INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman made a radical departure from the standard poetic practice of the time. He developed a new code, an original, highly differentiated idiolect, out of his interaction with the sociolect. Whitman's most important contribution lies in his ability to fill in the gaps already existing in the accepted discursive register, to achieve a newness, a distinctive style of embracing discourses on slavery, the body, and the city that had no place in the existing poetic canon of the time.

To explore Whitman's relationship to his cultural context and to examine Whitman's particular logic of distinction, the focus will be on the two basic levels of discourse that alternate in his poems: the sociolectic and the idiolectic. The concept of sociolect is used to define the historical and cultural circumstances in which a given text is produced. The sociolect can be considered in a general sense as a social utterance, or in a more specific sense a general period style of writing. Literary sociolect, such as that of Romanticism in the first half of the Nineteenth Century, is a good example because it was very widely spread and accepted so as to be a virtual period style, rather than the style of a particular author. The idiolect on the other hand can be defined as a language or a style of writing that is particular and specific to a given individual. To analyze and interpret the relationship of the idiolect with the sociolect in Whitman's poetry, to understand the way in which the societal discourse relates to his distinctive individual voice, attention has to be afforded to the sociolect. The study of the sociolect offers a useful alternative to the more narrow intertextual readings, providing a broader framework for an understanding of Whitman's poetry. The three broad areas of concern are: slavery, the city and the body. Whitman was the only major poet of his time associated with urban life; he created with few existing models, an urban poetry. Whitman's poetry also reflects his opposition to the romantic mode in which the abolitionist discourses portrayed slaves. Whitman's unique treatment of the body and the language he uses to describe it are all factors specific to Whitman and his radical idiolect.
Criticized by many of his contemporaries as a radical, a madman, an eccentric, and a pornographer, revered by others as a fearless prophet of a new phase of human development, Walt Whitman has, through his historical importance and sheer quality of his best work, survived both antagonism and adulation. He is safely enshrined as the author of an exceptional and revolutionary body of poetry that occupies a central position in the American Canon.

The publication of *Leaves of Grass* on or about July 4, 1855, represented a revolutionary departure in American literature; Whitman opened the field of American, and ultimately, of modern poetry. His subject was not the glossy smooth walks, the pruned hedges, flowery blossoms and birds of the English Poets, but the whole orb, with its geologic history, the Kosmos. He was the poet not only of Darwinian evolution, but also the poet of the city and crowd, science and the machine. Presenting himself as a model democrat who spoke for the people. Whitman was a breaker of bounds, he was female and male, farmer and factory worker, prostitute and slave, citizen of America and citizen of the world; traveling between past, present and the future, he was, as he wrote in *Leaves of Grass* , "an acme of things accomplished" and an "enclosure of things to be". His songs were songs not only of occupations but also of sex and the body. He was one of the first poets to write of the "body electric", of female eroticism, homosexual love and the sexual act.

Whitman's poetry has always been exposed to dramatic and hyperbolic responses in keeping with his own inflammatory rhetoric. The sudden and audacious appearance of Whitman in literary circles, his transformation from journalistic writer and editor to a major poet remains one of the most surprising phenomenon's in American literature. Whitman hoped to create, a "great original literature", since there was no national poetic tradition of any note at that time from which to take inspiration from, since most of the poets of the time were writing in the wake of Romanticism, how could an unconnected and self-educated writer like Whitman expect to establish a new national poetic tradition? In the late 1840's and early 1850's there was no way a man with a prophetic message like Whitman's could have been heard in, or through, any artistic medium open to him. And yet, it is incredible that an uneducated, thirty year old could within six years produce a
volume that changed the history of American poetry. Walt Whitman wrote in the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* about his literary objectives:

> American literature must become distinct from others, American writers must become national, idiomatic, free from the genteel laws America herself appears in the spirits and the form of her poems, and all other literary works. (LG, p.711)

The position Whitman held at mid-century was crucial in his development. It was in attempting to resolve this dilemma of resolving the tension between the individual and "en-masse", between the exigencies of high art and the more democratic posture of popular writing that Whitman created a new genre of American poem. The most significant poems in *Leaves of Grass* are neither the personal lyrics nor the public and outwardly political odes and treatises.

Whitman's poems combine the two tendencies in presenting a "publicly private poetry". In the well-known "Inscriptions" to the 1967 *Leaves of Grass*, in the poem, "One's Self I Sing", Whitman introduces distinctions only to collapse them. The distinctions he foregrounds in this very brief poem - - One's self/En-masse, Modern man/ Laws divine, separate person/democratic, physiognomy/ brain, Female/ male- suggest the more general distinctions that are embodied in his work as a whole: private/public, lyric/epic, national/universal, social/aesthetic. Each of these pairings represents an important opposition for Whitman; an opposition, which he believes, must be explored and then ultimately collapsed or rejected. Paradoxically, his poetic goal is to make distinctions among the vast array of available words and meanings so as to constitute or inaugurate a basic Americanness that on one level is without distinction - - democratic and egalitarian - - but at the same time is literarily and historically distinct from all other national cultures and from his own contemporary poetic culture. Whitman in a letter to Harper's Magazine wrote:

> Every really new person, (poet or other), Make his style-sometimes a little way removed from the previous models sometimes very far indeed. (P.15)
Whitman took on an impossible poetic task of presenting an Americanness that for all its tremendous diversity is united in common moral, historical and aesthetic purpose. He writes in an unpublished two-line poem from 1860-61 “Of My Poems”:

All others were singing the distinctions, and what was to be preferred, therefore I thought I would sing a song of inherent qualities in a man,
Indifferent whether they are right or wrong.

There is no single intention governing Whitman's work and displaying a consistent underlying ideology. Instead, there may be a conflicting set of different ideologies, both aesthetic and political, informing Whitman's poems. Rather than a purely social or ideological act, Whitman's characteristic poetic involves the response to a perceived gap in the discursive register -- for example, in the discussion of slavery or of the body -- which can be filled only by a constant effort at differentiation from both generic conventions and available discourses.

Whitman's poetic negotiation with the various discourses of Nineteenth-Century America represented a double logic, whereby he differentiated his poetry from previous literary models while at the same time articulating a poetics that could not be marked as culturally distinct with respect to social class or cultural orientation. Whitman's poems in *Leaves of Grass* involve a complex balancing act that reveals a great deal about the dynamic between literary modes and class relations in Nineteenth-Century America.

Socio-cultural discourses such as those surrounding slavery, urbanism, and the body: issues of race, class, gender and sexual orientation, in different ways, inform all Whitman's writing. Whitman's poetic project was to be "distinct from all others"; yet participate in the idiomatic register of daily life (the sociolect) rather than the literary register of the educated elite. Whitman was against the highly stylized language of the literary writers of the time, which he expressed in a letter he wrote to Horace Traubel,
The trouble is that writers are too literary too damned literary ......Instead of regarding literature as only a weapon, an instrument, in the service of something larger than itself, it looks at itself as an end as a fact to be finally worshipped, adored. To me that’s a horrible blasphemy—a bad smelling apostasy.

If a poet’s deviation from the historically current norm of language use differs substantially from that of other Poets from the same norm, it can be concluded that the poet in question has created a new code, an original or at least a highly differentiated idiolect, out of his or her interaction with the sociolect. Such a radical departure, from what we can identify as the standard poetic practice of the time, is certainly characteristic of Whitman’s poetry. At the same time that Whitman’s poetic writing is highly idiolectic it is also engaged with the sociolectic language of everyday speech and socio-historical events. What distinguishes Whitman most clearly from poetic contemporaries like Bryant, Whittier and Longfellow, is to define himself and his poetic language in terms of a social interdependence, which is separate from any literary interdependence. Whitman does not reject all forms of aesthetic production but only the particular form of decorous and artificial—something he finds exemplified abundantly in Emerson. He launches into a cultural critique both of Emerson’s art and of those readers who supported its literary status:

And though the author has much to say of freedom and wildness and simplicity and spontaneity, no performances was ever more based on artificial scholarships and decorum’s at third or fourth removes, (he calls it culture,) and build up from them. It is always a make, never an unconscious growth. It is the porcelain figure or statuette of lion, or stag, or Indian hunter - and a very choice one too - appropriate for the rosewood or bracket of parlor or library; never the animal itself, or the hunter? What would that do amid astral and bric-a-brac and tapestry, and ladies and gentlemen talking in subdued tones of Browning and Longfellow and art? The least suspicion of such actual bull, or Indian, or of nature carrying out
itself, would put all those people to instant terror and fight.3

(PW, 515-16)

Whitman’s poetic writings engaged with reality and then went a step further, as he explains in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The poet must have the power “to destroy or remold” reality, and to point out to his readers “the path between reality and their souls”. According to Whitman, poetic expression, unlike journalistic writing fiction or romance, is responsible for a universal vision. Though poetry is still concerned with “facts”, it is poetry’s capacity to transform those facts rhetorically or aesthetically that distinguishes it from other forms of writing:

As they emit themselves, facts are showered over with light the daylight is lit with more volatile light - the deep between the setting and rising sun goes deeper many fold. Each precise object or condition or combination or process exhibits a beauty- the multiplication table - its old age - its the carpenter's trade its - the grand opera its - the huge - hull'd clean-shaped New York clipper at sea under steam or full sail gleams with unmatched beauty - the America circles and large harmonies of government gleam with theirs and the commonest definite actions and intentions with theirs.

(PW, 449-50)

In Whitman’s vision, poetry must have the effect of denaturing the facts of everyday existence even while presenting them. According to him a true poet does not hide the truth through ornamentation or exaggeration.

In the first line of his longest poem “Song of Myself”, his claim to sing himself is not the narcissistic independence we might expect from the poem’s title but an identification with the addressee, whether reader or listener; “And what I assume You shall assume/for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you”. Whitman projects himself into a democratic social space, one that can be understood either in terms of interpersonal and inter-bodily relations, or as common sociolect.
The poems “Song of Myself”, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, “The Sleeper”, are linked to specific social, cultural and historical referents such as contemporary views on sexuality, slavery, the civil war, growth of cities, women's movements, technological progress. However the significance of Whitman's central poems is not exhausted by these referents and there is an attendant discourse. What is of significance and interest is the textual moment at which the poets voice interacts with these to construct a personalized register or idiolect. Whitman's radicalism lies not in his subversion of, or even in his resistance to, normal language use but in his capacity to resist closure of form, idea or discourse. This radical openness to verbal, social and somatic experience is a challenge to both bourgeois status quo and oppositional intellectual; it is also an invitation to the reader to experience with him the societal and linguistic energies that shape his poems. Whitman's most significant contribution lies in his ability to fill gaps in the previously accepted discursive register, to achieve a newness defined not by his distance from the language of the common man or woman but rather by a distance from the limitations imposed by the poetic canon and by the work of his contemporaries. In Democratic Vistas, Whitman performs an analysis of the innate cultural distinction between the "people" on the one hand, and the "merely educated classes", which he aligns with the European aristocracy. On the other hand, in an evocative literary metaphor Whitman compares the less privileged classes to a poem that is ungrammatical and scans roughly:

Like our huge earth itself, which to ordinary scansion is full of vulgar contradictions and offence, man, viewed in the lump, displeases, and is a constant puzzle and affront to the merely educated classes. The rare, cosmical, artist mind, lit with the infinite, alone confronts his manifold and oceanic qualities—but taste, intelligence and culture (so called), have been against the masses, and remain so But the people are ungrammatical, untidy, and their sins gaunt and ill-bred. Literature, strictly considered, has never recognized the people, and, whatever may be said does not today. It seems as if, so far, there were some natural repugnance
between a literary and professional life, and the rude rank spirit of
the democracies. (PW, 376)

Here Whitman makes two distinctions: one between the cultured classes and
the "People" and second between the professional and the "artist-mind" of the true
poet, or Whitman himself.

In the poem “Song of Exposition”\textsuperscript{4}, Whitman calls on the poet to leave behind
the works of the past and to join him in “far superber themes”. He visualizes his
poet in an environment so modern and devoid of poetic decorum that it even
strains the aesthetic tolerance of his sympathetic readers:

Making directly for this rendezvous, vigorously clearing a path for
herself, striding through the confusion,
By thud of machinery and shrill stream-Whistle undismay'd
Bluff'd not a bit by drain-pipe, gasometers, artificial fertilizers,
Smiling and pleased with palpable intent to stay,
She's here, installed amid the kitchenware! (LG, 55-59)

Here, Whitman fervently attempts to present a realistic and practical
industrial American landscape as a replacement to the topic of classical and
Romantic poetry.

Whitman also created a poetic persona of himself as one of the "roughs",
which was a radical step. Unlike virtually all his poetic contemporaries, Whitman
chose to write outside the prevailing literary codes of the day. Negotiating the
tension between his desire to develop a distinctive style as a poet and his desire to
merge with the American population. This desire to negotiate led him to embrace
discourses on ignored issues such as urban life, slavery and body that had
previously been largely excluded from poetic writing.

However, the attempt here is not to explain Whitman's genesis as a poet.
Instead, it is to propose a model from which at least a partial motivation, both for
Whitman's difference from his poetic contemporaries and for his unique poetic
evolution, can be derived. Whitman's relation to "high" or literary culture, his
attempts to subvert that culture even while participating in it and his interaction with various discursive fields such as issues of race, class, gender and sexual orientation, as well as with specific literary writings, helped him to articulate a theory of distinction. Whitman's response to the previously excluded discourses formed the basis for his poetic treatment of the subjects to be discussed in the chapters: race and slavery, the growth of the city and the body.

The most striking example of Whitman's appropriation and reformulation of discourses to deal with slavery and subjectively in *Leaves of Grass* comprising the Mid-Nineteenth Century sociolect of slavery is in the poem “I Sing the Body Electric”, where Whitman replaces the voice of the slave auctioneer with his own. He is not satisfied to utter poetic common places about the goodness or nobility of slaves, or the horrors suffered by the slave's body to the reader, He wants the reader to identify with the slave in order to learn to value fully the intrinsic beauty of the “other”.

Whitman transformed one of the central institutions of the slave society, the auction of human bodies, into a highly original appropriation of a cultural intertext. Similar instances can be found in various other poems in *Leaves of Grass* such as, “The Sleepers”, “Song of Myself”, “Blood Money” and many others. Whitman's attempt to enter into the subjectivity of the slave, and to find a means of representing poetically the unassailable, unapproachable, and virtually invisible discourse of this subjectivity is one of his central contributions to Nineteenth Century literature and culture in America.

The body is the privileged site of personal or idiolectic expression, a site that must be enlarged, in Whitman's terms, to provide for a more democratic or all embracing understanding of the relationship between private-physical and public-socia realities. Whitman attempts to use his poems as a vehicle for effecting a change in socio-cultural attitudes towards the body and sexuality. Whitman's poetic treatment of the body is not only a personal or lyric one; it is significantly informed by current discourses of hygiene and medical science, and even more importantly by Whitman's desire to give voice to a social body as well as to an individual body. The body is, for Whitman, the master trope that can contain or
comment on all other areas of society and discourse. As seen in poems such as “The Sleepers”, “I Sing the Body Electric”, and “Faces”, it is through the body that Whitman comments most effectively on political and social issues ranging from race and slavery to urban poverty and growth of the city.

Whitman's all-inclusive use of the body can be seen in the 1856 poem of Leaves of Grass, “Salut Au Monde!” (LG, P. 137) in which he embraces the bodies not only of all Americans but also of all the people of Asia, Africa, and Europe. Unlike a more lyric appropriation of the body where the poetic energies focus on the inward revelation of the poet's own body, Whitman's poems move outwards to grasp the complexity of the body in all its physical and social forms:

Within the latitude widens, longitude lengthens,
Asia, Africa, Europe, are to the east- America is provided for in the west, banding the bulge of the earth winds the hot equator,
Curiously north and south turn the axis-ends,
With me is the longest day, the sun wheels in slanting rings, it does not set for months
Stretch'd in due time within me the midnight sun just rises above the horizon and sinks again,
Within-me zones, seas, cataracts, forest, volcanoes, groups, Malaysia, Polynesia, and the great west Indian Island.

(LG, 14-20)

Whitman presents his poems as a physical body, a style that defines his unique individual idiolect. To emphasize the point, the title of the well known poem “Song of Myself”, (LG, P.28) in the editions from 1860 to 1881 was simply "Walt Whitman", this is significant in itself because, when read, what the reader encounters is not a poem but a person and, ultimately a body.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
I now thirty-seven year old in perfect health begin, hoping to cease not till death. (LG, 6-8)

Whitman uses the body as a means of resisting traditional modes of poetic figuration; in his poetic struggle with distinction: the avoidance of socio-cultural distinction in the poems is an effort to achieve solidarity - both personal and textual- with the physical presence of all people:

Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them,
No more modest than immodest. (LG, 498-500)

Of all American writers of his era, it is Whitman who departs most radically from both literary and sociolectic conventions in his discussion of the body. Whitman's celebration of the sexual body represents a far more decisive break in the discursive practice because he posits not only the balance between body and soul but also in some instances posits the body as superior to the soul. It is this refusal to represent the physical existence as either secondary to or separate from ethical, social or cultural levels of existence that characterizes Whitman's departure from the sociolectic view of the body.

Walt Whitman is the only major Nineteenth Century American poet whose life and work are commonly associated with the city. Unlike the discourses surrounding slavery and abolitionism, which were absorbed to varying degrees by all of Whitman's contemporaries, the rapid growth and change of American's cities was a subject of little interest to other poets. The American intellectual's reaction to the city was overwhelmingly negative. For the most part, the American poets of Whitman's time did not even bother to criticize the city; they simple ignored its existence. Whitman's relationship to the city may have been an ambivalent one, but at least he was willing to engage the growing reality of urban existence, and the corresponding discourse of urbanization, in a way that other American poets were not. Whitman's Drum-Taps poem "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun" begins with sweet comments such as “the spontaneous song” that the poet sings, “aside from
the noise of the world” giving way in the second half of the poem to an “Endless and noisy chorus”. Such opposition as lyric voice/active world and spontaneous songs/noisy chorus is a typical manifestation of the traditional split between the idiolectic mode of pastoral lyric and the sociolectic mode associated with the city.

Whitman indicates a desire for the very aspects of the city that are shunned by traditionally pastoral poets. In the poem “Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun”, (LG, P.312) he writes:

O such for me! O an intense life, full of repletion and varied!
The life of the theatre, bar-room huge hotel, for me!
The saloon of the steamer! The crowded excursion for me! The torchlight procession!

(LG, 32-34)

In effect, Whitman celebrates the intensity and the variety of the city. Whitman's radical contention that everything that passed or has passed him on the road is not only "accepted, but dear to me", is a central aspect of his poetic stance.

As a professional journalist, who would become the author of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman was deeply engaged with such discourses of his times as slavery, immigration, urban growth, technological progress and materialism. Whitman differentiated his work from previous literary models. At the same time he sought to portray the daily life of the common people in an idiomatic, rather than a high-flown literary manner. This study will focus on two basic levels of discourse that alternate in Whitman's poem: the sociolect and his idiolect. It will examine Whitman's own distinctive and highly adaptive appropriation and expression of these sociolects.