THE INFLUENCE OF WOMEN ON WALT WHITMAN

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THE INFLUENCE OF WOMEN ON WALT WHITMAN

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman, who has been called a great figure—"the greatest assuredly in our literature," says Parrington—
is, in many respects, an enigma. One phase of that enigma
lies in the connection between Whitman and women.

What did this apparently virile and masculine "Voice
of Democracy" think of women? What was their influence on
him? What was his philosophy concerning them? Did they
shape his thinking and his expression? If so, how?

It is the scope and purpose of this study to investigate
the Whitman-woman relationship and to attempt to answer,
so far as this Whitman puzzle may be answered, the question
of the effect of women on the Whitman philosophy and the
nature of that philosophy concerning woman. In the discussion, the following topics will be considered: (1) biographical
details, (2) the influence of women on Whitman,
(3) the Whitman philosophy concerning women, and (4) conclusions. In delimitation, it may be stated that in this study
no effort will be made to enter into the controversy over
Whitman's alleged homosexuality or heterosexuality. While

1Vernon Louis Parrington, Main Currents in American
the question of potential or existent sexual abnormality
may or may not have shaped the life and thought of Whitman,
much of the surmise concerning it is, like much else con-
ected with the poet, pure surmise and based upon dubious
evidence. Evidence sufficient to reach a certain or valu-
able answer to the question is not available for use in the
present study. This question will, therefore, for the most
part be ignored.

This study rests upon the undisputed fact, both explicit
and implicit in the Whitman poetry and prose, that Whitman
was keenly aware of the importance of the female in a dynamic
and expanding cosmos. As he expresses it:

Unfolded out of the sympathy of the woman is all
sympathy;
A man is a great thing upon the earth and through
eternity but every jot of the greatness of man
is unfolded out of woman;
First the man is shaped in the woman, he can then be
shaped in himself.²

Since "first the man is shaped in the woman," it may be
well to examine biographical details to note the "shaping"
of Whitman biographically. Again, difficulty is encountered.
Canby, one of the outstanding Whitman authorities, says that
the concrete biographical details of the poet's life are too
evusive to grasp, that his inner life as revealed in Leaves
of Grass was his important life, and that his definitive

²Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, 1900 edition, p. 31.
biography probably cannot be written. Mark Van Doren adds that there is a real Whitman and a legendary Whitman and that the two are so interwoven that both are breathtaking but that neither is completely true. The legend, Van Doren adds, is largely self-created. The real Whitman is still a mystery. Whitman was probably too much occupied with himself to be clear about himself. Van Doren adds, "Among the mysteries of human personality, this is one to which, in the nature of things, he could not give his full attention."

It is the legendary feature of Whitman, like that of Hamlet, which, perhaps, attracts the attention of so many writers. Elliot points out that "perhaps no man contributing to world literature has been the subject of so many books, magazine articles, and pamphlets as Walt Whitman. Certainly no American has." The difficulty of delineating Whitman was accurately foretold by the poet himself:

When I read the book, the biography famous,
And is this then (said I) what the author calls a man's life?
And so will some one when I am dead and gone with my life?
(As if any man really knew aught of my life,
Why even I myself I often think know little or nothing of my real life,

3Henry Seidel Canby, American Memoir, pp. 406-408.
4Mark Van Doren, Walt Whitman, pp. 1-3. 5Ibid., pp. 2-3.
6Charles N. Elliot, Walt Whitman as Man, Poet and Friend, p. 9.
Only a few hints, a few diffused clues and indi-
rections I seek for my own use to trace out
here.)

The bare chronological outlines of "what the author
calls a man's life" are simple and, with a few exceptions
to be discussed subsequently, are relatively uneventful.

Whitman was born May 31, 1819, at West Hills, a town-
ship on Long Island in the State of New York. 8 His family
were of Dutch and English blood. His father was a car-
penter and farmer. His mother was a housewife. Both were
uneducated. The Quaker religious strain loomed large in
his ancestral background.

When the child was four, the family moved to Brooklyn;
at six he witnessed the pageantry attending Lafayette's
visit to the Queens Borough, a visit which made a profound
impression. Whitman attended public school for approxi-
mately five years, and quit to become an office boy, first
in a lawyer's and then a doctor's office.

At the age of twelve, Whitman was an apprentice printer
in a New York newspaper office. He followed that trade
until 1836. In 1836, at the age of seventeen, the future
poet temporarily forsook the smell of printer's ink for the


8The details of the Whitman chronology are taken largely
from Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook, pp. xi-xviii
and 1-103.
ferrule and the slate. Apparently, entrance into the pedagogical profession was somewhat less exacting at that time than it is today. With the exception of a short stint as editor of the Long Islander, Whitman taught school until 1841.

In 1841, Whitman returned to the newspaper office. From 1841 to 1848, Whitman served first as a compositor and later as editor of a number of New York periodicals and newspapers. The most noteworthy of these positions was a two-year reign as editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. It may be noted as a supposition connected with the present study that the newspaper office of that day afforded only slight opportunity for contact with the softening, inspiring, or chastening influence of women. Whitman during this period contributed stories, essays, and other items to various journals. Most of these would-be literary attempts were banal and insignificant.

Whitman severed his relations with the Eagle either voluntarily or involuntarily in 1848. He spent approximately five months in New Orleans, part of the time as editor of the Crescent. Little is definitely known of the New Orleans period. Returning to Brooklyn, Whitman re-entered the newspaper business, which he followed until 1851, when he resigned the editorship of the Freeman, possibly because of a political dispute.
For the next three years, 1851-1854, Whitman followed the carpentering trade. Though details of this period of his life are scanty, he apparently was building with materials other than wood and nails, for he emerged from this apparently unproductive hiatus with the first edition of his magnificent _Leaves of Grass_. This first edition, consisting of twelve poems and a preface, was hailed by Emerson as "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed."\(^9\)

A second edition of _Leaves of Grass_ was published in 1856 and a third in 1860. Meanwhile, Whitman spent his time in idleness, in editing the _Brooklyn Times_, and in frequenting Pfaff's, a Brooklyn Bohemian rendezvous where the poet unquestionably encountered feminine adulation and may have been impressed by feminine influences.

In 1861, after the bombardment of Fort Sumter, Whitman, who recorded a moral and physical dedication to American idealism, deserted his Bohemian friends at Pfaff's. This dedication and desertion was precursor to his assumption of unofficial nursing duties during the Civil War. The immediate incident prompting his acceptance of this new role was the wounding of his brother George in 1864. One of the more publicized developments of Whitman's life, his dedication

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\(^9\)Van Doren, _op. cit._, p. 7.
to nursing in field and army hospitals, occupied much of the years 1863 and 1864. It was during this period that his friendships with the great naturalist, John Burroughs, and with one of his most sympathetic defenders, William Douglas O'Conner, began. Whitman's health failed in 1864, and he returned to his mother's home in Brooklyn for six months.

In 1865, Whitman emerged from his brief retirement to accept a position as a clerk in the Department of Interior. This apparently was a government sinecure, lost when Secretary of Interior Harlan, disapproving of the earthiness of *Leaves of Grass*, discharged him. Apparently in those days as in these there lurked in some official breasts a queasiness concerning possible investigating committees. It was during this period that *Drum Taps*, later to be incorporated in the *Leaves*, and the prose *Memoranda During the War*, now a part of *Specimen Days*, were issued. *Drum Taps* contains "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," which Van Doren terms Whitman's masterpiece in any form.10

The fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1867. Reviewed and later edited by William Rossetti, the edition was well-received in England. It was there brought to the attention of an Englishwoman, Mrs. Anne Gilchrist, who was

to play a somewhat opera bouffe role in Whitman's later career, a role subsequently to be discussed.

Between 1867 and 1873, Whitman wrote a number of new poems, published a fifth edition of Leaves of Grass, formed literary friendships with Swinburne and Tennyson, and had his first biography, that by John Burroughs, published. He broke with O'Connor over personal matters.

In 1873 tragedy entered. Whitman suffered a paralytic stroke from which he never completely recovered. His mother died, and Whitman identified himself as a "battered, wrecked old man."\[11\]

After the paralytic stroke, Whitman moved to Camden, where he spent much time in comparative poverty. During the next three years, the sixth edition of the Leaves appeared. Its sale, particularly through the efforts of Rossetti and Anne Gilchrist in England, together with some income from lectures, mitigated his poverty and encouraged a partial physical recovery.

The years from 1867 to 1882 were uneventful and unproductive. The second Boston edition of Leaves of Grass, published by Osgood in 1881, was condemned by the Society for the Suppression of Vice. The plates of the edition were given to Whitman, who found a new publisher, Rees,

\[11\]Allen, op. cit., p. xv.
Welch and Company of Philadelphia. This, the last edition of the Leaves, sold three thousand copies in one day. The sale leads to the cynical observation that perhaps one of the greatest American aids to the circulation of literature, real or tawdry, is condemnation by so-called "antisemit" groups.

Specimen Days was published in the autumn of 1882. The Bucke biography of Whitman, supervised by the poet, appeared the following year. Sale of Whitman works, essentially the Leaves, enabled Whitman to purchase a house on Mickle Street in Camden. There he lived until his death. There he made a number of new friends—Traubel, Donaldson, Ingersoll, and others. Some of these were to write biographies of the poet.

Whitman suffered a second stroke in 1885. Since walking was difficult for him, friends bought him a horse and phaeton. Since income from the Leaves was dwindling by this time, friends made up various small purses for him. His Lincoln lecture in 1887, for example, a lecture attended by many notables, resulted in a collection of $600.

Though not rewarded with great financial remuneration, Whitman during this period received artistic recognition. He was painted by Herbert Gilchrist and Thomas Eakins and sculptured by Morse and St. Gaudens. Thus, he became, in a mild sense, a literal illustration of a paraphrase of the
remarks about Robert Burns: he needed bread and they gave him a stone.

In 1888, while attempting to complete *November Boughs*, Whitman suffered another paralytic stroke. In 1891 he contracted pneumonia. On March 26, 1892, Whitman died. He was buried in Harleigh Cemetery in Camden.

The bare outline of the Whitman biography presents only a few unusual details. These details, however, coupled with the impressive and at times almost inexplicable quality of his poetry, present the puzzle which has mystified successive batteries of biographers. Among the as yet unexplained and unusual details are the following: (1) What happened to Whitman in New Orleans? (2) What occupied, shaped, and molded the man between 1850 and 1855? (3) Why his facility for making—and breaking—friendships? A brief summary of each of the biographical problems follows.

Whitman's stay in New Orleans was short. Did women in the Crescent City influence him greatly? Did he there contract romantic attachments which were to change the course of his literary existence? Did he make friendships which were to result in his self-confessed but probably apocryphal fathering of six illegitimate children? The answers to these questions still remain to be unraveled by literary and biographical detectives. From the standpoint of logic, it seems reasonable to assume that some powerful influence
changed the banal newspaper back into a poetic genius.
From the standpoint of amour, with all credit given to
the unquestionably romantic atmosphere permeating the City
of Bienville and the French Quarter, it may be presumed
that for a man of Whitman's nature to contract in a short
space of time alliances which were to result in six il-
legitimacies is preposterous. Whitman was no Charles II
or Louis XIV. Whether New Orleans made of him a man's man,
a woman's man, or, more logically, a universal man is a
surmise still incomplete.

What occupied and shaped Whitman between 1850 and
1855 after his return from New Orleans? What happened
during his carpentering days to consummate the change from
the producer of trite editorials and hackneyed "Lady's
Book" stuff into a poet whose magnificent carols became
among the greatest to be chanted on the North American con-
tinent? Again the answer is shrouded in the veiling mists
of literary obscurity. Perhaps, and again this is surmise,
nothing happened of startling significance during the ges-
tation period immediately prior to the great, formative
twenty-year period of creation which was to follow. Perhaps
all of Whitman's life--his environment, his heredity, his
multifold experiences, his preliminary apprenticeship in
editorial banality, and his subsequent post-graduate experi-
ences in war-time hospitals and in the seething ferment of
the capital of a nation whose life was at stake—was the anvil where the metal of the Whitman genius was forged.

What is the explanation of the Whitman faculty for making and breaking friendships? Women—and men—unequivocally idolized him, adored him, loved him. Why? Why did the wounded and suffering soldiers smile when they entered their hospital wards? Why was the nominal phrase "gray poet" almost invariably prefixed with the adjective "good"? Why, in the words of Van Doren, was Whitman "overwhelmed by disciples who gathered about him and took down every word he spoke"? Answers, in part, to these questions are attempted in subsequent pages of this study of the influence of women on Whitman and Whitman's philosophy concerning them. It is a cliche, but, perhaps, a true cliche, to state that behind every good man are good women. From the womb comes life and the shaping of life. Is this statement true of Whitman? This study has, in part, attempted to answer that question.

This biographical introduction of Whitman would not be complete without reference to the many biographers who have concerned themselves with the man and his work. Whitman biographies may be divided, as Allen (in part) divides them, into the following classifications: (1) early biographies of adulation and hate, (2) early foreign interpretations, (3) first re-evaluations, (4) first critical biography,
(5) scholarly biography, (6) research and textual study, and (6) recent biography.  

A brief consideration of the worth, nature, and thesis of each follows.

The first of the adulatory efforts was the pamphlet by O'Connor entitled *The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication*. Appearing in 1865, the work was oratorical and extravagant. It was the basis for much of the Whitman legend and the superman myths which came to be attached to him. *The Good Gray Poet* was followed by John Burroughs' *Notes*. The work, semi-autobiographical since Whitman assisted in its preparation, is sympathetic rather than critical. Part of it is mythical. Burroughs does say that "from the immediate mother of the poet come, I think, his chief traits." Another of the adulatory works and the first complete life of Whitman was that by Bucke. It, too, was prepared in part by Whitman himself who said that it was the final word on his life.

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14 John Burroughs, *Notes on Walt Whitman as a Poet and a Person*.


Chief of the early "hate" biographies was that by the German, Bertz, who brought and attempted to substantiate charges of homosexuality against Whitman, attempted to destroy the "prophet myth," and attacked Whitman's philosophy and thought.

Whitman began to receive acclaim in England as early as 1866. Among biographical articles and books were those by Moncure Conway, Rossetti, Anne Gilchrist, Edward Dowden, and John Addington Symonds. All were sympathetic. The Rossetti essay in the London Chronicle was responsible for bringing the bizarre Mrs. Gilchrist into Whitman's life.

The death of Whitman in 1892 prompted the publication by his literary executors of the work, In Re Walt Whitman. Much of it is worthless praise, but it does give new testimony by some of Whitman's friends. It also contains translations of critical foreign essays. In the Whitman bibliography it is accompanied by the companion work by Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden. Traubel attempts, with little success, to be the Boswell to Whitman. His

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19 Ibid., pp. 15-21.

20 Horace Traubel and others, In Re Walt Whitman, pp. 1-288.

21 Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, Vols. I, II, and III.
work is filled with much interesting and minute but unimportant trivia.

Other works by Whitman's renowned friends include that by Donaldson\textsuperscript{22} and a second work by Burroughs.\textsuperscript{23} The Donaldson biography adds little to earlier efforts. Burroughs in his second volume is critical rather than biographical.

Early re-evaluations by friends of Whitman included those by Trowbridge and Edward Carpenter. The Trowbridge work points out Whitman's confession of the influence Emerson had on him.\textsuperscript{24} Carpenter is friendly but critical.\textsuperscript{25} His book contains the first published evidence of Whitman's letter to Symonds in which Whitman claims the paternity of six children.

The first really critical biography of Whitman, in addition to that by Berti which was previously noted, is that by Binns.\textsuperscript{26} Binns, an Englishman sympathetic to Whitman, has presented one of the most reliable accounts of the poet's life. Yet even he engaged in highly-colored and, perhaps,

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\textsuperscript{26}Henry B. Binns, \textit{A Life of Walt Whitman}, pp. 1-369.
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fanciful conjecture concerning the New Orleans episode and the possible influence of a "high-born, southern lady" on Whitman. Binns is the first to analyze the subjective nature of the Whitman poetry.

Early scholarly biography of the poet include, in addition to Binns' contribution, works by Bliss Perry and George Rice Carpenter. Perry gives in impartial fashion the then known facts concerning Whitman's life. He interpreted the Leaves of Grass in the light of international literary developments. He also admits the Whitman faults and for that reason was criticized by Whitman devotees. Carpenter's work, published in the "English Men of Letters" series, presents an assimilation of the Bucke and Perry biographies. He claims that Whitman had love affairs, but was not influenced by other writers.

Research and textual studies include those by Holloway, Catel, and Schyberg. Holloway collected much of Whitman's hitherto unpublished writings. He attempted to explain the poet on the basis of his early life and intellectual development. Catel, a Frenchman, presents a psychological study of the origin of Leaves of Grass. Schyberg, a German,

27Ibid., p. 51.
28Bliss Perry, Walt Whitman, His Life and Work, pp. 1-318.
29George Rice Carpenter, Walt Whitman.
continues Catel's psychological analysis. He also places the poet in the stream of world literature.

A number of recent biographies of Whitman have appeared. Edgar Lee Masters, the Spoon River poet, explores the homosexual attack and claims that Whitman's greatest achievements were his unconventionality and his literary pioneering.31 Esther Shephard attacks Whitman bitterly, contending that he was a poser and, in a sense, a literary thief.32 Newton Arvin's Whitman is a study of the poet's social thinking.33 One of the more interesting of the recent Whitman biographies is that by Frances Winwar. Written, apparently, for women's club consumption, it is sentimental, mawkish, and a re-working of the old mines of myth and legend presented as actuality.34

Clifton J. Furness, who is at work on what may be the most authoritative biography of the poet, has presented Walt Whitman's Workshop.35 This collection of unpublished manuscripts has excellent critical annotations.

32Esther Shephard, Walt Whitman's Pose.
34Frances Winwar, American Giant: Walt Whitman and His Times, pp. 1-341.
35Clifton J. Furness, Walt Whitman's Workshop.
The most recent Whitman biography is one of the best. Canby, who confesses that he fails to have all of the answers, is interpretative rather than biographical. His conclusions in connection with the scope of this study are interesting: "He [Whitman] could feel like a woman. . . . He could love a woman . . . ."37

Of value to the Whitman student is the carefully documented and authoritative Walt Whitman Handbook by Gay Wilson Allen.38 Allen, emphatic in many statements, says that we cannot accept the poet's interpretation of himself. Neither can we completely accept that of any other interpreter because of the mysticism and breadth of the man. Allen adds: "Like Leaves of Grass itself, the life of our great poet is becoming an imperishable fable in which each generation attempts to find its own expression and the answers to its moral and spiritual problems."39

Some aspects of the place of woman in that fable may be found in the pages which follow.

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37 Ibid., pp. 204-205.
38 Allen, op. cit., pp. xi-560.
39 Ibid., pp. 94-95.
CHAPTER II

WOMEN WHO INFLUENCED WHITMAN

Since no man can live completely without woman, it is logical to assume that women played some role in shaping Walt Whitman's literary and personal career. It is proposed in this chapter to examine the feminine influence, real or alleged, which shaped his thought and life. Though, as was pointed out previously, it is often difficult to separate myth from reality in the Whitman saga, some evidence does validate, in part at least, the premise that women had in greater or lesser degree an effect on Whitman from three viewpoints, those of (1) literary stimulation, (2) comfort and morale building, and (3) romantic attachment. A consideration of each of these points of view follows.

Women as a Literary Influence on Whitman

Many biographers and other students of Whitman have attempted in detail and with some success to trace the influence of a number of male writers and thinkers on the Whitman prose and poetry. Hegel, Emerson, Carlyle, Scott, and others have left their imprints on the Whitman mind. The influence of active feminine literary thought and
artistry, while mentioned and, in the case of George Sand, stressed, has, on the whole, been relatively neglected. This neglect has come, perhaps, from the poet's own failure to elaborate on the influence of women writers in his life. His testimony is negative rather than positive. As early as 1840, in speaking of his literary plans, Whitman wrote in "The Sun Down Papers" that he would carefully avoid saying anything of women "because it behooves a modest person... not to speak upon a class of beings" about whose nature and habits he is completely ignorant, since he had never by experience or observation obtained any knowledge of them.¹

Further evidence, which would encourage neglect of the search for feminine literary influences, is found in the catalogue of books piled up around and being read by Whitman.²

The poet, under a pseudonym, contributed in his old age a description of his literary habitat. Among other descriptive passages occurs this:

... on the table more books, some of them evidently old-timers, a Bible, several Shakespeares,... Scott's "Rorder Minstrelsy," Tennyson, Ossian, Burns, Omar Khayyam, all miscellaneously together.²

No mention of women writers was in that catalogue. In fact, Fausset infers that few writers of any sex had much

¹Shephard, op. cit., p. 30.
²Hugh I. Fausset, Walt Whitman, p. 280.
influence on Whitman, quoting the poet's claim that he "stepped into literature unaware that there was ever hitherto such a production as a book or such a being as a writer."3 Canby concurs, saying that while scholars find many sources of Whitman thought, most of it comes from his imagination and emotion.4

Yet these negative evidences are more than offset by the outpourings of poetic genius in the "Song of Myself," one of the great Whitman poems. "I am," says Whitman,

... the poet of the woman the same as the man;
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man;
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.5

From then until his last written effort, the letter composed on his deathbed in January, 1892, Whitman acknowledges the importance of woman, saying that "the only theory worthy our modern times for great literature, politics, and sociology must combine all the bulk peoples of all lands, the woman not forgetting."6

That Whitman was "the woman not forgetting" is shown not so much by his positive allusions as by the shaping of

3Ibid., p. 86.
5Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, 1900 edition, p. 51.
6Fausset, op. cit., p. 298.
his prose and poetry. Among women of significance in the Whitman literary life were Frances Wright, Margaret Fuller, Fanny Fern, George Sand, and the hosts of unknown or forgotten women and feminine men who wrote the banalities current in the popular fiction of Whitman's day, banalities which irked, and must have inspired a vigorous counter-action in, the formative mind of the poet. A consideration of each of these influences follows.

Frances Wright, an English feminist and co-founder, with Robert Dale Owen, of Free Enterprise, a free-thought paper, was read avidly by Whitman's father. She, according to Shephard, had a powerful influence on Whitman's thinking. In A Few Days in Athens, Frances Wright advanced a plea for fuller sensual enjoyment. She also said that it was the manifest American destiny to correct all existing evils. Although this was a common concept among many during the early Nineteenth Century, her exposition of it was probably the source of Whitman's fundamental thesis of the purpose of democracy, as exemplified in Leaves of Grass.

While Canby does not go so far as Shephard in estimating the influence of Wright, he does say that Whitman had been born in a household familiar with radical liberalism, a liberalism emanating in part from the influence of Frances

7Shephard, op. cit., pp. 32-37.
Wright on Whitman's father. There, possibly, Whitman found his ideas of the worth of democracy, labor, and the common man.8

Fausset thinks that Whitman was influenced by Miss Wright's theory of "enlightenment," democratic ideals, and rational materialism. Her book *A Few Days in Athens*, Whitman said, had been daily food to him. Fausset points out that her intellectuality had attracted him as a young man "more than any other woman, when he heard her lecture on democratic ideals."9 She possessed herself, Whitman said, "... of my body and soul."10

Specific evidence of feminine prophetic influence on Whitman is found in the writings of the Transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller, who, in a sense, foretold the coming like a John the Baptist.

The idea of a great native poet was current in America, and in her essay "American Literature" Margaret Fuller had foretold the coming of a mighty genius in the western world. He would harrow the soil and open it to the air and the sun. Whitman, whose ear was attuned to the time, heard ... 11

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9Fausset, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

10Ibid.

There is evidence, says Fausset, that Whitman welcomed Margaret Fuller's prediction of a genius, "... wide and full as our rivers, flowery, luxuriant and impassioned as our great prairies, rooted in strength as the rocks on which the Puritan fathers landed." Fausset further thinks that the rebel and revolutionary in Whitman was stirred by Margaret Fuller's assumption that "only a noble fearlessness can give wings to the mind," though he deliberately cultivated caution as a necessary antidote to recklessness.

Further evidence, tenuous in nature, is afforded by the fact that Margaret Fuller wrote for magazines which were read by Whitman and to which he also contributed and that he, like Margaret, was a mystic. Allen says that one reason Whitman's works are international in influence arises from the belief that his literary sources were internationalist in influence, and that first and most important among these sources were the Transcendentalists represented by Margaret Fuller.

That the Transcendentalists had some effect on Whitman is, however, obvious. That Margaret Fuller was a leading Transcendentalist is equally obvious. It seems reasonable

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12 Fausset, op. cit., pp. 53-54.
13 Ibid., p. 90.
to surmise that part of the wellsprings of the Whitman genius found their roots in the mysticism of feminine New England.

More tangible than literary or intellectual influence is the tangible though minor part played in Whitman's life by Sarah Payson Willis, better known as Fanny Fern. The format of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and the titling of the Whitman work were, for example, probably hers. She was the sister of the popular writer, N. P. Willis, and was in her own right a successful sentimental novelist of the pre-*Leaves* era. She had worked on the *Ledger*, which Whitman for a time edited. Her *Portfolio* bore a marked resemblance in makeup to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The title of one of her effusive works, *Fern Leaves*, may have inspired the Whitman title. Canby suggests that the peculiar format of the first edition of the *Leaves* was much like that used by Fanny Fern in her books.

If Whitman needed self-confidence to continue his work on the *Leaves*, the rhapsodic review accorded it by Mrs. Fern must have helped. Using in part Whitman's quaint style, and punctuation of her own, she wrote:

Well baptised; fresh, hardy, and grown for the masses . . . *Leaves of Grass*: thou art unspeakably

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delicious after the forced, stiff Parnassian exotics

. . . Walt Whitman, the effeminate world needed thee
. . . Walt Whitman, the world needed a "Native Amer-
ican" of thorough out-and-out breed--enamoured of
women, not ladies--men, not gentlemen. It needed a
man who dared speak out his strong, honest thoughts
in the face of pusillanimous, toady ing, republican
aristocracy; dictionary men, hypocrites, cliques, and
creeds; it needed a large-hearted, untainted, self-
reliant, fearless son of the Stars and Stripes . . .
It were a spectacle worth seeing, this glorious Native
American, who, when the daily labor of chisel and
plane was over, himself with toil-hardened fingers
handled the types to print the pages which wise and
good men have since delighted to indorse \(\text{sic}\) and
honor.\(^{17}\)

If Whitman needed assurance other than Emerson's, this
fulsome blast must have massaged the bump of vanity found
in him as in most human beings. In format, titling, and the
instillation of confidence, therefore, the sister of Willis
must have been helpful or suggestive to the poet.

A more pronounced approach to the formative channels of
Whitman's mind is found in the works of the French eccentric,
George Sand. Whitman shared Margaret Fuller's love of George
Sand. He reviewed a number of the French woman's novels and
was duly impressed by them.\(^{18}\) *Consuelo* and its sequel, *The
Countess of Rudolstadt*, were read by Whitman, he said, a
dozen times. These two novels as well as *The Mosaic-Workers*

\(^{17}\) Winwar, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

\(^{18}\) Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
and *The Gentleman Joiner* gave Whitman concepts of the poet-to-be and his mission.19

The nonchalance, the love of comrades, walking, the concept of a Christ-like carpenter, the brotherhood striving for the redemption of the world—all were George Sand's images implanted in Whitman's mind.20 Even George Sand's concepts of attire were to find imitation in Whitman. The walking-stick, frock coat, and boutonniere were succeeded by the changing garb of the workman. These eccentricities came from George Sand, as did some of his literary ideas. As Brooks says,

... the heroes of George Sand may well have served him as a model, while he must have been seriously impressed by her prophecy of a literature with the manners of the people, a muse that would recover her strength in the bosom of the masses.21

That George Sand was almost the sole source of Whitman's literary inspiration, as was claimed by Esther Shephard,22 is, however, bitterly denied by other writers. Allen says that nearly every critic who reviewed Mrs. Shephard's book agreed that she had exaggerated the importance of this one source.23 Canby adds that George Sand, as well

23*Allen, op. cit.*, p. 75.
as other sources, had some influence, but was relatively unimportant. 24

There is some justification for the supposition that unknown or anonymous feminine writers did play a role in the shaping of Whitman's thought. There was much of the child and more of the rebel in Whitman. The conjecture may be advanced that the nature of popular poetry and fiction written by or for women during the formative forties--effete, priggish, "namby-pamby"--drove Whitman in subconscious rebellion to vigor, earthiness, vitality, and, in some instances, obscenity.

Women as Comforters and Morale Builders

The worn platitude that "behind every good man stands some good woman" may well have been true of Whitman. It is possible that comforters and confidantes may have had a greater influence on him than the feminine intelligentsia or the seekers of trysts and troths. Among those who played a part in caring for Whitman's daily needs, physical or psychological, were his mother and sister, the Prices, Mrs. James Brinton, Ursula Burroughs, Ellen O'Connor, Mary Davis, and Mary Philbrick Smith.

Most important in this catalogue of the Whitman matriarchy and hierarchy is his mother. Years after her death he was to write that she was "the most perfect and magnetic character, the rarest combination of practical, moral, and spiritual, and the least selfish of all and any I have ever known." \textsuperscript{25}

Canby says that Whitman's love for his mother and hers for him transcended everything else in their family life. \textsuperscript{26} She was a continual source both of care and of comfort to Whitman. Her letters show her to be almost illiterate and at times querulous and complaining, but she is characterized on the whole as an ample woman, wise, great of heart, and outstanding in quality and depth of her love. She was a good teller of stories and a confidante to whom Whitman poured out his reports throughout his life. Canby says that she was a rock of comfort and affection in a world where often Whitman found love more an irritant than a source of happiness. \textsuperscript{27}

While Whitman's mother probably knew little or nothing of the significance of Whitman's work, she supported him in

\textsuperscript{25} Fausset, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 243.


\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
it. She was, in a sense, a substitute for marriage and a possible cause of his bachelorhood.  

Carpenter, while not going into the panegyrics characteristic of some other writers in discussing Whitman's mother, does say that she was of marked spiritual and intuitive nature, healthy and strong, with a kind, generous heart, good sense, and a cheerful disposition.  

Holloway points out that Whitman, for all his devotion, realized his mother's limitations. She was unschooled and unliterary. Whitman had to trim his letters to her understanding, a fact which may have abetted his use of colloquialisms.  

Despite the existence of limitations, positive evidence of the influence of the maternal on Whitman is shown by the shock caused by her death and by these lines written some two years after her death:

To memories of my mother, to the divine blending, maternity,
To her, buried and gone, yet buried not, gone not from me,
(I see again the calm benignant face fresh and beautiful still,
I sit by the form in the coffin,
I kiss and kiss convulsively again the sweet old lips, the cheeks, the closed eyes in the coffin;)

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28 Ibid.
29 George Rice Carpenter, Walt Whitman, p. 8.
30 Emory Holloway, Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative, p. 200.
To her, the ideal woman, practical, spiritual, of all earth, life, love, to me the best.\textsuperscript{31}

Also of some influence in Whitman's life were his sister and his grandmother. Whitman attributes part of his intellectual ability to his paternal grandmother, Hannah Brush, who had been a schoolteacher with an unusually strong mind.\textsuperscript{32} Mary, Whitman's sister, was the prototype of the heroine in a Whitman short story, "The Half Breed." Whitman describes her as tender and affectionate though capricious and headstrong.\textsuperscript{33} The family on the whole, however, thought little of the poetic swan their ugly duckling had become. They did not enjoy the first edition of the Leaves. They either did not read it or found it incomprehensible and "... regarded the whole thing as a sort of malady from which they hoped \(	ext{Whitman}\) would now recover."\textsuperscript{34}

There were other feminine comforters or confidantes, important or passing, in Whitman's life. Reference should be made to these. In one of his early schoolteaching jobs, he proved a continual irritant to his host's wife, Mrs. James Brenton, because of his clumsiness and ineptitude.

\textsuperscript{31} Fausset, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 243.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 10.

\textsuperscript{33} Katherine Molinoff, \textit{Some Notes on Whitman's Family}, cited by Allen, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 82.

\textsuperscript{34} Fausset, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 100.
Her contempt for his "loafing and inviting his soul" may have caused a rebellion against the Puritanism and energy she represented.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 26-27.}

The Prices, mother and daughter, furnished a refuge for Whitman soon after the first publication of \textit{Leaves of Grass}. According to the daughter, Helen Price, the attraction to Whitman was the mother, who was tender and sympathetic and was regarded by Whitman as another mother. Helen said that Whitman, contrary to his own self-drawn picture, was non-assertive and non-egotistical. He listened attentively to the opinions of the Prices and gave the impression of regarding them of more value than his own.\footnote{Ibid., p. 109.}

Another friend who was irritated by Whitman but who served as a source of solace and comfort was Ursula Burroughs, the wife of Walt's friend, the naturalist, John Burroughs. She sewed shirts for Whitman, made griddle cakes for his Sunday breakfast, and nursed him when he was ill.\footnote{Ibid., p. 131.}

Ellen O'Connor, the wife of another Whitman friend, also both suffered and enjoyed the personal eccentricities of the perennial bachelor. She was the originator of the story that Whitman was in love with an anonymous Washington
married woman. Whitman boarded with the O'Connors for a
time during the Civil War. She gave him sympathy, social
independence, and unobtrusive care. He called her a woman
"without shams or brags, just a woman." She and Ursula
Burroughs were, according to Peter Doyle, Whitman's young
masculine confidante, his only close women friends.

Conforters who played a minor part in making Whitman's
old age more pleasant were Mary Whitall Smith and Mrs. Mary
Davis. Miss Smith, the elder daughter of a Philadelphia
Quaker family, insisted that her father find frequent occa-
sions to invite the poet into their home. Fausset says,

He enjoyed the gaiety of the Smith's home in
which wealth was pleasantly allied with philanthropy,
and would sit for hours in his familiar grey suit,
leaning on his stick, watching from a corner of the
hall the young folk dancing. They made him feel young
himself, and he would sing as he used to do "Old Jim
Crow" or some negro melody as he splashed about in his
bath. With both Mary and her father he became affec-
tionately intimate as he had been with no woman since
Anne Gilchrist had gone.

Mrs. Mary Davis, the widow of a sea captain, moved
into Whitman's house in Camden in the 1880's and served as
a combination housekeeper and friend for the rest of his
life. It is not clear whether she was actuated by pity or

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38 Holloway, op. cit., p. 233.
39 Fausset, op. cit., p. 183.
41 Ibid., p. 287.
romantic attachment or both. As Holloway says, "We do know that she took him to care for, voluntarily, at the cost of her strength, her property, and her own prospects."\(^{42}\) He willed her $500 upon his death. She sued his estate for $5000 more but was awarded only an additional $500.

Another woman in Whitman's life who, in a greater degree, combined the qualities of comforter with those of romantic interest was the Anne Gilchrist mentioned above. She will be considered in the next section of this study.

Romantic Attachments

It is difficult to determine whether or not Whitman had any real romantic interludes. The subject is clouded with rumor, fancy, and myth. Fausset says that the Whitman attitude toward women was essentially detached and that any manifestation of the tender sentiment toward them usually rang hollow.\(^{43}\) Brooks points out that much of Whitman's interest in conversation and writing in his formative years contained little or no mention of women.\(^{44}\) On the other hand, Binns,\(^{45}\) Holloway,\(^{46}\) Winwar,\(^{47}\) and other biographers

\(^{42}\)Holloway, op. cit., p. 306.

\(^{43}\)Fausset, op. cit., p. 209.

\(^{44}\)Brooks, op. cit., pp. 128-129.

\(^{45}\)Binns, op. cit., p. 51.


\(^{47}\)Winwar, op. cit., pp. 137-143.
subscribe to the theory of powerful feminine romantic influences in Whitman's career. Perhaps the best analysis is that of Canby:

He could feel like a woman. He could feel like a man. He could love a woman—though one suspects that it was difficult to love women physically, unless they were simple and primitive types. . . . Because all reference was back to his own body, he seemed to himself to be a microcosm of humanity. There are, I think, no truly objective love poems in the Leaves of Grass.48

The most pronounced romantic attachments in Whitman's life—real, partly real, or suppositions—were Anne Gilchrist, the "unknown" New Orleans woman, and the "unknown" Washington married woman.

There was nothing imaginary about Anne Gilchrist. She existed. The widow of a biographer of Blake, she read the Leaves of Grass and interpreted it as a tremendous and personal plea for romantic love. That plea she thought, despite her age—forty-eight—she could answer. She intimated these sentiments to Rossetti who forwarded them indirectly to Whitman. He was touched and pleased and sent her his photograph. The result was an article "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman" in praise of him—tantamount to an openly published love letter. This elicited no desired response from the cautious poet. She wrote a passionate declaration of love. After delaying his response for two months, Whitman

48 Henry Seidel Canby, Walt Whitman, pp. 204-205.
wrote a delicate and subtle evasion. She continued to write; Whitman replied infrequently.\textsuperscript{49}

After Whitman's paralysis, Mrs. Gilchrist decided, in spite of Whitman's protests, to come to America. She did. Details of the meeting of the two—the eager and palpitant and the coy and timorous lovers—are unavailable. The result was a transformation of passion into a "lofty, yet intimate friendship."\textsuperscript{50}

Eventually the intimacy of the "lofty" friendship waned. Mrs. Gilchrist returned to England. Upon her death, Whitman wrote to her son that she was "a sweet and rich memory." Later he wrote the poem "Going Somewhere" as a memorial to her: "My science-friend, my noblest woman-friend . . ."\textsuperscript{51}

Equally as spectacular but far more in the realm of myth and obscurity is the alleged affair with the New Orleans beauty. Some biographers accept her and her influence as being as real as the Koran and Talmud. Others say that she was largely a figment of Whitman's or some biographer's imagination. Was she the mother of the six illegitimate children mentioned in Whitman's famous letter of John Addington Symonds?

\textsuperscript{49}Emory Holloway, Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative, pp. 257-264.

\textsuperscript{50}Ibid., pp. 291-292.

\textsuperscript{51}Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, 1900 edition, p. 506.
My life, young manhood, mid-age, times South, &c., have been jolly, bodily, and doubtless open to criticism. Though unmarried, I have had six children—two are dead—one living Southern grandchild, fine boy, writes to me occasionally—circumstances (connected with their fortune and benefit) have separated me from intimate relations.  

Though many believe that Whitman was drawing a long bow here in a spurious attempt to authenticate his masculine virility, Binns accepts the legend. He conjures up a New Orleans romance with a highborn lady and thinks she influenced both Whitman's life and his poetry. Much of Whitman's work, Binns explains, is a result of frustrated love.  

Holloway also subscribes to the existence of the New Orleans woman, using the poem "Once I Passed through a Populous City" to substantiate it, and conveniently forgetting that he had found that the same poem was addressed to a man.  

Canby says there is no real evidence on the Crescent City affair and that to build an hypothesis on its influence is unsound. He also says in his memoirs that after writing his Whitman he has discovered evidence which supports the existence of an illegitimate son who resembled Whitman and who had an extraordinary career. Such facts or

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52 Edward Carpenter, Days with Walt Whitman, pp. 142-143.

53 Binns, op. cit., p. 51.


conjectures, he concludes, are not the essence of a Whitman biography.\footnote{56}{Henry Seidel Canby, American Memoir, p. 407.}

Equally conjectural are the stories of the existence of an affair with a Washington married woman. This episode allegedly occurred between 1868 and 1870. There are some indications in Whitman's notes that there was such an affair and that the lady's husband resented it.\footnote{57}{Fausset, op. cit., pp. 210-211.} As Fausset points out, however, since Whitman obscured much of his private life, even to the extent of using numbers instead of names, exact conclusions are impossible.\footnote{58}{Ibid., p. 211.}

The lady, if we are to accept Whitman's entries in his notebooks, did perturb him. He advises himself:

To give up absolutely and for good, from this present hour, this feverish, fluctuating, useless undignified pursuit of 164--too long (much too long) persevered in--so humiliating ... Let there be from this hour no faltering ... avoid seeing her, or meeting her, or any talk or explanations--or any meeting whatever, from this hour forth, for life.\footnote{59}{Ibid.}

Apparently, Madame 164 did exercise some influence on Whitman. It may be pointed out, however, that part of his greatest work had been written before she appeared on the scene.
Summary

The women in Whitman's life were made partly out of parchment, partly out of fustian and housekeepers' aprons, partly out of silk, and partly out of whole cloth. Among those influencing him from the literary standpoint were Frances Wright, Margaret Fuller, Fanny Fern, George Sand, and a host of ladies from the "pap and perfume" school. His comforters and confidantes were his mother and sister Mary, the Prices, Mrs. Brinton, Ursula Burroughs, Ellen O'Connor, Mary Smith, and Mary Davis. Romantic interests included Anne Gilchrist and two unknown or imaginary ladies—those from New Orleans and Washington.

How much influence did these ladies exert on Whitman's life and letters? He remained unmarried to the end of his days.
CHAPTER III

WHITMAN'S PHILOSOPHY OF WOMEN

An examination of the works of an artist may reveal, to some extent, the philosophy of the artist. It is proposed in this chapter to present a number of Whitman's utterances concerning women to determine, if possible, his philosophy concerning them. *Leaves of Grass* contains more than one hundred fifty general and specific direct allusions to the female. There are many other hidden, veiled, and indirect references to women. It is from the direct statements that this formulation of Whitman's philosophy toward women emerges.

It is difficult to divide or catalogue these references into specific compartments, or kinds of allusions. Whitman said of poetry that no definition sufficiently encloses it.\(^1\) The same may be said of any attempt to divide into separate categories the philosophy of Whitman concerning women. For the purposes of convenience in discussion, however, and always remembering that one division often is almost inextricably interwoven with another, Whitman's philosophy of women may be considered under the following heads: (1) general, (2) maternal, (3) procreational, (4) sexual, and

(5) romantic. It may be seen that often the divisions may be connected and indistinguishable. A consideration of each follows.

General Philosophy

In Whitman's scheme of things, woman is neither inferior nor superior to man. "The female equally with the male I sing." Evidence of that belief abounds throughout the poems when they refer to the position of the sexes in America—even in the careful version and inversion of terms. Speaking of America, the poet said:

Here lands female and male;
Here the heirship and heiress-ship of the world—here the flame of materials.

Repeatedly expressions such as that above occur:

"Toward the male of The States and toward the female of The States"; "And a compend of compends is the meat of a man or a woman"; "The perfect equality of the female with the male"; and "Man or woman! I might tell how I like you but cannot." The exhibition of modesty demonstrated in the

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2 Ibid., p. 11.
3 Ibid., p. 19.
4 Ibid., p. 25.
5 Ibid., p. 61.
6 Ibid., p. 296.
7 Ibid., p. 77.
preceding passage is believed by other utterances, and in such utterances Whitman places woman on the same plane in his affections and considerations as he does man. Reference has been made previously to these lines of Whitman:

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man;
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man.\(^8\)

Previous reference has been made also to Whitman's belief that

A man is a great thing upon the earth, and through eternity—but every jot of the greatness of man is unfolded out of woman.\(^9\)

Because of his belief in equality, Whitman occasionally exhorts and adjures women. "Be not ashamed," he tells them:

... your privilege encloses the rest, and is the exit of the rest;
You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul.\(^10\)

Whitman wants his republic to be a place

Where women walk in public processions in the streets, the same as the men,
Where they can enter the public assembly and take places the same as the men.\(^11\)

Why, Whitman demands, should woman not be regarded as an equal?

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 51.
\(^9\)Ibid., p. 31.
\(^10\)Ibid., p. 102.
\(^11\)Ibid., p. 162.
The wife—and she is not one jot less than the husband;
The daughter—and she is just as good as the son;
The mother—and she is every bit as much as the father.12

The importance and the equal ability of woman add to
her essential reality. Women are not, in the Whitman view,
dreams or dots. They are immortal realities:

Each man to himself, and each woman to herself, such
is the word of the past and present, and the word
of immortality;
No one can acquire for another—not one!
Not one can grow for another—not one!13

In addition to his belief in the equality of women,
Whitman, as he expresses himself in his poetry, felt a com-
passion for their lot, their woes, and their trials. Re-
peated notes of sympathy and pity occur throughout the
Leaves: "I wish I could translate the hints about the dead
young men and women"14; "This grass is very dark to be from
the white heads of old mothers"15; "How the lank loose-
gown'd women look'd when boated from the side of their pre-
pared graves"16; "The mother, condemn'd for a witch, burnt
with dry wood, her children gazing on."17

12 Ibid., p. 199.
13 Ibid., p. 223.
14 Ibid., p. 36.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 69.
17 Ibid.
Akin both to the spirit of equality and that of compassion was Whitman's refusal to recognize superior castes. The high-born aristocrats, the wealthy, those raised and bedded in silken luxury, did not excite his admiration. Instead, the lowly, the humble, those in the plebeian walks of life receive his comment and approval. Frequent are his allusions to them and to his admiration for them: "What is commonest, cheapest, easiest is Me"\(^1\); "The spinning girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel"\(^2\); "The quadroon girl is sold at the auction-stand"\(^3\); "The squaw, wrapt in her yellow-hemmed cloth, is offering moccasins and bead-bags for sale"\(^4\); "The clean-hair'd Yankee girl works with her sewing-machine, or in the factory or mill."\(^5\)

Whitman gives specific expression to his regard for the lowly:

I will not have a single person slighted or left away;
The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited;

\(^{1}\text{Ibid.}, p. 43.\)
\(^{2}\text{Ibid.}\)
\(^{3}\text{Ibid.}\)
\(^{4}\text{Ibid.}, p. 44.\)
\(^{5}\text{Ibid.}\)
The heavy-lipped slave is invited—the venereal is invited; there shall be no difference between them and the rest.\textsuperscript{23}

Those women who were not of high degree attracted Whitman—if his poetic references are to be accepted as evidence. He said that he could come every afternoon of his life to watch a farmer's girl boil and bake.\textsuperscript{24} He was "pleased with women, the homely as well as the handsome."\textsuperscript{25} Particularly was he pleased by the prostitute, not as an object for the satiation of lust, but as an example to which he could refer as an illustration for his regard for all women, no matter how lowly their estate might be. He wrote one poem entitled "To a Common Prostitute." Other references to this vocation are frequent:

The prostitute drags her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck;
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each other;
(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths, nor jeer you;)\textsuperscript{26}

Through me many long dumb voices . . .
Voices of prostitutes . . .\textsuperscript{27}

Singing what, to the Soul, entirely redeem'd her, the faithful one, even the prostitute, who detained

\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., p. 49
\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., p. 62.
\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., p. 67.
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., p. 45.
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., p. 55.
me when I went to the city; Singing the song of the prostitutes. 28
I take for my love some prostitute. 29
You prostitutes . . . Who am I, that I should call you more obscene than myself? 30
The lowest prostitute is not nothing. 31
Whitman's attitude of equality with and compassion for women came, perhaps, because he thought he understood them:
The young mother and old mother comprehend me; The girl and the wife rest the needle a moment, and forget where they are; They and all would resume what I have told them. 32
He could discuss them all, he said:
The sprawl and fulness of babes, the bosoms and heads of women, the folds of their dress, their style as we pass in the street, the contour of their shape downwards,
Girls, mothers, house-keepers, in all their performances. 33
Whitman liked, he said, to talk with "the perfect girl who understands me." 34 Sometimes, but rarely, he referred

28 Ibid., p. 96.
29 Ibid., p. 114.
30 Ibid., p. 238.
31 Ibid., p. 390.
32 Ibid., p. 90.
33 Ibid., p. 99.
34 Ibid., p. 97.
to her with humor. The muse of poetry he regarded as fem-
inine, summoning her from the antiquity of the Grecian
past to the New America:

She comes! this famous Female—as was indeed to be
expected;
(For who, so-ever youthful, 'cute and handsome, would
wish to stay in mansions such as those,
When offer'd quarters with all the modern improvements,
With all the fun that's going—and all the best
society?)

Sometimes he spoke of women comparatively as when in
"Democratic Vistas" he described admiringly the instances
of a domestic, a feminine mechanic, a housewife, and an
elderly arbiter in comparison with what he somewhat con-
temptuously referred to as "the stock feminine characters
of the current novelists or of foreign court poems (Ophe-
lias, Enids, princesses, or ladies of one thing or an-
other)."

Always Whitman regarded the female sex as fundamental
to and important in all life:

The New Society at last, proportionate to Nature,

In Woman more, far more than all your gold, or vines,
or even vital air.

Have I not said that womanhood involves all?
Have I not told how the universe has nothing better
than the best womanhood?

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35 Ibid., p. 442.
36 Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," Walt Whitman
38 Ibid., p. 534.
In general, therefore, Whitman considered woman an elemental and vitally important part of the cosmos. In her specific aspects she appealed to him from the standpoints of maternal influence, procreation, sex, and romantic love. A consideration of the Whitman attitude toward the maternal follows.

Maternal References

Whitman's attitude toward and philosophy of maternal woman may be considered from two standpoints: his philosophy about his own mother, and his philosophy about maternity in general.

Despite evidence offered by some biographers concerning the illiteracy, querulousness, and complaining of Whitman's mother, his poetic references to her were invariably complimentary and noble. There is, of course, the famous line occurring early in the Leaves that he was "well-begotten and raised by a perfect mother." He wrote of stories his mother related: "Now I tell what my mother told me today as we sat at dinner together." They must have made a profound impression on him, for again he writes:

Ah, from a little child,  
Thou knowest, Soul, how to me all sounds became music;

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39 Ibid., p. 15.  
40 Ibid., p. 215.
My mother's voice, in lullaby or hymn;
(The voice—O tender voices—memory's loving voices!
Last miracle of all—O dearest mother's, sister's,
voices:)

Whitman was apostrophizing America, but he might well have been thinking of his own mother when he wrote:

Oh mother! have you done much for me?
Behold, there shall from me be much done for you.

Lines previously quoted from the poem "As At Thy Portals Also Death" sum up Whitman's poetic estimate of his mother:

To her, the ideal woman, practical, spiritual, of all earth, life, love, to me the best.

The maternal played a large part in Whitman's catalogues. References to the general mother frequently occur. The grass of his Leaves of Grass came in part, he thought, from the laps of mothers. For him, he said, were mothers and "the mothers of mothers" because "there is nothing greater than the mothers of men." He speaks of the mechanic's wife with her babe at her breast interceding for

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41 Ibid., p. 357.
42 Ibid., p. 519.
43 Ibid., p. 489.
44 Ibid., p. 36.
46 Ibid., p. 51.
every person born. He likes to observe the mother nursing the little child and to identify himself with her. He speaks of the mother's never turning her "vigilant eyes" from her children. The forgotten and misused mother—"neglected, gaunt, desperate"—arouses his sympathy. On the more cheerful side, he is delighted by the "delicious singing of the mother," as she carefully swaddles her baby; her mild words, clean clothes, and "wholesome odor"; and her pioneer spirit.

It is with that pioneer spirit, in a sense, that Whitman identifies the maternal urge. Maternity, production, and protectiveness are part of the great democratic surge which is Whitman's conception of America. Time and again he identifies America with the Mother spirit and with procreation:

Beautiful World of new,superber Birth, that rises to my eyes,

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47 Ibid., p. 79.
48 Ibid., p. 100.
49 Ibid., p. 151.
50 Ibid., p. 179.
51 Ibid., p. 196.
52 Ibid., p. 236.
53 Ibid., p. 312.
Like a limitless golden cloud, filling the western sky;
Emblem of general Maternity, lifted above all. 54

Again Whitman writes,

I see where America, Mother of All,
Well-pleased, with full-spanning eye, gazes forth,
    dwells long,
And counts the varied gathering of the products. 55

At another time, during the Civil War, Whitman observes the "Mother of All," pensive and desperate, gazing on the torn bodies of her dead sons, "my young men's beautiful bodies." 56 Often he thinks of the mother as the creator, the agent of procreation from whom all the beautiful phases of humanity unfold. Woman, he says, is the "teeming mother of mothers" 57—and of mates. The entire mother philosophy, in short, is summed up in these eulogistic lines:

The melodious character of the earth,
The finish beyond which philosophy cannot go, and does not wish to go,
The justified mother of men. 58

Procreation

Whitman's attitude toward the maternal is closely allied with his philosophy of procreation as expressed in the

54 Ibid., p. 453.
55 Ibid., p. 419.
56 Ibid., p. 366.
57 Ibid., p. 104.
58 Ibid., p. 285.
Leaves of Grass. The extensive and expansive idea of the vital and comprehensive role enacted by woman in the creation is illustrated by the unforgettable lines of "Unfolded Out of the Folds."

Unfolded out of the folds of the woman, man comes unfolded, and is always to come unfolded;
Unfolded only out of the superbest woman of the earth, is to come the superbest man of the earth;
Unfolded out of the friendliest woman, is to come the friendliest man;
Unfolded only out of the perfect body of a woman, can a man be form'd of perfect body;
Unfolded only out of the inimitable poem of the woman, can come the poems of man--(only thence have my poems come;)
Unfolded out of the strong and arrogant woman I love, only thence can appear the strong and arrogant man I love;
Unfolded by brawny embraces from the well-muscled woman I love, only thence come the brawny embraces of the man;
Unfolded out of the folds of the woman's brain, come all the folds of the man's brain, duly obedient;
Unfolded out of the justice of the woman, all justice is unfolded;
Unfolded out of the sympathy of the woman is all sympathy.\(^{59}\)

Leaves of Grass abounds with repeated phrases and references to the procreational aspects of woman. A catalogue of some of these phrases follows: "On women fit for conception"\(^{60}\); "Long I was hugged close--long and long--before I was born out of my mother"\(^{61}\); "From my own voice . . .

\(^{59}\)Ibid., p. 30.
\(^{60}\)Ibid., p. 78.
\(^{61}\)Ibid., p. 85.
singing the song of procreation, singing the need of superb children"62; "Children prepared for"63; "The bearer of them that shall grow and be mates to the mothers64; "The oath of procreation I have sworn--my Adamic and fresh daughters"65; "The mother's joys, the watching--the endurance--the precious love--the anguish--the patiently yielded life"66; "Something long preparing and formless is arrived and form'd in you"67; "... to beget superb children"68; "Thou that laid folded like an unborn babe, within its folds so long"69; "... out of thy teeming womb."70

Some of the Whitman poems go into more complete detail concerning the importance of procreation and the importance of woman as a procreative agent. In some moods, as in "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman seems to regard the female in procreation as the most important phase of human existence:

62 Ibid., p. 95.
63 Ibid., p. 97.
64 Ibid., p. 104.
65 Ibid., p. 110.
66 Ibid., p. 378.
67 Ibid., p. 389.
68 Ibid., p. 426.
69 Ibid., p. 452.
70 Ibid., p. 453.
This is the nucleus—after the child is born of woman, the man is born of woman;
This is the bath of birth—this is the merge of small and large, and the outlet again.
Be not ashamed, women—your privilege encloses the rest, and is the exit of the rest;
You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul.
The female contains all qualities, and tempers them—

She is to conceive daughters as well as sons, and sons as well as daughters. 71

In the sometimes criticized "A Woman Waits for Me,"
Whitman is expressing the idea not of lustful sex but of creation and of the woman's important part in creation together with the significance of the sexual act for all humanity:

I am for you, and you are for me, not only for our own sake, but for others' sakes;
Envelop'd in you sleep greater heroes and bards,

On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved of me and America,

... fierce and athletic girls, new artists, musicians, and singers,
The babes I beget upon you are to beget babes in their turn,
I shall demand perfect men and women out of my love-spending,

I shall look for loving crops from the birth, life, death, immortality, I plant so lovingly now. 72

Woman, according to the Whitman philosophy, is in the procreational sense synonymous with the universe. In the

71 Ibid., p. 102.
72 Ibid., p. 108.
mystic lines of "Eidolons," he sings of geologic convulsions as he might of woman's pangs of labor:

Exaltē, rapt, extatic [sic],
The visible but their womb of birth,
Of orbic tendencies to shape, and shape, and shape,
The mighty Earth-Eidolon.73

Sex

Much of Whitman's sexual phraseology for which he has been criticized--and at times justly--is gusty and Elizabethan. Much of it is the exhibition of a rebellion against the effeminacy of contemporary poetic fancy. Some of it, however, is connected with his philosophy of women, particularly in their maternal and procreative aspects. It is that phase of Whitman's treatment of sex that is the concern of this section.

In "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," Whitman wrote that he wanted his poems to be of "women entirely" as well as of men. For that reason the subject of sex and even of animality would be introduced--but in a different light and attitude, that of superior men and women. Sex was, he thought, an element in character, personality, and the emotions as well as a theme in literature. "The vitality of it is altogether in its relations, bearings, significance--like the clef of a symphony."74

73 Ibid., p. 470.
74 Ibid., pp. 556-557.
Much of the poetry concerned with sex was an expression of Whitman's philosophy of the equality and the creativeness of women. An example of the idea of equality is found in the poem "Walt Whitman":

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance--always substances and increase, always sex; Always a knit of identity--always distinction--always a breed of life.\(^{75}\)

In later lines of the same poem, Whitman points out that he is the poet of the body, that through him hidden voices speak, that one of these is the voice of sex and lust, hitherto concealed by the squamishness of the existing mores, and that voices hitherto veiled are by him "clarified and transfigured."\(^{76}\)

The excited and possibly exaggerated lines of "From Pent-up Aching Rivers" couple the libido with creation and procreation. While this poem has been labeled a sex poem, it is more than that. It is a poem of maternity, paternity, and love. The female form which Whitman says he approaches with amorous madness and utter abandonment, the love act which Whitman describes as two lawless hawks in the air, two fishes swimming in the sea, are all "from the work of fatherhood."\(^{77}\) The passionate lines which read,

\(^{75}\) Ibid., p. 33.
\(^{76}\) Ibid., p. 55.
\(^{77}\) Ibid., p. 97.
"The oath of the inseparableness of two together—of the woman that loves me, and whom I love more than my life—that oath swearing," the woman without which all will be lost, are when Whitman gets down to the final analysis, lines with the objective of "children prepared for." 78

Part of the sexual imagery springs from love of the perfect body, an aesthetic more than a fleshly emotion, the idea, in part, that woman's body is sacred. That idea is expressed in "I Sing the Body Electric":

The love of the Body of man or woman balks account—
the body itself balks account;
That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect. 79

Another part of the imagery springs from Whitman's belief that from sex springs all creativeness and all human actions and traits. Whitman expresses that belief in "A Woman Waits for Me":

A woman waits for me—she contains all, nothing is lacking,
Yet all were lacking, if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of the right man were lacking.
Sex contains all,
Bodies, Souls, meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results, promulgations,
Sons, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery, the seminal milk;
All hopes, benefactions, bestowals,
All the passions, loves, beauties, delights of the earth,

78 Ibid., p. 97.
79 Ibid., p. 98.
All the governments, judges, gods, follow'd persons of the earth, These are contain'd in sex, as parts of itself, and justifications of itself.80

At times Whitman speaks of the irresistible urge of sex and of human guiltlessness arising from inability to resist its fierce importunities:

It was not I that sinn'd the sin, The ruthless Body dragg'd me in; Though long I strove courageously, The Body was too much for me.81

Again there is reference to the universality of the appeal. This theme—that of universality—is coupled with Whitman's concept of the all-embracing, all-pervasive quality of the Democratic spirit. Lines from "You Felons on Trial in Courts" exemplify the thought:

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?82

Romantic Love

In addition to his expression of philosophies of the maternal, procreative, and sexual love between men and

80 Ibid., p. 107.
81 Ibid., p. 421.
82 Ibid., pp. 421-422.
women, Whitman frequently presents aspects of romantic love. This kind of love, allied at times in Whitman's phraseology with procreation, is often more tender and ethereal or, paradoxically, more humdrum and commonplace than the poems of sex and procreation. It is difficult to separate, for the purposes of analysis, Whitman's love of woman and love of man, for much of Whitman's attachment was universal. In this study, passages quoted pertain primarily, insofar as can be ascertained, to woman.

Whitman proclaimed in his "Starting From Paumanok" that he was the evangel-poet of love.\(^83\) Loving a man or woman to excess was painful, but satisfying—"it makes the whole coincide." Love is, he thought, one of the great trinity: Democracy, Religion, and Love.\(^84\) All women, he announced, were his lovers.\(^85\) Every kind was for and to itself. He loved those that love women. "For me the sweet-heart and the old maid—for me mothers, and the mothers of mothers."\(^86\) He liked to witness marriages.\(^87\) He liked to

\(^{83}\) Ibid., p. 20.
\(^{84}\) Ibid., p. 22.
\(^{85}\) Ibid., p. 34.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., p. 37.
\(^{87}\) Ibid., p. 39.
observe women watching the young men with love-light in their eyes.

At times Whitman's love poetry has all the ardor and urgency of the Elizabethans or of the Psalms or the throbbing romanticism of Shelley. Whitman proclaims that life is "only life after love," and goes on to say:

I love you--O you entirely possess me,
0 I wish that you and I escape from the rest, and go utterly off--O free and lawless,

The oath of inseparableness of two together--of the woman that loves me, and whom I love more than my life--

: the perfect girl who understands me.89

Equally passionate is the declaration which may have been made to nature--or which may have been made to a woman:

Out of the rolling ocean, the crowd, came a drop gently to me,
Whispering, I love you, before long I die,
I have travel'd a long way, merely to look on you, to touch you,
For I could not die till I once look'd on you.90

There are the unforgettable and romantic lines which, as was pointed out previously, have aroused so much conjecture among some of Whitman's biographers, in "Once I

88 Ibid., p. 40.
89 Ibid., pp. 96-97.
90 Ibid., p. 113.
Pass'd Through a Populous City." This is a love poem if ever one has been written. There are the comprehensive pictures of "I Am He That Aches With Love." There are the tender lines:

... Heart of my love!—you too I heard, murmuring low... 
Heard the pulse of you, when all was still, ringing little bells last night under my ear.91

More emphatic and more demanding and more dynamic statements of romantic love are occasionally included:

Fast-anchor'd, eternal, O love! O woman I love! O bride! O wife! more resistless than I can tell, the thought of you!92

Sometimes Whitman speaks of love more objectively and as apart from himself. This form of romantic attachment, too, makes a profound impression on him, as in "Proud Music of the Storm" he writes:

The duet of the bridegroom and the bride—a marriage-march, 
With lips of love, and hearts of lovers, fill'd to the brim with love; 
The red-flush'd cheeks, and perfumes—the cortège swarming, full of friendly faces, young and old, To flutes' clear notes, and sounding harps' canta-bile.93

Love, as apart from Whitman personally, is also expressed in "The Mystic Trumpeter." Whitman commands the

91 Ibid., p. 116.
92 Ibid., p. 136.
93 Ibid., p. 356.
trumpeter to sound, among other themes, the all-enclosing theme of love:

Love, that is pulse of all--the sustenance and the pang;
The heart of man and woman all for love;
No other theme but love--knitting, enclosing, all-diffusing love.

I see the vast alembic ever working--I see and know
The flames that heat the world;
The glow, the blush, the beating hearts of lovers,
So blissful happy some--and some so silent, dark, and nigh to death;
Love, that is all the earth to lovers--Love, that
mocks time and space;
Love, that is day and night--Love, that is sun and
moon and stars;
Love, that is crimson, sumptuous, sick with perfume;
No other words, but words of love--no other thought
but Love.94

Whitman infrequently is sad when he contemplates romantic love, for his is the voice of optimism and a more beautiful tomorrow. Occasionally, however, a doleful refrain enters as in "As If a Phantom Caress'd Me":

As if a phantom caress'd me,
I thought I was not alone, walking here by the shore;
But the one I thought was with me, as now I walk by
the shore--the one I love, that caress'd me,
As I lean and look through the glimmering light--that
one has utterly disappear'd,
And those appear that are hateful to me, and mock me.95

Doubt seldom enters the Whitman philosophy concerning romantic love. When the intruder does appear, he is

94Ibid., p. 457.
95Ibid., p. 399.
summarily dismissed and reassurance returns as in "Sometimes With One I Love":

Sometimes with one I love, I fill myself with rage,
for fear I effuse unreturn'd love;
But now I think there is no unreturn'd love—the pay
is certain, one way or another;
(I loved a certain person ardently, and my love was
not returned;
Yet out of that, I have written these songs.)

It is correct for Whitman to say that out of love he
has written his songs. It is equally correct, however, to
say that they have come from many other sources and emo-
tions—democracy, religion, maternal affection, procrea-
tion, compassion, and an all-embracing belief in the equality
and intrinsic goodness of the human race.

Summary

In this chapter Whitman's philosophy toward women as
illustrated in his poems has been analyzed from the stand-
points of general attitudes, and philosophy of the maternal,
procreational, sexual, and romantic love. In general,
Whitman thought of woman as an equal and important part
of the universal scheme of things. Her role was particu-
larly important as a mother, a creator, an equal partner
in sex and procreation, and an equal participant in roman-
tic love. Above all she was the eternal mother, the

96 Ibid., p. 137.
progenitor of the sons and daughters who had built a great
and were to build a greater America.
CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

This has been a study of the influence of women on Whitman and of Whitman's philosophy concerning women expressed in his poetry. In the first chapter, the biographical details of Whitman's career were recounted in summary fashion to provide a background for the study of Whitman's feminine relationships. It was found that though the bare biographical data of Whitman's life are available, an accurate interpretation is difficult because of the insufficiency of evidence. There exist a number of hiatuses in Whitman's biography, gaps which fail to explain the sudden flowering of poetic genius from the soil of a relatively commonplace and hackneyed newspaper background. It was also found that the many Whitman biographers differ in their interpretation of the poet. Some are laudatory and non-factual; some are hypercritical upon the basis of insufficient evidence; the best agree that the definitive life of Whitman is yet to be written.

In the second chapter of the study, the women--real or fancied--who played an active part in the shaping of Whitman's career were presented. Whitman's women were considered
under the following headings: (1) as sources of Whitman's writings, (2) as comforters and morale-builders, and (3) as possible romantic interests.

Among the women who may have had some influence on Whitman's writings were Frances Wright, Margaret Fuller, Fanny Fern, George Sand, and an anonymous collection of feminine hacks. All possibly contributed to Whitman's literary background and thought. The most tangible evidence of influence is presented in the case of the Frenchwoman, George Sand. The most logical assumption of feminine literary influence on Whitman, however, is negative in character—the assumption that the sturdiness and vitality of his lines may have been in part a rebellion against the banalities of the usual feminine writers of the day. Insofar as this attitude is concerned, it may be contended that for the most part the chief literary influence on Whitman was Whitman.

Comforters and morale builders in Whitman's life included his mother and sister, the Prices, Mrs. John Brinton, Ursula Burroughs, Ellen O'Connor, Mary Philbrick Smith, and Mary Davis. These ladies afforded Whitman some creature comfort and consequent peace of mind, an atmosphere which may have assisted his literary creativeness. Certainly they gave him a respect for women, for their tenderness, motherliness, and solicitude.
Romantic interests include Anne Gilchrist, who was more comforter than lover, and the mythical or real New Orleans and Washington women. Evidence of the existence of these ladies is inconclusive and insufficient to warrant any assumption that they profoundly affected Whitman's writings. It is obvious to assume that all with which he came in contact affected him to some extent. The history of ancient Greece may show that its coins came from Libya, its scientists from Anatolia, its artists from Ionia, but the sum total product was not Libyan or Anatolian or Ionic. It was Greek. Thus, the sum total of Whitman's genius was not his mother or George Sand or some unknown New Orleans fille de joie. It was Whitman.

In the third chapter, Whitman's philosophy of women as revealed in his poetry was analyzed as general, maternal, procreative, sexual, and romantic. Generally, Whitman regarded women with admiration and compassion, and as democratic equals. In their capacity as mothers, he thought of them as vigilant comforters and as the source from which emanated good. Procreationally and sexually, Whitman thought of women as the fountain and source from which the well-springs of a greater America were to flow. Romantically, he regarded them at times with tenderness, at times with gusty Elizabethan ardor, at times sadly, at times objectively, and always as the potential creators of democracy, religion, and love.
Conclusions

In the introductory chapter, these questions were raised: What did Whitman think of women? What was their influence on him? What was his philosophy concerning them? Did they shape his thinking?

Though no dogmatic or arbitrary answer can be given to the above questions as a result of this study, certain conclusions may be drawn, as has been indicated throughout the study. In presenting these conclusions, indirect answers may be given to other questions: How important were women to Whitman? How much of his temperament is feminine?

Whitman thought of women admiringly and as equals. They, to him, were a great and integral part of all life in a desirable democratic society. He regarded them with affection and sympathy and tenderness, the lowliest prostitute as well as the debutante or dowager. He was their poet, as well as the poet of men.

The influence of women was probably no greater than other influences on Whitman. The romantic story that his sudden exhibition of genius developed because he was a victim of unrequited love is probably sheer fancy. Women served Whitman more as comforters and morale builders than as literary or romantic stimulants.

Whitman's philosophy concerning women has been described in part above. Women were to him objects of general, mater-
procreational, sexual, and romantic affection and attraction. Most important of these roles, perhaps, was the maternal, the breeder of a better race of human beings, the source of goodness and joy.

Women were important to Whitman just as all life was important to him, no more so and no less so than men. He loved women just as he loved men. His love was neither homosexual nor heterosexual. It was universal. That there was something feminine in Whitman is indisputable. He could not have written of women so graphically and beautifully had he not understood them. At the same time, Whitman was also masculine, national, natural, catholic. His was the temperament not of any one but of all humanity. His was the genius and the love of the earth and of all the living creatures which reside therein.
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