

# **The Leaves of Grass**

## **A Study of Walt Whitman**

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### **Introduction**

Whitman grasps the meaning of the God of the Christian world. At first, from the point of view of Whitman's historical background, he was affected by Nietzsche (1844—1900), who broke away from the religious dogma of the medieval age, when he said “God died”. In these times, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, new and private religions were appearing and, as modern science developed, Christianity lost the support of the people, because the absolute Christian doctrine was challenged by the developing science which was based on logic and refuted fantasy. Whitman wrote his poem *The Leaves of Grass* (published 1855) when the science culture was developing, after the period where the human mind was restricted by Christian dogma. Scientific religious thought, in other words, Newton's exposition that at first, God's hands moved, resulted in an absorption in science with the development of individual personality. English thinking shocked the world. Charles Darwin's theory, published in his book “*On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*” washed over America like a wave and American thought was greatly influenced by this new philosophy which contradicted the Christian doctrine that God created human nature and separated human existence from God. Since this philosophy could be explained by the scientific movement, the science culture became a subject of discussion in Literature throughout the world.

The title “*Leaves of Grass*” is used by Whitman to symbolize the immortality of the soul, the mechanical universe, and that all things are in a state of flux. Whitman says in the last chapter ;

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. (P. 95)

Here, he indicates a new start from the time of death which supports his view of life. He loves the grass so much as part of nature, assimilates himself to nature, and considers the immortality of the soul in nature because of his belief and his own inspiration and individuality.

It is similar to the belief in life of D.H Lawrence (1885—1930) and the life force of G. B. Shaw (1856—1950). D.H. Lawrence in his work "Sun" said that the lady who grew up in a cultural society felt the stream of life and self-consciousness when she went to the Mediterranean Sea and lay in the sun, reflecting on nature. His idea that all of human life is influenced by the sun and nature is very similar to Whitman's concept, and Lawrence's ability, on the base of his personality, covers the whole range of the universe. Whitman's idea of nature can be accepted concerning the world of death since nature is inextricably linked with mortal beings and in harmony with the mind. That greatest harmony is thought to be the immortality of the soul in nature. In other words, its harmonization is based on the medieval idea that "The will of God creates nature".

When Goethe (1749—1832) said "All things contribute to nothing" he was referring to his death and to the return of human beings to nature.

He thought that this is a dark mysterious world, and that human beings contribute to the world of death by their domination of nature. The human being is a lonely creature in a chaotic universe. Firm in this belief, Whitman in his philosophical approach to Nihilism described himself as the immortality of the soul in the great universe. He said in his first chapter;

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as God belongs to you. (P. 1)

This is the liberation of the mind from the philosophy of a controlling God, which was current in the plantation period of J. Edwards (1703—1758). To expound this theme, Whitman wrote his poem, in which he propounded his ideas.

Whitman may have read Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, in the first chapter of which is written; "On the way of my life, dropping out the right way, when I wake up there is in the woods, which is severe, merciless, desolate and austere." The woods of Dante's image are thought to be mysterious and evil. This image is also found in nineteenth century

American Literature. For example in N. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, it is said that the image of the woods symbolizes the morality of sin. In this story, Hester Prynne and Dimmesdale lost their way in the woods. Arnold in his review of Hawthorne's book says that Dimmesdale symbolizes strict and Puritanical conscience, and that Hester Prynne symbolizes romantic personality. The woods in which they were lost are symbolic of sin.

In the religious view of Dante and Hawthorne, the woods are in their works, in line with the ideas of the medieval Christian world which were continued from Adam's sin, as opposed to that of Whitman's in which the center of human dignity appears in his literature. Whitman said ;

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,

It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,

I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,

I am mad for it to be in contact with me. (P. 2)

Whitman's nature is good, not evil. The stream of this idea is accepted by J. Rousseau (1712—1778) "As a human being is good in nature" which is an absolutely optimistic and ever frontier spirit. The difference between these writers is obviously the Christian world background. M. Heidegger (1889—1976) said a propos this point that this background is God and Christian authorities lose and then instead of that the good and rationality authorities. As a reaction to this rationality, the social instinct came to the front. Escaping into the sensibility exchange of historical progress. The goal of permanent happiness changes the majority of peoples' earthly happiness. People turn to human nature, away from belief in God and then celebrate themselves and their personality. In accordance with the sensibility of the middle-ages as analyzed by science, the immortality of the soul in nature changes to good from evil, and the good of nature is considered to relate directly to the center of human nature. Whitman pursues each personal development by showing how people relate. For example ;

Looking forth on pavement and land, or outside of pavement and land,

Belonging to the winders of the circuit of circuits. (P. 78)

From this point of view, he looks over the natural phenomenon of circuits, and God is defined by the relationship of human nature to the circuits. It is similar to the Emerson's over

-soul as R.E. Spiller pointed out, "In the result of connected the over-soul comes out of the concept of Emerson's personality". As soon as it gains the abstract concept of the personality, Whitman's thought separates the value of the abstract personality from the assembling conditions and goes outside the circuit while making the same circuit. "He saw the universe in the center of his personality". The stream of this idea rooted in German idealism and French symbolism proved the inspiration for it. Gate said; "Inspiration is the connection between the phenomenon and the miracle. It is the line of the miracle phenomenon pushed into there, and finding the key on the ground". Gate considered the phenomenon. In Whitman's case, inspiration was a mysterious experience and in this; he was influenced by Emerson.

The literature of Symbolism was not all of the history of literature. In the nineteenth century, French Symbolic poetry appeared, it hit a high by the reaction of Naturalistic Literature. The poets of this poetry are Stephane Mallarme (1842—1898), Paul Verlaine (1844—1896) and Jean-Arthur Rimbaud (1854—1891), and these three poets separated from Romanticism, and published symbolic poetry in the eighteen-seventies. The spirit of symbolism in the nineteenth century influenced Edgar Allan Poe (1809—1849), H. Ibsen (1829—1906), G. Meredith (1828—1909) and Whitman (1829—1892).

Whitman thought that inspiration was equal to the dualism of the soul and the personality, and wrote:

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,  
Stand amused, complacent, compassionating, idea, unitary,  
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest.  
Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next.  
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.  
Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog with linguists  
and contenders.

I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait. (P. 6)

Whitman considered the relation of phenomenon and the personality. His mind was not closed to the realities in which his personality asserted the method of the audience and passive state condition and tried to contact the refusing phenomenon. Accordingly, he was a reasonable person. He accepted as suitable for a phenomena, himself which he considered to be permanent nature and also thought not to have relations with phenomenon, but didn't apply himself the phenomena. He was considering the life of the personality. Paradoxically

they must complete the abstract realities with their ability of common sense, in effect. If their ability of the composed recognition can grasp the meaning of the enormity of life, this will be possible. The totality of recognition differed from the expression of recognition, and appeared with a few. As can be seen in the following paragraph of Whitman's ;

A child said what is the grass? Fetching it to me with full hands ;  
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.  
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.  
Or I guess it is the hankerchief of the Lord,  
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,  
Bearing the owner's name somewhere in the corners, that many see and remark, and  
say whose?  
Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the product of the vegetation. (P. 8)

Whitman answered the question in a similar way to Socrates (469 ?—399 B.C.) “Ignorance is knowlege”, all people start to think from their recognition of ignorance, and their disposition” as the relations of themselves is asserted and symbolizes the God. It is standing on the pantheism, and similar to Emerson’ dignity of personality. “The grass is itself a child”, implies the circuits of nature and science. Finally, Whitman inquires into the future prospects of Democracy.

#### Reference Books

1. Whitman's Poems (Shinozaki Shorin)
2. The Cycle of American Literature by Robert E. Spiller  
(The Macmillan Company, 1955)
3. American Literature and Christian Doctrine by Randall Stewart  
(Louisiana State University Press, 1963)