The well-known American poet Carl Sandburg remarked in his Introduction to "Leaves of Grass", that the author of Leaves of Grass "Wrote his vital passages at the height of America's most stormily human period of history". (1)

Actually, it was difficult to estimate the revolutionary impact of those events which occurred in America at the time of Whitman. But Whitman had the heart and intelligence to realize the importance of those events.

In reality, there were many tendencies which clashed in the United States in the middle of 19th Century. Merchants became more and more rich, new factories were born, and bankers gained more influence. At the same time, the Southern land-owners developed a more stubborn attitude towards their slaves. They continually expanded the areas where slave labour was used. Thus they politically fettered the North, and thus obstructed the development of the productive forces of the country. The abolition of the slavery was urgently demanded by the capitalists for the basic interests of capital in New England as well as New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and other Northern and Western sections of the United States.

1. Walt Whitman. Leaves of Grass. Introduction by Carl Sandburg, P.VIII.
The landowners of the agricultural southern part of U.S.A. purchased Negroes as their slaves, and employed them to produce wheat and cotton in their fields. The Negroes got bare subsistence, but they had to work continuously without rest just like animals, and were whipped for any little slackness. President Lincoln had noticed such inhuman torture of human beings and had been thinking of putting an end to such treatment. Whitman always opposed this inhuman system of slavery which appeared to him as one of the cruel manifestations of evil on the earth. But he held the identical view with Lincoln that the integrity of the country should be preserved at any cost.

Walt Whitman's attitude intensified more and more in the struggle against the slave-owners. His democratic belief and his inherent love of liberty induced him to condemn the inhuman system of slavery. He firmly took his stand on the side of all the workingmen and farmers.

About fifteen years earlier than the civil war, Whitman predicted that the day was coming near when "thousands of noble heart at the North - the entire East - the uproaring giant of the free West would "sweep over them (the slave-owners) and their doctrines. " (1)

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Whitman's views on slavery were expressed clearly in his article. "Our Enmity to the South" which appeared in the first number of the Brooklyn Freeman, Sept. 9, 1848. With a remarkably clarity of vision and class-feeling, Whitman refused to consider the South as a unified whole. He wrote that there were "slave-owners, traders and breeders" in the south, but there were also "hundreds of thousands of white farming men, mechanics, artificers, professional persons, clerks etc. who do not own slaves." The Civil War started thirteen years later, but Whitman already openly and passionately declared his "enmity toward an aristocratical minority ........... who held bondmen." The poet was inspired with a genuine flame of love for the people who were free from any kind of self-interest (cf. "I say man shall not hold property in man").

The poet pumped down his sarcasm on the very concept of slavery in the poem "I sing the Body Electric." He spoke of his opportunity to visit a slave-market in the poem "A man's body at auction", and revealed his opinion that this buying and selling of human beings could not be allowed to continue. Actually man himself is a wonder, no money could evaluate the true price of a man. No matter what colour his skin might be, man could not be treated as an object. The poet declared ironically that "the auctioneer, the sloven..."
does not half know his business", for he could not see or show the real excellence of the man whom he was trying to sell.

"Gentlemen look on this wonder,
Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it,
For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or plant,
For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily robb'd."

So, according to Whitman, the Negro was also a specimen of humanity who shared all its grandeur. There flowed in a Negro's vein "the same old blood ! the same red running Blood !, in his heart there were "all passions, desires, aspirations" so how could such a man be sold ! Are not the blacks "divine - soul'd", "nobly - form'd superbly destin'd on equal terms with us?" The tone of the poet became more stern and sharp in his poem "Blood-Money." In 1850 the poet composed another poem called "The House of Friends" which was directly inspired by the struggle against slavery.
The militant tone of this poem directly inspired the genuine supporters of liberty.

"Fight on, band braver than warriers.
Faithful and few as spartans,
But fear not most the angriest, loudest malice."

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In "Resurgemus" the poet went far beyond the theme of slavery, and glorified, the revolutionary struggle for freedom throughout the world.

"Suddenly out of its state and drowsy lair, the lair of slaves, Like lightning it leapt forth half startled at itself, Its feet upon the ashes and the rags, its hand tight to the throats of kings!

The poem recalled the revolution in many European countries in the late forties. We realise that Whitman's sympathy for the Negroes was the outcome of his humanistic outlook. The high passion for the fight for the freedom of the oppressed in his own country reinforced Whitman's democratic outlook and gave him a greater awareness of all the revolutionary struggles in Europe.

Although "Song of Myself" did not deal specifically with slavery, still there also the poet spoke about the Negroes again and again. His profound love for ordinary men was reflected in his identification with them and in his hatred for the oppressors. He described the tremendous pain of a "hounded slave" with great accuracy, not concealing his emotional tension lurking behind his simple words.

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"I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me, * * * * *
* * * * I fall on the weeds and stones,
The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,
Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head
with Wipestocks."

He showed man in his true manifestation, he helped us to understand the real condition of America where people with black skin were victims of terrible oppression. The poet identified himself with the Negroes and said -

"Whoever degrades another degrades me,
And whatever is is done or said returns at last to me."

The poet's inherent conviction about the natural equality of all men generated in him this vehement protest against slavery. The idea that Negroes deserved freedom came out of his strong humanism which inspired him to condemn the possession of a man by another man -

"Where liberty draws not the blood out of slavery,
There slavery draws the blood out of liberty."

"Song of myself" also presented the grim picture of an ordinary Negro coachman who "holds firmly the reins of
his four horses." The picture did not have any sentimental exaggeration, but it belonged, as it were, to reality. The Negro was "steady and tall," his neck and breast were "ample" and his glance was calm and commanding", the poet also noticed the distinctive pose of the Negro, "pois'd on one leg on the string-piece." So the Negro was worthy of our love and respect, still he was doomed to suffer.

But the poet was not satisfied with this passive expression of sympathy for the Negro, but in his poem "By Blue onario's Shore" he condemned slavery as a "murderous and treacherous conspiracy," and called for resistance to those who wished to restore this inhuman practice "upon the ruins of all the rest." Whitman's poems always expressed a deep hatred of that inhuman system of slavery e.g. "I sing the Body Electric," "Salut Aq Monde", "Song of the open Road," "Respondez !" and several other poems.

To return to the new development in America, upto this time southern threats of secession had been considered as mere bombast, but the election of an antislavery President proved ominous for the Southern slave-owners. This success raised the question of secession again. They were not acquainted with the kindly nature of Lincoln; so fear of what might happen under the Republic administration led to the idea

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that calamity was inevitable for them. They know Lincoln's insistence of the preservation of Union, so the South demanded its right to live its own life under such social systems which would satisfy them. All these seceding states were drawn together by a strong sense of southern nationality. Delegates from those states met at Montgomery, Alabama, on February 4, 1861, and organised a new federal government under the name of the Confederate states of America with Jefferson Davis as President. Seven states joined this move, but they expected the immediate inclusion of the eight slave states which still remained loyal to the Union.

The Northern people watched these developments in the Lower South with bewilderment—nor was there coherence in their idea about slavery and the Union. The responsibility for formulating a policy to cope with the crisis rested on the outgoing President, but the aged and timid President Buchanan could do nothing on this.

So, the main responsibility for the next move fell upon Abraham Lincoln whose election had hastened the crisis. He had to undertake a task which he himself described in Springfield as "greater than that which rested upon Washington." He showed tact and patience in the management of his Cabinet, and had a deep understanding even of those which wanted to

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destroy his beloved Union. His inaugural speech was mainly devoted to the preservation of the Union which was "older than the Constitution."

Immediately after that, some events followed which forced the President to take some action leading to the civil war. Major Anderson sent his word that he would have to surrender Fort Sumter unless he were reinforced with more provisions. The majority of the Cabinet advised evacuation of the Fort, and General Scott informed the President of the fact that twenty thousand soldiers would be required to relieve the fort, which number of soldiers did not exist. Lincoln stood steadfast in his own judgement to reinforce the Fort, because he knew that the abandonment of Fort Sumter without any resistance would weaken Northern morale, it would also mean a recognition of the new confederacy. So, he issued a notice on the government of South Carolina that he wished to reprovision the Fort without adding to the garrisons. Thus he avoided taking the responsibility of the war knowing that if the Southerners decided to fire the first shot, they would be stamped as being the aggressors. After this the confederates asked Anderson, the Commander of Fort Sumter, to surrender to the able General Lee; when he refused, the confederate army opened fire. This bombardment of Fort Sumter had a tremendous effect upon both sides.

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The period of indecision ended, the divided nation faced the civil war. Lincoln's call to volunteers to arms met with success. He wrote "We must settle this question now, whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government a whenever they choose." As a result of these actions, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina and Tennessee -- which were less concerned with cotton production, ultimately decided to secede and joined the confederacy. Both sides had high hopes for victory, but the North enjoyed some advantages, the South was ultimately shattered; their war for independence met with failure in 1864. The war was resolved in favour of the supremacy of the union of the country. The war also resulted in the abolition of slavery and end of the power of cotton capitalism, which were the real causes of the struggle. The Northerners were not only victorious, but the war brought them prosperity, prestige and confidence also.

Even in his youth, Whitman felt disturbed by the role of the rich in the United States and the deviations from the principle of a democracy. As he grew more mature, he became more sharply conscious of all the imperfections penetrating through the social atmosphere of America.

Secession came as a blow to industry as a result of which the cost of living rose high while the labourers' pay lagged.
far behind. The usual war-time evil like corruption and illegitimate profit-making affected the whole society. As profiteers multiplied and wealth piled up, luxury spread in the cities.

The report of the correspondent of the London Times in 1863 was as follows - "The indulgence in every variety of pleasure, luxury and extravagance is simply shocking." The Spring Republican declared in 1864 that "Washington is mad with gaiety, reclining in the whirl of dissipation." Whitman echoed these words in his early notebook - "Amid - the universal accessibility of riches and personal comforts, the country seems to be threatened with a sort of ossification of the spirit".

In many other poems he spoke against this corruption of society. In the poem "I sit and look out" the poet spoke of this "Oppression and shame" -

"I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tgranny, I see martyrs and prisoners -
I observe the slights and degradations cast by a arrogant persons upon labourers, the poor, and upon negroes, and the like ........"

The poet was clearly aware of the contradiction between those "arrogant persons" who had wealth and the working people of


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North and South, who were condemned to poverty.

The great literary historian of America, Vernon Parrington in his book "Main currents in American Thought, remarked "That America was not yet a democracy was very far indeed from a democracy that it was a somewhat shoddy bourgeois capitalistic society shot through with cant and hypocrisy and every meanness, Whitman saw with calm, searching eyes. No contemporary critic - saw more clearly the unlovely reality or dealt with it more scathingly" (1)

Whitman remarked in "Democratic vistas" - "Society is canker'd, crude, superstitions and rotten." The poet might not be always right in his judgement of different policies after the war, but he remained a humanist and a democrat, always devoted to the interest of the people. So, he was quick to observe the undesirable situation arising in the North after the Civil War. He was one of the leading American writers to realise that the sudden expansion of different business enterprises in the United States followed moral as well as spiritual decline which was a great loss for society.

The poet spoke more frankly on this point in his personal conversation with his friend Traubel which he later recollected and published in a book.

In the poet's actual words the trouble with America was their "devil of a craze for money - money in every thinfe for every occasion - " by hook

1. Main currents in American Thought -

vernon Parrington. Vol - III, P. 82.

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or by crook, money and on top of that, show, shew L crowning all that, brilliancy, smartness unsurpassed, repartee, social wish-wash, very misleading, very superficial." (2).

Walt Whitman loudly expressed his condemnation for the landowners of the South, but he equally condemned the profit-making factory-owners of the North who oppressed the poor workers. That revealed his boundless love for ordinary men - he had no hesitation in protesting against those persons who tortured men no matter whether they were Southerners who owned slaves or the Northerners who owned factories. Whitman had not said anything about the war, but he might have shared the opinion of Abraham Lincoln for the preservation of the integrity and unity of America. Yet the poet's heart bled for the poor wounded soldiers, for whom he attended the hospitals, and nursed the soldiers, which act expressed his love for humanity.

Industrial development of U.S.A.

The 19th century could experience the rapidity of the change of U.S.A from an agricultural to an industrial era. After the war of 1812, problems of national security brought about a re-assessment of the position of factory in America. Later on, specialization in cotton industry in the South and the outburst of different enterprises in the West of America made both the sections profitable markets for machine-made goods.

2. With Walt Whitman in Camden; Horace Traubel; P.187
American canal and railroad building was financed so largely abroad that it inspired the Americans to invest their own savings into the industrial enterprises. Along with this, the profits from manufacturing enhanced since 1816 by some protective tariffs, proved both a major impetus and the greatest source of capital for industrial expansion.

Since the 18th century, industrialisation had remodelled the world of men. The year 1833 might be marked as the beginning of industrialisation, when the Englishman John Kay invented the 'flying shuttle' to lighten the domestic work and to multiply the output of small factories. Once the early machines became available for the factories, the next major step was the employment of steam power to run them. In 1702, the steam engine had been invented in England by Thomas Newcomen, but it took seventy-five years for the working out of the design which was actually done by Mr James Watt, Mathew Boulton and John Wilkinson - steam engine was also introduced in U.S.A. Arkwright began using steam power for spinning in the 1780's. In the early 1800's steam powerlooms were invented for weaving cloth in factories. These developments multiplied the productivity of individual textile workers more than a hundred times.

Eli Whitney's role in forwarding the whole concept and spread of industrialism was more important than his invention of the cotton gin. Whitney, the genius of America, rationalized factory
production into something new. The early factories made their progress and profit by mechanizing hand operations. Whitney mainly developed the interchangeable parts of the machine which increased mass production, Whitney did continuous experiments for adjusting the operations in industrial production to the unique possibilities of machine work and designed new machines to produce better parts of machines.

No poet was more alive to this rapid development of industrialism than Walt Whitman — most of the poets did not possess his enthusiasm. The romantics admired nature, they deliberately ignored the existence of industry and even deplored the intrusion of factories and railroads in the natural landscape. The American transcendentalists had not ignored it. Thoreau accepted the beauty of the locomotives passing through the woods. Emerson also favoured the integration of industry into poetry. But Whitman undertook the task of introducing in his poetry the most prosaic industries and to mention machines and tools which none had dared to mention in verse before him. Thus he admired the machines in "A song for occupations".

"A song for occupations!
In the labour of engines and trades and the labour of fields
I find the development,
And find the external meanings."

The poet did not shrink from using the most technical terms, he enumerated the different parts of the steam engine

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and the different tools of the shoemaker. The steam-whistle, the 'solide roll' of the train of approaching cars' and the 'press whirling its cylinders' seemed to him as admirable as the beautiful forests of Florida or the wild mountains.

On the other hand his "Broad-Axe Poem" recalled the epic event of the exploration and conquest of the American Continent and called up with a fervour -

"Shapes of factories, arsenals, foundries, markets,
Shapes of the two-threaded tracks of rail-roads,
Shapes of the sleepers of bridges, vast frameworks girders, arches,
Shapes of the fleet of barges, tows, lake and canal craft, river craft."

As the country became more and more industrialized, he gave industry more importance in his poems. In 1800, the poet began writing poems on different occupations -

"O I will make the new bardic list of trades and tools!"

He summed them up in the long poem "I hear America Singing" where he referred to the occupations of the mechanics, the carpenter, the mason, the boatman, the shoemaker and the woodcutter.

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So, the poet was always carried over by the national desire for pushing forward to a greater future. He was invited by the organizers of the American Institute to celebrate in verse the achievements of American industry on the occasion of the inauguration of the Institute. Whitman composed his "Song of the Exposition" which was a hymn to the glory of technology. He admired industry as a passionate outburst of energy and vitality. It merged naturally with his conception of the universe as a force going continuously forward in the way of a perpetual evolution. So, for him it did not contradict the beauties of nature, rather it was "Strong, real and practical like Nature", only it was distinguished in having an "opulence of power" with which it does everything. The industrial power of modern nations also inspired his idea of the grandeur of man. As Whitman was a poet of both body and soul, so he was equally attracted to industry symbolising materialism as well as the spiritual view of the world.