1-1-2001

Walt Whitman: The Optimism of an Evolutionary Pantheist

Katherine R. Hults

Eastern Illinois University

This research is a product of the graduate program in English at Eastern Illinois University. Find out more about the program.

Recommended Citation
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/1557

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.
TO: Graduate Degree Candidates (who have written formal theses)

SUBJECT: Permission to Reproduce Theses

The University Library is receiving a number of requests from other institutions asking permission to reproduce dissertations for inclusion in their library holdings. Although no copyright laws are involved, we feel that professional courtesy demands that permission be obtained from the author before we allow these to be copied.

PLEASE SIGN ONE OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS:

Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University has my permission to lend my thesis to a reputable college or university for the purpose of copying it for inclusion in that institution's library or research holdings.

[Signature] Date

I respectfully request Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University NOT allow my thesis to be reproduced because:

_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

[Signature] Date
Walt Whitman: The Optimism of an Evolutionary Pantheist

By

Katherine R. Hults

1975

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In the Graduate School, Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, Illinois

2001

I hereby recommend that this thesis be accepted as fulfilling this part of the graduate degree cited above

DATE

Thesis Director

DATE

Department Head
Abstract

E.M. Forster may have best described Walt Whitman’s prevailing optimism in the following passage:

He is the true optimist—not the professional optimist who shuts his eyes and shirks . . . but one who has seen and suffered much and yet rejoices. He is not a philosopher or theologian; he cannot answer the ultimate question and tell us what life is. But he is absolutely certain that it is grand, that it is happiness, and that ‘wherever life and force are manifested, beauty is manifested.’ (Allen, World 52)

Whitman was aware of the social taboos and social evils of his time, witnessing them up close during his long-time journalism career, and expressing his opinion of them in various works of prose. However, his outlook on life and the world remained cheerful; he “patiently accepted the temporary inequalities and injustices” of the world (Allen, Handbook 358). He was able to turn virtually any social taboo or negative social reality into something to be celebrated. This optimism derived from Whitman’s beliefs that all beings are equal and deserving of inclusion, and that the human race is becoming more perfect as the world evolves. He believed that social taboos and social ills would ultimately diminish as the world progressed. This optimistic attitude led Whitman to accept social taboos and social ills in his poetry and transform them into positive conditions.

In Walt Whitman Handbook, Gay Wilson Allen refers to Whitman as “ambitious to be the poetical rather than the political spokesman of his time and people. . . . The literary role which he assumed in . . . Leaves of Grass was that of ‘the
caresser of life' embracing all forms, good and evil alike, with a democracy that made no distinctions between persons or fractions . . . he attained an almost Brahman serenity” (354). The “caressing” and “embracing” that Allen refers to derives from Whitman’s main ideology, pantheism. Pantheism was the driving force behind Whitman’s persona, and there are many examples of his pantheistic persona throughout Leaves of Grass.

This paper explores Whitman’s pantheism, beginning with the basic premise of pantheism and leading into the various ideas and extensions of pantheism, specifically, evolutionary pantheism. Due to his evolutionary pantheistic beliefs, which included the obligation of the poet taking on a prophetic role, Whitman was able to accept and celebrate virtually all social taboos and negative social conditions in his poems such as insane individuals, criminals, sex, poverty, and even war. He exuded the optimistic persona of an evolutionary pantheist, hoping to leave readers with a “bible” to learn from and follow, helping to lead America, and ultimately the world, into a brighter future.
Dedication

In loving memory of Christopher Cary Hassan, a man whom Walt Whitman would have accepted and loved, despite Christopher’s mistakes and misfortunes.
Acknowledgments

I would like to first thank my husband and my family for their patience, support, and sacrifices during this endeavor. I would also like to extend many thanks to my entire thesis committee, Dr. Mark Christhilf, Dr. John Allison, and Dr. Stephen Swords for their time, suggestions, and guidance. I would like to especially thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Christhilf, for encouraging me to continually strive for excellence.
# Table of Contents

Introduction  

I. Whitman's Pantheistic Views  
   Whitman's Pantheistic Influences  

II. Evolutionary Pantheism  
   Whitman's Evolutionary Pantheistic Influences  
   America: Key to the Positive Evolution of the World  
   American Poets as Prophets  
   The Evolutionary Pantheistic Acceptance of Evil  

III. Whitman Transforms Social Taboos and Social Evils  
   Whitman Transforms Sex and the Body  
   Whitman Transforms the Tragedy of the Civil War  
   The Evolutionary Pantheistic Acceptance of Death  

Conclusion  

Works Cited  

Works Consulted
Introduction

Walt Whitman maintained an optimistic outlook on the future condition of the world throughout his lifetime. He was confident that only goodness would prevail as the world progressed. The poet passionately exudes this optimism in his poems, accepting and celebrating all beings and conditions and transforming the world’s imperfections and evils into positive realities.

This optimism, however, has led many critics to believe that Whitman was naïve, foolish, and unrealistic, for the world is still deeply flawed and filled with turmoil, unlike Whitman’s prediction of a grand future. Vernon Louis Parrington, in his essay “Afterglow of the Enlightenment” writes, “The great hopes on which he fed have been belied by after events—so his critics say. . . . Certainly in this welter of today . . . Whitman’s expansive hopes seem grotesque enough” (Bradley 865). The glorious future that Whitman predicted never came to fruition.

Some critics also feel that Whitman might have been blind to the negative realities around him. Others, however, believe that the poet indeed was aware of the negative social conditions surrounding him. Whitman experienced many of these social ills during his long-time journalism career as well as in the Civil War camps. He did not disregard the ill conditions around him; he actually expressed his disappointment in the world’s (primarily America’s) social condition in much of his prose. “With calm, searching eyes,” he saw “that America was not yet a democracy,” and that it was “shot through with cant and hypocrisy and every meanness. . . . No other critic saw more clearly the unlovely reality or dealt with it more scathingly. . . . especially in his prose writings and casual talk” (Parrington, Beginnings 82).
Whitman was aware of the injustices and negative conditions in his own nation, but he had faith in the future. He said in an interview, “The American nation is not much at present, but will be some day the most glorious one on earth. At first the cooking must be done, the table set, before one can sit down to a square meal. We are now tuning the instruments, afterwards comes the music” (Sadakichi 22).

While many critics view Whitman’s optimism as naïve and foolish, even though the poet was clearly aware of negative realities, Whitman’s optimism can be explained by his belief system. He was an evolutionary pantheist, one who accepted and celebrated all beings and conditions and believed that the world was evolving towards a perfect existence. This ideology affected Whitman’s poetry, leading him to accept and transform even the most undesirable, evil beings and conditions in his poems. He believed that the negative social realities of his time would eventually disappear as the world progressed.

In order to achieve this grand future existence, the evolutionary pantheist believed that American poets would have to lead the way. Through literature, readers would be inspired to live as better human beings, becoming more tolerant and more embracing of all individuals and conditions. Whitman would be the key “prophet-poet” in this journey towards greatness, and his *Leaves of Grass* would be the new “Bible” for human guidance. It was his duty as the prophet-poet to first realize the negative realities in the world, and then set out to transform the world into a more perfect existence, starting with America. Parrington perfectly states Whitman’s mission in the following lines:
Whitman accepted the twin duties laid upon him: to make clear to
America her present failure in the great adventure . . . and to mark out
afresh the path to the Canaan of democratic hopes. . . . To be both critic
and prophet—that he conceived to be his mission, a mission that he was
faithful to for upwards of forty years. (Beginnings 81-82)

The following chapters will explore Whitman’s pantheism, from the basic
premise of the ideology, to the various extensions of pantheism, primarily
evolutionary pantheism. Due to his evolutionary pantheism, the poet was able to
accept virtually all social taboos and social evils and transform them into conditions
worth celebrating. He expressed this evolutionary optimism in his Leaves of Grass,
hoping to leave readers with a book of poems that would provide them with the proper
guidance to lead America, and ultimately the world, towards a perfect societal
existence.
I. Whitman’s Pantheistic Views

Transcendentalism and mysticism are doctrines often associated with Walt Whitman. Pantheism, however, may be the best term for Whitman’s belief system because it explains his optimism and acceptance of social taboos and negative social conditions. In the most basic terms, pantheists believe that “all is God, and that God is all . . . God and the universe are one and inseparable . . . nature and God are identical” (Encyclopedia of Religion 613). This pantheistic idea of God’s existence is best described in one of Whitman’s earliest poems, “Song of Myself.” He says, “I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then, / In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass” (1284-1285). These lines show God’s immanence in everything. Whitman saw God everywhere and always, pervading everyone.

This belief in the immanence of God leads pantheists to believe also in oneness, unity, and equality on all levels. Everything is related to or a part of everything else. As a pantheist, Whitman believed that “the universe is a vast communion of spirits, souls of men, of animals, of plants, of earth and other planets, of the sun, all embraced as different members of the soul of the world” (Allen, Handbook 256). George Saintsbury, in his essay Leaves of Grass, comments on Whitman’s expression of unity in his prose: “The keyword of all his ideas and of all his writings is universality. His Utopia is one which shall be open to everybody; his ideal of man and woman one which shall be attainable by everybody; his favourite scenes, ideas, subjects, those which everybody . . . can enjoy and appreciate” (Bradley 785). Commenting on his own work, Whitman expands on this idea of
unity. He writes, “My poems when complete should be a unity, in the same sense that the earth is, or that the human body, (senses, soul, head, trunk, feet, blood, vescera, man-root, eyes, hair) or that a perfect musical composition is” (Bradley 763).

Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman celebrates the union of each and everything in existence, like God’s union with humans and with nature, human union with nature, human union with other humans, and the body’s union with the soul. This is the pantheistic way of life. “On the Beach at Night Alone” reveals the pantheistic idea of unity. The entire poem celebrates the immanence of everything: “A vast similitude interlocks all, / All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large suns, moons, planets, / All souls, all living bodies though they be ever so different, or in different worlds, / All gaseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes, the fishes, the brutes, / All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, languages” (4-5, 8-10). These lines embody Whitman’s pantheistic idea of unity among everything in the universe. He believed that each thing, large and small, exists within everything else. Whitman excluded nothing and nobody from his universal synthesis. Believing that God is everywhere and in everyone, a pantheist could believe in absolute goodness and unity.

**Whitman’s Pantheistic Influences**

While Whitman may have gained the majority of these pantheistic ideas from his own life experiences, he also was greatly influenced by other philosophers and writers during the nineteenth century. The era in which Whitman lived was one that exhibited many of the same philosophical values. Romantic, transcendental, and mystical beliefs were predominant at that time. Perry Miller, in *Errand into the*
Wilderness, says that “Everywhere this resurgence of the romantic heart against the enlightened head flowered in a veneration of Nature,” and nature was “feminine and dynamic, propelling all things” (209). Miller goes on to say that America was a Christian America “embedded in Nature” that “could derive its inspiration from the mountains, the lakes, the forests... America is... Nature’s nation, possessing a heart that watches and receives” (209). This idea of America being “Nature’s nation” is an omnipresent theme in nineteenth-century life and literature. It was believed that America could “progress indefinitely into an expanding future simply because it is nestled in Nature, is instructed and guided by mountains... it need not fear the debauchery of the artificial, the urban, the civilized. Nature somehow... would guide aright the faltering steps of a young republic” (211). Whitman was not the only writer expressing this common theme in literature; he merely had the strongest voice to speak “for a mood which did sustain a mass of Americans through a crucial half-century of Titanic exertion” (210).

Transcendentalism’s optimism and its ideas of God, Nature, and evolution parallel the pantheism doctrine. According to Octavius B. Frothingham, author of Transcendentalism in New England: A History, nineteenth-century transcendentalism was theoretically “an assertion of the immanence of divinity in instinct, the transference of supernatural attributes to the natural constitution of mankind” (136). Like pantheism, transcendentalism “is said to... sink God and nature in man” (342). Nineteenth-century transcendentalists were optimists who believed that divine illumination constantly surrounded them: “No evil lurked in the secret places of their hearts to whisper doubts concerning the goodness of life... Arch-romantics, they
were dreaming a transcendental dream” (Parrington, Romantic 375). The transcendentalists, like the pantheists, were optimists who rarely doubted that goodness would prevail. Whitman read from and contributed pieces to the same newspapers and magazines that transcendentalists such as Henry Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Margaret Fuller wrote for. It would have been almost impossible for Whitman to escape influence from the nineteenth-century transcendentalists.

Writers such as Emerson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge shared Whitman’s pantheistic ideas of the significance of nature and unity. The devotion to individuality in order to reach overall unity was perhaps the most common thread binding the three writers. They all of course shared a passion for nature. Coleridge, like Emerson and Whitman, believed that unity must be achieved, but by means of individuality first and foremost. He believed life to be “the principal of individuation. . . . The unity will be more intense in proportion as it constitutes each particular thing a whole of itself; and yet more, again, in proportion to the number and interdependence of the parts, which it unites as a whole” (Bate 193). Coleridge focused on the idea of being an individual whole before one can ever unite with something else; it takes millions of independent, solitary parts in order to make that whole. The writer’s “overriding philosophical interest” throughout his life was in “unity of interpretation, unity of feeling, unity of relationship of every sort” (31). He, like Whitman, took a great interest in Spinoza, “usually regarded as the father of modern pantheism” (Allen, Handbook 257). Spinoza “taught that proof of God is the existence of nature, and that the created and creator are one . . . ”(257). Coleridge
says in a 1799 notebook entry that if he ever wrote a poem about Spinoza, “who himself hungered for unity,” it would begin: “I would make a pilgrimage to the burning sands of Arabia . . . to find the Man who could explain to me there can be oneness, there being infinite perceptions—yet there must be oneness, not an intense Union but an Absolute Unity” (Bate 32). It is this idea of unity that Whitman and Coleridge so fervently shared with Spinoza, this essential oneness among everything in the universe, that encompasses the majority of Whitman’s works.

Emerson was the transcendentalist who probably had the greatest effect on Whitman’s pantheistic ideas of nature and unity. Whitman claimed later in life that he never read Emerson prior to the first edition of Leaves of Grass. Earlier in his life, however, Whitman already admitted to J.T. Trowbridge “that while he was helping his father as a carpenter in 1854 he used to take a book with his dinner-pail to read over his midday meal,” and the book turned out to be a collection of Emerson’s essays. He admitted that “from that time he took no other writer” and “he could never have written his poems, if he had not first ‘come to himself’ and that Emerson helped him to ‘find himself’” (Fausset 80). Whitman may have been denying Emerson’s influence because he was innately secretive, or because he feared plagiarism accusations. Nevertheless, Whitman’s earlier admissions indicate a significant Emerson influence. Whitman even said, “I was simmering and simmering; it was Emerson brought me to boil” (Parrington, Beginnings 78). Emerson’s “ideas helped to give coherence to the gospel which Whitman was struggling to embody” (Fausset 82). Emerson did not give Whitman ideas that he did not already have; he just strengthened those existing ideas.
Whitman and Emerson have often been compared, Whitman even being referred to as an Emersonian. John Townsend, poet and abolitionist, considered *Leaves of Grass* to be poetry of an “Emerson run wild” (Kaplan 254). Emerson’s essays reveal strong similarities in the two writers’ ideas. He, like Whitman, endlessly celebrates nature for example. In the essay “The Poet,” Emerson says the poet “shalt have the whole land for thy park and manor, the sea for thy bath and navigation. . . . Wherever, snow falls, or water flows, or birds fly . . . there is Beauty, plenteous as rain, shed for thee . . . thou shalt not be able to find a condition inopportune or ignoble” (*Essays* 291). Emerson is as exuberant about his love for nature in this essay as Whitman is in “Song of Myself.”

Like Whitman, Emerson also emphasized self-reliance and unity. He felt that only by first becoming strong, independent individuals could we then unite and create a strong universe. Emerson says in an 1842 journal entry, “The world is waking up to the idea of Union and already we have Communities. . . . It is and will be magic. . . . The union is only perfect when all the uniters are absolutely isolated” (Bercovitch 310). For both writers, the perfect union could occur only when individuals are willing to loaf alone among nature, becoming self-reliant and strong individuals before they attempt to form unions. Emerson, like Coleridge, Spinoza, and the rest, provided Whitman with opinions about God, nature, self-reliance, and unity that enabled Whitman to establish his own pantheistic beliefs.
II. Evolutionary Pantheism

Thus, the basic ideas of pantheism include the immanence of God, the importance of incorporating nature into one’s life, and unity among everything on earth. Most philosophical or religious belief systems, however, are much more complex than simply being comprised of three fundamental principles. An additional pantheistic principle, and perhaps the most prevailing idea encompassing the philosophy, is the belief in an evolving universe. Evolutionary pantheism is the simple belief that all life has been, and always will be, constantly evolving towards the future. For Whitman, “The entire universe appeared . . . essentially as a vital impulse, an irresistible current without beginning or end ceaselessly impelling the enormous mass of creation toward the future” (Asselineau 49). “Everything was in eternal flux and progress, surging from a beginning that lies beyond the thought of man to an end that can never be reached” (Smuts 61).

‘Going Somewhere’ is a poem that encapsulates Whitman’s evolutionary pantheism. The poem stresses the inevitability of evolution. Whitman writes, “. . . we all are onward, onward, speeding slowly, surely bettering, / Life, life an endless march, an endless army . . . / The world, the race, the soul—in space and time the universes, / All bound as is befitting each—all surely going somewhere” (5-8). The poet is absolutely sure that the world and all its inhabitants are marching forward into a better future.

We see more of this evolutionary pantheism in Whitman’s “The Calming Thought of All,” which exemplifies his faith in the evolution of the world. The entire poem follows:
That coursing on, whate’er men’s speculations,
Amid the changing schools, theologies, philosophies,
Amid the bawling presentations new and old,
The round earth’s silent vital laws, facts, modes continue. (1-4)

This short poem expresses Whitman’s belief that the world’s evolution is inevitable. It calms him to think that the world will still evolve, no matter what events occur. No matter how much institutions and beliefs may change, and despite all the “bawling” displays in the world, the human race is still going to evolve. The natural “laws” of the earth make the world’s evolution inevitable.

Another poem that depicts Whitman’s evolutionary pantheism is “Song of the Exposition.” Whitman wrote this poem to read at the opening of the American Institute’s Fortieth Annual Exhibition in New York City in 1871 (Bradley 194). In the poem, Whitman celebrates the latest inventions already improving the world’s existence and the inventions to come that will help the world evolve into a better existence. The world that he foresees will depend heavily on these new advancements. He expresses his satisfaction with what the latest inventions have already done for the world:

With latest connections, works, the inter-transportation of the world,

Steam-power, the great express lines, gas, petroleum,

These triumphs of our time, the Atlantic’s delicate cable,

The Pacific railroad, the Suez canal, the Mont Cenis and Gothard and Hoosac tunnels, the Brooklyn bridge,

This earth all spann’d with iron rails, with lines of steamships
threading every sea,

Our own rondure, the current globe I bring. (160-165)

These inventions are contributing to the positive evolution of the world. Whitman introduces the world to what is soon to come as well. He says, “You shall watch how the printer sets type, and learn what a composing-stick is, / You shall mark in amazement the Hoe press whirling its cylinders, shredding the printed leaves steady and fast, / The photograph, model, watch, pin, nail, shall be created before you” (103-105). “Song of the Exposition” celebrates nearly every existing invention and every major invention yet to come. Whitman would celebrate anything that proved to be helpful to the positive evolution of the world.

**Whitman’s Evolutionary Pantheistic Influences**

Once again, one cannot help but wonder if Whitman gained some of his evolutionary ideas from Emerson’s works. Emerson also had this fascination with evolution. Both writers embraced evolution and encouraged their readers to see the potential in the future. In “Self Reliance” for instance, Emerson writes that “man . . . stands on tiptoe to foresee the future” (Essays 49). In “Circles,” Emerson is “an endless seeker” for whom “there is no sleep, no pause, no preservation, but all things renew, germinate and spring” (225). The evolutionary ideas expressed in much of Emerson’s work are reflected throughout Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. Emerson and Whitman embraced “a set of ideas and beliefs which may rank among the most liberating ideas, the most vital and vitalizing beliefs produced by any culture, past or present” (Bercovitch 369). Their writings expressed the “dream of progress” by “spirit of expansion into a vision of growth, experimentation, and constant renewal;
and which, summarily, created in the word ‘America’ the most compelling cultural symbol of the modern era, nationally and internationally” (369). The two writers were leading the way in this evolutionary dream.

Emerson and Whitman were not the only writers of the time to express this desire for evolution and progress. Just as many other writers were expressing the significance of nature and unity, they were also upholding this idea of a greater future universe. It was a sort of trend in literature at that time and an idea that many citizens embraced. America in the 1840’s was an “expanding, prospering, booming America” that “if ever in the annals of man, was an era of optimism, with a vision of limitless possibilities, with faith in a boundless future” (Miller, Errand 206). Whitman and other writers were exuberantly spreading this optimism throughout their literature.

Everyone had faith in America’s progression and wanted to make sure that the future would bring prosperity. The mid 1800’s were Jacksonian America, a “nation of futurity . . . from one frontier to another and from one generation to the next” (Bercovitch 179). Throughout their literature, Whitman, Melville, Emerson, and others, were strenuously spreading this optimism in the future. As Bercovitch comments, “Virtually every one of the hundreds of mid-nineteenth-century biographers of ‘great Americans’ insisted that his subject was not someone unique, but the emblem of American enterprise: a self-reliant man who was therefore, paradoxically, a cultural pattern, the model of a rising nation” (47).
America: Key to the Positive Evolution of the World

Whitman was fascinated with the evolution of the entire world and the human race, but he emphasized America’s evolution. He said that “America is being made but is not made: much of him is yet in the state of dough: the loaf is not given shape. He will come—our American” (Teller 36). America was in the process of growing into the best America. In his 1872 Preface to “As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free,” Whitman refers to America as the “great Ideal Nationality of the future…” (Bradley 743). America, despite all its negative attributes, was “still the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon” (Parrington, Beginnings 72). It had the most potential of all the nations to evolve into a great nation. America would thus be the key to the positive evolution of the world. If America evolved into a great nation, other nations would as well. “He fixed his hopes on the great West where, he believed, a freer and more democratic America was taking shape. He was an expansionist, full of ardent hopes, an apostle of ‘manifest destiny’” (71).

Whitman wanted America to be the “leader of the human race... the... possessor in ideas, in type of character, and in tendency if not in actual achievement of all that is most powerful and promising for the progress of mankind” (Dowden 67). He said, “I believe in the higher patriotism—not, my country whether or no, God bless it and damn the rest!—no, not that—but my country, to be kept big, to grow bigger, to lead the procession, not in conquest, however, but in inspiration” (Teller 35). He invited “all men—yes, even the criminals—giving everyone a chance—a new outlook” (34).
“Pioneers! O Pioneers” is a poem that clearly expresses Whitman’s idea that America is the key to a better future world. He says, “All the past we leave behind, / We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world, / Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the march, / Pioneers! O pioneers!” (17-20). Whitman continues to emphasize Americans as being the “pioneers” of the great future world. He says, “All the pulses of the world, / Falling in they beat for us, with the Western movement beat, / Holding single or together, steady moving to the front, all for us, / Pioneers! O pioneers!” (57-60). The poet believed that the rest of the world will encourage America to lead the way into the better future world while they “fall in” right behind their leader. America is “to-day’s procession heading the route for travel clearing, / Pioneers! O pioneers!” (79-80). Whitman thought that America could be the open door to a better future for the entire universe. “By Blue Ontario’s Shore” also exemplifies Whitman’s belief that America would be the ideal nation to lead all other countries into the grander future. He writes:

These States are the ampest poem,

Here is not merely a nation but a teeming Nation of nations,

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Here is what moves in magnificent masses careless of particulars,

Here are the roughs, beards, friendliness, combativeness, the soul loves,

Here the flowing trains, here the crowds, equality, diversity, the soul loves.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
O America because you build for mankind I build for you,

O well-beloved stone-cutters, I lead them who plan with decision and science,

Lead the present with friendly hand toward the future.

(60-61, 63-65, 122-124)

**American Poets as Prophets**

To reiterate, Whitman had great optimism in the evolution of the world. America would be the leader, the motivator, the one to help move the rest of the world into this perfect existence. The poet did not stop there. The way America would become the great leader of this procession was by the work of great poets. He, the great American poet, would become a leader and motivator through his poetry. Forget the bibles and the churches; Whitman and others, through literature, were going to tell the world what it should do in order to reach the splendid future. In “Democratic Vistas” he says, “the problem of humanity all over the civilized world . . . is to be finally met and treated by literature. The priest departs, the divine literatus comes” (206).

In “American Bard,” the original preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes that the American poet is the one who “sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms” (13). He thought that literature was a branch of religion and the only branch “that stills shows any greenness; and, some think, must one day become the main stem” (Asselineau 46). Whitman hoped that poetry and literature “would supplant the established churches and would eventually become the religion of the future and or democracy” (45). He felt that he and other
writers could express more inspiration and optimism in their literature than any other piece of literature (such as the Bible) could. Barrett Wendell, in an essay titled “Walt Whitman” writes, “The prophets of equality are so stirred by dreams of the future that they half forget the horrors of the present or past” (Bradley 815). This is what Whitman wanted he and his fellow writers to focus on: optimism and inspiration for the good of the future.

He and other classic writers of his time, such as Melville and Emerson, “aspired to ‘gospelize the world anew’” (Bercovitch 179). Whitman “offered his ‘prophetic vision’ . . . as guarantee of the rising glory of America” (115). In “Poets to Come,” Whitman wants the poets of the future to prove his idea that poets are the key to the positive evolution of the world. He writes, “Poets to come! . . . / Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am or, / But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known, / Arouse! for you must justify me / Leaving it to you to prove and define it, / Expecting the main things from you” (1-4, 8-9). While Whitman planted the seed, it is up to the future poets to keep his mission alive and create a better future world.

Whitman hoped that through his poetry he would accomplish the task of being the sort of prophet that America needed in order to launch the universe into a brighter existence. In American Bard, he writes, “This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, Despise riches . . . stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others . . . Go freely with powerful uneducated persons, and with the young and with the mothers of families. Read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life” (17). Whitman virtually preaches to readers
during this preface before they indulge themselves in the book of poems. He hopes that from this book, they will learn to be more compassionate humans and take more of an interest in all members of society. By reading how Whitman accepts and celebrates each being and condition in his poems, readers would opt to become more tolerant and loving individuals as well, thus, eliminating prejudices and pessimism, initiating the betterment of the human race. If readers could maintain this optimism about the world, specifically its future, they could help to create a perfect society, free of taboos and social ills.

Whitman hoped that readers would read *Leaves of Grass* over and over again every year, and do it while absorbing themselves in nature. “Shut Not Your Doors,” reveals his emphasis on America’s need for poets. He writes, “Shut not your doors to me proud libraries, / For that which was lacking on all your well-fill’d shelves, yet needed most, I bring . . .” (1-2). If readers take the prophet’s inspirational words to heart, then the world will be steps closer to achieving positive evolution, and Whitman will have accomplished his goal as the American prophet-poet.

**The Evolutionary Pantheistic Acceptance of Evil**

As I have shown, evolutionary pantheists, specifically Whitman, like the transcendentalists and many Americans of the mid 1800’s, believed in a forever-evolving and better future world. In order for this ideal future to exist, people had to believe in the immanence of God, the relevance of nature, and unity on earth. Poets must also work to inspire readers by expressing these pantheistic principles in their works. This evolutionary pantheistic outlook caused pantheists to question the existence of evil. Could evil really exist under these optimistic beliefs?
It was difficult for evolutionary pantheists to accept that evil existed, though it was obvious to them that it did. Like many pantheists, Whitman pondered the existence of evil throughout his career. “Evil is the great logical problem” for pantheists (Allen, Handbook 272). They cannot understand how evil can exist if God pervades everything. Evolutionary pantheism, however, allowed pantheists to be optimistic about the presence of evil. They are able to justify the existence of evil, believing it to be “an unreality, to be sloughed off, outgrown, negated” (Chari 89). They believe that man is perfectible, and “If man be perfectible . . . how glorious must be the future toward which he is pressing! The evil will pass and the good remain” (Parrington, Beginnings 78). Evil must eventually disappear if man is going to someday be perfect. Whitman thought that “life is a continual struggle, a succession of painful convulsions, but the present is only a germ of the future, and why doubt the future when the past shows a constant progress? The future will justify the present and retrospectively give it its true sense . . .” (Asselineau 56). Evil is simply a part of the natural progression into the future, a temporary reality. For Whitman and the pantheists, all things are “incomplete and imperfect at any given moment in their transitory existence but will in due course of cosmic evolution come nearer to perfection” (Allen, Handbook 266).

Whitman went from initially believing that evil simply could not exist, to coming to terms with evil and accepting it, believing that it would eventually diminish as the world evolved. “So fervent is his joy and so passionate his optimism that he accepts everything, even evil” (Asselineau 52). And, since Whitman is “the poet of all—all life, all existence, every object and particle in the universe equally
necessary and therefore good” (Allen, *Handbook* 273), he must include evil in his acceptance. In “Starting from Paumanok” for instance, he accepts evil as much as anything else: “Omnes! Omnes! Let others ignore what they may, / I make the poem of evil also, I commemorate that part also, / I am myself just as much evil as good, and my nation is—and I say there is in fact no evil, / (Or if there is I say it is just as important to you, to the land or to me, as anything else.)” (98-101). The following passage from “Song of Myself” also exemplifies Whitman’s acceptance of evil. He writes, “I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also. / What blurt is this about virtue and about vice? / Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent” (463-465).

As with Whitman’s pantheistic ideas of God, nature, unity, and evolution, we again see that Whitman’s thoughts on evil may have been influenced by other writers and philosophers of his time. Emerson shared Whitman’s ideas of evil. He felt that “‘there is a huge and disproportionate abundance of evil on earth. Indeed the good that is here is but a little island of light amidst the unbounded ocean.’ But even then he hoped that America might prove a fresher field” (Matthiessen 181). Like Whitman, Emerson saw the enormous amount of evil in the world, but hoped that with a positive progression, we might overcome it. He believed that evil could be transcended: “All fragmentary sorrow and suffering would disappear in the radiance of good . . . and Emerson was free to go on and declare that ‘the soul refuses limits and always affirms an Optimism, never a Pessimism’” (182). Emerson’s essay “Compensation” is considered to have been an influence on Whitman’s evolutionary pantheistic ideas of evil (Asselineau 75). In the essay, Emerson says, “If the good is
there, so is the evil; if the affinity, so the repulsion; if the forces, so the limitation” (Essays 73). Whitman’s acceptance of evil into the natural scheme of evolution seems to echo Emerson’s ideas of evil in essays like “Compensation.”

The German idealists also had a major influence on Whitman’s pantheistic beliefs of the existence of evil. Whitman discovered idealists like Emmanuual Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel during his poetic career. He was intrigued by their “religious tone . . . the recognition of the future, of the unknown, of Deity over and under all . . .” (Allen, Handbook 455). Among the idealists, Hegel had the most impact on Whitman’s evolutionary pantheism. His ideas about evolution, unity, and goodness in everything reinforced Whitman’s existing pantheistic views (456).

“Traces of Hegelian influence may be seen . . . in Whitman’s belief that the ‘dialectic’ of conflict and struggle will produce a more perfect society” (Allen, Solitary 460). The poem “Roaming in Thought” is perhaps Whitman’s best illustration of the ‘dialectic’ of conflict and struggle. The poem suggests that the conflict of good and evil will eventually be solved. The entire poem follows:

Roaming in thought over the Universe, I saw the little that is
Good steadily hastening towards immortality,

And the vast all that is call’d Evil I saw hastening to merge itself
and become lost and dead. (1-2)

The Hegelian idea that existing evil is just a temporary conflict that will be terminated in the future by the dominance of good is also expressed in Whitman’s poem, “Song of the Universal.” In this poem, Whitman accepts “conflict and struggle” as natural, necessary parts of the evolution toward a better world:
In this broad earth of ours,
Amid the measureless grossness and the slag,
Enclosed and safe within its central heart,
Nestles the seed perfection.

Out of the bulk, the morbid and the shallow,
Out of the bad majority, the varied countless frauds of men and states,
Electric, antiseptic yet, cleaving, suffusing all,

Only the good is universal. (4-7, 25-28)

Only positive results are going to come out of the evil existing in the world. The goodness that exists in all evil things will eventually overtake evil, becoming universal.

Hegel’s influence allowed Whitman to accept evil as a normal part of evolution. Whitman salutes Hegel as “‘Humanity’s chiepest teacher and the choicest loved physician of [his] mind and soul’ who had helped him to resolve ‘the dark problem of evil’ . . .” (Asselineau 58). Because of Hegel, Whitman was able to view “progress as a synthesis of opposites.” Thus, he was able to integrate good and evil (Asselineau 143). Whitman’s “Thoughts (of These Years)” expresses the Hegelian synthesis of good and evil. Whitman has seen “How America illustrates birth, muscular youth, the promise, the sure fulfillment, the absolute success, despite of people—illustrates evil as well as good” (3). He can see past the evil and into the future. He sees the “seeds dropping into the ground . . . / the steady concentration of
America, inland, upward . . .” (16-17). Instead of dwelling on existing evil, Whitman focuses on the positive evolution of America in this poem.

The ideas of the transcendentalists and the German idealists, specifically Emerson’s and Hegel’s, are undoubtedly reflected in Whitman’s poems. They may not have given Whitman brand new ideas, but they confirmed Whitman’s existing ideas on God, nature, evolution, and evil. The following sections will reveal how Whitman’s ability to come to terms with and ultimately accept evil allowed him to tolerate, accept, and even celebrate virtually all beings and social conditions, no matter how disturbing or evil.
III. Whitman Transforms Social Taboos and Social Evils

While Whitman was aware of the social disturbances and social evils surrounding him (as shown in the Introduction), in his poems, he transforms these taboos and evil beings and conditions into acceptable, positive realities, even realities worth praising. The pantheistic doctrine of oneness and acceptance allowed Whitman to accept and celebrate all individuals that society considered unpleasant, unacceptable, offensive, and evil, such as the mentally ill, the dumb, the menials, and the criminals. The poet also accepted and celebrated tabooed and evil conditions, like the body and sexuality, poverty, crime, and war. Whitman’s evolutionary pantheism made him realize that these social taboos and social evils were merely temporary flaws that would eventually disappear as the world evolved towards perfection.

E.M. Forster describes Whitman as the man who “could glorify the absurd and the repulsive . . .” (Allen, World 51). He could transform any conditions that most humans would find unacceptable into positive conditions: “. . . he mentions the unmentionable, dwells on the ugly, the crude, the taboo . . . to force their inclusion in the whole of the life, nature and the cosmic scheme” (Allen, Handbook 273). Mentioning the “unmentionable” is exactly what the poet does over and over again in Leaves of Grass. In “A Hand Mirror,” for instance, he writes:

Hold it up sternly—see this it sends back, (who is it? Is it you?)

A drunkard’s breath, unwholesome eater’s face, venerealee’s flesh,

Lungs rotting away piecemeal, stomach sour and cankerous,
Whitman mentions these “unmentionable” people and conditions in order to show that we’re all made up of one another and on an equal level with all other things. Whitman shows us that we are not entirely what we appear to be. We are not merely the pure, untainted beings we thought we were; rather, we are also made up of the same indecent, unacceptable qualities that exist in those individuals that society shuns. The following passage from “Song of Myself” also exemplifies this idea of accepting all inhabitants, no matter how undesirable or defiled:

This is the meal equally set, this the meat for natural hunger,
It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous, I make appointments with all,
I will not have a single person slighted or left away,
The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited,
The heavy-lip’d slave is invited, the veneraelee is invited;
There shall be no difference between them and the rest. (372-377)

This passage emphasizes the acceptance and equality that he gives to all individuals.

Randall Jarrell, in his essay “Some Lines From Whitman,” elucidates the way Whitman’s poetry addresses social taboos. He says, “Sometimes Whitman will take
what would generally be considered an unpromising subject . . . and treat it with such
tenderness and subtlety and understanding that we are ashamed of ourselves for
having thought it unpromising . . .” (114). Whitman’s acceptance and celebration of
social taboos is represented throughout his poems.

In “Song of the Open Road,” Whitman transforms “unpromising” taboos into
positive realities. In the poem, he takes the open road of life, the journey of life
evolving towards a better state of existence, inviting anybody to come along with
him. He accepts and celebrates everything that he encounters along the way,
perceiving all to be beautiful. He sees and welcomes the "the felon, the diseas’d, the
illiterate,” even “the beggar’s tramp” and “the drunkard’s stagger” (19-20). He
accepts every embarrassing, unacceptable, rejected reality or person, according to
society’s standards. To Whitman, on the open road of life, “None but are accepted,
none but shall be dear” to him (24). He then invites them all to journey with him
towards a better future existence: “Camerado, I give you my hand! / Will you give me
yourself? Will you come travel with me? / Shall we stick by each other as long as we
live?” (220, 223-224).

In “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” Whitman again invites all inhabitants to help
carry the world towards a better future existence. As a prophet-poet, it is his duty to
accept all things, welcoming them along on the journey towards greatness. It is his
obligation to welcome all unacceptable, ill-thought people and conditions, as well as
the good, and to transform them into positive, acceptable realities. He writes, “I
know now why the earth is gross, tantalizing, wicked, it is for my sake, / I take you
specially to be mine, you terrible, rude forms” (311-312). He feels it is his challenge
and obligation as an evolutionary pantheist and poet to accept these rejected, unacceptable "rude forms."

"Salute Au Monde" exemplifies the way Whitman not only accepts but salutes all of the forbidden, socially tabooed individuals in the world. He writes:

"I see all the menials of the earth, laboring, / I see all the prisoners in the prisons, / I see the defective human bodies of the earth, / The blind, the deaf and dumb, idiots, hunchbacks, lunatics, / I see ranks, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, I go among them, I / mix indiscriminately, / And I salute all the inhabitants of the earth" (151-154, 161-162). Because of his evolutionary pantheism, Whitman accepts and salutes these social taboos just as he accepts and salutes the healthy-bodied, socially-accepted individuals in the world.

**Whitman Transforms Sex and the Body**

Whitman accepted virtually all social taboos, but he focused the majority of his attention on accepting and celebrating the tabooed subjects, sex and the body. This section explores the way Whitman not only accepts these unspoken realities but transforms them into miracles to be celebrated.

The flesh and sexuality in the nineteenth century were considered, and still are among many cultures and religions today, tabooed subjects. A popular Christian belief is that the body and the soul are completely separate entities and should not be placed on equal levels. Furthermore, the soul is always superior to the flesh. Whitman was aware that most of society viewed the celebration of the body negatively; however, he still glorified the body. In Whitman's *New York Times* obituary, March 27, 1892, it was written that the poet even "sang his own body and
liked to speak of the nude; he had a fixed idea found in all ages and most races that
the hairy breast is the breast of a powerful man and that the power in a man, or the
brute in him, deserves more admiration than is quite compatible with Christian
dogmas" (Bradley 797). Havelock Ellis in his essay titled “Whitman,” comments on
the innocence of the body in Whitman’s poems. He writes, “For the lover” in
Whitman’s poems, “there is nothing in the loved one’s body impure or unclean; a
breath of passion has passed over it, and all things are sweet” (Bradley 810). These
critics remind us of how lovingly and innocently Whitman viewed the body and how
important it was for him to express the beauty and innocence of the body in his
poems.

Whitman does not merely celebrate the flesh, though; he even claims that the
flesh equals the soul. “The word ‘body’ recurs as often in his poems as the word
‘soul’, and it is clear that it had the same poetic value for him. . . . He vindicates the
body and brings it up to the level of the soul” (Asselineau 3). In “Song of Myself,”
Whitman admits, “I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul” (422), and
he says, “. . . the soul is not more than the body, And . . . the body is not more than
the soul . . .” (1269-1270). At one point in the poem, he merges the body and soul in
a sort of sexual union. He writes:

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.
Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over
upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your
Tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.

(82-84, 87-90)

He invites his soul to lie with him, and he reminisces how the soul had once seduced
him. This passage is most reflective of the poet’s belief that the body and soul are
equal and one.

While Whitman shows through much of his poetry that he equates the body
with the soul, he tends to place emphasis on the body: “Much as he wished to hold an
equal balance between the body and the soul . . . he leaned toward the body”
(Asselineau 5). In “Song of Prudence,” Whitman writes, “The spirit receives from
the body just as much as it gives to the body, if not more” (11). In “Starting from
Paumanok,” he insists, “Behold, the body includes and is the meaning, the main
concern, and includes and is the soul; / Whoever you are, how superb and how divine
is your body, or any part of it” (187-188). This glorification of the body pervades
Leaves of Grass. “No poet before him had had such audacity or had ever taken his
flight from so low a base. Never had the word ‘body’ been pronounced with so much
respect and with so much voluptuousness at the same time” (Asselineau 3).

Whitman’s poems expressing human sexuality and glorification of the flesh
were perhaps the beginning of a more accepting attitude towards the subject of sex in
literature. In his essay “One’s Self I Sing,” Richard Volney Chase comments on the
role of Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” He writes, “There can be no doubt that ‘Song of Myself’ made sex a possible subject for American literature . . . . American literature was moving toward the freedom and inclusiveness that came more naturally to Europeans” (Bradley 891). The following lines from “Song of Myself” describe a seductive scene in which a women envisions herself secretly joining a group of naked, young male bathers: “Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore, / Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather, / The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them / The beards of the young men glisten’d with wet, it ran from their long hair, / Little streams pass’d all over their bodies” (199, 208-211). She fantasizes about joining the bathers in the following lines: “An unseen hand also pass’d over their bodies, / They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch, / They do not think whom they souse with spray” (212, 215-216). Whitman takes what would normally be considered an invasion of privacy and turns it into a fantastical, seductive, welcomed situation.

He again celebrates flesh and sex in the following lines from “Song of Myself,” which epitomize Whitman’s casual acceptance and celebration of both sex and the body itself:

Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil’d and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and trasfigur’d.

I do not press my fingers across my mouth,
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart,
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.

(516-521)

The poet admits to transforming the unmentionable subjects of body parts, sex, and lust into acceptable and celebrated subjects. He tells readers that he “believes in the flesh and the appetites, / The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,” and he says, “If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it, / Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you!” (522, 525, 527, 541). He admits that he worships his own body more than anything, and he even transforms genitals into pleasant realities, associating them with the gentle wind.

The “Children of Adam” poems contain numerous examples of Whitman’s celebration of the body and sex. “I Sing the Body Electric” glorifies flesh and sex throughout. He celebrates virtually all body parts in the poem, the “Head, neck, hair, ears . . . / Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eyebrows . . . / Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth . . . Hips, hip-sockets, hip-strength,” and even more vividly, the unmentionable and less appealing body parts, such as “man-balls, man-root, / The lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and clean, / The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk . . .” (133-135, 143, 148, 152). He believes these taboo body parts deserve as much credit as the soul: “Oh I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul, / O I say now these are the soul!” (163-164).

“The Sleepers” is a poem that not only emphasizes Whitman’s pantheistic ideas of unity, which is expressed in the way that he becomes one with the sleepers by experiencing their thoughts and dreams, but also his celebration of sexuality. The
poet, like a voyeur, stalks the sleepers in a sense, in order to experience everything that they experience, including any sexual thoughts or dreams. For instance, he invades the dream of one particular woman who is apparently dreaming of an intimate night with the darkness and a male lover, simultaneously: “Double yourself and receive me darkness, / Receive me and my lover too, he will not let me go without him. / Darkness, you are gentler than my lover, his flesh was sweaty and panting, / I feel the hot moisture yet that he left me” (48-49, 53-54).

Whitman describes his desire to procreate with women in “A Woman Waits for Me.” He writes, “It is I, you women, I make my way, / I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States, I press with slow rude muscle, / I brace myself effectually, I listen to no entreaties, / I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long accumulated within me” (25, 28-30). After Whitman vividly and bluntly describes the sexual encounter that he desires with numerous women, he goes on to describe his ulterior motive with these sexual experiences: “Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself, / In you I wrap a thousand onward years, / On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved of me and America, / The drops I distill upon you shall grow fierce and athletic girls, new artists, musicians, and singers, / I shall demand perfect men and women out of my love-spendings” (31-34, 36). Whitman views sex as a way to produce the perfect men and women for a grander future. Sex to him is not simply for physical gratification, but it’s also necessary and responsible for creating athletes, artists, and other “perfect” beings. This is why Whitman is so intent on glorifying the body and sex, for it takes both of them to produce the perfect, future members of society that he has always believed in.
The poet graphically depicts sex again in “Spontaneous Me”. He celebrates “Love thoughts, love-juice, love-odor, . . . / Arms and hands of love, lips of love, phallic thumb of love, breasts of love, bellies press’d and glued together with love, / The limpid liquid within the young man, / The young man that wakes deep at night, the hot hand seeking to repress what would master him” (12-13, 27, 32). He gives voice to these sexual elements and urges that nobody dared mention.

The mere fact that Whitman made a four-line poem about a hymen (O Hymen! O Hymenee!) was shocking enough at the time, but what was perhaps more shocking was the fact that he made several poems describing physical relationships between men. Critic Havelock Ellis in his essay “Whitman” writes, “With a sound insight he finds the roots of the most universal love in the intimate and physical love of comrades and lovers” (Bradley 809). While Whitman might have simply been celebrating male comradeship, homosexual themes are evident as well.

The “Calamus” poems contain the most obvious passages celebrating this intimacy between men that society wanted to deny. In the poem, “When I Heard at the Close of Day,” Whitman writes about himself having an unhappy day, until he hears news that his male friend is coming to visit. He describes his joy and their night together as follows:

When I wander’d alone over the beach, and undressing bathed,
laughing with the cool waters, and saw the sun rise,
And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way coming, O then I was happy,
O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food
nourish'd me more, and the beautiful day pass'd well,
And the next came with equal joy, and with the next at evening
came my friend,

For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover
in the cool night,
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined
toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast – and that night I was
happy. (5-8, 11-13)

Whether or not Whitman's intention is to express homosexuality in the previous poem, he celebrates men having a physical relationship nonetheless. He does the same in “What Think You I Take My Pen in Hand?” He writes about the beauty that he saw throughout the day, “The battle-ship, perfect-model'd, majestic,” the “vaunted glory and growth of the great city” (2, 4), and instead of taking his “pen in hand” and recording these spectacular sights, he chooses to write about what he found most beautiful that day: “two simple men I saw to-day on the pier in the midst of the crowd, parting the parting of dear friends, / The one to remain hung on the other's neck and passionately kiss'd him, / While the one to depart tightly prest the one to remain in his arms” (5-7). He felt it more worthy to write about two men engaging in a passionate kiss and embrace rather than writing about any other beauty he had seen that day. Once again, he transforms the social taboo of sexuality into something worth praising.
In the poem “Not Heat Flames up and Consumes,” the poet describes his burning desire for another man’s friendship. However, the lines sound more like passionate love rather than simple comradeship. He writes, “Not heat flames up and consumes, / Not sea-waves hurry in and out, / Not these, O none of these more than the flames of me, consuming, burning for his love whom I love, / Wafted in all directions O love, for friendship, for you” (1-2, 5, 10).

As a pantheist, believing in the unity and acceptance of all beings, Whitman could not exclude or insult the body, sexuality, male comradeship, or promiscuous individuals. As an evolutionary pantheist and poet, it was his duty to celebrate the body and sex, for procreation and the future of the great universe were dependent upon them. In the essay “Walt Whitman: ‘Cosmos-Inspired,’” author Gay Wilson Allen writes, “Whitman worships the human body . . . because it ferries the seeds of life, so that each person bridges, potentially at least, past and future generations” (Bradley 896).

Whitman’s all-embracing ideology extended beyond social taboos; the poet’s acceptance of evil as a principal of existence allowed him also to tolerate and accept all realms of evil, including America’s social evils that he spent so much time pondering in essays and articles. Addressing these social ills in his poetry, he incorporates them into his vision. In “I Sit and Look Out,” Whitman writes, “I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all oppression and shame, / All these—all the meanness and agony without end I sitting look out upon, See, hear, and am silent” (1, 9-10). The poet sees all of this evil on earth, but has nothing to say because he has learned to accept it, assured that it will dissipate with evolution.
He ameliorates other social ills, like greed for example, by saying, "We are growing: this present mad rush for money—every man robbing every man—cannot last. Our American people after all have enough sense to revise themselves when there is need for it. . . . I don’t expect an upset—I expect a growth: evolution" (Teller 31). He also says, "I never admit that men have any troubles which they cannot eventually outgrow" (123). Whitman had complete faith that America’s social evils would eventually diminish as the world evolved into a better existence. For him, "The present might be disappointing, but the ideal would eventually triumph. If he remained optimistic in spite of lucidity, it was because he put all his hope in the future . . ." (Asselineau 166).

Imprisonment and prostitution are among the social ills to which Whitman extends his acceptance. In “You Felons on Trial in Courts,” he places prisoners and prostitutes on equal levels with himself. He says:

You felons on trial in courts,

You convicts in prison-cells, you sentenced assassins chain’d and handcuff’d with iron,

Who am I too that I am not on trial or in prison?

Me ruthless and devilish as any, that my wrists are not chain’d with iron, or my ankles with iron?

You prostitutes flaunting over the trottoirs or obscene in your rooms,

Who am I that I should call you more obscene than myself?
Lusts and wickedness are acceptable to me,
I walk with delinquents with passionate love,
I feel I am of them—I belong to those convicts and prostitutes myself,
And henceforth I will not deny them—for how can I deny myself?

(1-6, 12-15)

The poet embraces these derelicts as nobody else could. Moreover, he admits to having his own wicked impulses. Since Whitman believes that we are all united with each other, according to the pantheistic doctrine, the felons are one with the law abiders, the prostitutes are even one with the chaste, and Whitman is one with all of them, for he is made up of all their wicked parts. In the poem “Transpositions,” Whitman actually suggests that prisoners be freed and the law be barred. He wants the criminals and the guards to switch places so that they might experience what it feels like to be in one another’s positions. He says, “Let judges and criminals be transposed—let the prison-keepers be put in prison—let those that were prisoners take the keys” (2). Since we are all one, we should know how it feels to be even the most unlawful, rejected members of society.

Instead of focusing on the awful deeds of criminals, Whitman accepts them and even sympathizes with them in their times of confinement. In “The Singer in the Prison,” he tells a story of a woman who visits a prison on a Sunday and sings a beautiful song for the prisoners. While listening to the song, the inmates forget their confinement and think of happier times:
With deep, half-stifled sobs and sound of bad men bow’d and

moved to weeping,

And youth’s convulsive breathings, memories of home,

The mother’s voice in lullaby, the sister’s care, the happy childhood,

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Years after, even in the hour of death, the sad refrain, the tune,

the voice, the words,

Resumed, the large calm lady walks the narrow aisle,

The wailing melody again, the singer in the prison sings. (44-46, 49-51)

He transforms the “evil” prisoners into individuals that society should feel

compassion for. Even the low-life criminals have emotions and good within them,

just as the good have evil within them. The felons can be moved by a mere song,

creating stimulating memories of their families and happy childhoods. We are all

equal, according to the pantheistic doctrine, even the law abiding citizens and the

forbidden prisoners.

In “To a Common Prostitute,” Whitman transforms the social ill of prostitution

into an acceptable and even honorable occupation. He says, “Be composed—be at
ease with me—I am Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty as Nature, / Not till the sun

excludes you do I exclude you, / And I charge you that you be patient and perfect till

I come. / Till then I salute you with a significant look that you do not forget

me” (1-2, 5-6). The poet first makes it clear that he will always accept the prostitute, no matter

how much the rest of society may exclude her. He then goes on to even make an

appointment with the prostitute, and finally, he salutes her.
“Thoughts (Of public opinion)” is one poem in which Whitman transforms the negative reality of the state of the American government into a positive condition, focusing on the future. After writing about the current “frivolous Judge” and “corrupt Congressman,” he has thoughts “Of the conformity of politics, armies, navies, to them, / Of the shining sun by them—of the inherent light, greater than the rest, / Of the envelopment of all by them, and the effusion of all from them” (8-11). He shows his hope in evolution bringing about a greater American government.

“Me Imperturbe” is one of Whitman’s earliest poems in which he nonchalantly accepts a variety of social ills. He writes:

Me imperturbe, standing at ease in Nature,

Master of all or mistress of all, aplomb in the midst of irrational things,

Imbued as they, passive, receptive, silent as they,

Finding my occupation, poverty, notoriety, foibles, crimes, less important than I thought,

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

To confront night, storms, hunger, ridicule, accidents, rebuffs, as the trees and animals do. (1-4, 8)

Whitman is unable to become agitated by such social ills, like crimes, poverty, hunger, and accidents. The poet stands back in silence and nonchalantly watches these realities, just as nature and the animals do, passively and with acceptance, as an evolutionary pantheist should. He includes these social ills into the natural scheme of evolution, realities which must exist, but which will someday become extinct.
Whitman Transforms the Tragedy of the Civil War

Whitman transformed a variety of social ills into positive conditions, but he was able to transform even the most unthinkable social ill: war. While his prose and even some poems express the horror that he saw during the Civil War, most of his poems focus on the beauty, pageantry, and heroism of the war.

The civil war is by far the social ill that affected Whitman most intensely. During the war, he spent day after day with the wounded and the dying, and witnessed the most horrific results of battle. He writes about the ugly realities of the war in much of his prose. The collection of Whitman’s essays, letters, notebook entries and such, Specimen Days & Collect, contains more than sixty pages of Whitman’s daily notebook entries revealing everything he experienced during the war. The following lines record his activities on December 21, 1862: “Begin my visits among the camp hospitals in the army of the Potomac . . . Out doors, at the foot of a tree, within ten yards of the front of the house, I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c., a full load for a one-horse cart. Several dead bodies lie near. . . . In the door-yard, towards the river, are fresh graves . . .” (26).

Whitman’s experiences continued to affect him more as he visited the hospitals. He writes of his experience when visiting the wounded of the battle of Chancellorsville in the following passage: “Then the camps of the wounded—O heavens, what scene is this?—Is this indeed humanity—these butchers’ shambles? There are several of them. There they lie, in the largest, in an open space in the woods, from 200 to 300 poor fellows—the groans and screams—the odor of blood . . . that slaughter-house!” (35).
He continues to describe the bloody war scenes in the following entry that he appropriately titled “A Glimpse of War’s Hell Scenes.” He writes about an incident in which a train filled with wounded soldiers was attacked by guerillas: “No sooner had our men surrender’d, the rebels instantly commenced robbing the train and murdering their prisoners, even the wounded.” He continues to describe the horrifying experiences of two officers on the train:

These two were dragged out on the ground on their backs, and were now surrounded by the guerillas, a demoniac crowd, each member of which was stabbing them in different parts of their bodies. One of the officers had his feet pinn’d firmly to the ground by bayonets stuck through them and thrust into the ground. . . . Of our men who surrendered, most had been thus maim’d or slaughter’d. (55-56)

Whitman not only wrote about the bloody scenes of the wounded and dying, but he also recorded the moments of emotional suffering and his longing to help the soldiers in any way. He writes about his experiences from December 23 to December 31, 1862: “I go around from one case to another. I do not see that I do much good to these wounded and dying; but I cannot leave them. Once in a while some youngster holds on to me convulsively, and I do what I can for him; at any rate, stop with him and sit near him for hours, if he wishes it” (26-27). He continues to record the emotionally traumatic aspects of his visits in the following entry titled “Death of a Hero,” in which he describes a young soldier about to die:

Stewart C. Glover, Company E, 5th Wisconsin—was wounded May 5, in one of those fierce tussles of the Wilderness—died May 21—aged about
20. . . . The fighting had about ceas’d for the day, and the general commanding the brigade rode by and call’d for volunteers to bring in the wounded. Glover responded among the first . . . but while in the act of bearing in a wounded sergeant to our lines, was shot in the knee by a rebel sharpshooter; consequence, amputation and death. . . . He kept a little diary . . . On the day of his death he wrote the following in it, today the doctor says I must die—all is over with me—ah, so young to die.

On another blank leaf he pencill’d to his brother, dear brother Thomas, I have been brave but wicked—pray for me. (52-53)

This is just one of the many young soldiers that Whitman became acquainted with, maybe even befriended, and ultimately watched die, during his visits to the hospital.

Whitman spent so much time writing about the horrifying war scenes, that it would seem nearly impossible that he could find anything positive in the years of the war. However, his evolutionary pantheism again surfaces. The poet transforms even the ugly reality of the war into a positive reality. One reason he does this is because, as a pantheist, he was able to find the positive in every situation, including the Civil War. He glorified the pageantry and bravery during the war; he wanted to make sure that a positive voice was given to the honorable soldiers who fought and died for their country. He expresses his desire to see the brave soldiers honored in a notebook entry from Specimen Days & Collect: “. . . aye, thousands, north and south, of unwrit heroes, unknown heroisms, incredible, impromptu, firstclass desperations—who tells? No history ever—no poem sings, no music sounds, those bravest men of all—those deeds. . . . Our manliest—our boys—our hardy darlings; no picture gives them.
... the Bravest Soldier crumbles in mother earth unburied and unknown” (36). He again shows his frustration for the unappreciated soldiers in the following lines: “The actual soldier of 1862-'65, North and South, with all his ways . . . his superb strength and animality, lawless gait, and a hundred unnamed lights and shades of camp, I say, will never be written” (81). Whitman wanted to give voice to these soldiers and make sure that they indeed got into the books.

A second reason Whitman transforms the Civil War into a positive reality is because the war could result in the betterment of America, mainly by possibly abolishing one of the most disturbing social ills of his time, slavery. The North feared the expansion of slavery throughout the United States. They had to fight for abolition in order to ensure that America would become a better, more united country; if the North didn’t fight, or if they lost to the South, the South could gain control of all the land, implementing even more slave states. Thus, Whitman could accept the Civil War, with all its darkness and death, for it could end one social evil, helping to create a better society, free of confinement and full of equality.

The poet did not express his favoritism between the North and the South; he embraced both the Confederate and the Union soldiers, because they both were a part of what would become one united nation. Whitman knew that the war was part of the dialectic conflict; it had to be fought in order to procure a positive outcome for America. If future equality and freedom could derive from the Civil War, then the struggles, injuries, and deaths would not be in vain.

Finally, Whitman could transform the war into a positive reality is because his evolutionary pantheistic optimism in continual life, even after the physical death of
the body, allowed him to accept and celebrate the tragedy of the Civil War. He believed that the dead soldiers and civilians would evolve into other forms of life on earth, living still. Whitman exemplifies this idea in the poem “Pensive on Her Dead Gazing,” in which Mother Nature gives those who died in the war back to us. He writes:

Pensive on her dead gazing I heard the Mother of All,

Desperate on the torn bodies, on the forms covering battle-Fields gazing,

Absorb them well O my earth, she cried, I charge you lose not my sons, lose not an atom,

And you trees down in your roots to bequeath to all future trees,

My dead absorb or South or North—my young men’s bodies

Absorb, and their precious precious blood,

Exhale me them centuries hence, breathe me their breath, let not an atom be lost,

O years and graves! O air and soil! O my dead, an aroma sweet!

Exhale them perennial sweet death, years, centuries hence.

(1-2, 5, 10-11, 15-17)
Mother Nature will ensure that the dead soldiers live on after their physical death, becoming one with the trees, the streams, the roots, and all of nature, whose duty it is to give life to the "dead" soldiers, through evolution.

As a result of these evolutionary pantheistic ideas, Whitman created a beautiful collection of poems celebrating the pageantry, music, beauty, and bravery of the Civil War, the "Drum-Taps" poems. One critic, Cesare Pavese, in his essay "Whitman—Poetry of Poetry Writing," even refers to the collection of war poems as "the vigorous and tender war-vignettes." Whitman reveals the purpose of "Drum-Taps" in a letter to a friend published in *Leaves of Grass*:

I am perhaps mainly satisfied with Drum-Taps because it delivers my ambition of the task that has haunted me, namely to express in a poem . . . with the unprecedented anguish of wounded and suffering, the beautiful young men. . . . The book is therefore unprecedently sad . . . but it also has the blast of the trumpet, & the drum pounds & whirrs in it, & then an undertone of sweetest comradeship & human love, threading its steady thread inside the chaos, & heard at every lull & interstice thereof—truly also it has clear notes of faith & triumph. (Bradley 765)

The collection of "Drum-Taps" poems is filled with positive representations of the war. The early poems in particular focus not on the tragic events of the war, but on the beauty and courage of the war. These poems express Whitman’s pantheistic optimism. "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" expresses the beauty and tranquility of troops crossing a ford, not the bloody battles of the day: "A line in long array where they wind betwixt green islands, / They take a serpentine course, their arms flash in the
sun—hark to the musical clank, / Behold the silvery river, in it the splashing horses
loitering stop to drink, / Scarlet and blue and snowy white, / The guidon flags flutter
gaily in the wind” (1-3, 6-7). Whitman paints a serene picture of the beautiful
cavalry slowly riding through the picturesque, natural surroundings.

He again distracts readers from the negative realities of war in “Bivouac on a
Mountain Side”. He writes, “I see before me now a traveling army halting, / Below a
fertile valley spread, with barns and the orchards of summer, / Behind, the terraced
sides of a mountain, abrupt, in places rising high, / And over all the sky—the sky!
Far, far out of reach, studded, breaking out, the eternal stars” (1-3, 7).

In “First Songs for a Prelude,” Whitman glorifies the act of serving in the war
because he knows that a united, free nation would be the end result. He writes about
Manhattan residents dropping everything to fearlessly march towards service. He
writes, “From the houses then and the workshops, and through all the doorways, /
Leapt they tumultuous, and lo! Manhattan arming, / Squads gather everywhere by
common consent and arm, / The new recruits, even boys, the old men show them how
to wear their accoutrements, they buckle the straps carefully” (19-20, 27-28).

Whitman paints a picture of men and boys dropping everything and leaping at the
chance to serve their country in the war. The war is a great opportunity for them, a
dutiful, glorious event offering the soon-to-be soldiers a chance to better the future
condition of their country. Whitman goes on: “(How good they look as they tramp
down to the river, sweaty, with their guns on their shoulders! / The unpent
enthusiasm, the wild cheers of the crowd for their favorites, / The artillery, the silent
cannons bright as gold, drawn along, rumble lightly under the stones, / War! be it
weeks, months, or years, an arm’d race is advancing to welcome it” (32, 39-40, 47). Whitman expresses the pride of the families and townspeople as they watch their brave men and boys parade towards the war. He creates a scene which depicts the beauty and pride of the war.

Another poem portraying the positive outcome of the war is “From Paumanok Starting I Fly Like a Bird.” Although the Civil War has torn a country apart, Whitman celebrates the possibility of the nation becoming one united nation, as a result of the war. He writes, “From Paumanok starting I fly like a bird, / Around and around to soar to sing the idea of all, / To the north betaking myself to sing there arctic songs, / To Tennessee and Kentucky, to the Carolinas and Georgia to sing theirs” (1-3, 7). Whitman does not favor one part of the nation more than the other; he includes both the North and South in his song. He wants to sing his idea to all of America in the following lines: “To sing first, (to the tap of the war drum if need be,) / The idea of all, of the Western world one and inseparable, / And then the song of each member of the states” (9-11). The poet will first sing the most important song of all, the collective song of the United States. After that, he can sing the praises of the states, individually.

“Long, Too Long America” is another poem from the “Drum Taps” collection that focuses on the prosperity of the future America. The poem reminds America how easy the “road” to the present has been; but now, America will be forced to find prosperity within the crisis, the Civil War. The country must view this tragedy as a necessary evil in order to procure a better future America. Whitman writes, “Long, too long America, / Traveling roads all even and peaceful you learn’d from joys and
prosperity only, / But now, ah now, to learn from crises of anguish, advancing, grappling, with direst fate and recoiling not” (1-3).

While the “Drum-Taps” poems express the most obvious of Whitman’s positive war transformations, several other *Leaves of Grass* poems also contain passages celebrating the soldiers, focusing on the pageantry of war, and expressing Whitman’s belief in the positive outcome of the war. The following passage from “Song of Joys” most exuberantly expresses his glorification of the brave troops in the act of battle:

O to resume the joys of the soldier!

To feel the presence of a brave commanding officer—to feel his sympathy!

To behold his calmness—to be warm’d in the rays of his smile!

To go to battle—to hear the bugles play and the drums beat!

To hear the crash of artillery—to see the glittering of the bayonets

And musket-barrels in the sun!

To see men fall and die and not complain!

To taste the savage taste of blood—to be so devilish!

To gloat so over the wounds and deaths of the enemy. (65-72)

Whitman expects the soldiers to accept willingly and be proud of their opportunity to help America evolve into a better nation.

It is difficult to imagine that anybody who witnessed such gruesome results of war would be able to find anything optimistic within those years of horror. It was Whitman’s responsibility, however, as a pantheist and prophet-poet, to accept the realities of the war and transform them into positive realities, focusing on the bravery,
the beautiful music, and the honor of serving. In addition, as an evolutionary pantheist, Whitman could justify the war with the possibility of abolishing slavery and helping achieve a better future. Also, he could transform the tragedy of the thousands dead into an evolutionary, positive reality, because there really was no death to Whitman, but only continual life. The following section will explore how the evolutionary pantheists came to accept death and how Whitman not only accepted it, but celebrated it in his poems.

The Evolutionary Pantheistic Acceptance of Death

Death, like evil, is a subject that once exhausted Whitman’s thoughts, and one that he, as an evolutionary pantheist, could eventually accept and celebrate. He initially feared death, and thought of it as a mystery to be solved. In an 1850 notebook entry he writes, “O mystery of Death, I pant for the time when I shall solve you!” (Asselineau 62). However, just as he accepted evil, he learned to accept death. No sign of anxiety over death exists in his poems. In “Song of Myself,” he says, “And as to you Death, and you bitter hug of immortality, it is idle to try to alarm me” (1289). Throughout Leaves of Grass, the poet accepts and even salutes death. “Good Hegelian that he was, Whitman knew how to resign himself to the necessity of death, the antithesis to life” (Asselineau 70).

Whitman could accept death and ultimately felt that there really was no such thing as death. He knew that life existed even after death; therefore, he did not dread the physical death of his body. Death was just another cycle in the grand scheme of life. In “Song of Myself,” he accepts and welcomes death, for it is still life to him:
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.

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it. (126-132)

"O Living Always, Always Dying" is another poem portraying Whitman’s belief that life will evolve even after death. He says, “O living always, always dying! / O me, what I was for years, now dead, (I lament not, I am content;) / O to disengage myself from those corpses of me, which I turn and look at where I cast them, / To pass on, (O living! Always living!) and leave the corpses behind” (1, 4-6). The poet’s evolutionary optimism allows him to accept death and view it as just a right of passage, a natural progression.

Whitman went from fearing death, to accepting it, to actually celebrating it. His acceptance and welcoming of death is beautifully and cheerfully expressed throughout *Leaves of Grass*. “A Song of Joys” is a possibly one of Whitman’s most optimistic, jubilant poems in which he celebrates nearly everything in existence, including death. He says, “For not life’s joys alone I sing, repeating—the joy of
death! / The beautiful touch of Death, soothing and benumbing a few moments . . ."

(139-140). He again celebrates death in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.” In this poem, Whitman and humankind struggle with their destinies, but in the end, Whitman celebrates and anxiously awaits death. He writes, “Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word death, / And again death, death, death, death, / Hissing melodious . . . / Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over, / Death, death, death, death, death” (168-170, 172-173). He salutes and welcomes his fate, repeating its name over and over again in the poem.

Like a Puritan divine, witnessing the death of a visible saint, Whitman congratulates the dying in “To One Shortly to Die”. He sits with a person in his or her time of death and puts that person at ease with the reality of death. He wants the dying to feel privileged to have the opportunity to die. He writes:

From all the rest I single out you, having a message for you,

You are to die—let others tell you what they please, I cannot prevaricate,

I am exact and merciless, but I love you—there is no escape for you.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

The sun bursts through in unlooked-for directions,

Strong thoughts fill you and confidence, you smile,

You forget you are sick, as I forget you are sick,

You do not see the medicines, you do not mind the weeping friends, I am with you,
I exclude others from you, there is nothing to be commiserated,

I do not commiserate, I congratulate you. (1-3, 10-15)

The poet feels he is the honest comforter for the dying. He is able to transform death into a positive reality. He makes death appear pleasant enough that the sick forgets the pain and welcomes the soothing thought of death. Whitman ultimately congratulates the sick person for reaching death.

Again, Whitman went from fearing death to celebrating it, and later in life he even looked forward to death. He learned to view death as a comfort. In the poem “Assurances,” he looks forward to death, for he does not believe that “Life provides for all and for Time and Space”, but that “Heavenly Death provides for all” (12). He again looks forward to death in “Night on the Prairies”. Upon thinking about what life has to offer, he comes to the following conclusion: “O I see now that life cannot exhibit all to me, as the day cannot, / I see that I am to wait for what will be exhibited by death” (16-17). He is anxious to see what death has to offer him.

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Whitman’s elegy to President Lincoln, is a poem that best represents Whitman’s acceptance, glorification, and welcoming of death. It may also be one of his most beautiful expressions of death in *Leaves of Grass*. He expresses the sadness that he and many others experienced after President Lincoln’s death, but he also expresses the comfort and solemnity of beautiful death itself. In the poem, Whitman writes about a time when he realizes death is near and he is walking towards it, and all of a sudden came the beautiful bird of death who sang: “*Come lovely and soothing death, / Undulate round the world,*
serenely arriving, arriving, / In the day, in the night, to all, to each, / Sooner or later
delicate death". The bird prepares us for death, which is inevitably coming for us all.

Once we are prepared for death, we can celebrate its arrival: “Prais’d be the
fathomless universe, / For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious, / And
for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise! / For the sure-enwinding arms of
cool-enfolding death” (135-142). The bird acknowledges all the fine things of the
world that deserve praise, but none so much as death. The bird then joyously
welcomes death’s powerful arrival: “Approach strong deliveress, / When it is so,
when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead, / Lost in the loving floating ocean
of thee, / Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death” (147-150). The bird of death ends
its song with a proud promise to continue its beautiful chant of death: “Over the tree-
tops I float thee a song, / Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields
and the prairies wide, / Over the dense-pack’d cities all and the teeming wharves and
ways, / I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death” (159-162).

Whitman takes these death poems and transforms the feared subject of death
into an acceptable, spectacular, comforting reality. Again, as a pantheist, Whitman
must accept death. His evolutionary pantheism, however, is what keeps him
optimistic about any of life’s evils, including death, for there really is no death to
Whitman, but only the evolution of life after death of the flesh. Gay Wilson Allen
may have commented on this evolutionary pantheistic justification of accepting death
best in his essay “Walt Whitman: ‘Cosmos-Inspired.’” He said that Whitman
“believes that there is no actual termination of existence of any kind–no death–only
change. What is called ‘death,’ therefore, is no more to be feared than birth, for both are merely stages in the everlasting cycles of life” (Bradley 896).

Whitman’s poem “This Compost” depicts this evolutionary pantheistic acceptance of death. The poem shows how the dead are actually still living on through nature, living as one with the earth. Whitman asks the earth where the dead have gone, and realizes that they are here, resurrected in nature and fertilizing the earth: “Behold this compost! behold it well! / Perhaps every mite has once form’d part of a sick person—yet behold! / The grass of spring covers the prairies, / The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden” (17-20). The poet realizes that the earth “grows such sweet things out of such corruptions” and “turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless successions of diseas’d corpses” (43-44). He also sees that the earth “distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor, / It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops, / It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last” (45-47).

By coming to terms with evil and death, evolutionary pantheists, Whitman in particular, were able to accept and celebrate virtually any undesirable, negative reality, including social taboos, social evils, and even war. This acceptance and celebration of social taboos and evils is evident throughout Whitman’s Leaves of Grass.
Conclusion

Whitman’s zealous optimism in the future condition of the world is a result of his evolutionary pantheistic beliefs. He was aware of the social taboos and social evils existing in the world, especially those that he experienced up-close like the Civil War. He had faith, however, that the taboos would one day be accepted, and the social evils were merely temporary flaws that would dissipate as the world evolved. Thus, we would be left with a perfect societal existence. Because of these beliefs, Whitman was able to transform social taboos and ills such as poverty, disease, imprisonment, prostitution, sexuality, death, and war into positive conditions. In his poetry, he treats these issues fervently and optimistically.

Whitman’s attitude towards the socially unacceptable and evil has led many critics to consider him to be naïve. According to Gay Wilson Allen, his pantheism led him to “sing of ‘reality’ with a boldness that might be taken as ‘naïve realism’” (Handbook 260). Perhaps he was too optimistic in the future and too naïve in thinking that these “realities” would eventually disappear. However, Whitman labeled his own ideas “as an ‘optimism with a touch of pessimism,’ probably wishing to indicate thereby that his optimism was neither blind nor naïve” (Asselineau 60).

Other critics justify Whitman’s naïve representations of social taboos and evils. Asselineau writes that the poet started with a more “joyous optimism of a mystic” and later adopted “a more subdued and more rational optimism based on Hegelianism and evolutionism” (60). He uses terms like “rational optimism” as opposed to words like “ naïve” to describe the poet’s set of ideals. It was only natural for Whitman to adopt an idea like evolutionary pantheism, which was supported by many great
philosophers, idealists, and writers of his time. His evolutionary beliefs were rational, but they were backed by his pantheistic optimism and faith in humankind.

Whether Whitman really was a naïve optimist or a rational optimist, he nonetheless, as an evolutionary pantheist, was an optimist who transformed social taboos and evils into acceptable and praiseworthy realities. The poet wanted to accomplish two things: one, create a book of poems expressing acceptance and optimism; and two, leave this world knowing that his readers were inspired by his beliefs, thus, helping to create a perfect future existence. As an evolutionary pantheist and prophet-poet, it was his obligation to ensure that he leave this legacy.

The poem “So Long!” perfectly expresses Whitman’s entire mission, what he hoped to accomplish through his work prior to his death. He writes, “When America does what was promis’d, / When through these States walk a hundred millions of superb persons, / When the rest parts away for superb persons and contributes to them, / When breeds of the most perfect mothers denote America, / Then to me and mine our due fruition” (4-8). Whitman wants to see the day that the prophet-poets’ efforts to help create a better society actually come to fruition. He has done all that he could do in order to help the world evolve, and he expresses his efforts in the following lines: “I have press’d through in my own right, / I have sung the body and the soul, war and peace have I sung, and the songs of life and death, / And the songs of birth, and shown that there are many births. / I have offer’d my style to every one, I have journey’d with confident step” (9-12). Now that he had done all that he could do and he nears death, he hopes that what he has left for the world will be the inspiration and “bible” that he hoped for. He writes, “I spring from the pages into
your arms—decease calls me forth. / Dear friend whoever you are take this kiss, / I
give it especially to you, do not forget me, / Remember my words, I may again return,
/ I love you, I depart from materials, / I am as one disembodied, triumphant, dead”
(57, 64-65, 69-71). As evolutionary pantheist and prophet-poet, Whitman could only
hope that the legacy he left behind within *Leaves of Grass* might serve as the new
inspirational book for humankind.
Works Cited


---. *Specimen Days & Collect*. Glasgow: Wilson & McCormick, 1883;

Works Consulted


