

**Walt Whitman:  
Self-Made Man or Man-Made Self?**

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Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;

The proper study of mankind is man.

### Introduction

I meant *Leaves of Grass*, as published, to be the Poem of Identity (of *yours* whoever you are, now reading these lines)...For genius must realize that precious as it may be, there is something far more precious, namely, simple Identity, One's self (qtd. in Carlisle xi).

Drawing upon these words and upon years of research, Gay Wilson Allen, the leading Whitman scholar, believes that exploration of self was Whitman's main focus in the penning of "Song of Myself." He asserts that "His [Whitman's] real object is the nature of *the self*; its delight in being--and the joy of existence provides the lyrical emotion of the poem; the equality and perfection of all beings; the kinship and sacredness of all selves; the immortality of the soul, which is the metaphysical foundation of the self" (Italics mine)(74).

Like Allen, most of us respond to Whitman's concepts of oneness and to his concept of universal selfhood. But I would assert that Whitman's search for the unified, transcendent self was ultimately also a search for himself. Whitman believed that in order to know himself, he had to understand the human self, and he felt

that, once he had attained the knowledge of the self, he would know how to live his life.

My approach to assessing Whitman's "way" of knowing himself and the self will be primarily through an examination of his texts and the critical responses to them. However, his historical era, his personal biography and the philosophy of selfhood will be examined as they impact on appropriate readings, especially on "Song of Myself". The insights provided by each of these sources are significant: His era focused on an evolving sense of nationalism; his biography centered around several vital influences missing from his life, including a strong father figure, a strong sense of self worth, and a respect for self; and the philosophical concept of self allows us to understand the self as Whitman may have understood it. From the work, it is apparent that all these factors intersected to create a tension between Whitman's sense of his own identity, his connection with others, and the appropriate realization of democracy, with its creation of a national "self". I will contend that Walt Whitman attempted to instruct himself and the citizens of the United States in ways of integrating two kinds of identity, the identity of man as individual alone and of man in connection with others and the universe.

My thesis is that through this poem, Whitman explores forms of identity, both of himself in relation to the world and himself in relation to his individual self and soul. By investigating the

influences of biological background, his historical background and his own philosophy of self-hood, we will see that these factors did indeed impact this most auspicious of works.

### Historical Era

The great instigator of the Liturgical Movement in the 1920's, Fr. Virgil Michel, OSB, once said:

...the spirit of a generation or an age, is vastly influential in the making or the unmaking of character...We are all subject to the spirit of the time—no one more so than those whose characters are in process of formation, who are in their most suggestible age (Spaeth 4).

Search for selfhood was very characteristic of Whitman's age. His early involvement with newspapers and propaganda greatly influenced his opinions and his belief that he should "write up America" (Diyanni 105). He loved to sing the song of America, and he made the land and its peoples his primary subject, celebrating both constantly. He considered it a challenge to, "extend the range of poetic subjects to encompass the common, the ordinary, the seemingly unimportant and inconsequential" (105). "*Leaves of Grass* is both the story and the result of this identification of the poet with his country. It is a description of his journey in search of himself and of his country" (Asselineau 64). The same is true of "Song of Myself."

His poems touched on concerns central to the whole of American society at the time: "the integrity and importance of the self; the democratic vision of human brotherhood; the majesty and mystery of nature; and the epic grandeur of America" (Diyanni 111). Asselineau further notes that:

"Whitman *absorbed* America, both passively and passionately. America became his internal world. It was not something outside of himself. It was himself—that self which he was soon to sing....So ardent is his patriotism that he goes so far as to proclaim: 'Great is the greatest nation—the nation of clusters of equal nations!....It is the mother of the brood that must rule the earth with the new rule'" (67-76).

If Whitman was very concerned with the search for the self then, it was in part because of his identification with the nation, but it was also because of the specific era in which he lived. The United States was trying to form its own identity. It had, in his lifetime, gone to war over internal strife, freed blacks who had been enslaved, and seen a man who was later to be considered one of our foremost Presidents, assassinated. In some ways, these events did not fit Americans' former pictures of themselves and a new identity had to be formed, and in the post-war period, blacks, Southerners, returning soldiers, most everyone, were searching for an identity as well.

It is only natural that the search was contagious, and that

Whitman was among those who contracted it. Critic V. K. Chari has said that the "whole of his [Whitman's] poetic effort was centered in the exploration of the nature of the self" (qtd. in Carlisle xiii). But at the same time, Carlisle suggests that Whitman was very uncertain about the nature of the self and the world, a concern seen through "his dramatization of many varieties of personal experience" (xiii). The need for the union of very diverse selves into one nation without losing individual selves is also obvious.

A basic aspect of Whitman's character was his love of the United States, and it impacted heavily on his sense of self and his concept of the relations between self and others as well as the relations between self and the universe. What inspired Whitman to love America so and to write about it was his feeling of and devotion to the democratic state. "He wanted above all to sing the resistless dynamism of American democracy" (Asselineau 77). He felt that America itself was a poem to be written and experienced. "America was himself and he was America. "Song of Myself" is also, to a large extent, the Song of America and all his poems about America are equally about himself" (63). He envisioned a sort of democratic brotherhood that seemingly would cross the barriers of sex, race, class, and creed. But, "he knew as well as anyone that complete liberty had not yet been achieved in the young self-styled 'democratic' nation" (Allen Walt 74). He longed to incite and inspire Americans to use their "natural advantages and possibilities

for greatness”.

He felt these inadequacies could be corrected by individual's growth and that, “Only when each man realizes his innate, God-given potentialities will he be worthy of his nation and his nation of him” (74). To further point out his sense of nationalism, Allen quotes Whitman saying, “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it” (74).

“Whitman was the ‘poet of democracy’ in the sense that he shared completely the American faith in the sacredness of the self and the American dream of its fullest development” (Allen Walt 79). But together with these concerns, he also valued self-reliance and individualism. Whitman himself said, in his first article published in *Galaxy* entitled “Democracy”, “that democracy was not an accomplished fact but a method of educating men to govern themselves, or in his own words, it “supplies a training school for making first-class men”” (131). In his second article, called “Personalism” however, he also expressed his theory “of the dependence of political health on the development of each individual to the utmost of his potentialities” (131). In 1871, Whitman said in *Democratic Vistas*. that he wrote more of the future of democracy than of its achievements to date and appealed to his countrymen to turn their professed democratic ideals into reality.

At times, when Whitman looked to the people for leaders to

turn ideals into reality, he was disappointed. To solve this dilemma of sorts, he distinguished between man and the masses. "Man", he says, "viewed in the lump, displeases, and is a constant puzzle and affront" to what he calls "the merely educated classes" (qtd. in Allen *The New* 130). However, even though they lacked taste, intelligence, and culture, he believed, "the comical, artist-mind sees their measureless wealth of latent power" (130). At this time, however, Whitman was becoming very wary of even the individual commoner, the self produced by democracy. What finally justified his faith in the individual was the war, for, "the unnamed, unknown rank and file" who "were responsible for the heroic courage, sacrifice, and 'labor of death,' and these were 'to all essential purposes, volunteer'd' even in the face of "hopelessness, mismanagement, [and] defeat" (qtd. in Allen *The New* 130). So, he faced a multitude of potentially conflicting beliefs: he believed in democracy, yet mistrusted the people; desired a self, yet longed for connectedness through the quest for a national identity; believed in the individual, yet championed a system of government that ruled by majority.

One way of resolving these conflicts was through his belief that the function of government is often misunderstood. It is not merely, "to repress disorder but to develop, to open up to cultivation." Democracy is not so much a political system as a "grand experiment" in the development of individuals" (qtd. in

Allen *The New* 130). He seemed not so much concerned with either the “romantic theory of the innate goodness of the masses or with the political theory of the sovereignty of the people, but with Democracy as a moral and ethical ideal—in fact, a religion: “For I say at the core of democracy, finally, is the religious element. All the religions, old and new, are there” (qtd. in Allen *The New* 130).

These views led to a suggestion for the American people. Whitman realized that there was, as yet, no democratic literature to guide the people. And so he issued a call for native authors to establish a new school of artists and writers. He saw the art of literature as a tool “to unite the people with common social and ethical ideals and to establish a moral pattern for its citizens” (qtd. in Allen *The New* 131). He wrote at one time about his fellow Americans and how he thought they saw democracy and its importance:

Many will say it is a dream, and will not follow my inferences:  
but I confidently expect a time when there will be seen,  
running like a half-hid warp through all the myriad audible  
and visible worldly interests of America, threads of manly  
friendship, fond and loving, pure and sweet, strong and life-  
long, carried to degrees hitherto unknown—not only giving  
tone to *individual* character, and making it unprecedentedly  
emotional, muscular, heroic, and refined, but having the  
*deepest relations* to general politics (Italics mine)(131).

Thus, both the individual character and the character of the whole could be united into the pursuance of one particular goal, that is, to establish a moral pattern for all.

### Biographical Factors

The nation's search, however, was only one element in Whitman's psychological foundation. A second was the result of his individual biography. I believe that the formation of his identity was particularly affected by three factors. First, Whitman came from what today we would consider a dysfunctional family. His father, an alcoholic, was responsible for the family's living in complete poverty. His many "get-rich-quick" schemes usually landed the family in worse shape than they were when he started. For example, he would, "buy a lot, build a house on it, move the family into it for a few months, then be forced to sell it and repeat the procedure when mortgage payments could not be met" (Moder 35). Because of this, Walt suffered severely from prejudices against those who could not afford to attend private schools. These experiences, without doubt, made him analyze himself critically and seek "oneness" with others.

The second important factor in his development of self was that his literary aspirations were scorned by his parents. As Donna Moder, author of the article "Gender Bipolarity and the Metaphorical Dimensions of Creativity in Walt Whitman's Poetry: A

Psychobiographical Study” suggests:

The Whitman family as a whole never learned to understand Walt's literary ambitions, but the father was particularly sarcastic and critical toward Walt's passion for reading and toward Walt's neglect to assist in the chores involved in operating the family farm during the years when Walt chose to teach in a country school instead and to write in his spare time (35).

But it was not a completely unprofitable association. Gay Wilson Allen described the family as , “working people, possessed of little or no formal culture, and with no marked artistic tastes in any direction. [They] were a large family, long-lived, and passed on to Walt their virile moral and physical energy” (Allen *The New* 17).

In spite of these positives, Moder asserts that the father's cruelty was particularly harmful to Whitman as a person. The enmity his father exhibited toward him probably led Walt to create the father figures in his early writings who were cruel and overly aggressive, and it certainly marked his personal relationships.

His relationship with his mother was equally problematic in assisting him to create a self. After his father's health began to decline during the summer of 1845, Walt began to support his family. He grew very close to his mother, as he was to most of the women with whom he travelled and stayed. Mrs. Whitman was one who, according to psychoanalytic critic Stephen Black, “demanded

demonstrations of closeness and could not grant independence to any of her children" (Moder 36). Her behaviors, Black asserts, reveals the "concept of the emotionally starved Jocasta mother who 'prevents or retards the separation-individuation and movement towards autonomy and a separate identity' in her children" (36-37). Much of Whitman's behavior as a young man illustrates the results of this relationship. First, the fact that he left home to seek work as an office boy at the age of twelve would lead us to believe that he felt both a concern for and a fear of his mother. Second, the fact that "Walt, who hungered for her approval, obliged submissively [in handing over his check] with each pay increase," illustrates that her love for him was not at all unconditional (38). It required much work on his part.

Ms. Moder further tells us that,

The poet has been overpowered by a regressive dependency on her(the mother) that impedes his struggle to differentiate self and that transforms her from a symbol of love to a symbol of death, from a womb to a tomb, when emotional separation from her fails to occur (38).

This compulsive overpowering affected Whitman very deeply. In imitation and rebellion he even acquired some of his mother's traits, though with a difference. Ms. Moder continues:

Whitman had *become* a veritable Jocasta mother *himself* upon satisfying his affect hunger for children through various

homoerotic liaisons with much younger soldier boys whom he nursed with maternal solicitude during the war, whom he referred to and treated as 'sons', and with whom he was openly affectionate with lengthy hugs and kisses (39).

What we think we know about personality formation makes comprehensible the kind of development Whitman apparently had and the accompanying effort to find and define the self.

Coupled with the feeling of anger resulting from contact with his family when he was a child and young adult was the constant presence, in later years, of rejection:

...rejection as he was compelled to publish the first two editions of *Leaves of Grass* himself when no one was willing to take the risk(only to have both editions flop), rejection as he desperately wrote sympathetic anonymous reviews of his own work, rejection as he fought obscenity charges, and rejection as he yearned for the American public to receive him (Moder 35-36).

This too impacted his view of "self." As Anthony Storr notes, it is "the work, rather than the person, [that] becomes the focus of self-esteem" and this in turn provokes him or her to be overly sensitive about the work because of the "transference of his libido to the work" (36). Therefore, it is entirely possible that Whitman took the rejection of his work as equal to the rejection of his self, compounding other identity problems.

If, as these events indicate, both father and mother had a huge impact on his concept of self and if the feeling of failure affected him dramatically, these should work themselves into his writings in the form of a search for a self separate from mother and not subject to the negative evaluations of the father and society. Whitman in fact included both of these aspects in his writings through his search for an individual, powerful self in near-mystical unity with the universe.

#### Self-hood and the Soul

Philosophically, the concept of union of self and universe resulted from the way in which he addressed body-soul duality. He brings together the concepts of soul and body explicitly in *Leaves of Grass*:

My life is a miracle and my body which lives is a miracle; but of what I can nibble at the edges of the limitless and delicious wonder I know that I cannot separate them, and call one superior and the other inferior, any more that I can say my sight is greater than my eyes...I cannot understand the mystery, but I am always conscious of myself as two—as my soul and I: and I reckon it is the same with all men and women (Allen *The New* 180).

We see here that Whitman is beginning to perceive a sort of two-fold self, and this will serve as one of the most basic problematics of

identity for him.

An additional outgrowth of his biographical history and his era was a particular set of religious and spiritual views which impacted his beliefs concerning the soul and its role in the life of an individual. He believed, for example, that the soul could become whatever it desired. In his Notebook he expressed the notion that,

The soul or spirit transmits itself into all matter—into rocks, and can live the life of a rock—into the sea, and can feel itself the sea—into an oak, or other tree—into an animal, and feel itself a horse, a fish, or bird—into the earth—into the motions of the suns and stars (qtd. in Carlisle 52).

Here, he implies that the “self” is limitless, limited neither by time nor space.

Similarly, he says in section 44 of “Song of Myself”:

I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I an encloser of things to be (qtd in Fogle 619),

and again in section 46 he says:

I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured.

I tramp a perpetual journey (qtd in Fogle 621).

The self, then, is understood as individual, dual, and limitless for Whitman. Asselineau ties the beliefs to those of the German idealists. He says that for Whitman, “Space and time are mere illusions—as the German Idealists had taught him—and therefore a

man exists not only where his body is, but all over the universe, and not only in the present but in all times" (23).

Whitman used the soul in many various ways as mind, consciousness, the self, or even God. In addition to the Idealists, it is clear that he borrowed many ideas from Emerson, the Spiritual father of modern American Literature. Emerson, however, emphasized the idea that, "The soul makes the body." In his essay "The Poet," Whitman maintains that the body and soul are equal in nature, and Asselineau suggests that, "Far from proclaiming the superiority of spirit over matter, he exalted the sacred character of the latter. His poetry is a constant attempt at combining them and reconciling spirit and matter" (24).

The dichotomy is again explored in section 3 of "Song of Myself":

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is  
not my soul.

Lacks one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,  
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn (qtd.  
in Fogle 580).

The relationships between the seen and the unseen would suggest the relationship between the body and the soul, and he asserts that they are equal. However, here he also refers to them as if they were two distinct entities joined in an identity (Allen *The New* 190). "In fact," Allen says, "'identity' of the self is apparently

made possible by this union" (190). But as he begins to speak more about the self as a soul, he asserts that there are necessary processes which the self must go through which include "perpetual transfers and promotions" of the self (191).

Whitman believes that all persons "may not attain the full potentiality of their divine heritage" without attention (Allen *The New* 192). His message is this: "let (or aid) your soul attain its 'promise'" (192). His main purpose at the time was to develop a sort of "New Theology", a "more splendid Theology" of the "Real behind the Real", "poetry suitable to the human soul" (192).

He also felt this duality, between the spirit and matter, so vividly because he was both a sensualist and a mystic (Asselineau 24). The combination of the two is found in a passage from "Song of Myself":

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer  
morning,

How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently  
turn'd over upon me...

Swiftly arose and spread the peace and knowledge that pass  
all the arguments of the earth,

And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,  
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and  
the women my sisters and lovers,

And that a kelson of the creation is love...(qtd. in Fogle 581-2).

“William James, author of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, quotes this passage as a “classic example” of a true mystical state”(qtd. in Asselineau 24). He indicates that the passage illustrates several characteristics of mysticism. The first is the literal inexpressibility of what Whitman is attempting to say, the second, a “noetic” quality, i.e., the revelation of truths which cannot be proved by rational thought. The third is a transiency or brevity of endurance, and, finally, the fourth is a sort of passivity implied by Whitman’s seeming containment by a superior power (24-25).

A friend of Whitman’s, Dr. R.M. Bucke, called Whitman’s encounter with mysticism by another name, that of “cosmic consciousness.” He defined the term as “a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe” (Allen *The New* 194). Bucke was convinced that Whitman lived constantly in this state. The only way he (Bucke) could explain the condition was that he felt he had had a similar experience himself. He described his experience as a “sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination, impossible to describe” (194).

To this attempt at explication of mystical experiences, James adds insight into Whitman’s belief saying that: “Whitman in another place expresses in a quieter way what was probably with him a chronic mystical perception” (193). He cites Whitman’s prose to prove his point:

There is, apart from mere intellect, in the make-up of every superior human identity, (in its moral completeness, considered as *ensemble*, not for that moral alone, but for the whole being, including physique,) a wondrous something that realizes without argument, frequently without what is called education, (though I think it the goal and apex of all education deserving the name)—an intuition of the absolute balance, in time and space, of the whole of this multifarious, mad chaos of fraud, frivolity, hoggishness—this revel of fools, and incredible make-believe and general unsettledness, we call *the world*; a soul-sight of the divine clue and unseen thread which holds the whole congeries of things, all history and time, and all events, however trivial, however, momentous, like a leash'd dog in the hand of the hunter. Such soul-sight and root-centre for the mind—mere optimism explains only the surface or fringe of it... (qtd. in James 193-194).

Whitman believed that, although "the man in his poetry is not something to be laughed at, but, on the contrary, a miracle to be wondered at," and that "man is not a ludicrous and despicable biped, but an unfathomable and ungraspable mystery." Mysticism then served as a special avenue of enlightenment to the knowledge of man's self and, particularly, of himself.

Connected to his mysticism was his attachment to concepts from the Transcendentalist movement that drew upon the Idealists

and included Emerson. Members in this movement "followed no single master, creed, or even philosophy, but all...were profoundly interested in speculative thinking and in the great minds of the past" (Allen *The New* 254). Although most of Transcendentalist thought was influenced by German Idealism, the movement also allowed for regional influence, thus making the American idea of Transcendentalism unique. Most of its assumptions came primarily from the East, but allowing for this regional shift, American Transcendentalism was modified by the American experience and by the Yankee character (255).

Transcendentalists "hoped to "transcend" the realm of phenomena and receive their inspirations toward truth at first hand from the Deity, unsullied by any contact with matter" (Allen *The New* 255). Transcendentalism is literally defined as any philosophy based upon the doctrine that the principles of reality are to be discovered by the study of the processes of thought or as a philosophy emphasizing the intuitive and spiritual above the empirical.

Allen tells us it was the subjective philosophy of Emerson and of post-Kantians in America that

provided both a framework and a rationalization for the psychological adjustments which his (Whitman's) inner nature compelled him to make. Perhaps he was only dimly aware of his great debt to Emerson, but Transcendentalism, like a

religion, opened up a new life to Walt Whitman. Like many a man who has experienced a religious conversion, from this time forth Whitman's whole life, outer as well as inner, became harmonized and tranquilized. He had found a pattern and a purpose" (38).

From Roger Asselineau's book, *The Transcendentalist Constant in American Literature*, we begin to see several characteristics of Transcendental writing alive in Whitman's work, "Song of Myself." The collection in which "Song of Myself" appeared, *Leaves of Grass*, has itself been called a translation into verse of the main tenets of the transcendentalist doctrine (18).

The most obvious aspects of the doctrine apparent in his work are the extensive use of contradictory statements such as his contrast of doubt and despair,

Down-hearted doubters, dull and excluded  
 Frivolous sullen moping angry affected disheartened  
 atheistical

I know every one of you, and I know the unspoken  
 interrogatories,

By experience I know them....(20)

with optimism and hope,

Sings by himself a song

Song of the bleeding throat

Death's outlet song of life (for well dear brother I know

If thou wast not granted to sing thou wouldst surely die) (21). These contradictions, between optimism and pessimism, express violent inner tensions, torturing hesitations, and passionate gropings after an everlasting but elusive truth, and they confer on his poetry its vital quality, its stimulating power. Whitman never provides us with ready-made answers, but instead invites us to follow him in his quest and even to go beyond him if we can (19).

Another set of intentional contrasts became apparent with his use of optimism and pessimism.

“At first sight, it is the expression of an absolute optimism: How perfect the earth is, and the minutest thing upon it What is called good is perfect, and what is called sin is just as perfect,  
he claims in “To Think of Time.”

This explains his feelings of optimism, a feeling which permeates much of his writing.

But there were moments when he doubted it and thought that maybe evil would triumph and his soul, his “identity,” would be destroyed forever. Whitman nevertheless did not give way to despair. Though he let some trace of doubts subsist, *Leaves of Grass* basically expresses his unshakable confidence that the essential meaning of the world “is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness” (qtd. in

Asselineau 25-26).

Here, Asselineau ties together Whitman's beliefs in the equality of souls and his ideas of democracy by saying:

It is the expression of his passionate attachments to the fundamental democratic principles: liberty, equality, fraternity:

In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barley-corn less...

O such themes—equalities! O divine average!...

All is eligible to all,

All is for individuals, all is for you (qtd. in Asselineau 25-26).

Therefore, the democratic aspect of Transcendentalism was very attractive to Whitman.

Another trait of the Transcendentalist movement in which Whitman found solace was its celebration of life. Whitman chose *Leaves of Grass* as the title of his major work because these words, in his eyes, symbolized the universality and eternity of life:

I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,

And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and in narrow zones,

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves...

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death...(qtd. in Asselineau 22).

This

“same current of life flows through the whole cosmos, through the smallest and humblest herbaceous plants, through the animals which feed upon them, and once more through the anonymous grass which grows on their corpses when they die (22)

and it even flows through the individual self of a person. I believe Whitman here is telling us that there is more to life than just living, not only literally, but also metaphorically. Yes, one could exist, that is, sustain life with food and water, but that is not living. He sees life as a vibrancy of sorts which flows through all people whether they realize it or not. And it is a constant re/realization of life that makes people “alive”.

Transcendentalist views also appealed to the religious convictions of an individual and forced them to question their beliefs and credences. Whitman tied his religious conviction together with his belief in the current of life and self by saying that,

God was essentially Life, an irresistible and indestructible force pulsing through the universe, immanent even in apparently inanimate materials. In *Leaves of Grass*, All is God and God is All, and this divine presence in all things confers an infinite value even on the commonest and cheapest objects, since they are parts of the sacred Whole (qtd. in Asselineau 23).

Whitman himself believed that the person of Christ was only the latest of the prophets sent to tell people of the Lord. He wanted to found his own, new religion enclosing and transcending all the others:

My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths,  
Enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between  
ancient and modern...(23).

Whitman used this theory of Transcendentalism to transcend practically all of the aspects of life in America in order to strip away all of the modern opinions and inclinations people had concerning the self. He used it to explain away negative reactions to the identity of himself and the nation. He wanted to express himself through the self and identity of the great country of America. As we open his *Leaves of Grass*, we read right from the beginning,

One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,  
and in "Song of Myself," he comments that he is

Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a Kosmos,  
Disorderly, fleshy and sensual...eating drinking and  
breeding,

No sentimentalist...no stander above men and women or  
apart from them...No more modest than immodest (qtd. in  
Asselineau 19).

By looking at what Whitman thought of the self at the time of the penning of "Song of Myself", we can see that his perception of

the self, both of his individual self and the national self, greatly impacted his writings. In the next section, we will clearly see that many of Whitman's beliefs in both the self and in democracy heavily impact his writings.

### Song of Myself

In order to facilitate my greater understanding of "Song of Myself", I have chosen to use parts of the work of Professor William Moore. He splits "Song of Myself" into six main sections. His first section examines the first five sections of the poem. In the beginning, Whitman, although he keeps his identity, that is his name a secret, tells the reader who the poet is, and what he does. He also extends an invitation to the reader to enter his world where he:

Know[s] that the hand of God is the promise of my own,  
And...know[s] that the spirit of God is the brother of my own  
And that all men ever born are also by brothers, and the  
women my sisters and lovers (qtd. in Fogle 581-2).

He conveys here the theme of universal harmony and the belief that the love which radiates from God is limitless and that it embraces all people. Whitman believes that the love of people should be a lot like the love of God, limitless and all-encompassing.

This belief is also one reason that many people believed that Whitman was a homosexual. He freely, though not publicly,

expressed his affections for both men and women and felt no guilt or remorse for doing so. Of course, at the time, and indeed even today, homosexuality was not eagerly accepted as “normal” or “acceptable” then or today, and this aspect of his life and work created more rejection and criticism. The issues of identity and union thus became even more complicated for him.

In examining Whitman's sections 6-19, Moore suggests that, “the poet moves among nature, from grass to man, companionship and seeking answers to his questions” (Moore 2). Whitman uses grass as a symbol of the immortality of humanity:

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full  
hands,

...It is a uniform hieroglyphic,

And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow  
zones.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,

And to die is different that anyone supposed, and luckier (qtd.  
in Fogle 582,83).

Whitman is accepting of all individuals throughout this section as well. He mentions:

Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,

Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly;

Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome.

Which of the young men does she like the best? (Fogle 585-6).

Here I believe he displaces the woman with himself and he is longing to know these twenty-eight men. But that is just another way he expresses his total acceptance of all of humanity.

In his sections 18 and 19, Whitman says:

I play not marches for accepted victors only, I play marches  
for conquer'd and slain persons.

This is the meal equally set, this the meat for natural hunger,  
It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous, I make  
appointments with all (qtd. in Fogle 591-2).

He is here expressing his love for all humanity, even those who are not readily accepted into society. I think he could be alluding to his potential homosexuality, as well. He felt that he was conquered in a way and that the righteous ones on the earth made him feel inferior to themselves. He, however, continues to express his own acceptance and love of all people. This clearly tells us that Whitman's identity was one of great complexity, for although he feels a certain amount of enmity for those who continue to insult him and persecute him, he still holds their souls in high regard.

It is in Moore's third section that he describes the place where the poet reveals his own nature. This section of Moore's analysis covers Whitman's sections 20-25. In it, Whitman sees his image and strength of himself and of other people as the images and

strengths of Man Eternal:

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.

One world is aware and by far the largest to me, and that is  
myself,

And whether I come to my own to-day or in ten thousand or  
ten million years,

I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheerfulness I can  
wait (qtd. in Fogle 593).

He begins to celebrate egoism and to praise sensuousness. The "I" within his work, I believe, is two-fold. On the one hand, the "I" represents Whitman himself, while on the other hand, the "I" also serves as the "personage" of the United States and the individual American. He continues saying that it is within him that all beliefs are contained:

What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?

Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand  
indifferent,

My gait is no fault-finder's or rejecter's gait,

I moisten the roots of all that has grown.

I find one side a balance and the antipodal side a balance,

Soft doctrine as steady help as stable doctrine,

Thoughts and deeds of the present our rouse and early start

(qtd. in Fogle 595).

He believes then, that what humanity believes in is contained within a person and that, although external sources can affect beliefs, people will naturally and inherently follow what is within them before being affected by societal factors.

Whitman, in section 25, indicate that he believes he is in possession of divine powers of vision and speech and he believes that he can distinguish between divine abilities and the mere talk and look of a mere mortal person:

Writing and talk do not prove me,

I carry the plenum of proof and every thing else in my face,

With the hush of my lips I wholly confound the skeptic (qtd.

in Fogle 599).

Moore then discusses section 26 through 37 of the poem. He believes that it is within these sections that Whitman details his definition of being, as it is affected by the touch of person upon person, and of person upon creature:

To be in any form, what is that?

I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,

They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.

I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy.

To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I

can stand (qtd. in Fogle 600).

Having thus established the being, Whitman finds revelations of

truth of a being in the most insignificant elements of Nature, in the most inaccessible areas of the Earth:

All truths wait in all things,

They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it,

They do not heed the obstetric forceps of the surgeon,

The insignificant is as big to me as any,

(What is less or more than a touch?)

Logic and sermons never convince,

The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul.

(Only what proves itself to every man and woman is so,

Only what nobody denies is so) (qtd. in Fogle 601).

His self and life is affected by other people and even by animals:

I think I could turn and live with animals, they're so placid  
and self-contained,

I stand and look at them long and long.

Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of  
owning things,

So they show their relations to me and I accept them (qtd. in  
Fogle 602).

Finally Moore asserts that Whitman reveals a feeling of  
oneness with the suffering outcasts of society:

Embody all presences outlaw'd or suffering,

See myself in prison shaped like another man,

And feel the dull unintermitted pain.

Askers embody themselves in me and I am embodied in them,  
I project my hat, sit shame-faced, and beg (qtd. in Fogle 612).

Sections 38-47 of "Song of Myself," according to Moore refer to the poet as a traveling companion and peripatetic teacher.

Whitman sees himself as a revealer of Truth. He goes from a sense of illumination and despair to a sense of oneness. He expresses a longing desire to know his companion. He asks:

The friendly and flowing savage, who is he?  
Is he waiting for civilization, or past it and mastering it?  
Wherever he goes men and women accept and desire him,  
They desire he should like them, touch them, speak to them,  
stay with them (qtd. in Fogle 613).

In Whitman's section 41 he acknowledges that there are gods of the ages. Here he ties in ideas of mysticism and transcendentalism. The credence he gave tenets of transcendentalist movement made him believe that there was indeed a divine presence in all things and that it was this presence that gave all things infinite value. However, he finds as much or more divinity in himself and in other men. Even though he knows and believes that there are gods, he also says that no one yet knows how great the potentialities of life are and no one knows what wonders lie beyond. Then, in section 44, he states:

It is time to explain myself—let us stand up.  
What is known I strip away,

I launch all men and women forward with me into the  
Unknown.

I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I an encloser of  
things to be (qtd. in Fogle 618-9).

He is the "acme" of the evolution which has shaped his physical  
being and has spurred and inspired him on into greater affinity with  
his soul:

All forces have been steadily employ'd to complete and delight  
me,

Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul (qtd. in Fogle  
619).

In sections 46 and 47, he encourages his audience to make  
their own search for themselves:

I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!)

...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 the  
public road.

Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,

You must travel it for yourself (qtd. in Fogle 621).

Here, his theme of personal and very separate individuality becomes  
very clear, as does the assertion that in spite of other kinds of  
democratic and mystical unity, each one must find his or her own  
ways. Through his works, however, he seems to believe that he can

help mankind to a deeper understanding of the human self. He points the way, in a sense.

He tells his readers that he is unable to answer their questions, for he too is only a companion:

You are also asking me questions and I hear you,  
I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out for yourself  
(qtd. in Fogle 621).

Whitman's sections 48-52 are typically called the poet's final reassurances and departure. It is the point at which Whitman feels he has done all he can through his writing to assist people in finding an identity. In it, he explains what he has said throughout "Song of Myself." He tells us that:

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,  
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,  
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is...  
(qtd. in Fogle 623).

He believes in the omnipresence of God:

I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not  
in the least,  
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than  
myself (qtd. in Fogle 624).

Before he ends his work, Whitman apologizes for the presence of any inconsistencies:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then, I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes) (qtd. in Fogle 625).

He believes that all of life is a contradiction of sorts. Because people's identities cover such vast arrays of feelings and emotions, there is bound to be contradiction between some of the things we do throughout our living years.

Finally, in section 52, Whitman bids a fond farewell to his companions:

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,  
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags (qtd. in  
Fogle 626).

And he tells us where he can be found should we seek him:

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles (qtd.  
in Fogle 626).

He is telling us here that we all will return to the ground someday, where the grass, that eternal symbol of life for Whitman, will continue to grow.

The penultimate paragraph finally comes full circle. He indicates that he is still separated in a sense from others, saying:

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,  
And filter and fibre your blood

and he implies again that it is very hard to ascertain the essence of a

person. However, he encourages his reader and believer to keep searching:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,

Missing me one place search another,

I stop waiting somewhere for you (qtd. in Fogle 626).

Eventually, I think, Whitman believes that he and we will one day find out true identities, and understand or become one with each other and the universe, but when that will be is yet unknown.

In "Song of Myself," then, Whitman poetically describes his search for an identity through several stages of development and maturity. It is this work which best illustrates both his understanding and concept of self as well as his continued ambiguity of self. He tells us that in searching for ourselves we must look to others and help them in the same journey. Whitman in no way preaches or teaches that man is alone in his search for himself. However, he maintains that man is his own individual and that no one else has control over his destiny, or his identity. He certainly asserts that this great country is in no way searching for its own identity without the help of its members either. Whitman relies on the resources of other people and other beliefs to form himself and his own beliefs.

### Conclusion

Thus we can see that in Whitman's quest to find himself, he is

forced to examine all of the aspects of a persons life and meld them together into one persona. He uses traits of the democratic being and combines them with his own personal history as well as with the transcendental movement and psychology of self-identity that the country, as well as himself, was going through at the time. By melding these themes together we get a picture of how the persona of Walt Whitman was created. Whether or not we are able to tell if Whitman himself was able to identify a true identity is yet unknown. However, by close examination, we could say that he knew what he needed to know about himself and about the society he lived in to get by in life. We can tell, however, that he was able to create a "persona" that many people would find very engaging, for his life and his works will long be remembered by scholars and aspirants alike.

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;

The proper study of mankind is man.

This quote by Alexander Pope with which I opened my paper, explains, in a nutshell, what Whitman was attempting to do. His works, in particular "Song of Myself", are perfect examples of studying the make-up of a person to know his/her identity. By looking at Whitman's historical era we saw that the very nation in which Whitman resided was forming its own identity at the same time he was. This impacted his writing greatly. By looking into

Whitman's biographical factors and contributions made to his life by those who were in some way close to him, we see that he did not have an easy childhood, nor did he dive into the history books as one of America's greatest poets with his first work. We see that he struggled like any of us do. This too greatly impacted his writing. By delving into his concepts of self-hood and the soul, we see that identity, especially of himself, often times confounded him, and that he knew no more than we know today about the formation of a "self." This too greatly impacted his writing. Finally, by critically looking at what most consider his greatest work, "Song of Myself", we see how he tried to express his thoughts about all of these aspects in a work that people would hopefully enjoy and appreciate.

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Perhaps the best way to conclude my examination of the trials and tribulations of a poetic American searching for an identity in a constantly changing, constantly growing environment, would be to quote Roger Asselineau:

[Whitman] thus built an immortal book of poetry and what W. B. Yeats called an "artificial personality," full of contradictions and perplexities which he never attempted completely to eliminate or conceal. He passionately searched for God as well as for his inner self and roamed throughout the infinity of space and time, now full of exuberance and exaltation when he thought he had found ground for faith, now depressed and

afraid when it seemed to him that his destination was chaos and nothingness. His poems express with perfect candor his wavering between hope and despair, his hesitations between matter and spirit, optimism and pessimism, the love of life and the attraction of death, liberty and authority, the individual and the masses (Asselineau 30).

On the literary as well as on the political plane he had to balance the requirements of society by the rights of the individual. He never resigned himself completely to merging his individuality, his "identity", as he called it, either in God or in his fellow citizens *en masse*. Though as an American and a champion of democracy he clamored for a national literature and accepted a theory of literary history, as a poet he again and again stressed the supreme importance of the self—"Myself," "One's Self." "Always a knit of identity, always distinction" (Asselineau 94-5).

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