

“Adabiyateh jahan: Goft-o-gooyeh ekhtesasi ba Ken Price va Catererina Bernardini pajoohesh-garaneh asareh Whitman, malekul shoarayeh democracy” [“World Literature: Exclusive Interview with Ken Price and Caterina Bernardini, Scholars of the Works of Whitman, the King of the Poets of Democracy”]. *Etemad* [Tehran, Iran] (July 2, 2013).

- 1) In some anthologies we read about the “Whitmanic” elements. Would you please explain when we call a poet or poetry Whitmanic?

Whitman’s poetry is characterized by use of free verse, lengthy lines, and catalogues, among other features. He typically avoids rhyme and instead relies often on opening repetition (anaphora). Thematically, he emphasizes the beauty of nature, the dignity of ordinary people, and the sanctity of the body and sexuality. For Whitman, the sensuous quality of human experience is intermingled with spiritual or religious (though not doctrinal) sentiment. His poetry celebrates democracy and encompasses a diverse range of people.

- 2) If we use a stylistic approach to read Whitman’s poems, can we categorize his poetry under a significant given style?

By using the stylistic devices mentioned above, Whitman consciously breaks away from traditional forms and from the dominance of the iambic pentameter of the British literary tradition. He writes: “Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!” Whitman strives to create a distinctive poetry suited for an American national tradition: a modern epic based on a collective lyrical “I”. “Song of Myself,” perhaps his most famous poem, can be regarded as an exploration of the complexity of his own personal identity and experience. Yet while the poem is personal it also about “you,” the reader, and about all human beings: “for what I assume, you shall assume.” Whitman’s “I,” in other words, is large and expansive. His personal epic is quite different in approach from classical epics, with their depiction of external, heroic episodes. Other notable features of Whitman’s work are his poetics of revision, as testified by the existence of six different editions of *Leaves of Grass*, and the use of a highly experimental language which mixes colloquial and slang expressions with erudite terms, and words borrowed from foreign languages.

- 3) We know that he believed there was a vital, symbiotic relationship between the poet and society. Is this the basis of his poetic theory?

In the Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman wrote: “the proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.” He in fact believed that a great poet would be embraced by readers, but this was a miscalculation, on his part: he did not find a large and enthusiastic audience, at the beginning of his poetic career, and only gradually did the value of his work come to be vindicated. Whitman’s poetry directly addresses, questions, and stimulates his readers; it is based on the belief that the vitality of the literary creation is crucially dependent on readers. For Whitman, poetry was the most effective means to articulate a democratic vision through a non-hierarchical formal style which could defy conventions and taboos and embody a diverse and pluralistic society.

- 4) Walt Whitman has been claimed as America’s first “poet of democracy.” Why?

Other American authors had written about democracy before, but they did not imbibe the democratic spirit as fully as did Whitman. He also specifically devoted a long essay to democracy, *Democratic Vistas* (1871), which deals with the shortcomings of American democracy, its potential and prospects, and the way writers can help consolidate democracy.

- 5) Which poets are his followers & which characteristics of his poetry are still useful in American poetry?

Ed Folsom, Jim Perlman and Dan Campion, the editors of *Walt Whitman: the Measure of His Song* (1998), have shown that almost every American poet has felt the need to revise, extend, counter, argue with, or otherwise talk back to Whitman. Some poets, like Ezra Pound or Allen Ginsberg, were more explicit than others such as T.S. Eliot. Whitman continues to be invoked by contemporary poets such as Natasha Trethewey, the current poet laureate of the United States. Whitman's poetry lives on internationally, too, and has entered into dialogue with the works of poets from numerous countries. His poetry remains vital because of its vigorous attempt to capture the complexity and beauty of life. It can still be surprisingly fresh for its genuine candor and tenderness, and for its capacity to establish intimacy with readers, and this latter characteristic arguably constitutes the most obvious reason for the variety of responses to Whitman’s poetry by writers who belong to different literary traditions and historical moments.

- 6) Mary Smith Whitall Costelloe wrote: “You cannot really understand America without Walt Whitman, without *Leaves of Grass*.” Do you confirm this matter? Why?

The poet Ezra Pound once wrote that Whitman “is America.” Whitman had a strong faith in the fact that his work could embody his vision of “America” and could make it come

true. Perhaps it could be said, then, that one could not really understand the work of Walt Whitman without trying to grasp his idea of “America” and the cultural, political, historical and geographical context in which this idea took shape.