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**MODERN PERCEPTION OF IMAGES CREATED IN WALT
WHITMAN’S “SONG OF MYSELF”, SECTION 6**
Bachelor’s thesis

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PREFACE

Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" with its section 6 has been discussed and analysed by poetry lovers and experts for many years since its publishing in the 19th century. Its core poetic image of grass has been in the focus of such studies. In the modern world of the Internet, cinema and TV, the image can be interpreted in new ways with new meanings. The aims of the present research are to discuss the role of "Song of Myself" in Whitman's works and its impact on its readers in the 19th century; to reveal the images depicted by Walt Whitman in "Song of Myself"; to conduct an experiment among university students in order to define images in "Song of Myself" (section 6) as they are perceived by young people in the 21st century, and to reveal if there are any influences of the Internet, cinema and TV on youth's imagination to interpret Walt Whitman's poem.

The paper includes the Introduction, Chapter I, Chapter II and the Conclusion. The Introduction presents an overview of critical reviews of Walt Whitman's life and poetry. Chapter I "Song of Myself" (section 6): Images and Perceptions" considers the imagery of "Song of Myself" (section 6) and its possible impact on the reader. Chapter II "Images of "Song of Myself" (section 6) in the Perception of Contemporary Youth" introduces the methodology of an experiment conducted in Narva College and describes its results. The Conclusion summarises the research and the main points of the analysis and comments on the hypothesis.

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INTRODUCTION

The Place and Role of Walt Whitman in Poetry of his Time

The life and works of Walt Whitman (1819-1892) have been studied for more than a century to reveal what makes his works so popular then and now. According to Beach (1994), in his article “Walt Whitman, Literary Culture, and the Discourse of Distinction”, Walt Whitman was one of the most distinctive poets of the 19th century USA and UK. In Beach’s (1994) overview of Walt Whitman’s life and works before and after “Leaves of Grass” (1855), he describes various thoughts and views of Walt Whitman (supported by Whitman’s own diaries and manuscripts), which are mainly the following: future readers are going to appreciate Whitman’s poetry and it will become popular for generations; Whitman writes simultaneously about both the celebration of popularity and about the sanctification of cultural rarity; Whitman’s contemporaries never accepted the concepts of the masses; there seems to be a genuine repulsion between a poetic and occupational life, and the rough rank nature of the democracies (Beach 1994).

Beach reports numerous interactions between Walt Whitman and his contemporaries, such as Emerson, Longfellow, Bryant and Whittier. That helps a modern reader to understand the mindset of other highly valued poets in the 19th century. The concepts of “poetry”, “literature”, “aesthetic” and “first-class” (linked to poetry, those who write and read it) are discussed in the article by merging the ideas of Walt Whitman and his contemporaries. Beach (1994: 79) underlines that “when Whitman does speak about an important American literature, it is almost invariably with reference to the future”. The reason Walt Whitman thought this way was his rebellious spirit and a provocative manner to write; be it essays, reviews, diaries or poems. As Beach (1994) suggests, Walt Whitman was concerned whether the people (or the masses) appreciated his ideas. Compared to his contemporaries, Whitman believed that those who would appreciate his works were the so-called first class, but in a spiritual, not material way.

Other authors (Miller, 1998; Hass, 2010) report about the significance of Ralph Waldo Emerson in Whitman’s life. Beach (1994) has also mentioned Emerson as one of the most prominent Whitman’s contemporaries. Emerson’s Romantic ode inspired Whitman into writing openly about sex and bodily pleasures, while Emerson himself warned Whitman not to publish any poems carrying sexual connotations, which

Whitman declined. This later resulted in Whitman's job loss. This fact can explain the way as Whitman being reckless due to an intense desire and a strong urge to write the way he felt like and the way he was identifying himself. Miller in his article "Sex and Sexuality" (1998: para. 8) has also referred to the words of Whitman: "I have not gain'd acceptance of my own time, but have fallen back on fond dreams of the future"; similar ideas, that Whitman felt his poetry was not appreciated in the 19th century have been revealed in the articles of Beach (1994) and Bauerlein (1986).

According to Bauerlein (1986: 1) such critics as John T. Irwin, Calvin Bedient, and C. Carroll Hollis have marked, that Whitman can certainly be considered as an oracular poet, meaning that Whitman was considered as someone competent enough to provide an adequate prognosis of the future. Supporting this outlook, Beach in his article (1994) has emphasised that Whitman referred to the future as often as he spoke about the essential parts of American literature.

To conclude, it can be said that Walt Whitman, apart from being one of the most distinctive poets of the 19th century, remains also one of the most contradictory poets. This has previously been revealed by such authors as Bauerlein (1986), Mancuso (2006), Kolbe (2009) and Ferstová (2011). Welty (1980: 45) adds that "acceptance of the view of the persona as mystic self, resolves most of the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies that have confused and perplexed so many critics". Miller (1998) believes that the poem is a spectacular conception of a mystical encounter. Hammah similarly (2014: 43) states that "we confess that it moves us, disturbs, will not lose its hold upon us". Characteristic features, which distinguish Whitman's poetry from any other of his contemporaries' are the following: extended free verse in long rhythmical lines with a natural, organic structure, simple style, unrhymed and unmeasured; simple present and imperative verb tenses; erotically scandalous terminology; contradictory nature; freedom of interpretation.

Walt Whitman's Life Reflection in "Song of Myself"

Concerning Whitman's life experience and the process of working on "Song of Myself", which lasted many decades, it can clearly be seen that there is a solid influence of Whitman's knowledge and wisdom in "Song of Myself" gained throughout the years of writing. Miller (1998) and Hass (2010) both reveal that it took Whitman nearly 30 years to name the poem "Song of Myself" in the 1891 version. Before, it had no name, then it was titled "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" and after that "Walt

Whitman". Hass (2010) additionally notes that Whitman changed the poem many times during his lifetime modifying the lines of "Song of Myself" to depict various stages of his own life. When the poem was finally named "Song of Myself" in 1891 (the final version of the poem), Whitman knew exactly what knowledge or wisdom he wanted to pass on to his readers. "Song of Myself" is also a part of Whitman's collection "Leaves of Grass", which Edlund (2017: 19) describes as a symbolic title "of the many sheets of papers that it takes before a final print is handed out to the public".

However, speaking about Whitman's claims and spiritual models, different authors (Miller, 1998; Hammah, 2014) have suggested that when Whitman writes about sex and the body, it can be considered as an evidence of Whitman's homosexuality. Considering this fact, it can be inferred that Whitman was at odds with the group of society who are Christian. One of the authors to point out Whitman's homosexuality was Miller (1998). Added to that, Hammah (2014: 33) explains that "Whitman was guilty of that horrible sin not to be mentioned among Christians". Moreover, Whitman was accused of homosexuality by Christians in public. Speaking about a literary critic, Hammah (2014: 33) argues that "Griswold's [the critic] intensely negative review almost caused the publication of the second edition to be suspended". Regarding the Christianity, Welty (1980) denotes that the persona in Whitman's "Song of Myself" does not consider the Christian notion of God, which can be interpreted as the persona being gay because it is a solid reason for a disagreement between Whitman and the Christian community. It can be assumed that there is a firm dissonance between Whitman's poetry and people who believe in the Christian concept of God.

Walt Whitman's Poetic Style and "Song of Myself"

Many authors (Miller, 1998; Beach, 1994; Hass, 2010) have revealed that Whitman's works are bound with the concept of freedom; they are grammatically non-traditional and novel in terms of language use. Miller (1998) explains that one of the main topics of Whitman's poetry is freedom which can be compared to democracy. This has also been implied by Beach (1994), Bauerlein (1986) and Ferstová (2011). Added to that, Hass (2010: para. 6 and para. 11) points out one of the most distinctive aspects about Whitman's "Song of Myself", which is "Whitman's choice to write the poem in extended free verse instead of a more traditional rhyme scheme" and "it is one of the first extended experiments in free verse in the English language". Whitman's language usage and poetic style were also underlined before by Beach (1994), Bauerlein (1986)

and Ferstová (2011). Curtis (2012) additionally reveals the role of language usage in Whitman's work; imagery that Whitman created using his unique approach in writing was essential in order to introduce readers to the atmosphere in the poem and in order to make readers feel related to the poem. Despite not corresponding to the customs of the 19th century poets, and not being valued as much as later, Walt Whitman established his own "highly distinctive poetic style" (Beach 1994: 79), due to its emphasis on both physical and spiritual beauty, openness in expressing personal and intimate thoughts, freedom in language usage, freedom in manners of writing, concerns about society and humanity revealed in a romantic way.

Moreover, the following three researchers emphasize the uniqueness of language features used by Whitman. Ferstová (2011: 41) underlines that "Whitman used free verse in long rhythmical lines with a natural, organic structure, simple style, unrhymed and unmeasured". A similar idea is expressed by Beach (1994), he states that the key point of Whitman's poetry, which makes it so distinctive, is the freedom in the language usage. Bauerlein (1986) adds that Whitman prefers the simple present and imperative verb tenses in his poetry. Bauerlein (1986: 3) reveals that "Whitman uses the simple present and imperative verb tenses" in his "Song of Myself", which can be considered as an evidence of Whitman's attempt to get closer to the reader. Bauerlein (1986: 2) states that Whitman "explicitly inflames" the lines from "Song of Myself", while Beach (1994: 84) also argues that Whitman's "highly distinctive poetic style" puts accent on beauty, intimacy, openness, freedom and romance. Moreover, Syvertsen (2016: 2) adds that in this way Whitman is remembered as "the great bard of democracy". It can be said that Whitman considered his poetic style to erase the borders that divided and afflicted the citizens (ibid). Bauerlein (1986: 3-4) also denotes that Whitman wants his readers to feel his presence or view him as a "bard", meaning that Whitman considered himself present whenever his work was in the centre of attention. This being said, there is an extremist position among few critics and teachers of literature that a reader must not neglect the fact poetry exists not only as symbols on a sheet but "as a living aural presence" (ibid: 4).

Additionally, the poem's peculiarity in the 19th century context lies in the fact of openly exposing the concept of sexuality to the masses, which resulted in gaining not much public support and recognition during that time. It "was criticized for the exaltation of the body and sexual love portrayed by the author" (Ferstová 2011: 41). Furthermore, "the poet proceeds to portray himself in a scene of self-induced sexual

arousal to the climactic point of orgasm” (Miller 1998: para. 6). Other authors, such as Beach (1994) and Bauerlein (1986) agree that Whitman’s “Song of Myself” would become accepted by the masses much later, and so it happened. Beach (1994) and Bauerlein (1986) also mention Whitman’s desire to inflame the lines of “Song of Myself” by putting accent on intimacy and romance. Moreover, Schweighauser (2007: 343) adds, that Whitman’s “sexually charged” imagery was well-known among his readers. In other words, it can be said that writing openly about sexual topics was Whitman’s style.

Whitman focuses more on individuals than on groups of people. Curtis (2012: para. 2) explains that “rather than depicting the harsh, hard working conditions present at the time, Whitman chooses to focus on the beauty of each individual in their social station”. That is what “Song of Myself” is about; it is about every person, and every person will definitely understand the poem in his/her own special way. After all, Beach (1994) claims that Whitman was concerned about the perception of the poem by masses while writing for (or about) them. Whitman thought that his work might be too futuristic for the society at large to understand due to the metaphorical word-usage and erotically scandalous terminology that was not used in the 19th century American poetry before.

While “Song of Myself” is previously claimed to be impossible to understand in a sole way, many authors have suggested the concept of contradiction in the poem. Mancuso (2006) and Kolbe (2009) both underline that Whitman’s “Song of Myself” carries contradictory implications, which is connected to the notion of Ferstová (2011), when the author mentions that Whitman gives his readers the freedom to interpret “Song of Myself” the way they are able to because there is no sole or right way to interpret the poem. Mancuso (2006: 149) points out that “dozens of schematic interpretations have been published in the twentieth century..., all assuming that a skein of narrative structure or thematic continuity can be read into or out of the poem. They vary widely and pursue remarkably divergent lines of thought”. According to the previous clarification of Mancuso (2006), Kolbe (2009: 1) agrees that “Walt Whitman fills his poetry with contradictions and inconsistencies as he explores different solutions to complex spiritual, social, and psychological problems”. Bauerlein (1986) also previously noticed that speaking about language usage in Whitman’s poetry, “Song of Myself” carries pluralistic meanings to express feelings and concerns. Beach (1994) writes about the pluralistic messages in Whitman’s poetry. Beach (1994) also concludes that Whitman valued freedom the most, which can also be applied speaking about the

writing style. Hence, it can be stated that Whitman's liberal way of writing created lots of different ways for readers to interpret "Song of Myself".

To expose the meaning behind Whitman's "Song of Myself" section 6, Bauerlein (1986: 7-8) states that section 6 carries a pluralistic message, meaning that the readers will not be able to describe the poem with a single characteristic trait due to its high sophistication level; Whitman places a hint into the line "What is the grass?", where there is no actual solid answer. Even though in the beginning of the answer to "What is the grass?" in section 6, the persona confesses that he does not know any more about grass than the child does, he later reveals five of his assumptions of what grass may be, and with each guess he penetrates deeper into the nature of the meaning of grass (Henderson 2008).

Readers are free to interpret the meaning of "Song of Myself" in their own way due to its metaphorically mystical nature. "Walt Whitman was the poet who liked leaving the reader in his own world of fantasy" (Ferstová 2011: 41). To support this idea (Miller 1998: para. 13) writes that Whitman wanted his readers to "find their own way through "Song of Myself"". Furthermore, Hammah (2014) states that in section 6, the persona asks the question of "What is the grass?" and proceeds to suggest various answers, such as "the flag of my disposition", "the handkerchief of the Lord", "the produced babe of the vegetation" or "a uniform hieroglyph". Hammah (2014: 61) also states that "the persona tells us that he does not know what the grass is any more than the child does, he employs the stative verb "to be" in his conjecturing, instead of employing the verb "might" or "may"". Therefore, it seems that all of the answers the persona suggests are viable possibilities of what grass is.

The hypothesis of the present study is that the youth of the 21st century would struggle to perceive the image of grass as it is mentioned in section 6 and rather construct it into images suggested by the Internet, cinema and TV in the 21st century. While readers interpret poetic imagery differently, Roberts (2011: 187) reveals that once the images enter "literary economy", media starts to shape poetic images to explain the meaning of poems in only one, usually the most common way. Hence, it is important to research viewpoints of readers in order to reveal whether the Internet, cinema and TV have an impact on the perception of poetic imagery among the readers. The present study is aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the Internet, cinema and TV impact the perception of "Song of Myself" (section 6) among contemporary youth?

2. How does the perception of “Song of Myself” (section 6) among contemporary youth vary?

CHAPTER I “SONG OF MYSELF” (SECTION 6): IMAGES AND PERCEPTIONS

1.1. Popular Poetic Images and their Perception in the 19th Century Society

Poetic images are mental pictures created in the mind of the reader while reading a poem. Richardson (2015: para. 12) explains that “image deepens, activates, invokes, invites”. Therefore, poetic imagery is an essential part of poetry that connects the mind of a reader to the content of a poem in order to make the reader feel what the author felt while composing a poem. Richardson (2015: para. 15) also adds that “ultimately, we might say that the close study of imagery is a way to escape, transcend, or re-contextualize the self”. Moreover, other researchers (Kao, Jurafsky 2012) have emphasised that poetic imagery can alter reader’s perception of the world and it can also provide a gateway to unique awareness which every reader perceives and interprets differently. It can be concluded that poetic images are the key to trigger the senses of the readers. However, poetic images never appear without a certain theme or context. This means that poetic imagery and themes in poetry are firmly connected, yet not the same. While imagery is a broad concept depending on readers’ personal perception, themes in poetry reveal commonly comprehensible (popular) images.

Throughout the 19th century, most popular poetic images in American literature were connected to the American Romantic Movement. Reynolds (2016) also refers to this period as the American Renaissance (1830-1865). Poets who are considered the scholars and representatives of the American Renaissance include Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickinson (Reynolds 2016). The most mainstream patterns manifesting in the American Renaissance according to Reynolds (2016: 1) were “nature’s miraculous beauty, spiritual truths behind the physical world, the primacy of the poetic imagination, the potential divinity of each individual, ultimate questions about death, God, and human nature”. Moreover, during the 19th century America many contradictions arose in the society which inspired American Renaissance poets write about their daily concerns. Reynolds (2016: 1) writes about “paradoxes of a nation that promoted both individualism and union, that touted freedom but tolerated chattel slavery, that preached equality but witnessed widening class divisions and the oppression of women, blacks, and Native Americans”. American Renaissance poetry can, therefore, be considered full of feelings, beauty, spirituality, liberty, democracy, anxiety and concerns. Poets during

this period managed to connect their own sentiments with problems in the society. Popular poetic images in the 19th century, hence, convey the sentiments of authors in contrast to the Age of Enlightenment (18th century), where the main focus of art was to express reason and logic rather than personal feelings or concerns. Forward (2014: para. 2 and para. 14) additionally clarifies that “the Romantics renounced the rationalism and order associated with the preceding Enlightenment era, stressing the importance of expressing authentic personal feelings” and “Romanticism offered a new way of looking at the world, prioritising imagination above reason”.

The greatest sources of inspiration for authors in the 19th century were nature, environment and children (Forward 2014). Forward (2014: para. 8) reveals that “children were special because they were innocent and uncorrupted, enjoying a precious affinity with nature”, this means that the poets of the 19th century were trying to view the world from the prism of a child in order to pass the sense of freedom to their readers through poetic imagery. Moreover, as suggested by Roberts (2011), imagery in 19th century poetry had particular referents in real life. Poets used to write about something that was meaningful or concerned them in their daily life. Additionally, researchers Jockers and Mimno (2012: 22) reveal some popular themes of 19th century American literature which are primarily the following: brotherhood, heaven, religion, prayers and refuge. These popular poetic themes reveal the imagery they convey, however, the knowledge of context is crucial in order to fully understand each literary work.

The tendency of popular themes in the 19th century shows that the authors brought frequently up the concepts of spirituality, community and religion. While these are the most common literary themes, themes that convey less common imagery are more dualistic and contradictory in their nature. Accordingly, Roberts (2011: 187) argues that “babies, birds, flowers and fires” in 19th century poetry are unique in regards of standing for various things other than themselves. This means that 19th century readers perceived some widespread images as common knowledge while some images were perceived in different ways because of readers’ divergent perception. Nevertheless, religion, God, brotherhood, and society were widely discussed topics in the 19th century society. Whereas eroticism, body, homosexuality, consciousness, etc were considered taboo topics, and therefore, left for readers to individually decide upon their imagery. The imagery regarding taboo topics was marginalised. Kao and Jurafsky (2012: 15) add that images the readers see in poetry depend on how they “project their own perceptions and interpretations” on their previous experience. Furthermore,

individual perception, which is caused only by personal feelings, can be considered to be most authentic because it is free from other influences.

Schweighauser (2007: 328) mentions “prairie” imagery in 19th century poetry, widespread among such authors as William Cullen Bryant, Herman Melville, Emily Elizabeth Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Ricou (1983: 111 and 109) defines prairie imagery as “the grassy sea” and “something utterly obvious, yet completely elusive”. Ricou (1983) also adds that writers describing the prairie scenery had to be skilful in turning illustrative devices into metaphors. This is another solid explanation for dualistic, contradictory and highly complex nature of 19th century poetry, and therefore, the images society perceived from poems. Apart from prairie imagery, Schweighauser (2007) reveals the notion of erotic imagery among 19th century female authors not only concerning the poetry of Emily Elizabeth Dickinson, but also regarding the poetry of such unlikely authors as Lydia Huntley Sigourney and Hannah Flagg Gould. Schweighauser (2007) also describes the imagery of eroticism in the poetry of Emily Elizabeth Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman. Additionally, “male and female writers use humour and irony to challenge codes of domesticity” (ibid: 325). This being said, 19th century writers discussed domesticity forming the public image of domestic life in the 19th century society (ibid). Finally, it can be concluded that 19th century poetic imagery was very symbolist and figurative in its nature leaving gaps for doubt, confusion and different interpretations.

1.2. Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”: Images

Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (1855) is a poem in Whitman’s poetry collection “Leaves of Grass” (1855). The poem consists of 52 sections, each representing 52 weeks of a year. Every line in “Song of Myself” is a complete thought. However, the sections can be grouped according to their rhythmic alternation. Egan (1987: 2) reveals that “sections 1-7, 17-25, and 44-52 consist primarily of direct assertions”. These sections speak about “I”, poetry and the Self (ibid), and provide a psychological alleviation to the reader and to the persona. While “sections 8-16 and 26-43 consist primarily of catalogues” and demonstrate a run-on structure in order to denote sharp contrasts between “cognitive propriety of the declarative sections” (ibid: 2). The poem has two relevant themes: “the persona's evolution toward an integrated personality” and “the reader's necessary involvement in that process” (ibid: 1). It can be said that the poem depicts two main

images according to its two essential themes: the image of persona and the image of something concerning life experience in each reader's mind. Therefore, all readers can find or see different imagery in the poem. Remarkably, the various and recurring motifs or patterns in "Song of Myself" can be considered an important part of literature during the American Renaissance (ibid).

Miller (1998) and Hass (2010) both bring forward the idea that Whitman in his "Song of Myself" equalised the body and the soul. Because of the equalisation of the body and the soul the poem carries various sexual connotations. When it comes to sexual imagery, however, it can also be called spiritual imagery because "Song of Myself" has the body and the soul in its focus during sexual encounters between the persona and other people. Sexual imagery in "Song of Myself", hence, does depict the spiritual side of sexual unification. Whitman praised the harmony of bodies, which he thought could be gained through sex. Other authors, such as Beach (1994), Bauerlein (1986), and Ferstová (2011) share the idea that Whitman's poems carry provocative, pluralistic and erotic images in their lines. While discussing the concept of homosexual love, in Whitman's "Song of Myself", Miller (1998) denotes that homosexual context can clearly be read and understood even without necessarily being gay. Miller (1998: para. 13) also adds that "in short, all readers can share, consciously and/or subconsciously, Whitman's omnisexual vision—omnisexual in the all-encompassing sense of embracing auto-, homo-, and hetero-erotic impulses". This being said, Ferstová (2011) argues that Whitman felt that all the readers had the right to their own fantasy and interpretation of "Song of Myself", and corresponding to that – the depiction of sexuality in the poem. Therefore, it can be inferred that people associate "Song of Myself" with their previous (sexual) experiences in life. As for homosexual imagery, Hammah (2014: 112) also concludes that "the persona's encounter with the twenty-eight young men bathing by the shore and the unmistakable eroticism of Section 5 (parting the shirt from his bosom-bone, and plunging his tongue to his bare-stript heart) has been cited as evidence, by critics like Vivian Pollak, for the homoerotic concept in Whitman's "Song of Myself"". Correspondingly, Welty (1980: 11) mentions that "the persona is not innocent, and the world he inhabits and writes about is not innocent, either". According to the description of such authors as Miller (1998), Hass (2010) and Beach (1994), it can be concluded that "Song of Myself" reveals such images as body, soul and a homosexual man.

Other reviews place significance on the celebration of God and brotherhood in the poem: “multiplicity of nature, in its smallest manifestations, is also embraced in the all-inclusive affirmations of God and brotherhood” (Miller 1998: para. 3). “The poem celebrates the freedom and dignity of the individual and sings the praise of democracy and the brotherhood of man” (Ferstová 2011: 41). These ideas are as well supported by Beach (1994) and Bauerlein (1986), who state that Whitman valued openness and freedom in his poetry. Concerning the part of “democracy”, Whitman expressed true democracy by writing the way he felt like, not adhering to the conventions of 19th century society. Kolbe (2009: 8) additionally explains that “Whitman’s poetry always begins with metaphysical claims and spiritual models and then progresses to the imagery of democracy, sex, brotherhood, and the body”. This exact idea of writing about brotherhood has previously been mentioned by other authors, such as Miller (1998) and Ferstová (2011). Miller (1998), Beach (1994), Kolbe (2009), conclude that among the images of “Song of Myself” there are such images as God, brotherhood and spiritual models.

Regarding the religious features in “Song of Myself”, Miller (1998) argues that both religion and science include the seeds that supply the author with sovereign might. However, Ferstová (2011) notes that Whitman excludes the concept of religion. Researchers’ opinions differ due to the fact that by religion Ferstová (2011) may have meant religious attributes, deities or rituals. While Miller (1998: para. 10) referred to the spiritual concept of human consciousness, pointing out that he [the poet] has “no chair, no church, no philosophy”. Additionally, two images of “Song of Myself” suggested by Miller (1998) and Ferstová (2011) are spirituality and consciousness.

Furthermore, Kurraz (2014: 17) reveals that significance of the image of grass in “Song of Myself” lies in a distinctive fact that the image of grass does not only symbolise grass but it “shapes a thematic reference to the poet's mercurial self” and depicts a spectrum of other images such as “soil”, “air”, “atmosphere”, “green leaves” and “dry leaves”. This means that while thinking about the image of grass, readers may see a variety of images, such as nature, their spiritual/higher self, soul, God, community, brotherhood, body or eroticism. The image of grass in “Song of Myself” is peculiar in terms of standing for many images at the same time. Moreover, the image of grass is unique because its symbolic meaning depends on readers’ perception. While it can be argued that some of the images in “Song of Myself” are clear and easily perceived (such as God, spirituality, body or eroticism), the image of grass cannot be perceived in one or

common way. Thus, it can be concluded that the image of grass is what gives the poem its depth; it is the reason why the poem is famous for its contradictory nature and is believed to be impossible for readers to understand in one way.

1.3. The Image of Grass in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (section 6)

Grass in Whitman's "Song of Myself" depicts a complex connection between humans, nature, body and soul. Ugolini (2010: para. 1) explains that "a single blade of grass represents an individual in society". Grass is a spiritual conception of how society at large functions concerning each human's purpose in the society. Ugolini (2010: para. 2) adds that "when the man ponders the blade of grass he is thinking about man (exemplified by the blade) and his purpose on the earth". Grass is our society; both jointly and separately along with everybody's individual life experience (ibid). However, Edlund (2017) argues that grass is a symbol of common people or the working class. Grass is a metaphor of what the higher class steps on without hesitation. Thus, Whitman implies that affluent people tend to disrespect common people. Edlund (2017) also suggests that Whitman considers himself an average person because he does not support the idea of hierarchy in society that is based solely on wealth. Since grass is a symbol of common people, it can also symbolise all the people "that go without recognition" (Edlund 2017: 19). However, Whitman believed in equality and that "all things are equal because of the same elements, atoms, which are the building blocks of the universe" (Huang 2017: 101). If to consider the fact that grass physically looks the same, then people whom grass represents in "Song of Myself" are definitely mentally different yet, of course, equal. Huang (2017: 101) mentions that "the equality in grass points to a democratic society which does not focus on the sameness of people, but rather on comprehending their diversity". This means that in a more equal society there are more chances to be different and accepted.

Since the image of grass represents a cycle (something connected, without an end or beginning), such as life and death, it also represents sub-cycles within life. The essential parts of living belong to sub-cycles of life and are divided into two levels: individual and collective (society). The individual level represents the person (a leaf of grass). The collective level represents connection of the person with other people (a field of grass). Grass, hence, functions as a bridge between all people; their lives, their problems, their joy, etc. Nevertheless, the image of grass as well represents people and their complex connection between their body and soul, and their eternal connection to

nature. Therefore, it can be said that grass is the connector of everything; it connects an individual to him or herself, and to society. Grass also connects life and death, and vice versa. However, in case of life and death, grass can only connect the sub-cycles of life because nobody knows about the sub-cycles of death to explain or interpret their connections. Figure 1 depicts the image of grass as the connector of an endless cycle between life and death with two level sub-cycles during life.

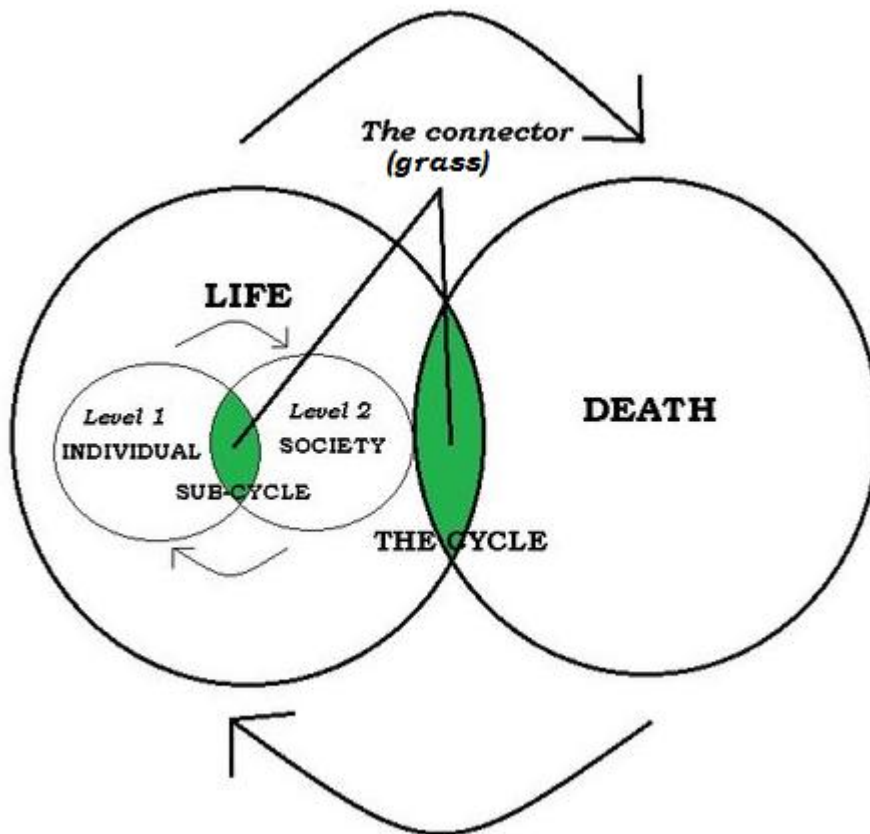


Figure 1. The image of grass as the connector of life and death in Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (section 6).

Even though there is nothing to discuss after death in terms of individual connections, death is described using the image of grass in Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (section 6).

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.
Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps. Whitman (1855: para. 6).

Whitman clearly hints on the life and death cycle writing “And here you are the mothers’ laps”, which means that the end of life is also the beginning of it, more

specifically, a rebirth. As for “uncut hair of graves” and the explanation of the image of curling grass, it can be suggested that the dead turned into grass, which means that they are still (or again) alive. Although Whitman believed into afterlife, it is not clear whether the existence included either a rebirth as grass (on the grave) or grass is simply an outcome of death; a connective tissue between life and death, which looks like an echo of the deceased.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier. Whitman (1855: para. 6).

Henderson (2008) clarifies that Whitman’s outlook on death with evident connotation of rebirth promoted visions of life after death as favourable and even wanted. Henderson (2008: 103) also adds that “Whitman proposes that the ground is designed to serve the dead, as the humus for their organic rebirth and as the entrance to their spiritual afterlife”. Accordingly, grass can mean the remnants of the dead and the new life, both at the same time. Remarkably, the poem begins and ends with the image of grass, which can be interpreted as an idea of eternal existence where grass connects both people and something divine. This being said, the image of grass may symbolise not just a connection between life and death (beginning and end), but reveal the unity of people and God.

While Roberts (2011) revealed that once poetic imagery enters into social media, the imagery will be interpreted in one common way for society to perceive. However, in the 21st century the perception of imagery in Whitman’s “Song of Myself” can be influenced by social peculiarities of the 21st century. The main singularities of the 21st century media lie in the fact of a broad usage of the Internet; the tolerance of different approaches towards life; and the variety of movies depicting distinct scenes from either fantasy, reality, or both at the same time. This means that the youth of the 21st century has more possibilities to find information about almost everything; hence, there are more tools to influence the perception and the mind of a modern reader. Syvertsen (2016: 17) writes that a modern approach of “Song of Myself” supports “a desperately needed reconsideration of the relationship between human bodies and the more-than-human-world in currently being undertaken by contemporary ecocriticism and its various sub-strata”. This means that grass in “Song of Myself” may be seen as an image of Mother Nature that is constantly being abused by the modern society. Furthermore, to conclude, this image may impact contemporary youth to reconsider their lifestyle in order to cause less harm to nature.

CHAPTER II IMAGES OF “SONG OF MYSELF” (SECTION 6) IN THE PERCEPTION OF CONTEMPORARY YOUTH

2.1. Introduction to the Experiment in Narva College

Since the role of media in the 21st century has increased the chances of social manipulation, there are several ways to persuade the masses into accepting and believing someone else's ideas. Firstly, according to Arifkhanova (2010) mass media uses either aesthetic or semantic information in order to impact different social layers. Aesthetic and semantic information can be found anywhere in mass media: be it news, movies or songs. Arifkhanova (2010: 3) explains that “aesthetic information does not submit to the logic and arouses certain mental state – emotions and reaction rather than reflects the reality. More stable, it creates an atmosphere in human consciousness” while semantic information is formed by “persuasion and interest and is addressed to logic and common sense”. Arifkhanova (2010: 4) also adds that mass media uses its interactive potential (most commonly the Internet and TV) based on audio and video content to “influence aesthetic perception of consciousness of the audience”. While TV can be considered to be the utmost tool to impact people in the sphere of politics because of its technical features (Arifkhanova 2010), it can also be suggested that the impact of either movies or songs on contemporary youth shapes their perception regarding attitude, worldview and behaviour. Additionally, Mahmood (2013: 77) reveals that “cinema is the most complex and powerful art form in the present world. It can help us to better understand our own lives, the lives of those around us and even how our society and culture operate”. Likewise, “they [the movies] can shed light on political and spiritual matters too and can provide catharsis and perspective and may open our eyes to new ways of thinking, feeling and pursuing our lives” (Mahmood 2013: 77). It can be concluded that the Internet and movies do shape the perception of contemporary youth in terms of varying approaches towards society and life. Moreover, it means that the influence of media should be evident in approaching and perceiving concepts or notions that were relevant in the past, such as poetic imagery in the 19th century, for instance. Hence, the current experiment in Narva College is aimed to reveal the possible impact of the Internet, cinema and TV on the perception of Walt Whitman's “Song of Myself” (section 6) among contemporary youth, and to examine the variety of their perceptions.

This being said, nature (the image of grass in Whitman's "Song of Myself") can be interpreted as a symbol of a connection between humans and God. The image of grass can be depicted as the image of The Tree of Souls (from the movie "Avatar" 2009). The Tree of Souls, according to the movie, functions as a connection to Eywa (the God) and also allows all of the Na'vi (the people) to unite as one. This means that through nature people connect to something divine, and they also connect to each other, especially to their ancestors. The Tree of Souls, therefore, works similarly as the modern Internet connection through the cable. Moreover, there is a special term for connection in the movie "Avatar" (2009) used to describe an interaction between Na'vi and other creatures depicted in the movie. This bond takes place when two creatures of Pandora (the planet) connect their queues. Regarding the unification of people, another significant symbolic approach to the image of grass is the modern wireless Internet connection (as in the movie "The Circle" 2017). The Circle is a social network that allows its users to see the world through other "transparent" users, who wear a tiny camera and speak to their audience. Everybody can go "transparent" and transfer their daily life for others to see. In this way, the Circle connected so many people, according to the movie, that it was possible to find anybody within approximately ten minutes. It can be argued that the contemporary youth would associate the image of grass with either the Internet (looking like a web, rays or wires), or to the ideas in other movies that represent a similar content about connection and being connected.

2.2. Views of Contemporary Youth: Images in "Song of Myself" (section 6)

The image of grass, being one of the core images of the poem "Song of Myself", is assumed to be the most complex image in its philosophical volume, and the most dependent on readers' interpretations of it. Moreover, its perception, being shaped by the personal life experience of the reader seems to be highly connected with readers' background. Regarding the modern young reader, the influence of the Internet, cinema and TV defines such a background in case of literary perception. Hence, an experiment was conducted in Narva College of University of Tartu to reveal how students of English faculty perceive the image of grass in "Song of Myself" (section 6), and how their interpretations of the image of grass can be connected with the images widely suggested by the Internet, cinema and TV.

The experiment in Narva College among the students of the second and the third year took place in April 2019. The participants were chosen according to the language

they study in Narva College, which had to be English because the poem had to be understood in terms of language among the contemporary youth. Students of the English faculty were firstly asked to read section 6 from Whitman's "Song of Myself", and then to write down the description of the imagery they perceived on a separate sheet of paper. Secondly, they were asked to transfer their ideas onto an experiment sheet (Appendix 1). The experiment sheet consists of a heading and an anonymous list of participants along with a space to write down their ideas. Each participant had an anonymous referent, for instance "Student 1". There were 15 people participating in the experiment, hence there were 15 "Students". The participants wrote down the imagery they perceived either using key words or short phrases. However, one student out of 15 participants did not write down any imagery ideas concerning section 6.

The student participants' views on imagery in Whitman's "Song of Myself" (section 6) can be grouped according to the key words (or the key words in phrases) that participants used to describe images in "Song of Myself" (section 6):

- eternity (mentioned by 6 students),
- life (mentioned by 5 students),
- death (mentioned by 5 students),
- nature (mentioned by 5 students),
- reincarnation (mentioned by 3 students),
- grass (mentioned by 3 students),
- child (mentioned by 3 students),
- old or aging (mentioned by 3 students),
- young or youth (mentioned by 2 students),
- connection (mentioned by 2 students).

The key words that were mentioned less than two times among the total amount of answers were not included into the list due to their exceptionality. However, the uncommon answers of the participants include such key words as *crops, woman, generation, darkness, gloom, spiritual life, fear, hell, life path, peace, universe, time as illusion, hope, and freedom*. Remarkably, there were two significant key words related to the hypothesis of the present research. Student 2 wrote about the connection which reminds a wireless Internet connection. Whereas Student 10 mentioned a tree of life which reminds the tree from the movie "Avatar" (2009). Nevertheless, Student 13 mentioned an eternal circle of life which reminds the cycle of life depicted in Figure 1.

Additionally, it can be concluded that the majority of participants (40% or 6 out of 15) perceived the image of eternity while reading section 6. It can also be applied that roughly 33% or 5 out of 15 participants associate section 6 with the images of life, death and nature. Whereas only 20% or 3 out of 15 students suggested they examined the images of reincarnation, grass, child, old or aging in section 6. Moreover, the minority of participants (approximately 13% or 2 out of 15) admitted to perceive the images of young or youth and connection in section 6. Slightly more than half of participants (circa 53% or 8 out of 15) revealed that while reading section 6 they perceived the images of crops, woman, generation, darkness, gloom, spiritual life, fear, hell, life path, peace, universe, time as illusion, hope, and freedom.

Chart 1 summarises participants' answers giving an overview of the number of participants and frequency of perceived imagery in percentages. Concerning Chart 1, the maximum amount of participants is 15, hence 100%. However, the maximum amount of participants depicted in Chart 1 is 8 due to the fact that 8 out of 15 students perceived various ungrouped imagery referred as "other" in Chart 1. Therefore, all the answers of 15 participants are distributed among either "other" or grouped according to their precise meaning, e.g. "eternity".

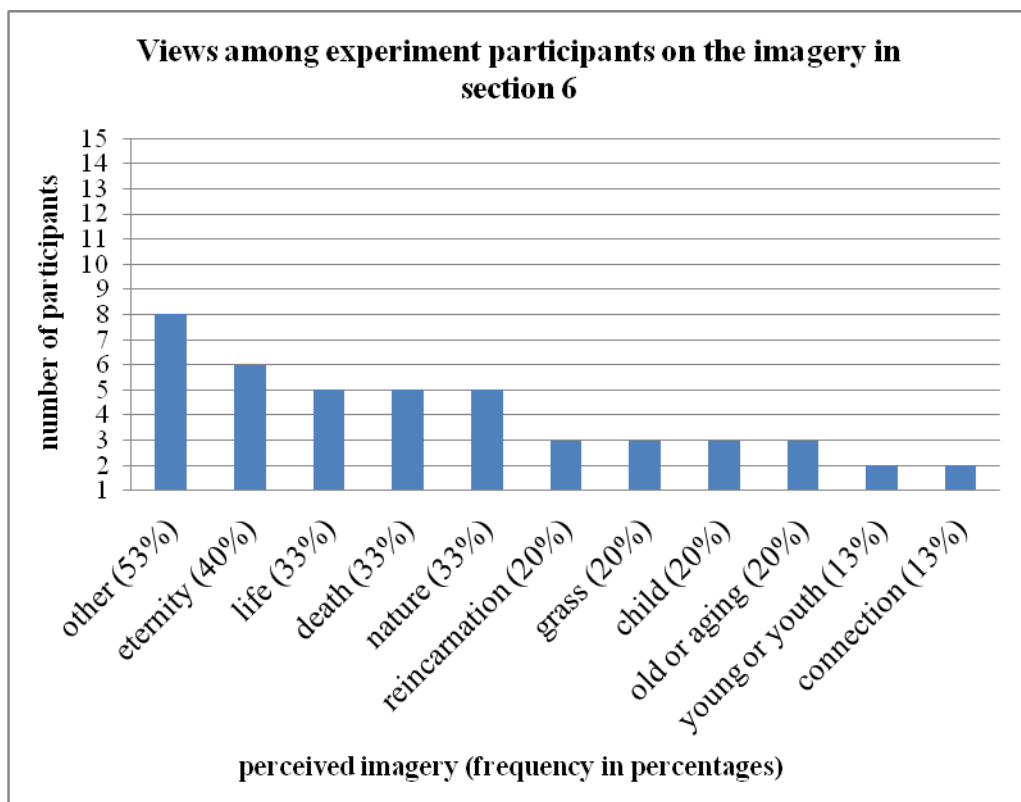


Chart 1. Views among experiment participants on the imagery in section 6.

Although there were 15 participants, 1 out of 15 participants did not express any perceived imagery when reading section 6. While 1 blank result out of 15 could have been excluded from the list, it would have changed the entire sequence of the results by shifting the percentages of frequency of the perceived imagery in an increasing manner. However, a blank result was also taken into consideration while calculating the ratio of frequently mentioned key words (images) and the number of participants in the present research.

2.3. Analysis of the Results of the Experiment among Narva College Students

While examining the results of the experiment among Narva College students it can be said that the Internet, cinema and TV do not considerably impact the perception of “Song of Myself” (section 6) among the students. According to the hypothesis of the current study, a modern reader was supposed to construct the image of grass from section 6 into the images suggested by the Internet, cinema and TV because of their solid impact on contemporary youth. However, the results of the experiment show that the majority of the participants perceived section 6 in the same manner as it was perceived in the 19th century, for instance suggesting the imagery of eternity, reincarnation, life and death (see pages 12-19 above).

On the other hand, the answers of two participants are notable in terms of the hypothesis of the present study. Firstly, Student 2 revealed an outlook of the connection through the Internet (*Wi-Fi*) and secondly, Student 10 mentioned an image of the tree of life. Both of these approaches indicate a modern perception according to the present study. Moreover, both of these images convey a phenomenon of connection: be it either via the Internet (like in the movie “The Circle” 2017) or via the tree of life (like in the movie “Avatar” 2009). Interestingly, Student 13 mentioned the image of the circle of life, which is presented in Figure 1. Even though Figure 1 focuses on the approach of section 6 as in the 19th century focusing on life, death and reincarnation, the image of grass as the connector (the core of the circle) of life and death in section 6 was previously not depicted as a cycle as in the current research. Additionally, Student 14 mentioned the image of connection, yet did not specify precisely what kind of a connection was perceived. However, the image of connection can also be interpreted as *web, rays, wires or roots*. Peculiarly, Student 9 expressed perceiving images no other student mentioned, such as “darkness”, “gloom”, “the dark side of spiritual life” and

“person’s fear”. Student 3 also suggested the image of “generation” which was not mentioned by other participants. These images were as well sole ideas suggested by Student 9 and Student 3. Moreover, as Student 10 wrote about the image of “hell”, it can be associated with the images mentioned by Student 9. Furthermore, it can be discussed which words exactly in section 6 made two participants perceive negative imagery. Outstandingly, Student 1 described the imagery in section 6 as in the form of *parabola*: “green and juicy grass” in the beginning, then “dark grass – old autumn grass” in the middle, and finally “crops, gold and beautiful” which means that section 6 can be argued to convey the most different images and feelings. Additionally, regarding further research, participants can be interviewed in order to find out the reasons explaining their perception. This data can be analysed to define and classify factors which influence the mind of modern readers in understanding literature in the 21st century.

It can be concluded that there is a well noticeable variation between the ideas of the perceived imagery while reading section 6 among the experiment group of young people, though there seems to be little evidence of the impact of the Internet, cinema and TV on the perception of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (section 6) among the experiment group of young people. However, it can be argued that by increasing the number of experiment participants the amount of answers with references to the images suggested by the Internet, cinema and TV in the 21st century would increase. For instance, in the current experiment there were 2 students out of 15 whose answers of the perception of the imagery in section 6 indicated some impact of the Internet, cinema and TV. If the ration increased proportionally, there would be 4 students per 30 whose answers would denote the influence of the Internet, cinema and TV, and etc.

CONCLUSION

The role of “Song of Myself” in Walt Whitman’s works, and its impact on its readers in the 19th century have been in the focus of many studies (e.g. Bauerlein, 1986; Beach, 1994; Miller, 1998; Hass, 2010). Walt Whitman remains one of the most distinctive poets of the 19th century USA, and is widely known among the literary specialists and critics in other countries. Walt Whitman’s poetry is not only grammatically non-traditional and novel in terms of language use in the 19th century, but it is also outstandingly complex in its meaning. “Song of Myself” can be argued to be one of the most contradictory poems written by Walt Whitman. Due to the contradictory nature of “Song of Myself”, its impact on the readers in the 19th century was prominent because everybody could find something according to their viewpoint or experiences in life depicted in the poem. Therefore, the imagery in “Song of Myself” varies and includes such images as eternity, reincarnation, life and death. Moreover, “Song of Myself” with its section 6 can also be considered scandalous during the 19th century because apart from conveying the images that were accepted in the 19th century society, the poem was argued to depict several kinds of sexual imagery. Hence, Walt Whitman was frequently accused for writing “Song of Myself”. Finally, the image of grass, being directly connected with such philosophical issues as life, death and love, is dependent on readers’ individual perceptions. In order to reveal the perception of the image of grass in “Song of Myself” (section 6), and to reveal how the interpretations of the image of grass can be connected with the images widely suggested by the Internet, cinema and TV in the 21st century, an experiment was conducted among students of Narva College of University of Tartu.

The results of the experiment show that many participants perceived the imagery in section 6 as it was perceived in the 19th century. However, there were 2 out of 15 participants’ answers that were remarkable in terms of their reference to the Internet, cinema and TV-suggested imagery according to the present research: the image of the Internet connection (*Wi-Fi*), and the image of The Tree of Life.

The conducted research about the perception of the image of grass in the poem “Song of Myself” (section 6) in the 19th century, when the poem was published, and in the 21st century among the group of students of Narva College, is of practical value. The research helps to understand how the perception of 19th century poetry (with the

example of one of the most controversial poems of the 19th century) has changed in the context of the modern world along with the increasing impact of the Internet, cinema and TV on the minds of young people. The study proves that this influence does not dramatically change the perception of poems with such deep philosophical messages as “Song of Myself”. However, as a follow-up research, there might be a wider-scale study conducted to make the observation statistically more significant by involving more respondents. Their answers would define and help to classify factors which influence the mind of modern readers in the 21st century.

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Bakalaureusetöö teema on „KAASAEGNE LÄHENEMINE LOODUD KUVANDITELE WALT WHITMAN-I TEOSES „LAUL ISEENDAST”, 6. JAGU”. Bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on analüüsida Walt Whitman-i teoseid ja „Laulu iseendast” 19. sajandi kontekstis ning seejärel viia läbi katse tänapäeva noorte inimeste seas, et selgitada välja, kuidas lähenetakse 21. sajandi kontekstis teosele „Laul iseendast”, 6. jao näitel. Töö autor püüab vastata kahele uurimisküsimusele:

1. Kuidas mõjutab internet, kino ning TV tänapäeva noorte inimeste lähenemist teosele „Laul iseendast” (6. jagu)?
2. Mil viisil erineb tänapäeva noorte inimeste lähenemine teosele „Laul iseendast” (6. jagu)?

Uurimistöö on jaotatud neljaks osaks. Sissejuhatuses on esitatud tuntud arusaamad, mis käsitlevad Walt Whitman-i luule ning kirjaniku enda rolli 19. sajandi kontekstis, Walt Whitman-i eluloo peegeldust tema teoses ning „Laulu iseendast”, selle keelelisi ja muid iseärasusi.

Esimeses peatükis on tutvustatud käesolevas bakalaureusetöös käsitletavaid teemasid, nagu näiteks tuntud kirjanduslikke kuvandeid ja lähenemist neile 19. sajandil, sageli esinevaid kuvandeid Walt Whitman-i teoses „Laul iseendast” ning täpsemalt Rohu kuvandit Walt Whitman-i teoses „Laul iseendast” (6. jaos).

Teises peatükis on kirjeldatud Tartu Ülikooli Narva kolledžis toimunud katse meetodikat ja läbiviimist. Katses osalesid 2. ning 3. kursuse inglise keele erialal õppivad Narva kolledži tudengid, kokku osales katses 15 noort inimest. Samuti on teises peatükis välja toodud toimunud katse tulemused ehk kuidas lähenevad tänapäeva noored inimesed teosele „Laul iseendast” (6. jagu). Lisaks on teise peatüki lõpus läbi viidud katse tulemuste analüüs. Uuring näitas, vastates esimesele uurimisküsimusele, et interneti, kino ning TV mõjul ei ole otsesest seost tänapäeva noorte inimeste lähenemisele Walt Whitman-i teoses „Laul iseendast” (6. jagu). Teisele uurimisküsimusele vastates selgus, et tänapäeva noorte inimeste lähenemine teosele „Laul iseendast” (6. jagu) erineb olulisel määral: vastajate seas esines kaheksal korral 15-st erinevat lähenemist teosele.

Bakalaureusetöö kokkuvõtteks võib järeldada, et vaatamata olulisele erinevusele vastajate lähenemises „Laulule iseendast” (6. jaos) ei õnnestunud uuringu käigus leida põhjapanevaid tõendeid interneti, kino ning TV mõjust tänapäeva noorte inimeste

lähenemisele Walt Whitman-i teoses. Samas tuleb märkida, et kahel korral 15-st õnnestus leida interneti, kino ning TV mõju tänapäeva noorte inimeste lähenemisele „Laulule iseendast” (6. jaos) lähtudes käesolevast uuringust. Võib lisada, et uuringu katses osalenud 21. sajandi noored inimesed lähenevad märkimisväärselt suurel määral Walt Whitman-i teosele sarnaselt nagu seda tehti 19. sajandil. Tuleb nentida, et on ebamõistlik kasutada käesoleva töö tulemusi üldistavate järelduste tegemiseks. Lisaks võib tuleviku uuring olla seotud katse taasloomisega muu valimi hulgas ning seejärel seoste leidmisega antud töös. Samuti võib tulevases uurimistöös keskenduda seoste leidmisele valimis sarnaselt vastanud noorte inimeste hulgas, et selgitada välja millised tegurid mõjutavad sarnaselt tänapäeva noorte inimeste lähenemist „Laulule iseendast”.

APPENDIX 1

Appendix 1

Experiment in Narva College

Views of Contemporary Youth: Images in the "Song of Myself" (section 6)

1. Student 1. ~~green and juicy grass~~ green and juicy grass in the beginning. dark grass - old, autumn grass, grass that can feed a woman and a child - crops, gold and beautiful.
2. Student 2. about connection in our life just like WiFi
3. Student 3. generation
4. Student 4. grass as something eternal, infinite.
5. Student 5. grass is like the life, never dies
6. Student 6. life is like nature is eternal.
7. Student 7. ?
8. Student 8. life-death; young-old - eternity.
9. Student 9. darkness; gloom; the dark side of spiritual life;
10. Student 10. ^{person's fear} death, hell, life, youth, aging, loss of life, lifepath
11. Student 11. rebirth, death, nature, peace, universe
12. Student 12. life, death, aging, child, & never die
13. Student 13. Reincarnation, eternal circle of life time as illusion
14. Student 14. nature, reincarnation, connection, hope, life, death, child
15. Student 15. nature, life, freedom

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(date of birth: 07.03.1996)

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MODERN PERCEPTION OF IMAGES CREATED IN WALT WHITMAN'S "SONG OF MYSELF", SECTION 6

Supervised by Niina Raud

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Narva, 22.05.2019