

# Whitman the Mystical Poet, Whitman the Man

**Hamid Pishgar<sup>a</sup>, Abolfazl Ramazani<sup>b\*</sup>, Ali Arian<sup>c</sup>**, <sup>a</sup>PhD Candidate in English Language and Literature, Kish International Campus, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran, <sup>b,c</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Tabriz, Iran, Email: <sup>b\*</sup>[ramazani57@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:ramazani57@yahoo.co.uk)

Although Walt Whitman (1990) is widely believed to intend to create a new American Bible, he, by proclaiming himself as the symbolic representative of common people, a poet-prophet, and matrix of a divine presence, was knowingly or unknowingly the American Bible himself. He endeavoured to be the leader of mankind towards a perfect form of life, truth, and eternity. As opposed to the traditional mystics who usually expressed themselves through abstract terms and who generally quested for the purgation of the self via the denial and mortification of the body and rejection of the physical world, Whitman exalted body pleasure and used concrete terms to illustrate his mystical ideas. In his *Song of Myself*, Whitman stated that everything and every individual is perfect per se and as “the unseen is proved by the seen,” Whitman (1990, p.45) felt no need to hide anything. He considered love as “a kelson of the creation,” (p.87) binding all together and creating unity in diversity. He placed “the body, the soul, God and the Self on an equal pedestal” (Sharma, 2016, p.69). While he was not a materialist thinker, he frequently sought the spiritual through the material and that helped him create a democratic mysticism available to everybody everywhere. In fact, his mysticism did not negate the material world. On the contrary, he invited everybody including the mystic to be an active member in a democratic society. He tried to awaken one's self and soul through a fusion of sensory and affective experience to see the divinity latent and inherent in the ordinary and in the commonplace. His mysticism did not make a secluded man out of one but an awakened self out of him. In this study, Whitman's life and thought is shown to be a new version of the American Bible encouraging mankind to appreciate an internal divinity and transcended self within their existence.

**Key words:** *Whitman, Poet-Prophet, the Bible, God, Mysticism, Self, Love, Democracy.*

## Introduction

Theologically viewed, no time might ever exist without the presence of any prophets. Prometheus-like, the prophets are assumed to have brought God's word and message for mankind so as to help them on their physical and, at the same time, spiritual journey back to God. These mediators can take different names like: messengers, angels, prophets, gurus, mystics, poets, and the like. In this view, every time has its prophet and, accordingly, its own bible. Writing bibles seems to be a common theme that has also been echoed by Emerson in his "Representative Men:" "We too must write Bibles, to unite again the heavens and the earthly world" (Harris, 1999, p.172). Similarly, dispelling the traditional idea that man was a puppet in the hands of fate, Whitman sought to bring the heavens and the earth close to each other by giving man a major role in his life. Over and over, he reiterates man's importance believing that "nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is" (Whitman, 1990, p.76). He leaves his *Leaves of Grass* to people and to his followers reflecting his whole physical and spiritual life. He offers it as the new American Bible for his people and countrymen and expects his readers and the coming poets to prove, justify, and focus on "the main things."

## Mysticism

Critics after critics have considered Whitman as a leading mystical poet who presented his work in the form of the Bible. He sees himself as a prophet of God who has had the chance to take the spirit of God and receive His words. He has the duty to deliver it fully to his people. As Das (2015, p.153) admits, "Walt Whitman's expression through "Song of Myself" is to set one's soul free, by a mystical journey of exploring, indulging, and experiencing the body to transcend to a higher plane of consciousness". In part five of "Song of Myself," Whitman posits:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth;

And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own; / And that a kelson of the creation is love (Whitman, 1990, p.87).

These lines depict a mystical experience in which he receives the ineffable peace and knowledge. What he gets is past beyond the argument of the earth, because it is spiritual and divine and he knows it. This experience brings him to some unity with the divine as he identifies himself with everybody born in the past, present, and also in the future. In his spiritual experience, he can freely soar everywhere without any trouble because he has transcended the bounds of time and place and is now unbounded. All he has received, including peace and knowledge in his spiritual union, rests on his love, which is truly a

kelson of the creation. Love and God can be taken as synonymous. His bible is a remembrance and a reminder of man's duty to himself, to the universe and to his Lord. An anonymous article, entitled "Show Whitman as a Mystic Poet with Reference to His 'Song of Myself,'" shows Whitman knows and tries to convey to the audience of his bible that "it is possible to achieve communion with God through contemplation and love; and this relationship would be established without the medium of human reason. It is a way of attaining knowledge of spiritual truths through intuition" (Whitman, 2016, p.3).

## **Discussion**

### ***Skepticism Regarding Technology***

Whitman contends that the root of the devastating civil war and slavery in man and in America is savagery and ignorance of or negligence to God's words in some way or another. The only cure he has for this turmoil in America is to remind his people of the grandeur of both man and God. Whitman does not attempt to encourage Americans just for scientific and technological progress. Although he admires them, he suggests that, "They are not for my dwelling." Whitman (1990, p. 47) is in no way against technology; nevertheless, he gives priority to the evolution and perfection of man. In "Song of the Broad-Axe," he beautifully states: "A great city is that which has the greatest men and women, / If it be a few ragged huts it is still the greatest city in the whole world".

### ***Poetry of Democracy***

In the opinion of Czon, (1971, p.96) "Whitman seems to assert that it is the strong democratic poet who should be the spiritual leader of this great city". As a democratic poet-prophet, Whitman thus decides to awaken his people and guide them towards a better understanding of what life is and how one should spend it properly. In her "Sufic Interpretations of Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself,'" she considers Whitman's life and philosophy "as a means to awaken man." She adds that "Those who awaken are able to return, to start 'the journey' while also living this present life in all its fullness. To awaken his people, Whitman needs to give them true knowledge. He feels that man needs to bring a change to his thought and base his relation with everything on love in which all are needed and equally important. Therefore, he offers and also helps them create American democracy. For Whitman, a true man "should never shun society and must live in it, serve it and also guide it if possible" (Sharma, 2016, p.62). They should in no way negate the physical world for the one to come after death. They should also not reject the next world for the corporeal world. Downgrading either of which is damage to the whole. He says, "lack one, lack both" (Whitman, 1990, p. 31). He is, therefore, viewed by many as a poet-prophet and a mystic, though not a conviction- or convention-

bound one but rather an intuitive one epitomising love and symbolising harmony and equality.

### ***The Necessity for Practical Divinity***

Walt Whitman who has well discovered God's grandeur and also the grandeur of his true self feels emboldened to proudly admit in his "Song of Myself" that "I am deathless" (Whitman, 1990, p.44) and that "what is known I strip away, I launch men and women forward with me into the unknown". He produced up to sixteen versions of his work, *Leaves of Grass*, and made no change in his main ideas. He just crossed out the redundant parts and turned "abstractions into concrete figures" (Thorp, 2016, p. 96). In light of this, Willard Thorp adds: "Ideas he seldom changed, for he knew what he wanted to say when he wanted to write". Whitman was brought up in a religious family. He was deeply affected by his mother's training and also by the ideas of his childhood priest which together prepared the ground for his evolving into transcendentalism and mysticism. While believing in scriptures and the church, he did his best to go beyond them. He believed in the Bible's words and its encouragement and emphasis that man is endowed with ears to hear and with eyes to see. He was sure of the Biblical fact that "that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them (Romans 1:19). Whitman's idea is compatible with what can be seen in postmodernism. In his article, Schreiber (2012, p.13) asserts that "Postmodernism tends to cower from preaching and teaching an experience, preferring to create spaces for groups and individuals to have their own".

### ***Sample 1: "Salut Au Monde"***

Whitman's philosophy was Hegelian in that he believed in dialectics or in the interactions between things that lead to their completion. He involves readers as partners in his work who can easily enter an interaction with him. As Miller (2010, p.46) holds, "Whitman's attitude toward the poem's authority foresees reader-response criticism by regarding literature requiring a reader for its completion". For instance, this poem starts with the reader asking him "O take my hand Walt Whitman" (Whitman, 1990, p.112). Besides, in the first lines of the second and third stanzas it is the reader who asks him, "What do you hear Walt Whitman? What do you see Walt Whitman?" (Whitman, 1990, p.113).

### ***Sample 2: "Starting From Paumanok"***

According to Bonaventure, the great duty of man is not just to know but to love. Because, "the goal of the journey is not to be simply a knower [but] above all, to become a lover" (Hayes, 1999, p.39). As a poet prophet and as a democratic poet, Whitman depicts a basic tenet of his thoughts by declaring "the whole earth and all the stars in the sky are for

religion's sake" (Whitman, 1990, p.22). His duty is to represent the whole and not just the parts. He endeavours to create democracy not only between different members of the society but in the person himself so that he can come to unity with himself, with the universe, and with the Lord. In sum, he prefers love to knowledge and aims to reveal "the greatness of Love and Democracy, and the greatness of Religion" (Whitman, 1990, p.23).

### ***Sample 3: "The Sleepers"***

His poem "The Sleepers" portrays his capacity and his intuitive power to enter the life of others and see or dream with all the dreamers. As Maharaj (2017, p.6) quotes Kant in his article "Kant on the Epistemology of Indirect Mystical Experience," "only a being equipped with 'divine intuition' or 'intellectual intuition' would be able to cognize supersensible realities" (Maharaj, 2017, p.6), and Whitman is endowed with this intuitive power. In "The Sleepers," he confesses that "I dream in my dream all the dream of the other dreamers" (Whitman, 1990, p. 326). This shows the elevation of both his thought and soul that shatter the boundaries of time and place. Dealing with the world of dream, which can be compared to Kant's and Swedenborg's "spirit-world," also shows his mystical union in which the subject-object dichotomy vanishes.

### ***Sample 4: "Song of the Open Road"***

In "Song of the Open Road," he remarks: "I am larger, better than I thought, I did not know I held so much goodness" (Whitman, 1990, p.123). Therefore, having found the truth in the world within and without him and having come to wisdom which "is of the soul," in the same poem he dares to "re-examine philosophies and religions". He calls his *Leaves of Grass* "the new American Bible" so as to remind his people of the words of the Lord. He concludes that the whole universe is like a road that needs to be taken and transcended for the ultimate truth. Whitman presents "the universe as a road, as many roads, as roads for travelling souls. / I know that they go toward the best- toward something great" (Whitman, 1990, p.127). He is the poet prophet who asks his readers to follow him saying "will you come travel with me?" (Whitman, 1990, p.127) According to Carlisle (1968, p.271), "Whitman's work dramatizes an awareness, vision, and journey which transcend time and space."

### ***Sample 5: "Song of Myself"***

He boldly says in his "Song" that "Logic and sermons never convince me" (Whitman,1990, p.53) and "they are not my dwelling" (47). Of course, he does not reject any science but it is the study of the self that makes his main interest. He quotes nobody and his words arise from his inner self. He knows that if one understands the mysteries hidden in the self, he can achieve mastery over the universe and submit himself fully to God. In view of this, Normand

M. Laurendeau (2012, p.241) suggests that, “While science is about mastery of nature, religion is about submission to God”. Accordingly, he sees everything as a sign of the Lord and says: “A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books” (Whitman, 1990, p.49).

***Sample 6: “A Persian Lesson”***

An article entitled “Walt Whitman and Sufism,” shows Whitman’s affinity with Sufism who “assimilated its essence much before the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*”. The main point is that, similar to Sufism, Transcendentalism “believes in essential unity of all creation”. Whitman, who took love as the “kelson of creation”, believed in the essential unity of all creation created out of love by the One God. In his poem “A Persian Lesson,” initially entitled “A Sufi Lesson,” the ‘greybeard Sufi’ who is metaphorically Whitman himself tells his young priests, students, and all his coming audience, “Finally my children, to envelop each world, each part of the rest, / Allah is all, all, all-is immanent in every life and object, May-be at many and many a- more removes- yet Allah, Allah, Allah is there” (Whitman,1990, p. 419).

***Sample 7: “A Song for Occupations”***

Whitman, in his “A Song for Occupations” states, “I do not say that Bibles and religions are not divine. I say that they have grown out of you still. It is not they who give the life. It is you who give the life” (Whitman, 1990, p.172). According to Whitman, this portrays the importance of man and his superiority over everything, even over the Bible. In addition, as Whitman points, it is man who is the life-giver but not they. Our argument is that Whitman the poet, symbolic of human super-sensuality, has attained a state of prophetic intuition through contemplation and love, which is ultimately communion and oneness with the source of innovation and creativity. This is a journey set off from without into the realm of unknown from within.

***Sample 8: “Grand Is the Seen”***

Although Whitman commends the physical world with all its beauties such as light, the sky, and stars, he underscores that, “grand is the seen / but grander far the unseen soul of me” (Whitman, 1990, p.421). Worldly beauties for Whitman are transient and in no way comparable to the everlasting and comprehending soul. Of course, he does not negate the physical beauties and pleasures. They pave the way for him to the realm of the real and everlasting soul or spiritual life for which he has been created. He agrees with the Bible that “For the invisible things of Him, being understood by means of the things that are made, are

perceived” (Romans 1:18-21). He rhetorically asks, “What were those, indeed, without thee, unseen soul? Of what amount without thee?”

***Sample 9: “Passage to India”***

The final section beautifully compares one’s soul to the pilot of a ship in need of an urgent sea journey. The soul commands the crew to “cut the hawsers- haul out- shake out every sail” (Whitman, 1990, p.323) and immediately be on the way. As the ship is tied by hawsers and ropes to land, man’s soul is bound and fettered in a variety of ways to the corporeal world. Although “They have stood here like trees in the ground long enough,” they are not to stay. He also adds that reading books is not enough for their journey. Even reading navigation books, if it is not followed by action, can make us hazed and crazy. Reading is about others’ experiences but anyone should experience it for himself. He sets sail to go farther and “they farther, farther, farther sail [and they] are all the seas of God”.

***Sample 10: “Darest Thou Now O Soul”***

The speaker calls his soul to bravely walk out with him “toward the unknown region, where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow” (Whitman, 1990, p.338). He wishes to be where there is no “touch of human hand”. He wants to be wholly away from this land and enter “the inaccessible land”. He clearly knows that such a journey is impossible unless he loosens all the ties of time and space. He does his best to untie all physical ties so as to be bound to eternity where there is no “darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any bounds”. The words used refer to land and the earth filled with darkness, ties, and sensory experiences. But he aims at reaching light, freedom, and knowledge of the unknown.

***Sample 11: “To One Shortly to Die”***

Whitman as a mystical poet is going to deliver an important message to the readers that “you are to die / and there is no escape for you” (Whitman, 1990, p.344). Even the title of the poem portrays the fact that one’s death will happen shortly. For Whitman, the three cycles of one’s birth, life, and death (which is a kind of rebirth) are interdependent and interrelated. He knows that remembrance of death makes him willingly unbind himself from the ties of any transient worldly thing and thought and begin his spiritual journey. He needs to know that death takes away from man whatever he has in life, may it be friends, properties, etc. Death “excludes others from you.” Whitman’s speaker attempts to know and experience this spiritual rebirth here before he physically dies.

***Sample 12: “As I Watch the Ploughman Ploughing”***

Whitman holds that mysticism is not a series of prayers and ceremonies. Mysticism does not invite people for the negation of physical pleasures or asceticism. He is the poet of both body and soul and values both equally. He reiterates the prophet Mohammad’s famous saying by likening life to the tillage and death to the harvest. It also shows the need to find truth and the ultimate reality here. If it is not found here, only God knows what that person’s portion there will be. This is true mysticism and for Whitman, “Life, life is the tillage, and death is the harvest according.” (Whitman, 1990, p.346).

***Sample 13: “Eidolons”***

The title “Eidolons” comes from a Greek word meaning idols worshipped by man instead of the one God. The speaker meets a seer who asks him to “pass the hues and objects of the world, / The fields of art and learning, pleasure, sense, / to glean eidolons” (Whitman, 1990, p.12). The speaker suggests that man should finally renounce all the forms, idols, and transient beauties of the world and hold fast to “a round full-orb’d eidolon” (14) that is God. All the stanzas of this nineteen-stanza poem end in the word eidolon. He adds that “All space, all time, [is] filled with eidolons only” / [he is] Unfixed yet fixed, / Ever shall be, ever have been and are” (13). He believes that all the disagreements of modern man can be solved by a return to God and eidolons.

***Sample 14: “Adieu to A Soldier”***

The speaker says farewell to a soldier who has bravely fought for the country in different battles and fulfilled his mission. But the speaker’s battle is endless and much more dangerous than the soldier’s whose enemy is from another country far away from him. However, the speaker is endlessly in battle with his own soul and believes it is “more warlike, / Myself and this contentious soul of mine” (Whitman, 1990, p.253). His war is “fiercer and weightier” than the soldier’s. For the speaker, one’s spiritual journey is comparable to a battle that happens within him throughout his life. He calls the soldier and any reader not to forget their inner spiritual journey.

***Pantheism***

Whitman believes in pantheism, especially vitalistic pantheism. Kvastad defines it this way: “the world, identified with God, is in some literal sense alive . . . and a living principle, identified with God, is penetrating the world and thereby giving it life” (Kvastad, 1975, p.21). Under this theory of a vital principle, the world has its own consciousness and Nature, as part of the world and universe, is endowed with life and consciousness. Whitman had a right



choice in choosing the grass as the title and as the symbol for all humanity and all universe. Every atom belonging to him “as good belongs to you,” (Whitman, 1990, p.22) and accordingly every atom belonging to the grass as well belongs to man in general.

Whitman pretends that he does not know more than the child. This is Whitman’s technique to get the attention of his audience. He pretends to be one of them looking for a true answer and actually leading them to truth. As such, Whitman is the mystic, or the prophet showing the way to his people. He starts with a seemingly simple question about a grass and then goes to deep questions on man, his life, and his end. He begins his work with the seen and the known but aims at the unseen and the unknown. He is well aware that “grand is the seen ... but grander far the unseen soul of me, comprehending, endowing all”

### ***Body and Soul***

Like Emerson’s Over-Soul, Whitman believes man has a continuous and yet inseparable link to the universal soul and so he can get some knowledge of the divine and directly contact the truth and the ultimate reality. The term Whitman uses for knowledge of the divine is “body electric” (Whitman, 1990, p. 81). For him, the body is as important as the soul given to man by the same God. His mysticism is one of acceptance, not one of abnegation and denial. Unlike the Christian mystics of the past who only emphasised the soul over the body, Whitman praises both, and as suggested by Ahmad (2017, p. 4), “He does not reject the physical, for it is only through the physical that one can have an insight of the spiritual”.

Sharif (2014, p.2) in his paper entitled “Whitman and Mysticism,” points that “He seeks the spiritual through the material”. In addition, Trecker (2011, p.85) is of the belief that “In showing how the natural and material universe is related to the individual, Whitman presupposes that cognition (understanding) is derived from both sensory and affective experience”. Walkington (1994, p.126) believes in the inversion of a typical mystical experience in Whitman. He quotes Miller (2010) as saying:

In 'Song of Myself' . . . the traditional values of the mystic are inverted. Purification is achieved, not through 'discipline and mortification,' but by an ennobling and an accepting of what has been mistakenly reviled and degraded.

### ***Unity in Diversity***

In the second phase of his life, as Shamsi (2016, p. 8) states, “He [Whitman] thinks of the larger, deeper, and ideal aspect of human self. Whitman ‘celebrates himself; he has a firm belief that God is one assuming different forms. Whitman Knows, “The aim and content of Christian mysticism is not self or nature but God” (Shamsi, 2016, p. 2). He is thought to offer

a “democratic mysticism which is available to every man with equal terms embracing contradictory elements” (Meshram, 2017, p. 52). He identifies himself with any object, bird, or animal. For him, God, Nature, and humans are interrelated and so reflecting each other. For Whitman, “an ideal poet is the poet of man first, then of Nature, and finally of God” (Shamsi, 2016, p. 1). He pertinently, holds that:

Mysticism gives him love for God whom he sees in all beings. Mysticism gives him the sympathy by which he is attracted to every person he meets, and mysticism helps him to understand and to admire all things and to appreciate all beings, and in that way to come nearer to all that exists.

Using catalogues, he addresses people from all walks of life and identifies himself with anybody. Man and woman, high and low, or great and small are equal for him. Syed (2014, p.129) expresses that “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”.

In order to acquire some knowledge of the divine, man needs to break himself of lifelong habits and be on the way to truth and unity. For Janic Law Trecker’s (2011, p.2), *Leaves of Grass* [is] a radically new epic: non-narrative, musical and democratic (Trecker, 2011, p.2).

### ***The Vision of the Truth***

Whitman is not content with the forms lacking any useful content and truth. This makes him break away with the conventional forms, conventional spirituality, and unavowed belief. This leads him to true knowledge and to ultimate reality. Having reached there, he offers his journey and his true life story in the form of *Leaves of Grass*. Repeatedly and emphatically, he asks his audience to cover this untravelled road with their own feet. He knows that “a blind man can understand nothing of colours save what he has learned by narration and hearsay...How great is the difference between knowing the definitions of health and being really healthy” (Lectures, 2018, p.10). Thomas Merton (2014) stresses the need for having a direct contact with truth this way: The truth is manifest to all who are able to receive it. No one can come near the river unless he walks on his own feet. (Merton, 2014, p.3)

Life for Whitman is a journey everyone is to embark on with his own personal ego or ‘I.’ This journey is comprised of a unique series of interrelated steps to be taken one way or another in the hope of finding unity with the ultimate truth. Like Whitman’s grass that starts its growth from a tiny seed, man should always be on the way in his journey to cover the stages necessary for his coming into perfection or fruition. Man is putatively the crown of

creation and he needs to prove it to himself and to the universe. Czon (1971, p.89) suggests the existence of a cycle in Whitman's mystic world:

“The present is but a growth out of the past and the future is an inevitable after growth of the present. In other words, the law of successions [in Whitman] works as a catalyst for the evolutionary process which promises the progress of mankind.”

### *The Spirit of Christianity*

Whitman is an outgrowth of Christianity and his bible has roots in The Bible. It is held that man's mindset affects his observation and also his understanding of things. As a mystic, he is possessed with a religious mindset making him offer his American bible in the form suitable to the needs and desire of the time. He puts the main emphasis on discovering one's true self. Whitman introduces his true 'I' as the “Real Me” and hence invites his readers to be after their real selves because “the world of reality exists for all; and all may participate in it, unite with it, according to their measure and to the strength and purity of their desire” (Practical, 2012, p.3). For Whitman, as is for Lancaster, “‘I’ is simply viewed as an obstacle to be overcome on the path towards the mystic's goal” (Lancaster, 1993, p.508).

Whitman is after finding the permanent thought which is accessible for man if mind and heart are in compatibility with each other. He is well aware that beyond and through the continuous physical and emotional change in man, “the self remains the same ... That Inner Self is Plato's charioteer, reining in the horses so that the charioteer is in charge rather than the horses” (Abdil, 2001, p.2).

What matters for Whitman is to know and to be. Knowing alone does not suffice in one's spiritual journey. In this view, Wayman B. McLaughin holds that “The word seeker implies the searching for the inner light, finding the right path, and entering into a new truth. This spiritual connects the birth of Jesus with His coming into the life of the individual” (McLaughin, 1960, p.76). He gives warning to his readers about how to approach him and his bible so as to comprehend it fully, because “without a proper approach and a proper understanding of him, “all will be useless” (Whitman, 1990, p.97).

As an example, in his poem “So Long” Whitman addresses his audience saying: “Camerado, this is no book, who touches this touches a man” (382). Like Jesus, he addresses them with the word comrade. He endeavours to involve them by addressing, because, as Theresa Tobin (2010) admits, he knows that “subjective involvement and participation is essential for gaining knowledge of a mystery” (Tobin, 2010, p.5). He cautions them not to deal with his work as an ordinary book since “this is no book” but a new bible. Instead, they should ever consider it active, alive, and a life-giver to man.

### ***Sympathy with Mankind***

Whitman creates an “I-Thou” relationship rather than an “I-It” relationship. He addresses another with “You” not “It” or “He”. He takes others as men who are always present not as objects or absent ones. Tobin’s (2010, p.6) quotation of Gabriel Marcel suits here:

“In order to participate in mystery, the knower must be open to the possibility that some others may present themselves to her as presences rather than as objects, and she must in turn be capable of being present to others” (Tobin, 2010, p.6).

Whitman feels a divine presence in him and says, “There is that in me – I do not know what it is – But I know it is in me” (Whitman, 1990, p.77). The inability to describe this presence shows its ineffability. Yet, this divine presence needs to be felt and worshipped. Readers are expected to touch his work as a divine presence addressing and having a bilateral and biblical relationship with them. Like in the poem “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” in which the bird is always looking with love for his lost mate, Whitman admits that: “I am almost sure I see her dimly whichever way I look.”. Pertinently, Sharma (2016) believes that “Each aspect of creation along with every fleeting moment is a complete revelation of God for Whitman” (Sharma, 2016, p.72).

### ***The Divine Presence***

Readers of Whitman are guided not to be after the shell and cover of the book but to be after the kernel and its divine presence lying there, waiting to be discovered. Whitman agrees with Marcel’s idea that: “In order to acquire knowledge of mysteries I must assume an epistemic posture of presence . . . Moreover, I must allow that I might be changed, or acquire self-knowledge, in virtue of an encounter with mystery” (Tobin, 2010, p. 8). Whitman’s work, like the Holy Scriptures, needs a lot of presence together with meditation and contemplation so that one can come to a ray and a glimpse of its meaning.

Moreover, similar to the Bible, and similar to what the Holy Quran says, his work has also two sides: “He misleadeth many thereby, and He guideth many thereby” (*The Cow* 26). The last lines of his poem “Whoever You Are Holding Me In Hand” reveals this meaning. For the sake of clarification, it is pertinent to quote it directly:

“Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it,  
Nor do those know me best who admire me and vauntingly praise me,  
Nor will my poems do good only, they will do just as much evil, perhaps more,  
For all is useless without that which you may guess at many times  
And not hit, that which I hinted at;

Therefore, release me and depart on your way” (Whitman, 1990, p.98).

Definitely, Whitman’s new bible brings with it a new religion one can easily name as the religion of presence. This presence refers both to the mental and spiritual presence of the subject as the addresser and that of the object as the addressee. When both the subject and the object interact while they are both present, understanding is realised and the meaning is effectively conveyed. When Whitman talks of the relationship between man, Nature, and God, he gives a central position to man and "his doctrine of divinity is primarily a doctrine of man" (Ford, 1950, p. 204) who plays an intermediary role between Nature and God and creates this link between Nature on one side and God on the other. If man discovers his spiritual and divine self, he can then feel and understand their divinity and their presence too. This understanding is a sign of man's perfection and a sign of his spirituality. To show the significance of this divine presence, he asks questions like: Which is valuable, the book as an object or the printer himself? The photograph of one's family or the family itself? The ship or the captain? The house or the Lord? Up there far away or down here near you? The saints in history or you yourself? Sermons or love and presence? In all the answers, the emphasis is on man. It is man who is the crown of the creation as it is love that is a “kelson of the creation” (Whitman, 1990, p.87). Now, comparing the house to the world and the lord to God, which is important? The world or the divine presence (God), the Bible or the divine presence, also the church or the divine presence? Of course, he does not want to downgrade the importance of the Bible and the church. For Whitman, “they have grown out of you still. It is not they who give the life. It is you who give the life” (Whitman, 1990, p.172).

He welcomes sciences of the time and portrays their importance, he claims: “They are not for my dwelling, I enter by them to an area of my own dwelling” (Whitman, 1990, p. 47). Similarly, Meister Eckhart, quoted in McGinn (1987, p. 17)., states, “since to understand is to become one or indistinct with what is understood, to rise up then to intellect, to be attached to it, is to be united with God”. While he enjoys perfectly all the beauties of the corporeal life, and while he admires science and modern technology, he is not confined to them. His dwelling is somewhere else. He is determined to feel the presence of God and to come to union with him.

As a true mystic who enjoys such a presence and such a union well, he knows that the prerequisites for such a presence is knowledge accompanied with love. Love and knowledge together help one to come to the mystical union. McGinn adds that “in the twelfth century, consideration of the Nature of union with God and its relation to love and knowledge became widespread”. Whitman admires science and knowledge but he loves and dies for love so much so that he calls love as a “kelson of the creation” (Whitman, 1990, p.87). He admits that through love man can have knowledge and access to everything, even to God. As man’s soul is identical to God’s, it is only through love, which is a form of understanding and

knowing, that man can penetrate into the unknown and the unseen. Whitman the mystic also remarks in the poem that “the unseen is known by the seen” (Whitman, 1990, p.421). It is for man to go from the seen house or the world to the unseen presence of The Lord, The Creator. On Whitman’s mystical power and on the truth of his claims, Das (2015, p.153) holds:

“Whitman finds oneness in his soul and god or the ultimate. He finds the presence of God in his own spirit. Everything he does is actually done by God. He is in quest of the divine which is the ultimate through the soul in every object. He realizes, actually the divine dwells in every soul, and one has to experience it” (Das, 2015, p.153).

Quite similar to the above quotation which portrays God’s accessibility to man and his ability to achieve union with Him if he is mentally, mystically, and spiritually elevated, Lancaster quotes Happold (1993, p.508) asserting: “Mysticism has its fount in ... a consciousness of a *beyond*, . . . of an *unseen* over and above the *seen*.” Indeed, union with the divine-the ultimate ‘beyond’ is frequently held to be the goal of mysticism. (Lancaster, 1993, p.508).

### ***Divine Love and Knowledge***

Whitman always admired and identified himself with all the beauties of Nature. His poem, “There Was a Child Went Forth” obviously shows his admiration, affinity, and unity with Nature. For him, the visible Nature is a symbol, “the handkerchief of the Lord” (Whitman, 1990, p. 33. Whitman sees them all as symbols. A symbol, as McLaughlin terms it, is “an outward sign of an inward meaning” (McLaughlin, 1960, p.69). Elsewhere, McLaughlin (1960, p.70) adds:

“... the mystic insight begins with the view of the unveiling of a mystery. Closely related to this view is the emphasis upon revelation rather than reason. The soul appears in utter loneliness to bring forth out of its own depths a within that is a beyond” (McLaughlin,1960, p.70).

With regard to this, McGinn argues that there “maintained at least some intellectual aspect to the ‘dart of love’ that alone can penetrate the cloud of unknowing that stands between us and God” (McGinn, 1987, p.14). McGinn describes love “as a form of knowing” and then posits that “the powers of knowing as well as those of loving are fulfilled in the marital embrace” of knowledge and love (9). Knowledge without love and love without knowledge is a defect and a barrier in man’s mystical union. It is like a bird lacking one of the wings. Whitman believed in “a twofold path to union, an intellectual ascent and an affective ascent”. However, he gave priority to love and affection. While admitting the relation between intellect and love, he emphasised the fusion of the two. For him, love itself is a kind of knowing higher than the



common science and “the height of love attained in the mystical union includes a transformed knowing”.

### **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that Whitman gives priority to man and asks him to know the central role he plays in the universe. Whitman warns man to know himself and find the divine presence in himself and in the whole universe so that he, as “the charioteer, is in charge rather than the horses. He endeavours to indicate that everything is for man, not man for everything. This is what all the creeds, religions, and bibles have been trying to convey and this is what Whitman, whose life and ideas are a bible in practice, is implying in his American Bible. The ever present question for man and for Whitman who is trying to answer in his bible-like work, “Song of Myself,” is: “What is man anyhow? What am I? What are you?” (Whitman,1990, p. 20).



## REFERENCES

- Ahmad, R. (2017). "Song of myself": Search for the transcendental in the immanent". University of Kashmir. <http://www.the-criterion.com/V8/n6/AM01.pdf>
- Allison, A. W. et al. (1983). *The norton anthology of poetry*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. London.
- Carlisle, E.F. (1968). "Walt whitman: The drama of identity". Wayne State University Press. Vol. 10, No. 4: pp. 259-276. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23094315>
- Czon, S-G. (1971). "Whitman's Mystic Vision in Song of the Broad-Axe". New York. ISSN: 1229-4381 <http://s-space.snu.ac.kr/handle/10371/88397>
- Das, S. (2015). "Traces of mysticism in walt whitman's song of myself". Chhattisgarh, India. [PDF](#)
- Deutsch, B. (2002). "Walt whitman: Builder for America". Enotes, Gale and Design. <https://www.enotes.com/topics/walt-whitman-babette-deutsch/in-depth>
- Fewkes, R. M. (1999). [https://www](https://www.firstparishnorwell.org/sermons/mystic.htm). First parish norwell "Are You A UU Mystic?" <https://firstparishnorwell.org/sermons/mystic.htm>
- Ford, N. A. (1950). "Walt whitman's conception of democracy". Clark atlanta university. Vol. 11, No. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1950), pp. 201-206, DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.2307/272002> ; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/272002>
- Harris, W. C. (1999). "Whitman's leaves of grass and the writing of a new American Bible." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*. 16 (Winter 1999), 172-190. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1622>, <https://ir.uiowa.edu/wwqr/vol16/iss3/6/>
- Hayes, Zachary. (1999) *Bonaventure mystical writings*. The crossroad publishing company. New York. [Google Scholar](#)
- Kepner, D. (1979). From spears to leaves: Walt whitman's theory of nature in "song of myself". *American Literature*. 51(2), 179-204. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2925583>
- Kvastad, N.B. (1975). Pantheism and mysticism. *SOPH* 14, 1-15 <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02804256>
- Lancaster, B. L. (1993). "Self or No-self? converging perspectives from neuropsychology and mysticism". *Zygon*®, 28: 507-526. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.1993.tb01053.x>





- Laurendeau, N. M. (2012). "Christian mysticism and science: The epistemological dimension". *Theology and Science*, 10(3), 225-248. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2012.695243>
- Maharaj, A. (2017). "Kant on the epistemology of indirect mystical experience." *Sophia*, 56, 311–336. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-016-0528-y>
- McGinn, B. (1987). "Love, knowledge, and mystical union in western christianity: Twelfth to Sixteenth centuries." *Church History*, 56(1), 7-24. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3165301>
- Mclaughlin, W. B. (1960). "Symbolism and Mysticism in the Spirituals." Clark Atlanta University. Vol. 24, No. 1 (1st Qtr., 1963), pp. 69-77. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/274227>, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/274227>
- Merton, Th. (2014). *Mysticism: Message to poets*. <https://mrlivemore.com/2017/05/05/mysticism-message-to-poets-by-thomas-merton/>
- Miller, M. (2010). *Collage of myself: Walt whitman and the making of leaves of grass*. University of Nebraska. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1488>
- Moore, Jared S and Knight Dunlap. (1928). "Consciousness, the unconscious, and mysticism." *Duke University Press*. Vol. 37, No. 1 (Jan., 1928), pp. 72-74. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2179525>, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2179525>
- Mysticism. (2018). *Lectures XVI and XVII*". <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/wjames.html>
- Peterson, David. (1998). "Beyond the body: Walt whitman's lavender language and 'out of the cradle endlessly rocking.'" *World Englishes*, 17: 239-248. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-971X.00097>
- Practical Mysticism/Chapter 1 What is Mysticism? (2012). <https://en.Wikisource.org>.
- Schreiber, D. A. (2012). "On the epistemology of postmodern spirituality". [Google Scholar](https://scholar.google.com/)
- Shakespeare, W. (1937). *The works of william shakespeare*. New York. <https://www.amazon.com/complete-works-William-Shakespeare-themes/dp/B00085U8UE>
- Shamsi, F. (2016). "The theme of mysticism in walt whitman and emily dickenson's poetry." *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*. 147, 166-169.



- Sharif, S. K. A. (2014). "Whitman and Mysticism". <https://ezinearticles.com/?Whitman-and-Mysticism&id=8636413>
- Syed, A. (2014). "Mysticism in walt whitman's poetry". Barkatullah University Bhopal. Volume 2, Issue 6. 118-132.
- Thorp, W. (2016). "Walt whitman's backward glances". The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography. 125, 58, 569-582.
- Tobin, Th. (2010). "Toward an Epistemology of Mysticism: Knowing God as Mystery". Marquette University. 25, 16, 101-106.
- Trachtenberg, A. (1998). "Democracy and the poet: Walt whitman and E. A. Robinson". Massachusetts Review. Vol. 39 Issue 2, p267-267. <http://140.234.252.185/c/literary-criticism/1004324/democracy-poet-walt-whitman-e-a-robinson>
- Trecker, J. L. (2011). "The ecstatic epistemology of song of myself". Midwest Quarterly. Pittsburg. 53(1), 11-25,7. [Link](#)
- Walkington, J. W. (1994). "Mystical experience in H.D. and walt whitman: An intertextual reading of tribute to the angles and "song of myself". Walt Whitman Quarterly Review. <https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1410&context=wwqr>
- Weber, O. F. (1927). "Walt whitman: The mystic." The English Journal. 148, 185-196.
- Whitman, W. (1990). *Leaves of Grass*. Edited by Jerome Loving. Oxford.