

# I N T R O D U C T I O N

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The first quarter of the twentieth century saw the rise of three great American Writers — Whitman, Mark Twain, and Melville — to fame. Although many critics assailed Whitman's poetic talent in scurrilous terms and down to the time of the poet's death the prevailing American opinion was that Whitman was a third-rate poet and an immoral man, Whitman was not altogether without friends and admirers. From across the Atlantic, W. M. Rossetti hailed him as a pioneer. Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams have all admitted their debt to the sage of Camden. D. H. Lawrence recognised in him a Kindred soul and placed him in the foremost rank amongst creative writers. Even Bernard Shaw was no less adulatory while commenting cryptically that Whitman was a classic.

Certain admirers of his genius have tried to offer elaborate justification for his moral and social aberrations. But Whitman was never ashamed of acknowledging his "baffling complexities." He admitted that he was of contradictions made; but he was only too human — "An American, one of the roughs, a Kosmos, of Manhattan the son."

Whitman presented unpurified, unsublimated American life. Through the rude force of everyday folk Whitman saw shining

an ideal America. His thinking did not measure upto his intentions, yet among nineteenth century American authors he stood alone in pointing to men the path between reality and their own souls.

Walt Whitman, the most representative poet of the American nation, developed himself from the scratch and by the strength of his will-power, self-discipline and ambition, made himself heard and respected by those who ridiculed him and refused to acknowledge him as a poet. He was proud to belong to America, and he visualised a great future for his country, not in the conventional refinement and culture confined to the upper few, but in a vast, comprehensive progress shared by the mass of the common people with their ordinary aims, objects, and occupations. He felt proud to think that America was made up of strong, self-reliant and independent elements drawn from various nations and that by the sheer power of determination and iron-will she was destined to make herself the greatest and most powerful nation of the world. Such a nation was not to be built up by the intellectuals alone, but by the vast and varied body of the common people with their strong, muscular, and agile virility.

Himself a common, half-educated, poor young man, with a vigorous body and a strong heart, with no formal literary training of any sort, Whitman took upon himself the mission of being the poet of such people. He continued in that vocation, undaunted by

the pricking and hostile critical comments and was at long last recognised as a poet of original genius. The biography of Whitman is the epitome of the history of the American nation. Just as America, from almost nothing, developed herself into the most powerful nation of the world, Whitman also, with no literary background and training, has come to be recognised as one of the greatest of American poets, opening up new vistas for the art of poetry and helped in establishing American literature to a place of high prestige and glory among the literatures of the world.

The personality of Whitman suffered from no inhibitions or prejudices. All Americans of all classes and professions were considered as brothers and sisters by him since they all belonged to the common humanity. He was aware of his own weaknesses and so could look sympathetically upon the weaknesses of his fellow mortals. For him even the most degraded person has some slight good in him and it was to that divine goodness in man that he made his appeal.

It is this fundamental love for man as man, that Whitman's patriotism transformed itself into universalism. The range of his sympathy extends to all humanity, and he sings about their ideals, aspirations, hopes, and fears. The result is that Whitman becomes not only the spokesman of the American people, but of the whole world. His vision ultimately becomes cosmic, and he

embraces the life not only of man but also of all animals, birds, insects, and even the natural elements like the wind, rain, ocean, mountains, stars, woods as well. His vision takes into its ken the hoary past as well as the future of the universe.

The fruit of Whitman's first poetic efforts was published in 1855 as Leaves of Grass and his poetic career continued till 1891 - 92 before his death. This period was the most crucial one in American history, because after the War of Independence, which had made her a free nation, she was now confronted with the threats of disintegration. The Southern and the Northern states fell out with each other on the question of slavery, leading to the bloody Civil War (1861 - 65) which shook the nation to its very foundations. It was felt for a time that the dream of a free, strong, democratic, American nation was going to be shattered. Fortunately, under the able guidance of Abraham Lincoln, the war came to a successful close, and America came out of the ordeal a strong, united nation.

Besides these upheavals in the political life of the country, new economic, social, philosophical and religious ideas were engaging the attention of the people. Quite a multitude of the American population consisted of recent immigrants from Europe, who were dominated by the idea of expansion into the unconquered continent. So the life was flowing at a swift speed, and American

people were engaged in all sorts of work for the development of the country and the maximum exploitation of its resources. Under the impact of these expansionist tendencies, the philosophical and religious ideas were rapidly undergoing radical changes. The old, rigorously dogmatic Puritanism was losing ground and a greater emphasis was laid on tolerance and freedom of thought in the religious life of the country. Under the influence of German Romantic Philosophy and Kant's Transcendentalism, the intellectuals of America, like Emerson and Thoreau, rejected ecclesiastical ceremony and authority, and preached the doctrine that God is everywhere and reveals himself in every individual. The anti-slavery abolitionist group got its most zealous supporters and champions from the ranks of the Transcendentalists. Thoreau and his friends defied the laws and received fugitive slaves in their homes. The American Women's Rights Movement got its chief advocate in the talented Margaret Fuller, a transcendentalist. Other great writers of the period -- Bryant, Lowell and Emerson -- were all advocates of free thought, tolerance and reform.

America was thus on the move in that crucial period. New life was pulsating in her veins. New experiments were being made in democracy and freedom of the people. The eyes of the whole world were set on the new nation emerging out of the throes of a hard, long-drawn-out struggle. And it was of this American nation, bubbling with enthusiasm and life, and shaping itself into a definite character out of multifarious, and at times conflicting

elements, that Whitman wanted to be the spokesman. He was the true American poet, the friend of all humanity, a co-sharer in the life of the whole universe, a well-wisher of everything animate and inanimate, who sings boldly and truly of his natural emotions in the most natural manner. We listen to Whitman as we listen to our most intimate friend who lays bare his heart before us without the least hesitation. What he says mostly corresponds to what we think and feel. Reading his poems gives us the impression of enjoying the fresh breeze. His poetry seems to be getting gently absorbed within our very being. It casts a spell on us which is imperceptible. It gives us a very fascinating experience which is indescribable, and leaves our mind healthier, stronger, fresher.

Walt Whitman does not look before and after, and pine for what is not, but he lives in the present and enjoys it. He accepts life as it comes, enjoys thoroughly the present moment, and does not bother either for the past or the future. Let everyone accept his place, do his job honestly, respect others and look upon all with an equal eye, without conflict, malice or rancour, and build a strong, healthy nation upon democratic principles — this is how Whitman's message to humanity, as expressed through his poetry, can be stated in a nutshell. He believes in a society in which every individual retains and develops his personality, but all these personalities, combined together, make a magnificent cosmopolitan society. In his view, not the sacrifice of the individual at the altar of society, nor the sacrifice of the social well-being for the sake of a

few individuals, but equal development of all the parts which, while maintaining their separate identity, can contribute to the proper well-being of the whole. This was Whitman's message, and it was his self-appointed mission to convey it to his fellow-countrymen and to the whole humanity in general.

In the literature of America, Whitman created a tradition by himself. Owing to his influence in the 1920's Whitman xxx escaped the decade's general censure of the past. He was seen as a rebel against tradition, appeared as a modern in ways that Emerson could not be, and offered a vision of democratic man that could survive all the critical and cultural onslaughts. Poets who came much after him carried such of his message and many of his innovations of style into the twentieth century.

Whitman never wanted to be invested with any halo of divinity. In his own mind there were no reservations, no sense of guilt. He had achieved complete self-realization. His concept of experience was that it should be truly cosmic in amplitude, excluding nothing, denying nothing. Consummation of experience — that was his ideal. Real truth, according to him, was all-inclusive and it did not shut out any element as alien.

A poet, according to Whitman, is not a mere visionary or dreamer, living in an ivory tower, divorced from the grim realities of everyday existence. On the other hand, he is destined to play a significant role in shaping the course of human history. Whitman

always regarded himself as the national poet, projecting through his poems the great ideals that have moved his countrymen. Whitman knew that to be the representative of one's country, a poet must assiduously study "out the land, its idiosyncrasies and men." He did not feel discouraged when the early years of his poetic career brought him little recognition. He was prepared to wait and to day America has come to consider him as her authentic voice. Whitman is now looked upon not only as the greatest poet of America, but one of the foremost poets of the world. He is the full-grown poet whose work is a perfect synthesis of the Soul of Man and Nature.

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Whitman's disregard for social conventions and public morality, and his deep love of the animals, brought within the compass of his imaginative sympathy the entire creation of God. In Society he did not recognise any distinctions of caste, colour or creed. His heart went out in sympathy to all the underdogs of society — the social outcasts and the forsaken. His vision would not exclude anyone, not even a convict, a sweeper, or a prostitute. Unlike most other poets who only weave a cobweb of sentimental love for mankind, Whitman always translated his humanitarianism into action. He considered himself the spokesman for mankind. He realised the inherent divineness of man. His purpose was, in his own words, "mainly to put a Person, a human being, freely, fully, and truly on



record."

Whitman was the apostle of democracy. His stark ideal of democracy was essentially pragmatic and earth bound. Whereas on the political plane he denounced all prerogatives and vested interests, on the social plane he visualized complete harmony between the individual and the society. But, above all, Whitman was, what one may call, a spiritual democrat who saw in true democracy, possibilities of universal peace, toleration, and brotherhood. No individual was to be excluded from God's grace, since all shall be admitted unto the Kingdom of Heaven regardless of any distinctions. The most authentic specimen of true humanity was the common man, "the divine average." The poet shall be a 'Kosmos', marked for generosity and affection, the most celebrated apostle of equality and fraternity, having no care for riches and privilege.

Whitman was intensely patriotic in the most religious sense of the word. The United States, for him, was the haven of democracy, the hope of the common mass. His object was to establish a basis for faith in democracy by showing that all human qualities, good or bad, sex or divinity, were latent in each individual. Thus Whitman's democratic ideals and intense humanitarianism became merged into a unified and identical whole. Again, his radical humanism is an integral part of the general concept of the so-called Transcendentalism.

Whitman always sought to explore the transcendental

nature of reality. His vision led him into regions extending beyond the limits of empirical experience. The unknown, the unseen, the unheard, and the unexpressed revealed to his mind the deepest truths about the ultimate reality. The Transcendentalists explain man and his world so far as possible in terms of man himself. They believe in the principle that the structure of the universe literally duplicates the structure of the individual self, and that all knowledge, therefore, begins with self-knowledge. Emerson and Thoreau, whom Whitman followed as his masters in this matter, stress always upon man as universal, reduced to his common humanity, and at the same time they can never forget that the drama of man is clothed with the aspect of eternity.

Whitman believed that the spiritual alone can not reveal the transcendent reality. Revelation can only come through the intimate fusion of the physical and the spiritual. Next he probes into the nature of the "self" and realizes that it is something which can not be held within the bounds of this earth. Then the self is purified and purification is achieved by ennobling the senses, not by 'purgation', nor through discipline. He, therefore, ennoble and accepts the degraded and rejected species of mankind and at the same time finds his realms widened and ascends to the mystical heights where he finds himself identified with the 'beautiful gentle God.'

After this the poet confronts a terrible setback and enters that phase of the mystic experience, which is traditionally

known as the 'dark night of the soul.' This consciousness of the agonies and despairs of the world gradually passes away; the poet develops an infinite sympathy and tenderness, looks upon all ~~xxx~~ suffering as only illusion, is united with the Transcendent beyond time and space, and finally realizes that the common is transfigured into the divine through the descent of the 'avatar' or the godhead. Through death of the physical body the soul passes into the stage of 'nirvana' or 'moksha' that is, the ultimate salvation.

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Whitman's style was admirably adapted to describe the still unshaped landscape of a new continent, the energy, romance and dreams of a pioneering nation sure of an illimitable future. It is also an excellent medium for his passionate nature and also responded admirably toward the sublime. What Whitman sought was a medium in which he could express the expansive soul, mind and body of the democratic man. He broke away from orthodoxy and he took his place beside his contemporary revolutionary poets in 19th century Europe, significantly anticipating the 'Free Verse' movement of the early 1900's. In his powerful lines where every word was right as also in his dislike of polishing, he was a true American, with his disdain for too much learning or art. His chants were never intended to be absolute art. They were written to capture his fellowmen in his own

time by any relevant means. It is from him that the next generation of poets got the training "to rely too exclusively on a rapt and bardic intuition". Whitman, during his life time, was little known to the multitude outside the intellectual circle. Still, his consolation was that, if the poet can not speak to mankind, he can speak for mankind and this is what Whitman himself does at his splendid best.

Whitman proved to be, with the passage of time, an exemplary figure in the growth of the poetry of his times. He heralded the dawn of a new era by giving a new dimension and subject-matter to the poets of his days. He was the poet of America and American democracy from the core of his heart. He attempted to embrace the whole of America in his epic Leaves of Grass. He found his subjects among all kinds of men in all their conditions. His catalogues symbolize the equalizing process of democracy for Everyone. His greatest and best quality has been his vigour, vitality, and immense naturalness, and all throughout his poetry, he sings and speaks about the simple glory of the "Divine average."

Whitman broke away with the conventions and hackneyed terminology of English Verse. His poetry has struck a new and original note. There have been, and are perhaps still, sharp differences of opinion as to the absolute merit of his work as poetry. Intellectual critics will strongly object to his emotionalism and vagueness; formal critics, to his lack of close structure; academic critics to his apotheosis of the uncultivated. But there can hardly be any

question of his power and influence. From Whitman starts a new chapter in American poetry. He was, in the truest sense of the expression, the poet of a new dawn in American literature.

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