Walt Whitman: Builder for America Short Guide

Walt Whitman: Builder for America by Babette Deutsch

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Overview

Ernest Hemingway maintained that American literature began with Huckleberry Finn, but if he had narrowed the category to American poetry, he would have had to acknowledge the primacy of Walt Whitman. "It was you that broke the new wood," Ezra Pound once said in grudging acknowledgment of a poet he disliked but whose extraordinary originality he recognized. While some excellent poetry had been written in the United States before Whitman's publication of Leaves of Grass on July 4, 1855, it was essentially British in form, style, and diction. Whitman pointed this out in a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1856, when he declared that "old forms, majestic and proper in their own lands here in this land are exiles," and set for himself the epic task of creating a body of poetry that would capture the spirit, values, and character of a still newly emerging nation.

To do this, Whitman attempted to locate and employ the poetic qualities of ordinary American conversation, a goal in agreement with Henry David Thoreau's contention that "poetry is nothing but healthy speech." Whitman created an open stanza that expanded the possibilities of conventional metric organization, and he developed a long, flowing line that established rhythms beyond the limits of rhyme and standard meter. He used a particularly American vocabulary that led to the formation of an American "voice," eliminating the gulf between a poetic performance and an audience that had to be "educated" to appreciate the poet's song. He understood the power of poetry as sound, connecting his work directly to the vitality of an oral tradition that tapped an energy long lost to a printdominated literary culture.

But Whitman was more than just a strikingly original poet. Even before the publication of Leaves of Grass, he had begun to think of himself as an artist who could express the full range and vitality of American cultural and political experience. This visionary ambition became his operating principle at a time when European models in the arts were still dominant in the United States, and it enabled him to claim artistic equality for the American experience. He saw his poetry as releasing and directing the forces latent in an untapped national consciousness. Because he believed that the ordinary citizen of the republic had an open, easy, accepting, and generous character unspoiled by artistic pretensions, he described and wrote for the "common man" and believed his poetry demonstrated that this commonality was the basis for heroic individuality. In a direct challenge to the vestiges of puritanism in American social life, he extolled the senses and praised the physicality of experience, believing as Emerson did that human beings were a part of the natural world and that nature was an example of God's bounty. At a time when the issue of slavery threatened to dissolve the Union, Whitman tried to show what was most valuable in American democracy.

His mighty image of a confident, openhearted, and great-spirited human on the threshold of an open road leading outward to the entire "kosmos" (as he spelled it) still stands as an emblem of what is most inspiring in American life.

About the Author

Babette Deutsch was born in New York on September 22, 1895, and lived there most of her life. She graduated from Barnard College with a bachelor's degree in 1917, and published her first volume of poetry, Banners, in 1919, beginning a literary career that continued for more than half a century. In 1921, she married Avraham Yarmolinsky, a scholar of European literature. She collaborated with Yarmolinsky on translations and anthologies of Russian and German authors.

Their partnership started with a translation of Alexander Blok's The Twelve in 1920, and continued with two anthologies, Modem Russian Poetry (1921) and Contemporary German Poetry (1923), and a translation of K. Chukovsky's Crocodile (1931). At the same time, Deutsch was establishing a reputation as a poet, publishing Honey Out of the Rock (1925), Fire for the Night (1930), Tales of Faraway Folk, 1952 (with Avraham Yarmolinsky) More Tales of Faraway Folk, 1963 (with Avraham Yarmolinsky) I Often Wish, 1966 and Epistle for Prometheus (1930).

During the 1930s she worked as a critic and an editor, and in 1933 she became a lecturer at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Her poetry was neither experimental nor accomplished enough to elevate her into the first rank of American poets, but the professional qualities of her work were universally admired, moving Marianne Moore to note the "depth, range, straightness" that contributed to her "commanding stature as a poet." In addition to her poetry, Deutsch's studies Potable Gold: Some Notes on Poetry and This Age (1929) and This Modem Poetry (1935) established her as a widely respected critic. The novels A Brittle Heaven (1926), In Such a Night (1927), and Mask of Silenus: A Novel about Socrates (1933) demonstrated her ability to write in a variety of literary forms.

Deutsch continued to collaborate with Yarmolinsky during the 1930s, assisting him in editing a 1936 edition of Alexander Pushkin's works. As World War II drew closer, public interest about other nations was growing in the United States, spurring her to write her first book for young people, a version of the Finnish national saga called Heroes of the Kalevala. Her wide knowledge of poetry provided the background for a book on Walt Whitman for young readers.

Deutsch translated Rainer Maria Rilke's Poems from the Book of Hours in 1941, and became a lecturer on poetry at Columbia University in 1944, a position she held until 1971. She and Yarmolinsky translated Alexander Pushkin's Eugene Onegin (1943) and collaborated on an edition of Shakespeare, The Reader's Shakespeare, designed for young readers. During the 1950s, she and Yarmolinsky adapted a collection of folktales called Tales of Faraway Folk (1952), which was followed by a similar collection for young people in 1963. She was an honorary consultant at the Library of Congress from 1960 to 1966, and served in several national literary organizations during the 1960s. Her Coming of Age: New and Selected Poems (1959) was combined in some reviews with Robert Lowell's Life Studies, an indication of how seriously her work was taken.

When she published her Collected Poems: 1919-1962 (1963), critical response suggested that her work was an important, if not major, element in the American poetic tradition. The final volume of her work, The Collected Poems of Babette Deutsch, was published in 1969, shortly after her single volume of poems for younger readers, I Often Wish. She died in New York on November 13, 1982, seven years after the death of her husband.

Setting

Born in 1819, Walt Whitman lived until 1892, witnessing during the course of his life the progression of nineteenth-century American history and helping to define the timeless elements of American culture through his poetry. Because Whitman was a poet deeply sensitive to his environment and often inspired by a striking image of the city, the sea, or some region of rural America, Deutsch frequently pauses in the narrative to focus on particular places that influenced his poetry. She shows him as a very young child among the crops and animals on a farm in Long Island, and then shows him, at age five, moving to the city, where the crowds, wagons, factories, and warehouses of the growing metropolis fascinate him.

As his family moves from one home in Brooklyn Heights to another, the names of the streets themselves evoke the flavor of the history of the old city. Whitman learns to appreciate the tremendous variety of urban life, and when he spends summers on Paumanok (the old Native American name for Long Island), Deutsch presents the landscape as a field for sensory experience. As an apprentice journalist, Whitman begins to develop a sense of the magnitude of creation during long walks by the seashore.

Near the beginning of his career as a newspaperman, at age twenty-two, Whitman is interested in every facet of city life, and attends lectures and the theater whenever he can afford the time and admission. One of his favorite forms of recreation is to ride trams and ferries while seated next to the driver or pilot.

Deutsch shows Whitman absorbing the colors, sounds, and smells that will enter into the physical imagery of his poetry.

As a young person interested in the world beyond his native Northeast, Whitman begins to travel to other areas of the country. Deutsch indicates how each part of the country he visits adds to his increasingly epic conception of the United States. Travels to New Orleans, the Midwest, and then to Washington, D.C., during the Civil War, give Whitman a sense of the tremendous diversity of American life, which he praises in his writing as a source of national strength. In the later part of his life, although generally restricted by his declining health, Whitman visits Kansas, Colorado, Quebec, and New England, finding in each place something to excite him, either in the landscape or in the style and pattern of the lives of the people he meets. The summers Whitman spends on a farm near Camden, New Jersey, during his last years reunite him with details of the natural world through the cycles of seasonal growth and decay that he observes. When Whitman becomes unable to leave his home on Mickle Street very often, Deutsch draws the reader into his room to create the mood of his final days. The world of mid-nineteenthcentury America, which was always an important part of Whitman's poetry, is shown through his eyes and ideas.

Social Sensitivity

Casual references to "darkies" and "pickaninnies" early in the book indicate the unconscious use of racist language that even a sensitive and unprejudiced person might employ in Whitman's own time as well as in the 1940s without realizing the effects of such words. Most of the narrative, however, is quite sensitive to the evils of slavery and racial intolerance. A greater problem involves Whitman's sexual inclination. Even today there are some readers who are offended by Whitman's open celebrations of physical desires and feelings. Deutsch handles Whitman's sensually oriented poems tastefully, but generally avoids the issue. She has either decided to totally ignore any aspect of the poet's homosexual tendencies or else has completely accepted the story—regarded as historically accurate in the early twentieth-century—that Whitman's work was heavily influenced by a mysterious, unknown "beloved" who might have been secretly married to the poet or the mother of his children. Recent scholarship has not corroborated this tale, nor has it entirely discredited it. But to understand Whitman's poetry, it is crucial to realize that the type of love he expresses is not dependent on a response to any specific attraction. Rather, it is an encompassing ardor for what he admires in humanity: a predisposition to love and understand, to extend compassion and appreciation for all, including the unconventional and the unknown.

Literary Qualities

One of the strongest features of Deutsch's biography of Walt Whitman is its extensive selection of more than 100 pages of his poems "arranged so as to present his own life-story." This section of the book is followed by a chapter-by-chapter listing of the poems that correspond, in Deutsch's view, to particular periods in the poet's life. Even for a poet as open and personal as Whitman, to assume the direct autobiographical equivalence of poetry and the poet's life is questionable, but Deutsch's choices are certainly useful as a guide to correspondences between incident and art. She used the material on Whitman available in 1940 to try to tell the story of the poet's life and work, whenever possible, from the perspective of the subject himself. Deutsch often uses the rhythms and images of Whitman's own writing to try to convey the mood of his thinking. Frequently, she depicts Whitman's responses to an especially important aspect of his world by directly interjecting an appropriate line from his poetry. Although Deutsch occasionally takes this technique into the realm of speculation, she is rarely far from the essential outlines of Whitman's life.

The other prominent feature of her work is an attempt to explain how Whitman's singular style of composition developed. To do this, she attempts to locate its origins in specific moments of perception in the course of the poet's life. Some of her speculation is sound, such as her observation that the "rough music at the station, the shouts of the newsboys, the rich brogue of the Irishwomen peddling peaches" influenced Whitman in his creation of poetic language that expressed the varieties of interesting speech he heard around him. She notes that he began to experiment with "loose unrhymed cadences" and that he was interested in breaking down "the barriers between verse and prose." She also draws interesting conclusions from early notebook entries, interjecting parenthetical asides amid Whitman's assertions.

In some cases, Deutsch tends to oversimplify, claiming that Whitman "broke all the rules. For one thing, his lines did not rhyme. They were almost as formless as prose," a statement that ignores the long breath lines and intricate rhythms that Whitman orchestrated into new but hardly formless measures.

But for the most part, her main points— that nature served as a source of inspiration; that Whitman saw God in every object of creation and that this led him to embrace existence; that he took America as his ultimate subject and identified his destiny as a poet with his country's destiny; that he saw the "poet as prophet" of a new age—are helpful in understanding Whitman's poetry and some of the motivating factors behind its production.

Themes and Characters

Deutsch's goal in her biography of Whitman is to connect the important incidents of his life to the formation of his creative intelligence in order to explain how the poet acquired and developed his abilities as a writer. Opening the book with a description of his early life on a Long Island farm close to the sea, Deutsch introduces the members of Whitman's family as distinctive characters, each of whom affects the young boy in a crucial way. His maternal grandmother is a sea captain's daughter who likes to tell stories of seafaring men and their adventures; a great-grandmother (who died before he was born) still lives in family legends as a strong, independent woman; and his paternal grandmother is a Quaker who may have sparked Whitman's interest in that gentle, tolerant religion.

Whitman's father is a carpenter, large and rough-hewn, quick-tempered and hard-working but never particularly successful. When the family moves to Brooklyn so that Whitman's father can seek work in this rapidly expanding borough, Whitman is as captivated by the "swarming crowds" of New York City as he had been by the natural world he knew on the farm. The narrative, to this point, is organized around the accumulation of experience; as Whitman reaches his twenties and begins to work in the newspaper business, these early experiences are concentrated into the first stages of poetic expression.

Whitman's fascination with the multiplicity of city life forms the foundation of his belief in the great diversity of democratic life in America. At age twenty-seven he becomes the editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle; already sympathetic to the cause of the underdog, he is moved by speeches in support of women's rights and the rights of labor.

His political sympathies draw him to hear abolitionist speakers, and while he is still uncertain about his feelings on the abolition of slavery, he becomes convinced that the new states admitted to the Union must be free.

Deutsch suggests that by 1850 Whitman's earliest poems have begun to form in his mind. Moving from one newspaper job to another, Whitman makes entries in his notebooks that eventually grow into the poems of Leaves of Grass. Deutsch suggests that Whitman's driving ambition—to become the poet of the people—leads to his creation of a voice that is direct, simple, and clear, a voice that he thrusts upon an indifferent public in 1855. Leaves of Grass catches the ear of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the philosopher-king of American letters. Emerson responds to Whitman's gift copy of Leaves of Grass with his famous salutation to a poet "at the beginning of a great career."

Delighted with Emerson's compliment but stung by some very negative reviews, Whitman writes and publishes pseudonymous reviews to enlighten the world about his own talent. From this point on, Whitman's life is devoted to his writing and to the promotion of what he writes.

In 1860, just before the Civil War, two crucial events occur in Whitman's life.

He visits Emerson in Concord, Massachusetts, and then sees Abraham Lincoln—already a proto-heroic figure for him—in New York. When war breaks out and his brother enlists, Whitman's life reaches a turning, point; the poet travels to Washington, D.C., to care for wounded soldiers after his brother is injured in battle.

Whitman's effort as a "wound-dresser" and comforter for injured soldiers enables him to be both witness to and participant in a crucial event in his country's history, but it also wrecks his physical health. For the remainder of his life, he gradually declines in strength until he reaches the near-helplessness of his final days.

Whitman suffers a stroke in 1873 and spends the rest of his life struggling with sickness, poverty, and some public enmity. He continues to revise Leaves of Grass, publishing a centennial edition in 1876 and working toward a final edition. His stature as a poet and public figure increases toward the end of the century as the country rapidly expands and a strong nationalistic spirit arises.

Printers are able to rush a few copies of the last edition of Leaves of Grass into Whitman's hands just before he dies in March of 1892.

Topics for Discussion

1. Show how Whitman's boyhood on a farm on Long Island introduces him to the natural world. What other experiences in his life contribute to this interest?

2. Discuss Whitman's relationship to his immediate family. How do actions and decisions of other family members influence his work?

3. Whitman admires many people. Examine his attitude toward Abraham Lincoln, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Elias Hicks.

4. How does Whitman use the sea in his poetry?

5. What images of the city occur in Whitman's poetry?

6. What kind of a picture of America does Whitman develop from his travels throughout the United States?

7. Examine Whitman's career as a journalist. What effect does this career have on his poetic style?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Connect a particular poem to an incident in Whitman's life and show how Whitman used his experience as a foundation for poetic expression.

2. Examine Whitman's concept of democracy and show how he supported "democratic" virtues in his work.

3. Discuss Whitman's experiences in the Civil War and examine the poems that emerged from this aspect of his life.

4. Analyze any one of Whitman's poems in depth, or describe the major features of Whitman's poetic style in depth.

5. Trace the development of Whitman's reputation as a poet from the publication of Leaves of Grass until his death. Explain positive and negative responses to his work.

For Further Reference

Allen, Gay Wilson. The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman.

New York: New York University Press, 1967. The first critical biography to connect the poet's life to his work.

Comprehensive if not always penetrating.

Bedient, Calvin. "Walt Whitman." In Voices and Visions, edited by Helen Vendler. New York: Random House, 1987. An excellent, appreciative essay which places the poet and his work in the context of American poetry and thought.

Davenport, Guy. "Whitman." In The Geography of the Imagination.

Berkeley, CA: North Point Press, 1981.

An exceptionally imaginative and empathetic essay that captures the sensibility of the poet and sets it within the cultural context of Whitman's times.

Kaplan, Justin. Walt Whitman: A Life.

New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980.

Winner of a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award, this fine biography combines research with perceptive, revealing commentary.

Zweig, Paul. Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet. New York: Basic Books, 1984. Very thoroughly researched and well-organized coverage of the period in Whitman's life between his employment with the Brooklyn Daily Eagle and the first publication of Leaves of Grass.

Related Titles

Readers who enjoy Deutsch's discussions of Whitman's work might also be interested in reading her Poetry in Our Time: A Critical Survey of Poetry in the English-Speaking World, 1900-1960 (1963) or her Poetry Handbook: ADictionary of Terms (1974).

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