In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century an Arab renaissance occurred in Arabic literature. Arab writers in the Arab world and in the Americas began to boldly experiment with various forms and themes and to assert their ethnic as well as national identities. Arab writers found themselves compelled to be open to modern trends that were already revolutionizing Western literature as well. One of those writers was Gibran Kahlil Gibran, who was born in Lebanon in 1883 and migrated to the United States. Gibran, along with other members of the Pen League, shared the common traits of being receptive to new ways of expressing their creativity. They were also known as the Syro-American School because most of them came from Lebanon and Syria. This group of writers lived in the United States and was exposed to modern American literary works.

The most famous member of the group, Kahlil Gibran, was influenced by Walt Whitman. Suhail Hanna, in an essay entitled “Gibran and Whitman: Their Literary Dialogue,” states that Whitman inspired Gibran for the creation of new techniques in Arabic poetry. Other critics have also noticed thematic and technical similarities between Gibran’s work and that of Whitman. However, Whitman’s main inspiration for Gibran is not merely one of themes and style. Whitman’s poetics of nation-building inspired in Gibran the need for poetic and social reform in the Arab world. As an Arab immigrant living in the West and writing extensively in Arabic, Gibran had a patriotic purpose of addressing the Arabs and specifically, the Lebanese people. Gibran as a writer

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belonged to the first wave of Arab American immigrants who were empathizing with Arabs’ aspirations in renouncing foreign rule and in being considered as nationals of the Ottoman Empire. This small group living in a strange land was like many Arabs refusing the Ottoman rule. The group of expatriate poets, however, found their position like their fellow nationals in the Arab world unable to act on their belief of achieving self-autonomy. His purpose was to uplift not only Arabic poetry but also Arab individuals from their deplorable state.

Gibran was exposed to the works of Walt Whitman by reading an article on Whitman written by Richard Hovey entitled “Decadence-or Renascence.” In this essay Hovey praised Walt Whitman and Edward Carpenter for their poetry and individuality and considered them as part of the vers libre. The effect the essay left was remarkable since the work of Walt Whitman was especially prevalent and influential in Boston where Gibran was staying in the 1890s. Later on Gibran embraced the principles laid down by the article and made them fundamentals in his poetry. Gibran was deliberately choosing Walt Whitman as a poet to be emulated. After he came back to New York, John Oppenheim asked him to become a member of the advisory board of a new magazine entitled, Seven Arts. The magazine wanted American writers to carry on the spirit of Whitman and especially the theme of regeneration that Whitman believed could be facilitated by literature.

There are a number of distinct qualities in Whitman’s later writings that can be

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2 Gibran, vers libre French word for “free verse” and means throwing off all traditional forms of rhyme and meter, p. 57


detected in the works of Gibran. Whitman’s suggestive style, spiritualized idealism, and intense political interests are attributes that we find in the works of Gibran. In style, both poets were revolutionary in establishing a new way of expressing their themes. Gibran, like Whitman used the prose poem, which became Gibran’s medium of expression. A prominent feature in their poetry is mysticism and in their reference to God, both see Him in his creation. For example, in “Song of Myself” Whitman sees God in His creation and especially in man: “I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least, / Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.”\(^5\) In a poem by Gibran entitled, "Song of the Soul," the persona says, “What human dares sing in voice/ The song of God?”\(^6\) Similarly, in *The Prophet*, Gibran sees God through His creation. He says to an old priest: “You shall see Him smiling in flowers, / Then rising and waving His hand in trees.”\(^7\)

The poets, moreover, believed that the poet should share with his fellowmen their feelings and reactions to the prevalent social and political times. It is imperative to consider the circumstances that surrounded each poet individually to understand the impact that certain historical moments left on their poetry and those circumstances that aid in understanding the closeness of the two poets’ aesthetics.

The prevalent social and political atmosphere shaped Whitman’s belief that a modern, democratic age needed an appropriate method of writing English poetry.

Reynolds in his essay, “Politics and Poetry: *Leaves of Grass* and the Social Crisis of the

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\(^6\) Kahlil Gibran, "Song of the Soul," *The Treasure Writings of Kahlil Gibran*. (New York: Castle Books, 1980), pp42-3. All other poems by Gibran will be taken from this anthology.

1850s,” notes that the prevalent political corruption and the collapse of the party system in the 1850s in America clarified for Walt Whitman the belief in the power of the individual to change his social environment. Whitman saw his role as a member of society and as a poet playing the role of a self-appointed rescuer from the stagnation of the deteriorating situations that surrounded him. In “Song of Myself” as well as in other poems Whitman emphasized the belief that democracy is the hope for a nation and its citizens.

Whitman and Gibran both had a belief in the power of the individual in initiating change, and it was evident in their early poems. It was only after social situations deteriorated that the poet took his position as a bard in the healing of a nation. It is Whitman’s belief in the idea of nation building that mostly attracted Gibran. Whitman believed that a nation state should encompass a unity of crowds bounded by the principles of equality and vibrating with diversity. He further emphasized the idea of movement and continual construction of a compact organism in which democracy molds together. What made the model of Whitman more appealing for Gibran is because Whitman believed that the poet could use that model for every nation suffering from deterioration.

Gibran conceived of himself as a bard and felt compelled to react to the deplorable situations that dominated the Arab world in early twentieth century. At that time, the Arab world was greatly suffering from an oppressive Ottoman rule. Though the Ottomans were Moslems by faith; Arab Moslems and Christians alike equally hated

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them. The consequences of their rule left the majority of the Arabs poor, sick, and illiterate. Moreover, the Ottoman Empire was constantly engaged in war, and this meant a lot of recruiting of young Arab men to fight in foreign lands for extended periods of time. Their strict rule meant a lot of repression. Any form of resistance usually ended up by severe punishment and eventually the death penalty became a standard for any dissenter. Even Arabs who were living outside the Arab world were not immune from any retaliation.

In his poetry, Gibran reacted immediately to the difficult political situations in the Arab world by writing poetry. His poem, “Dead Are My People,” was written at that time of famine that was a sequence of being under the neglect and oppression of the Ottoman rule. In this poem Gibran begins with lamenting the appalling state of the daily death due to famine:

Gone are my people, but I exist yet,
Lamenting them in my solitude…
Dead are my friends, and in their
Death my life is naught but great
Disaster.\(^9\)

In the poem, Gibran begins with a patriotic desire to help them because he can not accept the death of people or more precisely for him as "my people." Unfortunately, his lamentation is done in solitude because his efforts could not be accomplished as there were many political obstacles in even simple tasks as providing charitable aid to those in need at that time. As it is mentioned in the poem, their death is not only the result of

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"hunger" because "he who did not perish from starvation was butchered with the sword."
The whole poem builds on a complex set of images of despair in an attempt to justify for himself the inability and almost impossible task of offering aid both humanitarian and emotional. Nevertheless, he goes through a period of self-questioning on his specific role in this crisis. He follows by comparing his situation to those of his people. In this stanza, states that he is because of being away in a distant land he is immune from physical death, and in the following stanza, he comments on their death as "painful and shameful" while, he is leaving "in plenty and in peace." Yet, this good standard of living provides him with no comfort because the tragedy unsettled him and he can no longer be happy in his current state. In fact, he feels that his burden would probably be less if he shared with them their agony and "when he dies with them innocent with his fellow innocents." He moves on to a self-reflexive meditation on his role:

What can an exiled son do for his
Starving people, and of what value
Unto them is the lamentation of an
Absent poet?\textsuperscript{10}

His frustrations comes from his inability as an individual to exert any influence on the course of events even when it comes to providing basic human necessities such as food. In the poem, Gibran wishes to transform himself to "an ear of corn," "a ripe fruit," or "a bird flying" to feed them. Unfortunately, as an immigrant he feels that he is as incapable of providing help as they are in their ability to solve their dilemma. The repetition of words related to exile and absence are standard diction in most of his poems and prose.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p. 219.
He feels under obligation to solve problems in his native country, and at the same time is unable to do so.

The poet responds to people trying to calm him by saying that the situation of his people is nothing new in the history of humanity, and Gibran answers that the tragedy is more than famine and describes it as "a crime conceived by the heads of [s]erpents." He also believes that their death is due to the fact of their submission, an almost sacrificial death like that of Jesus Christ because in the end their death was a result of them being "peace[m]akers."

Ironically, the poem finally ends with a religious plea to his countrymen to contribute in saving their starved countrymen in Lebanon instead of resorting to others for help. The plea by Gibran comes from his belief that fellow countrymen should be able to help themselves, and it also carries the connotations that aid should also be in the form of political support because their troubles are a result of political oppression.

It is an important characteristic of a poet and especially one who assumes a prophetic role to show his sympathy to people in need. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman shows his sympathy for the poor people of his times as well:

I am he bringing help for the sick as they pant on their backs,

And for strong upright men I bring yet more needed help.\textsuperscript{11}

Unlike Whitman, Gibran was not mild in urging others to join him in a quest for a better life and a better nation. Whitman when addressing individuals in "Song of Myself" says:

A call in the midst of the crowd,

My own voice, orotund sweeping and final.

\textsuperscript{11} Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself." P. 420
Come my children,

Come my boys and girls, my women, household and intimates,

Now the performer launches his nerve, he has pass’d his prelude on the reeds within.\(^{12}\)

Whitman also offers himself for the trodden man and says:

I seize the descending man and raise him with resistless will,

O despaired, here is my neck,

By God, you shall not go down! hang your whole weight upon me.\(^{13}\)

Whitman sees hope for fellow citizens through a belief in political reform and upholds democracy as an ideal to aspire to for individuals. In “One's-Self I Sing”\(^ {14}\) Whitman states: "One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person./ Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse." However, Gibran, who was assuming a prophetic role as a poet, was more passionate in addressing social and political problems. In his poem, “My Countrymen,” Gibran commences by rebuking his fellow countrymen and by stating his difficult mission of awakening them to realizing their political situation\(^ {15}\):

What do you seek, my countrymen?

Do you desire that I build for

You gorgeous palaces, decorated

\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 421

\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 420.


With words of empty meaning, or
Temples roofed with dreams? Or
Do you command me to destroy what
The liars and tyrants have built?
Shall I uproot with my fingers
What the hypocrites and the wicked
Have implanted? Speak your insane
Wish\textsuperscript{16}

Gibran in "My Countrymen" is addressing an important topic not only in Middle-
Eastern politics but also in Arabic literature as well. A great deal of Arabic writing in the
past and because of the revival of classical themes and ways of composition in the
twentieth century is composed of highly elevated poetics. The themes as well as the
techniques emphasized that it should be pleasing to the ear, mellifluous, and most
importantly should focus on praise to the point of hypocrisy. It was a well-known fact
among writers in the Arab world that those who wrote works supporting or praising
governments usually earned a good reputation. Gibran's group of immigrant poets had
deliberately decided to change technique in order to change themes and distinguish
themselves from other writers in the Arab world.

Gibran's tone in "My Countrymen" is a sarcastic one. He makes fun of literary
conventions that are considered as standard in Arabic literature. In terms of technique, he
parodies their uses of ornate words and phrases to make fun of their appeal for highly
elevated diction. The great majority of his sarcasm is directed to the subject matter of
these poems. He states the contradictions that an Arab poet has to address when writing

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., pp184.
about national themes in particular. He wonders whether he should "sing and weep at the same time?" to please politicians and common people. For Gibran felt that in order to address national problems one should not fill his countrymen's ears with false praise and "purr like [t]he kitten," but he should "roar [l]ike the lion." He knows, however, the reason behind their inability to exert action, for in response to his cries they refused to wake up from their slumber because they were "locked in fear."

He also expresses his disillusionment in sympathizing with his fellow countrymen because they are extremely passive and they do not share his beliefs in the beauty of nature. Similar to Whitman, Gibran urges his countrymen to play a stronger role by observing nature. Therefore, Gibran sees the deplorable social circumstances as a natural outcome of their own neglect in observing the beautiful in nature. He chants:

And I said unto you, “Let us climb
To the mountain top and view the
Beauty of the world.” And you
Answered me, saying, "In the depths
Of this valley our fathers lived,
And in its shadows they died, and in
Its caves they were buried. How can
We depart this place for one which
They failed to honour?"17

It was part of the sensitivity to the prevailing turbulence of the times that the country was undergoing that infused Gibran and Whitman to turn into nature for a cleansing effect.

However, Gibran realizes that an appeal to reform is pointless. Instead of going to

17 Ibid., pp186.
nature for a source of rejuvenating their souls, his countrymen have found another
religion in falsehood and hypocrisy. He says:

Hypocrisy is your religion, and
Falsehood is your life, and
Nothingness is your ending; why,
Then, are you living? Is not
Death the sole comfort of the
Miserables? 18

Gibran's rejection of his countrymen is based on the fact that he can not change them no
matter how hard he tries to call them to revolutionize their ways of thinking. He feels
desperate that even though their living conditions are miserable, they are not able to
change and decide to keep on living the same way they have been entrapped in for
generations. He reaches a point where he believes that death is a better solution for those
who are under their own spell of intoxication. The poem also ends differently from the all
encompassing and loving embrace of Walt Whitman. Whitman in "Song of Myself" does
not feel despair and encourages small steps. Whitman states:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you. 19

Instead Gibran ends his address by loathing the inability of the people to take any action
to help themselves and seek a better life:

18 Ibid., pp188.

19 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," p. 431
I hate you, my countrymen, because
You hate glory and greatness. I
Despise you because you despise
Yourselves. I am your enemy, for
You refuse to realize that you are
The enemies of the goddesses.\(^{20}\)

Gibran found it fundamental in his mystical work that a union with God should necessarily come through attaining spirituality, an idea that he found appealing in Whitman. In this poem, however, his frustrations are real because any appeal seems to fall on deaf ears. He acknowledges that his people have been under superstitions for an extended period of time that they seem to have forgotten the glory of earlier times, a magnificence that emanated from their spirituality. There is also a third poem that along with "My Countrymen" and "Dead are My People" appears under the section entitled Secrets of the Heart. In this poem Gibran discusses the possibility of engaging in a relationship with the houri, traditionally defined in Arabic and Islamic culture as a beautiful woman in heaven. Thus, the poem entitled, "The Enchanting Houri"\(^{21}\) is his plea for a relationship that "owns" but not possesses" and as "a companion/ Who makes not slaves, nor will become/ One?" because he wants to be free.

Gibran’s idea of nation building though influenced by Walt Whitman is different because of the great disparity in the circumstances and situations prevalent


in the Arab world. Gibran was inspired by Whitman's appeal that people should be able to benefit from each others' experiences. Whitman's "Passage to India" testifies to the adoration and respect that Walt Whitman had for the East which he considers as the cradle of human civilization and God's purpose for "the Earth to be spann'd, connected by network, / The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,/ The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,/ The lands to be welded together." Gibran also held this belief but found that political chaos destroyed the spirits of his people. Moreover, one feels a sense of urgency in Gibran's poetry regarding the deteriorating situations of the citizens of the Arab world. Gibran, however, managed to promote poetry as part of a literacy program which he considers as essential in nation building. He along with other members of the Pen Group agreed on the importance of lifting up the individual to build an Arab nation and started implementing their ideas by changing the form of poetry so that it would be accessible to a wider public. His views on poetry are similar to those of the Romantics. Poetry for him is an incarnation of truth:

    Poetry my dear friend, is a sacred incarnation of a smile. Poetry is a sigh that dries the tears. Poetry is a spirit who dwells in the soul, whose nourishment is the heart, whose wine is affection. Poetry that comes not in this form is a false messiah. Gibran in this passage as well as in his work emphasizes the role of the poet as a bard of truth and does not attempt to mask any ugliness or to praise unworthiness.

    Gibran, unlike Whitman, has to battle with a complex set of issues relating to the fact that he is an immigrant, who still has strong emotional ties to his native country.

22 Walt Whitman, "Passage to India," p.460.

Gibran belongs to the first wave of Arab American immigrant's writers, who were responding to social and political situations facing Arabs or more specifically those living in what was called Syria. In a survey of Arab-American literature, Tanyss Ludescher explores the historical as well as literary productions of what is identified as three waves of Arab American immigrants and a corresponding three generations of writers.24

The second wave of Arab American writers who belong to the next wave of immigrants shows a different national mentality. They constituted a larger group of Muslim immigrants and found themselves no longer interested in problems in their native countries. The group of writers belonging to this period includes Vance Bourjaily, William Peter Blatty, and Eugene Paul Nassar and they remain largely obscure from critical attention. The irony is that the focus of their writings is on problems dealing with assimilation to American culture even though at the time of the literary publications the Arab-Israeli conflict was at its peak. Their literary works include novels that deal with the immigrant experience such as The End of My Life (1947) and Confessions of a Spent Youth (1960) by Vance Bourjaily. William Peter Blatty wrote about his negative attitude towards his Arabic background in The Exorcist, Which Way to Mecca Jack? (1960), and I'll Tell Them I Remember You (1973) and Eugene Nassar wrote Wind of the Land (1979) on Arab Americans way of living. Out of the third wave of immigrants who arrived after the 1967 war with Israel a list of writers appeared, who were engaged in a similar experience of the previous group except the shift was on a discussion on the Arab American images. The literary productions of this period include, Jospeh Jeha Through and Through: Toledo Stories (1990), Elamz Abinader Children of Roojme: A Family's

Journey (1991), Diana Abu-Jaber in Arabian Jazz, and other contemporary poets and writers. Yet, there still remains to be discussed the role that Arab American writers of later waves play in dealing with issues related to the Arab world and how that influences their role in the Arab American community. Earlier Arab-American poets had a clearer relationship with their new American environment and in their country of origins. For Gibran, poetry tells the poignant detail of the story of an immigrant who is the progeny of a native country that is need of aid.

In short, it is evident that Whitman and Gibran share common goals and objectives. The similarities between the two poets are a result of their beliefs in the need to reform society and poetry. Both poets have been active participants in their societies. They joined other poets to initiate reform both in poetry and society. Moreover, there are common traits in their poetry because Gibran followed Whitman's style, idealism, and political inclinations in his poetry. However, the poems of Gibran are more political than Whitman because he believed that a poet should be a voice for his nation in renouncing tyranny and oppression. Both believed strongly in the power of the individual who can initiate reform and their belief that a strong nation comes from group unity as well. Therefore, each one of them had sought reform and managed to find ways to implement it. Moreover, both had left an impact on their societies. It is the spirit of mutual interaction between poet and his society that pervades both of their works but it is the sense of exigency that gives Gibran's poetry its distinctness. Gibran was a patriotic immigrant who sought social and political reform so desperately because reform was needed in the Arab world. His zeal for poetic and social reform is exceptional among Arab-American writers both past and present.
Bibliography


---. "My Country Men."

---."The Enchanting Houri."

---."Song of the Soul."


