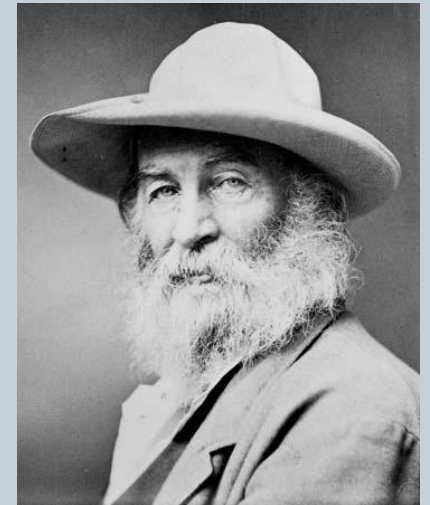


Leaves of Grass :The Bible of Democracy

For MA Sem IV Paper XVII

WALT WHITMAN

1819-1892



Submitted by:

Mrs Mamta

Head

Department of English

The History of America



- Colonial Period
- Declaration for independence
- War of 9 years for the freedom
- 1783 Establishment of United States
- 1800-1850 First National Period(Romantic Period)
- 1850-1900 Second National Period
- 1900 Onwards Modern Period

The History of America



- Colonialisation of America (1492-1763)
- With the discovery of west Indies by Columbus all European countries- Spain, Portugal, England, France, etc. set to these undiscovered lands and established their colonies

War of Independence (1775-1783)



- With the declaration of independence of United States by the union of colonies the war broke out between Britain and united colonies which terminated in 1783 with the victory of United States

American Declaration of Independence-1776



- Thomas Jefferson and other leaders from different British Colonies drafted a declaration of Independence and sent it to the King of Great Britain

The contemporary society of America



- America in 19th century was a nation of multiple cultures and with no culture and traditions of its own.
- The puritan influence was waning and the new vibrant society was coming in existence.
- The new nation was full of energy, vitality, and new ideas.
- The social practices like religion, slavery, other discriminations were being questioned.

American Literature



- Influence of European Romantic Movement on the literature of 18th century
- Thoreau and Emerson gave the slogan of transcendentalism which was influenced by the oriental culture.
- First half of 19th century saw the upsurging of American ideology, and pride in the nation.
- It was also a moment of constructing history.
- Famous writers of this period:

A new era in American literature



- Walt Whitman is one of America's most influential nineteenth century poets.
- His verse collection *Leaves of Grass* (1855) is regarded as a landmark in American literature.
- A poet often named the father of free verse mixed transcendentalism and realism in his writing.
- Democracy and the American experience were among his favorite topics.

Life History of Walt Whitman



- Left school at 11 to help support family.
- 1836 - teacher at a one room school house.
- 1841- founded a weekly newspaper.
- 1848 - traveled to New Orleans to become editor of newspaper.
- In New Orleans witnessed the horrors of slavery.

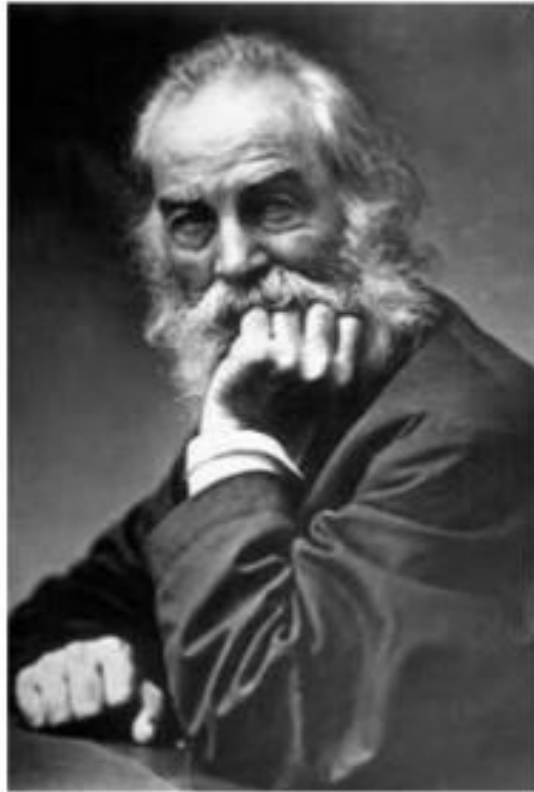




- 1848 - returned to Brooklyn, wrote poetry, founded a newspaper.
- 1855 - self-published a book of 12 untitled poems, *Leaves of Grass*.
- No one would publish due to hints of homosexuality.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson loved his poetry but reviewers found it too explicit.
- Emily Dickinson was advised not to read it because of its explicit sexual references.
- 1861- the third edition was published.





- 1862 - Civil War - traveled to DC to help his wounded brother. Ended up staying and helping out with wounded soldiers.
- 1865 - Lincoln's assassination. Whitman responded with "O Captain, My Captain" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed."

- Returns to the NY area, buys a home in Camden, New Jersey where he lives until he dies.
- *Leaves of Grass* published 8 times.



Three angles of Whitman's poetry



- His poetry is a climax of Romantic Movement
- In part it is as dateless and universal as our sense of mystery and tragedy
- His poetry shows him to be a precursor of Modern American Literature

Poetic Intention



- In his poetry, Whitman widened the possibilities of **Poetic diction** by including slang, colloquialisms, and regional dialects, rather than employing the stiff, erudite language so often found in nineteenth-century verse. Similarly, he broadened the possibilities of subject matter by describing myriad people and places. Like William Wordsworth, Whitman believed that everyday life and everyday people were fit subjects for poetry.

Egotism of Walt Whitman



- The hero in his poetry is he himself.
- He even dressed as a part of the shaggy, untamed poetic spokesperson of the proud young nation.
- Created a prosody- without rhyme or meter but abounding in sartorial oratorical rhymes and enchanted lists of names and objects
- He believed the American spirit could not be bound by the shackles of traditional verse form

Leaves of Grass



- **Leaves of Grass** is a poetry collection by the American poet Walt Whitman (1819–1892). ... Among the poems in the collection are "Song of Myself", "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking".
- On another level, the **title** is meant as a pun. The term "**grass**" was often used in Whitman's day to denote works of minor literature and Whitman uses the word "**leaves**" to describe the pages of his book. Thus, Whitman is saying that his book is a collection of minor literature.

The significance of the title



- The Grass is the flag of poet's disposition woven out of green stuff.
- It may be the handkerchief of the Lord, a scented gift and a remembrance.
- The grass may be a 'uniform hieroglyphic'.
- The grass may be looked at as 'the beautiful uncut hair of the graves'.

Grass as a symbol



- Used for common people for it is very persistent and that is why it can survive even in the adverse conditions
- Symbol of equality
- Symbol of strength
- Symbol of democracy
- Symbol of God's blessings

Poems in the syllabus



- Song of Myself : Unit 1, 4, 16, 32, 40
- Crossing Brooklyn Ferry
- Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking

Song of Myself



- This is a long poem divided in units of varying length, with seemingly different symbols, messages, themes.
- “Song of Myself” is a sprawling combination of biography, sermon, and poetic meditation.
- Whitman uses symbols and sly commentary to get at important issues.

Purpose of the song



- Purpose of the first poems is to arouse, dilate, expand and glorify the reader.
- The purpose is to radiate personal energy, so that the readers are proud, strenuous, joyful, optimist. In short to instil a sense of PRIDE in reader.
- Function of the second group of poems is provide for a union, an identification with Nature and God and by extension propagate LOVE.

Unit 1 - Song of Myself



I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,

I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,

Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,

I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,

Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,

Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,

I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,

Nature without check with original energy.

Tone and theme of Song of Myself



- In "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman celebrates the self. The speaker of the poem (the "I") speaks not just for himself but for all mankind, praising the joy and wonder of experiencing nature. He enjoys the union of his physical and spiritual selves.
- In this 52-part long poem, Whitman celebrates the human body and its ability to become one with the self and with nature.
- The speaker shows that the union of the self and the body allows for a truly transcendent experience in which one attains absolute fulfillment.
- This joined self is capable of simultaneously being one with nature and standing apart from nature. The self can merge with all things and experience all things and will in the course of life undergo many transformations while paradoxically remaining immortal.

'I' as symbol



Whitman's hero in his poetry is himself. His 'I'

- Asserted a mythical strength and vitality
- Assumed an appearance of shaggy and unshorn animal like individual
- Included entire humanity
- The vitality of the Human force
- A oneness with nature

Opening note of the poem



- “Song of Myself” opens in a triumphant paean to the individual: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself” (1). Elsewhere the speaker of that exuberant poem identifies himself as Walt Whitman and claims that, through him, the voices of many will speak. In this way, many individuals make up the individual democracy, a single entity composed of myriad parts. Every voice and every part will carry the same weight within the single democracy—and thus every voice and every individual is equally beautiful.
- The dominant tone of “Song of Myself” is joyous and mystical.

Themes



- Identity

Whitman sees his identity split into at least three components: his everyday personality, the more inner "self" or "Me Myself," and the universal "Soul."

- Vision of America

America was not just a place to Whitman, it was also an ideal to work for. The poem celebrates the diversity of the nation. His America is a place where all people are equal, all jobs are equally important, and people feel for one another with a passionate, neighborly love

- Friendship or universal brotherhood

It is also a desperate attempt to remind his fellow Americans of their common bonds.

- Spirituality

Whitman thinks that both body and soul are immortal because they are connected to the larger patterns of nature. "Song of Myself" is meant to be a prophetic statement.

Section 6



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 handkerchief of the Lord,

A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,

Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women, And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,

And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.
All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

Highlights of section 6



This section focuses on the various interpretations of the grass. It is

- ‘a Handkerchief of the lord’
- ‘itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation’
- ‘a uniform hieroglyphic’

Grass is a great equaliser:


‘Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff,...’

From Grass comes the message of eternity of Death

‘The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,...’.

In fact the message is that :

‘All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.’



I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-
contain'd,

I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,

They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,

They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,

Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of
owning things,

Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of
years ago,

Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

So they show their relations to me and I accept them,

They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their
possession.

I wonder where they get those tokens,

Did I pass that way huge times ago and negligently drop them?

Myself moving forward then and now and forever,

Gathering and showing more always and with velocity,

Infinite and omnigenous, and the like of these among them,

Not too exclusive toward the reachers of my remembrancers,

Picking out here one that I love, and now go with him on brotherly
terms.

A gigantic beauty of a stallion, fresh and responsive to my caresses,

Head high in the forehead, wide between the ears,

Limbs glossy and supple, tail dusting the ground,

Eyes full of sparkling wickedness, ears finely cut, flexibly moving.

His nostrils dilate as my heels embrace him,

His well-built limbs tremble with pleasure as we race around and
return.

I but use you a minute, then I resign you, stallion,

Why do I need your paces when I myself out-gallop them?

Even as I stand or sit passing faster than you.

Highlights of section 32



- The poet glorifies nature and its creatures.
‘I stand and look at them long and long.’
- The closeness with them is established and the message of eternal democracy given by them is appreciated.
‘Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,’
- But the human life is superior to any other creation according to the poet.
‘Why do I need your paces when I myself out-gallop them?’

Section 40



Flaunt of the sunshine I need not your bask—lie over!
You light surfaces only, I force surfaces and depths also.

Earth! you seem to look for something at my hands,
Say, old top-knot, what do you want?

Man or woman, I might tell how I like you, but cannot,
And might tell what it is in me and what it is in you, but cannot,

And might tell that pining I have, that pulse of my nights and days.
Behold, I do not give lectures or a little charity,

When I give I give myself.

You there, impotent, loose in the knees,
Open your scarf'd chops till I blow grit within you,

Spread your palms and lift the flaps of your pockets,
I am not to be denied, I compel, I have stores plenty and to spare,

And any thing I have I bestow.
I do not ask who you are, that is not important to me,

You can do nothing and be nothing but what I will infold you.
To cotton-field drudge or cleaner of privies I lean,

On his right cheek I put the family kiss,
And in my soul I swear I never will deny him.

On women fit for conception I start bigger and nimbler babes.
(This day I am jetting the stuff of far more arrogant republics.)

To any one dying, thither I speed and twist the knob of the door.
Turn the bed-clothes toward the foot of the bed,
Let the physician and the priest go home.

I seize the descending man and raise him with resistless will,
O despairer, here is my neck,
By God, you shall not go down! hang your whole weight upon me.

I dilate you with tremendous breath, I buoy you up,
Every room of the house do I fill with an arm'd force,
Lovers of me, bafflers of graves.

Sleep—I and they keep guard all night,
Not doubt, not decease shall dare to lay finger upon you,
I have embraced you, and henceforth possess you to myself,
And when you rise in the morning you will find what I tell you is so.

Crossing Brooklyn Ferry



- The Poem is a beautiful description of the journey of the speaker on the ferry
- The speaker, a man on a ferry between Manhattan and Brooklyn, leans over a railing to look into the water below and addresses all the readers—regardless of generation as you. He sees the clouds and the setting sun reflected there, and he addresses them as "you," as he will address many other things in the poem. He notes how all the business people and workers on the ferry appear "curious" to him. He thinks about the people who will make the same crossing many years from then.

He feels connected to a pattern larger than himself, and how the past and the future resemble each other. He praises the stuff around him as "glories". Other people will make the same crossing as him and see the same things, like the sunset and the tides. These things will exist even in a hundred years. Time and place cannot separate people, particularly when the speaker seems to have the power to project himself into the future. Speaking perhaps to future readers like us, he announces, "I am with you."

He says he is projecting himself into the future in order to tell us about this nice ferry crossing. Oddly, he talks about himself in the past tense, saying how much he loved the city.

He points out how close the future generations are to him. "What's a couple hundred years between friends?" Answer: not much. He describes the specifics of his life as if we had lived it, too. In case we thought he was this happy every day, he points out that he often has dark thoughts and has committed evil acts. Then, as if confessing, he pours out all the evil things he has done: lying, adulterous thoughts, and so on. He has to get some stuff off his chest.

His love for America is clearly visible when he claims that nothing, not even the "Gods," could be as amazing as the view he has from the deck of the ferryboat.

He says that we know the soul only by all the things that make up the physical world, the "faithful solids and fluids" that bind us together. These things have been waiting for us to perceive them in the right way. We've let them get away from us in the past, but no more! We've got those tricky things in our grasp now, but we're not going to let them go. In the end, the speaker affirms that the physical world provides the parts that make up the spiritual world, including eternity and the Soul.

Major themes of the poem



- Friendship

The bond of universal brotherhood is clearly visible in the poem. The time, the nation, the colour doesn't matter. The speaker invites and basks in the familiarity of his co-travellers

- A childlike awe and enthusiasm

The speaker is filled with awe and admiration for the world around him, for the daily commuters around him which is very infectious

- Timelessness

The essential things remain same even as the time passes. Nature, human life, human aspirations remain same.

- Spirituality

Like the transcendentalists, the speaker believes in a spiritual unity that underlies that natural world. We come to know about the Soul through nature.

Structure of the Poem



- The entire poem is written in free verse, a poetic form Whitman helped pioneer. Free verse has no regular meter or rhyme scheme. Whitman's style of free verse is one of the most easily recognizable forms in English-language poetry. It consists of lines of varying length, some so long that they have to be carried over and indented in what looks like small paragraphs. What looks like an indented line is actually part of the line above it. Each line is meant to be read in a single breath.

There are a couple of other ways to recognize Whitman's free verse. First, he repeats himself like crazy. For example, he frequently uses a rhetorical device called "anaphora." That's when you repeat the same word at the start of several lines in a row. Lines 13-16 all begin with the word "Others," and lines 34-37 begin with the word "Looked." He also repeats the same words and phrases several times throughout the poem, like a musician returning to a theme. He layers these repetitions so subtly into the poem that they are easy to miss. For instance, the beginning of the last line, "Great or small," is the same phrase that he used earlier when he compared people to actors performing roles of various sizes.

Another essential Whitman device is the catalogue, or list. In Section 16, he provides a catalogue of evil acts that he has committed. Whitman's poetry is like a big umbrella trying to bring as many things as possible beneath its cover.

Taken together, these and other techniques produce a familiar chant-like quality that characterizes all of Whitman's work. Although his poems lack a traditional meter, they contain incredibly complex and varied rhythms. He mixes the word "wanting" into the list of sins he has committed, in a way that produces stops and starts and pauses:

*The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,
The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not wanting,
Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these wanting.*

Symbolism, imagery



- Current and the tides

The movement of the tides parallels the speaker's movement back and forth in time, when he projects himself in the future and returns again. You could also read a tide-like pattern into the structure of the poem, where the same images and phrases come and go and come again.

- Light and darkness

The poet uses the image of sun, setting of the sun, the rays of sun radiating around the head, the shadow of the light coming from the chimneys, the imagery actually seems to grow darker as it progresses, as if to mirror the setting of the sun. Darkness corresponds to evil and doubt, but Whitman accepts it as a necessary part of nature, and not as a power to be fought and defeated.

- New York

The poem is about a ferry ride over the East River from Manhattan to Brooklyn – Whitman gives us the sights and sounds of the city in fact he paints what amounts to a panorama, which is a 360-degree view of everything within sight. In doing so he establishes New York as a microcosm

- Spirituality

The principle message of the poem, repeated again and again, is that all material things large and small contribute to some larger spiritual reality. The phrase “simple, compact, well-joined scheme,” is repeated many a times.

Quotes from the poem



- “The impalpable sustenance of me from all things, at all hours of the day,
The simple, compact, well-joined scheme – myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated, yet part of the scheme,
The similitudes of the past, and those of the future,
The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings – on the walk in the street, and the passage over the river,” (lines 6-9)
- “Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,
Looked at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sun-lit water,” (lines 33-34)

Theme of Friendship quotes



- “It avails not, neither time or place – instance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation,
or ever so many generations hence,
I project myself – also I return – I am with you, and
know how it is.”(lines 20-22)
- “These, and all else, were to me the same as they are
to you,
I project myself a moment to tell you – also I return.”
(lines 50-51)

Theme of Time quotes



- “And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence, are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.” (line 5)
- “Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high,
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them,
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring in of the flood-tide, the falling back to the sea of the ebb-tide.” (lines 17-19)

Theme of Identity quotes



- These, and all else, were to me the same as they are to you,
I project myself a moment to tell you – also I return.
(lines 50-51)
- I too had received identity by my body,
That I was, I knew was of my body – and what I should be, I knew I should be of my body. (lines 60-61)

Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking



- Written in 1859, this poem describes a young boy's awakening as a poet, his being mentored by nature and his own maturing consciousness. It is poem of reminiscence, in which the poet, at a crisis in his adult life, looks back to an incident in his childhood when he first became aware of his vocation as a poet. The structure of the poem owes a great deal to music, particularly grand opera, which Whitman loved

“A man, yet by these tears a little boy again, / Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves, / I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter, / Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them, / A reminiscence sing.”

Form and theme



- The poem is loose in its form, except for the sections that purport to be a transcript of the bird's call, which are musical in their repetition of words and phrases. The opening of the poem is marked by an abundance of repeated prepositions describing movement—out, over, down, up, from—which appear regularly later in the poem and which convey the sense of a struggle, in this case the poet's struggle to come to consciousness.

Poet as a boy



- The poet recalls that as a boy he spent many days one spring on Paumanok (the Indian name for Long Island), closely observing the nest of two mockingbirds. Recitative now alternates with the arias of the mockingbirds, who at first sing of their togetherness. One day the she-bird disappears, and all summer long the boy listens to the solitary song of the remaining bird. The song changes to that of pain of separation, the longing for reunion.

Symbol of Sea



- The sea is symbolic of the spiritual world of poetry, and the whispers of the ocean symbolize death.
- Death means more than simply death in that monosyllabic answer and whisper. It means death that ushers in life, that rocks a cradle of life and death.
- Sea is a symbol of Eternity.
- The sea is represented in this poem as a body that answers the poet and that whispers to him as a mentor, as a guide.
- “With angry moans the fierce old mother incessantly moaning”. Sea is here the old mother.

Symbol of Death



- Death is a lesson important for a child to learn.
- It can be learned from an elder or through nature, and in this case, it was nature.
- The realization of death is the only true way to maturity in an artistic and/or emotional state.
- The word death is the message brought to the budding poet by the waves of the sea:
“And with them the key, the word up from the waves, The word of the sweetest song and all songs”

Bird as a symbol



- Another image is that of the singing bird, introduced in the opening lines as “the bird that chanted” to the poet and used throughout the poem, culminating in the final lines, in which the song of the bird, as remembered from the poet’s youth, is both recalled and transformed into the adult bard’s song, sung to him by the sea and, in turn, metamorphosed into the poem itself.
- “my dusky demon and brother,” –the bird is the poet’s dark demon and his brother who has taught him life experience of pain.

Child as image



- Poet as a child is described in traditional yet Whitmanesque terms as “alone, bareheaded, barefoot” in the first stanza of the poem “Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating”.
- This image is recalled throughout the poem; the adult bard refers to his reminiscence of himself “with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting in my hair”.
- In the final stanzas he understands that he will never again be that “peaceful child.”
- The image of the singing bird that learns to sing alone (and as a mature voice) is a parallel to this image of the youth becoming adult, the boy becoming a bard.

Significance of music for Whitman



- The bird sings out to its mate who has gone away never to return. The poet confesses that he is glad he cannot understand the words -since the whole meaning is more truly expressed in the music itself.
- “The aria’s meaning, the ears, the soul, swiftly depositing,
The strange tears down the cheeks coursing”
- It is the music that penetrates in the soul of the child poet
- Although he will "translate" the melody of the mockingbird's song, the specific meanings will leave the poet unsatisfied.
- Only a "clew" whispered from the sea will ultimately enable the poet to reach a purely musical understanding of the bird's song of love and desire.

The Romantic element in the poem



- The “birth of the poet” genre was of particular importance to Wordsworth , whose *Prelude* details his artistic coming-of-age. Like Wordsworth, Whitman claims to take his inspiration from nature.
- Where Wordsworth is inspired by a wordless feeling of awe, though, Whitman finds an opportunity to anthropomorphize, and nature gives him very specific answers to his questions about overarching concepts.
- Nature like a child is a tabula rasa onto which the poet can project himself. He conquers it, inscribes it. While it may become a part of him that is always present, the fact that it does so seems to be by his permission.

List of some Books on Walt Whitman



- Reynolds, David. S. *Walt whitman*. London: OUP, 2005.
- William, C. K. *On Whitman*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Miller, James E. *Walt Whitman*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1962.
- Pannapacker, Williams. *Revised Lives: Walt Whitman and 19th Century Authorship*. London: Routledge, 2004
- Marx, Leo. *The Americanness of Walt Whitman*. Massachusetts: D. C. Heath, 1960.
- Clarke, Leadie. M. *Walt Whitman's Concept of Common American Man*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1955.
- Killingsworth, M. Jimmie. *Walt Whitman's Poetry of the Body: Sexuality, Politics and the Text*. US: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.