

Repetition in Walt Whitman's "A Passage to India"



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Poetry is the rhythmical creation of beauty in words.

Edgar Allan Poe

The language of Poetry is specifically melodious and extraordinary. In it every component, word and word order, sound and pause, image and echo is significant, significant in that it always means more. Its elements are figures and tropes in which each component can open new meanings, connotations, dimensions and resonances. No word is idle or accidental. Each word has a specific place within an overarching pattern. All the elements together create meaningful and beautiful designs.¹

Repetition (from Latin "repetitio") of a sound, syllable, word, phrase, line, stanza or metrical pattern is a basic unifying device in all poetry. Repetition aims at logical emphasis, an emphasis necessary to fix the attention of the reader on the key word of the utterance. The primary function of repetition is the intensification of the utterance which is the direct outcome of the use of expressive means employed in ordinary intercourse. When used in outer compositional patterns, the immediate emotional charge is greatly suppressed and is replaced by a purely aesthetic aim. This aim is especially evident in poetry, including Walt Whitman's poetry.²

The American author Walt Whitman changed the course of poetry. Generally recognized as the father of free verse, he liberated poetry from rhyme and meter, opening it up to the flexible rhythms of feeling and voice.³ His verse is a strong sense of inclusion, excitement, and invitation. It intends to initiate each individual into possibilities of poetic creation (Wolosky 2001). And his own poetic creations include many different kinds of repetition all of which play a key role, particularly in his praise.

Alliteration is a repetition of the same consonant at the beginning of neighboring words or accented syllables (Mostkova 1967). Alliteration may also be carried beyond the limits of a single line and may even operate in elaborate patterns throughout a poem as a counterpoint to other relationships indicated by different sorts of repetition, such as rhyme, metrical pattern, and assonance.⁴ Whitman uses alliteration as a tool when describing different phenomena: human suffering, description of war and beauty of nature.

Whitman's poem "A passage to India" is a typical example of good repetition. When the Suez Canal opened in 1869, Whitman wrote this poem as a reason for celebration.

*Not you alone, proud truths of the world,
 Nor you alone, ye facts of modern science,
 But myths and fables of eld, Asia's, Africa's fables,
 The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams,
 The deep diving bibles and legends,
 The daring plots of the poets, the elder religions;
 O you temples fairer than lilies, pour'd over by the rising sun!
 O you fables, spurning the known, eluding the hold of the known, mount-
 ing to heaven!
 You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd with gold!
 Towers of fables immortal, fashion'd from mortal dreams!
 You too I welcome, and fully, the same as the rest!
 You too with joy I sing.
 Passage to India!
 Lo, soul! seest thou not God's purpose from the first?
 The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,
 The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,
 The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,
 The lands to be welded together.
 A worship new I sing,
 You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours,
 You engineers, you architects, machinists, yours,
 You, not for trade or transportation only,
 But in God's name, and for thy sake, O soul.*

The poem is full of different kinds of repetition which are used in different functions. The lines greatly vary in length, with each one determined as a single sentence. Each sentence has its unique syllabic form and is independent. But all the lines together become a complete idea directed to humanity and God. The author's poetic voice is evident in each line, stanza.⁵ Alliteration is expressed in the accumulation of consonants (d,p,b) for a certain aim; to add emphasis to the celebration. Whitman doesn't put racial discrimination between nations and this is obviously relevant in his praise.

*But myths and **fables** of eld, Asia's, Africa's **fables**,
 The far-darting **beams** of the spirit, the unloos'd **dreams**,
 The **deep diving bibles** and legends,
 The **daring plots** of the **poets**, the elder religions*

Whitman rejects most traditional poetic norms. The lines⁶ vary in length but are held together both rhythmically and through sound repetition. These lines are further bound together through alliteration, the heavy repetition of sounds, not by rhyming, but grouping together words that begin with the same letter. Whitman intentionally uses alliteration to imply his unique style. The use of alliteration serves multiple functions in main-

taining poetic quality. On the one hand it shapes his poetry by repeating constant sounds, on the other hand it gives rhythm to the poem. Whitman's style encompasses repetition to improve the quality of his poetry. He dreams about a new era that would be peaceful.

Thus, the speaker announces:

***You** captains, voyagers, explorers, **yours!**
You engineers! **you** architects, machinists, **yours!**
You, not for trade or transportation only,
 but in God's name, and for thy sake, O soul.
The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams,
The deep diving bibles and legends,
The daring plots of the poets, the elder religions;*

In the lines beginning with *you* we come across the use of a specific, anaphoric repetition. Anaphora is a literary device which employs the repetition of a first word in each phrase. Here each line begins with *you*. Whitman uses anaphora to mimic biblical syntax and gives his work a weighty, epic feeling. The anaphora expressed by the personal pronoun *you* emphasizes each man's individuality and applies to every one in one's own way. Each line ends with *yours* which apparently strengthens the meaning of the utterance. There is anaphora in the last three lines as well. Besides *you* we have the repetition of the definite article *the* emphasizing the meanings of the given words.

Generally in Whitman's poetry anaphora is expressed mainly by personal pronouns *I, you, we*. These are the author's key words which mark his and the readers' presence through the whole poem. The usage of different kinds of anaphora (expressed by personal pronouns, by definite articles, etc) realizes different functions in his praise – on the one hand it deepens the author's ideas, on the other hand it gives structure to the poem.

Whitman's verse form is shaped by social context and social purpose which is typical of the writing of mid-nineteenth-century America. The poet consciously set out to redefine the relation between poet and the reader and ultimately the audience that poetry would address. The poet-audience relationship is deeply reflected in his poem.

Another thing that strikes the eye of the reader in the poem is the dominant use of the letter *s*. The sound is not used at random, it aims at a deliberate and intentional purpose and plays an important role in the rhythmical organization of the poem. Concentrating our attention on the nouns given in the poem (*truths, facts, fables, beams, dreams, bibles, legends, plots, poets, religions, temples, lilies, towers, roses, races, neighbours, oceans, lands, captains, voyagers, explorers, engineers, architects, machinist*) we notice that almost all of them are used in plural. Generally in English grammar the sound *s* is used to formulate the plural form but in Whitman's praise, besides this, the formation of the plural has acquired a symbolic value. It has become the author's appeal – an appeal for unity and solidarity among all nations. Here the concept of equality and the author's devotion to all peoples and God becomes the vital call of the poem. This basic idea of his governs the concept and form of the poem.

There are other kinds of repetitions in the poem worthy of notice. Whitman has

applied to the repetition of syntactic patterns which are used to strengthen the structure and bind the poem together.

*Not you alone, proud truths of the world,
Nor you alone, ye facts of modern science...*

*O you temples fairer than lilies, pour'd over by the rising sun!
O you fables, spurning the known, eluding the hold of the known, mounting to heaven...*

This grammatical pattern creates an energy that is endlessly creative and open.

This kind of structure is very typical of Whitman's style. Another interesting thing that strikes the attention of the reader is the repetition of the *ing* form.

*The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams,
The deep diving bibles and legends,
The daring plots of the poets, the elder religion;
O you temples fairer than lilies, pour'd over by the rising sun!
O you fables, spurning the known, eluding the hold of the known, mounting to heaven!
You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd with gold!
Towers of fables immortal, fashion'd from mortal dreams!*

The poet's view of the world is dominated by its change and fluidity, and this accounts for his frequent use of *ing* form which is an apparent proof of his criterion. Inner rhyme (*darting – diving – daring – rising – spurning – eluding – mounting – dazzling*) contributes not only to the rhythmical effect but gives additional emotional nuances as well.

Thus, repetition with its different kinds and functions plays an important role in the poem. Whitman has intentionally used it to achieve his purposes. As a brilliant master able to create an emotive atmosphere where the reader is greatly impressed, he well realizes the power of repetition.

Whitman's vocabulary is usually vigorous and often startling. Many of his unusual words surprise the reader by their very simplicity. These are not long and learned words but sturdy ones that reflect his interest in life's simple pursuits. Whitman's style remains consistent throughout, however. The poetic structures reflect his democratic ideas. Whitman hopes to give his readers a sympathetic experience. He often uses obscure, foreign, or invented words. Whitman largely avoids rhyme schemes and other traditional poetic devices. He does, however, use meter in masterful and innovative ways, often to mimic natural speech. In these ways he demonstrates that he has mastered traditional poetry but is no longer subservient to it.

Notes:

1. In poetry there are multiple reasons for choosing and placing words. There is not one single pattern in a poem but rather a multiplicity of patterns all of which ideally interlock in wider and larger designs (Wolosky 2001).
2. See Gasparian S.K, Matevosian A.I. *English Style In Action* (2008) Yerevan: Lusakn.
3. Free verse poetry, rhymed or unrhymed is composed without attention to conventional rules of meter. Free verse was first written and labeled “free verse” (“vers libre”) by a group of 19th century French poets. Their purpose was to deliver French poetry from the restrictions of formal metrical patterns and to re-create instead the free rhythms of natural speech. They wrote lines of varying length and cadence, usually not rhymed. The emotional content or meaning of the work was expressed through its rhythm. Free verse has been characteristic of the work of many modern American poets including Walt Whitman.
(<http://sandyshorespoetry.tripod.com/id22.htm>)
4. The latter is repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds, especially in stressed syllables, with changes in the intervening consonants, as in the phrase *tilting at windmills*.
5. Poetic voice is often assumed, in the lyric, to mean the voice of the poet. It is rather a pure, single or personal voice and can be complex with a range of different representations, different viewpoints for a variety of purposes. It also involves diction which can help define a poem’s speaker, whether in the role of the author or the characters who may be quoted or introduced as other speakers in the text, almost in the mode of reported or represented speech. The complexity of poetic voice is most obvious in poems that are quite explicitly structured through a speaker who is not the poet. In such a poem, the speaker is specifically defined or presented as an invented character and is often presented as if speaking to an invented addressee. This form is called a dramatic monologue, a poem which seems to be a speech taken from some dramatic encounter between an imagined character and the one addressed (Wolosky 2001).
6. Poetry is often separated into lines on a page. These lines may be based on the number of metrical feet, or may emphasize a rhyming pattern at the ends of lines. Lines may serve other functions, particularly where the poem is not written in a formal metrical pattern. Lines can separate, compare or contrast thoughts expressed in different units, or can highlight a change in tone. Lines of poems are often organized into stanzas, which are denominated by the number of lines included. These lines may or may not relate to each other by rhyme or rhythm (Wikipedia).

References:

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8. Wolosky, Sh. (2001) *The Art of Poetry*. USA: Oxford University Press.

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**Կրկնությունը Ուոլթ Ուիթմենի “A Passage to India”
բանաստեղծությունում**

Սույն հոդվածում ուսումնասիրության նյութ է դարձել կրկնություն ոճական հնարը, որը Ուիթմենի պոեզիայում առանցքային նշանակություն ունի: Այն նպաստում է ոչ միայն ռիթմի ու ներդաշնակության դրսևորմանը, այլև արտահայտում է ավելի բարձր բարոյական արժեքներ՝ իմաստություն, բարոյախոսություն, մարդկային ամենատարբեր հոգեվիճակներ ու տրամադրություններ: Ուիթմենի պոեզիայում կրկնությունը իր լայն դրսևորումներով, բացառիկ յուրահատկությունն է, առանց որի անհնար է պատկերացնել Ուիթմեն բանաստեղծին իր շքեղ խոսքարվեստով: Անտարակույս, նրա պոեզիան կրկնության արվեստի բարձրակետն է: