

## II

Development of humanitarian attitude  
in Walt Whitman's Personality

As charity begins at home, Walt Whitman started manifesting his compassionate nature toward members of his own family. His sympathetic and humanitarian attitude had taken proper shape in his very childhood. His behaviour with other family members was the chief and pivot object to develop his sympathetic outlook. <sup>From</sup> In his childhood onwards he remained his mother's chief dependence. Walt Whitman sacrificed his own comfort and cheerfully devoted his whole life to his family members. He had been moved very much by his sister's unhappy marriage and her neurotic condition there-on. He showered great sympathy on her to make her recover from her stupor. The more she suffered, the more he seemed to love her. Moreover, two of his brothers had ruined their lives by dissipation. Even then he did not blame them. Instead of criticizing and rebuking, he rendered them good services with great love. Again, there was always friction between Mrs. Whitman and her daughters-in-law. For keeping smooth relations, Walt Whitman wrote letters to soothe them and urged them of tolerance. Even his simplicity and lovable nature were manifested in his simple and modest living. Though he was earning very little, he always tried to offer

some gifts to his family members in order to make them feel happy. He gave the same kind of treatment to the wounded soldiers at hospitals, when he happened to visit them.

His philanthropic and generous nature was a special characteristic of his lovable personality. Just at the age of ten, he could understand the significance of love and duty toward his brethren. He was, by nature, most adjustable to his surrounding. He had come into contact with different types of human personality. In his early days, he happened to meet an old drunkard, the school mistress, friendly and quarrelsome boys, barefooted Negroes and men and women from all walks of life. He used to watch them anxiously. So he rightly pointed out that they had comprised the part of his nature.

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Like life in Brooklyn, the life <sup>in</sup> at New York also made a lasting influence on Whitman's life. Though he lived there for a short while, this brief stay gave him a golden opportunity to indulge in love, mingle with people in crowds, and develop individual contacts. He was happy in mixing with farmers, mechanics, carpenters, masons, pilots and the like. For them, he had a real feeling of brotherhood. He wanted to merge himself with them, instead of separating from them. He wanted to create a harmony with them. Therefore, he visited foundries, shops, rolling mills, factories and shipyards to contact

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ordinary men and workers. He became very sensible and tried to keep himself in close touch with all his fellow-men. Even during his short career as a teacher, he tried to instruct kindness and sympathy to his pupils. He also tried to impart the basic lessons in humanity. He struck his pupils, as 'a man out of the average, who strangely attracted our respect and affection.'<sup>6</sup> He wished that an intimate human relationship be established among individuals in society. So he tried to release the "Sweet fountains in every human heart."<sup>7</sup>

Later in 1846, he became the editor of the 'Brooklyn Daily Eagle' - a democratic journal. It provided him a very nice opportunity to bathe in the great 'tides of humanity'.<sup>8</sup> During these years of journalism, his impulse to merge himself in the human activity found full satisfaction. He came into contact with public life, the movement of the masses, their gatherings at lectures, on ferries and buses. He forgot his own self in the company of these simple people. His natural dignity and sympathy made him love their dormant qualities. He formed a good companionship with them by trusting the general life of them. Through out his life he felt attracted

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6. Hugh I'Anson Fausset, Walt Whitman - Poet of Democracy,  
(New York), Pub. 1942, p.24.

7. Ibid, p. 29.

8. Ibid, p. 32.

*Walt Whitman*

careless mixing up of present and past

towards these humble people so he used to communicate with common people and admire their naturalness.

poet  
awkward expression

Thus the homely atmosphere and his social activities gave a vent to his democratic spirit; so he was chiefly known as 'a pocket of democracy'. This profound faith in democracy plunged its roots into the most profound part of his being. He had a great faith in the two major principles of democracy - liberty and equality. Individual liberty seemed to him one of the greatest aspects of democracy. He thought that it was primary and basic need of each and every human being. So he deady opposed the slavery. He was the champion of liberty. So he insisted the fundamental rights of equality. He further declared in his 'Preface 1855', "of all mankind, the great poet is the equable man."<sup>9</sup> He was the equalizer of his age and land. It is his belief that in real democracy, each and every citizen must be granted equal political and social rights. The similar idea is expressed in his 'Preface 1855', where he said, "The messages of great poets to each man and woman are come to us on equal terms, only then can you understand us....."<sup>10</sup> He realized that, besides liberty and equality, democracy cannot be conceived without brotherhood which binds the citizens together. It means that not only political and social,

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9. Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman, ed. John Kouwenhoven (New Delhi), Random House, INC., Pub. 1950, p. 444.

10. Ibid, p. 449.

Whitman style

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but spiritual freedom is very significant. It should go deeper in man's hearts and belief. Thus he added the idea of fraternity here. So he proclaimed, "The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen."<sup>11</sup> Thus he expects democracy, the new social and political medium, the new ideal of mankind to develop and extend that "fervid comradeship"<sup>12</sup> which kept balance in society. His belief in spiritual democracy made him strongly and vehemently to attack on slavery. He opposed any anti-democratic idea.

So far as spiritual and intellectual aspects of Walt Whitman's philosophy are concerned, the notion of transcendence is central <sup>to</sup> the philosophy of humanism. Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of the greatest exponents of the transcendental philosophy. He invented a secular pulpit and spoke as man to man. He was deeply interested in nature as well as in man. He says that every natural fact is symbol of some spiritual phenomenon. The world is a divine dream from which we awake to the glories and certainties. He believes that there is a divinity in man who is an ingredient part of nature. Thus for him, within man lies the soul of cosmos. This emphasis on

11. Ibid, p. 442.

12. J.A. Symonds, Walt Whitman : A Study (London),  
Pub. 1926, p. 82.

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divinity of man results from the stress on freedom and creative capacity of man.

Emerson's views regarding man made an everlasting impression on Walt Whitman. From Emerson, he learned that the individual was not merely an eccentric but a seer. It is the faculty of the seer to recognize divinity in all lives upon the planet. So Walt Whitman places man at the very centre of his poetry. For him, man is a potential supreme, who is the measure of all things. He proclaims in his 'Song of Myself':

I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I an encloser of things to be.

He affirms the centrality of man, his holiness and his individual identity. For him, man is solid and sound reality. He believes that every individual has a soul which expresses the spiritual qualities in him. Thus, for him man is divine inside and out. It is his belief that man is given a dynamic role in the process of evaluation. For him, man is precious and significant, individually and together with other men in society. He felt that it is proper to worship the 'Divinity' in human soul. He had full faith in the spiritual world. He believed in the Ultimate Reality, namely, God, not only because he was curious about God's existence, but because of conviction regarding His all-pervading quality:



Textual references  
to edition, page, etc.  
should be given

In the faces man and woman,  
I see God; and in my own face in the glass,  
I find letters from God dropt in the street,  
and everyone is signed by God's name.

Thus, he worships not God but the divine quality in each individual self. It was Walt Whitman's 'secular religion'<sup>13</sup> which he expected to replace the 'institutional religion of priests and creeds.'<sup>14</sup> Thus his poetic role was both cosmological and national. Cosmologically, Whitman idealized to be the 'one complete lover'<sup>15</sup> of the universe. On the other side, he wanted to have a national integrity. It is his belief that an individual can make a nation great. So he gave much more importance to man's personality, which has a great power to bring glory to nation. The free human spirit is the thing that matters much for Walt Whitman, because it has the power to give a direction to history. Thus his humanism may be termed as creative humanism, which has faith in the special creative power of man. To Whitman human nature is really the central factor of man's world. Whitman, being a rationalistic humanitarian, had been keen on

13. G.W. Allen, Walt Whitman as Man, Poet and Legend,  
(Carbondale), Southern Wayne State University Press,  
Pub. 1961, p. 34.

14. Ibid, p. 34.

15. Ibid, p. 35.

Wang style

the minute subt<sup>l</sup>ities of human nature which he had dealt with from his personal experiences and experiments that he had tried on his close relations. His whole literature is reflected with the personal touch of Whitman, which is indicative of different phases of personalism.

Walt Whitman's humanism is excessively blended with his personalism. His selection and gradation of objects in piety are mostly the outcome of his personal experiences. His personal experiences are very well commingled with universality. That he views everything through cosmological Kaleidoscope is explicit from the following lines :

Of every hue and caste am I, of every  
 rank and religion,  
 A farmer, a mechanic, artist, gentle-man,  
 sailor, quaker,  
 Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer,  
 Physician, priest.

*Textual quotations should be from one of the standard editions of Whitman.*

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His art of blending personalism with universality forms a striking characteristic feature of his poetry.

All things in the world, "Oceans, rivers, trees, woman, man or state", possess a spiritual dimension. Whitman's concept of humanism with special reference to woman's position in society is clear from his idea of "the great soul" which



is a portion of the nature and the universe. For him, the "real I myself"<sup>16</sup> is the spiritual image. All-pervasive nature of the great soul is expressed from 'The Inscriptions' which considers the 'self' in relation to humanity as well as the glorification of common man. In the poem 'Starting From Paumanok', the personal voice of the poet blends with the broad, more representative notion of personality. The poet seems to identify himself with,

Solitary, singing in the west,  
I strike up for a New World.

The poet realizes the fact that both good and evil are part of life's whole. All facets of life, namely, the people, the nation, the material world and the poet himself contain the balance of good and evil within them. This is all from the optimistic side of life. That all the things of the universe are perfect miracles is explicit from his concept of the soul, being itself apparent "only through matter."<sup>17</sup> The identification of the body with the soul always gives the misconception of illusion. Whitman's poetry gives the body a grand purity and value on the basis of their

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16. Randall Keenan, Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass Monarch  
Notes (New York), Monarch Press, Pub. 1965, p. 16. *Walt*

17. Ibid, p. 24.

✓ separateness. There is close intimacy between the body and the soul which continues throughout his poetry. Whitman has emphasized the close relationship of all beings with the matter which is very akin with the idea of spiritual fraternity and partnership. Whitman was aware that the spirit of God is "the brother" of his own. Thus there is a brotherhood with all other humans based on the eternal binding of love. He visualizes all beings sharing the common bonds of their nature. In Whitman's concept of this kind of universality gives rise to his concept of eternity, the principle of immortality. We are all bound together with this spiritual cord. We must even think of neighbours and even unknown relations in terms of this principle. We must pray for the welfare of all which will truly satisfy our souls. This is best exemplified in lines :

Whatever satisfies souls is true;  
 Prudence entirely satisfies the craving  
 and glut of souls,  
 Itself only finally satisfies the soul.

While praying for goodness of the whole mankind he also prays for the emancipation of human beings which would ultimately lead them to peaceful abode. Whitman has perfectly understood the sublime philosophy of crucifixion which he

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applies to his poetry. The great mission of humanity, according to Whitman, was to bring all varied persons together, which is possible only through mutual compassion for each other in common walks of life. He, being highly poetical minded, had tried to establish the identification with the wicked, too. The soul pervading this category is also treated with great love. This is the glorified mission of a prophet, which we come across in his 'Song of Myself'. Self-discovery is a special phase of his poetry which is explicit from his questions like 'What is man?' 'What am I?' and 'What are you?'. While considering these questions he affirms human qualities like centrality, immortality, holiness and individual identity. Still, man being endowed with divine qualities is not opposed to spiritual sublimity which ultimately leads one to think in terms of ultimate reality in the form of God. In his concept of the all-inclusive nature of the human self Whitman goes closer and closer to the thought of man and finds his true place in nature to be that of the supreme good. Man is given an independent and dynamic role in the process of evolution :

Nor do I understand who there  
can be more wonderful than myself.

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reconciled to  
the idea  
of immortality  
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on p. 12?

Though influenced by monotheism, Whitman's originality is explicit from his concept of the ideal mode of being. According to his own system of thinking, he gives vital importance to changeability of human nature. Thus there is perfect consistency in his concept of man's eternal principle underlying the changeable garb of matter.

This is all perfectly in keeping with the philosophy of humanism. His belief that the human self being concentric with the divine and possessed of the potentialities of transformation into cosmic dimensions, gives us a clue to understand his concept of 'the plan and order of the universe.' He fashions his own phenomenal world by designing and re-ordering matter. At the same time he locates his own place in the order of things. While establishing a great unity of created things, he finds oneness of matter and spirit as well as their participation in the making of divine nature. For Whitman, the matter, containing the spiritual and material objects, values the most.

While treading over the dense vision of humanity, he allows no class distinctions which are purely based on the lowest material levels e.g. an opium-eater, a prostitute. He shows great sympathy towards these unavoidable factors of society. This ultimately leads to the principles of equality

and unity of all things. We also find symbolization of integrity and an internal wholesomeness in his poetry. His uplifting of the fallen and degraded humanity is a landmark of his humanism :

And of the rights of them the  
others are down upon,  
Of the deform'd, trivial, flat, foolish,  
despised.....

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