

Joey Collins

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Dr. Blais & Dr. LeBlanc

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The Lightning in Us: What Was Sparked by Walt Whitman's "I Sing The Body Electric"

Poets and historians of American literature have closely analyzed the contents of the great American poem "I Sing The Body Electric" by Walt Whitman. To comprehend the underlying messages conveyed in this work, one must understand how Whitman's musings relate to the history of, as well as the present incarnation of American culture. Whitman himself was a man of his own, defying the cultural norms of his time and expressing through his poetry a unique view of our nation. His expression in "Body Electric" is telling of his individuality as a poet and a nineteenth century American man, and this expression has proven itself to be timeless as it is revered in today's America.

The America of now is a vastly diverse melting pot of political views, personal backgrounds, and cultural fusions. "Body Electric" is an all-encompassing poem, written from the perspective of Whitman the careful observer, who is able to see the inherent beauty in the many interweaving constituents of our country. As the poem unfolds, there is a decidedly political stance taken by Whitman, a stance which, one hundred and sixty three years after the poem's publishing, still reads as contentious in our modern social climate. It is this contentiousness combined with a freshly delivered ode to the many colors of our nation that gives the poem its authenticity.

The title of the poem perfectly indicates its conveyed viewpoint. It is a poem celebrating both the individual's human body and its many components, as well as the body that is America and the many peoples and lands within that body that are like its blood vessels, its organs, and its many limbs and extremities. Whitman sees these bodies as very much alive, dynamic and vital in their functioning, and it is his emphasis on the intimate details of these bodies that leads "Body Electric" to stir its audiences, both old and new.

American culture is ever-evolving as it welcomes the new and both preserves and discards the old. It is something of a paradox, but a celebrated paradox nonetheless, and it is Whitman who zeroed in on the sort of bending and twisting that makes America the country it is known to be. The inherent sexuality of the poem was provocative for its time, but reads as rather tame to our current standards. There is also a subtle but sincere appreciation for an African-American presence, something not common in Whitman's era. With these ideas in mind, it is the declarative tone of the poem that echoes the sentiments of today's continuing social justice crusades, the results of America's continuing evolution. Whitman's "I Sing The Body Electric" has supplied people of each new decade with something substantial to refer to when they must confront a repeated questioning of America's purpose.

Whitman's openness is inherently liberal, but it is tactfully presented in such a way that it respects its diverse audience, just as much as it respects the many bodies it describes. This respect is the ethos of the poem as it conveys to readers that America is a special place because it is a diverse place. There is much to be celebrated across many lines of separation. Where the poem takes its political stance is where Whitman asks, "...and if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?" as if to posit to his vast audience that one's body is one's essence, a realization that is

meant to be liberating and in no way a secret. “Body Electric” is a celebratory poem and a reminder for successive generations to stand proudly in one’s own shoes, to value authenticity, and to never lose one’s home within one’s self. It is important to note the timeless relevance of the poem, as Whitman’s words can resonate with today’s Americans as much as they may have either privately or publicly resonated with the Americans of Whitman’s era, an era known to be decidedly stringent when compared with the era that is now. “I Sing The Body Electric” unpacks a perspective that is meant to persuade, to uplift, and to celebrate our country as a means of instilling a hope for the future in whomever may be its reader.

It has been suggested through time that much of what Whitman put forth in *Leaves of Grass* was the product of a “persona”, that, as per Mark Paryz’ account of the book, “functioned as a representative national figure ... and [made Whitman an] outsider” (Chapter 6). This is an interesting point as it suggests that much of what Whitman expresses in “Body Electric” is the result of a mere heightening of mood, something in alignment with his outward image as a Transcendentalist muse. What can be extracted from this is that, supposing the underlying sense of optimism in “Body Electric” is the result of a mood, then there is great inspiration to be taken from that mood, as it was in Whitman’s moments of enlivened sense that his best ideas spilled onto paper.

It is understood by scholars that as a result of its contents, “Body Electric” is an attention-grabbing read, but it is because of this that the poem can be truly appreciated. Because Whitman was ambitious in his approach to writing the poem, the poem itself holds weight and does not read like an ill-conceived complaint, but instead like an unveiling of masked beauty. This leads into a relating point of discussion that the poem is a sort of mission statement, written to encour-

age people to view themselves and each other in a new way. This is what makes the poem political and relevant in our current time, as there is always a need for a reminder of how much beauty there truly is around us. Also in relation to the politics of the poem are the references Whitman makes to people and aspects of American life who have been historically challenged by changing conditions in American social dynamics. Whitman takes a stand for these people, as he himself is one of them, expressing his desire for his own sex in a desirous manner. This is illustrated in Whitman's elaborate and descriptive account of men he observes, expressing that "the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face ... [y]ou linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side" ("I Sing The Body Electric" Stanza 2). It is recognizable that there is an innocence in the poem that makes it convincing, and it is this sense of innocence that Whitman wants readers to tap into as a means of liberating themselves, something that results in the poem being repeatedly worth exploring in-depth. Today's America can look to "Body Electric" for motivation, as it is certain that as culture fluctuates, so does recognition for its value.

Poignancy in Politics

Though "Body Electric" does not explicitly state which political party it affiliates with, in its words is an undercurrent of sociopolitical meaning. This meaning is poignantly conveyed to further illustrate the underlying message of liberation throughout the poem. Whitman chose to innovate in terms of the poem's compositional styling and the viewpoint it expresses about the human body. For its time, the poem was unconventional because it was written in such a way that the vast majority of published poems were not; it expressed ideas outside of the Christian norm, and it was a free verse poem instead of the usual metrical verse that dominated the poetry world. As the poem's title suggests, the poem is largely about what Whitman views to be the

miraculousness of the body. During Whitman's time, the body was not openly celebrated. Scholars J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings express in their 1998 encyclopedia of Whitman that "Whitman acknowledges that many have doubts about the body," and that "'Body Electric' ... is not a poem of doubt but a response to those who doubt the body [as] it is a paean of praise to the wonders of the sensual body." This is an inherently political aspect of the poem because Whitman chose to write about the body in a way that was likely to spark a degree of controversy among its first readers. People of the time were reserved in their expressions of their sexuality and of their physical appearances. When linking this aspect of the poem to modern culture, it is intriguing to notice that when the poem was first released in the mid-nineteenth century, Whitman's specific views about the vitality of the body were ahead of their time, as today, secularist culture echoes much of what Whitman said two hundred years ago. Much analysis has been given to the manner in which Whitman expresses the sexuality of the poem.

David S. Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* comments that Whitman "sang the naturalness of copulation and the sanctity of sexual organs," as he described them "with the loving attention of a physiologist or sculptor" (212). As explained by scholar M. Jimmie Killingsworth in his book *Whitman's Poetry of the Body*, the "themes [of "Body Electric"] ... are sharply focused and clearly expressed, [providing] a place to begin analysis of sexual politics in [*Leaves of Grass*] (One: Original Energy: 1855). Most people who read "Body Electric" today would agree with Whitman's views and it is precisely these views that are a relevant point of discussion in today's politically charged America.

Also in relation to Whitman's exploration of sexual politics is his expression of his attraction to another man. This is another example of something that was relatively new for its time

and is relevant in today's culture as much as it was to Whitman, whose free expression of his true self was and is liberating for its audience, who may connect with the encouraging nature of the poem. The third stanza of "Body Electric" is dedicated specifically to a farmer whom Whitman personally knew. Throughout the stanza, Whitman describes his fascination for the man, painting a vivid picture of the man's everyday repertoire and the light that seemed to follow the man wherever he would go.

When he went with his five sons and many grand-sons to hunt or fish, you would pick him out as the most beautiful and vigorous of the gang,

You would wish long and long to be with him, you would wish to sit by him in the boat that you and he might touch each other. ("I Sing The Body Electric" Stanza 3)

Author Gary Schmidgall writes in his 1997 book, *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life*, that Whitman went to great lengths to conceal his true identity but did so in a manner that was not entirely ambiguous. He was able to convey that he himself was a gay man without explicitly stating so. As demonstrated in the quote above, it is noted by Schmidgall that just as poet James Merrill in his own poetry "employed ... the pronoun "you", which served to protect [one's identity]," Whitman did so as well (Schmidgall xvi). This was a thinly veiled attempt to take some of a reader's attention off of the identity of the author and give that reader an opportunity to place themselves in the scenarios that are being described in a poem. Whitman, like many other gay authors of his time, chose to speak ambiguously of his identity because he wanted to keep himself safe from judgement in a society that was evidently oppressive to people like himself. Nevertheless, it was Whitman's ambition to cement himself as one of the first great American poets,

a poet who spoke ahead of his time, that led him to express himself freely. He wanted to take a political stance for the benefit of people like himself who would exist far into the future. Schidmgall quotes Whitman as saying “The time for me hasn’t come yet; some are born posthumously” (xviii). This is a telling quote that speaks to the relevancy of “Body Electric” in the modern world. Whitman is very much alive posthumously in the poem and in his many other works.

Further into the political background of the poem is the subtle yet profound stance taken by Whitman on the wellbeing of a slave. A major theme in “Body Electric” is empathy. Just as Whitman expressed to an extent with regard to his own and others’ homosexuality, he sees the toilsome life of the slave, and is struck by such a sight in a way that motivates him to stand in solidarity with another group of disenfranchised people. It is mentioned in J.R. LeMaster’s and Donald D. Kummings’ encyclopedia of Whitman that as Whitman looks upon the slaves who are being auctioned off at “the slavemart,” he cannot help but feel that what he is seeing is blatant injustice as the slaves who are being sold are of the “the same red-running blood” as any free person (197). This is the same truth that we emphasize today, and we still find ourselves in predicaments where this truth must be reiterated. There is a certain irony in the reality of the fact that a poet of the mid-nineteenth century was considered among the most avant-garde writers of his time because he “dared” to question the validity of the established practice of slavery. What makes this even more ironic is the fact that even in current times, we are echoing the sentiments of Whitman in “Body Electric” as we watch injustices persist against the African-American community. Whitman would go on to receive a great deal of praise for his choice to stand with the slaves he observed. In David S. Reynold’s *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography*, it is mentioned that notable African-Americans outwardly thanked Whitman. Among them were

Sojourner Truth and Langston Hughes. Reynolds includes a quote from an African-American friend of Whitman's who told him that he "would be of great use to [the African-American] race," something that proves to be true in the present day (148).

Scholar Jeffrey Stewart examines the specificities of Whitman's ode to "the black body" in his 2008 essay "I Sing the Black Body Electric: Transnationalism and the Black Body in Walt Whitman, Alain Locke, and Paul Robeson". Stewart points out the inherent racism in former United States president Thomas Jefferson's views on what exactly he felt separated blacks from whites; their bodies. Jefferson expressed that he wanted African-Americans to be excluded from first-class society because of their skin tone and the way their bodies looked (Stewart 262). Aside from this being a prejudiced idea, it is also highly superficial in nature, and in "Body Electric," Whitman aimed to look beyond the superficial and into the soul. He wanted to see the beauty in the most overlooked of people in society. Those who were frowned upon because of their surface-level attributes were considered by Whitman to be brave, because while they bore the burden of being automatically cast to the sidelines of society, they continued to persevere and make something of their lives, however small that something might have been (Stewart 263).

Lastly is Whitman's exploration of equality between the sexes. As he continues into his descriptions of the slaves he sees, he begins to call to mind the issue of gender inequality.

Have you ever loved the body of a woman?

Have you ever loved the body of a man?

Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth? ("I Sing The Body Electric" Stanza 8)

This is a political statement because it makes the argument that both the male and female bodies are exactly the same in their importance to the whole of humanity. While both male and female bodies may not appear the same when placed side by side, their individual functioning in the preservation and well-being of humanity is, between them, of equal importance. As a civilization, we need both male and female bodies to maintain a sense of balance and a sense of order.

In Christina Davey's "Walt Whitman and the Quaker Woman", Whitman's view of the American woman is explored in-depth, citing his personal opinion that women were dealt a bad hand by society as a result of the fact that they were subjected to a life of household chores and limited to no personal freedom. Davey asserts that through Whitman's elaborate description of the female, he allows for his male audience to "[observe] that the female contains all qualities," as if to express that the female provides for the male everything that is necessary to complete what makes a merging of two halves, or a making of one whole (Davey 10). This is a compelling idea that takes into account Whitman's views on procreation and how its role in the continuation of humanity provides its own beauty, aside from what he previously discusses in regard to the beauty of non-male-female relationships. In other words, in his effort to emphasize the need for the equality of the sexes, Whitman places emphasis on the fact that women are every bit as needed as men for the preservation of humanity. This is an aspect of human life that has always been and always will be essential.

The Power of Effective Persuasive Language

Just as Whitman outlines the political stances in which he takes with "Body Electric", he also makes use of persuasive tone and language in an effort to affect readers in a way that he hopes will inspire them, with the sparking of their inspiration being the poem's primary purpose.

It is known that Whitman wanted to be recognized as a “great American poet” and through his language, he hoped to spark change in the society that he knew was already beautiful, but could shine even more than it already had. One of the most compelling aspects of the poem is its focus on feeling, and the ability of one to stimulate feeling in others with words alone. “Body Electric” is a poem that emphasizes the experiencing of sensations, something that, when triggered in a reader, can affect their thinking and lead to change.

The very word “electric,” as explained by author Paul Gilmore in his 2001 in-depth work *The Genuine Article: Race, Mass Culture, and American Literary Manhood*, is a major contributor in the conveying of the poem’s message. In relation to Whitman’s efforts to encourage the unification of African-Americans and caucasian Americans, Gilmore explains that “by [his audience and himself becoming one] electric body, [and] linked to other electric bodies . . . , Whitman imagines the erasure of racial difference” (Gilmore 153-154). This is an intriguing note on what seems like the foremost source of inspiration for “Body Electric”; the way that we connect to each other through the conduction of electricity in our brains and bodies (Gilmore 153). Sparking an emotional response in an audience has been repeatedly proven to be a surefire way to affect their perspectives on relevant issues, making Whitman a clever persuader as he makes use of this tactic throughout the entirety of the poem.

Through a Transcendentalist Lens

At the start of “Body Electric”, Whitman paints a broad stroke by asking the question “if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?”. This is a thought-provoking inquiry that very early into the poem encourages readers to reflect on what exactly they consider to be worthy of being titled “of the soul”. The entire poem is a sort of question; what is the soul made up of?

Whitman invokes a sense of insightfulness with his words, pointing out the inherent beauty in his surroundings. This beauty is found in people and scenarios that may not immediately be recognized as beautiful. Whitman lived during the Transcendentalist era, an era which was very much a response of the heart and soul to the chaos that ensued during the Civil War. It is clear through Whitman's writings that he was influenced by the beliefs espoused by the Transcendentalist viewpoint. This viewpoint placed emphasis on the creation of a strong sense of the individual self, and a rejoicing of this individual self among many individuals. It was thought that through the embracing of one's own authenticity, society could prosper because a new sense of empathy among people could be fostered. This empathy was to be the product of a new cultural approach, one that stated that every individual was best to be themselves, as being oneself is the first step to true happiness.

Such emphasis placed on individualism is outlined in professor Susan Setzer's 1999 work, "Whitman, Transcendentalism and the American Dream: Alliance with Nature's Government through Language". Setzer explains that "without awakening the higher creative self, a person could not add to or make use of culture; one could merely learn it by rote" (5). This is an important comment on the nature of Transcendentalist poetry. Nature was a key source of inspiration for poets of the era, as it was considered to be the spring from which all nourishment and spirituality could flourish. Because Whitman placed emphasis on the nature of the human body in "Body Electric", it is easy to see how the dawning of nature-praising philosophy sparked his desire to write such a poem, as one's comfort and confidence in their own physical body is very much a part of their individuality.

Many of Whitman's creative peers were poets who came out of the Transcendentalist movement. They include Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. In an article written by scholar H el ene Gaillard, it is explained that "the concluding section of "I Sing The Body Electric" contains a 36-line catalogue with more than one-hundred bodily parts," something that "Emerson ... encouraged [Whitman] to remove [as he could not see the purpose of such inclusions]" (4). Whitman was not keen to consider the suggestions of Emerson because he felt that the inclusion of such a descriptive account of the body was very important to the message of "Body Electric". An important point made by Gaillard about the persuasive nature of the poem states that its descriptions of the body "force readers to reconsider their corporeality," reinforcing the idea that the poem is persuasive by way of it being insightful. This is something largely representative of the collection in which "Body Electric" is included, 1855's *Leaves of Grass*.

When focusing on Whitman's love of nature, it is possible to see that in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's goal is to excite his audience about the possibilities that await them if they allow themselves to truly explore their spirituality. This was very much a response to the destruction that was brought about by the Civil War. During such a tumultuous time in American history, there was a need to be reminded of all that was positive. Whitman was ambitious in his efforts to unify people and to uplift them by directing their attention to the beauty of things they often overlooked. Aspects of the body such as fingernails and the internal organs are not typically thought of as beautiful, but because they serve a purpose and they make human beings the very creatures that they are, their existence was a reason, in Whitman's mind, to be thankful to be alive. One can make a connection between the need in Whitman's poetry to rouse the people of his day, and the need for many of today's Americans to remember to stop, look around, and no-

tice the simplest of joys in some of the most under-appreciated environments. It is through the gaining of this renewed sense of mindfulness that one's spirit can be cleansed and made stronger.

The Impacts of War and Civil Unrest on the Mind of the Poet

As stated earlier, it was because Walt Whitman lived between the years 1819 and 1892 that he was present in the ravaged America that was the result of the Civil War. He worked as a nurse for wounded soldiers. Witnessing the destruction of the war was something that very much influenced Whitman's poetry, as toil often does for artists. Something was clearly wrong with the country that championed itself as the "land of the free". Whitman recognized this and chose to take an approach with his poetry that encouraged his audience to look inward during times of heightened turmoil. He chose to celebrate what educator Joe Countryman of Atco, New Jersey claims were "commonplace subjects," and more specifically, "common people" (2). Everyday people are often overlooked because they blend in amongst each other and there is a widespread cultural belief that to be "regular" is to be "boring" or "insignificant". However, Whitman knew this to be a fallacious idea because everyday people are each a part of the continuation of society; without the common person, there would be a gaping hole in the cloth that is our nation. His views on the everyday person are seen in his vivid descriptions in "Body Electric" of the people he witnesses regularly, which express that "[t]o pass among ... or touch any one" is sufficient enough for him to "not ask any more delight" and to "swim in it as a sea" (Stanza 4).

As Joe Countryman continues to explain, it was because Whitman chose to support regular people that he was named "the poet of democracy" (2). America itself is a democracy, operating on the consent of the governed. What led to the extensive unrest in the America that Whitman lived in was the fact that half of the governed were enslaved, their consent not considered,

and the meaning of “land of the free” remaining something of a lie. Whitman sought to challenge this condition during a time when tensions were mounting as a result of that very condition.

There needed to be a reform of perspective, and it was through the brilliance of Whitman’s cultural mindfulness that a new perspective could flourish. Someone as seemingly innocuous as a farmer was not innocuous at all. He was a cog in the spinning wheel of society. If his kind were to disappear, that spinning wheel would fail to function as it should.

Whitman’s poetic approach to addressing the unrest in the America of his time is something that many of today’s Americans can look to as an example of what can be done to resolve our current issues. Much of today’s political discourse tends to devolve into emotionally charged tirades exchanged via Twitter, or worse, violent outbursts that take place on our city streets and even in some of our suburban neighborhoods. It is always refreshing to see two or more individuals conversing maturely on the major topics of our day. It should be reiterated that without respect for those whom he debate or converse with, we cannot expect to reach resolutions on pressing issues. One may swipe out of their social media apps, feeling satisfied that they have just dropped their virtual microphone on an opponent who challenged them on a political issue, but how much of the semantic games that are played in today’s digital world actually contribute to real, nation-altering changes that advance our country? Whitman saw a similar sense of contempt in the America that surrounded him, and instead of choosing to pick fights with strangers, he channeled his disenchantment with such a wounded country into beautiful poetry that has inspired many since its origination.

Then and Now: A Look at Students' Research

Speaking of the “Body Electric’s” origination in relation to a distant time is what is explained in Atlanta University student Emma Ophelia Weathers’ 1936 masters thesis, which she dedicated to Whitman’s work in relation to the Civil War. What is fascinating about Weathers’ work is that she cites a number of “facts [that one] must be thoroughly acquainted with ... before one can know and appreciate the effect of the Civil War on Whitman the writer” (61). Weathers conducted extensive research for her thesis that was written almost one hundred years ago, speaking to the timelessness of Whitman’s poetry and how the perspectives of a student who discussed this poetry so long ago can be the same as the perspectives of a student exploring the same works today. The message of the poem has remained clear since its creation; America is *good*.

Weathers begins her exploration of Whitman’s enduring of the Civil War period by highlighting the pain he suffered as a result of his brother, George, having been injured during the war. It should be noted that “Body Electric” was written just prior to the onset of the war, but its words became all-the-more relevant following its composition, to the irony of its overall message. Weathers mentions an important fact that “arriving in Washington penniless, Whitman anxiously searched all the Washington hospitals for his brother”, only to find that his brother was not in Washington but was in fact at “the fort”, which Weathers previously mentioned in that particular section of her thesis was Fort Sumter, South Carolina (62). What started with the discovery of his brother there, healing from a wound, parlayed into a decision to engage in what was essentially volunteer work at the fort. Whitman chose to provide care for the war victims who were there, something which illustrates the sense of empathy he is remembered for having (63).

In a more recent masters thesis written by Karilyn Lindeen, a former student at Kansas State University, it is explained that it was because of the war's influence on Whitman that Americans referred to him as "the Good Gray Poet", a title befitting of his appearance and the overall energy that he exuded in the years closest to his death (Lindeen 2). Just as Emma Weathers did in her thesis, Lindeen also makes mention of the fact that Whitman's brother was injured and hospitalized during the war. This was an incident that made the weight of the war even heavier for Whitman, as for him, it was too close to home. It is often stated that when an artist experiences true hardship, they are motivated to create some of their best work. Whitman chose to propose his enlightened perspective to his audience and greater America in a way that encouraged them to see the humanity in those they saw as subhuman, and the inspiration that could be sparked from something as simple as the swaying of corn.

Many of today's Americans mirror the attitudes of those who saw the Civil War; jaded and unforgiving. In today's world, it is much easier to see the beauty in the smallest of things, because the smallest of things are so easily accessible to us, this being a result of technology. We must not take for granted these simple things, as Whitman would remind us to see their beauty as a blessing. "The flush of the known universe is in [us]," Whitman says ("I Sing The Body Electric"). As a result of reflecting upon the theses of both Emma Weathers and Karilyn Lindeen, it is possible to see the educational value of Whitman's poetry, and how, in varying eras of history, his work has been reviewed and analyzed with a close eye because of its lasting relevance.

Allen Ginsberg: Whitman's Greatest Scholar

Something that is particularly striking is the close resemblance that renowned poet Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" bares with "Body Electric". "Howl" was written exactly one hundred years

after “Body Electric” and reads as a sort of updated version of Whitman’s original observations. It is constructed in such a way that is very much like the free verse, descriptive, line-for-line structure of “Body Electric”, Ginsberg expressing in great detail the things he witnesses and has witnessed in what is a decidedly more pensive poem of his own. Ginsberg and Whitman were similar to each other, both gay poets concealing their identities for their own safety, describing the society they lived in as a means of making social commentaries they hoped would spark change. As Whitman’s writing feels inherently sexual, so does Ginsberg’s, whose words are a step further into the territory of the controversial, describing parts of the human body with an eloquent flippancy. This is seen in parts of Ginsberg’s “Howl”, an example being with a description of “how[ling] on ... knees in the subway and [being] dragged off the roof waiving genitals” (Ginsberg). It is as if Whitman laid a foundation for Ginsberg to continue Whitman’s original narrative.

Educator Bonnie Costello writes in her fascinating piece, *The Poetry of Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg*, about the public’s reaction to the poetry of Ginsberg, and how it resembled the push-back that Whitman received a century prior to the release of “Howl”. She explains that “in Ginsberg, Whitman’s optimistic vision has been severely tested by contemporary American realities,” pointing out the fact that America had changed quite drastically between 1855 and 1955, with Ginsberg’s choice of words, tone, and subject matter for “Howl” reflecting those changes (21). Just as Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* had been met with criticism from the America of his time, Ginsberg was ostracized by critics for having what Costello cites as “an utter lack of decorum”, but Ginsberg’s choice to push boundaries with his words was something done out of urgency to express visceral feelings (20).

Ginsberg was very much a scholar and devoted fan of Whitman's. Bill Morgan's *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg* conveys that Whitman was Ginsberg's "great personal Colossus of American poetry" (210). This is reflected in "Howl" and in many of Ginsberg's other works. Ginsberg saw himself in Whitman and thought it was necessary to follow in his footsteps by making critiques of the poetry of his era, which he considered to be quite uninspired. Morgan explains that Ginsberg "began to view poets who wrote in traditional forms as nothing more than trained dogs" (211). This sort of mundanity in the poetry of Ginsberg's time resembles the boredom felt by Whitman, who chose to shake things up and write in his bold new style of free verse, particularly seen in "Body Electric". Ginsberg did the same with "Howl", in his own somewhat cynical-yet-enthused way, lacing together a wealth of descriptive words that paint a vivid picture of the America he observed. To quote from "Howl"; I'm with you in Rockland / in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across / America in tears to the door of my cottage in the Western night" (Stanza III). These are the poem's closing lines, arguably the poem's most all-encompassing and most American. Just as Whitman is "with" all of those whom he observes in "Body Electric", Ginsberg is "with" all the people and scenarios he describes in "Howl", as it to mirror Whitman's original state of observance in a new century and with a new perspective.

Connections from Ginsberg to Whitman can be made in Ginsberg's 1956 poem "A Supermarket In California", which is expressed by Betsey Erkkila as a "nocturnal encounter with Whitman," as a result of the fact that "Supermarket" makes an explicit reference to Whitman. Erkkila cites the poem, zeroing in on its melancholy nature and its underlying message of the fact that time is unforgiving (189). Ginsberg addresses Whitman at the start of every new stanza

in his poem, asking him longingly; “what America did you have when ... you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of [the river] Lethe?” (“A Supermarket In California”). This seems to be a lamentation of Ginsberg’s on how he felt that America had changed since Whitman’s death. This message about time is meant to convey the point that in the hundred years it has been since *Leaves of Grass*, America has evolved in a way that Ginsberg does not exactly find perfect. This creates a sort of irony, as it reveals an account of our nation from a poet who lived in our nation’s distant past, but who, like Whitman, continues to be celebrated in the present day.

In today’s hectic state of being, the question may arise; what would Ginsberg say about our current society? Even more, what would Whitman say about it? Both are very similar poets who chose to reflect deeply on the state of the America around them, with hopes that their perspectives could enlighten and create a renewed sense of spirit in the disenchanted audiences they spoke to. This is an aspect of poetry that is quite powerful, and it is in such related poems like “Howl” and “Body Electric” that this aspect can be found. It would be exceptional if another poet were to come along in 2055 and continue the sort of observational pattern started by Whitman, a pattern of citing the America of each passing hundred years. Though time is unforgiving, we as intelligent and creative human beings have many ways of leveraging this reality, and it is quite possibly through the reflecting upon dated yet profound works poetry that we can do this. Today’s America can do this at any time with the click of a mouse, the touch of a button, or the sounding of a notification. What a privilege it is to be “notified” of our need to be mindful, and how ironic it is that so many of us seem to forget the importance of such a feature of modern life.

There is a sort of simplicity in “Body Electric” that is expounded upon quite extensively in “Howl”. The differences in the breadth of the two poems is something that is very much discussable. Whitman’s writing describes how much there is to embrace in the bodies of even the simplest of human beings; their movements, thoughts racing through their minds, and the way they shuffle to and fro during their everyday routines. Ginsberg’s writing reflects an America that has advanced past what it was for Whitman, its cities expanded with the endless flow of cars, planes, trains, nightlife, advertising, disposal of trash and the rejuvenation of littered spaces, ever-evolving technology, and what felt like louder voices. The vibration of this increased societal volume is felt in the almost frantic descriptiveness of “Howl”. Similar to how the flow of society and the functioning of the bodies Whitman witnessed made him feel “electric”, so too does Ginsberg feel New York pulsating through his veins in “Howl”. Costello explains a large portion of “Howl” “tells us what it is like to be carried up in the power of music ... momentarily overwhelmed by the power of these effects, tossed in the sea of emotion, going under [and] losing himself” (21).

Whitman’s Ability to *Feel*

Something more clinical in relation to Whitman’s use of the word “electric” as the poem’s central keyword is what is described by historian John Kinnaird as a possible reason for Whitman’s vibrant expression of sensation. Kinnaird writes in Roy Harvey Pearce’s *Whitman* editorial that it was documented that Whitman experienced a neurological condition known as “erethisia,” which increased his tactile sense beyond what is experienced by the majority of people. Because of this condition, Whitman remarked that he could feel “the flush of the universe,” as quoted by Kinnaird, something that was something of an unusual gift for Whitman, who could

feel what many others could not (25). It is possible that his condition led him to feel overwhelmed with a need to express, this overwhelming need resembling a sort of divine calling to write poems, which, though it supposedly caused in Whitman a sense of anguish from time to time, was crucial to the development of the skills he needed to become such a renowned poet.

Kinnaird's insights into what has been revealed to be Whitman's internal turmoil are another highly intriguing point of discussion in relation to the writing of "Body Electric". As mentioned earlier in this study, Whitman was a product of the Transcendentalist era, an era that emphasized personal autonomy and bred optimism. Whitman, by contrast, was very much "bipolar," as writer Alan Trachtenberg describes him, as a result of the fact that his internal sense of optimism was known to wax and wain as he passed his days. "The constant shifting and mutating versions of figures of self and other make disguise, evasion, and duplicity seem as crucial a part of Whitman's universe as the positing of oppositions" (Trachtenberg 126). A lesser known fact about "Body Electric" is that, for a duration of time before its inclusion in *Leaves of Grass*, it was untitled. Jerome Loving shares in *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* that it was Whitman who made "'electric" and "electricity" household words" (202). This is something that is particularly interesting because in today's world, these words are fairly common, but in Whitman's world, there was an of electrical atmosphere, giving his choice to use the word "electric" a bit of creative weight and freshness which helps to enhance the poem's effect.

By closely analyzing Whitman's work as a means of extracting its cultural and historical significance, as well as how the work ceases to become irrelevant as time passes, it is possible to embark on a journey of discovering a wealth of poetic purpose and educational value that was born of the mind of one of America's first great poets. America is a nation of momentum, of op-

portunity, and of great influence on the rest of the world, and its many gifted artists are a testament to that fact. Therefore, it is engaging to reflect on the nation's creative history, and Whitman's "I Sing The Body Electric" is a standout work among many other gems. If as a nation, we forget about the many contributions from our nation's history, we will suffer a great loss, perhaps without immediately realizing so. We must always honor the classic works of our history as a way to preserve our integrity as a nation, and to remember how fortunate we are to belong to it. We can become strained by the minutia of maintaining an ever-changing land that is routinely challenged by a bevy of conflicts. It is a blessing that artists like Whitman have existed through our country's history as they are a marking of our legacy, a legacy that has been firmly established and therefore, should be upheld. Analyzing "Body Electric" is sure to grant an insight on the mind of Walt Whitman, the America of his time, and the connections that can be made between Whitman's America and our current America, two places that may seem worlds apart but are inextricably linked to each other.

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