CHAPTER II
SOCIAL ALIENATION

Whitman believes that social alienation is the product of social, economic, technological, materialistic and secular conditions of the society. This type of alienation is seen either in behavioural or cultural norms. He proceeds with the presumption that industrialism has destroyed many of the traditional institutions which previously created in man a sense of belongingness. The anonymity and impersonality of human relations resulting from increased mechanization have accentuated individual isolation and frustration. Depersonalization and dehumanization result in the individual's loss of identity. Whitman's poetry embodies his strong dislikings of existing creeds, conventions and institutions leading to gloom and despair of man and disintegration of society as a whole.

In Beginners, he ironically reacts to the hollow and vicious social order bringing about alienation in man's life:

How they inure to themselves as much as to any—
What a paradox appears their age,
How people respond to them, yet know them not,
How there is something relentless in their fate all times,
How all times mischoose the objects of their
adoration and reward,
And how the same inexorable price must still be paid
for the same great purchase. 1

In *Me Imperturbe*, the poet says that in this devitalised society "poverty, notoriety, foibles, crimes" are considered "less important" than he thinks. In *Starting From Paumanok*, Whitman thinks of striking up for a "New World" quite "Solitary, singing in the west". The American society simply consists of "Victory, union, faith, identity, time/The indissoluble compacts, riches, mystery, Eternal progress, the kosmos, and the modern reports". The society has to put up to "so many throes and convulsions". He then gives a panoramic picture of the various ailments the society is infected with:

The little one sleeps in its cradle,  
I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently  
brush away flies with my hand.

The younger and the red-faced girl turn aside up the bushy hill,  
I peeringly view them from the top.

The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom,  
I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note  
where the pistol has fallen.

The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk of the promenaders,  
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor.

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2. Ibid.  
3. Ibid., p.13.  
4. Ibid.  
6. Ibid.
The snow-sleigns, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of 
snow-nails, 
The hurrahs for popular favorites, the fury of rous'd 
mobs, 
The flap of the curtain'd litter, a sick man inside 
borne to the hospital, 
The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows 
and fall, 
The excited crowd, the policeman with his star quickly 
working his passage to the centre of the crowd, 
The impassive stones that receive and return so many 
echoes, 
What groans of over-fed or half-starv'd who fall 
sunstruck or in fits, 
What exclamations of women taken suddenly who hurry 
home and give birth to babes, 
What living and buried speech is always vibrating 
here, what howls restrain'd by decorum, 
Arrests of criminals, slights, adulterous offers 
made, acceptances, rejections with convex lips, 
I mind them or the show or resonance of them – I come 
and I depart.

The big doors of the country barn stand open and ready, 
The dried grass of the harvest-time loads the slow-
drawn wagon, 
The clear light plays on the brown gray and green 
interlaced, 
The armfuls are pack'd to the sagging mow.

I am there, I help, I came stretch'd atop of the load, 
I felt its soft jolts, one leg reclined on the other, 
I jump from the cross-beams and seize the clover 
and timothy, 
And roll head over heels and tangle my hair full of 
wisps.¹

Likewise he portrays the spiritual ailment and moral perversion 
of the American society where life flows at its lowest ebb:

The jowr printer with gray head and gaunt jaws
works at his case,
He turns his quid of tobacco while his eyes blurr
with the manuscript;
The malform'd limbs are tied to the surgeon's table,
what is removed drops horribly in a pail;
The quadroon girl is sold at the auction-stand, the drunkard nods by the bar-room stove,
The machinist rolls up his sleeves, the policeman travels his beat, the gate-keeper marks who pass,
The young fellow drives the express-wagon, (I love him, though I do not know him;)
The half-breed straps on his light boots to compete in the race,
The western turkey-shooting draws old and young, some lean on their rifles, some sit on logs,
Out from the crowds steps the marksman, takes his position, levels his piece;¹

He continues:

The groups of newly-come immigrants cover the wharf or levee,
As the woolly-pates hoe in the sugar-field, the overseer views them from his saddle,
The bugle calls in the ball-room, the gentlemen run for their partners, the dancers bow to each other,
The youth lies awake in the cedar-roof'd garret and harks to the musical rain,
The wolverine sets traps on the creek that helps fill the Huron,
The squaw wrapt in her yellow-hemm'd cloth is offering moccasins and bead-bags for sale,
The connoisseur peers along the exhibition-gallery with half-shut eyes bent sideways,
As the deck-hand makes fast the steamboat the plank is thrown for the shore-going passengers,²

He adds:

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.34.
2. Ibid.
The young sister holds out the skein while the elder sister winds it off in a ball, and stops now and then for the knots.
The one-year wife is recovering and happy having a week ago borne her first child,
The clean-hair'd Yankee girl works with her sewing-machine or in the factory or mill,
The paving-man leans on his two-handed rammer, the reporter's lead flies swiftly over the note-book, the sign painter is lettering with blue and gold.
The canal boy trons on the tow-path, the book keeper counts at his desk, the shoemaker waxes his thread,
The conductor beats time for the band and all the performers follow him,
The child is baptized, the convert is making his first professions,
The regatta is spread on the bay, the race is begun, (how the white sails sparkle!)
The drover watching his drove sings out to them that would stray,
The pedlar sweats with his pack on his back, (the purchaser higgling about the odd cent;)
The bride unrumpleth her white dress, the minute-hand of the clock moves slowly,
The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just open'd lips.¹

In Europe, Whitman calls them "liars"² who are "paid to defile the People"³. The "numberless agonies"⁴, "murders"⁵ and "lusts"⁶ faint and corrupt the very fabric of society. Moreover "many a promise sworn by royal lips"⁷ are "broken"⁸

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¹. Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, p.34.
². Ibid., p.218
³. Ibid.
⁴. Ibid.
⁵. Ibid.
⁶. Ibid.
⁷. Ibid.
⁸. Ibid.
and "laughed at in the breaking". The "Sweetness of mercy" leads to "bitter destruction". It is a society of "hangman, priest, tax-gatherer, Soldier, lawyer, lord, jailer, and sycophant". In Thought, the poet says that persons at "high positions" are all "gaunt and naked". The pass "unwittingly the true realities of life, and go toward false realities". To him they are often "sad, hasty, unwaked sonambules walking the dusk".

In the poem, From Pent-Up Aching Rivers, for instance, he boldly says that he would sing the song of the phallus and the song of procreation. He speaks of:

The welcome nearness, the sight of the perfect body,     The swimmer swimming naked in the bath, or
   motionless on his back lying and floating,     The female form approaching, I pensive, love-flesh
tremulous aching, ....     The mystic deliria, the madness amorous, the
   utter abandonment.

and, addressing the female form, he goes on to say:

O you and I! what is it to us what the rest do or think?
What is all else to us? Only that we enjoy each other and exhaust each other if it must be so ....

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.218
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p.305
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p.76
10. Ibid.
That is not all. He goes on to speak of the long-
sustained kiss upon the mouth or bosom, the close pressure
that makes him or any man drunk, fainting with excess, the
bed-fellow's embrace in the night, and so on. In the poem
I sing the Body Electric, he says that the body of the male is
perfect and that the body of the female is perfect, and that
the human body defies description. Speaking of the female form,
he says:

This is the female form,
A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
it attracts with fierce undeniable attraction. 1

In the same poem, he gives us some more lines in praise of the
human body:

If any thing is sacred the human body is sacred,
And the glory and sweet of a man is the token of
manhood untainted,
And in man or woman a clean, strong, firm-fibred body,
is more beautiful than the most beautiful face. 2

In the poem called Ages and Ages Returning At Intervals,
Whitman speaks of himself thus:

Lusty, phallic, with the potent original loins,
perfectly sweet,
I, chanter of Adamic songs, ..... 
Bathing myself, bathing my songs in Sex,
Offspring of my loins. 3

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 79.
2. Ibid., p. 82.
3. Ibid., p. 88.
In I Am He That Aches with Love, he says: "I am he that aches with amorous love." ¹

In Song of Myself, the poet achieves intense self-awareness only through sexual awakening (Section 28). In Children of Adam, the consciousness projects outward from the self to embrace a partner. Announcing his intention to sing the song of the phallic and procreation, the poet celebrates 'the mystic deliria, the madness amorous, the utter abandonment'.² No longer is the poet alone; he becomes Adam with his Eve:

I draw you close to me you woman,
I cannot let you go, I would do you good,
I am for you, and you are for me, not only for our own sake, but for others' sakes,
Envelop'd in you sleep greater heroes and bards,
They refuse to awake at the touch of any man but me.³

The sexual consciousness is not only extended to another individual, but the centre of feeling is shifted to the procreational aspects of the experience. No longer driven backward on itself, the sexual identity extends outward to women, and on beyond into the future:

I shall look for loving crops from the birth,
life, death, immortality, I plant so lovingly now.⁴

¹ Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.89.
² Ibid., p.76.
³ Ibid., p.84.
⁴ Ibid., p.85.
In Calamus, the poet's sexual consciousness extends beyond the female to celebrate "manly attachment," \(^1\) "types of athletic love," \(^2\) and the "need of comrades." \(^3\)

Calamus is the name of a plant. It is a kind of very large and aromatic grass, or rush, growing about water-ponds in the valleys of the northern and middle States of America. This grass is about three feet high. Whitman used the name of this grass as a symbol of "adhesiveness" \(^4\) of "pulse of my life." \(^5\) In contrast with the common grass that grows wherever the land and the water is, the calamus plant grows:

> In paths untrodden,  
> In the growth by margins of pond-water,  
> Escaped from the life that wexhibits itself. \(^6\)

It is in this "secluded spot" \(^7\) that the poet can "respond" \(^8\) as he "would not dare elsewhere." \(^9\) As the poet elaborates the image in such poems as *Scented Herbage of My Breast* and *These I Singing In Spring*, he exploits all the

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 93.
4. Ibid., p. 97.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 92.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
possibilities for symbolism that the strongly individualistic plant offers:

Indeed O death, I think now these leaves mean precisely the same as you mean.\(^1\)

And this, O this shall henceforth be the token of comrades, this calamus-root shall.\(^2\)

Calamus plant has long, tapering leaves, and a cylindrical flower, and therefore serves also as a phallic symbol. Whitman points out the ambiguity of the image in the poem Scented Herbage Of My Breast, when he says:

Emblematic and capricious blades I leave you, now you serve me not, I will say what I have to say by itself.\(^3\)

Calamus has a religious symbolism also. The 'pink-tinged roots'\(^4\) of the calamus plant is a token passed around among the members of an esoteric cult. The exchange of the token binds the comrades in an unspoken compact so exclusive between two persons and held in such shyness and secrecy that it is not the worshipping of a divine power through erotic as in Children Of Adam but simply eroticism for its own sake.

2. Ibid., p.96.
3. Ibid., p.93.
4. Ibid.
Apart from the theme, what is remarkable in the Calamus poems is their sustained lyricism. They vibrate with deep personal emotion, and some of them rank very high among the great love-poems in world literature, though the love is of the homosexual kind. There is an erotomaniac quality in these poems because now and then we get the impression that, as Whitman himself says, he is not capable of enduring the blows of society which is so deeply immersed in corruption and moral perversion. He must go on to new experiences and new sensations. If Whitman in his own life did not establish a permanent love connection, he was prevented by his own nature; it would not have suited him. As a result, the constant flitting and wandering of his emotion is all-pervading in his lyricism.

The blending of emotions and moods, of heedless confession and poetic interpretation, is extraordinary in this section of *Leaves of Grass*. It stretches from requited to unrequited love, from confidence and arrogance to insecurity and shame, from bold shout and frank courtship to a wondering desperate confession that love is a dangerous, inconstant passion which will not bring happiness, for example, *Are You the New Person Drawn toward Me?*

Thus, in spite of the conflicting emotions, it is as tenderly expressed as any collection of love poetry in world literature. But we cannot deny that at times its diversity includes completely irreconcilable contradictions. Side by side
with the bashful confessions of love and devotion, along with the poetically inspired expression of ideal friendship and comradeship, are poems suddenly and completely erotic-maniac in character, in which the poet's insatiable longing for new faces, new experiences, makes us think of his disliking for a society which, he thinks, is rotten at the core. The theme of motherhood presents Walt Whitman with philosophical problems. The theme contributes directly to the success of Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking. But Whitman's athletic mothers are depressing—Muscle and wombs functional creatures: The undertone, the savage old mother incessantly crying. ¹ The woman is reduced, really, to a submissive function. She is no longer an individual being with a living soul: Ah soul, the sobs of women, the wounded groaning in agony. She must fold her arms and bend her head and sumit to a functioning capacity-function of sex, function of birth. Whitman seems to be oblivious of women's claims to social functions other than those of sex and birth. He is one of the most conservative of men. He believed in the old ways; had no faith in any reforms. He delighted in the company of old fashioned women, mothers of large families preferred, who did not talk about literature or reforms. Whitman's mothers are dull and stereotypic; they lack individual character. The picture of the mother that emerges from There was A Child Went

¹ Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.288.
Forth is that of an ordinary house lady:

The mother at home quietly placing the dishes
On the supper-table.1

In fact, he shared the views of many of the social radicals
of his day, in particular the notion that the female is superior
to the male because of her maternal capacity. Whitman is thus
tangled in a confusion that was as much cultural as it is
personal, and the badness of his poetry dealing with mother-
hood may be traced to this confusion. Before examining the
poetry itself, it is necessary to touch on his notion of female
superiority as presented in his prose writings and place it into
the context of nineteenth-century American social thought.

In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman gives particular attention
to women and the fictional models available to them. The
transcendental pedestalism with which sentimentalists coaxed
women into submission has no place in the American literature
he calls for; he rejects the middle-class ideal of the doll-
like, fragile, yet morally superior female.

I say a new founded literature .... underlying life,
religious, consistent with science, handling the elements and
forces with competent power, teaching and training men — and,
as perhaps the most precious of its results. He aims at achieving
the entire redemption of woman out of these incredible holds
and webs of silliness, millinery, and every kind of dyspeptic depletion—and thus insuring to the States a strong and sweet Female Race, a race of perfect Mothers.

He recognized the signs of neurasthenia, the condition of nerves which came to be a mark of class, education, or occupation for the nineteenth-century woman. In *Specimen Days*, when Whitman complains that the women he saw on his trip to the West were intellectual and fashionable, but dyspeptic-looking and generally doll-like, his criticism is again directed toward the fashionably neurasthenic woman. His admiration of George Sand, Frances Wright, and Margaret Fuller demonstrates his acceptance of genuine intellectuation in women. And the full context of his remarks in *Specimen Days* proves that his criticism is not sexist but class-oriented. He holds that ladies who are all fashionably dressed, and have the look of gentility in face, manner and action do not have, either the physique or the mentality appropriate to them. Likewise they do not have any high native originality of spirit or body.

Whitman believes that the most important [science] of all, parentage, and the means of thereby improving the race, remains enshrouded in comparative darkness. How long shall this species of ignorance be tolerated, and even fostered? A similar attitude also takes the form of a question or challenge in
I Sing the Body Electric:

How do you know who shall come from the offspring
Of his offspring through the centuries. ¹

He continues:

Have you seen the fool that corrupted his own live body,
Or the fool that corrupted her own live body. ²

And in the original (1856) version of A Woman Waits for Me
first titled Poem of Procreating, the narrator - hero declares
to his ideal woman: "I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has
so long accumulated within me." ³ Besides being aesthetically
offensive mainly because of the ridiculous pun on "bully",
the diction of this line might have been morally offensive to
Whitman's audience because it suggested the "breeding" ⁴
experiments which free lovers like Noyes carried out in hopes
of improving the race. Whitman may have dropped the line either
for artistic reasons or because he did not wish to become associat-
ed with the likes of Noyes. Even in its latest version the
poem retains its eugenicsist theme, now portrayed in imagery drawn
from horticulture or agriculture rather than from stirpiculture.

¹. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.82
². Ibid., p.82
³. Ibid., p.85
⁴. Ibid.
Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself,  
In you I wrap a thousand onward years,  
On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved  
of me and America,  
The drops I distil upon you shall grow fierce  
and athletic girls, new artists, musicians,  
and singers .....  
I shall demand perfect men and women out of my  
love-spendings,  
I shall expect them to interpenetrate with others,  
as I and you interpenetrate now .....  
I shall look for loving crops from the birth,  
life, death, immortality, I plant so lovingly now.1

Here and in many other passages Whitman's debt to Fowler  
is clear. Like many early eugenicists, he believed that  
parentage involved a grave responsibility, because he thought  
that moral as well as physical traits were inherited. The  
choice of a companion should be based on two factors: the  
prospective spouse's ancestry and his or her moral and physical  
condition. In order that descendents may inherit the longevity  
of their ancestors, two things are indispensable — that none of  
these ancestors have either married weakly companions, or broken  
their health by repeated abuses before the birth of any such  
descendents, and that the descendents themselves have also so  
far obeyed the physical laws as to have preserved their own  
health unimpaired.

Whitman's On the Beach at Night Alone also suggests that  
the mother's love is prerequisite to love in all its forms,  
including sexual love. The speaker is not really "alone"; 2

2. Ibid., p.213.
for there with him is the sea, the mother of all life: 'the old mother sways her to and fro singing her husky song'. The meditation runs:

I am not uneasy but I am to be beloved by young and old men, and to love them the same,
I suppose the pink nipples of the breasts of women with whom I shall sleep will touch the side of my face the same,
But this is a nipple of a breast of my mother, always near and always divine to me, her true child and son, whatever comes.

The mother is glorified in not only the spiritual realm but the physical realm as well. She holds the key to sex, life, love, and death; through her comes the knowledge that 'a vast similitude interlocks all'.

The intense devotion to motherhood in Whitman may even have been his primary motive for advocating a recognition of female sexuality - not a popular stance in Victorian times - and sexual reform in general. A common belief in nineteenth century medical folklore was that in order to conceive healthy offspring or even to conceive at all, a woman must enjoy sexual relations and achieve orgasm. Whitman might have based his encouragement of female sexuality on this belief. In A Woman Waits for Me, Whitman's hero proclaims: 'Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex/Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers'. He will be the

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.213
2. Ibid., p.215
3. Ibid., p.214
4. Ibid., p.84
'robust husband'\textsuperscript{1} of 'those women that are warm-blooded and sufficient for me'\textsuperscript{2} and therefore 'worthy of me'\textsuperscript{3}. He will, thus, dismiss 'impassive women.'\textsuperscript{4}

But when Whitman tried to sexualize the mother figure, he ran into severe difficulties. In \textit{On the Beach at Night Alone} sexuality and motherhood exist comfortably together because the mother's role is that of teacher rather than temptress or lover; all sexual longing is located in the child at the breast. But in other poems, when Whitman tries to unite the volatile sexual female and the great mother, the two figures collide rather than meld.

\textit{A Woman waits for Me} reveals that a double standard affects the portrayal of an ideal sexual couple. Though the poet claims that his waiting women are 'not one jot less'\textsuperscript{5} than the forceful first-person hero, and though they know and avow the 'deliciousness'\textsuperscript{6} of their sex, the hero's own aggressiveness and his assurance that 'I do not hurt you any more than is necessary for you'\textsuperscript{7} imply a degree of reluctance on the part of the women. This is at odds with his stated intention to 'dismiss myself from impassive women'\textsuperscript{8} and to

1. Whitman, Walt, \textit{Leaves of Grass}, p.84
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p.85
8. Ibid., p.84
'go stay ....... with those women that are warm-blooded and sufficient for me.' He speaks as if the female must be forced to the creative act, apparently ignorant of the fact that a healthy woman has as much passion as a man, that she needs nothing stronger than the law of attraction to draw her to the male. Even the poem's syntax bespeaks this uncertainty. In line 9 the man ''knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex'', while in line ten the woman ''knows and avows hers.' Though it is clear that by ''hers'' Whitman means ''the deliciousness of her sex'', his hesitancy to sexualize the future mother is quietly evident in this syntactical castration.

But the inconsistencies of A Woman Waits for Me are minor compared to those of I Sing the Body Electric, which, though it contains some of the poet's best lines, is sadly uneven as a whole. Section 5 encourages women to enjoy their sexuality: 'Be not ashamed women, your privilege encloses the rest, and is the exit of the rest, /You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul'. These lines are part of Whitman's portrayal of the sexualized ideal, which begins:

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.84
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p.80
This is the female form,
A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction,
I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than
a helpless vapor, all falls aside but myself and it,
Books, art, religion, time, the visible and solid
earth, and what was expected of heaven or
fear'd of hell, are now consumed,
Mad filaments, ungovernable shoots play out of it,
the response likewise ungovernable ..........1

The female body with its transcendent power is not specified as
the mother's - at least not right away. The lines which follow,
 describing sexual union metaphorically as the blending of night
and day at dawn, suggest a concern more materialistic than that
of the lines celebrating the "divine nimbus" of the female,
though the theme of uncontrollable mystic ecstasy continues:

Hair, bosom, hips, bend of legs, negligent
falling hands all diffused, mine too diffused,
Ebb stung by the flow and flow stung by the ebb,
love-flesh swelling and deliciously aching,
Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous,
quivering jelly of love, white-blow and
delirious juice,
Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly
into the prostrate dawn.
Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
Lost in the cleft of the clasping and sweet-flesh'd day.2

In the lines that follow, the two somewhat contradictory
views of the sexual female - the mystic and the erotic one - are
reconciled: "This the nucleus - after the child is born of

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 79
2. Ibid., p. 80
woman, man is born of woman, / This the bath of birth, this the
merge of small and large, and the outlet again.'1 Physical
sexuality is thus associated with the production of personalities,
first as mere individuals (the child is born of woman) and then
as mature personalities who through sexual experience rise to
a new awareness (man is born of woman). The major theme of the
poem is therefore reflected - the body and soul are one, and
the action of one is dependent on and largely indistinguishable
from the other.

Whitman's reconciliation of the mystical female and the
erotic female is not, however, altogether satisfactory, as the
following line demonstrate:

The female contains all qualities and tempers them,
She is in her place and moves with perfect balance,
She is all things duly veil'd, she is both passive
and active,
She is to conceive daughters as well as sons, and
sons as well as daughters.2

The yoking of opposites, particularly "passive and active,"
results is meaninglessness. Some of the terms- "tempers", "in her place", and "duly veil'd" - recall the rhetoric of
sentimentalism. The lines closing, Section 5 are so vague that
D.H. Lawrence could take them as evidence that Whitman valued

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.80
2. Ibid.
submissiveness as a feminine virtue:

As I see my soul reflected in Nature,  
As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible  
completeness, sanity, beauty,  
See the bent head and arms folded over the breast,  
the Female I see.  

Other poems indicate that Whitman did not think that  
woman exists merely for man's enjoyment and for the propagation  
of man's race. On the contrary, he advocated the full  
development of the female personality for its own sake. But  
he was trapped by his own rhetoric. His intention was to use  
the motherhood mystique as a means of winning favour for his  
feminist notions. His treatment of prostitution in Section 8  
of I Sing the Body Electric, for example, follows the logic  
that it is wrong to put the female's body on auction not only  
because this involves the selling of a soul (the body is the  
soul), but also because even the prostitute is a potential  
mother - 'the teeming mother of mothers'. Largely because  
of this rhetorical stance, his portrait of woman as a social  
ideal is contradictory and confusing.

Whitman's difficulty is decidedly Victorian. The mother  
as a physical being is unreal to him, and the only way he can  
successfully and consistently portray her is as the hopelessly

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1. whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.80  
2. Ibid., p.82
untouchable, mysterious ideal. In a short *Drum-Taps* poem, the speaker stands dumbfounded before the mystery of madonna and child:

I see the sleeping babe nestling the breast of its mother,
The sleeping mother and babe—hush'd, I study them long and long.¹

It makes us turn to Whitman's biography for an explanation of this psychology and find a wealth of material indicating a close, perhaps abnormally close, relationship with his own mother. But the culture from which he sprang encouraged a mystified and glorified mother-son bond. Mesmerism, animal magnetism, spiritual marriage, Christian mysticism—all were preoccupations of Victorian culture, and the motherhood mystique fused with other spiritual interests and inspired bizarre literary outbursts.

If Whitman and Lawrence share the same vision of free love between man and woman, they also share a common disgust for cold logic. Innocent intuitions and not intellect, they both say, will enable man to understand the riddle of life. *Leaves of Grass*, in this respect, is a strong denunciation of all logical processes, and a glorification of intuitive perceptions. Whitman distrusts all schools of thought, all sects—in

¹ Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 224
brief, all that divides man from man. Nor would he like to be associated with any school, dogma or creed. Free as the air he is, he also wants his fellow human beings to partake freely of the bounties of Nature. In a poem entitled Myself and Mine, he warns the readers:

I charge you forever reject those who would expound me, for I cannot expound myself, I charge that there be no theory or school founded out of me, I charge you to leave all free, as I have left all free.¹

In I Hear It was Charged Against Me, Whitman beckons everyone to seek the ultimate reality without edifices or rules or trustees or any argument. He seems to be one of the pioneers of the movement of anti-rationalism that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century. He anticipates Bergson's intuitionism in Song of Myself:

Logic and sermons never convince, The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul.²

He continues:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars, And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren, And the tree-toad is a chief-d’oeuvre for the highest.³

¹. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.195
². Ibid., p.48
³. Ibid.
He adds:

And the cow crunching with depress'd head surpasses any statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels. 1

It is as a strong reaction against the oppressive tyranny of logic and intellect that he idealises such simple natural phenomena as ''a leaf of grass,''' ''a grain of sand'', ''the running blackberry''. His love of animals also emerges from the same distrust of sophisticated modes of living and thinking. Animals symbolise for him the innate goodness, simplicity and kindness of all creation. Unlike the world of man which wallows in greed, lust, duplicity and brutality, the world of animals still retains the pristine happiness and placid contentment of the Garden of Eden. In a highly moving passage in Song of Myself, he pays a poet's tribute to the animals:

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd,
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, 2

His humanitarianism, his disregard for social conventions and public morality, and his deep love of the animals, bring

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.49
2. Ibid.
within the compass of his imaginative sympathy the entire creation of God. In society he does not recognise any distinctions of caste, colour or creed. His heart goes out in sympathy to all the underdogs of society - the social outcasts and the forsaken. His vision would not exclude anyone, not even a prostitute, who symbolises for his 'utter destitution'. In his poem *To a Common Prostitute*, he holds out his hand in friendship and comfort to this helpless victim of society:

> Be composed - be at ease with me - I am Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty as Nature, 
> Not ill the sun excludes you do I exclude you, 
> Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the leaves to restle for you, do my words refuse to glisten and rustle for you.\(^1\)

Unlike most other poets who only weave a cobweb of sentimental love for mankind, Whitman always translates his humanitarianism into action. In Brooklyn he was a frequent visitor to the prisons where he befriended and consoled the destitute convicts; in the New York hospital he nursed the helpless patients, and soothed their mental and physical agonies. Often he felt 'arous'd and angry', at the cold indifference of society towards these forsaken creatures. ''I'd thought to beat the alarum and urge relentless war. But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd, and I resigned

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myself to sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently
watch the dead.'" In his poem *The Wound-Dresser*, he echoes
some of his personal experiences, in words of sombre pathos:

Thus in silence in dreams' projections,
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,
The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience 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.)

In Democratic Vistas Whitman has pointed out the short-
comings of democratic practices and the political corruption
prevalent in his day. However, he has expressed his faith in
democracy stressing also the fact that the hope for the reform
and improvement of democracy lay in the self-reform of the
individual, in personal integrity and conscience. A significant
factor in Whitman's political philosophy is his glorification
of the individual. Though the phrase "'en masse'" appears
repeatedly in the poems of Whitman it is not to be deduced that
he is an apostle of the socialistic set up of society. He is
emphatically of the view that society should recognize the
infinite worth of the individual. Whitman's ideal society is
one where the individual is valid, because in such a society

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law is loved. He envisages and exemplifies a process of spiritualisation which alone could save democracy from moral disaster.

American democracy interested Whitman most. This is the ever-burning theme for his poetry. He embraces it and expresses it in its all manifestation fields, trees, animals, birds, farms, light, air, sea, men, women, and their politics and social transactions, factories, workshops, offices, stores, streets, cities, plains and the countryside. Whitman accepts these and many more items as the integral part of democracy.

In his poem *Song of Myself* Whitman writes:

A child said what is the grass fetching it to me with full hands,  
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.  

But it is clear that in naming his book *Leaves of Grass* Whitman is accepting this humblest of created things as symbol of his fierce and passionate belief in democracy. His choice of a title is an emphatic assertion that the common humble things of the earth are fit subjects for poetry. This is quite consistent behaviour from a poet whom the word 'equable' was of infinite value. Whitman's ideal society is one where every one is equal, where inequalities and social justice do not exist. In one

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1. Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, p.28
portion of Song of Myself Whitman expresses his admiration for animals. He claims he could turn and live with animals for a number of reasons, one of which is this:

Not one is dissatisfied—not one is demented with the mania of owing things; 

In his lyric I hear America Singing Whitman celebrates the mechanics, the carpenter, the mason, the boatman, the deckhand, 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.

In tones of exquisite lyric Whitman sings of the worth of Democracy envisaging for American democracy a brilliant future. In Thou Mother With Thy Equal Brood he extols democracy thus:

Sail, sail, thy best, ship of Democracy,
Of value is thy freight, 'tis not the present only. The past is also stored in thee,
Thou holdest not the venture of thy self alone, not of the Western continent alone,
Earth's resume entire floats on thy keel: O ship, is steadied by the spars,
With thee Time voyages in trust, the antecedent nations Sink or swim with thee,
With all their ancient struggles martyrs heroes, epies Wars, thou bear'st the other continents, Theirs, theirs as much as thine, the destination-port triumphant;

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 49
2. Ibid., p. 11
Steer then with good strong hand and eye
O helmsman, thou carriest great companions,
Venerable priestly Asia sails this day with thee,
And royal feudal Europe sails with thee.¹

One of his short poems is dedicated to Democracy. For You O Democracy runs thus:

Come I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands,
With the love of comrades,
With the life-long love of comrades.
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
By the love of comrades,
By the many love of comrades.
For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you
mafemme!
For you, for you I am trilling these songs.²

The phrase "love of comrades" occurring again and again in the poetry of Whitman underlines an important tenet in Whitman's political philosophy — that of mutual support and dependence among the members of a democratic society. In spite of Whitman's zealous upholding of the individual he ardently believes that isolation is something unnatural for a human being and that there is security only in cooperation among friends. In A Noiseless Patient Spider whitman draws a fine analogy expressing this idea:

¹Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.358
²Ibid., p.98
A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launched forth filament, filament, filament,
out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.
And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking
the spheres to connect them.
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the
doctile anchor
Hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my
Soul.

The entire group of poems called the Calamus poem illustrate
the idea that success of democracy depends on the co-operation
and spiritual enlightenment of its members.

Thus we find that a general spiritual, decay, disruption
of social values, disintegrating social order, diseased psycho-
logy of individuals, mechanization of life, psychic maladjust-
ment, nerve breaking social problems, falsity and sense of
rootlessness prevalent in the modern mechanized America create
in Whitman a sense of alienation from a society infested with
a number of moral and spiritual ailments.

In the following chapter attention is focused on the
theme of political alienation in the poetry of Walt Whitman.

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.352