

## Urban Scenarios in Walt Whitman's Poetry

### Cenários Urbanos na Poesia de Walt Whitman

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**ABSTRACT:** One of the most striking features in 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry is the scenes of astonishing industrial progress, the development of the cities, the people who rush around, either working or just living their lives. Such urban scenarios are constant images in poems of this period. American poet Walt Whitman is also one of the poets who conveys urban movement through his poetry. With these characteristics as a starting point, the purpose of this article is to focus on the urban images in Whitman's poetry, analyzing the poetry of the cities. Closely linked to Baudelaire's *flâneur*, Whitman also observes city life from a contemplative point of view. In poems like *City of Ships*, *I Hear America Singing*, *Crossing the Brooklyn Ferry*, among others, Whitman sings of city life, its constant movement, its people and its landscapes. Focusing on the poet's observation of urban life in the nineteenth century, this article also intends to make a link between the 19<sup>th</sup> Century idea of modernity and Whitman's poems. A small selection of poems from *Leaves of Grass* which highlights these characteristics was chosen to be the focus of this analysis.

**Keywords:** Whitman; Poetry; City; Modernity

**RESUMO:** Uma das características mais marcantes na poesia do século XIX são as cenas do progresso industrial assustador, o desenvolvimento das cidades, as pessoas que passam apressadas, quer trabalhando ou apenas vivendo suas vidas. Tais cenários urbanos são imagens constantes nos poemas desse período. O poeta americano Walt Whitman também é um desses poetas, ele canta o movimento urbano através de sua poesia. Tendo tais elementos como ponto de partida, a proposta deste artigo é focalizar nas imagens urbanas da poesia de Whitman, analisando a poesia vista nas cidades, a partir de seu ponto de vista. Diretamente relacionado com o flâneur de Baudelaire, Whitman também observa a vida na cidade de forma contemplativa. Em poemas como Cidade dos Navios, Eu Ouço a América Cantar, Atravessando a Balsa do Brooklin, entre outros, Whitman canta a vida da cidade, seu movimento constante, suas pessoas e suas paisagens. Tendo como foco o poeta que observa a vida urbana do século XIX, este artigo também pretende fazer um elo entre ideia de modernidade do século XIX e os poemas de Whitman, foram escolhidos alguns poemas da coletânea Folhas de Relva que destacam tais elementos para esta análise.

**Palavras-Chave:** Whitman; Poesia; Cidade; Modernidade.

According to Luis Roberto Silva (1994, p. 2), one of the most frequent themes in literature history is the city and everything that comes from it, especially in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. For many scholars, the French poet Charles Baudelaire is the most important representative of this movement. Baudelaire opens a new perspective in poetry, when he brings the *flâneur* to the scene: the man who observes and admires the city, the people

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who come and go. The city of Baudelaire is a living organism, that moves and breathes and the poet sings it and sings to it.

At the same period, in The United States, more precisely in New York, Walt Whitman was writing *Leaves of Grass* – was writing because in each new edition, more poems were included in his work – in which among the various subjects, the city is also there: The people who come and go, the movement, the beauty observed by the poet. But differently from Baudelaire, Whitman did not have the *flâneur's* eyes to the city, that is, while Baudelaire's *flâneur* just observes the city and carries a strong feeling of melancholy and solitude, Whitman sings the city. For Walt Whitman, he is not apart from the city, he is part of it.

In Baudelaire's *The Sun*, we can feel some of his melancholic feeling, the poet admires the city and feels as if he were its king, but a lonely one. He lives in the city, the buildings are the castles, but, although the city is energetic and noisy, for its lonely king who walks across the streets it is just silent:

“When, like a poet, he goes down into cities,  
He ennobles the fate of the lowliest things  
And enters like a king, without servants or noise  
All the hospitals and all the castles”  
(Le Soleil, translation by William Aggeler, 1954)

Walt Whitman also sings the life as an observer, but with a feeling of joy. In the poem “*Salut au Monde!*” Whitman, he celebrates the world, the places, the people from everywhere and feels part of this world and it can be seen as an example of Whitman's “optimistic poems (which) are written in long, sprawling lines and span an astonishing variety of subject matter and points of view” (The Academy of American Poets, 2009):

I see the cities of the earth and make myself at random a part of them.  
I am a real Parisian,  
I am a habitant of Viena, St. Petersburg, Berlin, Constantinople,  
I am of Adelaide, Sidney, Melbourne,

I am of London, Manchester, Bristol, Edinburgh, Limerick,

I am of Madrid, Cadiz, Barcelona, Oporto, Lyon, Brussels, Berne,  
Frankfort, Stuttgart, Turin, Florence,

I belong to Moscow, Cracow, Warsaw, or northward in

Christiania or Stckholm, or in Siberian Irkutsk, or in some street in  
Iceland, I descend upon all those cities, and rise from them again”  
(Whitman, 2005)

Although there are other similarities between the two poets, the main focus of this article is to analyze the view they have about the city and the modern life of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Both Whitman and Baudelaire used a large variety of subjects in their poetry, and as W. T. Brandy (1983, p.52) says, referring to Betsy Erkkila’s work, “in view of the fact that both Whitman and Baudelaire were precursors of the Symbolist movement in France, (Erkkila) attempts to show that the two men were similar in some aspects”. Though studies have proved that the contemporary poets knew very little about each other and have read little of each other’s work (Brandy, 1983, p. 52), coincidentally or not, the similarities exist. Other examples can be seen in Whitman’s *City of Orgies* and Baudelaire’s *Parisian Dream*. But while Whitman sings the beauty of Manhattan and the love he has for it, Baudelaire sings with sadness the city that grows and has a landscape in transformation by the buildings that emerge. Whitman sings and loves the city that grows before his eyes, Baudelaire loves and hates the progress that put him apart to heart of his homeland.

In *City of Orgies*, Whitman sings:

City of orgies, walks and joys,

City whom that I have lived and sung in your midst will one day make  
you illustrious,

Not the pageants of you, not your shifting tableaux, your spectacles,  
repay me,

Nor the interminable rows of your houses, nor the ships at the  
wharves,

Nor the processions in the streets, nor the bright windows with goods  
in them,

Nor the converse with learn’d persons, or bear my share in the soiree  
or feast;

Not those, but as I pass O Manhattan, your frequent and swift flash of eyes offering me love,

Offering response to my own – these repay me,

Lovers, continual lovers, only repay me. (Whitman, 2005)

Baudelaire's *Parisian Dream* brings the melancholic view of the city:

This morning I am still entranced

By the image, distant and dim

Of that aw- inspiring landscape

Such as no mortal ever saw

[...]

And, painter proud of his genius

I savored in my picture

The delightful monotony

Of water, marble and metal.

Babel of arcades and stairways

It was a place infinite

Full of basins and of cascades

Falling on dull or burnished gold

And heavy waterfalls, like curtains of crystal

Were hanging, bright and resplendent,

From ramparts of metal.

(Translation by William Aggeler, 1954)

It is possible to notice how, in Whitman's poetry, the author feels emerged in the city. He not only observes the people and the buildings, but also is part of it. He loves the city and its people and is loved back. Different from Baudelaire's eyes, who observe the city and its transformation from the distance. Although he is also part of the change, as Whitman, Baudelaire does not show the feeling of being immersed and involved by the city.

Other reference of similarities between the poets is seen when both poets write about a stranger walking on the street. Arac (1996, p. 56) relates his reading of Whitman's poem *Passing Stranger!* With Walter Benjamin's comments on Baudelaire's *To a Stranger*:

Benjamin emphasizes that in Baudelaire's poem the crowd is not represented; it emerges only through an allusion to the noise of the street in the opening line. In Whitman there is not even the allusion; it as though the speaker were alone with the stranger". [...] "Neither Whitman nor Baudelaire represents the crowd, but each is implicated in it: they are not protected by the distance of observation; even in passing, an encounter may count.

Many other poems could be cited here, like *Crossing the Brooklyn Ferry*, in which Whitman observes and meditates the people who cross the river after a day of work:

Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!

Clouds of the west – sun there half an hour high – I see you also face to face.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!

On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose,

And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose. (Whitman, 2005)

Here, in the first lines of the poem, Whitman shows how strongly he is touched by the movement of the people who come and go across the river by the end of the day. He observes those people's faces, and feels how important those people are for him. Throughout the poem, he gives the workers an amount of importance that, absorbed by their daily routine, they do not suppose they might have. Those people are the object of the author's curiosity and love, their jobs, how they are part of the movement of the boats crossing the river, keeping the city breathing, and how such movement – he foresees – will continue for years and years.

About the poem, Nelson (1998, p. 3) says:

“Crossing” says nothing about the poet's reason for crossing the river; the focus is not on a purpose or destination but on the act of crossing itself and the surrounding spectacle: the water, the people, the sun going down, the boats and docks and city in the distance. The poem describes the daily experience of a mid-nineteenth-century New York ferry-rider, mundane enough to most but glorious to Whitman. At the same time it makes the trip the basis for a profound meditation on time and flux and how we exist both within and outside them.

Besides *Crossing the Brooklyn Ferry*, there are other poems, like Whitman's *I Hear America Singing*, that sings the workers in their labor day:

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,  
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,  
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,  
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,  
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,  
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,  
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,  
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,  
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,  
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,  
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

Among other poems from *Leaves of Grass* in Calamus session, *I Hear America Singing* celebrates the life in the city and the modernity that is coming and transforming their landscape, into beautiful or sad and lonely, depending on each poet's view. The workers in

their labor day are the ones who make the city grow, they are the ones who turn the city into a living organism.

The presence of both poets continued and continues strong in the whole world. Influenced by the American and the French poets, and the strong ideas of modernity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, in Brazil we see poets like Mario and Oswald de Andrade singing the city of São Paulo. Sometimes showing the love and hate relationship with the city that grows, moves and does not stop as in Baudelaire's poetry as well as Whitman's enchanted view of the city, its buildings and its people, that make the city the beautiful chaos turned into poetry.

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