

## **Mysticism in Walt Whitman's poetry**

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### **Abstract**

Walt Whitman was a great poet – Prophet. He held a very high opinion about the role of a poet in Society; he considered him to be a teacher and leader of mankind. Walt Whitman was different from other mystical poets. Whitman's approach to mysticism was certainly not pedantic. It was not based on a scholarly understanding of concepts. Instead, the highest merit of Whitman's mysticism ... is that like all his thought, it is essentially based on common sense, on prudence. This makes it of interest to the scholar and the layman alike. Whitman has a mystical side of his personality, he, nevertheless, cannot be put in the category of pure mystics. There is, in fact, a certain novelty in Whitman's approach to religion. At the same time he was not entirely original besides, the Emersonian influence, his beliefs were inspired by the Hindu mystical thought of India, creating, as it were, a charming interplay of tradition and individual talent.

**Key words: mysticism, Walt Whitman, poet**

## **Introduction**

Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, in West Hills, long Island. His mother, Louisa Van Velsor, and his father Walter, were semi-literate. They had nine children, of whom two were mentally unfit. The father earned a meagre living, first at farming, then at labouring, building and carpentry. The mother was closer to her son, Walt, than the father. A number of influences operated upon Whitman from childhood onwards, influences which went into the making of his genius, and which gave to it a particular shape and direction. First and foremost among such influences was the influence of his parents. Whitman as a child was greatly influenced by his father's radical democratic ideas and his mother's Quakerism, and they left an indelible impression on his life and work. These influences went to a long way towards making him a poet of democracy. A faith in the dignity of the individual and in equality and fraternity is the very life – blood of his poetry. [2] Whitman gives us a glimpse of the domestic scene of his youth which tells much of the relationship between his parents. The portraits of the mother and the father in the poem have the ring of truth. He left school at the age of eleven and worked at a variety of jobs : an office – boy, as a printer's devil, as a printer, as a rural school – teacher. Clearly, he was unqualified for school teaching not only because of the meagreness of his academic back-ground but also because of his dreamy and speculative temperament. [4] Walt Whitman's career as a poet began in 1885, with the publication of the first edition of his poetry collection, "Leaves of Grass" Some of the greatest poetry of his career including "Drum Tops" (1865) and his magnificent elegy for President Abraham Lincoln was written during this period. In 1862, his brother George was wounded in battle, and Whitman went to Washington to nurse him. He continued as a hospital volunteer throughout the war, nursing other wounded Soldiers and acting as a benevolent father – figure and confidant. After the war, Whitman stayed on in Washington, working as a government clerk and continuing to write. [3]

## **Discussion**

Walt Whitman had moments when he was introspecting in his mind, feeling the presence of the Supreme Being. He was, thus, a great mystic poet. The term "mysticism" comes from the classical Greco-Roman mystery cults, perhaps it came from 'myelin' meaning "to close the lips and eyes, and refers to the sacred oath of the initiates, the 'mystes', to keep secret about the inner workings of the religion". According to the American Heritage Dictionary mysticism is "a belief in the existence of realities beyond perceptual or intellectual apprehension that are central to being and directly accessible by subjective experience".

Mysticism has many meanings in the study of the history of religions. In general it refers to a type of faith that emphasizes the direct experience of unity with the Divine. Although mysticism has emerged as a strain in all of the major religious systems, both East and West, yet since Walt Whitman hails from the United States of America it would be instructive to look at the history and progress of mysticism in that country. In the United States mystical forms of faith can be seen as a protest against the dominant religious tradition often centred around Charismatic leaders, many of whom have been women, important strains of American mysticism have also set themselves explicitly outside Christianity.

The most famous mystic in early American history was Anne Hutchinson, whose mysticism evolved from the puritan emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the means of grace. Ralph Waldo Emerson was perhaps the most prominent proponent of nineteenth – century Romantic mysticism in the United States. Emerson evolved a unique American mysticism that stressed the unity of humans with all nature. Through human’s communication with the world, Emerson argued, they could come to transcend it and recognize themselves as part of it at the same time. And Walt Whitman and Emerson belong to the same age. Mysticism also became better known to Americans through the world parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893.

In the Native American tradition, mysticism had always played a central role, and this tendency increased under the pressure of persecution and displacement from ancestral lands. The most famous example of this phenomenon is the rise of the Ghost Dance movement among the plains Indians in the late 1880s. [8]

The Roman Catholic Church has always had more of a place for mysticism than the protestant Churches, and the mystical experience has continued to be important in the lives of many Roman Catholic religious orders. Thomas Merton, a convert to Catholicism, was one of the influential voices for Catholic mysticism in the United States in the twentieth century. His exposition of the mystical way was marked by clarity and philosophical insight, and his works reveal a deep concern for Social Justice and a keen analysis of political issues. The contemporary time was ripe for Walt Whitman to blossom as a mystic poet. But, it must be remembered that Whitman’s was non-religious mysticism.

It must be admitted that the image of Walt Whitman as a mystic and prophet has traditionally enjoyed wide currency among Scholars. This image was first promoted by Whitman’s own friend and disciples — Richard Maurice Bucke, William Douglas O’Connor,

William Sloane Kennedy and Edward Carpenter — and corroborated by recent scholars, both Western and Eastern. There is no doubt that many resemblances can be seen in the ideas of Walt Whitman and the seers of the ancient times in all religions.

If we look at the mystical element in the poetry of Whitman, we find that he was no systematic philosopher; there are many contradictions regarding mystical element that we encounter in the poetry of this great American Bard. But despite its drawbacks, Whitman's thought importantly contributes to a fuller understanding of his highly imaginative approach to life, and therefore cannot be ignored. During the period of illumination, he underwent new sensations, Walt Whitman never thought of lying, the foundation of another 'metaphysical school' of his own. He had no original ideas about mysticism though he adopted many mystical strains for his poetic purposes. He was satisfied as a poet and did not want to be known even as 'an arm-chair philosopher'.

Walt Whitman was different from other mystical poets. He could recall his mystical experience in concrete terms while mystics usually use abstract terms to express their ideas. Here we can take his famous elegy when Lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloom's" – Whitman is able to understand the intricate concept of death from analysing the lilac. He understands that although the lilac will eventually die, it will be reborn again in the spring. On a deeper level he writes, "and I knew death, its though, and the sacred knowledge of death". The thought of death is exactly what he experiences from Lincoln's demise. Whitman's knowledge of death is an acknowledgement of man's eminent mortality. [1] The final section represents Whitman's acceptance of Lincoln's death. He writes, "I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves, I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring". Although Whitman will always feel some degree of grief, he is ready to continue with his life. The elegy is a source of healing for Walt Whitman and the country. As the elegy progresses, Whitman is able to reconcile his grief. The poem is analogous to the five stages of grief, with the most important being acceptance. This elegy simulates the process of accepting death.

'Lilacs' also symbolize the repeated cycle of life. Whitman understands from the lilacs, that death is an unavoidable component of this cycle. The cycle will continue and Whitman will again lament for Lincoln when spring arrives. Lincoln's life and memory will always be reborn as nature begins to flourish. The elegy is Whitman's personal Lincoln Memorial.

The images of the lilac represent love, hope, life, despair, and rebirth. Lilac allows Whitman to honour Lincoln as a great leader and a person. In addition, the poem is significant because it provides closure for the nation in mourning.

Despite having the core of a mystic in his heart, Walt Whitman cannot be hailed as a pure mystic. He cannot feel and ‘utterly humanize’ the tie between God and man. He is specific and not mystical in his philosophy of humanism.

Walt Whitman never believed that mysticism was the be all and end all of life. In his poetry, naturally, we encounter a judicious mixture of realism and materialism. Whitman always sought to seek the spiritual through the material. He never wanted to escape the realities of the day-to-day worldly life. He believed that the finite objects of this world are as real as the human soul. Thus, in the poetry of Walt Whitman, the celebration of the body goes hand in hand with mystical experiences. In “Song of Myself”, we read:

Urge and urge and urge,  
Always the procreant urge of the world,  
Out of the dimness opposite equals advance.  
always substance and increase, always sex,  
Always a knit of identity, always distinction,  
always a bread of life.

The 52-years-old Walt Whitman published his essay “From Democratic Vistas” in 1871, the end of the Civil war which took place only six years ago. The wounds of this five-year-war of brother against brother were certainly not healed and the question of unification was still un-answered. During the 1860s and 1870s the United States were changing tremendously. Due to the Civil war, the Reconstruction Era and the following Gilded Age, America was turning into a modern, industrialized country where materialism seemed to be the finite answer. While Whitman’s poet in the 1855 preface obtained the role of an observer of the country and her common people, the Poet’s role in “From Democratic Vistas” changed into an active builder of democracy. This change of role is due to Whitman’s personal experiences during the war. The healing process of re-unification after the war was not simply a mate-

realistic or institutional reunion for him, but rather an act of forming a sense of nationhood within the American people. This was the Poet's task.

As a mystic poet Walt Whitman believed in the oneness of all beings. Here William Blake is very near to Whitman who also saw the universe in a blade of grass:

To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in a hour.

In another poem "Passage to India", Walt Whitman fused East and West as well as old and the new:

Europe to Asia, Africa join'd , and they to the new world,  
The lands, geographies, dancing before you,  
Holding a festival garland,  
As brides and bride grooms hand in hand. [7]

It is this intuitive sense of unity and oneness that makes the core of Whitman's mystical vision.

One of the most unique characteristics of Walt Whitman's poetry was the spirituality that shines through and lends some sort of soul, or bit of himself to all of his poetry. Much of that spirituality can be attributed to the fact that Whitman was a mystic.

Whitman does not reject the physical, for it is only through the physical that we can have an idea, a perception, of the spiritual, and it is only through the physical that this idea can be conveyed. This makes Whitman a poet both of 'the body and the soul', and this acceptance of the body differentiates him from the other mystics. God has created both the body and the soul, and so both are equally valuable and significant.

Critic after critic has commented on the distinctive mystical elements in the 'Leaves of Grass'. It was because of the all-pervasive mystical note that O'Conner Called Leaves, "a sort of American Bible" and John Burroughs referred to it as, "The Bible of nations". James Miller examines the matter in detail and writes, "Although it is difficult at first glance to reconcile

Whitman's mysticism with his strong materialism, his assertion of self, his restless vagabondage, and his celebrated sexuality, the mystical theme asserts itself in the Leaves by its sheer power and vitality. In the last analysis, Whitman's temperament seems eminently unsuited to the selflessness of the Christian mystic and to the passivity of the oriental. He is far too much bound up in his own consciousness and selfhood and far too fully committed to wandering the open road. It is possible that Whitman, out of the multiple obscure sources and out of his own soul, created a unique mysticism designed for America — a 'democratic' mysticism available to every man on equal terms, embracing both the body and the soul, Science and myth, life and death, the active and passive, material and spiritual. But whatever the ultimate nature of his mysticism, it must be granted a Central role in the meaning of his greatest poetry in the Leaves". [5]

### **Conclusion**

At the end it is to be concluded that, Walt Whitman redefined poetry and the role of the poet in at least two important ways: First in terms of aesthetic practice, and second, in terms of the Social position of the poet as an active participant in a democratic society. Walt Whitman's poetry is spiritual that shines through and lends some sort of soul and much of spirituality, rich with passion, reverence, and wonder, this unique collection offers insight into Whitman's quest for self-discovery, which involved an ongoing mystical experience of the world. Though seemingly personal, his verse speaks to universal harmony and universal love, optimism and joy, and celebrates the outwardly mundane details of life through words electrified with love and spirit.



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