A Mystical Saga of the ‘Self’

Walt Whitman is one of the most gifted American writers, with a unique, original style and a profound, mystical worldview in whom American literature first found its own voice. He is considered to be among the five most important U.S. poets of all time along with Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, and Robert Frost for his influential and innovative poetry. He is a poet with profound impact on the literary scenario of the world which is both overrated and underrated. Whitman has equally received condemnation and commendation both. “He was a man and a writer who could be hated as an impostor or adored as a Messiah but who was in any case a challenge to discussion.” (Trent 258) Whitman was such a great writer that he could enhance his creativity by his lack of education and could nourish it by his own genius and his experience of the world. Gay Wilson Allen and Ed Folsom suggest that he has “a greater impact on cultures worldwide than any writer since Shakespeare.” (Allen 2)

Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* has been translated into more than 25 languages including French, German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese and Chinese and selections of his poetry have appeared in every major language. Carl Bode finds that, “Whitman is the father of that stream-of-consciousness technique which has been so popular in twentieth-century fiction.” (Bode 35) Whitman also inspired Socialists and Communists in America and abroad. Books on his life and poetry have been published in every continent. In his own time, Whitman was so famous that a letter from abroad could reach him without delay, addressed merely “Walt Whitman, America.” (Traubel 10) With great poetic genius, he
transformed beauty and power of individuality into universality. He is known to the world as a prophet of liberty and revolution.

Walter Whitman (May 31, 1819 - March 26, 1892) was the second son of an Englishman Walter Whitman, Sr. who was first a farmer and afterwards a carpenter and builder. Walter Whitman, Sr. was a liberal thinker believing in the religious principles of the great Quaker iconoclast, Elias Hicks. His mother Louisa Van Velsor was from Holland. Without wealth and education they lived in Brooklyn and Long Island where the Whitmans had lived and farmed for nearly two centuries. Walter Whitman, Sr. had immense love for his country so after giving his three elder children the names of their ancestors—turned to the heroes of the Revolution and the War of 1812 for the names of his other three sons: Andrew Jackson Whitman (1827-1863), George Washington Whitman (1829-1901), and Thomas Jefferson Whitman (1833-1890). The poet was greatly inspired by the views of his parents, and later in life he became a firm believer in the inherent dignity, equality and brotherhood of man. He found all men equally lovable and all professions equally honourable.

At the age of twelve, Whitman began his career as a printer’s apprentice to support his family and fell in love with books. He read extensively and reading became self discovery for him. Later on he changed his pursuits as a country teacher, miscellaneous press-writer, newspaper editor and builder. During his full-time career in journalism he founded newspapers like the Brooklyn Freeman and Long-Islander and also edited a number of Brooklyn and New York papers including Brooklyn Daily Eagle and the New Orleans Crescent. Between 1840 and 1845 his stories appeared in several magazines, including The American Review (later known as The American Whig Review) and the Democratic
Review, one of the most prestigious literary magazines in America. In 1855, Whitman himself published the first edition of his magnum opus, *Leaves of Grass*, as a bunch of twelve untitled poems and a Preface; which eventually grew into ‘the epic of America’. During the Civil War in America Whitman wrote as a freelance journalist and served the wounded at hospitals in New York and Washington, D.C. for twelve years. He took up the job of a clerk in the Department of the Interior, which ended when the Secretary of the Interior, James Harlan, discovered Whitman as the author of *Leaves of Grass*, which he found much too offensive.

In the early 1870s, Whitman settled in Camden and lived in a simple two-storey clapboard home. After being stricken with paralysis and suffering a stroke in February, 1873 he spent his declining years working on additions and revisions to a new edition of *Leaves of Grass* and preparing his final volume of poems and prose, *Good-Bye, My Fancy* (1891). After his death on March 26, 1892, Whitman was buried in a tomb which he himself had designed and built on a lot in Harleigh Cemetery.

Whitman’s absorption by Americans from all walks of life reaffirms his bold claim that “the proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.” (*Leaves of Grass* 731) Today, Whitman is an emblem of American culture having a profound and unpredictable impact on fiction, films, architecture, music, painting, dance, and other arts. He has been hailed in musical compositions, political speeches, television programmes, and, films and cartoons. He has also been featured on postage stamps, postcards, matchbook covers and in cartoons. Many schools, hotels, bridges,
apartment buildings, shopping malls, parks, corporate centres, political think tanks, and AIDS clinics in the United States are named after Whitman. Ludwig Lewisohn calls him “perhaps the greatest, certainly the most far-reaching; far-echoing poetic voice.” (Lewisohn 198)

Walt Whitman is the most innovative poet of the nineteenth century. George Hamlin Fitch calls him “the most original of American authors in form, in thought, and in expression.” (Fitch 12) He recreates poetry with the elements always at hand on a range of subjects. He utilises them in such a meticulous way that they turn out to be very rich and varied. “Amidst a confusing mass of details, the truly imaginative or artistic mind seizes upon the characteristic and suggestive features of a subject and reproduces them vividly.” (Fisher 361)

Walt Whitman promotes innovation, change, growth, and evolution through his poetry. He liberates the spirit of American poetry from ancient shackles of convention and tradition, assimilates a wide range of things and subjects and reveres them equally, the cosmic and the commonplace. Louis Untermeyer sums up his poetic excellence thus: “In almost everything he wrote there is a great urgency, an onward-going movement, the tempo and forward thrust of a half-idealistic, half-materialistic, sometimes corrupt, but ever-expanding America.” (Untermeyer 575)

Whitman’s refined poetic excellence was appreciated by Swinburne, Buchanan, W. B. Bell, W. M. Rossetti, Symonds, and Professor Dowden, etc. in England and by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thoreau in America. On the first publication of Leaves of Grass,
Emerson wrote a letter to Whitman, pronouncing it as the representative book of the poetry of the age:

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of *Leaves of Grass*. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed….I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perceptions only can inspire. (*Leaves of Grass* 731)

Thoreau also heartily admired “*Leaves of Grass,***” and said: “I do not believe that all the sermons that have been preached in the land put together are equal to it, for preaching.” (Fisher 351) Dante Gabriel Rossetti was nearly swept off his feet and said, “That glorious man Whit will one day be known as one of the greatest sons of Earth, a few steps below Shakespeare, Darwin or Nietzsche.” (Dave 328) Whitman’s work was also applauded by great Eastern minds. Sri Aurobindo compared him to the ancient Indian seers in his essay “Future Poetry”. Tagore praised him saying, “No American had caught the Oriental spirit of mysticism so well as [Whitman]” (Holloway 126) him and even translated one of his poems. Swami Vivekananda also hailed him as a ‘spiritual genius.’ The great nationalist poet Subramania Bharati praised Whitman for liberating verse from conventional prosody and for cultivating all-embracing vision of the world. Punjabi poet Puransingh was also impressed by his ‘immensity’ and ‘cosmic consciousness’.

Whitman grew as a poet by learning from the great poets of the world. Homer granted him the sense of epic background and the ability to see the individual in a large public context. From Ossian he imbibed free
rhythmic prose and heroic design. He adopted rhapsodical style of Hebrew verse and the account of prophecy from the Old Testament. He says that he went thoroughly through the masterpieces of literature in his late teenage years before he began his career as a poet:

(Of many debts incalculable, / Haply our New World’s chief test debt is to old poems.) / Ever so far back, preluding thee, America, / Old chants, Egyptian priests, and those of Ethiopia, / The Hindu epics, the Grecian, Chinese, Persian, / The Biblic books and prophets, and deep idyls of the Naza-/ rene, / The Iliad, Odyssey, plots, doings, / wanderings of Eneas, / Hesiod, Eschylus, Sophocles, Merlin, Arthur, / The Cid, Roland at Roncesvalles, the Nibelungen, / The troubadours, minstrels, minnesingers, skalds, / Chaucer, Dante, flocks of singing birds, / The Border Minstrelsy, the bye-gone ballads, feudal tales, essays, / plays, / Shakspeare, Schiller, Walter Scott, Tennyson, / As some vast wondrous weird dream-presences. (Leaves of Grass 547)

Quakerism, Transcendentalism, Emersonian philosophy and the Orient have played a significant role in shaping Whitman as a poet and as a man. The tremendous impact of Transcendentalism reveals that he was a humanist child of Transcendentalism. Whitman was much fascinated by the ancient texts of Hinduism. He combined ancient Classical Humanism with Oriental Metaphysics and presented his own version of down-to-earth Humanism in Leaves of Grass. His mystical experience and spiritual union with ‘self’, people, Nature and God prompt one to believe that his Humanism is inspired by Hinduism in general, and Advaita Vedantism in particular. One can trace Whitman’s mysticism in “Song of
Myself”, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”, “The sleepers”, “As I ebb’d with the Ocean of Life”, “Scented Herbage of My Breast” etc. One of his mystical experiences reveals that his Humanism is not centred in ‘self’ alone but centred in union with God and fellow human beings as well:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge that / pass all the art and argument of the earth, / And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own, / And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own, / And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the / women my sisters and lovers. (Leaves of Grass 33)

Whitman, during his life, was known more for his influence as a prophet of democracy and ‘an enthusiast of the common man’. There are numerous illustrations in his poems which clearly evince the influences of Hindu view of life working upon Whitman and his all-comprising Humanism. His firm belief in ‘Nothing is more divine than humankind’ and ‘Entire universe is divine’ must have been drawn from Vedantic scriptures. When he talks about, “for many years or stretching cycles of years” (Leaves of Grass 364) in “Starting from Paumanok” which refers to more than one lives.

In “Song of Myself” one can find him directly addressing the soul and taking it separate from body: “I believed in you my soul, the other I am must not abase Itself to you, / And you must not be abased to the other.”(Leaves of Grass 32) In “I Sing the Body Electric” he discusses the soul and body: “And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?” (Leaves of Grass 94) He also refers to the eternity of soul: “I am large, I
contain multitudes.” *(Leaves of Grass* 88) Whitman uses the term ‘*Maya*’ to describe something illusory when he asks in “New Person Drawn Towards Me”: “Have you no thought O dreamer that it may be all maya, illusion?” *(Leaves of Grass* 123) Whitman on one occasion even identifies himself with *Brahma*, equating him with the old Testament Jehovah: “From this side Jehovah / am I, / Old Brahma I, and I Saturnius am; / Not time affects me---I am Time, old, modern as any.” *(Leaves of Grass* 443)

At the age of thirty-five years, Whitman suddenly abandoned all other activities and devoted himself to compose *Leaves of Grass* to narrate the cosmic life of a man. He was a great reviser. His unending shuffling, re-titling, editing, and re-conceptualising of *Leaves of Grass* made it possible to comprehend and assimilate every change in his life and in his country. He revised and published it nine times throughout the life and made it a great poetic biography of humanity: “One’s-Self I sing a simple separate person, / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.” *(Leaves of Grass* 59)

His careful use of ‘One-self” instead of ‘Myself’ makes it clear that the poem is not autobiographical and not revealing personal statements but a complete revelation of humanity. He purposefully utters the phrase “democratic, the word en-mass,” to let others know that though he sings seemingly of himself but actually, ‘Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power, / Cheerful, for freest action form’d under the laws divine, / The Modern Man I sing.’ *(Leaves of Grass* 59)

*Leaves of Grass* is “one of the finest and most humane in all literature” *(Lewisohn 207)* and it raises Whitman to the most talented, the
most influential, the most creative humanist writer that America has ever produced. The very title ‘Leaves of Grass’ speaks enough about Whitman’s philosophy. The grass represents the humblest and free natural growth and democracy. Man has occupied the focal position in *Leaves of Grass*. The central purpose of *Leaves of Grass* is to assert for every man and woman his or her individuality. The poet identifies himself with common men, continent and the cosmos. The main emphasis is on the brotherhood of man and democracy. America stands for both brotherhood and democracy, and Lincoln for the lonely individual deeply involved in humanity in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman focuses on the equality of male and female. The oneness of man with all things in the universe---from great stars to leaves of grass---outgrowths naturally from the beginning.

Whitman has been hailed as the poet of America and the poet of democracy. His vision of democracy is very much humanistic. By invoking all sorts of people and describing all types of conditions *Leaves of Grass* presents humanistic view of life. His ardent desire is for the unity of America, his great Mother-land. *Leaves of Grass* is an epic of humanity that deals with Man, his origin, nature, and destiny. It ranges widely from birth to death through the various stages and circumstances of human life. Life on earth for him is no consequence of ‘sin’ rather he enjoys innumerable bonds of delight in happy engagement with life.

In the beginning of “Song of Myself” Whitman celebrates the ‘self’ suggesting the nature of his Humanism: “I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume; / For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you.”(*Leaves of Grass* 872) Discovery of ‘self’ is the cardinal theme in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. For the first time in American
literature, perhaps for the first time in all literature, he created ‘I’ who does not remain his individual ‘Self’ but assumes universal identity. It is non-specific, all-inclusive and embracing the entire humanity, Nature and the cosmos. It is united mystically and pantheistically with all other souls assimilating altogether many minds and many experiences. The ‘I’ is an equable creature representing pluralities and contradictory impulses and instincts. ‘I’ in its universal sense is Everyman, representative of entire humanity and a fragment of the world-soul. This innovative use of personal pronoun ‘I’ is revolutionary which has become common today in poetry.

Whitman is very much keen to celebrate the eternal march of the soul. Peter Jones says “If we read each section in sequence, we witness the progress of a man’s spirit, the magnitude of the journey, and the final, completed vision of itself.” (Jones 78) Life is a continuous progress, onward, “Forever and forever---longer than soil is brown and solid---longer than water ebbs and flows.” (Leaves of Grass 18) Leaves of Grass is a journey of soul from the ‘simple separate person’ to the ‘enmasse’. Whitman firmly believes that individual development is possible only within the aggregate. Whitman’s enthusiastic Humanism encourages to assimilate all men into his expanded self with a resulting expanded view of his motherland: “I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise, / Regardless of others, ever regardful of others, / Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,” (Leaves of Grass 44)

The Humanism reflected in Whitman’s poetry is a view in which man is the dominant and ultimate reality, the criterion of value, truth, and reality. Man sits on the highest altar and everything else has been deployed to serve him. He is well aware of his high state and
significance: “All forces have been steadily employed to complete and
delight me, / Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.” (Leaves of
Grass 81) The Humanism of Whitman revolves around the idea of
individual man having healthy body, sound mind, compassionate heart
and universal soul. He wishes that such individuals unite themselves,
form ‘enmasse’, and travel together along the open roads of the world. In
“As I Ponder’d in Silence” Whitman expresses his ardent desire to wage
quite a different kind of war, “I too haughty Shade also sing war, and a
longer and greater one / than any, / .... / the field [is] the world, / For life
and death, for the Body and for the eternal Soul, / .... / I above all promote
brave soldiers.” (Leaves of Grass 2)

Whitman’s poems clearly express his idea of the world as it was
and as it should be---the real world of his time and the dream world of his
mind. ‘The Sleepers’ is one of the significant poems of Whitman which
presents his vision in which he identifies himself with all men sleeping
under different roofs of society. For him everything in the world is divine
because the world has become divine with the all-pervading presence of
God. Nothing in the world is mean, unimportant, irrelevant or out of its
place. Everything has a significant place and role to play in the complete
scheme of the universe. The entire world is mysterious and beyond our
imagination and comprehension. And man is the greatest mystery and
miracle and ‘the acme of things accomplished’ for whom the whole
creation is at service. He says:

Immense have been the preparations for me, / Faithful and friendly
the arms that have help’d me. / Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing
and rowing like cheerful boatmen, / For room to me stars kept
aside in their own rings, / They sent influences to look after what was to hold me. (*Leaves of Grass* 81)

Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is a celebration of humanity and could create a world-wide sensation, especially in France, where Whitman’s intense humanism influenced the naturalist revolution in French literature. Every aspect of human life and activity, social, political, religious, has been described in his poetry. Even more remarkable is the variety of relationships between man and Nature, and between man and God. Man has an inner power within him which enables him to realise his unity with the whole of mankind, with Nature, and also with God. Whitman propagates the idea that the human soul is the most divine and the greatest in the world. He gave supreme importance to the human soul and yet loved the word ‘enmasse’. Whitman has absolute faith in fellow human beings. Like Vedantists he can see limitless potential and possibilities in human beings. For him each one is independent and capable enough to create his own destiny. The poet proceeds with a sense of individual self-assertion:

I myself make the only growth by which I can be appreciated, / I reject none, accept all, then reproduce all in my own forms. We are powerful and tremendous in ourselves, / We are executive in ourselves, We are sufficient in the variety of / ourselves, / We are the most beautiful to ourselves and in ourselves, Nothing is sinful to us outside of ourselves, /..... / All is eligible to all, / All is for individuals, all is for you, Produce great Persons, the rest follows. (*Leaves of Grass* 340-2)
Literature to Whitman is for life’s sake. Despite his faith in the human spirit and commitment to Humanism, Whitman was aware of man’s limitations. So he works hard on the themes of human greatness and human smallness. He seeks to develop ‘grand individuals’ and through them the ideal democratic society in which power, glory and dignity of each individual is asserted. Though he seeks to build an ideal democratic society on the principles of universal brotherhood, unity and equality yet he is very much aware that only great individuals can build a great society. So Whitman does not hesitate in promoting the creed of Individualism:

It is not the earth, it is not America who is so great, / It is I who am great or to be great, it is You up there, or any one, / .... / I swear nothing is good to me now that ignores individuals, / The American compact is altogether with individuals, / The only government is that which makes minute of individuals, / The whole theory of the universe is directed unerringly to one / single individual—namely to You. (*Leaves of Grass* 352)

Whitman brings to the countless generations a message of power and glory inherited by each human being. He has unwavering faith in the beauty, bounty, unity, dignity and divinity of humanity. Each member of the human society is potentially great but not greater than the society. His indulging into the self eventually turns into his reverence for the race which becomes a special trait of his Humanism. Whitman lays stress upon the value of human act, word, thought, and their consequences. He urges men to utilise all their energy to achieve perfect manhood. He sets high goals for humanity which can be achieved through ability and nobility. Even after grand success one should approach one’s fellow
human beings with humility. One may have love for divine things and aspiration for high achievements but cannot afford to forget the eternal quest for self identity. He speculates on Humanity thus: “What is a man anyhow? What am I? What are you? / All I mark as my own you shall offset it with your own, / Else it were time lost listening to me. (Leaves of Grass 47)

Whitman believes in the power, peace and glory of humanity but not at the cost of individuality of one’s self. Blend of powerful individuality and of general human interest is an essential feature of Whitman’s poetical creation. He identifies himself with ‘enmasse’ without any form of discriminations. He applies his theory of Existential Humanism to himself: “I exist as I am, that is enough, / If no other in the world be aware I sit content. / And if each and all be aware I sit content.” (Leaves of Grass 48)

The Humanism reflected in the Leaves of Grass concentrates on the grandeur and supremacy of the Individual. Whitman is always ready to explore ‘Man’ behind each and every advancement, growth and success of Humanity. He can love individuals because they lose individuality to form ‘enmasse’. He seemingly sings of ‘simple separate person’ but actually he sings of ‘All Men’. Such passion for humanity, according to Mabie makes him a rare poet:

Whitman had a passion for humanity, without reference to character, education, occupation, condition. The streets, ferryboats, tops of stages, loafing-places, were dear to him because they gave him a chance to see men and women in the whole range of the conditions and accidents of life. (Mabie 211)
Whitman’s precepts of humanism are genuine because they have sprouted from his dedication to the care of the sick and wounded during the Civil War between the North and South America. When word reached Whitman on 16 December 1862 that his brother George had been wounded in the battle of Fredericksburg, Maryland, the poet set off to find him at the Camp Hospital at Falmouth, Virginia. After searching in the hospitals in Washington, he found George still with his company across the Rappahannock from Fredericksburg. His wound was superficial and on the mend. He had fully anticipated that he would return to New York after determining that George was safe, but, after telegraphing his mother and the rest of the family that he had found George, Whitman devoted himself to becoming the arms and legs of the wounded and maimed soldiers in the Civil War hospitals until the close of the war. He learned to dress wounds, and remained in Washington for twelve years.

The tragedy of the Civil War touched Whitman’s large warm heart, and he began providing aid, comfort, and encouragement to the sick, wounded, and dying soldiers. Working in the crowded, chaotic wards of Washington hospitals, Whitman wrote letters for afflicted soldiers, dressed wounds, distributed gifts of money, clothing, and food, and read aloud from Shakespeare, Scott, Miles O’Reilly and the Bible. He would often bring these men fruit, flavoured syrup, tobacco, paper, envelopes, books, oranges, stamps, stationary, small change, ice-cream, friendship, and love and soon became a familiar figure in the hospitals. He entered the hospitals well-rested, sweet-scented, and cheerful in appearance. Though he might often break down hours after a visit, he took care to steel himself to the agonies he witnessed for as long as he was in the
presence of the soldiers, to keep his spirits high. John Burroughs, gesturing towards Whitman’s complexity, speculated that “he was not an athlete, or a rough, but a great tender mother-man” (Barrus 339). Whitman’s hospital visits strengthened his belief in the dignity of common people and reinforced his faith in Humanism.

Whitman felt that he had glimpsed in the military hospitals the very expression of a democratic America, and he cherished that glimpse as a turning point in his own life, what he later termed as ‘the very centre, circumference, umbilicus, of my whole career’ in Walt Whitman’s Civil War. Whitman visited from eighty thousand to a hundred thousand of the wounded and sick. These soldiers came from all over the country, and their reminiscences of home taught Whitman about the breadth and diversity of the growing nation. Walking the wards was for him like walking America: every bed contained a representative of a different region, a different city or town, a different way of life. He loved the varied accents and the diverse physiognomies. Though he was a Northerner, he served the Southern sick with equal love and care. This reinforced his attitude towards the universality of human nature and experience---another tenet of Humanism.

The calamus relationship is based on love between men. Whitman developed such relationships in the hospitals which confirmed his deepest beliefs about friendship, love, and democracy. Whitman was moved by the comradeship of wounded soldiers. Immediately before the war, Whitman’s “Calamus” poems (1860) had celebrated a riper and more mature feeling, namely, manly affection and the need of comrades. All the poems included in ‘Calamus’ group are a brilliant poetical plea for unity and comradeship. Whitman had seen in the hospitals---the
sacrifices, courage, strength, and capacity for love and affection---in context of unchecked capitalist expansion, increasing immigration, and the end of reconstruction. He was convinced that there was an interlocking relationship between the calamus emotion and American democracy, and this belief offered him a basis for his Humanism.

He recorded his day-to-day experiences as a volunteer in the hospital wards and in the camps, and in 1875 published a volume of these journals under the title *Memoranda During the War*. Much of *Memoranda During the War* is devoted to brief portraits of wounded and dying soldiers he met during his time in the hospitals. Some of these wounded men spent their last moments of life in the company of Whitman, and his prose monuments to them reveal a deeply human side of the man whose poetry often tends toward the grandiose. *Memoranda During the War* and an essay called “Democratic Vistas,” along with unmetrical and unrhymed verse in the same style as the *Leaves of Grass* were compiled as “The Two Rivulets”.

During all the time of his hospital service, Whitman was writing poems---a new kind of humanistic poem for him. These poems were about the war experience, but almost never about battles---rather about the after-effects of warfare: the moonlight illuminating the dead on the battlefields, the churches turned into hospitals, the experience of dressing wounds, the encounter with a dead enemy in a coffin, the trauma of battle nightmares for soldiers who had returned home. These poems were gathered in a book called *Drum-Taps*, the title evoking both the beating of the drums that accompanied soldiers into battle and the beating out of “Taps,” the death march sounded at the burial of soldiers. “Drum-Taps” describes soldiers, not in their totality but in their individuality, each
defined by the specificity of his wound. It also talks about the deepest experience that life can offer through, discovery and celebration of love and comradeship:

The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand, / I sit the restless all the dark night; some are young, / Some suffer so much, I recall the experiences sweet and sad, / (Many a soldier’s loving arms about this neck have cross’d and / rested, Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on these bearded lips.) (Leaves of Grass 504)

Whitman does not discuss the principles of humanism in various forums and pass judgements like a theorist. Rather his words are guided by his deeds. He identifies himself with his countrymen and serves them as a nurse and a poet. Whitman could compose innumerable songs of love and comradeship which no one has sung earlier. Even if one has never met him before one feels like one has met a true friend. It is so because Whitman showers his selfless love saying: “I am more than nurse, more than parent or neighbour.” (Leaves of Grass 451)

Walter Blair finds Whitman “in a very real sense a war-born poet”. (Blair 632) Whitman composed quite a new kind of humanistic poetry while searching for ways to absorb the personal and national trauma of the Civil War into Leaves of Grass. He gave expression to the grief of a soldier’s family, and perhaps his own remorse, in “Come up from the Fields Father.” Where the poem describes a family’s reaction to the receipt of a letter written in a stranger’s hand telling them of their son’s hospitalization during war. Despite the correspondent’s assurance that the boy will recover, the mother in the poem intuitively knows that her son is dead. Whitman uses maternal loss to convey the ineradicable pain
occasioned by the violence of war. The poem ends with this image of the grief-stricken parent:

By day her meals untouch’d, then at night fitfully sleeping, often / waking, / In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep longing, / O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life escape and / withdraw, / To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son. (*Leaves of Grass* 303)

Whitman attempted to write a “new Bible”, re-experiencing the Crucifixion in Fredericksburg: this one young man’s death amidst the thousands is as significant as any in history. And, for Whitman, the massive slaughter of young soldier-Christ would create for all those who survived the war an obligation to construct a nation worthy of their great sacrifice. Now a generation of young American males, the very males on which he had staked the future of democracy, was literally being disarmed, amputated, and killed. By running errands for them, writing letters for them, encircling them in his arms, Whitman tried the best he could, to make them whole again. It was only now, encountering the horrifying aftermath of a real battle that the powerful Civil War poems began to emerge. One of the sketches from *Memoranda During the War* is transformed into a poem thus:

Then to the third—a face nor child nor old, very calm, as of / beautiful yellow-white ivory; / Young man I think I know you—I think this face is the face / of the Christ himself, / Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.

(*Leaves of Grass* 303)
Whitman was a Humanist whose interests were universal, his dynamism great, his advocacy of abolitionism and the ‘free-soil’ movement vehement. His love of peace and his distaste of war are evidenced in “Reconciliation”:

Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be / utterly lost, / That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly / wash again, and ever again, this soil’d world; / For my enemy is dead, a man as divine as myself is dead, / I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin - I draw / near, / Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the / coffin. (Leaves of Grass 321)

A true Humanist never rejects life on earth because he has no approach of negation. All the aspects of human life and emotions are celebrated in Whitman’s hymns. He involves in sex, in Nature and other worldly things as well. Whitman sings of the robust pleasures of the whole man, body and soul, and heartily disbelieved in asceticism. He speaks of the joyous acceptance of domestic life as it is and speaks of life itself. Love and friendship, pleasure and pain---everything life offers---is beautiful, and hence dear to him. His poems are all unified by a positive, affirmative approach to life and strengthen Man’s bondage with the phenomenal world. Whitman understands that even a brief stay of man on earth is very significant because it is a reality. He does not speculate on future which is fictitious or ponder over the past which already has gone. Like a true Humanist he thinks in a most practical way and always considers present time for the benefit of one and all:
There was never any more inception than there is now, / Nor any more youth or age than there is now; / And will never be anymore perfection than there is now, / Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now. / Urge, and urge, and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world. *(Leaves of Grass 30-31)*

Whitman is a seeker of the ultimate freedom and beauty in this life on this planet, and not beyond that. This Humanistic outlook inspires him to take a positive attitude toward life: “It seems to me that everything in the light and air ought to be / happy, / Whoever is not in his coffin and the dark grave, let him know he / has enough.” *(Leaves of Grass 427-28)* Whitman holds himself out as the exemplar of a fuller, outer and inner life. Whitman was not only a poet of cheerful rebellion, but also of cheerful optimism. A zest for life characterises all his utterance. In “A Song of Myself”, he gave the inherent joyousness of his heart a memorable expression. His was a proud, independent spirit, and it was joy for him to rebel, to live own life and to write in his own way, irrespective of social and literary laws and taboos. At times he was optimistic, exultant, and a celebrant of life—“Of Life immense in passion, pulse and power, / Cheerful, for fiercest action form’d under the laws divine, / The Modern Man I sing.” *(Leaves of Grass 1)*

Humanism always offers an optimistic view of life. Though inspired by the aftermath of civil war Whitman’s poetry never loses faith in the essential goodness of man. He was always faithful to the conviction that living is joyful and new. This optimism Whitman carries through with the genuine fervour of religion. Edith Wyatt appreciates the sense of dignity in *Leaves of Grass:* “The whole of this book which Whitman inhabits is filled with the sense of the dignity of life—its preciousness in
every aspect—the sense, too, that life and death are hardly separable and are merged one in the other.” (Wyatt164)

Oriental Humanists pondered much over life after death also. Their approach to death is quite different and more convincing as it speculates on death not pessimistically but as a new beginning of a life afresh and the end of all earthly limitations. Whitman as a Mystic Humanist does not have a pessimistic view of life. His harmonious approach towards life has helped him to give a solution to the baffling problems of life and death. He has an invincible faith in the essential goodness of man. Whitman not merely tells us the meaning and crown and fruition of life, but throws light of his pure soul on the mystery of death and shows us the true meaning of death. He never wants to run away from it; its face to him is never ugly or fearsome. It is, on the contrary, beautiful, a fascinating maya (Illusion) perhaps. For him death is like night, which is magnetic, nourishing, and restorative.

Inspired by Oriental Humanism, Whitman glorifies death which figures prominently in several of his poems. Death is not only inevitable, but it is necessary. Life is sweet because there is death. Moreover, death enables us to have a better perspective of life. Standing at the threshold of death a man can perceive the world with all its beauty and glamour. The world looks entrancing ‘against the background of Death.’ Death is, therefore, never an expression of emptiness but a perennial promise of fullness. The mesmerizing beauty and bounty of death drags all his attention and associates him with the Graveyard School of poetry. His preoccupation with death inspires him to compose some of the finest elegies in the English language: “O Captain! My Captain!” “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” and “Out of the Cradle Endlessly
Rocking.” His attitude to death seems to be filled with emotions of tenderness and pathos. The paradox of Whitman’s attitude to life and death appears thus:

Has anyone supposed it lucky to be born? / I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die and I / know it. / I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash’d babe / and am not contain’d between my hat and boots. / And peruse manifold objects, no two alike and every one good, / The earth good and the stars good and their adjuncts all Good. *(Leaves of Grass 35)*

Death for Whitman is not merely a matter of contemplation. He himself has faced death, mingled with it, borne it daily through four terrible years during the Civil War. And so legitimately he can sing his glowing chants of ‘heavenly death.’ Whitman is never afraid of death and never looks at it as a ‘dread monster,’ an enemy or ‘something so strange’. Only to ordinary mortals it has a terrifying countenance. For a true comradeship with death, the poet wants to wipe off all barriers. With all his power and perception of a free man Whitman finds the blessedness of death as well as the blessedness of life.

In “When Lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” the poet mourns for the dead but celebrates death; he identifies Lincoln’s death with the coming of peace; and he remembers Lincoln not because he was a great leader or conqueror but because he was well-loved. The poem begins as an elegy for one man and becomes an elegy for all the dead. He announces his intention to bring his blossoms and branches to all the dead, and goes even further, to “chant a song for O sane and sacred death.” Whitman gives an apostrophe to death and hails it lovingly as a
friend: “Come lovely and soothing death, / Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving, / In the day, in the night, to all, to each, / Sooner or later delicate death.” (Leaves of Grass 335)

Whitman proclaims death and life to be so inseparably attached as to render one unimaginable without the other. The concepts of life’s eternity as ‘stretching cycles of years’ and death in Whitman’s philosophy are not distinct from his Humanism but related to it. Like all mystics, Whitman affirms death as well as life: “Great is life, real and mystical, wherever and whoever, / Great is death--- Sure as life holds all parts together, / death holds all parts together.” (Leaves of Grass 588) Whitman is much fascinated by the thought of Death. It is the wonder of wonders to him,—the glory and consolation of his life—the one great end worth living for, being, according to Walt Whitman—Death. Thus he exclaims: "And I will show that whatever happens to anybody it may be / turned to beautiful results, / and I will show that nothing can happen more beautiful than / death.” (Leaves of Grass 23)

Whitman speaks in his “Song at Sunset” of—“the superb vistas of Death.” In “To one Shortly to Die,” he closes it not in pity but in felicitation: “I do not commiserate—I congratulate you.” (Leaves of Grass 451) The poet addresses “brothers and sisters” and reveals the meaning he found in the transcendental journey: “It is not chaos or death--it is form, union, plan--it is eternal life--it is Happiness.” (Leaves of Grass 88) The elegy assumes remarkable power and beauty in the hands of Walt Whitman. The two greatest elegies in American literature –“O Captain! My Captain!” and “When Lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” are inspired by the death of Abraham Lincoln while a third elegy written by Whitman “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” is an exquisite lyrical
expression of grief caused by the thought of death in general. The two elegies on the death of Lincoln are deeply stirring because the grief depicted therein is profound and genuine. The assassination of Lincoln was naturally a cause for intense grief leading to poetic composition. Grief gives place to a soothing peace to the soul of the poet, a peace that comes from tranquil contemplation of death. As the singer walks the night with the knowledge of death and the thought of death as companions, the warble of the gray-brown bird singing in the swamp the song of death pervades it all:

To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still / And the singer so shy to the rest received me, / The grey brown bird I know received us comrades three, / And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love / And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird. (*Leaves of Grass* 334)

There is a note of transcending peace, rather than of poignant tragedy even though Whitman does not develop the theme of immortality. He gives sufficient hints about the life that follows death as something to be welcomed and to be glad about: “And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veiled death / And the body gratefully nestling to thee.” (*Leaves of Grass* 335) Death to him is full of delicious tenderness and mystery with some element of sensuousness curiously blended with it: “The beautiful touch of Death, soothing and benumbing a few/ moments, for reasons.” (*Leaves of Grass* 182) Death is also described as a solemn and immortal birth:

Dark Mother, always gliding near, with soft feet, / Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome? / Then I chant it for
thee—I glorify thee above all, / I bring thee a song that when thou must in-deed come, come/ unfalteringly. (*Leaves of Grass* 335)

Whitman’s is a religion of love --- love for Nature, love for other creatures and love for the self which refers to the whole of humanity. He can easily identify with all men without any difference or discrimination. He is also very eager to show what he claims for himself:

I have loved the earth, sun, animals, I have despised riches, / Claim’d nothing to myself which I have not carefully claim’d for others on the same terms, I am willing to wait to be understood by the growth of the taste / of myself, / Rejecting none, permitting all. (*Leaves of Grass* 352)

Love is the theme of the two most important, most coherent, and most famous clusters of poems in the *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman conceived of “Enfans d’Adam” as a cluster about ‘the amative love of woman’, phrenological jargon for sexual love between women and men. These poems celebrate procreative sex and the innocence, beauty, and sacredness of the human body. Although Ralph Waldo Emerson urged him to delete these poems, Whitman retained them and their bold, erotic language. Moralistic critics and public officials condemned the “Enfans d’Adam” poems as obscene, while other readers—many of them women—expressed admiration.

The companion cluster, “Calamus,” focuses on love between men, what Whitman called comradeship or ‘adhesiveness,’ the phrenological term for ‘manly love’ (*Notebooks* 1:413). They were largely accepted as innocent poems of comradeship and brotherly love. The intimate
expressions of manly friendship sublimated, in the poet’s many close relationships with injured soldiers. The correspondences between these soldiers and Whitman clearly indicate the intense and heart-felt love among them. The language of this correspondence is—partly that of lovers, partly that of friends, partly that of son to father and father to son, and partly that of calm, wise, old counsellor to confused, scared, and half-literate young men. “There is something in personal love, caresses, and the magnetic food of sympathy,” he wrote in Hospital Visits, “that does, in its way, more good than all the medicine in the world.” (Untermeyer 568) Whitman through his life and poems shows that true love always favours true manhood and its duties in life. It illumines life and makes it pure and divine by self-sacrifice.

The passion of adhesiveness seems to be manifested in the simplest of gestures—the holding of a hand, the encircling of an arm. Whitman expresses the sentiments of equality, fraternity, self-surrender, and comradeship in his “Calamus” poems. The Latin word “Calamus” is much used in Old English writing. Whitman explained his title “Calamus” in the following way: “[I]t is the very large and aromatic grass, or root, spears three feet high—often called ‘sweet flag’—rows all over the Northern and Middle States. . . . The récherché or ethereal sense, as used in my book, arises probably from it” (Poetry and Prose 941) The plant bearing the name “Calamus” with its close knit blades symbolizes the mutual support gained from comradeship. Through this richly suggestive, phallic shaped cylindrical, spike flower of calamus and terms such as ‘manly love,’ ‘calamus love,’ ‘adhesiveness’, Whitman celebrates friendship and “manly attachment” in the poems of the “Calamus” cluster. “Considering his place and time the “Calamus” Poems are of an amazing out-spokenness.” (Lewisohn 199)
The introductory poem “In Paths Untrodden” announces ‘manly attachment,’ as the theme of the “Calamus” cluster. With a straightforward resolution “to sing no songs to-day but those of manly attachment,” (Leaves of Grass 113) the poem concludes in poet’s love for humanity: “I proceed for all who are or have been young men, / To tell the secret of my nights and days, / To celebrate the need of comrades.” (Leaves of Grass 113) In “Scented Herbage of My Breast,” the poet begins with imagery of ‘tomb-leaves,’ ‘body-leaves,’ ‘tall leaves,’ ‘sweet leaves,’ and in the middle of the poem exclaims: “Emblematic and capricious blades I leave you, now you serve me not, / I will say what I have to say by itself.” (Leaves of Grass 114) The poet feels himself entangled in his self-weaved obscure web of imagery and finally he tosses it all aside and declares: “I will sound myself and comrades only, / I will never again utter a call only their call.” (Leaves of Grass 114)

Apparently the ‘Calamus’ poems seem absolutely personal, intimate, often erotic love poems, but Whitman insists that they are political. Whitman’s imagines homoerotic affection as the basis for the unity and universal brotherhood. The politics imagined here are expressions of faith in a spiritualized comradeship which is beautiful union of the love, democracy and religion. That “political” dimension is explicit in “For You, O Democracy” where the poet announces his aim to make ‘the continent indissoluble,’ ‘the most splendid race,’ ‘inseparable cities’—all ‘By the love of comrades’ or ‘By the manly love of comrades.’ He also announces a model of national solidarity built on affiliations between strangers enlisted in the quest for a revivified Union. He elucidates how all past metaphysical speculations done by Plato, Socrates, Christ, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, etc. finds it basis on “The dear love of man for his
comrade, the attraction of friend to friend, / Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents, / Of city for city and land for land.” (Leaves of Grass 121)

Whitman finds America’s peace, progress and prosperity in the beautiful concept of comradeship. Whitman sees a power to eradicate the weakness of the materialism, the selfishness, the vulgarity of American democracy. He has a firm belief in the capability of comradeship in spiritualizing the lives of American citizens. Whitman is sure that such loving comradeship is essential for the survival of a democracy. He expresses the tenderness and ardour of love of man for man:

And when I thought how my dear friend, my lover, was on his way / coming, O then I was happy, / O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food / nourish’d me more, and the beautiful day pass’d well.” (Leaves of Grass 121)

Love, to Whitman, is the means of individual, social, national and international binding. Perhaps the most vibrant theme of Whitman’s songs is love. Love illuminates the inner world of human emotions and sensibilities and brings man closer to man. It exalts man to be worthy of his serene vision of universal brotherhood. Whitman’s earlier poems describe city life in detail and become poetry of comradeship and sexual love. Whitman presents modern world with all its beauty, unity and diversity. He bring in the sights and sounds of a great civilization—the carter, the factory girl, the president, the boatman, the conductor, all attending to their various vocations.

Everybody finds his voice in Whitman’s poetry--- the slave being auctioned; the infant being baptized in the Church, a drunken prostitute
cursing a jeering crowd, a convert ‘making his first profession.’ He beautifully delineates vivid pictures of a singer and the children. Even a lunatic is included in his poetry. Everyone can find his place and solace in Whitman’s poems. He showers love and sympathy on everyone without any reservations. “The known universe,” (Leaves of Grass 97) he says, “has one complete lover, and that is the greatest poet.” (Leaves of Grass 717) His care for outcast men and women in the city streets and the prisons, and to the wounded soldiers in the war-hospitals, testify to the sincerity of his belief in comradeship.

Whitman’s cardinal aim as a poet was that of bringing about the confederation of America and the unity of its citizens. With selfless love and empathy he wants to make the continent everlasting. While others promote institutions with jealous care, he will build “the institution of the dear love of comrades” (Leaves of Grass128) which alone could steer the great ship of America along the true course. He offers and envisages as the vital bond of America “a superb friendship, exalted, previously unknown.” (Leaves of Grass134) He has a vision of a land of lovers and of friends. His statecraft is to drench the imagination of the people and to promote universal comradeship. In “I Hear It Was Charged Against Me”, Whitman exonerates himself from the charge that he sought to destroy institutions. He declares that it was not what he sought. His aim was quite different. He puts it thus:

Only I will establish in the Mannahatta, and in every city of These States, inland and seaboard, / And in the fields and woods, and above every keel, little or large, / that dents the water, / Without edifices, or rules, or trustees, or any argument, / The institution of the dear love of comrades. (Leaves of Grass 128)
Whitman cherishes the phrase ‘the love of comrades' and utilizes it frequently in his poems. Whitman’s concept of the true basis of a democratic society is diligently expressed through this phrase. Whitman sings about ‘self’ most freely and readily in “Song of Myself,” which is also a song of identification. Whitman’s poetry does not celebrate the elite, but celebrates common humanity for whom he derives the word ‘en masse’. With a sense of complete identity with the humanity at large he declares in the beginning of the poem: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you.” (Leaves of Grass 28) The identification of one man, himself, and all men sustains to enlarge as the poems grow in number. The love is not only intense and all-embracing. Whitman celebrates humanity---by celebrating himself. Whitman’s identifying himself with a wounded soldier is an evidence of his universality, cosmic consciousness and his spiritual fervour: “Agonies are one of my changes of garment, / I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become / the wounded person.” (Leaves of Grass 67)

In the “Song of Myself” Whitman gives the password of democracy and asserts of common heritage through freedom and progress: “By God I will accept nothing which all cannot, / Have their counterpart of, on the same terms.” Whitman shines with great sympathy and brotherhood for all, lofty and low, wealthy and pauper, noble and foul, thief, drunkard, and prostitute. He chants of evil and angel alike or rather acknowledges them alike, feeling that everything which has the vivacity to exist has therein the right to exist; he cannot indeed bring himself to allow that there is any evil. Hamilton Wright Mabie notes that, “one feels the presence, in an original and powerful way, of the most
inclusive human sympathy, the most sincere human fellowship” in the poems of Walt Whitman. He observes the American world, the whole planet and identifies himself in his archetypical way with the people he observes. By exploiting his experiences in this way, Whitman expands his deep feelings into a kind of ideal sympathetic reporter: “I am a free companion, I bivouac by invading watch fires. / I understand the large hearts of heroes, / The courage of present times and all times” (*Leaves of Grass* 65-66) When Whitman attempts to describe the Nature or the captain and the people whose steam-ship was wrecked he is seen submerged into them:

“How he saved the drifting company at last, / How the lank loose-gown’d woman look’d when boated from the / side of their prepared graves, / How the silent old-faced infants and the lifted sick, And / the sharp lipp’d unshaven men; / All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine, / I am the man, I suffer’d, I was there.” (*Leaves of Grass* 66)

Catalogues of nature and man in Whitman’s hand become very impressive, because they have become part of his identity. While preaching democracy he cannot prevent him from expressing his intense feeling of comradeship and his sympathy with all. In one of his favourite verses he says “And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own / funeral drest in his shroud,” (*Leaves of Grass* 86) His Civil War experiences further intensified this feeling. He is a Northerner but when he looks on the lifeless face of a son of the South he writes: “… For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead, / I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw / near, / Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.” (*Leaves of Grass* 321)
Whitman is a living document of the age. He seems like a spokesperson of the Civil War. Whitman as a ‘Wound Dresser’ bandages the war-plaqued nation with balm of his profound compassion for both the North and the South, the whites and the blacks. He speaks to the outcasts and hated ones: “O you shunn’d persons, I at least do not shun you, / I come forth with your midst, I will be your poet, / I will be more to you than to any of the rest.” (Leaves of Grass 109) Whitman cautions his countrymen against both the racial divide as well as the sectional divide. In “Aboard at a Ship’s Helm,” Whitman’s ‘ship of state’ is warned against prolonged social divisions. He believes that another catastrophe like the Civil War can be avoided by the amendment of social relations becoming more inclusive rather than exclusive.

Everywhere in Leaves of Grass Whitman attempts at a complete blending with the common man and he considers himself the singer of the greatness and grandeur of the common man. Whitman desires to intermingle with crowds, for he is one of the crowds. He sees himself projected in the young men, shipbuilders, cartmen, firemen, butchers, whose appearance and movement are free and charming. “He was a lover of crowds, had a particular fondness for ferries, and his favourite comrades were omnibus-drivers”. (Fisher 353) He finds himself in everything, in every object, animate and inanimate around him. No doubt, he aims his poetry and his philosophy to be intended for the soul of the common man. It is Whitman’s ardent faith that poetry should be written for and about the common man. Whitman’s empathy with the common man has left its mark on his manner too. In “I Hear America Singing” Whitman celebrates the mechanic, the carpenter, the mason,
The boatman, the deck-hand, the shoe-maker, the wood-cutter, and the plough boy? / Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else, / The day what belongs to the day---at night the party of young / fellows, robust, friendly, / Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs. (Leaves of Grass 13)

He sings for oyster-men and clam-diggers, and Western hunters and raftsmen, and farmers and red-cheeked matrons, and omnibus-drivers and mechanics; and for all bona fide Americans. He is very much concerned about the poor man, the friendless, the outcast—he picks them up from the trench and sets them up straight. If he has a dime in his pocket he obviously gives the poor ten cents of it. Ingersoll appreciates him for being sympathetic to all:

He was, above all I have known, the poet of humanity, of sympathy . . . He sympathized with the imprisoned and despised, and even on the brow of crime he was great enough to place the kiss of human sympathy. (473-4)

According to Whitman men should be a part of Nature; dynamic children of the earth, of decent activity, fervent, gay, defiant, proud, inquisitive, free, friendly, brave and determined. In such ‘powerful uneducated persons’ he finds the substance of all that is most valuable in humanity. They had never been a part of the literature of peers of the realm. But for Whitman they are the comrades he loves to consort with:
I am enamour’d of growing outdoors, / Of men that live among cattle, or taste of the ocean or woods, / Of the builders and steerers of ships, and the wielders of axes and / mauls, and the drivers of horses, / I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out. (Leaves of Grass 41)

Whitman discards alienation from common humanity. He finds God outside himself in the company of the common man. He endeavours for total identification with ordinary and suffering men. He desires to be insightful enough to feel the sorrows and sufferings of the poor. Whitman refers to a person who strikes a deep chord in other people:

The gentleman of perfect blood acknowledges his perfect blood, /The insulter, the prostitute, the angry person, the beggar, see / themselves in the ways of him, he strangely transmutes them, / They are not vile any more, they hardly know themselves, they are / so grown. (Leaves of Grass 169)

Whitman is “the caresser of life, wherever moving.” (Leaves of Grass 40) He does not search the glorious past for gallant men and gorgeous women but always has joyous sympathy with contemporary men:

I have perceiv’d that to be with those I like is enough, / To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough, / To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh/ is enough, / To pass among them, or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so/ lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this / then? / I do not ask any more delight. I swim in it as in a sea. (Leaves of Grass 96)
The subjugated and the despised, who are habituated to swallowing insults and unaware of their rights, are objects of Whitman’s love. His Humanist idea of love turns into sympathy for the feeble and ignored. The poet finds the world burning in the fire of abhorrence and exploitations. His poetic heart is touched by the sufferings and sorrows of the poor. He asks the seer in him to awaken to the call of the real. He has attempted to identify himself with the sufferers. He does not seek any divine figure as his hero, rather he is contented with the Negro to whom he showers all his sympathy and love:

The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses, the block swags / underneath on its tied-over chain; / The negro that drives the dray of the stone-yard, steady and / tall he stands, pois’d on one leg on the string-piece; / His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast, and loosens over / his hip-band; / His glance is tall and commanding, / he tosses the slouch of his / hat away from his fore-head; / The sun falls on his crispy hair and moustache, falls on the black / of his polished and perfect limbs. / I behold the picturesque giant, and love him. (Leaves of Grass 39-40)

Whitman employs here the style of a hymn to point out the significance of living and working together with the labours and peasants. He discards those who only wish to put on white robes and worship God with flowers in the lonely dark temples but decline to toil together with the poorest and lowliest masses of the people in the filthy places. Whitman has intense love for the suffering, oppressed and embarrassed. He has a passionate wish for listening to wails and cries, sobs and he
bemoans of the deprived and the deserted who usually remained unheard. He longs to take a note of these unheard cries.

It makes him contented when he sings in microscopic detail for the visible instruments of toil, and the labour which they carry out. He acknowledges the good as well as the evil as perfect. He discards nothing. He decisively believes that failure and evil are essential to have a complete experience of life: “How perfect the earth and the minutest thing upon it! / What is called good is perfect, and what is called evil is just as perfect.” *(Leaves of Grass 439)*

Whitman showers his love not only on those who are gorgeous, good and fit but he also offers his love to all who are unattractive, timid and outcast. Whitman stretches out his hand to help, and through him one can hear the voices—appeals or demands—of the sick and desolate, of slaves, of prostitutes, of thieves, of deformed persons, of drunkards. Every man is a divine wonder to him, and he sees a ‘saviour’ in every ‘comrade’ who performs an act of loving and altruism:

Three scythes at harvest whizzing in a row, from three lusty angels / with shirts bagged out at their waists; / The snag-tooth’d hostler with red hair redeeming sins past and to / come, / Selling all he possesses, travelling on foot to fee lawyers for his / brother, and sit by him while he is tried for forgery. *(Leaves of Grass 75)*

Establishment of economic and political justice has to be central to national reconstruction. One has to be, at times, a rebel to break the shackles of slavery, superstition, discrimination and exploitation. Whitman emphasizes the democratic principle of the equality of all things
in his *Leaves of Grass*. He says: “I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the star.” (*Leaves of Grass* 59) This egalitarian principle is based both on the theory of evolution and on a pantheistic belief. Whitman also identifies himself with the hounded slave and the handcuffed mutineer. The poet desires to eradicate traditional discriminations, celebrating ‘conquer’d and slain persons’ along with victors, the ‘righteous’ along with the ‘wicked’—expanding his encirclement to include outcasts and outlaws. Whitman touches the apex of equality when he asserts:

I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to / Be the / poet of wickedness also. / What blurt is this about virtue and about vice? / Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent. (*Leaves of Grass* 50)

Whitman’s ideal society is one where inequalities and social injustice do not exist. In one section of “Song of Myself” Whitman expresses his praise for animals. He asserts he could turn and live with animals for many reasons, one of them is this:

Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania / Of owing things; / Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived Thousands of years ago; / Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth. / (*Leaves of Grass* 50)

Long before the beginning of the modern feminist movement Whitman was a committed feminist. With his dedicated insight into sociological problems, he exerted his pen and his tongue for social, religious and political reform and held up the encouragement of women.
He finds man and woman as corresponding to each other, in vocation, virtue and worship. They are co-creators of civilization and culture. While celebrating muscles of the male and teeming fibre of the female, Whitman never believed in the inadequacy of woman. In “Small the Theme of My Chant” he says “Man’s physiology complete, from top to toe, I sing. Not physic / ognomy alone, nor brain alone, is worthy for the Muse; - I / say the Form complete is worthier far. The Female equally / with the Male, I sing.” (Leaves of Grass 525) Leaves of Grass and "Two Rivulets" ponders over a New World Man and a New World Woman, modern, complete, democratic, not only fully and nobly intellectual and spiritual, but in the same measure physical, emotional, and even fully and nobly carnal.

The magnificent projection of the man in Leaves of Grass also comprises of the woman. While clearly emphasizing motherhood, Whitman valued other roles for women as well. He hailed those women who defied traditional ways, including Margaret Fuller, Frances Wright, George Sand, Delia Bacon, and others. Whitman imagines his radical poems having the effect of creating new individuals, of generating new artists and poets. He presents a new kind of independent American woman. In “A Woman Waits for Me,” the poet presents the vision of a future woman whose physical life is every bit as expanded, as open, and as athletic as a man’s.

Whitman persists that women must “know how to swim, row, ride, wrestle, shoot, run, strike, retreat, advance, resist, defend themselves. / They are ultimate in their own right—they are calm, clear, well-possessed of themselves” (Leaves of Grass 102). His vision of comradeship—modelled on empathy and equality lent itself readily to a critique of
hierarchical relations between men and women: “I am the poet of the woman the same as the man, / And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man, / And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men. (Leaves of Grass 48) He wishes a humanistic culmination of naive and spiritual life where woman is equally dignified with man and body is equally valued with the soul. In “So Long,” the poet forecasts his idea of future society:

I announce natural persons to rise, / I announce justice triumphant, 
I announce uncompromising liberty and equality, / I announce the justification of candor and the justification of / pride.... / I announce a life that shall be copious, vehement, spiritual, bold, / I announce the end that shall lightly and joyfully meet its translation. 
(Leaves of Grass 504)

The equality of woman with man has been emphasized by Whitman in Leaves of Grass. Woman is treated broadly and distinctly honourable. Whitman does not imply any obsession with sensuality. He simply adores woman’s body as an ideal manifestation of the principle in the Universe and with his Humanistic outlook he teaches the art of enjoying life without vulgarizing it. Woman is no more a plaything, an invalid, a fashion-plate, a gentle dependent, a delicate and delightful subordinate, a caressed and courted being in Leaves of Grass. She appears mature, full grown, firm in her own right, powerful in womanly charms, manly and the equal of man, cultured, athletic and dignified, adorned with the civic dignity, filled with the pride, the determination, the love and splendour of her country. Man is a great thing upon the earth, and through all eternity—but every speck of the greatness of man is
unfolded out of woman. She is the matrix of all and mother of a great generation:

Unfolded out of the folds of the woman man comes unfolded, / and is always to come unfolded; Unfolded only out of the superbest woman of the earth is to come / the superbest man of the earth. (*Leaves of Grass* 391)

The declaration of the majestic power and equality of the woman with the man is also implicated in the grand statement, full of the spirit of America, which projects the ideal city:

Where the men and women think lightly of the laws; /…. / Where fierce men and women pour forth, as the sea to the whistle / of death pours it sweeping and unript waves. / (*Leaves of Grass* 189)

Faith in democracy is the significance of Whitman’s poetry. Whitman has universally been identified as one of the few white American writers who transcended the racial attitudes of his age, a great prophet commemorating ethnic and racial multiplicity and exemplifying egalitarian morals. He has been accepted as a poetic father by poets of Native America, Asia, Africa, and Europe. Whitman presents a humanistic concept of perfect and free human beings as ideal citizens of democratic society. That is why he not only shows sympathy towards slaves but he equates himself with them and feels as if he himself is a slave. His purpose as a poet is to bring liberty and equality for all:

For the great Idea, the idea of perfect and free individuals, / For that, the bard walks in advance, leader of leaders, / The attitude of
him cheers up slaves and horrifies foreign despots. / Without extinction is Liberty, without retrograde is Equality, / They live in the feelings of young men and the best women, / Not for nothing have the indomitable heads of the earth been / always ready to fall for Liberty. / For the great Idea, / That, O my brethren, that is the mission of poets. (Leaves of Grass 348)

Elsewhere in Leaves of Grass Whitman depicts African Americans with deep insight and great sympathy. He calls himself as a “Brother of slaves”. (Leaves of Grass 444) In the portraits of the “negro” drayman in “Song of Myself” or of the slaves at auction in “I Sing the Body Electric,” Whitman celebrates African-American splendour, decorum, and potency against popular stereotypes, and he reveals the importance of black persons to the democratic future of America. ‘Examine these limbs, red, black or white,’ (Leaves of Grass 98) Whitman says of the auctioned slave, featuring him as symbol of a multiracial body politic.

In “The Sleepers,” Whitman gives voice to the slave’s longing for vengeance which most Americans wished not to recognize: “I have been wrong’d --- I am oppressed ---I hate him that oppresses me, / I will either destroy him, or he shall release me” (Leaves of Grass 627) The savage-greed of urban people is stripped naked. The poet’s rage is directed against the slayers of human freedom. His sympathy is definitely with the distressed black Africans. The poet’s fury is visible in the imagery he utilizes to portray the black deeds of the assassins of humanity.

Whitman’s association with slavery began with his newspaper editorials in 1846. During the same time, Whitman was experimenting with an altogether different voice and attitude toward slavery in his
poetry: “I am the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves / I am the poet of the body / I am” (Notebooks 1:67). Whitman describes his very craft as poet in terms of slavery, levelling the differences formed by slavery and claiming to embody both slaves and their masters. Further on Whitman says: “I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters . . . Entering into both so that both will understand me alike” (Notebooks 1:67).

The black slave scene in “The Sleepers” brings in a black slave’s eruption of hatred for his white master, and, for the first time in American poetry, a white poet shifts the unfolding of a poem to a black character. Whitman’s endeavour is not to speak for the black slave but to speak as the black slave. The poem remains one of the most influential and evocative passages about slavery in American literature:

Now Lucifer was not dead . . . . or if he was I am his sorrowful terrible heir; / Damn him! How he does defile me, / How he informs against my brother and sister and takes pay for their / blood, How he laughs when I look down the bend after / the steamboat that carries away my woman. / Now the vast dusk bulk that is the whale’s bulk . . . . it seems mine, / Warily, sportsman! though I lie so sleepy and sluggish, my tap is death. (Leaves of Grass 96)

The self-proclaimed ‘American Bard,’ Whitman can see beyond the norms and expectations of society so he opposed obeying the rules of society and stunned his contemporaries with his embrace of the corporeal. But underneath his manifesto for social revolution there is a dynamic call for spiritual revolution. His humanist agenda does not discard religion, rather it seeks for a better understanding and interpretations of religious
principle for the benefit of society. He calls for the wisdom of the ancients in an omnisciently motivated and persistent note:

Outbidding at the start the old cautions hucksters, / Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah, / Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son, and Hercules his grandson, / Buying drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha, In my portfolio placing Manito loose, Allah on a leaf, the crucifix engraved. / With Odin and the hideous-faced Mexitli and every idol and image, / Taking them all for what they are worth and not a cent more. (Leaves of Grass 75)

His spirituality depends not on hours of worship but rather on creative emergence of the human being in all its earthiness, personality and spirit. Whitman is deeply spiritual poet, though not with the belief of the creeds. He looks through Nature to supreme forces and rejoices in them:

And as to you Death, and you bitter tug of mortality, it is idle to / try to alarm me. / And as to you Life, I reason you are the leavings of many deaths, / hear you whispering there O stars of heaven, / O suns—O grass of graves—O perpetual transfers and promotions. (Leaves of Grass 87)

Philosophy or religion, however great it might be it is worthless and imperfect without commitment to the service of humanity. In Whitman’s poetry the human and divine are never in conflict, they always converge in peace. The divine descends from its stature and becomes human and the human ascends from the smallness of the self and becomes divine. One can comprehend the character of Whitman’s
‘greater religion,’ or ‘the Religion of Humanity’ from a Preface to 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* written by the poet himself:

A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. The churches built under their umbrage shall be the churches of men and women. Through the divinity of themselves shall the Kosmos and the new breed of poets be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things. They shall find their inspiration in real objects today, symptoms of the past and future. (Leaves of Grass 729)

Unlike the Renaissance humanist, Whitman does not fully discard religion. His approach to religion is fairly exceptional. He recognizes religion in the context of time in which it is developed, but discards the same for any other times if it loses its relevance. Whitman does not sing to any specific God or Goddess. He is a Universalist, not in its creedal sense, but in the implication of the term. He realizes God everywhere. He rejects the bonds of all orthodox faiths and desires to liberate himself from every thwarting practice. His humanistic approach makes us believe that God is to be found not in temples or mosques but in humanity itself:

I have no chair, no church, no philosophy, / I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, or ex-Change, / But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll, / My left hand hooking you round the waist, / My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents, and a plain public / road./.(Leaves of Grass 83)

That ‘plain public road’ each man must travel for himself. Whitman presents his notion of humanistic God where God is most
dearly felt in human beings. Whitman’s truly humanistic theological creed is evident in this extract:

And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God, / For I who am curious about each am not curious about God, / (No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God / and about death.) I hear and behold God in every object, yet I understand God not/ in the least, / Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than / myself. / Why should I wish to see God better than this day? I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then, / In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in / the glass. (Leaves of Grass 86-7)

His religion does not comprise of dogmas, churches, creeds, etc. They have least consequence to him, but Whitman in his habitual state of feelings regards everything around him filled with divine grace of God. He often speaks expressively of God, as when he says: “I find letters from God dropped in the street, and everyone is signed / by God’s name.” (Leaves of Grass 87) According to the Christian world view God and man are entirely different and can never meet on equal terms. Whitman diverges with this popular Western view and discovers a compassionate chord in the native European tradition of humanistic values as well as in the Upanishads. There are no barriers between men and the Divine: “Nothing, not God, is greater to one than one’s self is, / And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy, walks to his own / funeral, Dressed in his shroud,” (Leaves of Grass 86) Like upanishadic sages he recognizes the soul as a mere spectator:
I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the / poet of wickedness also. / What blurt is this about virtue and about vice? / Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent. (Leaves of Grass 50)

The dominant tone of Leaves of Grass is peculiarly oriental, as though Whitman is an embodiment of Brahma, and a pantheist. He says: “Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.” (Leaves of Grass 50) For John Reid “there is a great similarity between his view of the world and his expression of that view, and Hindu Vedantic thought.” (Reid 55) God is not limited to the altar of worship but He is God in person as a great companion of humanity. There is a vision of the essential oneness of all things and beings including himself, in God or the “Kosmic spirit”:

And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own, / And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own, / And that all men ever born are also my brothers, and the / women my sisters, and lovers, / And that a kelson of the creation is love. (Leaves of Grass 33)

R.A. Dave notes that though the Leaves of Grass has been “written in the aftermath of the Civil War, it opens up a sea of harmony and peace under some vast unreached sky”. (Dave 333) Every iota of his existence is ripe with the realization of his soul which abruptly awakens Whitman to the ‘peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,’ a fragmentary but certain knowledge: ‘that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,’ ‘that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers, ‘that a kelson of the creation is love.’ This
realization merges into a mountain of jumbled images—‘limitless’ ‘leaves,’ ‘brown ants,’ ‘elder, mullein and poke-weed.’ And ultimately, the unintelligible array of Nature, in its smallest manifestations, is also embraced in the all-inclusive assertion of God and brotherhood. Hamilton Mabie affirms the same: “Whitman has a fundamentally religious view of life which makes him brother with all men and in sympathy with all experience” (Mabie 240)

Whitman as a humanist, has a firm faith in modern material accomplishments because they can serve as means to better understand the “aged fierce enigmas” (Leaves of Grass, 420) at the heart of spiritual queries. “Passage to India” is imposing in conception and has had many admirers. It shifts from the material to the spiritual and celebrates the highly revealed work of engineers, especially the evocative universal linking achieved by the transcontinental railroad, the Suez Canal, and the Atlantic cable.

A humanist does not surrender to blind faith. He comprehends the ‘truth’ in his own way. Whitman does not bother to establish propositions but to stimulate energy and supply a motivation. He wishes no one to follow him but instead must separate from him as quickly as possible, and pave his own way. In “Song of the open Road”, Whitman inspires the individual to cast off all thwarting conventions and responsibilities, to strike out on one’s own: “Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road, / healthy, free, the world before me, / The long brown path before me, leading Wherever I chose.” (Leaves of Grass, 149)

Whitman’s Humanism draws much from Transcendentalism. But his approach to transcendentalism differs from that of most of his
contemporaries like Thoreau and others. They did not discard the importance of the material aspect of life but they exalted the spiritual as the highest. Whitman disagrees with the belief that a perfect society would come from disengagement with the world around him and he celebrated the baser aspects of economy--- work, soil and body--- as an important part of the absolute goodness of the word. A true humanist like him cannot disregard sensual aspect of life. He always gives equal importance to matter as well as spirit. Whitman does not reject the physical, for it is only through the physical that one can have an insight of the spiritual, and it is only through the physical that this vision can be conveyed. Thus he emerges as a poet both of the body and the soul. The acceptance of the body distinguishes him from the other mystics in America. He firmly believes that God has created both the body and the soul, and so both are equally important and substantial. This also accounts for the sexuality of many of his poems The poet argues that democratic consciousness requires for care and respect of the physical existence. He believes that ignoring one’s own body leads to the subjugation of others’ bodies as well.

Whitman looks for those experiences that cross the fences of class, gender, and race: all humans live in bodies and arrest the world through the five senses and breathe the same air. Whitman’s insisting on the body and on sensuality breeds out of his belief that such an appeal to corporeal experience eradicates hierarchies and discriminations among his readers. To signify such experiences Whitman creates a democratic poetry accessible to everyone. He makes brave and native use of his own body and soul. Study of the whole of Whitman’s poetry indicates that he not only applauds the pleasure of the senses, but sings of the real life. He asserts that the soul achieves its identity through the act of observing
loving and absorbing concrete objects: “We realize the soul only by you, you faithful solids and fluids.” *(Leaves of Grass*, 633)* Arthur Christopher Benson explains Whitman’s sentient principle of equality of body and soul:

That is a rough analogy of the doctrine of Walt Whitman; namely, that the individual, soul and body, is a polity; and that the true life is to be found in a harmonious co-operation of body and soul. The reason is not at liberty to deride or to neglect the bodily desires, even the meanest and basest of them, because every desire, whether of soul or body, is the expression of something that exists in the animating principle. (http://www.blackmask.com)

Whitman was the first major poet to make humanity his subject. He was not derisive of the material and practical aspects of life. He seems most eloquent and champion of the poetic revolution when he takes body as a subject worth praise. The celebration of human body is a major theme in *Leaves of Grass*. Love, sex, work, courage, hope, and strength are all subjects of the poems in *Leaves of Grass* and each is put into the context of the immeasurable value of the human body.

Whitman launches a campaign to declare the claims of the body along with those of the soul. Whitman rejected any distinction of importance between body and soul and sought unity in their mutual dependence. He realized that body and spirit, visible and invisible, within and without are co-dependent for their mutual realisation – they are one and the same, and one is not without the other. To him there was no division or reason for shame between one function of the body and another, or between the function of one sense or another and all the parts
of the human anatomy he held to be equal and the whole body must be in accord with itself before the soul can appropriately dwell in it.

The Human body is a ground of human understanding to which all notions ultimately relate. It is also a fund of delight, the capital of sexual pleasure and the compassionate emotions which bind person to person. Thus the body is the heart of democratic politics, the universal denominator in the experience of all men and women. Whitman’s absorption with the body is very obvious in his poetry. He was meticulously bound in his attraction to medicine and to the hospitals, where he learned to face bodily disfigurations and gained the ability to see beyond wounds and illness to the human personalities that endured through grief and disgrace. He claims:

I am the poet of the body, And I am the poet of the soul. / The pleasures of heaven are with me, and the pains of hell are / with me, / The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue. (Leaves of Grass, 48)

He is well aware of the limitations of the human body yet he never fails to remember its importance as an essential ground to all human experience and existence. He unequivocally claims beauty of a human body and the divine harmony of Body and Soul: “Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man / hearty and clean, / Not an inch, nor a particle of an inch, is vile, and none shall be / less familiar than the rest. (Leaves of Grass 31) The entire world is full of mystery, but man among all is the greatest miracle. He loves and hails whatever is expressed or felt through human body. Like a true Humanist he does not close the gateway of the senses, but allows the divine brilliance of spirit
to come in abundance through the senses. Whitman articulates his firm faith in sensuous experience thus: “I believe in the flesh and the appetites, / Seeing, hearing, and feeling are miracles, and each part and tag me/ is a miracle.” (Leaves of Grass 53)

“I Sing the Body Electric” is a wonderful poem celebrating the splendour of existence. Human body becomes a mouthpiece for spiritual, social, and political expression. In “Body Electric”, physical existence emerges as a central element in the poet’s scheme. The poet emphasizes his bond with all men and women, the children of Adam. He declares, “The bodies of men and women engirth me, and I engirth them, / They will not let me off nor I them till I go with them and respond to them.” (Leaves of Grass, 93) Whitman traces his delight at the amazing qualities of the human body. “If anything is sacred the human body is sacred” (Leaves of Grass, 99). He writes, “And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?” (Leaves of Grass, 94)

The “Children of Adam,” poems have as the foremost theme---the exaltation of the body and love. The author celebrates amativeness and the principle of sex. They have most likely been very much misunderstood in these poems he projects his hero mostly as a breeding animal--- a stalwart, healthy, eccentric man. Sexual imagery runs through it and Whitman does not waver to sing the pleasures of human body. Even when Whitman deals with a patriotic theme, he gives it a sexual ambience, as in these lines about George Washington:

When peace is declared, / He stands in the room of the old tavern....the well-belov’d soldiers/ all pass through. / The officers speechless and slow draw near in their turns, / The chief encircles their necks with his arm and kisses them on /
the cheek, / He kisses lightly the wet cheeks one after another
/
....he shakes / hands and bids goodbye to the army. (Leaves of
Grass 429)

A careful reading of Leaves of Grass reveals that all the sexuality
has been sublimated and philosophised. Like all mystics Whitman
envisages of God as his beloved and the sex-encounters are the poet’s
meetings with his Creator. An enlightening selection about sexual joy
exists in which Whitman employs the word “God,” later replacing it with
‘hugging and loving bedfellow’:

I am satisfied---I see, dance, laugh, sing; / As the hugging and
loving bedfellow and sleeps at my side through / night, and
withdraws at the peep of the day with/ stealthy tread, / Leaving me
baskets cover’d with white towels swelling the house / with their
plenty (Leaves of Grass 31-32)

Walt Whitman is known as the greatest and most revolutionary
poet and the father and founder of a distinctively American literature. At
the time of Whitman’s birth America was still very much in the process
of formation. Malcolm Cowley once commented that “before Walt
Whitman America hardly existed.” (Cowley 136) Walt Whitman has
virtues and strength sufficient for claiming laureateship of the great
American nation that no American creative writer ever yet had. The
comprehensiveness of Leaves of Grass reverberates especially powerfully
in the United States, a country outstanding for its varied population and
for its constant struggle to fulfil its meaning and promise. He projected
himself as the representative of America, the spokesperson of free
institutions, the image of all that men had waited for. Leaves of Grass
represents the American psyche and the state of American society more
faithfully than any other poems. In the poems, for the first time, the full strength of our American life receives expression and assertion.

From the focus on the grass imagery, the poet shifts on to the theme of ‘en-masse’ in the *Leaves of Grass*. He becomes Walt Whitman, American, wandering the continent, celebrating everyday scenes of mundane life. He appears as the “caresser of life wherever moving . . . Absorbing all to myself and for this song.” (*Leaves of Grass* 40) This advance rises in upsurge to the comprehensive catalogue with rapid-fire snapshots of American types and scenes. Enumerating *Leaves of Grass*’ very American elements Walter Blair says,

Whitman’s poetry was original and revolutionary and indisputably American. He broke with the conventions and traditions of English verse….He employed free rhythms, which are comparable with those of the Old Testament. (Blair 678)

Walt Whitman is characteristically and transcendently the representative Poet of America--- the genuine and potential founder of a great poetic literature proportional to the material enormity and the unmeasured fortunes of America---as holding to American literature the same relation as Homer holds to Greek literature, Dante to Italian, Goethe to German Cervantes to Spain, Shakespeare to English, Haftz to Persia and Vyasa to India. Ezra Pound praised him and commented: Whitman “is America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it is America.” (Pound 112) Whitman’s poems, are soaked through and through with the spirit of America. e.g. ‘Starting from Paumanock,’ ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,’ ‘A Song of Joys,’ ‘Song of the Broad Axe,’ ‘A Song for Occupations,’ ‘Pioneers! O Pioneers!’ ‘By Blue Ontario’s Shore,”
‘Drum-taps,’ and ‘Sea Drift.’ Whitman celebrated America and the celebration quite often turned into catalogues of the American scene:

I Hear America singing the varied carols, I hear, / Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe / and strong. / The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam, / The mason singing his as he makes ready for work or leaves / off / work.’ (*Leaves of Grass* 12)

Whitman keenly felt the special place of America in the world, and he expressed this throughout *Leaves of Grass*. His Humanism brings democracy for all people, and his love of country is as wide and inclusive as can be. He has equal reverence for the winners as well as for them who have lost the battle: “I play not marches for accepted victors only, I play marches for / conquer’d and slain persons.” His poems demonstrate a keen acquaintance with the America of his day which was unparalleled in its geographical, social, occupational range and in the exactitude of its detail. His long catalogues articulate his wish and his determined to do justice to every bit of America, every individual that forms the great people of America. M. G. Krishnamurthi says,

The whole of America which is being celebrated and the emphasis on song and the separate listing of the representative of America who are singing hold the poem together and make it an expression of the belief in America as the land of opportunities.(236)

Whitman’s was the patriotism of a humanist. He couldn’t blindly worship his country. He rests human values at the highest --- higher than power values. He regards the ‘spirit of man’ more than the power and the
glory of the nation. Patriotism never exceeds soul, conscience and love for humanity in his poetry. His adoration for America and American people never induce him to compromise his noble, humanistic ideal of human comradeship; nor did it lead him to abhor the people or nations hostile to America.

Whitman celebrated the United States with the same fervour Virgil celebrated Rome. Everything about America, he loved, respected and enjoyed. “To celebrate man and to celebrate his country were the two dominant ambitions of Whitman evinced in his poetry.” (David 113) His *Leaves of Grass* wishes the American nation to keep looking forward, for the future is full of innumerable promises: “The present holds thee not for such vast growth as thine, / For such unparall’d flight as thine, such brood as thine, The future only holds thee and can hold thee.” (*Leaves of Grass* 461)

This flamboyant conception of the future of America is expressed also in such poems as “Turn O Liberated”, “Thick Sprinkled Bunting,” “Pioneers, O, Pioneers,” “Passage to India” and “To a Locomotive in Winter”. “Pioneers, O, Pioneers,” celebrates the Westward movement, grasping the spirit of the pioneers commendably in the metaphor of the marching army and in the heavily metrical rhythms of its regular trochaic measure. In ‘One’s self I sing’ Whitman says:

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, / and along the shores of the great lakes and all over the prairies, / I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other’s necks, (*Leaves of Grass* 610)
The Humanistic patriotism forms one of the poet’s grandest characteristics. It is so comprehensive and influential that inexpensive pocket editions of *Leaves of Grass* were circulated among workers and farmers during the Depression, and free copies were distributed to the American Armed forces during World War II. Walt Whitman casts a spell on every Americans because he loves the whole country without any types of prejudices or preferences. He is from North yet he naturally has a warm place in his heart for the South, and it is apparent on several pages of *Leaves of Grass*:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise, / Regardless of others, ever regardful of others, / Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man, / Stuff’d with the stuff that is coarse and stuff’d with stuff that / is fine, / One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same And / the largest the same, / A southerner soon as a Northerner. (*Leaves of Grass* 44)

The deep mourning that the nation was thrust into at the death of Abraham Lincoln finds expression in the two great elegies of Whitman: “O Captain, My Captain” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” “O Captain, My Captain” illustrates a striking contrast between the triumph of the nation and its severest loss in the moment of victory:

O Captain! My Captain! our fearful trip is done / The ship has weather’d every rack the prize we sought is won, / The port is near the bells I hear, the people all exulting, / While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel/ grim and daring; But O heart! heart! heart! /
O the bleeding drops of red, / Were on the deck my Captain lies, /
Fallen cold and dead (Leaves of Grass 337-8)

The great national deficit and the anguish caused by Lincoln’s death are expressed in the delicate poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” where the poet refers to the great “bright Western Star” Lincoln whose death will be mourned by the poet with every coming of spring: “Ever-returning spring trinity sure to me you bring, /
Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping stat in the west, / And thought of him I love.” (Leaves of Grass 328) The poem is the hymn of the poet’s soul weaved with Lilac and the star and the bird song to keep the memory of “the sweetest and wisest soul of all my days and lands.” (Leaves of Grass 337) The deep grief that thus finds poetic expression makes Whitman the spokesman of the entire America that was sunk into sorrow by the loss of the national hero, Lincoln. While sharing this common grief American people showed unparallel solidarity which Whitman has imbibed and articulated in the two immortal elegies. In “Thou Mother of thy Equal Brood” Whitman expresses the note of optimism urging his country to rise and triumph over all the repulsive memories of the civil war and face the possibility of greatness lying ahead:

The storm shall dash thy face, the murk of war and worse Than / war shall cover thee all over, / …. / But thou shalt face thy fortunes, thy diseases and Surmount them / all, / Whatever they are to-day / and whatever through time they may be, / They each and all shall lift and pass away and cease from thee. (Leaves of Grass 460)
It is amazing to see patriotism so compassionate and absolute amalgamated with such a breadth of universal and purely human sympathy. Whitman’s poetry shows that the poet is less interested in the cult of prearranged patriotism or an indecisive cosmopolitanism, and more interested in universal humanity, which transcends all hurdles of time and place. Patriotism often becomes pitiless when it is erected on the (mis)use of power and has slender and unreasonable attitude for other nation and people. Such patriotism becomes a source of human belittlement, abhorrence, war and massacre. Whitman transcends mere patriotism and becomes a universal nationalist with universal love and brotherhood for the whole of humanity. His Humanist attitude with heavenly compassion for and acceptance of the dead enemy is seen in one of the poems spanned by the word ‘Reconciliation’:

Word over all, beautiful as the sky, / Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage, must in time be / utterly lost, / That the hands of the sisters Death and Night, incessantly softly / wash again, and ever again, this soil’d world. (Leaves of Grass 321)

The poet in his patriotic enthusiasm liked to think of his mother country singing together, flourishing in harmony, soaring on the wings of harmony to greater and still greater heights. The civil conflict that caused severe wounds on his beloved motherland offended the poet. Whitman knew the terrors of war at first hand as he himself had the chance to serve as a nurse to the wounded. His impressions are documented in the poem, “The Wound Dresser.” “Come up from the Field Father” is another moving and mesmerizing poem, where Whitman’s imagination brings back the horror of war and the fierce waste of human life it brings about. An extremely stirring scene is pictured in a short poem where the father
and the mother come up from their errands to receive news of their son’s death. The immeasurable grief that Whitman felt has been crystallized in these beautiful lines, full of pathos:

The only son is dead. / But the mother need to be better, / She with thin form presently drest in black, / By day her meals untouch’d, then at night fitfully sleeping, often waking, / In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep Longing, / O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life escape and / withdraw, / To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son. (Leaves of Grass 303)

Walt Whitman represents the American psyche and the state of American society more authentically than any other poets: “Every spear of grass—the frames, limbs, organs, of men and women, and all that concerns them, / All these to me are unspeakably perfect miracles.” (Leaves of Grass 634) There is enough space in the notion of America for everybody and no one is barred because of his poverty or his sins except the nonbeliever and sceptic. Whitman does not linger over the minor groups of human society, like the family. He is not a fireside poet. Whitman is a humanist poet and true hero of his epic is the nation of which he is a member, or the whole race of man to which the nation belongs.

The advancement of science in the nineteenth century intensely affected religious thought. Geology established the antiquity of the earth, thus questioning the chronology of Genesis. Evolution, as set forth in Darwin’s The Origin of Species in 1859, saw man as the product of a
slow development from simpler forms of animal life, thus challenging the Christian belief in His special creation.

Science and religion are believed to be contrary to each other. Whitman as a religious Humanist expresses profound faith in Science and religion both in the same manner as he deals with Man and God. He deals with astronomy, geology, physiology, chemistry, and all other sciences with the same passion, and that yet he happily sings of the butcher, the baker, and candlestick-maker, the sailor and soldier, and every other individual high or low, beast, man, insect, flower, or stone with ceaseless sympathies and intentions of the man.

He firmly believed that modern America is the centre of science and democracy, just as formerly Europe was the centre of Feudalism, and Asia that of myth and fable. This sense of the superiority of America runs through his poetry. Whitman anticipated a poetry that would be the companion of science. Nelen Vendler expresses Whitman’s scientific approach thus:

He beholds no visions of visible things in heaven or hell unseen to other men. He rather sees with extraordinary precision the realities of our earth. Whitman had no fear of science; science was revelation, and supported the view that he who is at the peak of the present---as an American from his very pastlessness tended to be---is the first into the future. (Vendler 5)

The modernity of Whitman is invigorating. Though he has persona of the romantic in him, he is not perpetually gazing at the past. He is motivated by the adventurous spirit of his time, by the spirit of expansion,
immortalized in “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” by all the scientific inventions in which America was obviously ahead of the rest of the world. The beauty of the Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* lies in the final appreciation of science. He superbly blends his poetry with geology, mathematics, chemistry, navigation, astronomy, anatomy, phrenology, and engineering. His ‘Passage to India’ celebrates three great engineering feats of the 1860s: the Atlantic Cable, the Suez Canal, and the Union Pacific Railroad. Whitman’s “To a Locomotive in Winter” depicts his affectionate admiration with which he looks at the locomotive with its ‘black cylindric body, golden brass and silvery steel’ etc….He invites this ‘type of the modern emblem of motion and power-pulse of the continent’ to come and serve the Muse:

Fierce-throated beauty! / Roll through my chant with all thy lawless music, thy swinging / lamps at night, / Thy madly-whistled laughter, echoing, rumbling like an Earth- / quake, rousing all, / Law of thyself complete; thine own track firmly holding, / (No sweetness debonair of tearful harp or glib piano thine) / Thy trills of shrieks by rocks and hills return’d / Launch’d o’er the prairies wide, across the lakes, / To the free skies unpent and glad and strong. (*Leaves of Grass* 634)

Science can but supply the mystic with a new leaf in which spiritual truths are recorded: “Gentlemen! [men of science] to you the first honours always! / Your facts are useful and real, and yet they are not my dwelling. / I but enter by them into an area of my dwelling.” (*Leaves of Grass* 51)
Whitman’s Humanist manifesto aims at universal brotherhood realized through love, dignity and compassion but not by force and agreement. He does not leave any vagueness and disbelief when he warns against unity achieved by law or force:

To hold men together by paper and seal or by compulsion is no account, That only holds men together which aggregates all in a living principle, as the hold of the limbs of the body or the fibres of plants. (*Leaves of Grass* 47)

Whitman insists upon the solidarity of America with all nations of the world. He comprehended that humanity has but one heart and that it should have but one will. For the unity of America he pronounces the notion of ‘one and indivisible’ country. Whitman believes that in spite of all diversity in external aspects the unity in America was cemented forever by the issue of the Civil War.

Whitman is a Universalist who has no antagonisms. Whitman has cut across fences of race, ethnicity, nationality, and gender. He accepts all, respects all, loves all. He would welcome all objects---material and spiritual, as if the grasp of his finite intellect were the fundamental principle that unites things together, harmonizes all discords, and wipes out all distinctions---of good and evil, of pain and pleasure, of past and future, of time and eternity:

I respect Assyria, China, Teutonia, and the Hebrews, / I adopt each theory, myth, god, and demi-god, / I see that the old accounts, bibles, genealogies, are true, without / exception, / I assert that all past days were what they should have been, / And that they could
no-how have been better than they were, / And that to-day is what it should be—and that America is, / And that to-day and America could no-how be better than they / are. (*Leaves of Grass* 241)

Certainly, the earth ever soars in Whitman’s mind as his mightiest symbol, ---his type of entirety and power in “To the Sayers of Words,” “This Compost,” “The Song of the Open Road,” and “Pensive on her Dead gazing I heard the Mother of all.” The poet’s approach toward cosmic humanity is well illustrated in “Salut au Monde:

My spirit has pass’d in compassion and determination around the / whole earth, / I have look’d for equals and lovers, and found them ready for me / in all lands, / I think some divine rapport has equalized me with them. / You vapors! I think I have risen with you and moved away to distant / continents, and fallen down there for reasons, / I think I have blown with you, you winds, / O waters, I have finger’d every shore with you, (*Leaves of Grass* 148)

Indeed, the whole book permeates with vehement Comradeship. Not only in the mutual relations of individuals, not only between the different towns and cities and all the States of the indissoluble, compacted Union, ---but it seeks to make a tie of fraternity and fusion holding all the races and peoples and countries of the whole earth. Men of every class are worthy of note to Whitman. But no individual is pre-eminently appealing to him. His sketches of individual men and women, though amazingly lucid and exact, are none of them longer than a page; each individual figure passes swiftly out of sight, and a flood of other figures of men and women succeeds. Even in “Lincoln’s Burial Hymn” he has only a word to say of Lincoln---‘the large sweet soul that has gone.’ The
implicated sweetness, odour, sound and light really speak not of Lincoln but of death. Whitman’s interest in humanity and his claim that the entire world is family is expressed with natural humility:

These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they / are not original with me, / If they are not yours as much as mine they are Nothing, or next / to nothing, / If they are the riddle and the untying of the riddle, they are / nothing, not just as close as they are distant they are nothing. / This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is, / This is the common air that bathes the globe. *(Leaves of Grass 45)*

The ecstasy caused by the concept of free democratic world is the essence of Whitman’s poetry. It is his safeguarding of the ethics of democracy that makes Whitman, the poet of the common man, the spokesman of the ‘uncultivated,’ and the singer of humanity as a whole. In the poem “The Mystic Trumpeter” the poet advises the trumpeter to bring to his soul “some vision of the future”—vision of an ideal world:

A reborn race appears---a perfect world, all joy! / Women and men in wisdom innocence and health--- all joy! / Riotous laughing bacchanals fill’d with joy! / War, sorrow, suffering gone---the rank earth purged---nothing / But joy left! / The ocean fill’d with joy---the atmosphere all joy! / Joy! joy! in freedom, worship, love! joy in the ecstasy of life! *(Leaves of Grass 471)*

No voice was raised more graciously for freedom of the entire world as that of Walt Whitman. We find the slogan of blissful freedom sung in all
his literary quests. The goal of his freedom is the realization of universality only through love, sympathy and adjustment.

Walt Whitman is the intimate companion of Nature and his *Leaves of Grass* is a revelation from the Kingdom of Nature. Whitman finds all things embraced and realized in the individual, to whom certainly the universe belongs and who belongs to the universe. He recognizes the common brotherhood of mankind, and the same human nature recurring in every person. He aspires for a noble race of human beings, vigorous and vigorous, living their perfect lives pleasantly, in sympathy with Nature, in an idyllic world. The charm and thoughtful intensity of Whitman’s Nature poetry can be traced to his inborn, personal experience. He yells to a gaping universe: “I, Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a Cosmos; I shout my voice high and clear over the waves; I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.” (*Leaves of Grass* 89)

Whitman is a glowing and full-blooded lover of Nature who learns her very affectionately. According to his own description, he is ‘a Kosmos.’ His study of Nature has been adjacent and passionate. “A morning glory at my window satisfies me more than the meta-physics of books” (*Leaves of Grass* 54) One of the distinguishing features of Whitman’s poetry---the plentiful long catalogues. His poems thrive in endless catalogues of Nature’s infinite beauty. These are the poet’s efforts to give illustration of the ‘fullness and variety of Nature.’ Such microscopic observation was the result of reverential affection. His short poems like ‘The First Dandelion’ or ‘A Prairine Sunset’ evoke the best in English Nature poetry:
Shot gold, maroon and violet, dazzling silver, emerald, fawn, / The earth’s whole amplitude and Nature’s multiform power / Consign’d for once to colours; / The light, the general air possess’d by them—colours till now unknown, / No limit, confine--- not the Western sky alone---the high meridian / ---North, South, all, / Pure luminous colour fighting the silent shadows to the last. (Leaves of Grass 530-31)

As a lover of Nature, he looks at all natural things. Trees, birds, fish similarly savour him. He finds God in everything: “I find letters from God dropt in the street, and everyone is sign’d by God’s name.” (Leaves of Grass 87) Affinity with Nature, for Whitman, took such form as “a child went forth every day. And he became the first object he looked upon. And the object became part of him.” The secret of true personality according to Whitman is the identification of the microcosm with all things natural and external:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manahattan the son, / Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating drinking and breeding, / No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from / them No more modest than immodest. (Leaves of Grass 52)

Whitman has feeling of identity not only with man but with all living creatures. This sense of the ‘oneness of all’ makes his democracy universal and pantheistic. He walks in the midst of the herds of cattle and gives us this lesson of unity, integrity, brotherhood, contentedness, happiness and optimism combined with his humanistic outlook:
I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and / self-contained, I stand and look at them long and long. / They do not sweat and whine about their condition, / They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins, / They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God. / Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of / owning things, / Not one kneels to another nor to his kind that lived thousands of / years ago, / Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth. (Leaves of Grass 60)

He supposed that Nature alone remains permanent to man, and the ultimate tranquillity and happiness of mankind depends upon awakening “from their torpid recesses the affinities of a man or a woman with the open air, the trees, fields, changes of seasons, the sun by day and the stars of heaven by night.” (Fisher 356) Whitman was fond of the ocean. He loved its feature and music, more than any other object. He addresses the sea in beautiful manner thus:

With husky-haughty lips, O sea! / Where day and night I wend thy surf-beat shore, / Imaging to my sense thy varied strange suggestions, / (I see and plainly list thy talk and conference here,) /Thy troops of white-maned racers racing to the goal, / Thy ample, smiling face, dash’d with the sparkling dimples of the / sun,  (Leaves of Grass 517)

Whitman is a pantheist to whom every object of Nature throbs with life. He ascribes a living, conscience and lively personality to the earth.
Whitman at his best as a lover of the earth gives a beautiful pen-picture of Nature as his apostrophe to the earth:

Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees! / Earth of departed sunset earth of the mountains misty-topt! / Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue! / Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river! / Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake! / Far-swooping elbow’d earth rich apple-blossom’d earth! / Smile, for your lover comes. / Prodigal, you have given me love--- therefore I to you give love! / O unspeakable passionate love. (Leaves of Grass 49)

The Sun appears in a number of poems. In “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and in the “Drum Tap” poems, it symbolises fertility or a prolific, happy life. The Moon, too, features in a number of poems, and it seems to reconcile the poet to death and tragedy. Whitman delightfully expresses his knowledge of sunrise thus:

To behold the daybreak! / The little light fades the immense and diaphanous shadows, / The air tastes good to my palate / Hefts of the moving world at innocent gambols, silently rising, / freshly exuding. / Scooting obliquely high and low. / Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs, / Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven. (Leaves of Grass 54)

Whitman is fond of the motionlessness of night, and apostrophizes it with fervent intensity: “Press close, bare-bosom’d night! --- press close magnetic, nourishing night! Night of south winds! ---night of the large, few stars! / Still, nodding night! --- mad, naked, Summer Night.” (Leaves
of Grass 49) Above all he loves movement in Nature. His poetry proliferates in the so-called motor images. He takes delight in picturing a scene “Where the heifers browse, where geese nip their food with short jerks,” (Leaves of Grass 63) He is the poet of Nature as well as of man. He reveals how Nature educated him:

The early lilacs became part of this child, / And grass and white and red morning-glories, and white and red / clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird, / And the Third-month lambs and the sow’s pink-faint litter, and / the mare’s foal and the cow’s calf.

(Leaves of Grass 364)

The splendour and thoughtful passion of Whitman’s poetry about Nature can be traced to his intrinsic, individual experience. It can be seen that Man incorporates within his personality not only his fellow beings through love and comradeship, but also assimilates Nature into him. The relation between Man and Nature is that of interdependence and collaboration. Both need each other and are imperfect without each other. Whitman lived as much as possible out of doors, making a gymnasium of the silent woods, taking naked sun baths and brisk rubbings, exercising arms and chest by pulling on the sturdy flexible young boughs of beech, exercising his lungs by shouting, singing, declaiming, as in the old Broadway days, living.

Away from Books-away from Art---the lesson learn’d, pass’d o’er, / soothing, bathing, merging all-the sane, magnetic, / for the day and night themselves---the open air, / Now for the fields, the seasons, insects, trees---the rain and snow, / Where wild bees flitting hum, / Or August mulleins grow, or winter’s snowflakes
fall, Or stars in the skies roll round---The silent sun and stars.

(Leaves of Grass 579)

American life and convention have saturated Whitman’s soul. American air has permeated his lungs. He does not pay heed to old-world notions and conventions and passes them by as things undeserving of a thought. He is an American, Manhattanese, a democrat humanist. The world he lives in is peaceful with questions of kingcraft or priestcraft. He knows and loves human nature in the diverse developments. Comradeship is his dictum. Men who labour and love like him are his brothers. He does not bother always about success. He sings elapsed or nameless heroes as well as those whose names are leading in the scroll of fame. The imperfections of the human nature he considers are as well worthy of study as its perfections. Nothing about manhood is evil or impure. His disdain for the suppositions of philosophy is neither greater nor less than his indifference of the dogmatism of power.

Whitman is the most pantheistic of pantheists. He finds God in all places, even where Egyptian or Phoenician would not have sought him. He understands and worships the divine in the human. He finds nothing inappropriate to utilize in poetry. His foremost theme is, however, manhood; first, as he sees it in the individual that is himself, next as he sees it in the world at large, the American world that is. Leaves of Grass is the poem of personality and humanity. It is stalwart, fervent, rhapsodical even, and yet permeated with matter-of-fact plainness of speech. It is profligate at times both in reality and ideality. One thing, at least, it never is—detrimental or sinister and it is through and through humanist poetry.
Works-cited


