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THE SPIRIT OF DEMOCRACY AS SEEN IN WALT WHITMAN'S *I HEAR AMERICA SINGING*

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Abstract

This research is mainly intended to reveal the spirit of democracy in Walt Whitman's *I Hear America Singing*. This study is regarded as qualitative research. The data were collected from the main source, the poem itself, and from other books as secondary sources. The data analyzed are presented in descriptive form. The expressive approach and mimetic approach are used to analyze the data. The result of the study shows that Walt Whitman, as the poet lifted up the freedom and competence of the common people to the growth of America. They are mechanics, carpenter, mason, boatmen, deckhand, shoemaker, hatter, wood-cutter, ploughboys, mother, young wife and girl. They have dignity and rights to make full use his/her activities as a part of democracy.

Keywords: Spirit, Democracy, Freedom, *I Hear America Singing*

Abstrak

Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah untuk mengungkapkan semangat demokrasi dalam I Hear America Singing, karya Walt Whitman. Penelitian ini adalah penelitian kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan dari sumber utama yakni puisi itu sendiri, dan dari buku-buku lain sebagai sumber sekunder. Data yang dianalisis disajikan dalam bentuk deskriptif. Pendekatan ekspresif dan pendekatan mimetik digunakan untuk menganalisis data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Walt Whitman, sebagai penyair mengangkat kebebasan dan kompetensi rakyat biasa untuk pertumbuhan Amerika. Mereka direpresentasikan oleh mekanik, tukang kayu, tukang batu, tukang perahu, tukang geladak, pembuat sepatu, pembuat topi, pemotong kayu, tukang bajak, ibu, istri muda dan perempuan muda. Mereka memiliki martabat dan hak untuk memanfaatkan sepenuhnya potensi mereka sebagai bagian dari demokrasi.

Kata kunci : Semangat, Demokrasi, Kebebasan, *I Hear America Singing*

1. INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman is one of the famous American poets who lived in the nineteenth century. He is also regarded as a poet of democracy, for many of his works expressed his faith in the United States, in democracy, and in the common man (Edwin, 410).

Leaves of Grass contain a collection of Whitman's works including *I Hear America Singing*. Through the poem, the poet welcomes democracy to the United States. He

suggests that every policy should be referred to the democracy.

In a democratic nation, each individual has to be treated as a unique person and worth one means that human being has the same right to get equality be living in this world. More concretely, facts show that White Americans gradually welcomes Black Indians, Asian, and other ethnic groups to get the same standard of education. It is proved that Democracy has got its place in every aspect of American life, for example, democracy in an economy that suggests Americans may choose a job as they please and may change it as they wish to without intimidation or tyrannical consequences.

In the government system, each individual ought to have a chance to sit in government according to his/her abilities. In that way discrimination has no place in America (Burns and Pletason, 147). This idea can be clearly seen when Negroes obtained election as congressmen, John J. Parker as a state legislator, Thurgood Marchall as municipal judges nad many others. This proves that the Negro's right to vote and to hold office was accepted (Edwin, 353 and Blake, 514). Democracy to the Americans becomes the fundamental dignity, which means that everyone searching for the essential equality of human beings because of freedom.

Leaves of Grass is a collection of Whitman's works including I Hear America Singing. Through the poem, Whitman welcomes democracy to the United States. In I Hear America Singing, Whitman appreciates the mechanic, carpenter, boatman, shoemaker, wood-cutter, mother, young wife, and girl, for they echo democracy as the Americans. They represent different common people in abilities, ambitions, and backgrounds. Democracy for them is, everyone should have the opportunity to make full use of his/her abilities without discrimination of race, culture, sex, or work. I Hear America Singing reflects the spirit of democracy.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Hudson states that literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they haver thought and felt about the essential aspect of life (10). Since the vital point of life is recorded in the literary work it is assumed that "I Hear America Singing reflects Walt Whitman's own experience living in the democratic era of America. In this work, he sharply characterizes what he sees around him and bravely offers his specification for a mature democracy in the future.

The poem I Hear America Singing contains some elements such as characterization, point of view, diction, setting, theme, and symbolism. The following explanations give a description of the elements of the poem.

2.1 Characterization

Griffith has stated that characterization is the author's presentation and development of characters (46). Griffith seems in line with Hornby that defines characters as the action or process of characterizing especially the description of human characters in novels, plays, poetry, etc. (186).

I Hear America Singing consists of eleven characters, they are the "I" or the poet himself: who is described as the person whose attitude amazed common people and their life, the other characters are mechanics, the carpenter, the mason, the boatman, shoemaker, woodcutter, ploughboy, the mother, young wife, and the girl, are all represented to the common people who have the right and freedom in doing their works. Each of them expresses the situation being experienced in their life.

2.2 Diction

Griffith has pointed out that diction refers to the poet's choice of words. Poets are sensitive to the subtle shades of meanings of words, to the possible double meanings of words, and to the denotative and connotative meanings and words (93).

In this poem, Whitman chooses the connotative meaning, for example, the word "singing" symbolizes freedom in this case freedom of common people.

2.3 Symbolism

A symbol is an object, usually a physical object that represents an abstract idea or idea (Griffith,110). It means that a symbol is something concrete that stands for something abstracts a visible sign for something invisible.

2.4 Setting

Griffith differentiates the setting into four kinds. First, the setting is the physical, sensuous world of the work. Second, it is the time in which the action of the work takes place. Third, it is the social environment of the character. And fourth, it is the atmosphere (52).

The setting of I Hear America Singing is in the romantic period, which shows common people's life and great attention to nature. The story in I Hear America Singing takes place in the social environment where the common people work, for example, the boatman works on his steamboat (1,5) and the girl sewing and washing (1,8), each expression only reflects their life and situation they have.

2.5 The Meaning of Democracy

Democracy is more than a word definable in so many words; it is rather a living

truth that emanates from the hearts of free-loving men all over the world. It is a government in which there is moral integrity and self-sacrifice on the part of every citizen as well as those in public office, Hope, opportunity, anxiety, and success are still the products of real democracy. According to Hall and Klinger (60), democracy among others means:

- That people are free to think and act as they please within limitations.
- The equality of all persons and respect for each individual.
- A government in which each citizen works for the good of all.

The people in a democracy have some very important beliefs, which act as the foundation stones of democratic living and governing. These beliefs are not only deeply embedded in the attitudes toward good human relations but also from the basis of American belief in democracy.

As people in a democracy have some very important beliefs, which act as the foundation stones of democratic living and governing. These beliefs are not only deeply embedded in the attitudes toward good human relations but also from the basis of American belief in democracy. American beliefs in the worth of every person become the fundamental belief of people in a democratic nation that individual persons are of supreme importance. Each human being has greater value than any machine, any amount of property, or any organization.

President Eisenhower in his message on the State of the Union of the 84th Congress, make these remarks:

“At the outset, I believe it would be well to remind ourselves of this great fundamental in our national life: our common belief that every human being is divinely endowed with dignity and worth and inalienable rights. This faith, with its corollary—that to grow and flourish people must be free—shapes the interests and aspirations of every American” (Hall& Klinger, 62).

American believes in the equality of all people. These famous words are stated in the Declaration of Independence: “All men are created equal”. In a democracy, the people are equal because no matter one social color or racial group, the privileges of democracy should be theirs. These privileges include education, health services, freedom under the law, and the opportunity to develop personal skills, talents, and interests. Equality includes also the rights of all individuals to attempt to realize their most cherished ambitions. A true democracy tries to eliminate those inequalities that prevent or hinder any individual from achieving his best.

2.6 America as Democratic Nation

America has a democratic state of society, which has naturally suggested to them certain laws and certain political manners. It also created in their minds many feelings and opinions which were unknown in the old aristocratic societies of Europe. It has destroyed or modified the old relations of men to one another and has established new ones (Philips, iii).

American President, Abraham Lincoln said the famous word in the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776: "...that all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral development or social capacity. All men are created equal in certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Hall and Klinger, 63). This declaration promises the freedom of the American people. PhilipsB, in Alexis de Tocqueville *Democracy in America*, states that: "Man who lives in democratic ages upon which we are entering has naturally a taste".

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is regarded as qualitative research since the data collected are in the form of words and presented in descriptive form. Bogdan and Biklen point out that, Qualitative research is descriptive. The data collected is in the form of words or pictures rather than numbers. The written result of the research contains quotations from the data to illustrate and substantiate the presentation (28).

The expressive and mimetic approaches are used to analyze the data. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* states that "this theory regards that a work of art is the result of a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet's perception, thoughts, and feeling Line(22).

The mimetic theory of literature as the explanation of art as essentially an imitation of an aspect of the universe was probably the most primitive aesthetic theory. The arts of painting, poetry, music, dancing, and sculpture, Socrates says are all imitations. Imitation is a relational term, signifying two items and some correspondence between the (Line8).

4. ANALYSIS

Close reading Whitman's *I Hear America Singing*, the writer sees that Whitman focuses his attention on the American people who echo democracy. Democracy in this poem is the freedom to think and act. The word "singing" as he stated in the following: "I hear America singing the varied carols I hear" (L,1), shows that the common people glorify the freedom to think and act when they do their work as a part of the spirit of democracy. The mechanics, carpenter, mason, boatman, shoemaker, woodcutters, ploughboy, mother, young wife, and girl all represented

common people and their work.

Walt Whitman reflects the common people's happiness and satisfaction through his work *I Hear America Singing*. He hears a bunch of different carols from American people who have gained success in every field of work. The American people are represented by mechanics, carpenters, shoemakers, boatman, wood-cutter, ploughboys, mother, young wife, and girl. Each of them has a different way of expressing their emotion and feeling as stated in the following lines:

I hear America singing the varied carols I hear, Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong, (Lines,1-3).

The mechanics show their feeling of happiness and satisfaction in doing their job. They put the best forward by their ability and capability in producing machine, such as the locomotive for railways in Stockton and Darlington at 1825 (Black, 152). The achievement proves that there is freedom inside, freedom to think and act makes them more motivated and forceful. These senses push those works creatively and productively as reflected in the phrase "as it should be blithe and strong" (Lines 1,2).

Whitman proves that the "shoemaker and batter" as common people pleased them reach on their work. They glorify in what they have done. Whatever the work they do, they enjoy it because of freedom.

The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work, (Lines5-6)

The lines pointed that "mason" contents with his work, and whatever the situation around them, they keep great with their achievement. Whatever the work they choose, they have a chance to make full use. It implies that there is freedom in their activity.

The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing in the steamboat deck,(Lines 7-8).

Walt Whitman shows clearly the boatman has a good feeling in his activity, the same as the deckhand who respects his work. This line also describes the boatman and the deckhand's desire, hopes, and purpose in their work. When they have a chance to bring into reality what they expected, they will optimize the work. These things bring satisfaction and happiness to their life.

American history proves that when the freedom to think and act fully goes on by the boatman and the deckhand, they can set progress in transportation as indicated by the word "steamboat" (1,5). Water transportation is important for America because it increases economic growth through commercial agriculture and mechanized industry. Blakes states, "Transportation was the necessary condition to improve every step of national progress, and as transportation

improved and commerce grew, the inevitable result was the growth of cities (143).

The “steamboat” (1,5) proved most useful than other transportation because carried cargo from one seaport to another and every river and like that would float a boat (Blake, 148).

The boatman and the deckhand as the American common people prove their achievement and feel satisfied in the work because they are to think and act and also have the right and responsibility to take part in the growth of the American economy. For this purpose, they try to do their best to work hard as seen in the phrases “singing what belongs to him in his boat” and “singing on the steamboat deck”.

The wood-cutter’s song, the ploughboy’s on his way in the morning or at noon intermission or at sundown, (Lines11-12)

This line shows that the “wood-cutter and ploughboy enjoy their good work. They work hard every day and take a rest only at intermission. The line proves that freedom makes the common people work productively.

The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing, (Lines13-14)

The above lines show that the mother, young wife, and girl are females who are pleased with their work. They feel satisfied with what they have done as reflected “singing of the mother, the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing”(Lines 13-14). It means that women have equal competence with men as well as responsibility in raising America.

Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else, (Line15).

The word “each” (9) still refers to the common people mentioned before. The confirmation about the common people who feel satisfied within reach in their work is reflected with the word ‘singing what belongs to him or her and to none else’.

The day what belongs to the day at night the party young fellow, robust, friendly, (16-17).

The common people as the workers, work hard every day, and they have a rest at night, as stated “ The day what belongs to the day at night” (line 10). The common people also have the same right to be equal with the noblemen and the educated, as stated in the Declaration of Independence:” all men are created equal, we are endowed by our creator with the certain unalienable right that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (Hall & Klinger, 63). Those people are represented by “young fellows, robust and friendly” (1,11). Without the common people, all of them cannot bring America to reach its purpose. The people are also equal to get the opportunity to develop personal skills and interests, they are free in doing or creating their work as a part of their activities.

In the last line of the poem, *I Hear America Singing*, the poet affirms that the common people fully have well on their work and praise democracy including the right to act, be pleased, and also to speak as their hope for liberty:

Singing with open mouths their strong melodious song (Line18).

Whitman used the word “singing” which appears in every line of the poem indicating the American spirit of democracy; freedom to think and act to their work, through this, they are pleased in every field of work, in other words, each individual should have the maximum opportunity to select his/her own purposes in life and to choose any means to accomplish those purposes.

5. CONCLUSION

The word “singing” in every line of the poem shows the spirit of democracy. As a democratic poet, Walt Whitman wants to lift up the dignity of common people, each of them honors the freedom to think and act. From this spirit of democracy, they have the opportunity to develop their life.

Whitman proves through freedom to think and act, the common people are able to participate to build up the nation by creating machinery, steamboat, railway, and others.

These facts show that common people also have the competence to lead America to reach the super nation.

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