

Whitman's Poetic Expression of Sex— A Textual Interpretation of *Leaves of Grass*

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Abstract: *Walt Whitman's poetic expression of sex in Leaves of Grass breaks through the ideological constraints of the 19th century, demonstrating a pioneering sexual perspective and profound humanistic connotations. With "omnisexual vision" as its core, this expression covers four basic forms of human sexual development: egomania, heterosexuality, homosexuality, and universal love. It constructs a unique sexual poetics through the dialectical unity of body and soul, the harmonious coexistence of sex and nature, and the spiritual integration of sex and democracy. While fiercely attacked by the conservative thoughts of the Victorian era, this expression has been recognized by later generations as a pioneering work of modern sexual writing. Its sincere eulogy of sex and awareness of equality not only enriches the artistic dimension of American poetry but also establishes Whitman's dual status in the development of world sexology and literary innovation.*

Keywords: *Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, Poetic expression of sex, Omnisexual vision, Democratic spirit*

1. Introduction

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) is a landmark poet in the history of American literature, hailed as "the poet laureate of American democratic spirit." His works completely break the constraints of traditional poetic meter, establish a unique free verse system, and exert a profound influence on the development of both Eastern and Western literature in later generations. Whitman had a rich and diverse life experience. He did not receive a systematic higher education and engaged in various occupations in his early years, such as printer, journalist, teacher, and carpenter, with his footsteps covering many places in the eastern United States. These grassroots life experiences and extensive social observations allow him to deeply touch the true life of American people, perceive the vitality of this emerging nation in the process of expansion and transformation, and also infuse his poetic creation with a strong civilian flavor, abundant passion for life, and inclusive democratic consciousness. Different from the literati poets of his time pursuing elegance and refinement, Whitman always views the world from the perspective of an "ordinary person," focusing on nature, the body, labor, and ordinary life, and eulogizing the value of the individual and the coexistence of all things with straightforward and magnificent language.

Leaves of Grass is the lifelong masterpiece of Whitman and the concentrated embodiment of his literary achievements. This poetry collection was not completed in one go. Since its first anonymous publication in 1855, Whitman spent decades revising and expanding it repeatedly, eventually forming a complete edition containing hundreds of poems. Its creative process itself reflects the evolution of the poet's thoughts and the changes of American society. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* includes only 12 poems, with a simple cover and no author's signature. The opening poem, "Song of Myself," laid the core tone of the entire collection—taking "self" as the starting point, connecting all things, and praising the truth and freedom of life. Upon its release, this work aroused great controversy due to its unconventional form and bold and avant-garde content. It abandons the rhyme and meter of European classical poetry, and imitates the rhythm of spoken language with irregular and free-flowing lines, allowing poetry to return to the inherent rhythm of life. At the same time, it breaks the moral taboos of the Victorian era, openly writes about the body, desire, and sexuality, regarding them as the core carrier of life vitality rather than vulgar taboo topics. The core spirit of *Leaves of Grass* lies in "inclusiveness" and "unity." Whitman integrates the self with others, the individual with nature, the body with the soul, and the mundane with the sacred, constructing a democratic utopia of equality and coexistence of all things in his poetry. His ideas, influenced by American transcendentalism yet transcending the boundaries of traditional philosophy, become an iconic work marking the independence of American

literature from the European tradition.

The American literary world in the 19th century was constrained by Puritan asceticism and the moral norms of the Victorian era, where sex, as a taboo topic, was excluded from the orthodox of literary writing. However, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, places sex at the core of poetry for the first time, opening a new era of sexual theme writing with its unrestrained free verse. As Whitman stated in the preface to the 1855 first edition: "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem," he attempted to capture the vitality and democratic spirit of this emerging nation with primitive and bold poetic language^[1] (Gray 118). Although the work was banned and criticized as "immoral" upon its release, it has been recognized as a literary work of epoch-making value a century later. Whitman openly praises sex and the body in his poems, a writing that stems from his profound insight into the essence of human nature and reflects his brave rebellion against traditional morality. Centered on *Leaves of Grass*, this paper explores the multiple dimensions, core connotations, and historical significance of his poetic expression of sex in combination with Whitman's "omnisexual vision" and transcendentalist ideas.

2. The Multidimensional Forms of Whitman's Poetic Expression of Sex

Whitman's poetic expression of sex is not a one-dimensional physiological description but is supported by the "omnisexual vision," presenting diverse and multi-layered characteristics. It covers four basic forms of human sexual development, each corresponding to a unique poetic carrier and spiritual core, and can be further refined into specific sub-dimensions with sufficient textual support from *Leaves of Grass*.

2.1. Egomania: The Affirmation of Self-Body and Soul from Dual Genders

As the starting point of sexual expression, egomania in Whitman's poems is not limited to a single gender perspective, but respectively presents the self-awakening of male and female individuals through the affirmation of their own bodies. This kind of narcissism is never narrow self-indulgence, but the recognition of the sacredness of the body and the realization of spiritual transcendence, which lays the foundation for his "omnisexual vision."

Male narcissism is mainly concentrated in "Song of Myself", with the core of establishing the subject status of the male body through self-examination and self-eulogy. Whitman shapes the self-image of "a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,"^[2] (Whitman 210) and conducts a thorough cognition of his own body: "Having pried through the strata, analyzed to a hair, counsel'd with doctors and calculated close, I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones."^[2] (Whitman 206) The poem uses the detail of "prided through the strata" and "analyzed to a hair" to show the thoroughness of the poet's self-exploration, with a down-to-earth and concrete imagery. The "sweeter fat" is a vivid physical metaphor, abandoning the traditional depreciatory view of the body and praising the vitality of the self-body in a direct way. This expression integrates rational analysis and emotional praise, reflecting the unity of body and soul. This description breaks the Puritan tradition of depreciating the body, and regards the male body as a microcosm of the universe. The "sweeter fat" not only refers to the physical vitality of the body, but also implies the spiritual satisfaction brought by the recognition of self-existence. Whitman's male narcissism is a kind of positive self-confirmation, which takes the body as the medium to connect the self with the world, and realizes the unity of body and soul in the process of affirming the self.

Female narcissism is embodied in "I Sing the Body Electric", showing the female's active perception and affirmation of her own body. In this poem, Whitman writes from the female perspective: "That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect."^[2] (Whitman 251) It uses parallel syntax to form a strong rhetorical force, directly negating the traditional gender hierarchy with concise and powerful language. The repeated use of "perfect" erases the aesthetic and moral differences between male and female bodies in traditional cognition, and constructs an equal body value view. This straightforward expression is consistent with Whitman's free and bold poetic style, and highlights the core of gender equality. This statement directly negates the gender hierarchy in traditional body cognition, and endows female narcissism with the meaning of gender equality. In the poem, the female's perception of her own body is no longer passive and hidden, but active and open: "She is all things duly veil'd, she is both passive and active, she is to conceive daughters as well as sons, and sons as well as daughters."^[2] (Whitman 254) This kind of female narcissism breaks the long-standing marginalized status of women in the sexual discourse of the Victorian era, an age when female images in literary works were invariably confined to an inferior and subordinate position under the shackles of male-dominated social norms and religious morality, with women even being regarded as men's appendages and reproductive tools in both

social reality and literary representation^[3] (Lv 176). In sharp contrast to such a literary context, Whitman's positive affirmation of the female body achieves a genuine awakening of female subject consciousness that transcends the limitations of his time.

2.2. Heterosexuality: The Mutual Perception and Worship of Bodies from Dual Perspectives

Heterosexuality, as the foundation of human reproduction, is endowed with sacred connotations in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman abandons the traditional mode of regarding women as passive objects, and respectively presents the body perception and emotional sustenance of heterosexual love from the male and female perspectives, highlighting the equality and mutual respect in heterosexual relations.

From the male perspective, the description of the female body is a kind of worship of life vitality, which integrates desire with the praise of nature. In "Children of Adam", Whitman writes: "The female contains all qualities and tempers them, she is in her place and moves with perfect balance."^[2] (Whitman 254) The verb "contains" uses a metaphor of the container, implying that the female body is a carrier of all natural qualities, with a broad and inclusive imagery. The phrase "tempers them" shows the female's unique ability to reconcile all things, reflecting the soft and moderate characteristics of the female body. The "perfect balance" is both a physical description and a spiritual metaphor, equating the female's physical state with the harmonious operation of nature. This description does not reduce the female body to a tool of desire, but regards it as a carrier of natural vitality. This kind of male perspective breaks the objectification of women in traditional heterosexual writing, and realizes the equal dialogue between genders through the reverence for the female body. The male's perception of the female body is closely linked to the praise of nature, reflecting Whitman's view of "harmony between human and nature."

From the female perspective, the description of the male body is a kind of affirmation of strength and equality, endowing women with active sexual consciousness. In "A Woman Waits for Me", Whitman gives the female a dominant voice: "A woman waits for me, she contains all, nothing is lacking, yet all were lacking, if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of the right man were lacking."^[2] (Whitman 258) The poem uses the contrast of "contains all" and "all were lacking" to form a strong emotional tension, highlighting the importance of sexual love in female life. The "moisture of the right man" is a subtle and vivid physical metaphor, abandoning the obscure expression of traditional love poems and directly writing about female sexual desire. This expression gives women the right to speak about sexual love, breaking the traditional stereotype of women as passive recipients of desire. The female here is no longer a passive recipient of desire, but an active pursuer of love and equality. This female perspective breaks the traditional gender order, and regards heterosexual love as a bridge of equal communication between men and women, which is closely linked to Whitman's democratic ideas. Through the active perception of the male body, women establish their own subject status in sexual discourse.

2.3. Homosexuality: The Spiritual Bond of Same-Sex Love in Dual Genders

Whitman's description of homosexuality is mainly reflected in the sequence "Calamus", which is not limited to single-gender same-sex love, but respectively presents the spiritual connotation of male homosexuality and female homosexuality. This kind of same-sex love is not indulgence in carnal desire, but a pure spiritual connection, which is an important part of his democratic utopia.

Male homosexuality is presented as "comradeship love," which takes spiritual harmony as the core and is elevated to the height of constructing a democratic society. In "For You, O Democracy", Whitman writes: "Come, I will make the continent indissoluble, I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon, I will make divine magnetic lands, with the love of comrades, with the life-long love of comrades."^[2] (Whitman 272) The poem uses a series of parallel imperative sentences to show the poet's lofty ambition, with a grand and passionate poetic tone. The "divine magnetic lands" uses the metaphor of magnetism, implying that comradeship love has a strong cohesive force, which can unite the whole nation. The repeated use of "the love of comrades" strengthens the emotional expression, elevating the individual same-sex love to the height of national and social construction. This kind of male same-sex love is not only an emotional bond between individuals, but also a spiritual force for uniting the nation. In "Calamus", he further describes the intimacy between men: "We two boys together clinging, One the other never leaving, Up and down the roads going, North and South excursions making."^[2] (Whitman 282) It uses simple and plain verbal imagery such as "clinging" and "never leaving" to depict the daily companionship between boys, with a warm and vivid scene. The content of "Up and down the roads going" and "North and South excursions making" expands the space of companionship, making the same-sex emotional connection break the limitation of time and space. This expression abandons the obscure

writing of same-sex love, and presents the pure spiritual companionship between men in a direct and simple way. This kind of companionship transcends the physical level and becomes a spiritual reliance based on equality and trust, reflecting the prevalence of intimate same-sex relationships in American society before the Civil War, and also embodying Whitman's idea of "equality of all people."

Female homosexuality is presented as a subtle emotional connection, focusing on the mutual understanding and tolerance between women. In "I Sing the Body Electric", Whitman describes the intimate relationship between women: "I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough, to stop in company with the rest at evening is enough, to be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough."^[2] (Whitman 253) The poem uses the repeated structure of "is enough" to express the simple and pure pursuit of female same-sex love, with a soft and delicate emotional tone. The "beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh" is a concrete and vivid physical imagery, depicting the lively and vivid female body, and highlighting the aesthetic feeling of female same-sex companionship. This expression abandons the grand narrative, and presents the subtle emotional connection between women from the perspective of daily experience, reflecting the unique tenderness of female same-sex love. This kind of female same-sex love is not as bold and unrestrained as male homosexuality, but shows a delicate and warm emotional tone. He emphasizes that female same-sex love is also a kind of "healthy spiritual connection", which breaks the silence on female same-sex love in traditional literature, and endows it with equal value, reflecting Whitman's inclusive attitude towards the diversity of human relationships.

2.4. Universal Love: The Transcendental Connection between Human and the Universe in Multiple Dimensions

As the highest dimension of sexual expression, universal love expands the connotation of sex to the connection between human and nature, human and the universe, and all things in the universe. It can be divided into three sub-dimensions: human-nature love, human-universe love, and inter-all-things love, reflecting Whitman's transcendentalist idea of "harmony between human and all things."

Human-nature love regards nature as a partner of sexual spirit, and realizes the integration of human body and natural vitality. Whitman believes that "human can communicate with any of the natural creatures,"^[4] (Guo 38) and in "Song of Myself", he writes: "My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air, born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same."^[2] (Whitman 188) It uses the imagery of "every atom of my blood" to refine the connection between human body and nature to the micro atomic level, making the integration of human and nature more concrete and scientific. The description of intergenerational inheritance of parents links the individual body with the natural land of generations, endowing the human-nature connection with a sense of history and inheritance. This expression breaks the dual opposition between human and nature, and lays the foundation for the view of human-nature integration. He integrates his own physical existence with the soil, air and other natural elements that nurture all life, and regards the interaction between human and nature as a kind of sacred sexual connection. In the poem, he describes: "I loafe and invite my soul, I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass."^[2] (Whitman 188) The "loafe" depicts the poet's relaxed and free state, with a casual and natural poetic style, reflecting the harmonious coexistence between human and nature. The "a spear of summer grass" is a tiny and delicate natural imagery, and Whitman eulogizes the greatness of nature through the small grass, embodying the view of "seeing the big from the small". This imagery of grass becomes a symbol of the integration of human soul and nature, realizing the spiritual communication between human and nature. This kind of intimate integration with grass and all natural things makes the body and soul merge with nature completely, and this kind of human-nature love breaks the boundary between human and nature, and regards nature as a carrier of spiritual desire.

Human-universe love elevates the sexual spirit to the cosmic level, connecting individual sexual experience with the operation of the universe. In "Song of Myself", Whitman declares: "I am the poet of the body; And I am the poet of the soul. The pleasures of heaven are with me, and the pains of hell are with me."^[2] (Whitman 46) He regards the individual body as a microcosm of the universe, and the sexual awakening of the individual is consistent with the rhythmic operation of the universe. This kind of human-universe love breaks the limitations of anthropocentrism, and regards sex as "a kelson of the creation," a sacred bond connecting the self with the universe, the finite with the infinite. Whitman's dual celebration of body and soul aligns with Plato's vision of the "true poet" in *The Republic*—one who must "imitate the form of the good" and reflect the rational order uniting the individual soul with the cosmic whole^[5] (Plato 59). While Plato warns against poetry that indulges base appetites, Whitman reclaims the body-soul unity Plato deems essential, framing sexual awakening not as a threat to rational order but as a manifestation of the universe's harmonious operation.

Inter-all-things love expands the scope of sexual connection to all things in the universe, emphasizing the unity and interdependence of all things. Whitman writes: "The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good."^[2] (Whitman 194) The poem uses the parallel repetition of "good" to form a strong emotional resonance, affirming the inherent value of all things in the universe with a simple and direct way. The imagery of "earth" and "stars" spans the micro terrestrial and macro cosmic space, expanding the scope of the praise of all things to the entire universe. This expression abandons the traditional human-centered view, and regards all things as equal subjects with their own value. He affirms the inherent beauty and vitality of all things in the universe, and regards all things as an organic whole with the same life force. He describes the connection between all things as a kind of silent and eternal life attraction: "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, and to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier."^[2] (Whitman 194) The phrase "all goes onward and outward" uses dynamic spatial imagery to depict the endless development and expansion of the universe, reflecting the eternal vitality of all things. The subversion of the traditional view of death with "and luckier" breaks the fear of death, and regards death as a part of the natural cycle of all things. This expression constructs the eternal life connection of all things in the universe, and the interconnection between all things becomes the extension of the sexual instinct of life in the cosmic dimension. The life cycle of all things in the universe is an unbroken whole, and this kind of interconnection is the extension of the sexual instinct of life in the cosmic dimension. This kind of inter-all-things love reflects the core idea of transcendentalism that "spirit or oversoul is placed in the supreme position in the universe,"^[6] (Liu 137) and constructs a cosmic order based on mutual love and interdependence.

3. The Core Connotations of Whitman's Poetic Expression of Sex

Whitman's poetic expression of sex is not a superficial description of desire, but a profound exploration of human nature, the relationship between humans and the world, and social ideals. Its core connotations are concentrated in three interrelated dimensions: the dialectical unity of body and soul, the harmonious coexistence of sex and nature, and the spiritual integration of sex and democracy. These connotations interweave and complement each other, constructing a unique sexual poetics that integrates life perception, natural reverence, and democratic pursuit.

3.1. Dialectical Unity of Body and Soul

Whitman firmly rejects the body-soul dualism advocated by traditional Western philosophy, which depreciates the body and elevates the soul. In his view, the body and the soul are not opposing entities but an indivisible whole — the body is the material carrier of the soul, and the soul is the spiritual essence of the body. Sexual desire, as a natural expression of the body, is not a vulgar instinct to be suppressed, but a bridge connecting the body and the soul, reflecting the wholeness and authenticity of human existence. Whitman explicitly opposes the Puritan view of "opposing the body and the soul," advocating that "the body contains the soul, and the soul is inherent in the body"^[7] (Hong 25), a view that runs through his poetic expression of sex.

In "Song of Myself", Whitman writes: "I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you, and you must not be abased to the other."^[2] (Whitman 30) This line directly breaks the opposition between body and soul. The "other I" here refers to the physical body, and Whitman emphasizes that neither the body nor the soul should be subordinate to the other. The body's desires and the soul's pursuits are of equal value, and their mutual respect and coexistence constitute the completeness of human beings. The poem further describes the intimate integration of body and soul: "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-stript heart."^[2] (Whitman 192) The phrase "transparent summer morning" acts as a synesthetic metaphor that blurs the boundary between the physical and the spiritual, where the clarity and openness of the natural scene mirror the unobstructed union of body and soul. The physical contact described here is not merely a carnal interaction, but a spiritual communication — the tongue "plunged to my bare-stript heart" symbolizes the soul's dialogue through the body. The body's intimacy becomes a medium for the soul's integration, and the sexual desire contained in it is elevated to a spiritual exchange that transcends physicality. This description fully demonstrates Whitman's view of body-soul symbiosis: the body is not a cage of the soul, and the soul is not a denial of the body; the two depend on each other and jointly realize the value of human existence.

Another typical example is "I Sing the Body Electric": "The man's body is sacred and the woman's

body is sacred, no matter who it is, it is sacred."^[2] (Whitman 254) Whitman equates the sacredness of the body with the sacredness of the soul, for in his transcendental vision, the soul is not a pure, abstract entity separate from the flesh, but a divine force that dwells within and animates every part of the human body. He does not separate the soul from the body to pursue a so-called "pure spiritual realm", but affirms that the soul's sublimation can only be achieved through the recognition and respect of the body. This view subverts the Puritan tradition that depreciates the body and the Platonic dualism that separates body and soul, and constructs a view of human nature that emphasizes the unity of body and soul.

3.2. Harmonious Coexistence of Sex and Nature

Whitman regards sex as a natural attribute of human beings, just like the growth of plants, the flow of rivers, and the operation of the universe, embodying a natural law and the endless vitality of reproduction and life. He rejects the view that sex is a "sinful" or "shameful" act constrained by traditional morality, and integrates sexual desire into the grand background of nature, showing the harmony and unity between human sexuality and natural laws. In his poems, sex is no longer a private and taboo topic, but a natural phenomenon that echoes the vitality of all things, reflecting the interconnectedness between humans and nature.

In "Song of Myself", Whitman writes: "My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air, born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same."^[2] (Whitman 188) This line reveals the origin of human beings — it is soil and air that nurture and sustain human life, and human life is an integral part of the natural cycle. Sexual desire, as a natural instinct of the human body, is naturally consistent with the vitality of nature. The poem further describes the integration of human sexuality and natural scenery: "I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked, I am mad for it to be in contact with me."^[2] (Whitman 27) The act of "becoming undisguised and naked" symbolizes the return of human beings to their natural state, and the desire to "be in contact with" nature reflects the inherent connection between human sexuality and nature. In nature, human beings abandon the constraints of civilization and morality, and their sexual desire is released as a natural instinct, which is in harmony with the growth of plants, the singing of birds, and the flowing of water in nature. This kind of integration is not a degradation of human beings to the level of creatures, but a return to the essence of life, showing the harmony between human sexuality and natural laws.

In "Children of Adam", Whitman describes the connection between sexual love and natural vitality: "The love of the body of man or woman balks account, the body itself balks account, that of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect."^[2] (Whitman 118) He compares the perfection of the male and female bodies to the perfection of natural things, and regards sexual love as a natural expression of this perfection. The poem does not hide the description of sexual desire, but integrates it into the praise of natural vitality. For example, the description of the body's curves, the warmth of skin contact, and the passion of love all echo the vitality of nature such as the "sprawl and fulness of babes" and "the bosoms and heads of women"^[2] (Whitman 118). This integration makes sexual desire no longer an isolated human instinct, but a part of the universal vitality of nature, reflecting Whitman's view of "harmony between humans and nature".

3.3. Spiritual Integration of Sex and Democracy

Whitman's poetic expression of sex is closely linked to his democratic ideals. He regards sexual equality as an important part of social equality, and uses the equality, inclusiveness, and mutual respect in sexual relations to symbolize the democratic spirit he pursues. Whitman believes that "only when sex is properly treated, discussed, acknowledged, and accepted can women be equal to men," this awareness of sexual equality is a direct manifestation of his democratic ideas, reflecting his pursuit of equality and freedom for all people. In his poems, sexual relations are no longer constrained by traditional gender hierarchies, class differences, or identity distinctions, but are based on the equal communication and mutual love between individuals. This kind of sexual expression becomes a way to build a democratic utopia.

In "A Woman Waits for Me", Whitman writes: "A woman waits for me, she contains all, nothing is lacking, yet all were lacking, if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of the right man were lacking."^[2] (Whitman 258) This line endows women with an active and equal sexual subject status. The woman in the poem is no longer a passive recipient of male desire, the stereotyped "the angel in the house" imposed on women by Victorian patriarchy, but an active pursuer of love and sexual equality. She "contains all" and has an independent and complete personality. Her desire for sex is as natural and legitimate as that

of men, which breaks the traditional gender hierarchy that regards women as subordinate to men. Whitman uses this equal heterosexual relationship to symbolize the democratic ideal of gender equality — in a democratic society, men and women are equal in personality and rights, and women have the same right to pursue happiness and express desire as men.

In the "Calamus" sequence, Whitman's description of same-sex love further reflects the integration of sex and democracy. He writes: "We two boys together clinging, One the other never leaving, Up and down the roads going, North and South excursions making."^[2] (Whitman 282) The phrases "up and down the roads" and "North and South excursions" carry rich democratic connotations. They suggest that love is not confined by geographical boundaries, social ranks, or sectional differences, embodying the all-embracing and inclusive spirit of democracy. The same-sex love described here is based on equality, mutual respect, and spiritual harmony, without any sense of hierarchy or oppression. Whitman regards this kind of same-sex love as an important part of his democratic utopia — in a truly democratic society, all people, regardless of gender, race, or identity, can establish equal and harmonious emotional relations. The "comradeship love" in the poem is not only an emotional bond between individuals, but also a symbol of social equality and unity. As he writes in "For You, O Democracy": "Come, I will make the continent indissoluble, I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon, I will make divine magnetic lands, with the love of comrades, with the life-long love of comrades."^[2] (Whitman 272) In these lines, "the continent indissoluble" and "divine magnetic lands" symbolize a united and harmonious nation, and Whitman attributes this national unity and vitality to "the love of comrades". He elevates same-sex comradeship to a foundational force that binds the entire continent and sustains the democratic nation. This kind of same-sex love is elevated to the height of uniting the nation and building a democratic society, reflecting the deep integration of sexual equality and democratic ideals.

In addition, Whitman's inclusive attitude towards various sexual orientations also reflects the democratic spirit. In his poems, heterosexual love, same-sex love, and universal love all have equal value, and there is no distinction between "legitimate" and "illegitimate". This inclusiveness is consistent with the core of democracy— respect for the diversity of individuals and the equality of all people. Whitman uses his poetic expression of sex to build a democratic utopia where everyone is equal, free, and inclusive, and sexual equality becomes a microcosm of social equality.

4. The Historical Controversies and Modern Value of Whitman's Poetic Expression of Sex

Whitman's poetic expression of sex in *Leaves of Grass* stands at the intersection of historical controversy and trans-era value. Its bold breakthroughs triggered fierce confrontations with the conservative ideology of the 19th century, while its pioneering exploration laid a profound foundation for modern literary creation, sexological research, and social thought. The dual attributes of historical controversy and modern value complement each other, highlighting the unique historical status of this poetic expression.

4.1. Historical Controversies: Confrontations between Bold Expression and Conservative Ideology

In the 19th century, dominated by Puritan asceticism and Victorian moral norms, including the censorship of sexual discourse, the stigmatization of open bodily expression, and the strict restriction of non-procreative love, Whitman's open writing about sex was regarded as a "provocation" to traditional order, triggering widespread and fierce criticisms and suppressions. These controversies were not only superficial disputes over literary content but also reflections of deep-seated cultural conflicts in the process of American social transformation.

4.1.1. Critical Voices from Conservative Literary Circles and Moral Authorities

Conservative literary critics and moralists directly attacked the sexual expression in *Leaves of Grass* as "obscene" and "immoral." An anonymous reviewer in London's *The Critic* even used extremely harsh language, mocking Whitman for "lacking basic artistic literacy, and his poetry being nothing but the reckless vent of animalistic desires"^[6] (Liu 137). Such evaluations completely negated the literary and ideological value of Whitman's works, reducing his profound exploration of human nature to vulgar physiological descriptions.

Puritan moral authorities, who advocated asceticism and regarded sex as a taboo that must be hidden, were even more intolerant of Whitman's writing. They claimed that the explicit sexual descriptions in *Leaves of Grass* would "corrupt public morality, induce evil desires, and destroy the pure social atmosphere," and thus strongly demanded that Whitman delete the "Children of Adam" and "Calamus"

sequences, which focused on sexual themes. Some extreme conservatives even called for a comprehensive ban on the publication and circulation of the book, trying to eliminate this "heretical work" from the source.

4.1.2. Ambiguity and Persuasion from Progressive Intellectuals

It is worth noting that even progressive intellectuals of the same era who recognized Whitman's literary innovation held an ambiguous attitude towards his sexual expression, and some even tried to persuade him to make compromises. Emerson, a representative of American transcendentalism and one of the earliest supporters of Whitman, admired the free verse form and democratic spirit in *Leaves of Grass*, but he worried that the bold sexual descriptions would overshadow the work's overall value and hinder its public acceptance. During their private meeting in Boston in 1860, he strongly urged Whitman to revise or remove the sexually explicit passages, believing that only by doing so could Whitman's profound democratic ideas be more widely spread.¹

This kind of persuasion, though out of good intentions, essentially reflected the pressure of the conservative cultural environment at that time. Even progressive thinkers could not completely break away from the constraints of traditional moral concepts and dared not fully affirm Whitman's pioneering exploration of sexual themes. This also made Whitman face a double dilemma: on the one hand, he had to resist the fierce attacks of conservatives; on the other hand, he had to adhere to his own creative beliefs in the face of the persuasion of progressive friends.

4.1.3. The Essence of Controversies: Conflicts between Human Liberation and Traditional Constraints

The essence of the fierce controversies triggered by Whitman's sexual expression lies in the conflict between the call for human liberation and the constraints of traditional morality. In the 19th century, American society was in a period of transition from a traditional agricultural society to a modern industrial society, and ideological and cultural fields were also experiencing drastic changes. Puritanism, which had long dominated American society, emphasized self-denial, asceticism, and the suppression of human desires, regarding the body and sex as "impure" and "sinful."

Whitman's poetic expression of sex, however, openly affirmed the value of the body, praised the beauty of sex, and regarded it as a natural and sacred manifestation of human vitality. This was a direct challenge to the traditional moral order centered on asceticism. The conservatives' attacks were essentially to maintain the existing moral and cultural order and suppress the awakening of human nature; while Whitman's persistence was a brave pursuit of human freedom and dignity, trying to break the ideological shackles that constrained human nature. Therefore, this controversy was not only a dispute over literary works but also a collision between two different worldviews and values: one advocated suppressing human nature to maintain traditional order, and the other advocated releasing human nature to pursue true freedom and equality.

4.2. Modern Value: Pioneering Significance in Literature, Sexology, and Social Thought

Despite being misunderstood and attacked in his time, Whitman's poetic expression of sex has gradually revealed its profound modern value with the progress of history. It has exerted a far-reaching influence on modern literary creation, the development of sexology, and the advancement of social thought, becoming an important source of inspiration for later generations. It not only pioneered the literary expression of sexual themes and innovated free verse, but also foresaw the diversity of human sexuality ahead of his time, and provided profound ideological resources for the later gender equality and sexual liberation movements.

4.2.1. Literary Value: Pioneering Modern Sexual Theme Writing and Free Verse Innovation

In the field of literature, Whitman's pioneering exploration has broken the long-standing shackles of traditional poetry and opened up new directions for literary creation. Before Whitman, sexual themes were almost a forbidden area in orthodox literary writing, and poetry was mostly confined to elegant themes such as love, nature, and heroism, with rigid forms and meters. Whitman, however, took sex as a core theme of poetry, and with his unique free verse form, he expressed the most real desires and vitality of human nature.

This bold innovation directly influenced the development of modern and contemporary literature.

¹ He, Zhaohui. "Sex in Whitman and *Leaves of Grass*." *Guangming Net*, 19 Sept. 2007, https://www.gmw.cn/01ds/2007-09/19/content_673834.htm. Originally published in *China Reading Weekly*.

The Beat Generation poets in the 20th century, such as Allen Ginsberg, were deeply inspired by Whitman's free and unrestrained writing style and his courage to challenge taboos. Ginsberg's *Howl* inherited Whitman's tradition of directly expressing human desires and social criticisms, continuing to use free verse to break the constraints of traditional poetry. In China, Guo Moruo, a poet of the New Culture Movement, also drew on Whitman's poetic spirit, emphasizing the expression of individual vitality and the praise of natural desires in his works such as *Goddesses*.

In addition, Whitman's integration of sexual themes with democratic spirit, natural philosophy, and other connotations has enriched the depth and breadth of literary expression. He proved that sexual themes are not vulgar and superficial, but can carry profound thoughts on human nature, society, and the universe, providing a valuable reference for later writers to explore sensitive themes.

4.2.2. Sexological Value: Pioneering Exploration of Human Sexual Diversity

Whitman's "omnisexual vision" and his poetic description of the four basic forms of sexual expression have established his pioneering status in the development of world sexology. Long before Darwin put forward the theory of evolution and Freud established psychoanalytic theory to explore human sexual instincts, Whitman had already intuitively perceived and artistically presented the diversity of human sexuality.

In the 19th century, when homosexuality and other non-heterosexual orientations were regarded as "abnormal" and "sinful," Whitman openly praised "comradeship love" in the "Calamus" sequence, affirming that same-sex love is a healthy and valuable spiritual connection. This view was far ahead of his time and provided important ideological resources for the later development of sexology and the sexual liberation movement. Modern sexology research has proved that human sexuality is diverse, and the four forms of sexual expression described by Whitman are important manifestations of this diversity. His works have laid a foundation for the later recognition of sexual diversity and the advocacy of sexual equality, making him a "pioneer of modern sexology"^[4] (Guo 34).

Moreover, Whitman's view of the unity of body and soul in sexual expression has also had a profound impact on modern sexology. He opposed the traditional dualism that separated body and soul, advocating that sex is not only a physiological behavior but also a spiritual communication. This view has corrected the one-sided understanding of sex as a purely physiological desire in traditional sexology and promoted the development of sexology towards a more comprehensive and humanistic direction.

4.2.3. Social Value: Enlightenment for Contemporary Gender Equality and Sexual Liberation Movements

The equality awareness and democratic spirit contained in Whitman's poetic expression of sex have important enlightenment significance for contemporary social movements such as gender equality and sexual liberation. Whitman firmly advocated gender equality in his works, breaking the marginalized status of women in sexual discourse in the 19th century. In "A Woman Waits for Me," he endowed women with active sexual rights, emphasizing that women's desires and needs are equally important as men's, and that sexual equality is the prerequisite for gender equality. This view has provided a powerful ideological support for the contemporary feminist movement, encouraging women to pursue their own sexual rights and gender equality.

In addition, Whitman's affirmation of the diversity of sexual orientations has also provided important inspiration for the contemporary sexual liberation movement. In a society where sexual minorities are still discriminated against and excluded, Whitman's works remind people that all forms of sexual expression that conform to human nature and do not harm others should be respected and accepted. His advocacy of "equality of all things" includes not only gender equality but also equality among different sexual orientations, races, and classes, which has important guiding significance for building an inclusive and equal modern society.

Furthermore, Whitman's view that sex is a natural and sacred manifestation of human vitality has also helped to eliminate the stigma and prejudice against sex in contemporary society. In many cultures, sex is still regarded as a taboo that is difficult to talk about, leading to a series of social problems such as sexual repression and sexual violence. Whitman's sincere praise of sex helps people establish a healthy attitude towards sex, recognize the natural and sacred nature of sex, and thus promote the harmonious development of individuals and society.

5. Conclusion

Walt Whitman's poetic expression of sex in *Leaves of Grass* is far more than a literary rebellion against 19th-century taboos — it is a profound celebration of human wholeness and equality. Centered on the "omnisexual vision," his works unfold through four interconnected forms of desire, rooted in the belief that body and soul are indivisible, sex is a natural bond with the cosmos, and sexual equality is the bedrock of democratic idealism. By rejecting Puritan asceticism and Victorian moral constraints, Whitman reclaims sex as a sacred force — one that unites individuals with each other, with nature, and with the universal rhythm of life — transforming a private taboo into a public affirmation of human dignity.

This pioneering poetics has transcended its era to become a timeless call for inclusivity. What was once condemned as "immoral" now stands as a foundational text for modern conversations about gender justice, sexual diversity, and human liberation. Whitman's legacy lies not just in expanding the boundaries of literature, but in reminding us that true progress begins with embracing the fullness of human nature — with all its desires, connections, and equal claims to freedom. His work endures as a testament to the power of poetry to challenge, heal, and envision a world where everybody, every love, and every voice is recognized as sacred.

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