



**Ain Shams University**

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*The American Dream versus a Deferred Dream*

*America as Presented by Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes:*

*A Postcolonial Study*

AN M.A. THESIS

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جامعه عين شمس  
كلية الآداب  
قسم اللغة الانجليزية وآدابها

## الحلم الأمريكي في مواجهة الحلم المؤجل أمريكا كما صورها والت ويتمان ولانجستون هيوز دراسة ما بعد الاستعمار

رسالة ماجستير مقدمه من الطالبة  
نهلة رزق سند إبراهيم ليلة  
لقسم اللغة الانجليزية وآدابها بجامعة عين شمس  
كإحدى المتطلبات الجزئية لنيل درجه الماجستير في  
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## Chapter I

### ***Biographical and Socio-political Contexts of Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes***

To analyse a certain poet's works, critics refer back to the events in the poet's life and his/her ideological background which are sometimes reflected in his/her poetry. That is why Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the Russian poet, said that "A poet's autobiography is his poetry. Anything else is just a footnote." Hence, this chapter aims at exploring the biographical and socio-political contexts of Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes; the circumstances that shaped the respective ideologies evident in their poetry.

#### **1.1. Biographical and Socio-political Contexts of Walt Whitman:**

According to Killingsworth:

In light of Whitman's identification with America, the history out of which *Leaves of Grass* grew is best understood not as mere "background" for the poems, but as a context in which the text is deeply rooted. Better yet, history and culture were "influences" in the literal sense of something that "flows in" to the work, or (to use two of Whitman's favorite terms) "rivulets" that "infused" the poetry. (13)

Thus, Whitman's talent as a poet and his poems were chiselled by major aspects and events in his life and in American history.

Walter (Walt) Whitman was born on May 31, 1819 in West Hills, Long Island. He was the second child of Walter Whitman, Sr. (1789–1855) and Louisa Van Velsor Whitman (1795–1873). "His family consisted of his parents and seven siblings: his older brother, Jesse; his sisters, Mary and Hannah; Edward, the youngest; and three other brothers with patriotic names—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson." (Reynolds, "A Brief Biography" 19) This

sense of patriotism, inherited from his parents, became a prominent part of Whitman's personality and sprouted into a lot of Whitman's patriotic works later on. Whitman also inherited other important traits from his parents. According to Reynolds, Whitman "inherited from his father freethinking and democratic sympathies." (16) That is because his father was a Jeffersonian rationalist, who knew Thomas Paine in his youth and subscribed to the *Free Enquirer*; the radical journal edited by Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen. (18) He also stated that "Walt's mother...was a loving woman with a vivid imagination and a gift for storytelling" (16); traits that Whitman inherited and appeared in his poetry and short stories.

Moreover, the diversity amidst which Whitman spent his early years is what probably made tolerance and open-mindedness two of the major characteristics of his personality and works. When Whitman was born, Long Island was a blend of people, cultures and ideologies. On the one hand, the community consisted of the Indian tribes of hunters that settled there shortly after the ice age ended 10,000 years before. Those were followed by the first white settlers, who arrived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These consisted of the Dutch who came first and settled on the western half of the island, and the English who settled on the eastern half. On the other hand, there were a number of distinctive and influential religious organizations such as one of the oldest Presbyterian churches, one of the oldest Methodist societies, the Protestant Episcopal Church of America, an African-American Episcopal church, the first Catholic churches, Lutheran congregations, the first Jewish congregation and the Long Island Quakers. Of all the previously-mentioned religious organizations, the Quakers had the greatest religious influence on Whitman. That is because Naomi Van Velsor, Whitman's grandmother whom he loved and admired,

passed on to him a number of ideals. Those included the moral value of fraternity, democracy in church affairs and equal opportunity for the expression of religious ideas. These Quaker ideals are evident in the poet's works. (Oliver 4-6) Thus, Whitman once said that the basis of his poetry was "human fraternity, comradeship". (Brasas 83) Besides Quakerism, Walt was exposed to another liberating philosophy; namely **Deism**. This was a belief in the presence of a Supreme Creator who does not interfere in the universe. Frances Wright, who had feminist and freethinking views, was highly admired by Whitman. Her Deistic novel, *Ten Days in Athens*, was one of little Whitman's favourite books. His Deistic background resulted in his famous proclamation that his faith "was the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths—the greatest in his belief in God and everyday miracles, the least in his acceptance of any particular church or creed." (Reynolds 18)

According to Eiselein, Whitman did not benefit much by going to school, but his childhood encounters with the Marquis de Lafayette and Elias Hicks had great effects on Whitman's personality and way of thinking. At the age of six, Whitman met the Marquis de Lafayette, the Revolutionary War hero, at an Independence Day celebration. Lafayette held Whitman up, hugged him and kissed him before setting him back down to enjoy the celebration. This memory increased little Whitman's admiration for the young nation's heroes and his celebration of democratic independence. At the age of ten, he went with his parents to hear the Quaker minister Elias Hicks and was deeply moved by the minister's powerful eloquence that night. Decades later, Whitman still expressed his admiration for Hicks due to his support for unpopular convictions and his strong belief in individual divine inner light. ("Whitman's Life and Work" 12)

Whitman ended his formal education shortly after he had begun it in 1824 because his family was having financial difficulties. Thus, the 11-year-old boy left school in the summer of 1830 to work as an office boy in the James B. Clark & Son law firm. To compensate for Whitman's public education, Edward (the "Son" in the firm) gave Whitman a subscription to a large circulation library. That introduced Whitman to literary masterpieces such as *The Arabian Nights* and Walter Scott's novels, *Complete Poems* and Scott's three-volume *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. He also read James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. Luckily, through the books he read and the experience he gained by working at various jobs, Whitman could learn faster and more than he could have learned at school. Later, in 1831, Whitman was introduced to the world of journalism by working as a printing apprentice for the *Long Island Patriot* in Brooklyn. Between 1831 and 1859, Whitman worked mostly as a reporter or editor for 28 newspapers, and published about 3,000 articles or editorials in 80 different papers during his lifetime. However, he spent no more than two years and a half in each newspaper because in most cases he disagreed with the owners over political matters. (Oliver 8)

Whitman's career in journalism was a very enriching experience. It enhanced his career as a poet in two ways. On the one hand, it helped him publish his poetry either through the newspapers and magazines that he edited or through the publishers that he dealt with. On the other hand, it made him aware of the technical procedures of editing and printing books. According to Reynolds, it was an experience that "presaged his instinct to govern the printing of his poetry with a strong, controlling hand." ("A Brief Biography"19) In addition, Whitman's career in journalism introduced him to politics and helped him shape his own political views. Thus, he was introduced to the politics of the **Democratic Party** through his work



for the Democratic weekly *Long Island Patriot*, where he was trained under William Hartshorne; "a cheerfully sedate, elderly man who had personal reminiscences of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson." (Reynolds 19) Moreover, in 1832 Whitman was introduced to the politics of the **Whig Party**, which contrasted with the political viewpoint of the Democrats that he supported. That was through his work as a compositor for the *Long-Island Star*, a Whig weekly run by the vibrant Alden Spooner. From 1846 to early 1848, he became an editor in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, a leading newspaper of the Democratic Party. (19- 22) During that period, Whitman wrote more than 1,000 articles and editorials on topics like democracy and patriotism, local and national politics and politicians, the **U.S.-Mexican War** (1846–1848), economy, prison reform, labour and labour organizations, local newspapers and their editors as well as education and schools. (Oliver 11) Thus, Whitman's journalistic career led to his active involvement in the political and social issues of the day.

At that time, slavery was a controversial social and political issue that endangered the apparent unity and stability of the American society. The congressional debates over slavery, which started in 1850, reached their peak in 1854 with the passage of the **Kansas- Nebraska Act**. The Act cancelled the **Missouri Compromise** and allowed slavery in the western territories. (Reynolds "Politics and Poetry" 66) That led to animosities and divisions among the states as well as the political parties. According to Reynolds:

The early 1850s witnessed one of the most momentous phenomena in American political history: the collapse of the party system. The Whig Party, weak for years, broke up in 1854 as a result of sectional quarrels over slavery, and Whitman's Democratic Party became strife-ridden as well. (66)

Hence, the Democratic Party was divided into the Southern Democrats and the Northern Democrats. On the one hand, the Southern Democrats were for slave economy and a strong “state’s rights” position but against the growing tendency of the federal government to monopolize the laws and cancel the self-rule of individual states. On the other hand, although the Northern Democrats were for the state’s rights just like the Southern Democrats, they disapproved of slavery because slave economy threatened the integrity and the competitive power of northern labour. (Killingsworth 14) All those incidents made Whitman ponder over the institution of slavery. Despite the fact that he opposed the abolitionists because he believed they were extreme, he was an eager supporter of **David Wilmot's Proviso**. The Proviso was a proposal to make any western territory, acquired by the United States as a result of the **Mexican War**, free from slavery. (Reynolds "A Brief Biography"22) Moreover, at some point, he decided to leave the Democrats and join the **Free-Soil Party** to be consistent with his commitment to working-class politics in the North. (Killingsworth 14) Thus, he was chosen in August, 1849 as a representative of Brooklyn to attend the convention of the newly formed Free-Soil party. A month later, Whitman founded the *Brooklyn Freeman* newspaper to be the mouthpiece of the Free-Soil and to support their presidential candidate, Martin Van Buren. However, neither the *Brooklyn Freeman* nor the Free-Soil party lasted for long because Whitman's newspaper office was destroyed by fire while the Free-Soilers did not win the presidential elections in November, 1849. (Reynolds "A Brief Biography"23) In addition, the slavery crisis shook Whitman's belief in the governmental authority figures he had once respected, and induced his attack on them. He considered the presidencies of Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan a time of presidential incompetence because of their useless

compromises on the slavery issue. The period of the 1850s was also a time of profound class divisions. According to Reynolds, "Another alarming social phenomenon was the growing inequality between the rich and the poor. With the rise of market capitalism, class differences in America widened far more rapidly between 1825 and 1860 than either before or after this period." ("Politics and Poetry" 81) In addition, it was a decade when political corruption, which took the forms of vote-buying, wire pulling, graft, and patronage, reached its peak. (66) Besides the passage of the **Kansas-Nebraska Act**, the capture of fugitive slave **Anthony Burns** was another disillusioning event that shook Whitman's faith in the political status-quo. At that time, in a desperate trial to solve the slavery issue and to decrease the divisions among the states and the political parties resulting from it, the Congress passed the **Fugitive Slave Act** by which runaway slaves would be captured and tried without jury, and those who helped them would pay a fine or be imprisoned. Hence, like many other fugitive slaves, Anthony Burns was arrested in Boston, tried and delivered back to captivity in Virginia. Those events inspired Whitman's bitter poems "**Dough-Face Song**" and "**House of Friends**" as well as "**Resurgemus**" and "**A Boston Ballad**" that were integrated later on into *Leaves of Grass*. ("A Brief Biography" 24-26)

All those issues sparked Whitman's deep faith in self-empowerment, the individual, common people and in the power of populist poetry. This corresponded with the rise of new political movements such as **Anarchism** and **Know-Nothingism**, and the emerging **Republican Party**. However, unlike those individual movements, Whitman's strategies for renewal were far more broad-ranging. ("Politics and Poetry" 66, 67) According to Reynolds:

Into the vacuum created by the dissolution of the nation's political structure rushed Whitman's gargantuan "I," assimilating images from virtually every aspect of antebellum American culture in a poetic document of togetherness offered to a nation that seemed on the verge of unraveling. The healing of a divided nation, he had come to believe, could be best achieved through all-absorptive poetry. (67)

That was the point at which aspects of Whitman's biographical and socio-political contexts were blended, embodied, celebrated and sometimes questioned and critiqued in his first volume of poetry *Leaves of Grass* (1855). According to Oliver:

All of Whitman's previous experiences—on newspapers; in teaching; in a somewhat dysfunctional family; in contact with people of ideas and moral values, especially people like Emerson and Thoreau; with writing nearly 3,000 articles and editorials; even with writing a novel and 24 short stories, which were, by today's standards, pretty bad—all of this experience led to his thinking about, making notes for, and finally writing the first poems that would make their way into, and sometimes out from, *Leaves of Grass*. (12)

However, the reception of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* disappointed Whitman. It did not achieve high sales and was attacked for its free-verse style and its tackling of taboo issues such as the human body in general and sexual love in particular. However, Emerson praised Whitman for his difference from other American poets of the time, who abided by the standard patterns of rhyme and rhythm that were characteristic of British poetry. Thus, the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* was more popular and better read thanks to Emerson's praise. In addition, Emerson influenced Whitman profoundly. Hence, the importance of writing poetry that embodies the American identity along with many transcendentalist ideas were originally inspired by Emerson. Whitman thought of himself as the "nation's bard" and put that notion into action by writing typical American poems. (Oliver 12, 13)

Civil War broke out on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1861 with the Confederate forces' attack on Fort Sumter. On April 13<sup>th</sup>, Whitman was attending Verdi's *A Masked Ball* in New York City. He heard the news about the breaking of war while he was making his way to the Brooklyn ferry. (Mancuso 290) Whitman considered the Civil War

the spiritual and moral axis of his life and work. His first response to war was the “recruitment poems” such as “**Beat! Beat! Drums!**”:

Beat! beat! drums! blow! bugles! blow!  
Over the traffic of cities over the rumble of wheels in the streets;  
Are beds prepared for sleepers at night in the houses? no  
Sleepers must sleep in those beds,  
(Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* 419)

During the rest of the year 1862 he escaped to Long Island to avoid the ugliness of war. However, he was brought face to face with it when he read the misspelled name of his brother George on the list of New York soldiers wounded at the tragic battle of **Fredericksburg** published in the New York Herald. On December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1862, Whitman set off to the army camp in Falmouth, Virginia. When he reached there, he found that his brother was safe. However, the atrocities of war represented in the pile of amputated limbs, the wounded soldiers and the open graves made Whitman take the decision to stay. During his stay, he visited the wounded and dying soldiers, brought them refreshments, read the Bible to them, served them, wrote letters home on their behalf, stood by them during difficult medical treatments, and sometimes sat by their deathbed. He raised funds from friends and well-known public figures and used his own money to support his work. He even had relationships with some of the soldiers and expressed his love for them in letters. He found his dreams of a society rooted in “the dear love of comrades” come true. Although war “saved” Whitman on the spiritual level, it destroyed him on the physical level. He consumed all his energy in the hospital work to the extent that the military doctors began to worry about his health. During 1864, he returned to Brooklyn to recover from fatigue, and by the end of the war, he was totally devastated. Whitman dedicated his prose writing during war years to recording the atrocities of war, which he later collected in *Memoranda During the War* (1875)

and *Specimen Days and Collect* (1882) As for his war poetry, he collected it in *Drum-Taps* (1865). This collection was first published as an independent book. After the assassination of Lincoln, it was expanded with a “**Sequel**” in 1866, and eventually it was merged into *Leaves of Grass*. *Drum-Taps* as well as Herman Melville’s *Battle Pieces* are considered the best American war poetry. It is mainly composed of short poems marked by vivid imagery and an elegiac tone. The book also includes “**When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d**” and “**O Captain! My Captain!**”; two elegies on the death of Lincoln in April 1865. President Lincoln had a special place in Whitman’s poetry and played an important role in his understanding of America, so he was the centre of a lot of Whitman's poems. The poet admired "the rough-hewn look of the President, his western background, and his determination in the face of adversity."

Toward the end of the war in 1865, Whitman met Peter Doyle in Washington; he was a twenty-one-year-old streetcar driver and later a railroad man. Whitman and Doyle were constantly together until Whitman’s bad health made him leave Washington forever. Whitman had a paralytic stroke that destroyed his health after receiving the devastating news of his mother's death in 1873. He had to leave Washington and live in Camden with his brother George and his family. This separated him for some time from friends like Doyle and the O’Connors. Although he recovered gradually, he never regained his poetic inspiration or his physical strength. He bought a house of his own in Camden to spend his last days. However, Whitman continued to develop *Leaves of Grass* and reprinted new editions of it. As a prose writer, he wrote his two reflective essays “**Democracy**” and “**Personalism**” that were expanded into the 1871 volume *Democratic Vistas*. He also added *Memoranda During the War* to other deep reflections on nature, literature,

philosophy, and travel to produce the memoir *Specimen Days* (1882). After Whitman had a stroke, Doyle and Ellen O'Connor took turns in nursing him and accompanied him till he died on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 1892 at his home in Camden.

Thus, Whitman's being a country schoolteacher, a worker, a journalist, a companion to wounded soldiers during Civil War, and a poet who initiated historical change made him an active participant rather than a passive witness to the movements and events of his time. (Killingsworth 8 – 13)

## **1.2. Biographical and Socio-political Contexts of Langston Hughes:**

Just like Whitman, Langston Hughes's artistic character and literary works were the outcome of events in his life and in American history. James Langston Hughes was born to Carrie Langston Hughes and James Nathaniel Hughes on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1902 in Joplin, Missouri. By observing Hughes's family, one can understand a lot about his personality. He inherited his poetic and artistic talent from his mother who wrote poetry and delivered monologues in costume. Moreover, Hughes was as ambitious as his father, and both the father's and the son's dreams and ambitions were usually shattered by the racism of the American society and the governmental institutions. Thus, his father studied law by correspondence to improve his social and financial status, yet the all-white examining board refused to allow him to take the Oklahoma Territory bar examination. This made him move to Joplin with his wife in 1899. Nevertheless, in October 1903, he left the United States for Mexico due to poverty and being unable to support the eighteen-month-old Hughes. In Mexico, James Hughes could prosper and support his son, yet Carrie Hughes preferred to stay in the United States and had to move constantly to look for jobs taking little Langston with her from time to time. Thus, Hughes did not see his father until he travelled with his mother to Mexico to visit his father in 1908.