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Drahuše Valentová

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Drahuše Valentová

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ABSTRACT

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The object of this undergraduate thesis is to describe the life and work of one of the greatest poets Walt Whitman. It was at the time of the nineteenth century when Whitman brought to public his masterpiece *Leaves of Grass*.

This thesis is separated into two main sections. The first section is called Walt Whitman and includes Whitman's life and his beginnings as a printer as well as an author. It covers the period when Whitman was struggling with the acceptance by readers and critics. The second period of this thesis is called Themes of Walt Whitman's Poetry. This section refers to themes that are to be found in *Leaves of Grass* and which are according to my opinion the most important. Finally, there is the summarization of the whole thesis in the conclusion part.

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INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman was one of the great poets of the nineteenth century. He was one of those who were born into the new formation of The United States. At the beginning of his career probably no one of his critics would believe that he would be so admired and followed after his death. He was an example of a person who managed to overcome his poor origin and thanks to his abilities and courage received attention. Whitman lived an interesting, long life, full of challenges. His work for newspapers which begun in his youth lasted almost for all his life. He started as a printer so he knew the craft from its basis. As a result of his controversial work, he was misunderstood and neglected and as a great person was fully understood later by other poets and authors.

Walt Whitman was born into a family which had eight children. They moved to Brooklyn when Whitman was just a little child. His education did not last long and when he was eleven he had to start to work and supported the family. It is important to mention that he was an autodidact. He studied by himself and visited museums and theatres. He also liked to debate with others. After several years spent in Brooklyn, the family went back home to Huntington but Whitman stayed in Brooklyn and later moved to New York. He worked as an office boy for a legal company which enabled him to visit the library. Later he worked for several newspapers as a printer, for example *Patriot*. After several years he was forced to go back to his hometown because of the fires in the printing district in New York and bad economy. He worked as a teacher but did not enjoy it. He returned to New York and worked for several newspapers, *Aurora* and the *Brooklyn Eagle*. During his early life he already contributed to magazines and newspapers with his poetry and fiction. In 1838 Whitman established his own newspaper *The Long Islander*, which still exists. Whitman became a journalist and wrote editorials and contributed to others.

Whitman was a democrat and a free soiler which meant also a new attitude to slavery. He wanted to abolish slavery because in order to expand more on the west of America, slaves would mean cheap workers. And he could not allow this to happen. He had a clear attitude to the question of slavery and later to the war. He was an active member of the Democratic Party and used to meet with other important people in the Party. Thanks to his early work as a printer, he was able to print his main work *Leaves of Grass* by himself. In 1855 was published the first version of this unique masterpiece. He continued adding poems and kept changing it for his all life. When the Civil War begun he

included the theme of war into his poetry. He was an observer of the war. Although before and at the beginning of the war he was a sympathizer, later after his own experience at the battlefield, which gave him the unforgettable impression of terror, his attitude changed. Through his poetry, Whitman gave the life to his feelings about the world. He travelled and saw various things which made him think about the life and himself and his place in this universe. Thanks to *Leaves of Grass* he was a controversial figure who caused sensation and was celebrated by few and misunderstood by many. A new kind of a poet was born.

The first controversial point was that he was not ashamed to admire not only a person's soul but also a person's body. He was in the connection with nature and everything what was natural for human beings. It could be the body, its scent, the wonderful role of a woman but also a man on the Earth and no one was more and no one meant less to him. In his poetry, Whitman as a perfect observer of life was able to capture all moments he experienced or witnessed and a reader can feel what he must have felt when he was writing it. Whitman describes people and their suffering as well as nice moments of people who are proud of America.

The name of Whitman's compilation *Leaves of Grass* leads a reader to the question about the title itself. Why did he name it *Leaves of Grass* and why does he refer to grass. The famous theme of grass is interwoven through his first and long poem "Song of Myself". He identifies himself as a speaker of all people in the world and he also believes that this is the main aim of poetry. And through the poetry people are connected with each other. They are like grass which has many shapes. He knows that he is singing about obvious everyday matters and people themselves are participants of those moments.

The aim of the following chapters is to define and show examples of the main themes and topics of Whitman's poetry. The themes such as democracy, independence, equality, celebration of one's self and sexuality and finally the end of division of a good soul and bad body are themes which can be found across the Whitman's work. At the first part of this thesis I would like to present Whitman's life and introduce his origin and beginning in New York. I will continue with the description of his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and the controversy which followed him with it. Another part of this thesis will be themes which are included in his poetry and I will focus on the most apparent ones. In my opinion these themes are timeless and it is still a great inspiration to many people. In this thesis, when cited the poems of Whitman, is used the Norton edition from 1973 that includes all poems. Whitman is attractive for the artists even in these days when they invite him as a source for their art work. He is cited in films and literature, he has been adored

by many and it is probably because of his uncommon and honest way of expressing himself and his feelings towards this world.

WALT WHITMAN (1819-1892)

Life

Walt Whitman was an author who started to write poetry at the time when The United States was still a new nation and strong changes were happening. Poets who created at the same time as Whitman expressed a new attitude to human beings, nature, and God. It was Ralph Waldo Emerson, the founder of the American Transcendentalists, who called for the need of a new kind of poet. Walt Whitman did not belong to the Transcendentalists but he, later in his life, knew Emerson. These two poets shared a similar view on individualism, nature and they both celebrated America. They both shared struggles at the beginning of their careers so it helped Whitman when Emerson, after the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*, wrote him a letter. In the letter, Emerson confessed that he was pleasantly surprised by the nature of *Leaves of Grass*. To him, it was an extraordinary work which was full of wisdom. Emerson considered Whitman brave and proclaimed Whitman's great career as a poet. He finally found the poet he was calling for (Whitman, 1986, p. viii-x).

Walt Whitman was born into a family of a man who was a carpenter and farmer. When Whitman was four-years-old, the family moved from Long Island to Brooklyn. His father was English whereas his mother was of a Dutch origin. Their characters were different and thanks to this fact they had arguments. Whitman had a special bond with his mother which lasted until her death. With his father, Whitman did not have such a close relationship. Maybe it was because his father was a rough man, probably an alcoholic (Norton, 1980, p. 711).

The education at school played no relevance to him. He did not like it and preferred attending various seminars, museums and other cultural events. One of the most significant meetings was when Whitman met the Quaker Elisha Hicks (1748-1830). Whitman's father admired him and Whitman did as well. Whitman's parents were not Quakers but shared the same opinions as they did and Whitman's mother often talked about Hicks at home. Hicks used to preach under the sky. He believed that people did not need clergy in order to be in contact with God. He preached about the Inner Light that was inside of everyone and independence of people in their choices in order to experience salvation (LeMaster, Kummings, 1998, p. 277). Hicks managed to separate from other Quakers and as a leader he caused a Quaker schism in 1827. And as Quaker leader Francis Brown (1999) states in his article "The Separation of 1827", it happened mostly because of the arguments Quakers

had with each other, also there were misunderstandings about who should lead them. Hicks's followers were called the Liberal branch of the Society of Friends and his belief has been followed until today (p. 1).

When Whitman was eleven years old, he finished school and started working. He had various occupations. One of them was working for a law firm. Nevertheless, leaving school did not stop his education. He liked going to the library and continued to educate himself for the rest of his life. Later he worked for a printing house which was a useful experience. When he was only twelve years old, he began to contribute to the newspaper *Mirror*. After two other years, his family moved back to Long Island and Whitman stayed in Brooklyn alone. Whitman's career as a printer was ended by the fires which were destructive to many places in New York. He returned to his family in Long Island. He did not want to become a farmer so he was employed as a teacher. Whitman had a unique method according to which he taught the students. He wanted them to think and not just repeat. This experience gave him an outlook on various personalities and way of lives. He was already creating poems and was interested in politics. He became a member of the Democratic Party (Folsom & Price, n.d.).

In 1838 Whitman finished as a teacher and started to publish his own newspaper which was called *The Long Islander*. After two years he had to close and returned to a position as a teacher. During those years, he taught in rural Long Island schools. He did not like to teach and ended this work soon. His desire was to be a non-fiction writer. He wrote stories and was published by many magazines and newspapers. Among his stories belongs for example *Death in the School-Room* or *The Shadow and the Light of a Young Man's Soul*. In 1842 a novel *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate* was published by *New World*. This work was not his best but the topic was unique and many copies were sold, more than anything he wrote had written before (Folsom & Price, n.d.).

As a journalist he returned to Brooklyn. He was fond of operas and as he said especially of a performance by Marietta Alboni in the opera *Norma*. It was told by Whitman that without this brilliant performance full of uplift, rapture and emotions, he would never have written *Leaves of Grass*. In 1846 Whitman started working as a chief editor for *The Eagle*. He was an author of reviews. In 1848 he travelled to New Orleans while working for the newspaper *The Crescent*. He had an opportunity to see other places in the States and it influenced his further work. He met people from various backgrounds and heard many different languages. The auctions with slaves had a huge impact on him and he was shocked by this dehumanizing institution (Folsom & Price, n.d.). Whitman later

wrote a poem which was based on this experience, called "I Sing the Body Electric":

Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest ignorant?
Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she
has no right to a sight?
Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffuse float,
and the soil is on the surface, and water runs and vegetation sprouts,
For you only, and not for him and her? ("I Sing" 91-94)

In 1840's Walt Whitman transformed himself into the poet we know today. He did not resemble other poets who were poets of rhymes. He started to experiment with a new style. In his notebooks, it was found that he was already playing with the idea of self and was interested in such topics that later created *Leaves of Grass* (Folsom & Price, n.d.).

It is inevitable to mention the creation of the free verse in the connection with Walt Whitman. He was the creator and the first well-known author in America who wrote in this style. This style is typical for his *Leaves of Grass*; it allows the author the fluency of the words and his thoughts. He writes as if he feels no obstructions. A poem written in a free verse has no metre which means that there is no rhythmical pattern in verse. The lines do not rhyme and the sound of a poem is natural as speech. After Whitman's poetry, the free verse became dominant in lyric poetry (Free verse, n.d.).

Another unique style in which he was creating is called the method of catalogue. It was used before Whitman, but he was the author who popularized this form. The catalogue in this connection means "a traditional epic device consisting of a long rhetorical list or inventory" (Lexicon, n.d.). An example is to be found almost everywhere in *Leaves of Grass*. A good one could be for instance this:

I am the actor, the actress, the voter, the politician,
The emigrant and the exile, the criminal that stood in the box,
He who has been famous and he who shall be famous after to-day,
The stammerer, the well-form'd person, the wasted of feeble

person.

I am she who adorn'd herself and folded her hair expectantly,

My truant love has come, and it is dark. ("The Sleepers", 42-47)

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855. Whitman prepared the book and had it printed in a printing house in Brooklyn. He did it by himself as his own publisher. Even the distribution was not professional, his friends helped deliver the book (Whitman, 1986, p. vii).

During his whole life, he kept changing the poems and was adding more of them. The original cover was green with gold letters on it. It was a first hint of the theme of grass. At the beginning, there is a picture of a working man who wears a shirt with an open collar. It is Whitman himself. The first edition contained ninety five pages and his name or the publisher's name was not mentioned at the beginning of the book. Whitman's name was mentioned twice (Miller, 1989, p. xi). At first it was on the copyright page and for the second time his name is written within the first poem: Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos / Disorderly fleshy and sensual.... eating drinking and breeding ("Song of Myself", 458-459).

Twelve poems were included, whereas the first is the longest one. In this edition the poems do not have a title. Whitman was his own critic who wrote reviews about *Leaves of Grass*. Not many copies were sold and common people did not read it almost at all. This unique work was written in a new style and included topics which were not clear to the vast audience. This was the reason why the ordinary people did not read it. Only literary scholars were aware of *Leaves of Grass* and they were not satisfied with it. It was because of the use of free verse which was new as well as shocking erotic themes. Many of those scholars did not agree with Emerson, who was pleased by it, as was mentioned before. Whitman was lost and misunderstood (Whitman, 1986, p. viii).

The editor Malcolm Cowley believes that he knows the reason why Whitman was treated in such way. It is a new attitude to the world, a new vision for poets and different subjects of his poetry that caused Whitman trouble with readers. Whitman was so unique and open minded that it was unacceptable in the States during his lifetime. Cowley writes in his introduction to *Leaves of Grass* in 1959:

One reason among others why "Song of Myself" has been widely misprized

and misinterpreted, especially by scholars, is that they have paid a disproportionate share of attention to its sources in contemporary culture. Besides noting many parallels with Emerson, they have found that it reflected a number of popular works and spectacles. They tempt us to conclude that “Song of Myself” was merely a journalist’s report, inspired but uneven, of popular culture in the 1850’s. It was something more than that, and something vastly different from any of its literary sources (Whitman, 1986, p. x-xi).

In my point of view, Whitman is the embodiment of the person about whom Emerson writes in his essay “Self – Reliance”. To be more specific, Emerson clearly writes that great people are those who are bold and not ashamed for their thoughts and opinions. And who is great is misunderstood. Whitman stood for himself and was brave enough to express his feelings. He meant a shock to many but later after his death the world suddenly started to understand.

In the preface to his first edition in 1855, Whitman writes about his intentions and explains why the States were so much of an inspiration to him. Whitman created a bard, a new personality who wrote the poems as well. He saw himself as a spokesman of a democratic world. In the preface he also writes about the American nation which he sees as the greatest. United States were born for a poet who could write about them because they were full of rich themes and contained inspiration (p. 5). These words Whitman wrote in the 1855 preface:

The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to hospitality which forever indicates heroes (Whitman, 1986, p. 5).

In my opinion, Whitman was a proud man, proud of being an American. He must have felt that that new nation was unique and as a poet, who was sensitive to the world as poets usually are, he saw the life prepared for all the adventures which the States were offering and was excited about it, as he was excited about people in general.

Whitman celebrates common people who are more important in the reputation of

the US than its political side. American citizens are citizens of other nations who were united under a new nation. To him they are flawless in their imperfection. They experience freedom that is cherished. He himself is a poet who sees himself as the one who can write about them. He is celebrating nature, working men and women – who are equal, or the vastness of America. He as a poet is on the same level as other people. He is not more or less than they are. The poet is in balance with nature. He is everywhere in nature. According to Whitman, the poet is aware of many things and situations. He sees them and sings about them and includes completely everything:

The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into any thing that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer... he is individual... he is complete in himself... the others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not. He is not one of the chorus... he does not stop for any regulations ... he is the president of regulations. What the eyesight does to the rest he does to the rest (Whitman, 1986, p. 9).

The poet of rhymes is no longer needed. It would be a limitation to the description of the world and nature. The poet should not write about situations and things which could be seen by anyone. He should be a mediator between what is real and a man's soul. Whitman gives us a guideline for what we should do in order to live a good life, as he perceives it. For example men and women should be generous and diligent. They should loathe riches and tyrants and to forget what harms their soul. If they would behave in this way, they would be clean and their life would be a poem itself (Whitman, 1986, p. 10). In my opinion, he is exhorting people to go back to nature and to their humanity, to forget about the bad things and be kind to everyone around. Do not pretend something we are not but to be honest with ourselves and do not judge others on their human flaws. His vision is about a perfect symbiosis among human beings and nature. In the 1855 preface he names these opinions:

Who troubles himself about his ornaments or fluency is lost. This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of

families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent motion and joint of your body (Whitman, 1986, p. 11).

The poet is in love with the universe and whatever happens – bad or good – it is his inspiration during creating: “the known universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet” (Whitman, 1986, p. 11). The greatest poet according to Whitman treasures simplicity. He has to name things as they are with no curls. Only the one who writes about nature is the true poet. He is convinced that a good poet is the one whose work survives for following generations and is still read and commented upon: “Still the final test of poems or any character or work remains. The prescient poet projects himself centuries ahead... does it live through them?” (Whitman, 1986, p. 21).

Whitman continues in the preface by the statement that God is within a man. I find it as a matter that he had in common with Emerson and his attitude to God. It is the vision of human being who experiences the connection with higher spirit through themselves. Maybe it is why Whitman continues that the poet has to consider everything in the world equal and take nothing as supreme (Whitman, 1986, p. 14). When mentioning religion, another significant and interesting notion is about the place of priests. Whitman suggests that in the future, there will be no need of priests and their position will be replaced by poets. Men and women will be their own priests. It is a concept of a doctrine of Universal Priesthood. Priests will be receding one after another and someone who is more important will take their place. This is supposed to be a poet. Poets will substitute them fully, as a bond of people. And because true poets have this bonding power and see human beings equal and also because God is in every person it explains why people will be their own priests (Whitman, 1986, p. 22). The question of God and equality in Whitman’s view will be described in this thesis later in more detail.

At the end of his preface of the 1855 edition Whitman concludes that like the nation each man is a great individual. Its soul is waiting for its poet. He is not questioning if it will be right or wrong. He knows that there are no faults, for he is right in his opinions:

An individual is as superb as a nation when he has the qualities which make a superb nation. The soul of the largest and wealthiest and proudest nation may well go half-way to meet that of its poets. There is no fear of mistake. If the one is true the other is true. The proof of a poet is that his country

absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it (Whitman, 1986, p. 24).

As it was mentioned before, Walt Whitman was not known or popular at the beginning of his career as a poet. In the *Brooklyn Daily Times* he published his review of his own work in September 1855 and he did so perhaps because he wanted to be known. His name was not mentioned under this review. In this review, Whitman as a critic introduces a new type of a poet. He does not forget to mention that this kind of poetry is not for everyone. Some readers would be in awe whereas others could curse it. He is suggesting the author's personality and calls him 'undraped' and 'sensual'. He continues in naming personal qualities of the author and does not omit that he is impolite and arrogant: "politeness this man has none, and regulation he has none. A rude child of the people! – No imitation – No foreigner – but a growth idiom of America" (Norton, 1973, p. 777). He can understand that the author is in love with the world and the world is a source for his poetry. He is not a racist and believes in equality of people. He is very close to the working class. He says that other poets are interested in beauty of themes such as love, passion and romance. Whitman, on the other hand, is the true poet who is celebrating the everyday life. To him as to a critic, Whitman is the one who outlines the new American character (Norton, 1973, p. 777-779).

Whitman after the first publication

Whitman edited *Leaves of Grass* for six times. From a thin book it became an expansive one. During this time, Whitman created a work which was understandable to ordinary people because it was not chaotic as the first edition and made more sense. He also added titles (Asselineau, 1999, p. 253). He was a freelance poet at those days and was enjoying the company of other culturally interested people. His friendship with Emerson grew and he systematically worked on the revising of *Leaves of Grass*. The Civil war was approaching. It was previously suggested to Whitman that his work could be published by Thayer and Eldridge who owned a printing house in Boston. Unfortunately, because of the war, they went bankrupt and *Leaves of Grass* – already many times changed by Whitman, was sold to the publisher Richard Worthington. He would continue to publish *Leaves of Grass* without Whitman's permission (Folsom & Price, n.d.).

During the Civil war, Whitman used to visit wounded soldiers; he would read to them and support them. He was writing articles about these soldiers but they were also friends. This experience had an influence on his work. Although he was at the battlefield for some time, he did not work as a soldier but as an emotional support. He had a close

relationship with some soldiers, perhaps some as lovers, for others he was a paternal figure. Whitman went to Washington D.C. where he decided to stay. In 1865 he started working in the Indian bureau in the Department of the Interior in the US Patent Office Building (Folsom & Price, n.d.).

The work of Walt Whitman was controversial for many people and when James Harlan a new Secretary of the Interior was appointed changes came. He wanted to reorganize positions, to decide who was an important employee and who was not. Also employees whose reputations were in question had to be dismissed. Walt Whitman had to leave. Thanks to his friend William Douglas O'Connor, he was immediately employed in the Attorney General's Office, where he worked until he had to leave for his illness. But O'Connor was upset by the behaviour of Secretary Harlan and wrote a letter in which he expressed his indignation. His pamphlet was called "The Good Gray Poet" and was published in 1866. O'Connor accused Harlan of being a prude. He was glorifying the poet and emphasized him. To him, Whitman was mankind. The fifty pages long pamphlet brought positive attention of the public. From forbidden and immoral poet, Whitman established himself in the eye of the public, as a poet of American values (Folsom & Price, n.d.).

In the 1870's Whitman wrote "A Passage to India" and *Democratic Vistas*. "A Passage to India" should have been an extension of *Leaves of Grass*. This work concentrated on the new access to Asia via the Suez Canal. Whitman was charmed by the possibility of becoming closer to Asian culture and admired the new technology that brought this culture closer. The vision of the world wide peace and democratic leadership was what he had in mind (Ekiss, n.d., p.1). E.M. Forster, an author of *A Passage to India* purposely borrowed the title from Whitman: "While writing *A Passage to India*, Foster's intention was 'philosophic and poetic'. For this reason, he had borrowed the title of this novel from a poem by Walt Whitman, the American poet whose major themes include political, spiritual and sexual freedom" (Hossain, 2012, p. 305).

Democratic Vistas contained essays, which were a reaction to a criticism of Thomas Carlyle who was a critic of democratization. Whitman stayed by his own opinions and remained a supporter of democratic tendencies in the United States (Wrobel, 1998, p.1).

The last poems which had the typical message and force were written in 1871 (Asselineau, 1999, p. 255). In 1873 Whitman suffered a stroke. He was aging and ill, his feelings were reflected in a poem *Prayer of Columbus*: "A batter'd, wreck'd old man, / Thrown on this savage shore, far, far from home" (1-2) or "Is it the prophet's thought I

speak, or am I raving / What I know of life? what of myself?" (56-57).

Whitman suffered many strokes until his death. Nevertheless, he was still lecturing and travelling (Folsom & Price, n.d.). In the last years of his life, he was not ready to give up writing poems. He was still recreating *Leaves of Grass* but these poems were not long and not so powerful. His extraordinary view upon the world was still preserved. For all his life, he was an optimistic poet. On the other hand, the situation of the Civil War and the reality that people did not cherish democracy tortured him (Asselineau, 1999, p. 253-258).

Before his death, Whitman made an elaborate preparation for his funeral. He had prepared a mausoleum for himself in Camden's Harleigh Cemetery. In December 1891, he made a last will. Frederick Warren Fritzing as his nurse was by him when Whitman died. His last words were "shift, Warry" because he wanted to be turned in bed. The cause of his death was tuberculosis. The autopsy revealed that Whitman was not an alcoholic and did not have syphilis as people suggested (Folsom & Price, n.d.).

THEMES OF WALT WHITMAN'S POETRY

F.O. Matthiessen in the book *American Renaissance* focused on the theme of language in *Leaves of Grass*. He mentions that Whitman himself proclaimed that it was a language experiment to him. Matthiessen continues that language in Whitman's perception was not language which is taught at school and by the dictionary but language was created by people through their lives. Words are the consequence of work and good and bad things which happen – “words are signs of natural facts”. He claims that Whitman saw the United States as an opportunity for the English language. A new path through which the poet's words would be created. It was a unique statement in the nineteenth century together with the perception of the body and soul and their unity. English meant a uniting element for all the inhabitants of the United States. As Whitman said in his journal – “nothing is more spiritual than words” (Matthiessen, 1968, p. 517-520).

At first, it is essential to look at the first poem of the book and that is “Song of Myself”. The poem is the longest one and includes basic information or it could be said main topics of Whitman's poetry. A reader should consider what first person pronoun means within the poems. Some authors believe that “I” do not mean Whitman himself. Others claim that Whitman was self centered man who could not do otherwise but to write about him – as James Thomson says – “He sings himself with long-unequaled arrogance” (Price, 2004, p. 10).

The early critics did not understand him completely and that was one reason why the book was banned: “Some nineteenth-century commentators, naïve or disingenuous, mistook the persona for the person and emphasized Whitman's claim that he was rude, uneducated, lusty, and vulgar” (Price, 2004, p. 10).

In *A mosaic of Interpretions*, Miller (1989) points out other examples of opinions concerning Whitman. “What he celebrates in himself are just those qualities that make him one of the ‘divine average’ for whom he sings” (p. 45-46).

On the other hand, Whitman had also admirers who did everything they could to support him. One of them was a writer and critic Robert Buchanan who had strong opinions on Whitman and did not hesitate to write about it publically. After 1876 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wanted to spread awareness about his poetry and wrote anonymously to *West Jersey Press*. In the article, he writes about his struggles as a poet, he had not money and readers in America would not read him. On this article reacted Robert Buchanan and wrote to *London Daily News* because he wanted to help him and show

readers how great Whitman was as poet (Anonymous, 1876). And also in other articles as reactions on Whitman's poetry Buchanan claims about him that he is a poet who is able to include "the three essentials of poetic art – perfect vision, supreme emotion and true music." He sees him as an artist who praises democracy and individuality (Buchanan, 1867).

In my opinion, Whitman wants to be closer to the reader and one possible way to do so is to speak to the reader directly and show them, in Whitman's case, that he as the author is one of them. This can be supported by the idea of not writing his name at the beginning of *Leaves of Grass*. He did not want his name to overshadow the purpose. He wanted to be one of many (Asselineau, 1999, p. 48). I think that at the beginning the reader can be confused and maybe think of Whitman as a self-centered, arrogant person. On the other hand, after the reading of the first poem, the reader is more acquainted and I believe that then they understand that if Whitman is also singing about himself, he is singing about everyone else in the world. In the following extract, there is an example of the idea of all people being linked together that appears in the poem "Song of Myself": "And what I assume you shall assume/, For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (2-3).

The well known words "do I contradict myself? / very well then I contradict myself" ("Song of Myself" 1324-1325) are a good example of the fact that his themes are wide because he embraces almost everything and is not afraid to be inconsistent. In my opinion, Whitman claims this in order to understand everyone and the world itself. He writes: "I am large, I contain multitudes" ("Song of Myself" 1326) which suggests sympathy for everyone. And also because he as a bard is a voice of his generation and through him people are connected together.

In Whitman's poetry, a reader can find there many topics and themes. In the following chapters, I will mention topics which are, in my opinion, the most significant ones.

Democracy, Equality, Independence, and Self - reliance

Through the whole of his life, Whitman was a supporter of democracy. He did not think about democracy only within boundaries of politics but he wanted to see democracy in all aspects of life, in nature, in a person etc. His dedication to democracy is clear in the poem “For You O Democracy”:

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. (1-11)

This poem is special because it shows his love for his comrades and the importance of their relationships for democracy. This will be mentioned more in detail later. Whitman is connected to everyone as it is mentioned above. The connection of all people is stunning and it is possible to find this theme within his poetry quite often. Whitman is proud of

being a human being and being a witness of the world. It seems that he is charmed by people and nature. He is in love with everything around him. And that is what makes him observant and equalitarian.

With democracy is connected the theme of grass. In “Song of Myself”, Whitman asks questions about what is grass and he answers himself. The grass is the uniting element of all the people because it is available for everyone without prejudice. The theme of grass is repeated many times within the poem “Song of Myself”. Whitman invites readers to rest with him and enjoy the grass around. There are various opinions about the meaning of the grass. Miller (1989) presents several opinions of the critics. The theme can represent freshness and spontaneity as the poem itself. The grass stands for democracy, according to George B. Hutchinson who is the one of the critics. As he claims: “All dualisms are joined in the grass, a riddle in itself... diversity merges with unity: subject with object, good with evil, life with death... this symbol stands both for the complementarity of life and death and democracy. The grass is the emblem of cultural renewal” (p. 50).

But Whitman perceives the democracy in a different light than a reader may understand. Whitman celebrates the freedom of personality. Women and men are seen as individuals. Democracy is not seen as a group of people but as individuals living next to each other. It is apparent in the following extract:

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look
through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the specters in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.
(“Song of Myself” 34-36)

To his perception of democracy and equality is substantial to mention minorities. Price (2004) explains why Whitman was so popular with them and what his feeling of equality really meant. He claims that “the exceptionally strong egalitarian and inclusive impulse guiding his life’s work, *Leaves of Grass*, is periodically disrupted by moments of insensitivity and racism” (p. 9). In spite of the fact that he had these lapses, the minorities adored him. Because Whitman knew what it was to be a minority himself. He as a homosexual with a unique perception of the world, his life was not easy. The passages

where he is a racist are mostly forgotten by his admirers and – “we find widespread admiration of Whitman over a long period of time and from a distinguished group of African American writers” (Price, 2004, p. 9) and “he was both privileged and not, an Anglo male but also a sexual minority, a person with roots in the working class, and a writer whose book was banned.” These facts were what bring him to people in the past. Among the African American writers who found him exceptional belong for example Kelly Miller or James Weldon Johnson.

Walt Whitman was a very independent man who grows up more or less alone without his family. He was just a child when he had to take care of himself, living alone in Brooklyn. Perhaps that it is why his sense of independence was so well formed. In the 19th century the society was just evolving in America properly and there were new newspapers emerging almost every day. So jobs were easy to find. He was skillful and already enthusiastic about his writing. His first attempts at prose and poetry were not successful and we could hardly see in this kind of work the man Whitman later would become, the poet of *Leaves of Grass*. He was a good journalist though (Price, 2004, p. 29). The style of writing was full of simplicity and familiarity, free from the mannerisms and affectations and poetic clichés. Being a journalist opened his mind and he was more tolerable to others. In my opinion, he as a homosexual could feel what it was to be out of the ordinary. Also during his travels for a newspaper in New Orleans, he met people and encountered moments and experiences, which were different than that he knew. He was not judgmental; he was curious and wanted to know more and admired the different (Asselineau, 1999, p. 48). This is shown in this extract of the poem “Song of Myself”:

My lovers suffocate me,
Crowding my lips, thick in the pores of my skin,
Jostling me through streets and public halls, coming naked to me
at night,
Crying by day *Ahoy!* from the rocks of the river, swinging and
chirping over my head. (“Song” 1172-1175)

Whitman clearly is for human beings who do not behave as it is expected from others but beings, who do their best for the best purpose which will serve to them. It is an

important part of democracy because there is freedom and in my opinion, people should gain the most and best of it and through this possibility would become better as human beings. They would be able to evolve their abilities and then benefit more for the society. People should rely on themselves, their own experience and believe in themselves. They should perceive and try things, not to only hear about them and listen and obey blindly others. This is evident in this part of “Song of Myself”:

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look
through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the specters in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self. (“Song” 34-36)

Another theme which could be connected to democracy is already mentioned slavery. Whitman’s attitude to this topic was quite unique within the Democratic Party. He was not an active abolitionist but on the other hand, he supported slaves and was very moved when he saw auctions. He was a so called free soiler. This means that he was for colonization of the West by free people. These people’s work would be threatened by slaves whose work was cheaper. That it is why he wanted to end slavery. As Martin Klammer explains in his article “Slavery and Abolitionism”, Whitman is contradictory in his attitude. He says that on one side Whitman mentions African Americans as a part of his vision of the nation and sees them “as beautiful, dignified, and intelligent”. On the other side, there are texts in which he thinks that they are inferior to whites. Whitman’s attitude to slavery started properly in 1840’s with him saying that: “the introduction of slavery into new territories would discourage, if not prohibit, whites from migrating to those areas because white labour could not economically compete with slave labour and would be “degraded” by it”. His opinion was a part of his dream of spreading democracy through the states and to the new territories. Klammer claims that it is important to see Whitman’s changes in the historical context. At first it was because of his free-soiler reasons, but later in 1850’s “Whitman’s antislavery rhetoric turns conciliatory in response to the threat to the very existence of the Union”.

Religion

As David Reynolds (2005) points out, Whitman invites all the religions, sees them as equal and as deists did - he does not believe in a single church. Whitman wrote Emerson, "the churches are one vast lie; the people do not believe them, and they do not believe themselves.... The spectacle is a pitiful one." According to Reynolds, Whitman had a problem with the churches because of the economic injustice and slavery they were in connection with. It is apparent in the poem "Respondez!" Whitman is calling for a change (p. 77).

Let nothing but copies at second hand be permitted to exist upon the earth!

Let the earth desert God, nor let there ever henceforth

be mention'd the name of God!

Let there be no God! ("Respondez!" 40-44)

Whitman has a unique vision of religion, in "Song of Myself" he says: "Why should I wish to see God better than this day? I see something of God each hour of the twenty- four, and each moment then..." (1283-1284).

Religion goes hand in hand with death and it is possible to find the theme of death throughout his poetry. Aspiz (2004) suggests that for better understanding Whitman's poetry the theme of death cannot be forgotten. He says that "Whitman generally interprets death in terms of his experience and his intuitions, so his death-oriented poems tend to be personal and poignant." Whitman sees death carried in his body in every phase of his life which means in the lives of all. He is the one who wants to interpret this mystery to readers (p. ix-x).

According to Aspiz (2004), Whitman does not think about death as about something that is not important but believes that if a life is supposed to be fulfilled then a person must not be scared of it but consider it as a part of life:

Throughout the *Leaves of Grass* he proclaimed his faith that death was not a plunge into the terminal nada and was convinced that we can live our lives fully only if we are prepared to welcome death as a transition in a continued, but still mysterious, process of spiritual evolution (p. 1).

Whitman mentions death by many images and says to all the people that death is not something when life ends and tries to explain them that vision of immortal life is understandable:

He sings the praise of all the dead; he presents himself as a prophet of an immortality that embraces even the most humble and rejected mortals and as a translator of the auguries of universal immortality that he finds everywhere. His words, he feels, are as inspire as those of any man or god (Aspiz, 2004, p. 4).

Reynold (2005) claims that the cycle of life and death and its place in nature in the point of view of Whitman was influenced by science. He admired chemistry and a chemist Liebig gave him the idea of a cycle – when people and animals died, their atoms became transferred to the earth and plant life, whose atoms in turn became the source of new life (p. 78). So the first lines of “Song of Myself” “for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (3) – are suggestions of this cycle. Furthermore, in the poem “The Compost” Whitman says that the human body is good manure and wonders where all the liquid and meat go. It is endless spring because from earth is a new life, from the dead are the alive ones. He asks how it is possible that nature is healthy when sick dead bodies are buried in earth.

Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,
It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless
successions of diseas'd corpses. (“The Compost” 42-44)

In connection to nature, Whitman uses the word “kosmos” when he is describing himself or it also embodies his vision of a one of man’s best qualities. In this sense it describes a person who is in tune with everything (Reynolds, 2005, p. 82). The example is to be found in “Song of Myself” when he is writing about “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son” (497) or in poem “Kosmos” where the harmony is depicted:

Who includes diversity and is Nature,
Who is the amplitude of the earth, and the coarseness and sex-

uality of the earth, and the great charity of the earth, and
the equilibrium also. (“Kosmos” 1-2)

As last point of this chapter, it is significant to point out Whitman’s specific visions and his connection to Eastern philosophy, if there was even any. At the beginning of his career as a poet, he was not widely known but what happen to him that he published *Leaves of Grass*, masterpiece which did not have any parallel at least at his time, stays unclear. One possible explanation is that something occurred to him. Something happened and he had a vision. It is apparent from the following example:

... there is no difference of degree, but a difference of kind between the pre-1855 Whitman and the author of *Leaves of Grass*. Whereas most authors develop by a gradual and regular evolution, the career of Whitman is marked by a sharp break, a sudden mutation. The man suddenly changed into a Titan. Bucke explains the mystery by comparing the case of Whitman to those of Buddha, St. Paul, and Mohammed. Like them he had a vision. His soul was filled with joy and ineffable peace, and this ecstasy was accompanied by an illumination. He had the revelation of the presence of God in the world, of the immortality of the soul, of the continuity of creation, and of the universal brotherhood of all living things (Asselineau, 1999, p. 48).

It is impossible to explain truly why Whitman had these visions and what made him to write about them. Some critics believe that Whitman just waited to be more certain about his opinions. But no one can answer that properly and it stays as a mystery. The one thing is clear though. It is the truth that it was a transformation and birth of an extraordinary poet.

Malcolm Cowley, the literary editor of *The New Republic* wrote an introduction to *Leaves of Grass* before publishing the work in 1959. In the introduction, he suggests that Whitman was influenced by some vision. To be more precise, his work seems to be connected with Indian philosophy. The connection is peculiar because Whitman had no idea that the philosophy had existed; he had not read any of those authors as Cowley points out. For example the *Bhagavad-Gita* nor Nietzsches’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Cowley claims that:

I might suggest that the real nature of the poem becomes clearer when it is

considered in relation to quite another list of works, even though Whitman had probably read none of them in 1855. Most of them he could not have read, because they were not yet written, or not published, or not translated into English (Whitman, 1986, p. xi).

In the journals, Whitman wrote which books he read and there is no suggestion that he was aware of this kind of literature. Cowley claims that *Leaves of Grass* are “one of the great and insane prophetic works that have appeared in the Western world”. It seems that Whitman was totally original and without influence.

To Cowley it seems that Whitman had to have some kind of experience which helped him with creation. He calls it “a mystical experience”. Although in Whitman’s journals is no direct evidence of such recognition, there are hints that it could be possible that Whitman had visions as bards and prophets had had before him. How Cowley explains, the vision is a strong and engrossed feeling of a connection with God or Soul. A person is very joyful and is convinced that he is out of time and space and knows the right truth almost impossible to express. Cowley gives an example of one of Whitman’s poems which should be a proof to that:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and
knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth;
And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own.
(Whitman, 1986, p.xiii)

These visions have appeared many times in the world and they have the same appearance. No one can explain the conditions by which these occurrences are made. If they are the results of self-hypnosis, drug abuse or just being full of energy (Whitman, 1986, p. xi-xiv).

Folsom (1995) states that Whitman’s contemporaries Emerson and Thoreau were influenced by Indian philosophy and in 1956 Thoreau asked Whitman if he knew about this kind of philosophy. Whitman replied that he did not know (p. 398). On the other side, years later Whitman, in 1889 publication of *Leaves of Grass* in which he included a letter called “A Backward Glance O’ver Travel’d Roads”, writes that he goes out to nature and reads

various authors and writings, one of them are the ancient Hindoo poems (Norton, 1965, p. 569). In my point of view, this question will remain unanswered and every reader can absorb from his poetry what they need and want. The clear and straightforward answer would give only Whitman himself.

Sexuality and Comradeship

Whitman's free view on sexuality and passion must not be mistaken for pornography. Whitman is an open minded author who seems to write without any boundaries but he was strictly against cheap obscene erotic content and as Reynolds (2005) mentions "he puzzled that some inferred from his poetry that he would take an interest in what he called all the literature of rape, all the pornography of vile minds." And he continues pointing Whitman's words about this theme: "No one would more rigidly keep in mind the difference between the simply erotic, the merely lascivious, and what is frank, free, modern, in sexual behavior, than I would: no one" (p. 101-102).

It is believed by many that Whitman wrote these verses of love as a reaction to contemporary novels where we could find unsatisfied women and immature young men. This can be applied to "Song of the Exposition" when Whitman writes in his diary that he wants the end of romance (p. 103).

Away with old romance!

Away with novels, plots and plays of foreign courts,

Away with love-verses sugar'd in rhyme, the intrigues, amours of

idlers. ("Song of the Exposition" 131-133)

Whitman thinks about sexuality as a significant part of people's lives when if treated sensibly it can only benefit to their happiness. He wants to encourage men and women to have a healthy lifestyle and not to make sexuality a taboo. He considers it as a centre of human's life and the organs which are connected with reproduction are to Whitman holy (Reynolds, 2005, p. 105).

A woman waits for me, she contains all, nothing is lacking,

Yet all were lacking if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of the

right man were lacking. ("A Woman Waits for Me" 1-2)

From this extract is obvious that if people need a satisfying sex life to be happy, sexuality is inevitable and Whitman encourages men and women to experience this part of life without shame:

Sex contains all, bodies, souls,
Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results, promulgations,
Songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery, the seminal
milk,
All hopes, benefactions, bestowals, all the passions, loves, beauties,
delights of the earth,
All the governments, judges, gods, follow'd persons of the earth,
These are contain'd in sex as parts of itself and justifications of
itself. ("A Woman Waits for Me" 3-8)

Whitman was interested in exhibitions and was fond of nudity. He was against the attitude of Christian prudes and believed that if the community of people does not ridicule the nude and behaves healthy around it then their children are also healthy. Because of being against the cultural presentation of the body of that time, his works contains a different point of view. He writes about it in a scientific curiousness (Reynolds, 2005, p. 107).

I say the human shape or face is so great, it must never be made ridiculous;
I say for ornaments nothing outre can be allowed,
And that anything is most beautiful without ornament. ("Says" 8-10)

And I say that genius need never more be turned to romances,
(For facts properly told, how mean appear all romances.) ("Says" 13-14)

He does not make any difference between a man and a woman. He is a feminist in this view because of his belief in equality: “I say that every right, in politics or what-not, shall be eligible to that one man or woman, on the same terms as any” (“Says” 26). He is celebrating womanhood and motherhood by saying: “I am the poet of the woman the same as the man, and I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man, and I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men” (“Song of Myself” 425-427). He celebrates it also in these verses:

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse, I
say the Form complete is worthier far,
The Female equally with the Male I sing. (“One’s-Self I Sing” 3-5)

Whitman lived in the time of changes, suffragettes were marching in the streets and the question of free love started. Reynolds (2005) claims that Whitman was “attacked” by others as a free lover. At that time, people who were for free love did not see it as promiscuity. They believed in mutual love, not forced by parents and which would lead to marriage. But Whitman was for marriage and saw free love as something which could hurt society as such (p. 112).

On the other hand, Whitman saw marriage as an institution that was not pleasant for women. They lost their freedom in it and their property and wages were given away to their husbands. He protested against it and saw women as very capable creatures (Reynolds, 2005, p. 111).

When reading through the poetry of Walt Whitman love to other men is a topic that is very often repeated and the question arises whether he was a homosexual and if this affected his poetry. To be more precise, it is important to mention two terms that Whitman used to distinguish. James Miller (1998) explains in his essay “Sex and Sexuality” that Whitman’s perception of sexuality included a term “amativeness” – which means love between man and woman and “adhesiveness” which is manly love. Whitman writes about passion but also about contact between two people. He connects sex with spiritual experience and Miller gives an example of Whitman’s opinion of sex when he himself

wrote: “The body, he teaches, is beautiful. Sex is also beautiful. Sex will not put aside; it is a great ordination of the universe”

The poems which are mostly about this theme are these which are included under the title “Children of Adam” and these are for example “I Sing the Body Electric”, “The Sleepers”, “A Woman Waits for Me” and “Spontaneous Me”. Here is an example of admiration of a woman: “Be not ashamed women, your privilege encloses the rest, and is the exit of the rest, you are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul” (“I Sing the Body Electric” 65-66). Love to his comrades is mostly in the poems which are written under the bigger title “Calamus” and these are for example “To a Stranger”, “These I Singing in Spring” or “In Paths Untrodden”. From the last mentioned poem are following verses:

Afternoon this delicious Ninth-month in my forty-first year,
I proceed for all who are or have been young men,
To tell the secret of my nights and days,
To celebrate the need of comrades. (“In Paths” 15-18)

Verses like this were controversial and it was Emerson who warned him that he should withdraw poems which contained this topic. But Whitman was proud of his verses and it would not be him if he did so (Miller, 1998).

Reynolds (2005) suggests that in pre-Civil War America it was natural that two people of same sex were intimate. Whitman had some experience with women but felt romantic toward his comrades. It was common that men had strong relationships between each other. In Whitman’s poetry some words can be confusing for a contemporary reader. He writes about orgies with men but what he means really is a party or the word lover which can also mean a friend. Whitman wants to celebrate relationship of friends and desires to point out the importance of such relationship. He stopped to believe in institutions and see friendship as glue of the society:

Comradely love is one of the United States-it is the quality which makes the states whole-it is their thread-but oh! The significant thread-by which the nation is held together, a chain of comrades...I know no country anyhow in which comradeship is so far developed as here-here, among the mechanic

classes (p. 118-121).

The Civil War

The Civil War in the United States had a certain impact on Walt Whitman and as it was already mentioned before he used to visit wounded soldiers and talked to them, being a nurse and a friend. Poetry that mainly concentrates on the war is under the title “Drum-Taps” and was added later to the main poem “Song of Myself”. Whitman found in the war what he was searching. “It blew away many of the social ills that his early poetry had tried to rectify. It cleared the atmosphere like a thunderstorm” (Reynolds, 2005, p. 123).

Whitman himself was not a soldier because of his age, he was forty-two and soldiers were younger than him and another reason could be his upbringing as a Quaker when he feared of violence. He was on the side of the Union and set a place for a poet during the war: “In war he is the most deadly force of the war...he fetches parks of artillery the best the engineer ever saw...he can make every word he speaks draw blood.” His experience from the battlefield was thanks to his brother who was a soldier and when Whitman heard that he had been wounded he decided to go look for him. He stayed in the battlefield for a few days and these were unforgettable moments (Asselineau, 1999, p. 137-153).

To the drum-taps prompt,

The young men falling in and arming,

The mechanics arming, (the trowel, the jack-plane, the black-smith's hammer, tost aside with precipitation,)

The lawyer leaving his office and arming, the judge leaving the court. (“First O Song of a Prelude” 21-24)

Whitman was satisfied with the war before he saw the carnage that happened on the battlefield, “He celebrated war because it was for him the synonym of energy, of manly vigor and generous spirit.” The Civil War meant many to him because it was the fight for democracy which he cherished so much. To him it was an ideological war and if the Union would fall it would be the end of democracy: “The United States, henceforth, disunited, would be too weak to defend itself against attacks from without and nowhere else would democracy be able to triumph over tyranny” (Asselineau, 1999, p. 154-155).

After his visit of the battlefield and carrying for the soldiers in the hospital he wished the war would stop. His feelings about the war are described in a letter he wrote his mother: “Mother, one’s heart grows sick of war, after all, when you what it really is; every once in a while I feel so horrified and disgusted – it seem to me like a great slaughter-house and the men butchering each other” (Asselineau, 1999, p. 157).

What Whitman saw in hospitals he had visited was as he said ideal humanity. He was skeptical about society before the war but this humanity changed his opinion. He liked to see that people were generous and those who were wounded were brave and tried not to show that they were deeply suffering because of their injuries (Reynolds, 2005, p. 127).

He was an admirer of President Abraham Lincoln and wrote poems titled under the name “Memories of President Lincoln”. One of the well-known poems is called “O Captain! My Captain!”:

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting. (1-3)

The reason why Whitman was a proponent of Lincoln was that he said that the Union had to be saved and slavery had to end. He wrote about the President in his journals that: “He was a family man but was had an air of complete independence. He went his own lonely road, disregarding all the usual ways-refusing the guides, accepting no warning-just keeping his appointment with himself every time” (Reynolds, 2005, p. 129-130).

Abraham Lincoln was a man who was represented in Whitman’s poetry by the first person pronoun. He was rough and a kosmos and all characteristics about which Whitman wrote. Lincoln completed a mission which was crucial to Whitman and it was unifying the States (Reynolds, 2005, p. 131).

CONCLUSION

In the nineteenth century, the United States was a new nation undergoing many changes. The States were struggling with the question of slavery and the Civil War. There were authors who felt the need to capture the unique tension between the North and South. One such author was Walt Whitman who dedicated his life to poetry and depicting the nation not only at war but also in peace. He was a great observer of human beings who populated the USA as well as the entire world.

Walt Whitman was a man who brought a fresh air into poetry. He was a prophet who came with extraordinary opinions but these did not guarantee him success. On the contrary, he was so revolutionary that only a few understood him. Whitman became known thanks to his masterpiece *Leaves of Grass*. The first edition was published in 1855 when he was thirty-six years old. From a poor origin he was able to become a worldwide known poet who underwent many struggles in order to communicate with readers, to let them know that he was on their side and he was one who understood them completely. His aim was to praise democracy and individuality of all and through him people could be connected. Through all his life Whitman kept changing *Leaves of Grass* but he never changed his unique character. As he worked on his poetry, Whitman made a living mostly as a journalist and even for a time as a teacher. The experience of a life in the countryside and later living in the city had a certain effect on him and this was reflected in his poetry.

The major purpose of this thesis was to describe Whitman's life, the beginning as a poet and the birth of *Leaves of Grass*. Last but not least was to point out in my opinion the masterpiece's most significant themes. Thanks to his work as a printer from a very early age, Whitman was able to publish *Leaves of Grass* almost by himself. Using an unusual style for that time, Whitman wrote in the free-verse, and included opinions, which were suspicious to many and he caused a literary commotion. The most controversial part of Whitman's poetry is his attitude to the medieval division of the body and the soul. The medieval conception considered the body and the soul as two separate parts of a person when the soul was holy and the body and everything connected with it was filthy. Whitman presented a different approach and that is what made him so controversial. He claimed that every part of a person is equal to another parts and he had no problem to write very openly about the body and sexuality as well. But Whitman was not known only for this but also for his vision of democracy and individuality. He celebrated men and women, people of all races and saw the United States as a nation in which this equality is possible. Therefore the "leaves" of *Leaves of Grass* should be spread all over the world which will lead people to

understanding and love for one another.

Walt Whitman had an unquestionable influence on many authors, mostly on those who came after him and paid tribute to him on some level. It was Alfred Lord Tennyson who was Whitman's friend and who honored Whitman in his lifetime. Later Allen Ginsberg copied Whitman's verse style and expressed his sympathy particularly in a poem "A Supermarket in California". Another poet Pablo Neruda confessed to never ending admiration of Whitman since he was a boy and claimed that we live in a Whitmanesque world.

Finally, I came to a conclusion that Whitman had and still has a lasting impact on readers. His explicitness is surprising even today. His eagerness to fight for the democracy is in my opinion his best value as a man as well as a poet. These are the chief values from which all the other values grow. His explicitness is surprising even today. There are many themes which we do not have the space to mention about Whitman and it could be a good suggestion for deeper research. It is sure that his legacy will live forever and readers, artists or other writers will find him irreplaceable source of inspiration as well as comradeship and empathy.

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SUMMARY IN CZECH

Předmětem této bakalářské práce je popis života a díla Walta Whitmana, jednoho z největších básníků. Whitman přivedl své dílo *Stébla trávy* k životu v průběhu devatenáctého století.

Tato bakalářská práce je rozdělena do dvou hlavních částí. První část se jmenuje Walt Whitman a zahrnuje Whitmanův život, jeho tiskařské a autorské začátky. Zabývá se obdobím, kdy se Whitman snažil o uznání čtenářů a kritiků. Druhá část této práce je nazvána Témata poezie Walta Whitmana. Poukazuje se v ní na témata, která lze najít ve *Stéblách trávy* a které jsou dle mého názoru nejdůležitější. Za těmito kapitolami následuje shrnutí, které rekapituluje celou práci.