

souls. Shakespeare rightly said in *Troilus and Cressida*, “One touch of nature makes the whole world kin” (1602, 3.3.175). Mahabir forgets all his bitterness and angst of his heart. He even throws his pistol at Veera's insistence and gets ready to lead a reformed life for his love's sake. Veera also gets clarity, realizing her true self. Here she thinks she has found her dream home and resolves to live with Mahabir in the lap of purity and serenity in nature. But as the nature would have it, things have to be put in order. She needs sacrifice. Mahabir has to atone for his sins. He dies a reformed soul. Veera is helpless before this onslaught of nature. She has to reconcile with nature but she cannot just compromise with world down in the plains. She cannot come back to it as she herself firmly declares in front of her parents in a manner as if she has imbibed an indomitable strength and resolve from her brief contact with nature. As per her resolve she is shown to have gone to the abode of nature (the same place where Mahabir was killed), helping others to make their living (she has started some business here) and cherishing the fond memories of her love.

The Romantic Movement prevailed upon the sensibilities of people particularly in the field of literature for a comparatively briefer span of time than it was the case with other movements and periods like Neoclassical and Elizabethan periods. It was considered a reactionary effort which gained momentum to change the oppressive tradition of age old rules and conventions, impressing upon all fields of human endeavors be it political, social or literary. This influence was considered a transient bubble, which could burst any time soon. It was vigorously criticized by notable critics in that age as well as the time to come. Still it kept alive and kicking in the efforts of certain writers like Robert Frost, W B Yeats and Rabindranath Tagore. It has contributed significantly to our films with its emphasis on elements like - individual freedom; depiction of common life with its simple language and manners; the spirit of rebellion; role of imagination, passion and emotion; elements of gloom, silence, death and escape; and most significant, the presence of nature. *Highway* is one such film that successfully employs all these elements. Considering its erstwhile influence and presence, the trend seems to last forever.

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Walt Whitman and the Divided World of Critics

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Abstract: Walt Whitman continues to puzzle the critics with his poetic concerns that openly celebrate love between man and woman as well as man and man. The critics earlier have condemned him as being perverted, later on as homosexual, but none can deny that love which he professes is beyond body urges embodying the spirit of love between souls. The result has been divided opinion amongst members of critics' fraternity with some supporting him, some criticizing him while many almost worshipping him. This paper attempts to put forward this division amongst researchers in the last century and see how Whitman was really ahead of his times and a true ambassador of humanity, celebrating love forever.

Keywords: Whitmaniacs, Homosexuality, Love, Transcendentalism

American Literature has come a long way from being younger brother of British Literature to becoming the Master of World Literature today. It could attain this position only because of innumerable writers of excellent creativity and philosophy shaping and nurturing it. Their immortal works as well as their philosophic thought continue to nourish the emotional and intellectual needs of the readers even till date. One such writer is Walt Whitman and his 'Leaves of Grass'. To talk of American Literature without them is like British drama sans Shakespeare. Leaves of Grass is essentially a saga of American Civilization, a poem in process, with each succeeding edition from 1855 to 1891 representing a unique period in the poet's life as well as the nation. Leaves of Grass in its final edition is the perfect mirror of American philosophy of the last century, Whitman's poetic philosophy as well as the general ideology of U.S.A. Today, more than a century after publication of the final edition of the Leaves of Grass, Whitman's place in American history often seems as nebulous and enigmatic as the ideas upon which America was founded. Numerous poets since Whitman have consciously either placed themselves in the wake of his tradition or reacted violently against him, and the aesthetic value of Whitman's poetry continues to be a controversial subject. But for the critics, every decade has seen emergence of those who are called "Whitmaniacs", the readers who are much caught up in Whitman the man, as in his writings. Consequently, they have created a series of authorial myths, often but not necessarily contradictory: Whitman the good g(r)ay poet, the nationalist, the moralist, the advocate of the family, the prophet, the crusader for liberty, the enemy of social injustice. Whitman may be said to have believed in only one religion - the religion of modern man. And Leaves of Grass was his Bible, the text of his religion, the guide for those who would embrace

this latest expansion and purification of Christianity or indeed, of all creeds that taught brotherly love. Throughout his life he has professed simplicity through his dress and manner and preached eternal brotherhood by his mixing with the laboring people and with the physically and mentally impaired, his service in the hospital during civil war being his biggest religious service to mankind. In spite of his preaching universal brotherhood through his leaves, he has been condemned by a large section of people as being homosexual and at times even of perversion. Since his *Leaves of Grass* was first published, he has been a puzzle for his readers who have tried to construct him in their own individual capacity. There have been enthusiasts like Horace L. Traubel, William Sloane Kennedy, Bucke, Thomas Donaldson, Harrison S. Morris who have seen in him a modern prophet. They have believed him to be the most enlightened of men with a gospel of supreme ethical content. Whitman's emphasis in his writings as in his life upon brotherly love as a "Kelson of creation" makes him to his disciples, Christ's equal. Whitman himself also seems to have favoured the Christ legend in his poems, but not solely for himself, rather each one of us embodying his spirit, for example in *To Him That was Crucified*, he wrote -

We few equals indifferent of lands, indifferent of times,
We, enclosures of all continents, all castes, allowers of all theologies,
Compassionates, perceivers, rapport of men,
We walk silent among disputes and assertions, but reject not the
disputers nor anything that is asserted,
We hear the bawling and din, we are reach'd at by divisions, jealousies,
recriminations on every side,
They close peremptorily upon us to surround us, my comrade,
Yet we walk unheld, free, the whole earth over, journeying up and down
till we make our ineffaceable mark upon time and the diverse eras,
Till we saturate time and eras, that the men and women of races, ages to
come, may prove brethren and lovers as we are. (Whitman, 385)

The enthusiasm that these admirers have showed can be aptly summarized by remarks of Richard Le Gallienne in 1898. To an interviewer from the New York Herald he said - "Walt Whitman has had greater influence on me than any other American poet... I consider him the most original man, except Christ, the world has known." (186). Later speaking at a meeting of the New York Fellowship, he became more ecstatic in his adulation of the author of *The New Testament of the New World* -

"Walt Whitman came nearer to telling the whole truth about life than any man who ever lived, and it is only due to the mildness of modern manners that he was not crucified". (The Conservator, IX: 1 March, 1898, p. 4)

For the journalist critics it was few decades before they could accept Walt Whitman as a great bard. The difference in attitude can be easily seen in two pieces of articles in New York Times. Norman Astley in The New York Times, May 5, 1906, wrote "Whitman was a great poetic animal,

almost bursting at times with ideas he had not the power to express. He was destitute of every form of aesthetic culture and expression and lacking in the true spiritual inspiration necessary to and found in all great poetry. He was crude, coarse, and gloried in being thought rudely blunt in manner and method. Whitman not only posed but he exaggerated the pose of being 'near to nature', which with him was simply lack of culture." Surprisingly, a decade later, in the issue of April 15, 1917 New York Times conceded that "there are few, if any, of the nations of the world whose national glories and aspirations have been so eloquently, so passionately sung as have ours, and this too, by a poet whose sterling achievement has been recognized from one end to the other of the civilized world." The reason for the dilemma of the readers and the critics to appreciate or scorn the poetry of Walt Whitman lay in the poet's unique outlook towards life and his prophesying an overwhelming love for his fellow human beings. This some interpreted as being unnatural, homosexual. Unnatural it was, but was it homosexual, has been a field of research for the readers of Whitman. Transcendentalism preached spiritual dignity of man and believed in unlimited perfectibility of man. Whitman celebrated man, in spirit, body and soul. He loved, being a man and, every other man. Thus in *Children of Adam*, he could say -

I have perceive'd that to be with those I like is enough,
To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,
To pass among them, or touch anyone, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?
I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea. There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well, All things please the soul, but these please the soul well. (Whitman, 94)

He very easily celebrated womanhood as well, in his verse with the female figure forming an integral part of his poems. This outlook fetched for him titles of being a perverted and obscene poet. But he never distinguished between his love for men and his love for woman, which added another problem for critics who labeled him as being homosexual. Generally speaking, earlier readers attempted to deny Whitman's homosexuality entirely. Later critics tended to accept a still uncomfortable truth about the poet while minimizing its importance, and the most recent generation has, in Betsy Erkkila's words, rebelled against a "critical tradition that has insisted on silencing, spiritualizing, heterosexuality or marginalizing Whitman's sexual feelings for men", (Folsom 153)). Interestingly enough, in more recent times, some of the strongest resistance to acknowledging Whitman's homosexuality came from the left. Gilbert Frey, a Brazilian communist argued that Whitman's "vibrant sense of life and community", which sometimes seemed "homosexuals gone mad probably was bisexualism sublimated in to fraternalism." Paul Jamati, a French communist, described Whitman's homosexuality as "*une contre-legende*" created by those who attack democracy by defaming

its greatest poet advocate. Maurice Mendelson, a Soviet biographer of Whitman interpreted the eroticism of his poetry as symbolic of equality and freedom, "an expression of active protest against social injustice". (Folsom, 83-150). These leftists perhaps did not have any idea of the essays of Emerson. Emerson had in one of "ms essays titled 'Love' said, (Emerson's Essays: 1st & 2nd series: p.102) - "*Every soul is a celestial Venus to every other soul,*". In the same essay, later he says-

...a lover comes to a warmer love of these nobilities, and a quicker apprehension of them. Then he passes from loving them in one, to loving them in all; and so is the one beautiful soul only the door through which he enters to the society of all true and pure souls ...And beholding in many souls the traits of divine beauty, and separating in each soul that which is divine from the taint which they have contracted in the world, the lover ascends ever to the highest beauty, to love and knowledge of the Divinity by steps on this ladder of created souls ...But we need not fear that we can lose anything by the progress of the soul. The soul may be trusted to the end that which is so beautiful and attractive as these relations, must be succeeded and supplanted only by what is more beautiful and so on forever. (Emerson, 102)

What Emerson had preached, Whitman had practiced. Thus he cried -
I am he that aches with amorous love; Does the earth gravitate? Does not matter, aching, attract all matter? So the body of me to all I meet or know... (Whitman, 109)

and for Whitman, body was parallel to soul or perhaps the body and soul together were gateway to the Unknown. The leftists had defended Whitman from social and political standpoint. Socially, spiritually, politically, philosophically, Whitman was universal lover, and that was the pedestal on which stood his transcendentalism. Basil de Selincourt author of *Walt Whitman: A critical study* (1914) had defended Whitman not through biographical material but rather on a careful and decorous reading of Whitman's work. In *Calamus*, he asserted. Whitman "advocates and to a certain extent himself practiced on affectionate demonstrativeness which is uncongenial to the Anglo-Saxon temperament and which those Englishmen who forget that there are two sides to the channel find even shocking. The resultis that he is quite generally suspected of a particularly unpleasant kind of abnormality" (Selincourt, 204). Selincourt asserted that "Earth my likeness" was the "only passage in the *Leaves of Grass* (132) that could be constructed as an allusion to sodomy" After examining the poem:

Earth my likeness,
Though you look so impassive, ample, and spheric there,
I suspect that is not all;
I now suspect that there is something fierce in you eligible to burst forth, For an athlete is enamour'd of me, and I of him,
But toward him there is something fierce and terrible in me eligible to burst forth, I dare not tell it in words, not even in these songs.
he interpreted it as a condemnation of a particular "impulse "
(Selincourt, 206-7).

Once we free Calamus "from the breath of this suspicion", we could approach it properly as:

The celebration of the ideal relationship of soul to soul ... (In order to divest this relationship of sexual associations, Whitman confines his hymns of it to the love of one man for another. It is equally of course the relation of woman to woman, or of man to woman in the rare case in which the difference of sex becomes irrelevant. (Selincourt, 207-210)

Henry Seidel Canby in *Walt Whitman: An American* (1943) asserted, "Whitman was intermediate in sex ... Such men are very common, especially among strong creative intellects, whose imaginative sympathies penetrate beyond sexual differences. They are very seldom homosexuals in the vulgar sense of the word. [Whitman's] eroticism ... was sublimated into a fatherly love of innumerable 'sons', and into magnificent poems of the comradeship of true democracy" (201-02). In fact Canby dismissed Whitman's attachment to Peter Doyle and others as "the outpourings of a thwarted paternalism". (198) The argument may continue in the next centuries to come and people may scorn or praise the physical communion that Whitman writes about but there can never be any doubt that he always advocated social bonding through his *Leaves*. For Whitman love was the door to all goodness, and he was never ashamed of his love. Thus in *Calamus*, he said -

I here it was charged against me that I sought to destroy institutions,
But really I am neither for nor against institution
(What indeed have I in common with them? Or
what with the destruction of them?)
Only will establish in Manhattan and in every other city of these states
inland and seaboard,
And in the fields and woods, and above every keel little or large that
dents the water.
Without edifices or rules or trustees or any argument,
The institution of the dear love of comrades. (Whitman, 128)

Whitman's poetry abounded in sexual imagery which might seem obscene and his celebration of female body, and poems in *Children of Adam* and *Calamus* outraged many. But he had transcended mortal feelings in his philosophy of life and saw in everything, a miraculous work, a thing of eternal beauty. In fact, he was far ahead of his times in advocacy of female rights. Mothers and matriarchs were worshipped by him. Gay Wilson Allen on in his biography - *The Solitary Singer* wrote - "As the "equal rights for women" movement gained momentum in this decade, Whitman began to envision a new race of muscular, athletic mothers; strong, fearless, and as able to endure hardships as their husbands". (81) Thus in *I sing the Body Electric*, Whitman sang -

This the nucleus - after the child is born of women, man is born of
woman,
This the bath of birth, this the merge of small and large, and the outlet
agai.,
Be not ashamed women, your privilege encloses the rest, and is the exit
of the rest,