

THE FUNCTION OF POETRY IN THE MODERN WORLD: A CASE STUDY OF WALT WHITMAN AND AUDRE LORDE'S POEMS

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Abstract

Lyric poetry has historically referred to a genre that we think of as brief, musical, and personal as well as subjective. This article addresses the role of lyric poetry in the modern world, and how critical analysis enables us to better appreciate the potential impact of poetry today. Specifically, we will offer brief contrastive assessments of two landmark exemplars of American poets, Walt Whitman and Audre Lorde. These two figures demonstrate some of the varied ways of the American poetry tradition. We compare Walt Whitman, a canonical white male poet from the 19th century, with an equally important 20th century African American woman poet, Audre Lorde. These American poets differ in historical periods, sex, race, and other factors, yet both uphold the conventional functions of lyric poetry and prove its continuing relevance to a global readership. The results show that as the reflection of human life, poetry could represent honesty, realism, democracy and even power.

Keywords: *American literature; American women poet; gender; lyric poetry; race*

1. Introduction

Lyric poetry is an ancient art form, and there have been many definitions and understandings of this old and revered literary genre throughout history. When asked how she could recognize true poetry, Emily Dickinson gave this famous answer: "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold, no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry." If we sometimes find ourselves frustrated to get at the meaning of some poems even if we viscerally feel their impact, T. S. Eliot wrote, "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood." For Dante, poetry means "Things that are true expressed in words that are beautiful." In another famous definition, according to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, poetry is "The best words in the best order." In a powerful dictum from one of the greatest of African American poets, Gwendolyn Brooks, poetry is "life distilled." For John Keats, as we read in his classic poem "Ode on A Grecian Urn," poetry is directed to, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," and that is a definition that we will return to later. Poetry operates along two axes: there are the features that transcend time and place and speak eternally for the human experience, and the features that make poetry a truthful reflection of the time and place in which it is created. Poetry and poetry criticism are diachronic and synchronic in the finest poetic creations and analyses. Critical theory enables us to articulate an interpretive perspective of a poem. We

believe that a fruitful application of theory generates a site of union among the worlds of the poet, the poem, and the critic. In our own applications of critical theory, we habitually use many different methods to best suit each poem that we analyze, and sometimes these theoretical perspectives are implicit.

In this brief article, we combine assumptions relating to feminist criticism, gender criticism, critical race theory, genre theory, and postcolonial theory. Being aware of our own natural inclinations as well as our blind spots is one of theory's greatest benefits as a tool to understand and appreciate the importance of poetry in our lives and in the modern world. We have aimed to seek out the best critical apparatus both to suit our own personal sensibilities—our philosophy of life and art—and the sensibility of the poems we are discussing. We believe it is a great strength to be comfortable with several different theoretical perspectives to potentially apply.

Professor Wayne C. Booth would tell his University of Chicago students, "Theory is not something grafted on. It is how you see the world." We have aimed to apply that dictum in our own respectful introduction to two towering figures of American literature and culture. We selected the representative poets Whitman and Lorde because both uphold conventional definitions of this genre and prove its vitality and meaning in the current era despite many surface differences. The poems we will be discussing—one by Whitman and one by Lorde—reveal poets whose world views have some radical differences, so using different theoretical approaches will be most illuminating in comparing them.

2. Literature Review

For some people, poetry is a decorative artifact—an attractive and undemanding use of language to reinforce the comfortable values of the power structures of a society. But for others, poetry is the opposite: it is a political force to challenge those status quo values and even correct the wrongdoings of those in power. It is a true and well-established dictum that African American poetry has always been a force of political agency because it needs to be. For example, the editors of *The Negro Caravan*, an influential early 20th century anthology of African American poetry, wrote that African American poetry tends to be poetry of protest because there had always been so much to protest. Extending well into the 20th century, African American poetry has been widely regarded as a vehicle to serve the community. It has often conveyed the philosophy that the purpose of African American art and culture is social action and political efficacy for all those who have historically been so often disempowered. As the great novelist and critic Toni Morrison asserted in her classic study, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, "There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States." It is for this very reason that we have chosen to compare Lorde to a white male canonical writer.

There are countless biographical and critical studies of both Lorde and Whitman in the bibliographical record. A major study that provides a cross-section of these two poets is *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet*, edited by Wilson (2014).

Additional resources on Lorde include *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* by De Veaux (2004), and the Audre Lorde Collection in the Spelman College Archives. For an explicit connection on the relationship between Lorde and American social and political issues such as democracy, freedom, race, and collective action, see Chapter 25 by Turner

(2021) entitled “Audre Lorde’s Politics of Difference” in *African American Political Thought: A Collected History*, edited by Jack Turner (2021). An essential introduction to Lorde’s major poems and essays has been expertly edited in *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde* (Gay, 2020).

A recent major study among the voluminous critical works on Whitman is *The New Walt Whitman Studies: Twenty-First-Century Critical Revisions*, edited by Cohen (2020). *Walt Whitman: A Literary Life* is an important book by Wagner-Martin (2021) that offers a fresh perspective on the impact of class and economics on Whitman’s life and poetry. The complexities between Whitman’s rhetorical posture in his poetry compared to his actions in the nation’s capital during and after the Civil War are problematized in *Whitman in Washington: Becoming the National Poet* by Price (2020). *The Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, a peer-reviewed journal published by the University of Iowa, is an open-access peer-reviewed scholarly journal that is the official publication of the Walt Whitman Society. The current issue contains an up-to-date bibliography by Folsom (2022) of Whitman resources and reference materials. The comprehensive Whitman Archive also hosted by the University of Iowa, contains a wealth of open-access digitized writings, correspondence, bibliographies, maps, citations, and more.

3. Research Method

The preparation of this paper has entailed close reading and a hybrid approach to critical analysis of the selected poems by Lorde and Whitman. The main themes address power discrepancies in the context of a white patriarchal society, especially class, race, and sex. By means of poetic products, we demonstrate the significance of underrepresented voices and how they are often misread in a white male-dominated society. This recognition leads to a more profound understanding of what both Lorde and Whitman sought to convey and the valuable impact of their writing on society.

4. Results and Discussion

The concept of democracy and a harmonious society comprised of separate but united individuals is a deeply embedded ideal in American culture, society, and art. Whitman has a glowing vision of America as a nation where every individual is respected and valued—where all people sing together in peace, brotherhood, and sisterhood, across lines of class, race, sex, religion, and profession. Would Whitman’s vision of a harmonious society for everyone be the same philosophical and aesthetic perspective as Audre Lorde’s views in a poem like “Power”? Let us look at these two poems for comparison: “For You, O Democracy” written by Whitman in 1892, and “Power” written by Audre Lorde in 1978.

For Whitman, all races become one race, as we see in line 2 of stanza 1: “the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon.” This line is quite pertinent for our comparison because Whitman seems to be suggesting that “race” is an inclusive, non-differentiating, all-encompassing unity comprised of everyone who serves democracy. We notice no black or white or divisions or tensions anywhere in this poem, including between humanity and nature under the democratic system.

Democracy is a female muse figure, “ma femme,” and we see she is addressed possessively and with the flourish of French integrated into Whitman’s vision of an American polyglot lexicon. The feminine ideal of this symbol of Democracy is served by “manly love of comrades,” which would have represented the social and aesthetic values of Whitman’s 19th-century era. In Whitman’s ode to Democracy, his role as a poet is to create songs to serve

and extoll this sociocultural principle of the highest human order, the democratic form of government. In that sense, Whitman's view of poetry and the poet is social, political, and organic. When we consider the terms and worldview of this poem, we see it as essentially a song of praise and commitment by the poet via the poem, as it calls for everyone to pay homage and fealty to this most perfect and most natural form of government. We notice the references in stanza two both to the cosmopolitan and natural worlds: cities, rivers, trees, lakes, sun, and prairies.

The diction used by Whitman throughout this poem includes terms of strength and indivisibility: indissoluble, splendid, divine, magnetic, love, comrades, companionship, serve, and inseparable. The anaphoric repetition of "I will make" and "I will plant" can be read as a statement of the poet's belief in his own power to bring Democracy to fruition as an act of willing servitude, as we see in that important closing couplet, envoi, or turn of this quasi-sonnet and its last line which underscores the poet's motive: "For you, for you, I am trilling these songs." The poem is for Democracy—an apostrophe to an anthropomorphized, aspirational, and gendered abstract principle. Principles may be beautiful but are not necessarily realized in truth.

For Whitman, the mission of poetry is personal, temporal, spatial, specific, and permanent: his aim was to "put a Person, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the 19th century, in America) freely, fully, and truly on record." We can now compare Whitman's self-empowered, optimistic, and confident view of the role of the poet and poetry with a self-statement by Audre Lorde and the way she saw herself as a poet and person in 20th century America. Lorde wrote, "I am a Negro woman and a poet—all three things stand outside the realm of choice." For Whitman, his self-image as a poet was inclusive, expansive, and a matter of choice. Whitman makes assumptions that democracy incorporates everyone in a spirit of harmony, unanimity, love, and acceptance. Whitman could view himself as "a Person" and "a human being," "freely" and "fully" on record.

For Lorde, being a black American and a woman often meant not always and universally being recognized and respected as "a person," "a human being," "free," and with the unquestioned ability for her words to be "on record." For Lorde, her identity entailed separations, restrictions, non-self-determination, and otherness—as a Negro, a woman, a poet. She would not have thought of herself as capable of representing all people or all Americans, nor would she have been seen that way—in all probability—by a white male poet of the 19th century like Whitman. For Lorde, democracy had been applied differentially and prejudicially with discrimination, violence, divisiveness, and exclusions. Whitman viewed Democracy as the guiding principle of America; for Lorde, the guiding principle is power. How does Lorde's poem that is dedicated to "Power" compare with Whitman's Paeon to Democracy?

In her 1984 essay from her book *Sister Outsider*, Lorde famously wrote the following:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older -- know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.

Lorde believed it necessary for those who were “forged in the crucibles of difference” to create and use their own tools to “dismantle the master’s house” to undo the structures of oppression. Consider how the imagery and diction of Lorde’s poem differ from Whitman’s. While we may view Whitman’s vision as one representing 19th-century idealistic beauty, Lorde uses the terminology of 20th-century lived experience: kill, gunshot wounds, trapped, dead, shattered, blood, punctured, churns, splits, hatred, destruction, dying, shot, die, forcing, graveyard, destruction, poisonous, beat, senseless, and raping. Quite a different poetic landscape is presented in Lorde compared to Whitman. Unlike the harmonious utopian equality represented by Whitman, Lorde presents us with a battlefield of negative, pessimistic, and polarizing differences and binary oppositions of power hierarchies: black/white, adult/child, poetry/rhetoric, police/civilian, man/woman, power/powerlessness. Whitman—one of the foundational poets of the American literary tradition—could see himself, very influentially, as representing and singing the Democratic spirit. In this sense, the politicization of American poetry is an originating and identifying feature of this genre. But, in contrast, Lorde represents the perspective and experience of the downtrodden and powerless in a poem that is a bitter and ironic tribute to whomever and whatever holds power in American society. The speaker in Lorde’s poem represents the victims of this destructive and exclusionary society, unlike Whitman, who represents the essence of this society’s power in its inclusivity and absence of divisions as embodied by the poet himself.

5. Conclusion

By comparing Whitman and Lorde, we find two useful examples of the diversity in the American poetry tradition—that power and inclusion are not the same for all Americans. African American poetry and criticism must inevitably be political in a different way from the centrist mainstream poetry by white writers that have the luxury of assuming unanimity and embracing satisfaction. To return to our issue of critical theory, for Whitman, we could easily apply the tropes of American studies, Romanticism, and ecocriticism, among several other effective approaches. For Lorde, we might usefully call on gender theory, critical race theory, postcolonialism, psychoanalytical theory, and others.

Lorde’s poem references the murder of a ten-year-old black boy named Clifford Glover who was killed in 1973 by a police officer named Thomas Shea, who was acquitted of this heinous act. She learned of his acquittal from the radio while driving her car and was so distraught that she had to stop driving. The poem explicitly addresses the murder of this child and the trial of his killer, as well as other real and potential acts driven by feelings of powerlessness, discrimination, and racially motivated violence. More than forty years after Lorde’s poem, we face a spate of countless murders by police officers of African Americans of all ages, from 17-year-old Trayvon Martin who was murdered in 2012 to the 2020 murder of George Floyd that was resolved in 2022 by convicting of all accused perpetrators of this crime. Lorde’s topic remains as politically relevant today as it did when she wrote it.

Lorde and Whitman together offer a fruitful answer to the question “What is the role of poetry in the modern world?” To return to the utopian dictum of Keats—truth equates with beauty—poetry can represent the most vaunted, eternal, and beautiful human values, as we see in the case of Whitman. Poetry can also represent honesty and realism, as we see in the case of Lorde who calls out humanity’s failures to uphold those ideals. In their own ways, “Democracy” by Whitman and “Power” by Lorde might express similar visions of the aspirations of American standards, though they would likely differ on the truth of how

successfully those goals have been upheld in practice. Whitman provides us with often-inspiring poetry that reminds us of our best selves in the world we wish to inhabit. By "speaking truth to power" about injustice and cruelty, Lorde holds up a mirror to society's violence and inequality. Poetry can remind us of our best values and yet it refuses to be pacified. Many African American poets have insisted on pointing to the social ills of the contemporary world that are intolerable and demand resolution to authentically realize the harmonious vision of America. Whitman and Lorde offer us two significant models of the indispensable role that poetry can play for us in our challenging present.

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