

# Sexuality Concerning Homosexual Standpoints in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"

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**Abstract** –*This literary study analyzes the poem "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman using formalistic theory and archetypal theory. This aims at finding the sexuality concerning homosexual standpoints in the text. This research uses the qualitative method of discourse analysis. The textual investigation is underpinned with related literature and studies. The study shows that the symbolic archetypes in Walt Whitman's poem are filled with emblems and motifs which are enamored and erogenous; the poetic images depict same-sex copulation and eroticism, the tone-diction transaction delineates the language of the homosexual individuals, and the symbolic transaction of the persona and the addressee embosoms essential affinity which then evokes poetic vision. It is also found out that the poem has symbolic signification regarding the human body part, nature, action, set, and color. The study, in addition, it shows kinaesthetic, tactile, and gustatory sensations. The investigation further unveils slang and vulgar diction which provokes an informal and amorous tone. Finally, the poem discloses a homosexual persona; its theme is addressed to gay men. In conclusion, it has been proven that Walt Whitman's poem reveals sexuality concerning homosexual standpoints of the symbolic archetype, poetic imagery, tone-diction connection, and symbolic transaction of the persona and the addressee. The result hedges to inform educators and literature major students concerning the practicability of analyzing the sexuality concerning homosexual standpoints in poetry. Also, the result of this qualitative research is hoped to give a noteworthy contribution to the critics and researchers in the field of literary and gender studies.*

**Keywords** –*Walt Whitman, sexuality, homosexual standpoints, poetry*

## INTRODUCTION

Poetry inculcates human principles and provides a placid disposition. It is a mirror wherein people can perceive their own reflection. It is, in addition, one of the genres in literature which refers to the formulation and utilization of imaginative terms to produce emotional responses [1]. These first-line words create aestheticism, truth, and sapience. It is the product of one's inward and outward experiences. Sherry and Schouten venture to say that poet collects perceptive data then transforms these into an imaginative text [2]. Literary individuals deem poetry as an arduous literary genre. It is because words are chosen heedfully to delineate poetic languages. The languages of poetry are suggestive, vivid, figurative, symbolic, and creative.

Poets often conceal their feelings and thoughts through their bardic technique. Critics recommend

that the newbies in crafting poetry should value more the showing of emotion than telling it explicitly. Out of the vague conception, the reader is expected to decode poetry imaginatively and metaphorically. It is because the signification is embedded in the text. More so, poets let their readers see, smell, taste, touch, and hear the world around them. Human senses, therefore, aid in yielding images. Bards further exploit symbolic archetypes in their poems. For them, things, places, and actions signify ideas. As such, the concept of the signifier-and-signified transaction is stressed out. The signifier is an image or object that represents underlying conception; whereas, signified is the meaning of the given symbol. Figurative languages are common in poetry. Muses secrete the genuine motif of the text through simile, metaphor, and hyperbole. Creativity depends on the style of versifiers. They have their own poetical signature. In

fact, the poetic style during the earlier epoch mainly adhered to the conciseness of meter and rhyme. Lyric poems were typical during primordial periods. Poets, however, indoctrinate themselves in a new form of writing. They discover free verse, a non-metrical and non-rhyming poem, out of their endeavor of searching for an innovative style of composing poetry. Although the free verse is an emerging type of poem, only a few kinds of research and reviews are made by critics and researchers about it. Their investigation mostly focuses on the structure and not on the behavioral, cultural, or psychological aspects like sexuality.

Among all the poems, "Song of Myself" is chosen because of its controversial and daring concepts. The prominence of the author is another reason for choosing this masterpiece. This poem is written by Walt Whitman, an eminent American poet who values liberation in writing. In fact, he is the father of free verse.

Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, in Long Island, New York. Lindeen infers that he is not only influenced by nature's beauty but also by his parents' political idealism in writing his poems [3]. He is best known for his anthology: *Leaves of Grass*. "Song of Myself" is one of the poems in this compilation. For some critics, sexuality regarding homosexual manifesto is evident in this poem. Until now, few sensual poems are scrutinized due to some restrictions. As such, this study aims to interpret Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" to add the existing literature about sexuality concerning homosexual standpoints.

To inspire literary individuals and to give a pellucid framework of understanding sexuality regarding homosexual standpoints are the reason why this study is regarded. The result of this literary investigation is hoped to give an integral contribution to the field of literary study. This will help educators and scholars in comprehending the essential concepts of this poem. Further, the result will serve as a reference in their reciprocated class discussion. Students will discover significant human values and cultural orientations by studying poetry. Interactive discussion can be enhanced by letting students share their experiences and insights [4]. Roebuck deduces that writing and understanding poetry can produce academic achievement for students [5]. It caters to a student's language comprehension. More so, this study can be supplemental information for critics, researchers, and enthusiasts in decoding Whitman's

poem. The result will inspire them in looking into works that focus on the theme of sexuality.

This study is supported by the formalistic theory and archetypal theory. Formalistic theory adheres to the structure of the text. Formalist critics are interested in the poetic elements: persona, addressee, theme, the figure of speech, syntax, tone, and diction. They follow the objective process and pursue a structural investigation to disclose the signification of certain masterpieces [6]. They are not on the contextual concepts, and thus they disregard the author's biography, history, and society. Moreover, the archetypal theory focuses on the symbolic archetypes. Unlike in formalism, archetypal critics look into a wider scope of scrutinizing symbols. Thamarana [7] contends that critics using this approach are fascinated by looking into the archetypal thematic element in a text. In a wider scope, this comprehensive study is assumed to be a guide for students and educators on how to use the aforesaid theories in analyzing the text. Furthermore, decoding Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" could propitiously instigate an investigation of other poetic masterpieces that deal with the sexuality concerning homosexual standpoints. Understanding his poem is one way of acquiring deeper insights into the role of homosexual individuals in society.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The related literature reviewed comprises essays, reviews, and books. Journals, theses, and dissertations are also used to support the main research objective and its sub-problems.

Walt Whitman is a notable bard whose anthology is complimented by literary individuals with his innovative writing technique [8]. *Leaves of Grass*, his anthology, is revised again and again over the year. Al-Nehar declares that Whitman writes for the ordinary people and makes his manly persona as the seeker for soul, eroticism, and democracy [9]. Prior to the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman has always been the subject of criticism and discussion. Whitman's collection, however, is reprehended by his portrayal of sexual habits and desires. The author wants to go beyond what is standard decorum in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In a textual analysis, Alexander points out that Whitman seeks poetic liberation and deems human sexuality as a significant conception in comprehending poetry [10].

Walt Whitman finds his own style in writing. In comprehensive qualitative research, Zoeller claims

that Whitman wants to showcase globally his anthology as an expression of intrepid self-governing conceit [11]. Miller declares that one of the products of his literary endeavour is "Song of Myself" [12]. In scholarly review, Loving asserts that the commonly mentioned abhorrent concept is linked and attributed to "Song of Myself" and other clusters poems [13].

In a thorough discourse analysis of Whitman's poem, Bromwich [14] suggests and declares that it is illogical to deem that "Song of Myself" is just a poem in search of sensations. Critics, on the other hand, argue about the poet's intention in this poem. Marsden affirms that literary individuals conceive this poem as either an emblem of amorous sensual attachment or philosophical truth that is linked to the audience [15]. On a related note, Luidens infers that some of the author's poems expose eroticism and vulgar language [8]. The poet's diction shows concepts of sexuality and homosexuality. Nevertheless, Whitman still employs symbolism which is embedded in the lines. Patel declares that Whitman's poem delineates archetypal symbols, imageries, and conceptions related and mirrored to the physical world [16]. His technique is equated to environmental variations. He does not mind how his poetry looks like. What is important to him, akin to nature, is the capacity to yield aesthetic products. Images are also evident in this poem. Kurraz concludes that the images of the natural forces and conditions disport the author's disrupted self [17]. Kinaesthetic and tactile images are present in Walt Whitman's poem. In the qualitative investigation of the select poems of Walt Whitman, Ruta-Canayong asserts that these images portray coitus and sexual gratification [18].

Hutchinson suggests that in order to decipher the symbols in the poems, one must read the entire anthology [19]. Ferber, on the other hand, affirms that there are numerous symbolic motifs found in poetry and it is more facile to collect related concepts than in fiction [20]. Carl Jung is the major proponent of archetypal criticism. He believes that conventional symbols are derived from the human psychological process [21].

These related literature and studies support the sub-problems of this literary research that delves into the sexuality concerning homosexual standpoints.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This literary study aims to investigate sexuality concerning homosexual standpoints in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." Specifically, it focuses on the symbolic archetype, poetic imagery, tone-

diction connection, and symbolic transaction of the persona and the addressee.

#### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study uses a qualitative method of discourse analysis. This method mainly concentrates on the text and not on the numerical data [22]. Aitken and Herman [23] venture to say that researcher is tasked to formulate hypotheses, collect relevant data, and interpret the collected information to draw conclusions. In this study, the text is decoded through formalistic criticism and archetypal criticism to reveal the answers to the sub-problems of the study. The main source of data is Whitman's "Song of Myself" which is found in his anthology, *Leaves of Grass*, and is published by the Rosing Digital Publications in 1855. The secondary sources are taken from online articles, reviews, essays, theses, dissertations, and journals related to the topics in the study.

This study is focused on the analysis of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" dealing with the symbolic archetypes, poetic imagery, tone-diction connection, and symbolic transaction of the persona and the addressee. This critical analysis follows the four fundamental analytical phases in order to arrive at the principal result: Phase one is on the analysis of symbolic archetypes; phase two is on the investigation of the poetic imagery, phase three is on the examination of tone-diction connection; and phase four is on the scrutiny of the symbolic transaction of the persona and the addressee. In order to reveal the answers to the sub-problems of the study, the researcher read the whole poem, gathers pertinent information, and analyzes the data thereafter. Through this research methodology, a guide on how the poem is investigated in the study is provided.

#### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

##### **(1). Symbolic Archetypes**

"Song of Myself," has these following symbolic archetypes: human body part, action, nature, set and color.

##### **A. Human Body Symbolic Archetypes**

The human body part symbol is evident in this line: "My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs" [24]. Cirlot contends that the heart signifies affection [21]. Blood represents carnal heat [25]-[26]. The persona describes the vital process of his body while deeming his lover. His consuming love commingles in the blood which gives impetus to his

heart. In section 5, the persona (other scholarly journals call it the narrator of the poem) experiences an intense point of sexual pleasure and desire [27]. Another human body symbol is an eye. Ferber [20] infers that eye embodies the benchmark of someone's cogitation and feeling as lucidly stated: "You shall not look through my eyes either, or take things from me" [24]. In this line, the persona declares to his male bedfellow that his presence is enough and there is no need for him to scrutinize his eyes to get emotional purport. In section 10, the persona meets a fugitive bondman. He is allured by the bondman's personal charm. This is unequivocal on his deed as placidly described in these lines: "And gave him a room that enter'd from my own, and gave him some coarse clean clothing,/And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,/And remember, putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles" [24]. The neck is another human body symbol. It emblemizes sexual receptivity [25]-[26]. The persona not only feels camaraderie with the male visitor but also sexual desire.

### **B. Action Symbolic Archetype**

The action symbol can be found in the succeeding sections. This action exhibits sensual attachment as stated in this line: "A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms" [24]. The kiss in this line symbolizes sexual relations. The persona displays his sensual craving for his lover. Further, the homoerotic linking of bodies as the persona ventures through the night-time is evident in section 21. Kolbe claims that they deem each other as a sensual lover [27]. Another action symbolic archetype is cited in the poem. Whitman writes in section 28, line 22: "You villain touch! What are you doing? My breath is tight in its throat" [24]. In this line, touch represents the sexual urge of his lover and thus evoking an erogenous situation. In fact, in the following sections, the persona equates himself as a wrangler who rides a stallion out of sexual excitement [9].

### **C. Nature Symbolic Archetype**

The poem has also nature symbols. In fact, Whitman is influenced and inspired by his genuine personal encounters with the physical world [9]. The first nature symbol is evident in this line: "The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun" [24]. The persona is excited and jubilant to wake up to run across the sun. Sun is a masculine symbol [25]-[26]. The persona, in other words, is electrified to arouse because of his male lover. Another nature symbol can be found in

section 5, line 6: "I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning" [24]. Ferber remarks that summer in this line symbolizes growing old or maturity [20]. The persona ponders his past life along with his lover while looking forward to their old age. In fact, there is allurements in the poem as described in this line: "At apple-peelings wanting kisses for all the red fruit I find" [24]. The apple personifies temptation and sensual affection [20]. The persona is tempted by his lover. The apple, therefore, becomes atotem of the persona's craving for sensual attachment.

Some lines of the poem depict the persona's freedom from self-awareness as illustrated: "And brought water and fill'd a tub for his sweated body and bruised feet" [24]. The persona meets a fugitive bondman and welcomes him into his house. He is not hesitant to show courtesy with the slave. He even helps him wipe his body with water. Cirlot asserts that water is a signification of the unconscious [21]. Out of the persona's desire of helping the slave, he becomes insensible of the things that might happen spitefully. Furthermore, the persona of this poem is an open-eyed man who perceives numerous things in the milieu. This is evident in these lines: "Blacksmiths with grimed and hairy chest environ the anvil/ Each has his main-sled, they are all out, there is a great heat in the fire" [24]. The "heat in the fire" evokes the burning emotion of the persona. Fire embodies sexual drive [21]. The persona is sexually attracted to the blacksmiths and the other individuals as described in this passage: "The lithe sheer of their waists plays even with their massive arms" [24]. The sensual attachment, however, is accompanied by bitterness in his life as demonstrated in this line: "Parting track'd by arriving, perpetual payment of perpetual loan/Rich showering rain, and recompense richer afterward" [24]. The persona unveils acrid emotion of manly attachment. Rain signifies distress [20]. The persona is dejected because his lover departs from the other place.

The animal symbol can be found in section 31, line 18: "In vain the snake slides through the creepers and logs" [24]. This line reflects the persona's emotional weakness. He equates himself with animals. Following the chart of conventional symbols, the snake emblemizes temptation and sexuality [25]-[26]. The persona's sexual desire is analogized with the serpent. Its movement shows a timid characteristic of not producing the desired result in his sexual life. The persona deems animals as significations of his desired relationship as stated in this line: "I think I

could turn and live with animals; they are so placid and self-contained" [24]. He observes the milieu and searches for a perfect animal that suits his love and found: "A gigantic beauty of a stallion, fresh and responsive to my caresses" [24]. The stallion is the persona's signification of his intense desires and instincts [21]. The succeeding sections evoke manly love. This manifests in this line: "At he-festivals, with blackguard gibes, ironical license, bull-dances, drinking, laughter" [24]. The bull is a masculine symbol [21]. This line, however, does not only evoke masculinity but also homosexuality. In fact, the term "bull-dances" refers to homosexual lovers doing sexual acts.

#### **D. Set and Colour Symbolic Archetype**

The bed, in addition, is a set symbol. This manifests in this line: "The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun" [24]. The bed is a representation of utilized marriage [25]-[26]. Whitman uses "marriage" to pertain relationships among people of the same sex. The persona is pleased and inspired to wake up because of his lover. The color symbol can be found in section 28, line 17: "They have left me helpless to a red marauder" [24]. Red, which describes the marauder, symbolizes emotion and excitement [21]. The marauder is the persona's emblem of his ardent lover.

### **(2) Poetic Imagery**

#### **A. Kinaesthetic Imagery and Tactile Imagery**

This poem contains kinaesthetic and tactile images. Kinaesthetic imagery is illustrated in these lines: "How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me, / And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stripe heart, / And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet" [24]. In these lines, sexual intercourse has been the activity of the persona. Tuten goes on elaborating that this section delineates sexual intercourse which is illustrated without ambiguity [28]. The persona is doing a sex act together with his male lover. Their sensual activity carries on as described in this line: "Unbuttoning my clothes, holding me by the bare waist" [24]. Moreover, Kolbe claims that the tactile imagery initiates as political tension and then progresses as a sensual externalization; this manifests in these lines: "The sentries desert every other part of me, / They have left me helpless to a red marauder...They desire

he should like them, touch them, speak to them, stay with them" [24].

#### **B. Gustatory Imagery**

Gustatory imagery is also accentuated in the succeeding sections as demonstrated in these lines: "At he-festivals, with blackguard gibes, ironical license, bull-dances, drinking, laughter, / At the cider-mill tasting the sweets of the brown mash, sucking the juice through a straw, / At apple-peelings wanting kisses for all the red fruit I find" [24]. These lines portray homosexual connotations. There are phrases in these lines which evoke sensual deed. The phrase "sucking the juice through a straw" educes oral sex. The straw signifies the male genitalia that is drawn into the mouth through suction by the persona's male partner for sexual pleasure.

### **(3) Diction-Tone Connection**

This poem has an informal diction and amorous tone. The informal diction is evident with its subjective locution as stated in these lines: "I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning, / How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me, / And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stripe heart" [24]. The utilization of pronoun "I" makes the poem informal. In fact, some scholarly articles describe the "I" in Whitman's poem as the chronicler which reflects his bearing as a poet in ecological diversity. On a related note, Kolbe asserts that the "I" in the poem as either a "Hero" or "Whitman" himself [27]. Another facet that adds to its informal diction is the utilization of contracted words like "turn'd." Terms are shortened rather than written completely. The usage of informal diction, on the other hand, makes the poem more realistic and communicative. In this light, Whitman ventilates himself liberally.

Whitman's words depict sexual connotation. This is evident with the harnessing of such words: love-blossoms, love-root, and to mention a few. This diction delineates sensual manifestations. Tuten concludes that the sex act resembles the author's vulgar diction in order to impart the physical orientation of the corporality of humankind [28].

Furthermore, the poem has a slang diction. This manifests in this line: "Pass death with the dying and birth with the new washe'd babe, and am not contain'd between my hat and boots" [24]. The "babe" in this poetic line is a slang term which means a person who is sexually attractive. This is also apparent

in this line: "At he-festivals, with blackguard gibes, ironical license, bull-dances, drinking, laughter" [24]. The "he-festivals" and "bull-dances" are slang phrases. In an online article "Homoerotic Writings," Nava [29] declares that "he-festivals" and "bull-dances" are 19th-century phrases that denote same-sex physical exertion. On a related note, Thomas points out that Whitman's idea about homosexual and amorous standpoint is taken from the trends during the middle 19<sup>th</sup> century [30]. Apprehending this prototype during this epoch is Whitman's way of emphasizing the homoerotic aspects as rational concepts of sensual craving.

This poem has a personal tone. The usage of the pronoun "I" makes this poem subjective. This poem also has a sexual tone. In fact, the author's concept of sexuality was taken from the past centuries concerning the representation of the sensual bodies of men [9]. Whitman expresses his feeling and attitude towards his writings. There are numerous lines that exhibit an amorous tone. Whitman [24] writes in section 28, lines 8-9: "Depriving me of my best as for a purpose, /Unbuttoning my clothes, holding me by the bare waist." The aforesaid lines show the persona's excessive interest in manly sex. The persona is excited to see his lover and wanted to perform a sex act. However, the poem does not only stress out sexual standpoints but also philosophical viewpoints. In a qualitative investigation, Schweda asserts that the tone gradually alters in a more predictive and homiletic aspect in the concluding part of the poem [31].

#### **(4) Symbolic transaction of the persona and the addressee**

Critics of Walt Whitman are still dubious about the genuine persona of this poem. It is because the poet does not only elucidate a single aspect. He is giving light about poetic democracy, human sexuality, and the universe. Welty [32] goes on elaborating that the persona of this poem is either a hero, binary self, versatile self, or cosmos. However, he infers that the cosmos is the befitting persona because it encloses the other remaining conceptions. Some scholarly articles suggest that the persona of this poem is a homosexual individual. He is attracted to other juvenile men as clearly described in this line: "The beards of young men glisten'd with wet/It ran from their longhair, little streams pass'd all over their bodies" [24]. This line dramatizes that the persona's hypersexual fantasies.

The persona of this poem embodies the queer community. In fact, the term gay or homosexuality is

coined in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Karolyn Maria Benkert, a German psychologist [33]. Whitman is an advocator of gender and sexuality. For him, these categories are rejected during this epoch. His daring rebellion on what is considered normative reflects in his poem. He expresses himself freely using poetic concepts.

His poem is addressed to gay men who seek homosexual rights. The author wants to interlink to his audience as manifested in these lines: "I celebrate myself/And what I assume you shall assume/For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" [24]. He addresses his audiences and prods them to agree on what he is patronizing. The "you" in the poem can be anyone: male or female. For Whitman, however, the reader is homosexual or queer. This poem further provides a poetic vision of self in relation to otherselves and the author's poetic attachment to the physical world. Whitman reminds his readers that people must be esteemed and must be given similar rights regardless of their gender.

#### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

By means of formalistic and archetypal approaches and techniques, the following findings are hereby summarized in response to the sub-problems of the study : (a) the human body part, nature, action, set, and color symbolic archetypes delineate sensual and homoerotic signification; (b) the poetic imagery evokes virile and sexual images that are produced by kinaesthetic, tactile, and gustatory sensations; (c) the tone-diction connection expresses the author's view of the text, thereby accentuating the phraseology, the emotion, and the sensual deeds of the homosexual persona;(d) the symbolic transaction of the persona and the addressee provokes the underlying idea of the poem. Based on the findings of this study, Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" reveals sexuality concerning homosexual standpoints of the symbolic archetype, poetic imagery, tone-diction connection, and symbolic transaction of the persona and the addressee. Significantly, the result provides deeper insights into Walt Whitman's sexuality as manifested in the homosexual concepts of his poem.

Based on the findings and the conclusion, it is therefore recommended that literary scholars and educators may look into the symbolic archetype of Walt Whitman's less known poems. More so, the literary enthusiast may scrutinize the poetic imagery of his notable patriotic poems. Further, literary researchers and critics should produce discourse

analysis on the tone-diction connection and symbolic transaction of the persona and the addresses in Whitman's select poems regarding body and soul. Finally, the findings of this study are used as a reference or supplemental information in an interactive discussion and in the literary investigation.

Furthermore, findings on this study are limited to the main problem and sub problems formulated by the author guided by the related scholarship and supported by the theories of literature. Future researchers are encouraged to search other poetic masterpieces that deal with the theme of sexuality and homosexuality using other literary approaches following the same method of analysis.

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