

Inspiring the Poetry and Identity of a People: Walt Whitman's Influence and Reception in the Middle East

The reception of authors and their works is vastly different throughout the world, and throughout time. What a critic or person feels and responds to in one country can be dramatically different for a critic or person in another country. What people are going through and struggling with, are also greatly influenced by the writers and works of their time. Many can find solace, hope, and inspiration in these works, even if they are not from their own country, or even their own continent. Human emotion and thinking are universal: therefore, works can transcend cultures, languages, oceans, etc. to reach an audience it can inspire. Walt Whitman is one of these writers, and his works have reached people throughout the world, and inspired them as well. Whitman's reception in America and in Europe is immense; however, it is interesting to look at some of the lesser looked at areas of the world to see just how far Whitman's messages have traveled. The Middle East in particular has poets and other various people who have been heavily influenced by Whitman, and are inspired by his beliefs and works. Two of the main countries in the Middle East that have been directly impacted by him and his works are Israel and Lebanon. These countries have also enhanced and modified their academic institutions over the years, and because of this, have greater access to literature worldwide, such as Whitman. This has also increased the translation of works of literature (particularly Western literature) so they can be accessible to the public in these countries. Many people in Israel and Lebanon have related to Whitman's beliefs in democracy and peace, and have used him and his works to speak for themselves and for their country, especially in times of political and social change.

In the autumn of 1947, the United Nations General Assembly made a decision on the partition of Palestine, which within a few months, led to the establishment of the State of Israel

(Laor 297). During this dramatic political change, Israeli's had become more than mere citizens; they had become pioneers of a new state entirely. This sudden identity change made many feel lost and confused; thus, Whitman was brought into play and became a source of inspiration. These Israeli poets were searching for a literary mode to express their experience as pioneers in the new state (294). These "modern Canaanites" saw that Whitman was the poet of the New America, and that they could learn a lot from him (294). Whitman's experience in the New America reflected the poets' own in Israel, and so, they used his works to help inspire them. They saw Whitman's passion for America and were inspired to have a passion for their new state as well (298). Thus, this created a sense of national identity and pride through their own kind of emerging literature. Other poets throughout Israel, particularly ones who were writing their poetry in Yiddish, versus Hebrew, also focused on these aspects of Whitman. They focused their attention on Whitman's modernism, and how he created a nationalist literary modernism, something that these poets wanted to achieve in their newly formed state (Rubinstein 431-432).

Though Whitman's America has several cultural differences and beliefs compared to Israel (individuality, eroticism, Christianity, etc.) he has still become an important influence on the cultural life of modern Israel (Greenspan 386). In the past few decades, Israel has sought to open itself up to the outside world. Culturally, this has meant absorbing the great works of other cultures and translating and adapting them into modern Hebrew (386). When the nation was being revived, Hebrew was being revived as well; Israeli's feel a huge pride in their language and a vital stake in its development. Therefore, the translation of an important writer into modern Hebrew has often been a genuine cultural event (387). During the mid-1990's, an Israeli poet named Simon Halkin (1899-1987) helped transform Whitman's influence in Israel. He is responsible for translating almost all of Whitman's works into Hebrew, thus making Whitman

extremely accessible to the public throughout Israel (Greenspan 389). Whitman's far reaching influence could not have been possible if it was not for Halkin. Halkin himself developed a respect for American democracy and saw Whitman as a major poet and extraordinarily useful in expanding the range of Hebrew poetry (389). Because of these translations, Israeli poets were able to look at and examine Whitman's works, and use them as inspiration for their own poetry. One poet, by the name of Uri Zvi Grinberg (1896-1981), called for a revitalized Jewish national literature that incorporated the same kind of energizing spirit that Whitman had brought three generations earlier to American literature (Greenspan 387). Grinberg's writing in 1928 helped establish Whitman's name and reputation in society during that time. Simon Halkin was also a major influence due to his translations of much of Whitman's work. According to Greenspan, it is hard to imagine any American literary figure who would have been more relevant to this generation of Israelis, and even Israeli author Moshe Shamir (1921-2004) stated that Whitman served as a sustaining tie between the "two sides of the ocean" (Israel and America) (390-391). However, Whitman's influence has seemed to deteriorate over time. The post-1967 generation has not felt the same inspiration as did the early pioneering generation, and he seems to have become a more foreign voice in Israel than he used to be (392). Though this unfortunate fact is true, it cannot be denied that Whitman's reception has embraced the poles of modern Israeli society (394). He appeals to all: socialists and nationalists, secular and religious persons, academics and journalists, etc. (394). Greenspan writes that "Whitman's richness and breadth will allow him to remain a continuing source of attraction to future generations of Israeli readers" (394).

Whitman's influence and reach in Israeli society has also been due in part to the expansion and rejuvenation of academic institutions in the country. These institutions of higher

learning have spread throughout Israel, and because of this expansion in formal learning, there has also been a significant growth in literary scholarship (Greenspan 392). The literary canon in these universities has also accommodated American literature including Whitman, Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, the transcendentalists, Emily Dickinson, Theodore Dreiser, T.S. Eliot, and more (Troen 170). Whitman in particular was valued because of his celebration of democracy, population diversity, and pioneering (170). These works were studied in their original format and in their translations. The new generation of post-independence authors studied them at the national university and they were able to formally encounter a literature that had previously been outside of the canon (170). Furthermore, because of the expansion of literary scholarship, there have been some major collections, specifically for Whitman, in Israel that have been created. One collection is the Feinberg Collection at the National and University Library of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Greenspan 394). Charles E. Feinberg donated the collection, which contains around 20,000 items, including papers, photographs, early editions of his writings, and secondary research materials (Feinberg-Whitman Collection). The other collection is the Freedman Collection at the Sourasky Library of Tel Aviv University (Greenspan 394). Florence Bernstein Freedman owned private files on Whitman and had her own private collection, which she donated to the university's library (Greenspan x).

The influence that Whitman had on Israel is immense, especially since many Israeli's sympathized with his views on pioneering and democracy, but Lebanon was also heavily influenced by Whitman as well. This may in part be due to the fact that Israel and Lebanon are in proximity of each other. One significant Lebanese poet is Ameen Rihani (1876-1940). Rihani's works are extremely influenced by Whitman, especially when it comes to form. He sought to

naturalize the use of free verse in Arabic, and so, used Whitman as inspiration (DeYoung 25). He asked his listeners to oppose wars and to criticize useless acts of courage and sacrifice for the sake of one's homeland, ideas that are very Whitman-like (26). Rihani also included women as part of his audience and wrote about reconciliation and peace, rather than war (26). He also translated Whitman's poetry in Arabic, so it could be accessible to Arabic speakers (28). Another Lebanese poet, Khalil Gibran (1883-1931) was also heavily influenced by Whitman's form. According to Shmuel Moreh, both Rihani and Gibran used free verse in order to express their pantheism and democratic emotions, because it is capable of expressing new thought, emotions, and imagination (Moreh 339). Like Whitman, they argued that poetry does not lie in meter, rhyme, or memorizing classical verse. They felt that those aspects restricted the poet's innovation, novelty, genuine emotions and freedom of thought because the old themes, diction, style, metaphor and techniques of classical and conventional poetry force themselves upon the poet (339). In order to give poets the freedom they need, it is necessary to discard the conventional meters and apply a new medium between prose and poetry (339). Rihani also applied Whitman's argument about poetry having the free movements of nature (340). By using this kind of approach, the poetry can become "nearer to the examples of various measures in nature, in which only law works in it, and that is the law of symmetry and balance" (340). Rihani also attacked the "lamenting, morbid and sentimental romantic tendencies in Arabic literature which he found more dangerous to the Arabs than any epidemic" (341). He called and aspired for a simple realistic, nationalistic, philosophic and humanitarian literature. It is in this way that Rihani again uses Whitman, as Whitman called for a departure from the literature of the Old World, which was feudalistic, tyrannic, melancholic and affectionate, and superstitious and evil (341). Rihani and Gibran both use Whitman as the backbone and main influence for their

writing, especially Rihani. Rihani's passion for incorporating free verse in Arabic is due to Whitman's use of it, and much of what Rihani is trying to write about and convey is directly inspired by Whitman as well. His influence is very strong in Lebanese literature and made the way for a new type of emerging poetry during that time.

Walt Whitman's messages, style, beliefs, and more influence countless poets all around the world. Even poets in the Middle East have been significantly impacted by Whitman's works and style, especially in the countries of Israel and Lebanon. Whitman provided inspiration and a sense of camaraderie for the poets during times of political and social change, such as the developing of the new State of Israel. These poets, and people, saw Whitman's messages and sympathies for pioneers and found that they could relate his works to their own situations. This started the influx of Whitman's influence in the Middle East, which then spread when most of his works were translated into Arabic and Hebrew. These poets could examine Whitman's writing and notice his form, style, diction, and themes and then try to mold them for their own experiences and for the experiences of their people and countries. Whitman's messages, though created mainly for an American audience, have transcended the boundaries of country, language, religion, and politics to truly captivate and entrance readers and writers of poetry to become inspired and to write and create their poetry and beliefs; the stories of themselves and the stories of their people.

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