers that "no art is more stubbornly national than poetry "(qtd. in Murphy, 2007:

376). These words best fit the poetry of Whitman who was rejoiced at celebrating in his poetry the national identity at length. The poet expresses his love for America and "if he had any love ,it was America—the America of his dreams" (Tilak, 2011: 3). Although he had expressed strong emotions in politics early in his journalistic career, and advocated the Free Soil party, these emotions had descended with his interest in poetry. He did not expect the Civil War, but when the news of this war arrived in New York and it made clear that a great national fight was coming closer, Whitman turned his minor concerns into more creative vision (Tilak, 2011: 4-5).

Whitman considers himself as a speaker in this poem and he addresses people who may not present at the moment. He starts his calling on with the low class people who have a brown skin as they are exposed to the rays of the sun. From the very beginning, the readers can realize the poet's intention that this class of people is eligible for showing a response to the slogan. Curiously enough, Whitman specifically addresses the young generation being the image of the American dream and future. The poet comes to call on an important class of the American society who are youths. After he appealed the class of children, now he concentrated on the most important class, youths, who are filled with vigor and vitality. Because they can play a good role for keeping the national identity safe. Forty-one years old at the outbreak of the war, the poet was beyond the age of enlistment (Tilak, 2011: 5). In section 5, this point is made clear, " All the past we leave behind;/ We debouch upon a newer, mightier world, varied world,... world of labor and the march." He addresses the young in such a manner:

For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,
We, the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
Pioneers! O pioneers! (5-8)

The rising generation is held reliable for a more promising and a brighter future. The future youth must forget and break away with the seamy past; the future is the focus of interest and labor for them.

The feeling of zeal continues to the range of trying hard to retain the national identity from loss. As a democrat, the poet urges the American people to maintain America as liberated. When he was a child, Whitman had been influenced by his father's democratic thoughts. These impacts left well-marked impression on his life and work. A faith in the dignity of individual and in equality and fraternity is the life-blood of his poetry (Tilak, 2011: 2). Hence, he invites even children to join the rest of the American people to go ahead:

See my children, resolute children,
By those swarms upon our rear we must never yield or falter,
Ages back in ghostly millions frowning there behind us urging,
Pioneers! O Pioneers! (45- 49)

Whitman's sense of identity with all human beings is perfect. He has that sense of national identity not only with man but with all animate beings. This belief of the "Oneness of all" makes his democracy cosmic and pantheistic. It leads, therefore, to the tendency that Whitman's lyricism is a sense of a close connection with all creation (Tilak, 2011: 14-15). The speaker addresses the American people to leave their conflicts behind. He reminds them their original identity, American identity, and urges them to save it as far as possible.

Whitman is much concerned with the construction of a democratized American self or identity, and by extension, a universal self. "This concept of a universal self that permeates all things and all beings solves the crisis of belief by embracing all beliefs, however contradictory, in one vast unity " (Strandberg, 1964: 479). His vision of America was expanded to involve its great prairies, its

treacherous and rapid rivers, its raw frontiers and its purified metropolises—and its fusing pot of humanity in the vigorous process of integrating and melting (Tilak, 2011: 3). He supports, as a democrat, the idea that proletariat plays a great role in keeping the American national identity safe.

In stanzas 8 and 9, Whitman speaks to all the Americans, south and north, to achieve the American dream which is encompassed in living together in peace and order:

Colorado men are we,
From the peaks gigantic, from the great sierras and the high plateaus,
From the mine and from the gully, from the hunting trail we come,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

From Nebraska, from Arkansas,
central inland race are we, from Missouri, with the continental blood intervein'd,
All the hands of comrades clasping, all the Southern, all the Northern,
Pioneers! O pioneers! (29-36)

On close scrutiny, these two stanzas exemplarily illustrate Whitman's invitation for the American people to feel proud of their national concordance and solidarity, especially after the end of the catastrophic repercussions of the civil war. There is a real popular mobilization to construct a national identity for the Americans regardless their race, religion, and class.

Whitman casts himself in the role of Christ in the poem. He shows his boundless love for humankind. By using the word trio, he transfigures the image into a portrait of Christ. Yet however much Whitman cultivated the role of Christ, in public state or in poetic mask, he did not try to set up a religion or develop a cult (Tilak, 2011: 3):

I too with my soul and body,
We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way,
Through these shores amid the shadows, with the apparitions pressing,
Pioneers! O Pioneers! (69-72)

As Whitman's was a great age of Evangelism and Oratory, the impact of both of them is well-seen on his Pioneers! O Pioneers!. The Evangelists believe in the exclusive authority of the Bible and the sinners can be redeemed by the teachings of Christ. The emotional intimacy and pleading of some lines in the poem could have been used by a highly excited orator calling forth the American people to be well-united and to keep division away from the nation. Other lines could have been declaimed by an orator or politician—patriot setting forth for his addressees the glories of America's past and future (Tilak, 2011: 10-11).

Because he is a born democrat, Whitman believes in equality of all men and women. According to his point of view all men are equal and all professions are equally entitled to respect. Edward Dowden says:

Men of every class then are interesting to Whitman. But not individual is permanently interesting to him. No single person is the subject of Whitman song, or can be, the individual suggests a group, and the group a multitude. Hence the recurring tendency of his poems to become catalogues of persons and things . Selections seems forbidden to him; if he names one race of mankind the names of all other races press into his page; if he mentions one trade or occupation, all other trades and occupations follow. Whitman will not have the people appear in his poems by representatives or delegates; the people itself, in its undiminished totality, marches through his poems, making its greatness and variety felt". A faith in the

inherent dignity and nobility of the common is the very root and basis of Whitman's democracy (qtd. in Tilak, 2011: 13-14).

In "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" Whitman burns with great sympathy and brotherhood for all, high and low, rich and poor, noble and vile prisoners...etc. in order to stand united against the civil war. In a very mesmeric way, he addresses all the American social ranks to join the campaign of building their own nation:

All the hapless silent lovers,
All the prisoners in the prisons, all the righteous and the wicked,
All the joyous, all the sorrowing, all the living, all the dying,
Pioneers! O Pioneers! (65-68)

Whitman is proud of his nationality. The genuine hero of his poem is that the American nation conceived of as the leader of humanity. He adheres to his identity and his awareness of it (Tilak, 2011: 16). His use of "I" and "We" alludes to his pride of his national identity. The "I" in Whitman's poetry does not represent the poet alone. It symbolizes the modern American identity, the modern man, or even Everyman (Tilak, 2011: 8). Whitman fulfilled complete identity with the American people, and became their articulate voice:

We primeval forests felling,
We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing deep the mines within,
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving,
Pioneers! O Pioneers! (25-28)

The rhythm of the poem is basically trochaic, a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one. The idea of "Pioneers" is used in this poem to identify not just the explorers, the first people to discover the eastern shores of America or the far

West, but to celebrate the pioneer spirit of all Americans(Oliver, 2006: 152). All the pulses of the world Falling in they beat for us, with the Western movement beat, Holding single or together, steady moving to the front, all of us, Pioneers! O pioneers!" "The theme is somewhat patriotic, since it celebrates "pioneers," and of course the word suggests the great American migration; but Whitman uses it especially for the marching army of civilization--a theme that always fascinated him"(Allen, 1946: 165).

In stanza 11, the national spirit is not confined to men; rather, it includes women, especially, mothers. Whitman strongly holds the opinion of "many of the social radicals of his day, in particular the notion that the female is superior to the male because of her maternal capacity" (Killingsworth, 1982: 28- 29). More importantly, mothers' significant role resides in their bearing the brunt and the heavy burden of raising a generation who is entitled to build the hoped- for nation:

Raise the mighty mother mistress,
Waving high the delicate mistress, over all the starry mistress, (bend your heads all,)
Raise the fang'd and warlike mistress, stern, impassive, weapon'd mistress,
Pioneers! O pioneers! (40-44)

In Whitman's view, the American nation makes a worldwide movement toward the democratic principles, a matter which encourages the pioneering spirit to take shape . All American pioneers are dubbed as having an unrivaled spirit of challenge and adventure which embraces , “a curious trio”—the mind, body, and soul of a poet. The “curious trio”—I, soul, and body—is described in the following stanza (Oliver,2006: 152):

I too with my soul and body,
We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way,

Through these shores amid the shadows, with the apparitions pressing,
Pioneers! O pioneers! (69-72)

The final stanza , 26, employs many images which draw attention to America's westward movement, which includes women, "daughters of the West"; and minstrels, taking the place of the bards of other lands," no longer needed. Throughout the poem, different social ranks are addressed in a way as to enhance the concept of the national spirit, a matter that must lead to social integration, "All the hands of comrades clasping, all the southern, all the Northern." "The catalog is of course the most remarked upon rhetorical form through which Whitman looks to evince this comprehensive mutual absorption of poet and nation" (Coviello,2001: 89).

To conclude, Whitman tries to reconstruct the national identity by reuniting the different races of American society against the civil war. He reminds them their union and united identity. He urges them that their only and unique identity is American and nothing else. The nation's concerns stand at the forefront of Whitman's priorities as the poet of " a teeming nation", to use his own words. The idealized nation is the meeting point where human souls embrace each other in an impressive manner. Beyond any shred of doubt, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" is about the spirit of patriotism which penetrates the whole texture of Whitman's poem. It celebrates his higher dream for a brighter and colorful future for a greater America. Eventually, it appears that when Whitman wrote this poem, he had in mind the resonating proverbial words "united we stand, divided we fall." He puts this national unity and solidarity in section 21, " Never must you be divided, in our ranks you move united."

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