



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Content Signification and Universal Freedom in Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass

Dr. Nina Jen R. Canayong *

Cebu Normal University, Cebu City, Philippines

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Sep 11, 2024	<p>This literary research investigates the poesy in the select poems of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass. This focuses on the following aspects: (1) imagery in content signification; and (2) symbolic transaction for universal freedom. Qualitative method of pure descriptive discourse analysis of the poetic language in the chosen poems is used in this research. The study reveals that (1) the poetic imagery is produced by the senses of sight, touch, taste, and sound; and (2) the persona in the select poems is a muted man speaking his right for universal freedom to his fellow oppressed and oppressors. Furthermore, it has been found that Whitman's select poems in Leaves of Grass are written with a lot of imagery types and most of these are images of sight, touch, sound, and taste which are sensual that metaphorically extend the meaning of universal freedom. There are also different themes of the poems. "A Song for Occupations" reminds everyone to value their work and their being. "Faces" features the different faces and characters encountered by the persona. "A Boston Ballad" emphasizes that a made man is the one who survives in all the trials in the battles of life. "Who Learns my Lesson Complete" portrays the wonder of life that must be learned completely by all men. When a person knows that his life and his being are wonderful; then, that's the time that he learns the lessons completely. "Great are the Myths" reveals the two great myths on earth which are life and death. Life and death are great for these two are both real and mystical. Furthermore, this collection of poems is an anthology of celebrations of nature, of the individual, of freedom and the kinship of all humanity. The study concludes that the poems in Whitman's Leaves of Grass reveal the imagery in content signification and symbolic transaction for universal freedom.</p>
Accepted: Nov 9, 2024	
Keywords	
Poesy	
Imagery	
Content signification	
Symbolic transaction	
Universal freedom	
*Corresponding Author	
canayongn@cnu.edu.ph	

INTRODUCTION

Literature represents life itself. It is a body of literary productions, either oral or written, containing imaginative language that realistically portrays thoughts, emotions, and experiences of the human condition (Sialongo et al. 1). Literature is the language in use that provides insights and intellectual stimulation to the reader. As one explores literature, he likewise discovers the beauty of language.

One important and unique genre in literature that provides an avenue for the people to express their feelings, ideas, and their whole self freely is poetry. Poetry has an immense subject, that brings harmony and understanding to humanity (Anderson, 1993). Whatever race a person belongs to, poetry connects everyone's soul, mind, and heart because it captures intense experiences or creative perceptions of the world. Ross claims that "a great poem is for ages and ages in common and for all degrees and complexions and all departments and sects and for a woman as much as a man and a man as much as a woman" (2010). A great poem is no finish to a man or woman but rather a beginning. Primarily, everyone is involved in poetry and a great poem exists forever.

Though centuries have passed, there are still many literary masterpieces that continue to inspire and touch people with its rich language and exuberant themes. One of these literary works is from the American poet, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

Leaves of Grass is a collection of long poems which was first published in 1855 by Whitman. This literary collection was notable for its discussion of delight in sensual pleasures during a time when such candid displays were considered immoral. The book was highly controversial during its time for its explicit sexual imagery, and Whitman was subject to derision by many contemporary critics (Ross, 2010).

Perkins states that Whitman is important to literature because he is a great poet (2002). As an artist, he had the kind of courage and vision upon which new epochs are founded. Perkins adds that Whitman's free verse provided an example that slowly communicated itself to later poets who likewise sought to refresh their art (11). He remains one of the most important poets because he announced and instructed a new age. Significantly, Meem explains that Whitman's long free verse lines and philosophy of personal liberation positioned him as a harbinger of literary modernism. Whitman was also considered as the prophet of homosexuality, openly celebrating love between men (2010).

Whitman's greatness in his collection of poetry *Leaves of Grass* is one of the reasons why this study is being conceived then. Whitman's poems are worthy to be studied because these bring a remarkable contribution and change into a wider perspective of beauty in poetry (Cureton, 1992).

Moreover, another known characteristic of poetry is its being dynamic. It is appreciated by literary lovers because writers and readers taste freedom when involved in writing and reading poetry (Brereton, 2008). Before, most poems were measured by feet. It was not even considered poetry if there was no rhyme and rhythm. Poetry did not just stop to evolve. Writers kept on changing its styles and themes. One of the creative writers who composed a new style in poetry in 1855 was Walt Whitman, known as the "Father of Free Verse" (Whitman Home Page). For Whitman, a poem can still be considered a poem even if it is not measured as long as there is a balance of imagery in a line even if it is not following a certain measure. It was during that time that poets experienced more freedom in writing a poem. That time, poets did not need to find words to fill just to balance rhyme and meter.

Poetry then must be given enough time for the reader to understand its message (Aguilar, 1997). It creates another world where only creative, imaginative, and profound people can cross its threshold. However, in this new generation, many consider it as unfathomable and only a few has the interest to read, study, and learn to value and to appreciate these literary masterpieces. Even though, there are many literary works that are available for study in this digital age but these will become out of value if these students will not spend time reading the original text. In connection with this contention, this research is conceived to motivate the students to read and to study the original text of a certain literary masterpiece. They will also realize that they can appreciate and understand more the theme, content, and other literary elements of a certain literary piece if they read the text more closely and not just rely on the summaries and commentaries provided by the internet. Specifically, to provide a prototype on how to study a certain poem more closely, this study analyzes the poetics and the series of imagery found in all the stanzas of the representative poems. Then, the persona-vision-addressee symbolic transaction or meaning is also unlocked and understood.

In the field of poetry, it is indispensable to discuss Whitman's collection of poems *Leaves of Grass*. He is considered by many to be the greatest of all American poets. He celebrated the freedom and dignity of the individual and sang the praises of democracy and the brotherhood of man. Principally, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* deserves focus in this study to encourage all the literati to give importance of the different masterpieces of poetry for its themes and influences are always universal. People may have different cultures because they come from different countries and continents but their feelings and thoughts as human beings have something in common. It is for this reason that this study is focused on the American poems because even though Filipinos have different cultures from the Americans yet these two share the same concept of love, freedom, and happiness which can be also featured in the poems of *Leaves of Grass*.

It is also the motive of this study to revive the interest of the literati to appreciate the magical world of poetry and that they may also promote the aliveness of poetry even until this time. This interest needs to be revitalized for there are already enormous masterpieces which have been kept in the archives. This study further motivates the students to find and to study other literary masterpieces especially in poetry.

Moreover, it is essential that in the aim of finding Whitman's free versification, imagery, and meaning of his poems, theories of formalism and mimesis are used in this investigation. In connection with this objective, a comprehensive discourse analysis is also done on the selected poems of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This literary study investigates the poetics in the five representative poems of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*: "A Song for Occupations," "Faces," "A Boston Ballad," "Who Learns My Lesson Complete" and "Great are the Myths."

Specifically, it focuses on the following aspects:

1. Imagery in content signification; and
2. Symbolic transaction for universal freedom.

METHODOLOGY

Research Method Used

This research uses the qualitative method of pure descriptive discourse analysis of the poetic language of five selected lengthy poems from Whitman's collection of poems *Leaves of Grass*. Specifically, the analysis of the discourse is conducted through formalism particularly on imagery and symbolic transaction analyses. The significant functions of the poetic elements involved in the poems particularly on imagery are analyzed to find the persona-vision-addressee symbolic transaction. Each line in the stanzas of the poems are investigated and analyzed in a comprehensive discussion to come up with the result of the study.

In doing all these, this study is focused on the five select poems which are "A Song for Occupation," "Faces," "A Boston Ballad," "Who Learns My Lesson Complete," and "Great Are the Myths."

Sources of Data

The main source of data, which is very essential to the investigation, is the book edited by Laura Ross entitled *Leaves of Grass*, the original 1855 edition. This book contains the complete twelve original poems of Whitman in his collection *Leaves of Grass*. The original text is used in the discourse analysis focusing on imagery and symbolic transaction.

Data-gathering Procedure

This study deals with the five select poems of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. This employs the discourse analysis of the text specifically on poetic imagery to understand the persona-vision-addressee symbolic transaction.

The discourse analysis is conducted in two phases:

Phase 1 discusses the series of imagery found in all the lines of the poems. A discussion on the imageries found in the poems is presented comprehensively.

Phase 2 provides information on persona-vision-addressee symbolic transaction. Significant meanings found in the poems are discussed in this phase for a clearer understanding of the meaning of the poems selected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Imagery in Content Signification

The following table summarizes the images with their sensations of the five representative poems.

Table 1: Imagery in Content Signification

Titles of the Poems	Stanzas from the Poem	Images	Sensations
"A Song for Occupations"	3, 4	sensual activity or sex	Touch
	7,8	man with justice	Sight
	19	men and women in ecstasy	Sight
	23	old's education rate	Sight
	29 30	people shouting for Freedom	Sound
	33, 34	people doing their jobs properly	Sight
"Faces"	1	different faces of People	Sight
	4	relaxed man	Sight
	5	man who is bitter to the world	Sight
	6	hardworking people	Sight
	14	God	Sight
"A Boston Ballad"	1	ordinary man who gives way to Extraordinary People	Sight
	4	men preparing for War	Sight
"Who Learns My Lesson Complete"	1	men who learn life's lesson completely	Sight
	5	a happy man who cannot express because of ecstasy	Sight
		the Divine's creation	
" Great are the Myths"	1	great people	Sight
	5	people with justice	Sight
	13	man pressed for Truth	Sight
	14	greatness of speech	Sight
	21	greatness of life and death	Sight

A lot of images are found in these five select poems of Whitman. In general, it is observable that most of these images are characterized as images of sight since the persona in these select poems is a muted man who is primarily observing the people surrounding him. He has been watching different

types of people in most of the poems in this collection. Some images of sound, touch, and taste are also found in these poems.

Whitman's use of imagery shows his imaginative power, the depth of his sensory perceptions, and his capacity to capture reality instantaneously. He expresses his impressions of the world in language which mirrors the present. He makes the past come alive in his images and makes the future seem immediate. Whitman's imagery has some logical order on the conscious level, but it also delves into the subconscious, into the world of memories, producing a stream-of-consciousness of images as noted in these stanzas:

“Why what have you thought of yourself?
Is it you then that thought yourself less?
Is it you that thought the President greater than you?
“Because you are greasy or pimpled— or that you was
once drunk, or a thief, or diseased, or rheumatic, or
a prostitute— or are so now— or from frivolity... “

These images seem like parts of a dream, pictures of fragments of a world. On the other hand, they have solidity; they build the structure of the poems (Leaves of Grass Summary Home page).

Furthermore, Anderson (1993) states that an image is basically what the readers see in a poem (938). He adds that pictures painted with words can be very powerful sometimes even more powerful than the real thing because poetic images help the readers see ordinary things in new and unexpected ways. This idea is very relevant in the poems of Whitman. Table 1 presents the imageries found in the selected poems of Whitman. In this table, it is notable that the dominant type of imagery found in most of the poems is imagery of sight as portrayed in these lines:

“I see not merely that you are polite or whitefaced
married or single citizens of old states or citizens
of new states eminent in some profession....”

In the poem “A Song for Occupations,” the first type of imagery is touch as obviously expressed in these lines:

“I pass so poorly with paper and types I must pass with
the contact of bodies and souls.
I do not thank you for liking me as I am, and liking the
touch of me I know that it is good for you to do so.”

In these lines, sex has been talked about. This goes with the idea of Lauter who states that Whitman's songs were songs not only of occupations but of sex and the body (2726). He adds that Whitman sang of the sexual organs and the sexual act; he was one of the first poets to write of the “body electric,” of female eroticism, homosexual love, and the anguish of repressed desire.

Then, a series of imagery of sight is found in the next lines. However, it can also be observed in this poem the other types of imagery like touch, taste, and sound. One of these imageries of sight is manifested in these lines:

“The sun and stars that float in the open air the
appleshaped earth and we upon it surely the drift
of them is something grand;
I do not know what it is except that it is grand, and that it
is happiness...”

On the other hand, imagery of sound is clearly indicated in these lines:

“All music is what awakens from you when you are
reminded by the instruments,
It is not the violins and the cornets ... it is not the oboe
nor the beating drums— nor the notes of the baritone
singer singing his sweet romanza ...”

Primarily, the first poem features different types of imagery.

In the second poem “Faces,” imagery of sight is the only type that can be observed. It can be noticed that the different types of faces are featured in this poem since the persona is observing the different characteristics of the faces he encountered in the pave.

Imagery of sight which allows the reader to visualize is obviously delineated in these lines of the poem “Faces”:

“The Lord advances and yet advances:
Always the shadow in front.... always the reached hand
bringing up the laggards.
Out of this face emerge banners and horses . . . O superb! ...”

It is very obvious then that there is a celebration coming in these lines.

The next poem “A Boston Ballad” features only imagery of sight. This is clearly portrayed in these lines:

“How bright shine the foremost with cutlasses,
Every man holds his revolver.... marching stiff through
Boston town...”

This means that the speaker is observing war during that period. The persona observes that every man was holding a revolver. In this poem too, it is vivid that death is everywhere as described in these lines:

“Why this is a show! It has called the dead out of the earth,
The old graveyards of the hills have hurried to see..”

These lines portray that war and death are quite evident during the era the poem is written.

In the next poem “Who Learns My Lesson Complete,” there are two types of imagery found; sight and taste. Images of different men who learn life’s lesson complete are also dominant in this poem as manifested in these lines:

“Who learns my lesson complete?
Boss and journeyman and apprentice?
churchman and atheist?
The stupid and the wise thinker parents and offspring....
merchant and clerk and porter and customer
editor, author, artist and schoolboy?”

In this poem also, the presence of imagery of taste is clearly illustrated in these lines:

“It is no little matter, this round and delicious globe,
moving so exactly in its orbit forever and ever, without
one jolt or the untruth of a single second.”

It is very clear then that the feelings of the body are featured in these lines.

Lastly, the poem “Great are the Myths” features images of greatness like people, language, life, and death. Primarily, imagery of sight is dominant in this poem.

The last stanza simply illustrates the two great things on earth which are life and death as stated:

“Great is life . . and real and mystical . . wherever and
 whoever,
 Great is death... Sure as life holds all parts together,
 death holds all parts together;
 Sure as the stars return again after they merge in the light,
 death is great as life.”

This means that life and death are the two great myths as featured in the last poem.

Certainly, the poetic imagery in Walt Whitman’s select poems is produced by the senses of sight, touch, taste, and sound.

Symbolic Transaction for Universal Freedom

Table 2 presents the identification and delineation of the symbolic transaction between the persona and the addressee of the five select poems.

Table 2: Symbolic Transaction for Universal Freedom

Title of the Poem	Poetic Vision	Persona	Addressee
"A Song for Occupations"	People must value their work and their being.	an ordinary man talking to people of different occupations	people of different occupations/jobs
"Faces"	Men are of different faces and character. Everyone should appreciate one’s uniqueness.	a muted man observing all the faces he encountered	people of different faces
"A Boston Ballad"	A made man is the one who survives in all the trials in the battles of life.	a child or a person in a battle	Jonathan or ordinary fellowmen
"Who Learns My Lessons Complete?"	When a person knows that his life and his being are wonderful; then, that’s the time that he learns the lessons completely.	ordinary man	all people
"Great are the Myths"	Life and death are great for these two are both real and mystical.	ordinary man	all people

Table 2 presents the summary of the symbolic transaction between the persona and the addressee of each select poem in *Leaves of Grass*.

The first poem “A Song for Occupations” is a continuance of *Song of Myself*, the first and the longest poem of *Leaves of Grass*. Important themes that are dominantly presented in this poem are communal living and loving as portrayed in the first few lines.

In the lines of this poem, you have Whitman announcing that all items and people belong to each other and not to any one particular person. In this sense, all people are equal including women to men as Whitman points out later in the poem. Following that logic, Whitman must discuss the very clearly marked hierarchy of the social classes. Typical of him, he simply does away with him, saying

that such distinctions are unimportant because they are simply adjuncts to one's life. These differences, which Whitman considers small, such as religion, occupation, clothing, and even words themselves, are but material things that are only ornaments to the person and not the person themselves. "When the psalm sings instead of the singer" is when Whitman will treasure the psalm as much as the singer. Materials and concepts are unimportant. They are things that people neither need nor will make them happy. Instead, Whitman proposes something else which states:

"I bring what you much need, yet always have,
I bring not money or amours or dress or eating . . . but I bring as
good;
And send no agent or medium . . . and offer no representative of
value- but offer the value itself."

Whitman is saying that he is not giving you anything in the poem, he is simply reminding everyone of what they all already know but have chosen to overlook. That value is the value of being a living human being, which everyone has, but seems to have forgotten somewhere along the ages was ever valuable in the first place. More depressing is that this human value seems to be beneath that of vague concepts and materials. This innate human value is "unrateable" as Whitman emphasizes, which is why everyone is equal in his eyes (Leaves of Grass Summary Homepage).

The second poem "Faces" represents the types of faces encountered by the persona in the poem. Whitman's love of typefaces is evident in the poem; as he looks around him, he sees typefaces everywhere — on signs and labels, posters and documents — and they powerfully affect his experience of the world. Each typeface elicits an emotional response (Whitman's Faces Homepage). In order to convey this understanding of the poem, some of the following lines can be a type specimen, identifying each new face as it was used and trying to find appropriate faces to convey the meaning of the lines:

"Sauntering the pavement or riding the country byroad
here then are faces,
Faces of friendship, precision, caution, suavity, ideality,
The sacred faces of infants the illuminated face of the
mother of many children."

In this stanza, it is very clear that the persona describes all the types of faces he encountered as he travels by road. This means that during that period, there were already different faces with different personalities who were working together for the betterment of the society.

The third poem "A Boston Ballad" features the war experienced by the persona in the poem. The whole scene of war has been called a show and the persona wonders why it is called a show as stated in these lines:

"Why this is a show! It has called the dead out of the earth,
The old graveyards of the hills have hurried to see;
Uncountable phantoms gather by flank and rear of it,
Cocked hats of mothy mould and crutches made of mist,
Ains in slings and old men leaning on young men's
shoulders."

It is very obvious also that the persona is just watching the whole show since he is still a child during this time.

At the end of this poem, the message is clearly indicated in these lines:

"Stick your hands in your pockets Jonathan you are

a made man from this day,
 You are mighty cute and here is one of your bargains.”

This means that a made man is the one who survives in all the trials in the battles of life.

The fourth poem “Who Learns my Lesson Complete” is asked by a persona who seems to be a silent man but thinks deeply. This persona asks if who learns the life’s lesson completely. According to him, the one who learns the lesson complete is the one who knows that everything in life is wonderful as illustrated in these lines:

“Come I should like to hear you tell me what there is in
 yourself that is not just as wonderful,
 And I should like to hear the name of anything between
 Sunday morning and Saturday night that is not just as
 wonderful.”

Everything is so wonderful and if somebody knows this, then he learns the lesson completely.

Specifically, the central theme of the poem is the understanding of the most important type of knowledge, that is, knowledge that cannot be communicated except through a shared sense of wonder. The “lesson complete” is the lesson felt, experienced, and endured; it is not a lesson learned in textbooks or in lectures. The most important kind of knowledge is gained through a relaxation of the soul, making possible the understanding of the wonderful nature of natural phenomena (Whitman Archive Home page).

Particularly, as the poem’s title suggests, the great poet functions as a great teacher. The poet as teacher is a common nineteenth century figure. The poet does not instruct so much as he shows the way through his own example. Readers of *Leaves of Grass* will recognize the theme of the difficulty of communicating the sense of wonder as pervasive in Whitman’s work.

The last poem “Great are the Myths” generally reveals the two great myths on earth which are life and death. This idea is evident in these lines:

“Great is life . . and real and mystical . . wherever and
 whoever,
 Great is death Sure as life holds all parts together,
 death holds all parts together;
 Sure as the stars return again after they merge in the light,
 death is great as life.”

In this poem, many great things are mentioned like liberty, equality, even today and democracy as described in these lines:

“Great is liberty! Great is equality! I am their follower,
 Great is today, and beautiful,
 Great are the plunges and throes and triumphs and falls of
 democracy,
 Great the reformers with their lapses and screams,
 Great the daring and venture of sailors on new

Indeed, the persona in this poem is saying that great is everything in life and death. People must appreciate everything in both life and death.

Thus, the persona in the select poems of Walt Whitman is a muted man speaking his right for universal freedom to his fellow oppressed and the oppressors.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, the following generalization is arrived at as the conclusion, proving the research argument:

The poems in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* reveal an imagery in content signification, and symbolic transaction for universal freedom.

REFERENCES

- Aguilar, Celedonio G. *Critique on Poetry*. First Edition. Quezon City. Rex Bookstore Inc., 1997.
- Anderson, Robert et.al. *Elements of Literature. Second Course*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., United States of America, 1993.
- Brereton, John C. *Living Literature. An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. United States: Pearson Education, Inc., 2008.
- Cureton, Richard D. *Poetry, Language, and Literary Study*. London: Longman. 1992.
- Lauter, Paul. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature. Third Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company. United States of America. 1998.
- Marki, Ivan. *Leaves of Grass: The Original Edition*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1998.
- Meem, Deborah et. al. *Finding Out: An Introduction to LGBT Studies*. United States of America: SAGE Publications, Inc. 2010.
- Perkins, George and Perkins, Barbara. *The American Tradition in Literature*. United States of America. McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. 2002.
- Ross, Laura. *Leaves of Grass: The Original 1855 Edition*. New York. Sterling Co., Inc., 2010.
- Schwiebert, John E. *Passage to More than Imagism: Whitman's Imagistic Poems*. The University of Iowa. 1990.
- Sialongo, Erlinda, et.al. *Literatures of the World*. Quezon City: Rex Book Store, 2010.
- A Brief Guide to Imagism. 2004. 4 June 2014
<<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/brief-guide-imagism>>
- A Song for Occupation Analysis. 2014. December 1, 2014
<<http://blogofgrass.blogspot.com/2012/02/song-for-occupations-and-then-some.html>>
- Bright Hub Education. 2014. December 1, 2014
<<http://www.brighthubedu.com/leaves-of-grass>>
- Cureton, Richard. *Thoery of Poetic Syntax*. 2013. 15 May 2014
<<http://webbut.unithv.ro/bulletin>>
- Delahoyde, Michael. *Introduction to Literature*. 2011. 14 June 2014
<<http://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/lit.html>>
- Free Versification. Poetry Soup official Website. 2014. 1 June 2014
<http://www.poetrysoup.com/dictionary/free_verse>
- Leaves of Grass Summary. 1999. 14 June 2014
<<http://www.gradesaver.com/leaves-of-grass/study-guide/short-summary>>
- Marki, Ivan. *The Walt Whitman Archive*. 1998. 8 June 2014
<<http://www.whitmanarchive.org>>
- Maugham, W. Somerset. *Poetry*. Education Oasis. 2012. 06 June 2014
<<http://www.educationoasis.com/>>
- Murfin, Ross & Ray, Supryia. *Poems in Depth*. 1998. 8 May 2014
<<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com>>
- New Criticism. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. 2014. !3 July 2014
<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/411305/New-Criticism/>>

Versification in English Poetry. 8 June 2014

<<http://theliterarylink.com/versification.html>>

Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" and Biography. 2014. 08 June 2014

<<http://www.questia.com/library/literature/poetry/poems/leaves-of-grass>>

Whitman Archive Homepage. 2014. August 28, 2014

<<http://www.whitmanarchive.org>>

Whitman's Poetry. Sparknotes Official Website. 2014. 11 June 2014

<<http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/whitman/section2.rhtml>>

Whitman's Poetry. 2014. December 1, 2014

<<http://www.gradesaver.com/leaves-of-grass/study-guide/themes>>