REVERBERATING REFLECTIONS OF WHITMAN:
A DARK ROMANTIC REVEALED

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

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Denton, Texas
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Walt Whitman has long been celebrated as a Romantic writer who celebrates the self, reveres Nature, claims unity in all things, and sings praises to humanity. However, some of what Whitman has to say has been overlooked.

Whitman often questioned the goodness of humanity. He recognized evil in various shapes. He pondered death and the imperturbability of Nature to human death. He exhibited nightmarish imagery in some of his works and gory violence in others. While Whitman has long been called a celebratory poet, he is nevertheless also in part a writer of the Dark Romantic.

Instead of always presenting the universe as an orderly, harmonious system, and perpetuating his vision of the self—one of order, harmony, and complexity of detail—his tendency is toward blackness, toward the “mind-gloom” of a movement that became an evident outgrowth of American Romanticism. Whitman’s earlier works are, as Reynolds claims, “scarred with suffering” (53).

Because of three periods in Whitman's life, he is in fact a Dark Romantic. As a young school teacher, Whitman suffered the humiliation of low pay, little respect, no privacy, and at some point a tragic crisis that reverberates throughout much of his literature on and about education and authority figures. His experiences during the Civil War also affected his perspective on the human spirit, human potential toward good,
evil, and death. Finally, his battle with severe ill health affected his outlook on life, nature, humanity, and death.

In *Reverberating Reflections of Whitman: A Dark Romantic Revealed*, I hope to illuminate these facts by studying each of the genres to which Whitman contributed: his correspondence, journalism, poetry, non-fiction prose, and fiction. Through this process, I hope to illustrate that throughout much of his work, he is not the celebratory writer most scholars would like to think he is, but rather that he is a deeper, more contemplative thinker about the darker elements of life, nature, and death. In essence, I hope to reveal that Walt Whitman is a Dark Romantic.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

[T]hough our daylight selves may conform to a public vista of bland perfection, on the night-side we are not exempt from the visitations of insecurity. (Levin 6)

Walt Whitman has long been characterized and celebrated as the most joyous of American Romantics. Throughout the majority of his works, he celebrates the land, the people, the workers, the leaders, the wars, the heroes, religion, government, and home. He also celebrates the physical, whether it be the earth or the body, and physical union as well as spiritual. Whitman has been reputed as uniting man with nature. Whitman presents the universe as an orderly, harmonious system, and this system perpetuates his vision of the self—order, harmony, and complexity of detail. However, what few recognize or celebrate in Whitman is his tendency toward blackness, toward the “mind-gloom” of a movement that became an evident outgrowth of American Romanticism. The good gray poet reveals himself to be “complex, contradictory, alone” (Clarke 17). Whitman’s earlier works are, as Reynolds claims, “scarred with suffering” (Walt Whitman’s America 53), and the majority of his work illustrates a degree, sometimes veiled yet still visible, of abandoned hopelessness and contemplation of darkness.

The American Romantic literary movement developed an identifiable set of descriptors. Writers who were classified as Romantic aspired to emotional freedom in
their works and all that that freedom could entail. They focused on emotion, imagination, individualism, freedom from rules, spontaneity, reverence for nature, and a fascination with the past and with myths. “The most important American Romantic writers were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman” (Morner 192). Each of these writers displays these characteristics in some, if not all, of his works. Examples of such Romantic texts include Emerson’s “The American Scholar,” Hawthorne’s “The Celestial Railroad,” Thoreau’s Walden, and of course many of Whitman’s poems in Leaves of Grass.

What the rest of the world experienced as positive and uplifting in the Romantic movement was altered by the development of an additional, darker strain of Romanticism. The works of Dark Romanticism are characterized largely by the same descriptors as those of the Romantic period but in a much more sinister fashion. The writers of the Dark Romantic were emotional to the point of despair. Their imaginations became somewhat nightmarish, pessimistic at best. They imagined themselves alone and abandoned by society, not individuals who celebrated their choices to live individually. Their searches for freedom from rules seemed an intense fear of the victimization of rules they could not escape and of the chaos of a world with no rules and the possibility of damnation. The spontaneity of the Romantics appeared as monomaniacal tendencies toward the insane or, at the very least, obsession with and pursuit of death. The Dark Romantics exhibited a reverence for nature; however, this devotion seemed more a fear of the uncontrollable, violent turns of nature, the indifference of nature to the trials of
human kind, and of the lusty abandon of wild growth. These writers exhibited Gothicism in their works—some degree of "mind gloom" (92-93), mystery, decadence, and grotesque obsession. Dark Romantics demonstrated an interest in the past—not with the romances, love interests, or fancies, but with the criminal systems, the violated moral codes, and the cruelties of humans upon and to each other.

Many of the authors of the Romantic period can also be classified as Dark Romantic. Hawthorne, while claiming to write a romance in The Scarlet Letter, really wrote a dark romance as is clearly evident in the largely autobiographical character Arthur Dimmesdale and also in his Reverend Mr. Hooper in "The Minister's Black Veil." Hawthorne revealed, through his portrayal of Hester Prynne in The Scarlet Letter, some doubt about ministers and their consistency of respect for and obeyance of moral codes.

Sometimes the red infamy upon her breast would give a sympathetic throb, as she passed near a venerable minister or magistrate, the model of piety and justice . . . . "What evil thing is at hand?" would Hester say to herself. (61)

Because Hawthorne was preoccupied with stigmas or emblems as indications of concealed, past sin, these characters suffer with secret sin and obsess about manners of repentance. They preach about the evils of secret sin, the need for repentance, the inevitability of death, and the possibilities for salvation. "It was as if the author [was] reenacting the role of a preacher, and directly exhorting his congregation of readers to behold 'an ambiguity of sin and sorrow'" (Levin 17). Hawthorne, through his ministers
and with a voice of suspected experience, warned those attending against sin, violations
of morality, and secrecy. The tones of his ministers’ sermons are always powerful,
passionate, and eloquent; at the same time these sermons are melancholy, tremulous, and
sad. As mortal men, Hawthorne’s ministerial characters are overshadowed by intense
guilt for sins they deem to be unforgivable and almost unbearable. While they preach to
their congregations to pray for forgiveness of sins, these men never feel their requests for
their own forgiveness are adequate; nor can they conceive of forgiving themselves. They
lack the ability to confess their sins and insist that this inability is for the public good.
Their guilt torments them until death. They lead lives of total isolation and adopt strange
habits that provide some sort of symbolic cover for their undisclosed sin. In Hawthorne’s
novel, we see Arthur fall to that lusty abandon of nature as he momentarily plans to
escape the constraints of society with Hester during their meeting in the forest. This and
many other of Hawthorne’s works illustrate the darker obsessions of the Romantic period.

Poe, in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” illustrated dark obsessions through
Roderick. In the internal poem, “The Haunted Palace,” Roderick obsesses over insanity
as he describes sanity’s death through the metaphor of a house. Roderick describes the
palace’s roof, paralleling the human mind, as “yellow, glorious and golden” on which the
“gentle air” with its “winged odor” has disappeared. The color imagery of the roof refers
to the sun, often seen in literature as masculine. Roderick creates this passage to show
the house to be representative of himself. The winged odor may refer to butterfly
imagery that often symbolizes the human psyche; if it leaves, so too will sanity. As
nature is indifferent to man—in the Dark Romantic belief system—the butterfly will inevitably flit away, as will sanity. This metaphor provides proof of contemplation of insanity, loss of control, decay, and death. Fear of nature becomes evident in the work as well. Surrounding the house are “white trunks of decayed trees” (317). The house appears almost human, aged and discolored, surrounded by wintry gray and white trunks (hair). The subtle crack in the walls indicates a flaw in the house. The tarn reflects the house into which it and the Ushers fall at the end of the tale. In front of the house is a “pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible and leaden-hued” (319). This degenerated pond reflects the degenerating house as still; no freshness revives it from its descent from sanity. Poe’s obsessions with nature’s indifference, the decay and death of humans, and the transient state of man all abound in this work.

Melville, in *Moby-Dick*, shows us the tragic flaw in the dark character of Captain Ahab. Ahab’s crew admires him, as he stands on the quarter-deck, “in all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe” (*Melville* 111). Furtive contemplation and worry about nature and its wild uncontrollability seem evident from Ishmael’s description of Ahab, who suffered “clouds that layer upon layer were piled upon his brow” (111). Ahab suffers the darkness of “mind-gloom.” He obsesses about nature (the whale) and the evil done him by that uncontrollable force; he seeks only revenge. His pride smarts at his own maimed form; instead of celebrating life, he pities himself and seeks the dark goal of revenge on nature. “[S]ocially, Ahab was inaccessible . . . . [His] soul, shut up in the caved trunk of his body, there fed upon the sullen paws of its gloom!”
Ahab is unable to aspire to more celestial goals. Instead he obsesses about his past (the loss of his leg), the indifference of Nature to his tragedy, the evil in the world, and the inevitable victor over humans—Death.

Perhaps each of these authors' works is what Father Mapple calls, "a story of the sin, hard-heartedness, suddenly awakened fears, ... swift punishment, repentance, [and] prayers . . ." (145). However, they are also clear-cut evidence of the characteristics of the American Dark Romantic. Even during the early part of the century, this dark tendency seemed evident. In works such as *Edgar Huntly* by Charles Brockden Brown and The Leatherstocking Saga by James Fenimore Cooper, we see evidence of the darker tendency of Romanticism. Brown's character continually pursues his nightmares of insanity, the victimization of humankind, death, and secret sin. Brown, described as one of "vigorous mind and a frail body" (Clark vi), read about and was interested in "insomnia, insanity, and other abnormal states. Such aberrations are the warp and woof of Brown's narratives" (Clark xiv). Clark, in the introduction to Brown's novel, points out that these interests added to "Indian massacres, yellow fever epidemics, and religious fanaticism were the ingredients of a typical Brown novel" (xi). Indeed, Brown illustrates his obsessions with "[dis]orders of mind and diseases of body" (xv) through the actions and experiences of all his characters in *Edgar Huntly*. One of Brown's characters, Clithero, illustrates dark obsessions with insanity, inhumane acts by one human against another, Death, and transience. He admits to the desire to murder; however, after the interrupted attempt at murder, he considers suicide to escape his own evil thoughts. "Death is but a
shifting of the scene... and the endless progress of eternity... is to the wicked an accumulation of woe” (Brown 89-90). Huntly, Brown’s primary character, constantly inspects and contemplates darkness—both real and symbolic. “Intense dark is always the parent of fears” (103). Brown explores the victimization of one human by another in his murder plot, as his characters seek the murderer of Waldegrave. Brown illustrates the human tendency to judge that which is different. “The European, by definition, always has a ‘past.’ [...] Foreign birth and criminality become virtually synonymous...” (Morse 90). Brown further explores these darker human tendencies throughout the novel.

In James Fenimore Cooper’s The Leatherstocking Saga, we see the commonplace considerations of such inhumanity among humankind. In The Pioneers, the landlady comments on the “manliness” of Big Snake:

> He played his part, too, like a man; for I saw him next day, with thirteen scalps on his pole. And I will say this for the Big Snake, that he always dealt fair, and never scalped any that he didn’t kill with his own hands. (Cooper 651)

The violence of the Indians in their fight for their survival seems all too easily accepted among Cooper’s community. Cooper also explores and exposes the indifference of nature to humanity in a passage during which three characters are trying to escape a wildfire. As Elizabeth and Edwards try to escape the fire, they notice it has surrounded Mohegan.
That fatal moment seemed now to have arrived; for the hissing steams of the spring appeared to be nearly exhausted, and the moss of the rocks was already curling under the intense heat . . . .

Elizabeth, having relinquished entirely the idea of escape, was fast obtaining that resigned composure with which the most delicate of her sex are sometimes known to meet unavoidable evils; while Mohegan . . . maintained his seat with the invincible resignation of an Indian warrior . . . . As his body was unprotected, his sufferings must have been great; but his fortitude was superior to all. His voice could yet be heard, even in the midst of these horrors. (747-48)

Nature, the unavoidable evil, consumes Mohegan without faltering. Cooper further examines the human tendency to victimize, as he exposes the “criminal wastefulness, from Billy Kirby’s destruction of the maple trees to the wanton massacre of the pigeons and the extravagant wasteful catches of fish” (Morse 53). Cooper observes this evil of humans against Nature when Hawkeye brags about his hunting prowess. “[F]ar from deploring the destruction of life, he positively prides himself upon it” (59). These few points illustrate an early tendency in the nineteenth century to explore the darker side of humanity. Cooper’s Indians, “fight for a losing cause and belong to a dying tribe” (Levin 23), much like the Dark Romantics imagine themselves doing in the inevitable contemplation of and fall to Death. All of these Romantic writers examine and share
their dreams, or nightmares, in their writing. However, “dreams not only dramatize our wishes; they also mock our anxieties; and though our daylight selves may conform to a public vista of bland perfection, on the night-side we are not exempt from the visitations of insecurity” (6). The writers of the Dark Romantic are all visited by insecurity and express it in their works.

Finally, Walt Whitman exhibits the tendencies of the Dark Romantics in much of his work. He admits that in the human voice, “All sorts of physical, moral, and mental deformities are inevitably returned” (An American Primer 10). Although he did not realize the truth of this statement, so much is true for his own voice as well as those of others. In an interview with Sadakichi Hartmann, Whitman said of Hawthorne’s canon: “His works are languid, melancholy, morbid. He likes to dwell on crimes, on the sufferings of the human heart . . .” (24-25). Yet, Whitman’s earliest work blatantly reveals the same tendency as does his later work on a much subtler, veiled note. Whitman lingered on evil: “the bloodiest wars . . . years of infinite inhumanity of man to man; years when cruelty and killing became articles of faith . . .” (Kallen 176).

In each of the literary genres in which Whitman participated and contributed to, he reveals not only the celebration of sensuality, nature, music, and individualism but also a contemplation of pain and suffering and a recollection and repentance over some past indiscretion or sin. He reveals several emotional conflicts in his work; among them are his “fear of isolation versus his fear of intimacy with others” and his “need to believe in immortality versus his rational doubts which opposed such belief” (Black 44). In his
contemplations of death, on human victimization, on human transience, Whitman displays this power of darkness. In his correspondence, Whitman reveals at least three major periods in his life which influence his darker obsessions. In much of the journalism by and about him, Whitman discloses a worry or a concern over the human sense of evil and its workings against others. In his poetry, he illustrates an obsession with ailments, insanity, humanity's transience, and Death. In his non-fiction prose—like his correspondence—he again ponders the human victimization of one to another. And in his fiction he observes all the dark obsessions: nightmares, abandonment, victimization, the uncontrollability and indifference of Nature, past crimes of immorality, and human transience. These elements appear in much of the Whitman canon and prove his tendency toward "mind-gloom."

Whitman instructed his editor Horace Traubel, "Be sure to write about me honest . . . . Whatever you do, do not prettify me: include all the hells and damns" (qtd. in Kaplan 41). Only a few critics admit that Whitman recognized Death as an inevitable and fearful fate. The majority of Whitman scholars claim the good gray poet to be one who celebrated the unity of all things. Most who see Whitman's discussions or contemplation of Death claim that Whitman merely saw that "There is no cure for birth or death . . . save to enjoy the interval of existing. To enjoy it . . . is to die living and live dying, by loving" (Kallen 180). The few who recognize the darker side, the ominous fears Whitman exhibited in his work, express feelings similar to those of Hughes:
On those rare occasions when he did attempt to portray tragedy or evil from the traditional point of view, the results were almost always inferior and sometimes simply bad. His poetic power seemed to function only on an exalted level, above traditional views of good and evil. (237)

While many scholars write about Whitman in no less than glowing terms and disguise his writing as purely celebratory, in the following document, I will discuss at length the Dark Romantic characteristics of Whitman. While perhaps not intending to study the darkness of human existence, Whitman clearly illuminates his secret fears and obsessions in the bulk of his work. "[T]he artistic process originates in and often expresses personal conflicts that may be . . . unconscious" (Black 9). While hoping to exalt the unity of himself with all creatures, spirits, ideas, and forms, Whitman unknowingly studies the darker parts of that unity. He aims for a "self-styled public persona: of the way he constructed his image as part of a self-propagating myth which represses its historical counterpart" (Clarke 141). It is this counterpart that appears in his literature, although unintended. In an essay from *November Boughs*, Whitman applauded language: "words become vitaliz’d, and stand for things" (*Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* 1161). The words he uses in his works so qualify. He further commented on the nature of words as slang. He defined slang:
Such is Slang, or indirection, an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism, and express itself illimitably, which in highest walks produces poets and poems . . . (1165-66)

Existing in his correspondence, journalism, poetry, non-fiction prose, and fiction are the so-called “highest walks” of slang which have produced the good gray poet. In the 1855 Preface to Leaves of Grass, Whitman exclaims,

It is that something in the soul which says, Rage on, Whirl on, I tread Master here and everywhere, Master of the spasms of the sky and of the shatter of the sea, Master of nature and passion and death, And of all terror and all pain. (15)

Rage, spasms, shatterings, death, terror, and pain all abound in his many works. As we will see, the words written in his texts indirectly reveal elements of “mind-gloom,” of darker obsessions, which define and disclose how Walt Whitman serves more clearly as a Dark Romantic rather than a wholly celebratory writer in American Romanticism.
CHAPTER 2

HINTS OF DESPAIR IN THE WHITMAN CORRESPONDENCE

Dear friend, let me warn you somewhat about myself--&c yourself also. You must not construct such an unauthorized & imaginary ideal Figure, & call it W. W. and so devotedly invest your loving nature in it. The actual W. W. is a very plain personage, & entirely unworthy such devotion. (Whitman, Complete Poetry & Selected Prose 1006)

At least three reasons explain why Walt Whitman displayed a tendency toward the Dark Romantic style of writing. From 1836 to 1842, he served as a teacher for several school districts on Long Island. At some point in his teaching career, he suffered a crisis. His reflection on some mysterious tragedy arises not only in his non-fiction but also in his poetry and fiction. This reflection will be examined thoroughly in the next chapter. During the Civil War, Whitman served in war hospitals. His service in this capacity provided him the insight into the realism of war and also the tragedy done to and by the young men with whom he associated. This extended experience encouraged his reminiscence over death and the inhumanity of one to the other that so often appears in his correspondence and in his poetry and prose. Finally, during the last twenty years of his life, Whitman suffered intense bouts of ill health. The incapacitating periods of
paralysis and required stretches of rest forced his obsession with death, illness, and the transience of humankind. These periods, in addition to his teaching career, serve as sources for his “mind-gloom,” his periodic reverences of the darkness of nature, the Gothicism of humanity, and a focused concentration on death. As Whitman himself records in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*,

> Only the soul is of itself . . . all else has reference to what ensues. All that a person does or thinks is of consequence. Not a move can a man or woman make that affects him or her in a day or a month or any part of the direct lifetime or the hour of death but the same affects him or her onward afterward through the indirect lifetime. The indirect is always as great and real as the direct. The spirit receives from the body just as much as it gives to the body. Not one name of word or deed . . . (21)

Indeed, the experiences of Whitman’s early life affected him immensely and are reflected in his vast writings. He could not disguise his feelings of terror at the Unknown, his fear of loneliness, his astonishment at the inhumanity that exists among humankind. As he said of the soul, “No disguise can pass on it . . . no disguise can conceal from it. It rejects none, it permits all” (26). He simply could not disguise that which insulted his own soul (11) as these experiences did. In the following chapter, I shall examine these three periods of his life through his correspondence and analyze how they relate to his later outlook on life . . . and death.
To read his self-description in March, 1863, one would never think Whitman to be one of “mind-gloom.” To friends, he wrote,

My health, strength, personal beauty, etc., are, I am happy to inform you, without diminution, but on the contrary quite the reverse. I weigh full 220 pounds avoirdupois, yet still retain my usual perfect shape—a regular model. My beard, neck, etc., are woolier, fleecier, whiteyer than ever. I wear army boots, with magnificent black morocco tops, the trousers put in, wherein shod and legged, confront I Virginia’s deepest mud with supercilious eyes. (Whitman, Complete Poetry & Selected Prose 898)

Yet anyone who writes at all fluctuates in his/her expressions of happiness, sadness, excitement, frustration, apathy, insecurity, and anger. Whitman acknowledged his own tendency to ponder the darker elements of life in a letter celebrating the completion and possible publication of Drum-Taps to William O’Connor in 1865. He claims,

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 . . . the pending action of this Time & Land we swim in, with all their large conflicting fluctuations of despair & hope, the shiftings, masses, & the whirl & deafening din . . . with the unprecedented anguish of wounded & suffering . . . . The book is therefore unprecedently sad (as these days are, are they not?) . . . . (949-50)
Despite his 1863 state of good health and his joy over the 1865 publication, Whitman obsesses over what he witnesses during the Civil War— one human’s inhumanity to another, vast illness, and imperturbable death. “Certainly he didn’t, in his private life, look upon evil as illusory. His correspondence during the Civil War amply reveals this” (Hughes 239). While he seems to celebrate the patriotic nature of the soldiers and their dedication to their cause, his observations of the suffering they must endure as a result of others’ actions against them proves his fear of and obsession with the inhumanity among men. In a letter to Nat Gray and Fred Gray in March 1863, he records his observations of war hospitals and their inmates.

These Hospitals, so different from all others— these thousands, and tens and twenties of thousands of American young men, badly wounded, all sorts of wounds, operated on, pallid with diarrhoea [sic], languishing, dying with fever, pneumonia, etc., open a new world somehow to me, giving closer insights, new things, exploring deeper mines, than any yet, showing our humanity . . . tried by terrible, fearfulest tests, probed deepest, the living soul’s, the body’s tragedies . . . . For here I see, not at intervals, but quite always, how certain man, our American man— how he holds himself . . . unquestioned master above all pains and bloody mutilations. (896-97)

Whitman goes on to say as he claims that at this time and place, observing such nobility of purpose among a nation’s men, Death holds no fear for him.
This then, what frightened us all so long [Death]. Why, it is put to flight with ignominy—a mere stuffed scarecrow of the fields. Oh death, where is thy sting? Oh grave, where is thy victory? (896-97)

While Whitman would like it to appear that he sees nothing to fear in Death, his careful observations of the sufferings that lead up to that point indicate some feeling more intense than mere dismissiveness. This contemplation and subsequent expression of the darker side of life will be seen in a study of his correspondence.

As a pseudo-nurse, or as Whitman called himself, “merely a friend visiting the hospitals occasionally to cheer the wounded and sick” (956) during the Civil War, Whitman experienced much sadness as a result of his daily regimen. “Whitman . . . was not indifferent to evil and human suffering” (Hughes 239). As Gay Wilson Allen puts it, “He was primarily a nurse of the soul (in its psychological sense)” (The Solitary Singer 290). Kaplan more specifically reports that “In January he had been appointed a Delegate of the Christian Commission, a wartime agency of the YMCAs, and became, as he signed himself inside the cover of a notebook, ‘Walt Whitman—Soldiers’ Missionary’” (275). Just providing the sick and wounded soldiers with company gave him a sense of purpose during the war. In 1863, “he spent most of his time in Armory Square Hospital, which had the worst cases. Altogether, he made some six hundred visits in three years, seeing between 80,000 and 100,000 soldiers” (Reynolds 425). In a letter to his mother, he reported that while he found his work intensely worthwhile, he experienced sadness.
[I]t is the most affecting thing you ever see, the lots of poor sick and wounded young men that depend so much, in one word or another, upon my petting or soothing or feeding, sitting by them and feeding them their dinner or supper—some are quite helpless, some wounded in both arms—or giving some trifle . . . or stopping a little while with them . . . . (Whitman, Complete Poetry & Selected Prose 907)

His services to these soldiers included writing letters for them or reading letters to them, bringing them small gifts, contributing money toward the hospital fund, and merely providing the soldiers with company when they had none. He describes the hospitals in which the troops suffer.

I suppose you know that what we call hospital here in the field is nothing but a collection of tents on the bare ground for a floor—rather hard accommodation for a sick man. They heat them there by digging a long trough in the ground under them, covering it over with old railroad iron and earth, and then building a fire at one end and letting it draw through and go out at the other, as both ends are open. This heats the ground through the middle of the hospital quite hot. I find some poor creatures crawling about pretty weak with diarrhoea [sic]; there is a great deal of that . . . . O mother, how often and how many I have seen come into Washington . . . with the look of death on their poor young faces;
they keep them so long in the field hospitals with poor accommodations the disease gets too deeply seated. (937)

Whitman acknowledges the results of wartime atrocities and the reality of man’s inhumanity to man. In these observations, Death seems not so unsuccessful in its claim on humankind. In a letter to his mother in April, 1864, he admits,

Mother, it is serious times. I do not feel to fret or whimper, but in my heart and soul about our country, the forthcoming campaign with all its vicissitudes and the wounded and slain—I dare say, mother, I feel the reality more than some because I am in the midst of its saddest results so much. (942)

His associations with the wounded perpetuate his contemplations of human cruelty, illness, and Death. The dismal mood of war affects him further. In June, 1864, he tells his mother,

I feel a little blue this morning, as two young men I knew very well have just died. One died last night, and the other about half an hour before I went to the hospital. I did not anticipate the death of either of them. Each was a very, very sad case, so young. Well mother, I see I have written you another gloomy sort of letter. I do not feel as first rate as usual . . . I believe I am homesick . . . then I have seen all the horrors of soldiers’ life and not been kept up by its excitement. It is awful to see so much, and not be able to relieve it. (944-45)
Not only do these trials of war affect him, but the death of President Lincoln affects him as well. "As impressive as Lincoln was in life, it was his death that represented for Whitman the transcendent, crucial moment in America's cultural life" (Reynolds 440). Although his correspondence does not reflect much upon this particular tragedy, it does reflect on the mood and turmoil the war has caused within him. "Whitman experienced loss even when his soldiers recovered, built ties to families, farms and jobs, sent him their news and pictures, and named their children after him" (Kaplan 285). The Civil War caused Whitman to ruminate on the darker elements of life: one human's inhumanity to another, tragedy, illness, human transience, and ultimately death. As Kaplan recounts, Whitman argued that he had "seen enough of Armageddon in the hospitals to decide it was 'about nine hundred and ninety-nine parts diarrhea to one part glory: the people who like the wars should be compelled to fight the wars'" (291). The nobility of patriotic devotion seems to have lost its charm for Whitman as he sees the cruelty that results from its most intense defense.

During the war, specifically in 1863, Whitman’s family was suffering its own trials. Whitman’s mother was ill with severe rheumatism in her limbs. One of Whitman’s brothers, Andrew, was ill with tuberculosis. Another brother, Eddy, went insane and had to be committed to an asylum. Another brother Jesse “was now as helpless as Eddy, but more troublesome. He was no longer able to hold a job, awoke in moods of violence, vomited his meals, between sick spells was good only for rocking his niece’s cradle hour after hour in a sort of edgy catatonia” (Kaplan 293). Additionally, Whitman’s brother George was off at war and had been reported to have been captured in
combat. To Charles Eldridge, Whitman acknowledged George's peril and the fright of his family. "We are deprest in spirits here about my brother George—if not killed, he is a prisoner—he was in the engagement of Sept. 30 . . ." (948). He wrote to William O'Connor that "the probabilities are most gloomy" (950). No information was available to the family as to his fate until Christmas, 1864. Finally, Hannah, Whitman's sister, was suffering at the hands of an abusive husband, "a mean, improvident artist who starved and beat her . . . until she became psychopathic" (Allen, The Walt Whitman Handbook 82). He would write his mother from time to time regarding Hannah.

[Y]ou must not worry about Han—one can't tell any thing about it—but it is probable things go on with them just as they always did—I believe I shall write to Han again—shall not say any thing about Heyde, of course . . . (983)

This period in Whitman's life, combined with the cruelties of the war he was witnessing in Washington, D. C., changed his life, outlook, and subsequently his writing forever.

The family, as a presence, belongs to all that is negative and threatening to Whitman . . . [W]hat emerges is a picture of the family experience as anathema: a confusing and contrasting series of influences and conflicts which continue to bear down upon him. (Clarke 38)

The stress of his family's life combined with the pressures and chaos of the war greatly affected his correspondence as it did his other attempts at writing.
As early as his days in the hospitals during the Civil War, Whitman began to suffer severe ill health. He acknowledged the beginnings of illness to J. T. Trowbridge in a letter in February 1865.

My health is pretty good, but since I was prostrated last July, I have not had that unconscious and perfect health I formerly had. The physicians say my system has been penetrated by the malaria,—it is tenacious, peculiar and somewhat baffling.... It is my first appearance in the character of a man not entirely well. (953)

His ill health never fully dissipated, and he contracted various other symptoms as time passed. From sometime in 1864 until his death in 1892, Whitman was plagued with a variety of illnesses.

Symptoms suggesting severe hypertension... signaled Whitman's collapse: depressions, insomnia, night sweats and night terrors, spells of dizziness, faintness and trembling, terrible headaches, photophobia, sinusitis and sore throat, deafness, buzzing and humming in the ears.... (Kaplan 295-96)

These illnesses also affected him, his mood, and his subsequent outlook on life. On June 7, 1864, he wrote his mother, "I have not felt well at all the last week. I had spells of deathly faintness and bad trouble in my head too, and sore throat...." (Complete Poetry & Selected Prose 945). He repeated complaints of serious headaches and subsequent "spells" that caused him not to sleep well (961). By 1869, his health became an overwhelming influence in his life. As he wrote to Peter Doyle, a friend and confidant,
Whitman discovered as a result of his wartime experiences, "I have been very sick the last three days . . . it makes me prostrated and deadly weak, and little use of my limbs" (984). At one point, Whitman admitted that his health was even keeping him from his writing, his passion.

I . . . find myself needing glasses every time I read or write—this has grown upon me very rapidly since and during the hot weather, and especially since I left Washington—so I read and write as little as possible, beyond my printing matters, etc.—as that occupies several hours and tires my eyes sometimes. (993)

He suffered similar troubles as these for years after, complaining often to his close friends and confidantes of "head-swimming, faintness, vomiting" (1015). To Anne Gilchrist in 1873, Whitman confessed to some severe symptoms amidst the deaths of both a sister and his mother.

Since I last wrote clouds have darkened over me, & still remain.

On the night of 23d of January last I was paralyzed, left side, & have remained so since. February 19th I lost a dear sister, who died in St. Louis, leaving two young daughters. May 23d my inexpressibly beloved mother died in Camden. I was just able to get from Washington to her dying bed, & sit there. I thought I was bearing it all stoutly but I find it affecting the progress of my recovery since & now. The doctor says my disease is cerebral
anaemia, resulting in paralysis. I am still feeble, palsied, & have

spells of great distress in the head . . . . (1012)

And on November 26, 1875, he described his most debilitating illness. “My paralysis has

left me permanently disabled, unable to do anything of any consequence” (1022).

Whitman addressed the fact that he suffered from a variety of illnesses in 1873. He told

John Burroughs that his doctor had diagnosed liver troubles as the origin of all his other

illnesses. Of course, he tried to get along despite his ill health. To Helen Price in 1881,

he said that he was “pretty well for me—am still under the benumbing influence of

paralysis, but thankful to be as well as I am” (1037). Yet, the fact that his state of health

entered into each letter supports that it weighed heavily on Whitman’s mind and occupied

much of his time. In 1887, he wrote,

I am now in my 69th year, living plainly, but very comfortably, in a

little wooden cottage of my own, good spirits invariably, but

physically a sad wreck, and failing more and more each successive

season, unable even to get about the house without help . . . the

paralysis that prostrated me after the Secession War (several

shocks) never lifting entirely since . . . . (1049)

His acknowledgment of his perpetuating ill health further lends support that it was—as

how could it not be?—constantly on his mind. His debilitation continued to plague him

and occupy his thoughts up until his death.
In a letter penned on February 6 and 7, 1892, he ended his correspondence, advising that society in its own best interest must never forget to combine literature, politics, and sociology.

Well I must send you all dear fellows a word from my own hand—propp’d up in bed, deadly weak yet, but the spark seems to glimmer yet . . . my sufferings much of the time are fearful . . . .

More & more it comes to the fore that the only theory worthy our modern times for g’t literature politics and sociology must combine all the bulk-people of all lands, the women not forgetting.

But the mustard plaster on my side is stinging & I must stop—

(1058-59)

His health had caused him to halt that which he loved, writing, and must therefore be acknowledged as a force which influenced him in his writing, his thoughts, his life. His last words of correspondence, never before written, follow:

Good-bye to all. (1058-59)

Whitman died on March 26, 1892.

Walt Whitman acknowledged the difficulties of life in a letter to Peter Doyle in 1870. As if speaking to anyone who would heed his advice, he stated,

I want you to try and put a brave face against everything that happens—for it is not so much the little misfortunes of life themselves, as the way we take them and brood over them, that causes the trouble. . . . (993-94)
The poet suffered a loss of faith in humanity as a result of his experiences during the 1860's. "The Civil War wrecked not only his health but his earliest faith in an open society" (Mottram 15). Whitman, while almost always trying to follow his own advice, found difficulty in hiding his brooding over his own life misfortunes, a fact that will become evident through the study of his journalism and especially of his poetry, fiction, and non-fiction prose.
CHAPTER 3

WHITMAN AND HIS REVEALING JOURNALISM

[W]e are all derelict, in some particular! (Daily Eagle, June 1, 1846)

During his journalism career, Walt Whitman edited and published for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, The Long Islander, the Brooklyn Daily Times, the New York Aurora, the New York Evening Tattler, the New York Sunday Times, the New York Statesman, the New York Democrat, the New York Sun, the New York Mirror, and the Brooklyn Evening Star (Bergman, “Whitman on Editing” 345). While working on the Mirror, he published several of his first works, among which were his Sun-Down Papers and several poems on various human vices such as ambition and pride. Kaplan observes that “Ego confusion intermittently surfaces in these poems along with a terror of drift, lawless imperatives, and the obliteration of identity” (80). Both his correspondence and his journalism exhibit some remorse over a past indiscretion or, at the very least, a witnessing of a colleague’s misuse of power toward a student. From 1836 to 1842, Whitman served as a teacher for several Long Island school districts. At some point in his teaching career, he suffered a crisis. His reflection on this mysterious tragedy arises not only in his non-fiction prose but also in his poetry and fiction. However, his reflections on teaching and his experience abound patently in the canon of journalism he contributed to various newspapers following his teaching years.
In the Brooklyn *Evening Star* of October 2, 1845, Whitman recalled the circumstances of most young schoolteachers. He claimed that most schools were taught by "chance teachers—young men during college vacations, poor students, tolerably intelligent farmers, who have some months of leisure in the winter" (qtd. in Freedman 67). However, for Whitman, it appears that economic circumstance largely influenced his decision to teach during the depression occurring in Manhattan between 1836 and 1842. Because of a "terrible fire that summer [that] was to devastate the printing and publishing district" (Kaplan 81), Whitman found himself unable to support himself in any other trade. Not only did the 1835 fire in Manhattan encourage out-of-work authors and printers to take on a teaching position, but the inflation due to crop failures in 1835 caused prices to soar. He became an "economic casualty" (81). He was forced by the lagging economy to assume the duties of a teacher.

Between farming and teaching the choice was clear; still, as Walt suggested in a story called "The Shadow and the Light of a Young Man's Soul," it may have been with dread and a sense of defeat that he took up the first in a series of irregular and poorly paid appointments as a country schoolmaster on Long Island. (82)

Because of these factors and an increase in joblessness, Whitman among others taught school to make ends meet.

Teaching was not all Whitman expected or wanted in a job. Kaplan reports without specific reference that Whitman "was too easygoing, appeared not to have his heart in his work, and spent much of his time musing and writing" (83). The living
conditions for a country school teacher were less than inviting. "The customary rewards of country school teaching, he said were 'poor pay,' 'coarse fare' . . . and a straw mattress . . . in the homes of his pupils' parents; he was once invited to bed down with a sick cow" (83). This factor, his experiences during teaching, some alleged crisis during his teaching career, and the after-effects of teaching on Whitman all caused him to contribute a large number of articles to the newspapers for and on which he later worked. These articles all present some evidence of darkness—some issue to defeat or reform, some evidence of "mind-gloom" over classroom issues.

Kaplan also recounts periods of explosive temperament in Whitman that lend credence to the possibility of overused authority in the classroom. The fact that a short time after his teaching assignment at Southold he published his first short story "Death in the School-Room"—a story of dramatic violence of a schoolmaster against a sickly child—gives rise to the question of his professionalism and ability to control his temper as a schoolmaster. "[I]t was only with this tale about a country teacher who flogs to death an innocent student that negativity begins to be combined with gory violence and autobiographical overtones" (Reynolds 53). Printed in the Democratic Review in the summer of 1841, this short story prefaces a revelation of Whitman given in an interview during his old age, which indicates he may have been autobiographically confessing to an extreme temper during his youth. David Reynolds retells Whitman's story in Walt Whitman's America:

One day he was fishing from a boat on a trout pond near the family property when he was harassed by Benjamin Carman, a boy who
lived on the adjacent farm. Carman was throwing stones near the boat to disturb the fish. At last he got in his own boat and approached Whitman, who patiently ignored him and then struck up a cheerful conversation. When Carman’s boat came within striking range, Walt seized his pole and thrashed the boy mercilessly, breaking the pole in the process. The beaten Carman went home, and soon his furious father brought charges of assault and battery against Whitman. News of the case spread like wildfire, and on trial day the courtroom was crowded. Whitman pleaded his own defense, admitting to the beating but insisting his vested rights had been violated. The case was dismissed. The courtroom exploded into laughter when the jury foreman, an Englishman, declared, “We find ‘e did not ‘it him ‘ard enough” (59).

Whitman’s telling of this on himself may or may not have been true; however, the possibility gives rise to the question of whether or not he had been able to control his temper during his youth and if that uncontrollable temper caused him to do injustice to either this boy or perhaps another—a student of his at Southold, perhaps—or both.

In addition to the Benjamin Carman fishing incident, recounted also in Kaplan, are the following reports:

In later years Walt was to be seen kicking a politician down the stairs, manhandling a verger in a church, and grappling with a
carpet-bag senator who insulted him; these demonstrations of explosive temper were memorable because they were infrequent and because he had been trying so hard to cultivate Quaker peacefulness. (84)

Was this the crisis that caused Whitman to fight for the rights of students? Was he attempting to redeem himself for a past crime of violence against a child?

His teaching career and suspected crisis gave rise to dozens of articles on education. In an article Whitman printed in the Brooklyn Evening Star on October 30, 1845, he recounts the orthodoxy of the whip in schools of the nineteenth century.

[Whether he says 'damn' or breaks a glass—whether he insults his mother or tears his trousers—whether, tempted by God’s beautiful sunshine and air, he plays ‘hookey,’ or prompted by hunger, eats the forbidden pound-cake, kept for ‘company’ only—whether he invents a falsehood or loses his pocket handkerchief—*the whip*, the quick and sharp infliction of physical pain, is the great cure-all and punish-all. (qtd. in Freedman 75)

Among additional articles on school methods of discipline was “The Whip in Schools,” from the Brooklyn Evening Star on October 22, 1845, in which Whitman cried out to teachers and parents alike:

How many noble spirited boys are beaten into sullen and spiteful endurance of what there is no earthly need—sharp taunts, blows, and frowning looks! Awake! parent and teacher, to higher ideas
for your kind, in the young freshness wherewith God has formed them, than to suppose there are not a hundred better ways of drawing out what is good, and repelling what is bad, in them, than the ferrule and the rod! (Reynolds 59)

Whitman "allied himself completely with the education reformers by emphasizing the role of a nurturing physical and emotional environment in the training of children" (63). Whitman claimed, also in the Star, not to be attacking schoolteachers but to hope that "hints we may give, to suggest to them means of making their duties less repulsive" (qtd. in Freedman 74). In his article of October 30, 1845, he claims that the "orthodox teacher and parent" would whip a student out of one state and into the other in the formation of values and educational ideas. Whitman reasons that the whip in schools is much like tyranny in nations—that men will revolt at the harshness of their treatment by their leaders. Whitman wrote so many articles on corporal punishment, his readers wondered at the cause behind them all. On November 8, 1845, he quipped that whipping "saves a lazy teacher much trouble" (qtd. in Freedman 79). Yet he continued in this article to warn that,

Many a boy, hardened, wicked, and contumacious under the former influence—a plague to his friends and a fountain of bitterness to himself—could have been, perhaps yet could be made a different and a far better creature by the prudent application of discriminating love instead of severity. (qtd. in Freedman 79)
He further encourages parents to monitor the teachers in their childrens' schools. He warns them that "It will never do to wait for teachers to abolish whipping as a punishment. As a body they are in favor of it . . . . To teach a good school it is not at all necessary for a man to be inflexible in rules and severe in discipline" (85).

In the Brooklyn Daily Eagle on March 19, 1947, he contributed "Rules for Governing Children." In this article, Whitman offered three rules for disciplining children. He encouraged seldom using authority but reason instead as means of persuasion; seldom threatening but always executing that claim which has been made; and lastly avoiding nagging tones of the existence of forgetfulness or depravity in children. In April 1847, he published an article of "Maxims" that state how we should perceive and treat schools. Although having been out of the teaching career for some time and seeming to have forgotten his $72.00 per-term-wages, he stated that "As is the teacher, so is the school, and as is the pay, so is the teacher" (Reynolds 188). Yet he accurately maximizes that "One man taught soon becomes the teacher of twenty" (189).

In his "Corporal Punishment in Schools," also from the Brooklyn Daily Eagle in 1847, he again returns to the topic of the whip in schools. Yet he admonishes his readers on their duty to watch the teacher: "There is altogether too much of this lashing business in our Brooklyn schools. The teachers have not a sufficient guard kept over them—for really most teachers need as great a supervision as the pupils" (197). Whitman gives undeniable proof of his contempt for the whip as a disciplining tool in the schools in "Flogging in Schools," an article printed September 3, 1846:
A good deal of attention has been turned, in New England of late, to the practice of flogging in schools. It is hard, we know, to obliterate even a foolish and wicked practice, that has long precedent to support it. And yet this lashing plan, for schools, is one of the most abhorrent relics, in its way, of a barbarous and ignorant belief. Its influence is poisonous, as such; for the objection to it is not on account of the mere physical pain, or anything of that sort. An American boy should be taught from his very birth, the highest tone of self-respect and moral pride—to which blows are fatal... Investigating a late flogging case at New Haven, the school committee conclude their report on it, (a report describing a case which has too many duplicates, we fear,) as follows: "The too frequent habit of inflicting corporeal punishment, for the violation of mere arbitrary rules of discipline in schools, which are as various as the taste or caprice of their authors, and sometimes as absurd as they are useless, confounds in the minds of the young, all accurate distinctions between right and wrong, perverts the design of the law in delegating so delicate a trust as the power of corporeal chastisement into the hands of a stranger, blunts the sensibilities of the young, and hardens their hearts to commit more malignant offences, for which is reserved
no punishment adequate for the same, within his province to
inflict.” (133-34)

Whitman demonstrates in this article his disdain for the procedure as well as the
autonomous nature of the teacher’s position. He comments further on the teacher’s role
in “The Rule of the Rod,” October 8, 1846.

While passing one of the Public Schools in Brooklyn yesterday
afternoon, we heard the terrible hubbub which severe personal
chastisement causes—screaming, the angry-voiced teacher, and so
on. We don’t know what the fault was, nor how heavy the
punishment was; but we know that the punishment should not have
been of that sort at all . . . . [T]he instructor who uses the lash in
his school at all, is unworthy to hold the power he does hold. That
he has found no other means . . . than thrashing, proves him fit
perhaps for a menagerie-tamer, but not for the holy office of
fashioning an immortal human soul. (138-39)

This acknowledgement and condemnation of the lashing teacher could be evidence of
first-hand knowledge, as Whitman had had the experience of schoolmaster. As stories
surfaced about him as one of harsh temper and also as one with a teaching record, one
must wonder at his state of mind regarding the autonomy of teaching and the motivation
which caused his continuous commentary on the subject. As he states in 1847, “hardly
any words are too emphatic to apply to the teacher—unworthy that noble and honorable
name—who has no other means of making his pupils obey him, than blows” (190).
Are these articles evidence of a past indiscretion on Whitman’s part? Is this how he redeems whatever act he committed during his teaching days? While he contributed several political articles to newspapers during his teaching career, the articles that most pathetically affected his readers were those on school teaching. So what happened to Whitman during those years? Reynolds claims that Whitman was “notoriously foggy about autobiographical data” (70), and no accurate records exist to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt any trouble between him and a student; yet speculation exists that he did, in some way, misuse his authority with/over a student. Because of the publication of his “Death in the School-Room,” his later interview about the fishing incident, and all of his articles on corporal punishment, one might logically suspect his overuse of the rod on one of his Southold students. However, the official historian of Southold and fourteen community members at Southold communicated a story of Whitman’s indiscretion to Katherine Molinoff, who privately published a journalistic pamphlet *Walt Whitman at Southold* (1966). Repeated in Reynolds, the story progresses as follows:

In those days it was not unusual for a male teacher boarding with his students’ families to sleep in the attic with one or more of the boys. Whitman allegedly did more than sleep. As the story goes, one Sunday...he was publicly denounced by the Reverend Ralph Smith...from the pulpit of Southold’s First Presbyterian Church ‘because of his behavior to the children, and his goings on.’ (Later on, reports of ‘bloody bedding’ would emerge.) Members of the congregation formed a furious mob and went to nearby Kettle Hill,
where hot tar was always available for mending fishing nets. They hunted Whitman down at the home of George C. Wells, whose son Giles was later said by Judge Jesse Case to have been ‘one of Whitman’s victims.’ Whitman fled to the nearby home of Dr. Ira Corwin, whose housekeeper, Selina Danes, known as ‘the orphan’s friend,’ hid him in the attic. The pursuing townspeople found him there, hiding under ‘straw ticks’ (summer mattresses). They seized him, plastered tar and feathers on his hair and clothes, and rode him out of town on a rail. (70)

If this was a true account of what happened to him at Southold, his “fogginess” regarding his autobiography seems plausible. It seems logical that something like this may have indeed happened, as he did not write a word for six months after this alleged occurrence. “[N]othing of his appeared in print between November 28, 1840, and June 22, 1841 . . . . Those ‘lost’ seven middle months lend credence to the notion that he experienced some numbing blow that incapacitated him emotionally and perhaps physically” (73). In August 1841, he published his “Death in the School-Room.” Like this tale, the other stories he contributed to newspapers all entailed some sort of “bloody, violent confrontation, usually between an adult authority figure and a male child” (74).

Needless to say, his writing—not just his journalistic works, but his prose, poetry, and fiction as well—took on a darker tone. Whitman addressed many topics other than schoolroom management in his journalism from politics—both national and international—to human interest issues such as labor and female equality to the states of
wars worldwide. Yet the bulk of the articles that seem to stem from personal observation or experience, and those about which he displays such a passion seem to have to do with corporal punishment in the schools. Whitman began exploring the other inhumanity of humans against each other, death issues, and the transience of humanity. He explored and exploited matters concerning abortions, prostitution, rape on ships, among other issues (Bergman, “The Influence of Whitman’s Journalism” 399). Controversial issues began to abound in the Whitman journalism as well as in his prose. “To be sure, pain would never disappear totally from his writings and would in fact form a vivid counterpoint to the prevailing optimism of his major poems” (79). Whatever the reason, Whitman’s teaching career had a definite impact on his writing—a dark influence that caused him to ponder the elements of cruelty, insanity, decay, depravity, death, and human transience. All of these appear in the Whitman canon and convey his participation in the Dark Romantic movement of the nineteenth century.
CHAPTER 4

THE DARKER TINT OF WHITMAN'S POETRY

Behold this swarthy face, these gray eyes,
This beard, the white wool unclipt upon my neck,
My brown hands and the silent manner of me
without charm . . . .

(“Behold This Swarthy Face” ll. 1-3)

Whitman’s poetry has long been revered as celebratory in nature. Yet, this “swarthy,” darker side “without charm” he claims to possess appears in much of his work. In much of his poetry is the voice of despair, a darker tone.

Thus we clearly see what is the subject of *Leaves of Grass*. It is the personality of Walt Whitman; it is a self-analysis, a self-portraiture. The main figure in the painting is Walt Whitman himself; while America, American civilisation, and nineteenth century progress furnish the setting, the environment, the background to that figure. (Smuts 60)

Whitman notices Nature as a force that does not distinguish status or rank. As Kaplan claims, “The great cycle of *Leaves of Grass* had renewed the dead. The nation was now ‘saturated, perfumed with their impalpable ashes’” (283). In many of his poems,
Whitman envisions the nightmarish experiences of war, human beings' cruelty to one another, and the moral codes humans violate against each other. He despairs of the inability to control fate, Death, and Nature. He shows an overpowering obsession with the past, particularly of birth and its purity followed by the tragic downfall of humans in their maturing state. He reflects on the decadence in which humans participate as they mature. He contemplates loneliness and isolation.

Where he is successful, and gloriously successful, is in his rendition of the inner drama of self-searching, now fearfully, now joyfully, for identity... Whitman... recognized that the self was the only uncertain stability in an unstable world. (E. Miller, WW's Poetry 27)

The only certain stability in an unstable world is Death. He focuses on this thought as he moves from subjects of melancholy to Death in many of his poems.

In an uncollected poem, “The Death of the Nature Lover” (1843), Whitman presents a wounded soldier dying amid the wonders of Nature. An early piece in his career, this poem reflects the contemplation of Death as unknown and recognition of Nature's imperturbability to human endings. As he lies dying, he notes the sun shining and the flowers blooming. In this war remembrance, Whitman addresses the fact that the young man dies to an age of uncertainty:

He bids adieu to earth, and steps

Down to the World Unknown. (ll. 31-32)
Even in this early poem, one of the first published in Whitman's career, we see the contemplation of Death and an undisturbed Nature. These indications alone place Whitman among the country's Dark Romantics.

Prefacing a chapter in *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate* (1842), Whitman wrote a poem addressing the inhumanity of one race of people toward another. In "The Inca's Daughter" (1840), Whitman presents an Indian captive who faces death at the hands of her captors. Whitman presents the cruelties commonly dealt the Indians in the second stanza:

> The rack had riven her frame that day—
> But not a sigh or murmur broke
> Forth from her breast . . . (l. 5-7)

While the Indian girl seems not to fear Death in this Whitman contemplation, she acknowledges the cruelty done to her and the plans of further cruelty to be done her by the Spaniards and chooses to die instead. Whitman's contemplation of human cruelty is obvious in this 1840 poem.

Published in the *Long Island Democrat* on May 19, 1840, "The Love That is Hereafter" presents another early contemplation of humanity and its place in the world. As nature continues its beautiful play,

> [Man] faints with grief—he toils through care—
> And from the cradle to the bier
> He wearily plods on—till Death
> Cuts short his transient, panting breath,
And sends him to his sleep. (ll. 31-35)

Whitman's contemplations of Death and the nature of Nature at this point may stem from his dismal outlook on his struggling career.

In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman employs many symbols that present Death. For Whitman, "Death connotes, in *Leaves of Grass*, the cessation of the vital principle, destruction, and the dissolution of what the speaker calls 'the excrementitious body'" (Clare 14). In "To Think of Time" (1855), originally written as a burial poem, Whitman reflects on Death. Critics applaud this work as "a brilliant variation on Bryant's 'Thanatopsis' theme" (Aspiz 56). That is, "the major theme is fear and death" (Allen, *The Solitary Singer* 165). He thinks of and ponders the weight of "being," that Death is ubiquitous and unavoidable. "Not a day passes, not a minute, or second without a corpse" (l. 11). He recognizes the human tendency to take for granted the riches, the education, the everything all around us (lines 25-27) and how materialistic we become. Aspiz claims this recognition to be the affirmation of "his love for all the rejected persons of the earth" (56). Whitman ponders Nature's indifference to humanity's transitory condition:

> Cold dash of waves at the ferry-wharf, posh and ice in the river,
> half-frozen mud in the streets,
> A gray discouraged sky overhead, the short last daylight of December,
> A hearse and stages, the funeral of an old Broadway stage-driver,
> the cortege mostly drivers. (ll. 36-38)
Whitman acknowledges the need to think of the past: “The law of the past cannot be eluded . . .” (l. 81). He further indicts man as victim of both present and past law.

I have dream’d that heroes and good-doers shall be under the present and past law,

And that murderers, drunkards, liars, shall be under the present and past law,

For I have dream’d that the law they are under now is enough.

And I have dream’d that the purpose and essence of the known life, the transient,

Is to form and decide identity for the unknown life, the permanent.

If all came but to ashes of dung,

If maggots and rats ended us, then Alarum! for we are betray’d,

Then indeed suspicion of death. (ll. 97-105)

Is this despair? Whitman exhibits possible doubt of salvation even though he claims he believes in “an eternal soul” (l. 117). Yet, the mere fact that he focuses on the physical body’s subjection to corruption and ultimate end in death gives credence to the claim that he ponders Death.

In “The Sleepers” (1855), Whitman has nightmarish visions of all varieties of humans in death-like poses, lying among each other. The poet illustrates “layers of darkness” in this work (Mary 190). He vicariously suffers “the sins and afflictions of all men” (Allen, The Walt Whitman Handbook 145). Clarke aptly describes this work as a
“disturbing text—upending the familiar Whitman tropes . . . It is terms are not that of light and unity so much as of darkness and disintegration” (‘The Sleepers’ 99). Indeed “The Sleepers” is a work that expresses Whitman’s ultimate fears of pain, depravity of human nature, sin, and Death.

In this poem, Whitman observes. He is a passive character whose movements are unnoticed, unfelt. His “spirit’ step[s] or wander[s] among the outcasts and evil-doers of society” (Vince 18). While he supposes these bodies are merely sleeping, Whitman presents them as in poses of the dead:

How solemn they look there, stretch’d and still,
How quiet they breathe, the little children in their cradles.

The wretched features of ennueyes, the white features of corpses,
the livid faces of drunkards, the sick-gray faces of onanists,
The gash’d bodies on battle-fields, the insane in their strong-door’d rooms, the sacred idiots, the new-born emerging from gates, and the dying emerging from gates . . . (ll. 6-9)

Whitman’s “corpses” and “gash’d bodies” reinforce this death imagery (Blasing 112). His observations demonstrate his interest in “the lost and violated Edenic past” (Kornblatt 86). Whitman indicates his interest in Death and war’s subsequent violence of one human to another with his “gash’d bodies.” Darkness, too, is associated with Death. His “infolding night” is impervious to any and victimizes all, as Death does. The lack of noise reinforces the dark tone. The narrator’s prowling and creeping about the death-like
figures reinforces this sense of darkness. The noise that exists, however, serves as further amplification of the dark intent of the poem. "Sounds' come at Whitman: disparate signifiers of isolated hurt and fear" (Clarke 101).

Several interpretations of this work exist, all of which indicate dark thoughts in Whitman. In Miller's analysis of this poem, we are presented with Whitman's journey from childhood to adulthood and all the eye-opening awarenesses that progression entails. Miller sees the hand as the pivotal symbol of motion: the guiding hand of parents, the freeing hand of sexual awakening, and the self's hand that paves the way of adult life to death (Miller, A Century 262). Chase presents this work as a "poem about the descent of the as yet unformed and unstable ego into the id, its confrontation there of the dark human tragedy, its emergence in a new, more stable form" (54). He claims this poem to be a stream-of-consciousness foray, "penetrating the veil of death" and "rebounding into the midst of life" (57).

Whitman, while claiming this dream to be about humankind, indicates his reflection on Death and violated moral codes as he studies another of crime's victims: "And the murder'd person, how does he sleep?" (l. 18) It is this line which gives us cause to see Whitman's dream as an observation of the dead. He sees both good and evil. Yet the evil seems to provide Whitman's work with the obsessive mystery and decadence he lingers on. His "money-maker that plotted all day," the "nimble ghosts" who "surround me and lead me" with "stretch'd arms" (ll. 33-39) reflect his observation and meditation on the evils of humankind.
In the fourth part of the poem, he focuses on a shipwreck from which no living person emerges from the ice-cold and unforgiving sea. His view of Nature, of water, is one of destruction, impervious indifference to human suffering. Whitman specifically views the sea as a vehicle of humankind toward Death.

Man has . . . been considered in *Leaves of Grass* in his various activities on the sea—wading, bathing, swimming, and sailing . . . overtures or tentative proposals to Death . . . [The sea] symbolizes the voyage of Death into the unknown . . . .” (Clare 15-16)

Whitman illustrates this tendency to see forces of Nature, specifically bodies of water, as impenetrable destroyers of humanity. “I look where the ship helplessly heads end on, I hear the burst as she strikes, I hear the howls of dismay . . .” (l. 85), and he recognizes his human inability to help, to save, to stave off nature’s treachery or the coming of Death. Whitman sees that Death obscures identity, and he wrings his hands at the thought of losing the self he celebrates. “I cannot aid with my wringing fingers” (l. 86). When the narrator admits to his inability to save those on a sinking ship, “his impotence forces him to an unspoken assertion of mortality” (Kornblatt 87). Whitman’s archetypal swimmer is always reclaimed by the sea; despite his continual effort, he always falls prey to Death (87). This fate illustrates Whitman’s obsession with man’s destiny and the indifference of an unknown and unavoidable Death.

Even though Whitman turns in the seventh stanza to reflect on the equal beauty of all who “sleep,” his reflections on Death and dying, the victimized and the cruel, still
remain. In his contemplation, he recognizes that he will "duly return" to that which he has contemplated—Death. He will unavoidably lose his identity to a natural force which indifferently treads upon humanity, uncaring in its wake.

"The Sleepers" also presents Whitman's obsessions with evil and darkness merely through its nighttime setting and through the isolation of the observing narrator. Night "connotes both restriction and darkness, an all embracing doubt of the unseen and unspeakable... a condition more akin to the claustrophobia and extreme internalization of Melville's Pierre, Emily Dickinson's 'I Felt a Funeral in my Brain' and Poe's 'The Pit and the Pendulum'" (Clarke 102). The narrator wanders continuously through this darkness, the only one supposedly awake, the only one not participating in that which his subjects are participating in, the outsider looking in.

The poet pictures himself "pausing and gazing and bending and stopping" as he will "stand with drooping eyes"... The continuous present... gives way to a series of passive activities which imply secret, and guilty, activities. Whitman gazes on the sleepers; he views them naked, without their knowledge. He emerges as a dark and threatening presence... (Clarke 103)

The fact that it is night, that the narrator is alone in his wanderings, that he commits unknown acts gives credence that Whitman has dark obsessions, that he lingers on subjects of darkness, on human frailty, sin, and Death.

In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856), Whitman doesn't view himself as isolated; he seems to contemplate the inevitable passage from Life to Death of all human beings.
He imagines himself dead, viewing the living: “Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd . . .” (l. 23). His contemplation of Death appears in this work (again) as night or darkness. He also reflects on the past and the evil done by one to another.

I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,
Blabb’d, blush’d, resented, lied, stole, grudg’d,
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,
The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,
The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not wanting,
Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these wanting,
Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest,
Was call’d by my nighest name by clear loud voices of young men as they saw me approaching or passing,
Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh against me as I sat . . . . (ll. 70-80)

Whitman realizes his inner nature and expresses it in these lines. “[W]hatever guilty thoughts or sly intentions others have had, he has had the same” (Allen, The Solitary Singer 185). Whitman appears to present an extended metaphor of life as the river, birth
as the ebb, and death as the reasonable and expected flow. Yet his lingering on the evils of the world reflect his contemplation of a darker, less celebrated life-force. While Whitman claims he knows evil, has committed evil acts, and presents this fact as part of “the great unity which embraces the duality of good and evil” (Goodson 46), the fact that he employs images of evil, Gothic elements of terror, and inhumanity of one to the other reflects his existence as one of Dark Romanticism.

In “Song of the Open Road” (1856), Whitman gives us another metaphor of life as a road. In this poem, he contemplates Nature and mentions that it “is rude and incomprehensible” (l. 117). He admits all humans are on the road, including “Soldiers of revolts, standers by gaping graves, lowerers-down of coffins” (l. 157). Although he seems matter-of-fact and celebratory of life’s ups and downs, he still contemplates Death:

Stately, solemn, sad, withdrawn, baffled, mad, turbulent, feeble,

dissatisfied,

Desperate, proud, fond, sick, accepted by men, rejected by men,

They go! they go! I know that they go, but I know not where they go . . . . (ll. 185-87)

It is here that we see Whitman’s contemplation on Death and doubt of heaven. He thinks on Death as it comes to all men and women and is part of them. He describes all humans as victims of silent Death:

Smartly attired, countenance smiling, form upright, death under the breast-bones, hell under the skull-bones,
Under the broadcloth and gloves, under the ribbons and artificial flowers,

Keeping fair with the customs, speaking not a syllable of itself . . . .

(ll. 202-4)

Whitman acknowledges that his and all humans’ call, or reason for being, is the fight against Death.

My call is the call of battle, I nourish active rebellion,

He going with me must go well arm’d,

He going with me goes often with spare diet, poverty, angry enemies, desertions. (ll. 211-13)

As he asks his traveling companion whether or not they will “stick by each other as long as we live,” one wonders if “Camerado” is Death, if Death is indeed resident under the breastbone? If so, is Whitman asking to escape Death and the end of life on the open road?

In “The World Below the Brine” (1860), fragmentary thoughts of other-worldliness exhibit Whitman’s contemplation of an afterlife, an after-death.

The change thence to the sight here, and to the subtle air breathed by beings like us who walk this sphere,

The change onward from ours to that of beings who walk other spheres. (10-11)

True, he contemplates other life forms; yet he simultaneously ponders past existence, the transitory nature of our current existence, and the possible, unknown, future existence.
The mere use of the word “brine” in the title indicates the possibility of sadness at an unknown future, as it could mean not only the surface of the ocean but also heart-felt tears.

Whitman exhibits true elements of the Dark Romantic as he “A reminiscence sings” in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.” Whitman’s “cradle” is life and nature. He describes it as “savage.” Most scholars assert that “The rhythm of death is . . . a cyclic recurrence of that which gives rest again, and again, and again, like the ‘shsh’ of wavelets on the shore or the soothing of a mother at the cradle, but rocking endlessly” (Kinkead-Weekes 54). However, he discusses birth and innocence, the past, the heartbreak of maturity and reminds us that Death is the only certainty in life. Whitman throws himself “on the sand, confronting the waves” (19). He exhibits anguish at the unknowns of life and of Death. While he reminds the reader that Death is the only certainty in life, he reflects on the uncertainties of life as well: the maturing process, the loneliness of life, and the mysterious unknown that takes away our mates. Whitman knows “he cannot retreat to ‘innocence’” (Black 70). He recalls two birds he once observed.

Till of a sudden,

May-be kill’d, unknown to her mate,

One forenoon the she-bird crouch’d not on the nest,

Nor return’d that afternoon, nor the next,

Nor ever appear’d again. (ll. 41-45)
He notices the indifference of Nature—the sea, the land, the moon, the stars—as from the he-bird’s perspective he pleads for the return of his mate. He refers to the past, lingers on it:

O past! O happy life! O Songs of joy. (125)

He notices the unfeeling bent of the mother, of Nature, as the wind howls. Whitman claims he will never escape these ponderings on the miserable unknowns of life, and he curses life’s necessity to mature and learn these heartbreaks:

Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,
Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me,
Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before what there in the night,
By the sea under the yellow and sagging moon,
The messenger there arous’d, the fire, the sweet hell within,
The unknown want, the destiny of me. (ll. 152-57)

Gay Wilson Allen claims this poem to be one of pure mourning (The Solitary Singer 50). “What loved one had died we do not know, but the real theme of ‘Out of the Cradle’ is ‘Two together.’” Allen claims the “extremely personal tone of the first version lends credence to the suspicion that the original poem gave expression to some deep and genuine experience” (Walt Whitman Handbook 67). Whitman exhibits a hopelessness, a tragic tone, at his quest for answers to what lies in store for humanity other than its own end. Finally, he plainly states Nature’s conclusion to all.

Whereto answering, the sea,
Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whisper’d me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak,
Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word death,
And again death, death, death, death,
Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous’d child’s heart,
But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,
Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,
Death, death, death, death, death. (ll. 165-73)

Critics claim that this work exhibits “the poet’s intuitive realization of the ultimate meaning of death, which is that it is the absorption of the individual into the soul of nature or the universe” (Allen The Solitary Singer 236). However the loss is interpreted, Death is certain to the individual; so too is the loss of identity. “[D]eath is seen as existing externally and is the cause of grief over loss and abandonment” (Black 73).

Beyond Death, Whitman concludes there is no possibility for further knowledge.

Instead of the triumphant vision of Life which Whitman himself had known, when the whole world smiled on its conquering lover, nothing rises now before the outsetting bard but a dim phantasmagoria of Death-shapes. (Whicher 289)

Whitman mourns the loss of the self to Death. Whitman’s searching, doubting contemplation directly ties him to the Dark Romantics.
Whitman displays a deprecating, critical view of himself in “A Hand-Mirror” (1860). “‘A Hand-Mirror’ presents a searing case of a man whose ‘fair costume’ cannot disguise the fact that he has violated nature’s physical laws. . . . [H]e has ruined his body through drink, gluttony, venereal disease, and unwholesome living” (Aspiz 205). The surface reflection the narrator sees “gives way to its historical ‘other’” (Clarke 140). Not only does he not see the goodness in himself or in others, but he does not see hope for the future as he reflects on the past—the downfall of man from such a splendid and innocent beginning (birth). Printed in its entirety below is Whitman’s exhibition of human frailty and its doomed state:

A Hand-Mirror

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

Outside fair costume, within ashes and filth,

No more a flashing eye, no more a sonorous voice or springy step,

Now some slave’s eye, voice, hands, step,

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

Lungs rotting away piecemeal, stomach sour and cankerous,

Joints rheumatic, bowels clogged with abomination,

Blood circulating dark and poisonous streams,

Words babble, hearing and touch callous,

No brain, no heart left, no magnetism of sex;

Such from one look in this looking-glass ere you go hence,

Such a result so soon—and from such a beginning!
This poem is perhaps one of Whitman's strongest pieces of evidence that he curses the maturity of humanity from its innocent beginnings to its societal evils and falls to the temptations of life. As pure as humans begin, they end equally tainted by sin, corruption, and evil. This work not only presents his criticism of self but also his indictment of the nation as well. "The Hand-Mirror" presents pure proof of Whitman's misgivings of human goodness and furthers the claim that he believes more whole-heartedly in the human, innate sense of depravity.

Whitman again ponders the indifference of Nature to life and the indifference of Death to life in an elegy on Abraham Lincoln. In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865), "universally admitted to be [Whitman's] masterpiece" (Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook 170), he memorializes a specific person; yet he applies the elegy universally to all. He claims that despite life, "night and day journeys a coffin" (I. 32). In the work, "concerned with the mourning of a nation over a communal loss, and . . . an effort on the part of a poet to assuage personal sorrow" (Fein 115), Whitman "curses death as 'cruel hands that hold me powerless!' then realizes that even his inner immortal self is not safe: 'O helpless soul of me!' The soul . . . is drawn into finite boundaries, enveloped by the dark cloud of death" (Butscher 18). The personal aspect of the poem reveals his fearful ponderings of Death as an unknowable event but inevitably unavoidable. He notes that he goes through life, "with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,/And the thought of death close-walking the other side of
me . . .” (ll. 120-21). In addition to his reflection on Death itself, he considers the events that lead up to Death. He reflects not only on Nature’s indifference to humans but also on the human inhumanity to comrades.

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,

And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,

I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,

But I saw they were not as was thought,

They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer’d not,

The living remain’d and suffer’d, the mother suffer’d,

And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer’d,

And the armies that remain’d suffer’d. (177-84)

In what Fein calls “a dirge,” Whitman reveals his own sense of loss by using a recurring interjection. He addresses his personal loss, that of President Lincoln. Whitman refers to Lincoln several times: “O powerful western fallen star!” (ll. 7); “O great star disappear’d” (ll. 9); “O western orb sailing the heaven” (ll. 56); and “O comrade” (ll. 198). These personal addresses illustrate Whitman’s devotion to and sense of loss at the Death of one of the heroes of the time. The emotional interjection occurs again in a different context—one in which Whitman addresses Death. Calling Death by natural names, Whitman cries out in frustration at the unavoidable certainty and the indifferent nature of Death: “O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!” (ll. 8); “O cruel hands that hold me powerless” (ll. 9); “O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul” (ll. 11). And, finally, Whitman reveals with this same emotional tool his own frustration at his inability to
adequately deal with his loss: "O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?" (l. 72); "O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?" (l. 79). Whitman's repeated use of this interjection, "the mournful O's that begin each line" (Fein 115), reveals true emotions and fears of and about Death and its indifference. Allen again sums up the impact of Whitman's work. "The poem... will keep alive... the true meaning of the President's death, and the inevitable death of every individual" (The Solitary Singer 357). Whitman laments that Death must conquer all. "The sprigs from the lilac bushes ('to perfume the grave of him I love') are not just for this one coffin, but for 'coffins all'" (Burke 295).

Some critics interpret the work differently but still acknowledge the significant role Death plays for Whitman in the work. Yongue claims that, in "Lilacs," "nascent spring and the 'powerful western fallen star' (that serves as a metaphor for Lincoln in death) evoke powerful, conflicting emotions in the poet which transport him back to that first and continuously remembered rebellion signaling the death of his own innocence" (12). Yongue claims that Whitman parallels the Civil War and the climactic assassination of Lincoln to the loss of virginity. She pinpoints Whitman's acts of violence as causes of the death of innocence. Whitman lingers on violent acts throughout the poem.

Whitman declares poetically, breaking the sprig is a distinctly violent act committed by man against nature, an act which contradicts the thrust of nature" force represented by the "all growing" lilac bush. But it is also a deed that is to be identified
with the assassin's crime, the lover's brutality, and the soldier's
gruel task. (Yongue 14)

The mere fact that Whitman focuses at length on violence, or the murder of Lincoln, the
loss of life, proves Whitman's tendency to obsess on Death and the violent turns of
human behavior that so often lead to Death.

Although critics have claimed that after Whitman wrote "When Lilacs Last in the
Dooryard Bloom'd," "there would be no more confrontations with his unconscious self
and that his conflicts would have to remain unresolved" (Black 45). Yet Kallen asserts
that "Song of the Answerer" (1855) is Whitman's revelation to man that Death is the one
and inevitable destiny of man. In this work, Whitman expresses that humanity is
"reduced to a futility, a meaningless nothing, a living absurdity, born only to die" (Kallen
172). Whitman, in using the pronoun "he," illustrates that all fall prey to Death:

Beautiful women, the haughtiest nations, laws, the landscape,

people, animals,

The profound earth and its attributes and the unquiet ocean, (so tell

I my morning's romanza,)

All enjoyments and properties and money, and whatever money

will buy,

The best farms, others toiling and planting and he unavoidable

reaps,

The noblest and costliest cities, others grading and building and he
domiciles there,
Nothing for any one but what is for him . . . (II. 11-16)

Whitman describes all human toiling in life and the inevitable fall of each to Death. In this work and in “Song of Myself” (1855) Whitman presents the “singularities of death” (Kallen 173).

In his most celebrated work, “Song of Myself,” Whitman exhibits a dark moment. This work has been described as “remarkably ironic, covert, elusive” (Chase 76). The problem with this work that has been so widely applauded as celebratory in nature is in “the veiled questions asked by Whitman of himself” (Black 89). “Song of Myself” becomes, not a celebration of self, but a doubtful, speculative contemplation that poses the “troublesome question: who and what am I?” (Black 93). Throughout the lengthy poem, Whitman discreetly admits his doubts about God, his fear of the unknown, his obsessions with Death. The good gray poet, in continuing to attempt a public persona, would like the reader to believe that “Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul” (sect. 44, p. 239). Yet, in almost every single section is a passage or hint that reveals his darker nature. In the first section, he even reveals his disbelief in an afterlife. Speaking “at every hazard, Nature without check,” Whitman reveals—unintentionally to be sure—his obsession with Death. He opens the work with his celebrations of self and unity but hopes “to cease not till Death.” This hope indicates that he believes that ceasing will occur, that there is no afterlife, that there is no known following Death.

The celebratory, erotic stanzas that begin the work fail to disguise the human doubt that erupt in the latter part of the work. In the third section, Whitman denies that he talks or thinks about Death.
I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end,

But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

He immediately follows with a celebration of “now.”

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

Is he trying to convince us or himself? This denial of anything else than the “now” seems to be a flight from the Unknown. Later in the same section, he states that “I and this mystery here we stand.” If the mystery is not Death, what is it then? He reasons that if he and his soul,

Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,

Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn . . . .

However, what happens after death never is proved to the conscious self. It is this contradiction that Whitman battles throughout the poem.

In the fourth section, Whitman reveals past influences of his family’s crises, of personal crises, and of war. He claims that

The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss or lack of money, or depressions or exaltations,

Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news,

the fitful events;
These come to me days and nights and go from me again,

But they are not the Me myself.

While he would like us to believe that these experiences truly "go from [him]," they would not arise in his work. And while he claims that the darker occasions of his life have not comprised any of his "Me myself," the bulk of his work that spans his lifetime reveals hints of those dismal events. He elusively confesses in the same section that he has played with words and phrasing, that he has tried to illuminate only what he has wanted to reveal.

Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog with linguists and contenders,

I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait.

He indeed hints at another self, a hidden "other," as he begins his fifth section.

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you.

While this could mean his physical self, as most interpret, it could also signal the "other" he has hidden in his life of words, the darker, more contemplative self.

Whitman's sixth section reveals his doubt in Nature and in religion. He admits that he does not know what grass is any more than the child who inquires about it. If Whitman does not know Nature, how can he know himself or the "himself" he unconsciously exposes? He expresses doubt in God in this section as well.

I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,

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

He further reveals his thoughts on Death, when he supposes that the grass could be “the beautiful uncut hair of graves.” This supposition reveals that he thinks of what happens to the body after death, that he imagines the body as the producer of new life. While the entire work strives to convey that everything is eternal and rejuvenating, reincarnating, and never-ending, it continues to convey thoughts of Death as the great Unknown.

Whitman claims,

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,

And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.

The use of the word “translate” indicates that he wishes he could interpret or know. He ends the section with the claim that “to die is different from what any one supposed.”

Section eight is filled with images of Death.

The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom,

I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note where the pistol has fallen. . . .

The flap of the curtain’d litter, a sick man inside borne to the hospital,

The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows and fall . . . .
While he celebrates the happy children running "up the bushy hill," he also laments the sick, the tortured, the dead. His claim that he sees unity in everything does not deny that Death is part of that unity, that evil and illness also abound. That he thinks about these of life's ills proves that his minds does turn toward a darker side of life. One wonders at his use of such painful words. When Whitman wonders at "what howls restrain'd by decorum" linger, he expresses that there are some who shriek out in pain or sorrow in this lifetime. Whitman pays attention to the criminal, the pained.

Arrests of criminals, slights, adulterous offers made, acceptances, rejections with convex lips,

I mind them or the show or resonance of them—I come and I depart.

Isn't this an echo of "the beginning and the end," of life and death, of the contemplation of the transience of man?

Whitman contemplates the inhumanity done among humans in the tenth section, as he recalls "the runaway slave who came to my house." He recalls treating "the galls of his neck and ankles," the signals of past chaining of one human being by another. He recalls the lustiness of the peeping maiden in the eleventh section as she intrudes on the twenty-eight bathing men.

An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,

It descended tremulously from their temples and ribs.
The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to the sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them, They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch, They do not think whom they souse with spray.

The erotic passage depicts the invasive nature of lust, the invaded privacy of the young men, the objectification of humans among themselves for selfish pleasure.

Whitman continues to examine the darker forces of life. In the fifteenth section, he views man's violence against nature.

The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready,

The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches.

He studies the decay of the human psyche and its tragic results.

The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case, (He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's bed-room;)

And he reveals the gangrenous experience of the Civil War.

The malform'd limbs are tied to the surgeon's table, What is removed drops horribly in a pail;

He studies one of the most extreme forms of objectification of one human by another.

The quadroon girl is sold at the auction-stand, the drunkard nods by the bar-room stove.
He continues his observations of darkness with the drug addict and the prostitute.

   The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just-open'd lips,

   The prostitute draggles 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 at you;)

Whitman concludes the section by stating that "of these one and all I weave the song of myself." While it seems that he celebrates this wondrous unity, he points out the negative in himself, the depraved, violent, vengeful, fearful part of himself that he does not intend to part of his public persona.

   In the nineteenth section, Whitman's "I" could express himself the poet. However, it could equally serve as the pronoun for Death. He exclaims,

   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-lipp'd slave is invited, the venerealee is invited;

   There shall be no difference between them and the rest.

He does not say "between them and me." He expresses that he visits with all, the good and the evil. While this could express his anatomizing the human race as all part of the
unity of existence, it could also express that Death is the only certainty that comes to each and every soul. This possible duality creates the evil within the poet, the darker side of that good gray “Me myself” and also the all-encompassing, puzzling Unknown, Death.

Dark elements abound in each of the sections. In section twenty-four, Whitman provides evidence of the preponderence of past violated moral codes. He mentions victims of mankind and of Nature whose voices cry out through him.

Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseas’d and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs . . . .

In section twenty-five, Whitman addresses his own thoughts.

O speech how the buds beneath you are folded?

Waiting in gloom, protected by frost,

The dirt receding before my prophetical screams,

I underlying causes to balance them at last,

My knowledge my live parts, it keeping tally with the meaning of all things,

Happiness, (which whoever hears me let him or her set out in search of this day.)

My final merit I refuse you, I refuse putting from me what I really am . . . .

There it is. Whitman admits that he will not put his “final merit,” that is, his final summation of the human plight to the public. He will not put from him, that is, reveal,
what he really is. He admits he must balance his words. He asks if the unborn words, waiting in ... screams, would not reveal the “meaning of all things” (himself) if not for “I underlying” them and causing them to balance. Whitman recognizes the public persona he wishes to maintain and tries here to avoid admitting a nature less than celebratory. While he ends the section with the exclamation that “Writing and talk do not prove me,” he contradicts himself when he admits that he hides “what I really am.”

After admitting that he “and nobody else [is] the greatest traitor” in section twenty-eight, Whitman discusses Death in the form of “waiting” in section thirty. Using the word “wait,” Whitman indicates that Death is the only thing that comes to all, it is the only thing that all will undoubtedly attain. He exclaims,

All truths wait in all things,

They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it,

They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon,

The insignificant is a big to me as any . . . .

Only what nobody denies is so.

Whitman implies that Death, a fact no one argues, is the only truth.

In sections thirty-three to thirty-seven, he exhibits a darkness of the soul. In a lengthy thirty-third section, Whitman acknowledges the violence of humankind. He admits his own tendency to anger as he recalls being “Hot toward one I hate, ready in my madness to knife him.” He further illustrates human violence when he examines, The disdain and calmness of martyrs,
The mother of old, condemn'd for a witch, burnt with dry wood,
her children gazing on,
The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the fence,
blowing, cover'd with sweat,
The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck, the
murderous buckshot and the bullets,
All these I feel or am.
Whitman returns to his theme that all this is unified.
I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the
marksmen,
I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinn'd with the ooze
of my skin,
I fall on the weeds and stones,
The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,
Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with
whip-stocks.
Agonies are one of my changes of garments,
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the
wounded person,
My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe. (838-46)

Not only does he admit to the evils that arrive upon him in his maturity, but he also confesses to the egocentrism he suffers as he matures. He further contemplates man's inhumanity to man through an example of the Battle of Goliad in section thirty-four.

The maim'd and mangled dug in the dirt, the new-combers saw them there,

Some half-kill'd attempted to crawl away,

These were despatch'd with bayonets or batter'd with the blunts of muskets . . . (889-91)

Whitman contemplates the cruelties of war even before experiencing them himself during the Civil War. The tone of this work, in addition to the vocabulary used, serves as a "protective mechanism to disguise the poet's uncertainty and disenchantment from his audience and probably from himself" (Miller, WW's Poetry: A Psychological Journey 86-87).

In section thirty-six, Whitman displays his understanding of Nature as unfeeling, impervious, to the sufferings of humankind. Describing two ships at sea, one "riddled and slowly sinking," he recalls,

A few large stars overhead, silent and mournful shining,

Delicate sniffs of sea-breeze, smells of sedgy grass and fields by the shore, Death-messages given in charge to survivors,
The hiss of the surgeon’s knife, the knife, the gnawing teeth of his saw,
Wheeze, cluck, swash of falling blood, short wild scream, and long, dull, tapering groan,
These so, these irretrievable.
The oxymoronic stars that continue to shine despite the sailors’ suffering and the grassy odors on the breeze seem an unfeeling continuation of Nature to mankind.

Whitman tries to recover his optimism following these dark passages. However, glimpses of darkness continue to pervade the work. Much like Hawthorne and Melville’s symbolic veils, Whitman’s light tone attempts to hide his dark thoughts, fears, and obsessions but fails to conquer his covert but revealing vocabulary.

In Drum-Taps, Whitman expresses the astonishment of inhumanity committed during war. In “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown” (1865), Whitman observes the casualties of war on the inevitable trail toward Death. He reveals in this poem that he sees more than just glorious unity of spirit.

I see a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made,
Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles and lamps,
And by one great pitchy torch stationary with wild red flame and clouds of smoke,
By these, crowds, groups of forms vaguely I see on the floor, some in the pews laid down,
At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of
bleeding to death . . . .

Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o'er the scene fain to absorb
it all,
Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in obscurity,
some of them dead . . . . (ll. 7-14)

Whitman acknowledges figuratively that he witnesses the inhumanity done by humans
upon themselves and that he recognizes that despite all efforts, humankind has but one
destiny: Death. While he tries to portray the unavoidable fate of death as a calm
progression and a natural event, Whitman's illustration of war and its atrocities provides
the tone of horror and violent fear at the unknown aspect of the future.

Then the eyes close, calmly close, and I speed forth to the
darkness,

Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching, on in the ranks,

The unknown road still marching. (ll. 23-25)

Whitman claims that we continue to march toward Death even though we fear it. "We
can see Whitman's personal feelings expressed in . . . his Drum-Taps poems" (Hughes
241). While attempting a tone of calmness, Whitman expresses confusion at human
behavior, an overwhelming sadness at the indifference of humans to one another in light
of the inevitable fall to an indifferent Death.

A most profound work, also in Drum-Taps, illustrates Whitman's disenchantment
with human atrocities upon one another. In "The Wound-Dresser" (1865), Whitman
elegizes the injured and dying he comforts in the war hospital. The tone is one of sadness, as he recalls his duties there:

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood,
Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv'd neck and side-falling head,
His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody stump,
And has not yet look'd on it.

I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep,
But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,
And the yellow-blue countenance see.

I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound,
Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive,
While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray and pail. (ll. 45-55)
Admitting at the beginning of the work that he is “An old man bending,” Whitman focuses on the past, on the violated peacefulness, on war crimes of one soldier against
another. This labored study provides proof of Whitman’s obsession for the violated moral codes and crimes and of the past. This poem is instrumental in qualifying Whitman as a Dark Romantic.

In the Calamus section of Leaves of Grass, Whitman more clearly illustrates his obsessions with alienation, loneliness, and Death. Hughes reluctantly admits, “The ‘Calamus’ poems, first published in 1860, reveal some wavering of Whitman’s cosmic equanimity” (239). In a brief poem, “I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing” (1860), Whitman further reveals his fear of isolation, of loneliness. Observing the title tree, Whitman claims,

But I wonder’d how it could utter joyous leaves standing alone
There without its friend near, for I knew I could not. . . . (1. 5)

Although he admits to having taken a part of the tree home with him to bolster his strength and sense of self, he admits that he is not strong like the live oak is.

For all that, and though the live-oak glistens there in Louisiana solitary
in a wide flat space,
Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend a lover near,

I know very well I could not. (ll. 11-13)

Whitman acknowledges his inability to survive alone in the world and expresses his fear of such isolation in this work.

[T]o release the inner condition hidden by a surface glaze and
gloss, when Whitman declares in “Calamus,” for example, that
“passing stranger, you do not know how longingly I look upon
he suggests a characteristic pose: open, celebratory, and an instance of his famed camaraderie. But equally these words speak out from a condition of desperation. The poet here is isolated . . . that he needs . . . to make contact. He longs for someone to speak to . . . . (Clarke 16)

He again expresses a fear of loneliness in a much more blatant manner in “When I Peruse the Conquer’d Fame” (1860). In this poem (also from Calamus), Whitman observes the closeness of lovers. As he ponders the eternal ties between life partners, he expresses his heartfelt fear of isolation and admits to painful feelings.

[When I hear of the brotherhood of lovers, how it was with them,
How together through life, through dangers, odium,
unchanging, long and long,
Through youth and through middle and old age, how un faltering, how affectionate and faithful they were,
Then I am pensive—I hastily walk away fill’d with the bitterest envy. (ll. 3-6)

This revelation of envy is a rare admission to darker feelings in the Whitman canon, yet it indicates that darker feelings do in fact exist and can be found if sought.

Like his other poems from Calamus, Whitman’s “Scented Herbage of My Breast” (1860) explores the inescapability of Death. Whether about his poetry that will live after him or about the natural growth that will spring up from his grave, this poem indicates
bitterness and lengthy contemplation of Death and the revelation of his true self—a self filled with obsessive feelings of loneliness, fear, doubt, and despair. Addressing either his poetry or Nature, Whitman confesses that what emerges from him after Death will reveal what he is about.

Scented herbage of my breast,

Leaves from you I glean, I write, to be perused best

afterwards,

Tomb-leaves, body-leaves growing up above me above Death,

Perrenial roots, tall leaves, O the winter shall not freeze you delicate leaves,

Every year shall you bloom again, out from where you retired you shall emerge again . . . (ll. 1-5)

In this address, Whitman, while appearing perhaps to be talking to the natural growth that will spring up above him from the grave, really addresses his poetry as it will live on. In calling them his “tomb-leaves,” Whitman associates his poetry with Death. Although he appears to positively reflect on his life’s work as an eternally living force, he later confides that it will be his poetry that reveals the worst, the most vulnerable, and the most fearful in himself.

[Y]ou are not happiness,

You are often more bitter than I can bear, you burn and Sting me,
Yet you are beautiful to me you faint tinged roots, you make me

think of Death . . . . (ll. 8-10)

He further addresses his poetry and acknowledges that it will reveal what he has tried his entire life to conceal: the fear of Death and the darker elements of the human experience.

[Grow up out of my breast!]

Spring away from the conceal’d heart there!

Do not fold yourself so in your pink-tinged roots timid leaves!

Do not remain down there so ashamed, herbage of my breast!

Come I am determin’d to unbare this broad breast of mine,

I have long enough stifled and choked . . . . (ll. 17-21)

Finally, Whitman acknowledges that he has attempted to hide his real self in his poetry but that the poetics of his work cannot keep his true self from the public eye. He turns his address toward himself:

That you hide in these shifting forms of life, for reasons . . . . (l. 32)

“These shifting forms” of the physical self and the emotional mask hide the feelings of Whitman’s true self, his true feelings and contemplations. He returns to address his poetry and the revelations of his frailties that will come from it after his Death.

That you beyond them [the various forms of life] come forth to remain, the real reality,

That behind the mask of materials you patiently wait, no matter how long,

That you will one day perhaps take control of all,
That you will perhaps dissipate this entire show of appearance . . . .

(ll. 33-36)

This poem gives proof that Whitman tries his entire life to hide the darker side of his nature, the fears and frailties of his true self, beneath words. Yet he realizes and says as much that his work will undoubtedly reveal that which he has attempted to hide. If no other poem gives proof of this fact, Whitman’s “Scented Herbage of My Breast” certainly does and therefore categorizes him as a Dark Romantic. Though Whitman admits to having tried to hide such tendencies, he confides in this address to his life’s work that he does indeed contemplate the darker side of life and that this revelation will shine through his work despite his attempts at masking it.

Whitman admits to doubtfulness of everything, to fearful uncertainty, to awful feelings of isolation in his poem “Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances” (1860). Although the poem ends on a note of contentment—as the poet finds himself in the company of a loved one, the beginning of the work reflects his obsessions and fears during periods of isolation.

Of the terrible doubt of appearances,

Of the uncertainty after all, that we may be deluded,

That may-be reliance and hope are but speculations after all,

That may-be identity beyond the grave is a beautiful fable only,

May-be the things I perceive, the animals, plants, men, hills,

shining and flowing waters,
The skies of day and night, colors, densities, forms, may-be these are (as doubtless they are) only apparitions, and the real something has yet to be known,
(How often they dart out of themselves as if to confound me and mock me!
How often I think neither I know, nor any man knows, aught of them,)
May-be seeming to me what they are (as doubtless they indeed but seem) as from my present point of view, and might prove (as of course they would) nought of what they appear, or nought anyhow, from entirely changed points of view . . . .
(Il. 1-9)

In the beginning of this work, Whitman in isolation obsesses that the future is unknown and uncertain, that this appearance of reality is “terrible,” that “reliance and hope are [only] speculations,” and that an afterlife of any kind is a “beautiful fable only.” The mere fact that he thinks of these unknowns proves his darker thought processes and tendencies to linger on his own isolation and “mind-gloom.” The fact that the poem ends with his no longer caring either way because he has the company of a loved one does not overshadow nor cause his darker thoughts to disappear.

In one of his Sea-Drift poems, “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” (1860), Whitman mourns his inability to know. He confesses his despair.

O baffled, balk’d, bent to the very earth,
Oppress'd with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,

Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon me I have not once had the least idea who or what I am.... (ll. 25-27)

These lines illustrate the doubt Whitman feels about himself and the insecurity he suffers about his feelings and work. Calling his poetry, his "open... mouth," "that blab whose echoes recoil upon me" indicates his fear at self-revelation and the insecurity of his vulnerable self. These feelings demonstrate his role as a self-deprecating preacher whose attempts at hiding his sins only reveal his flaws. Like Hawthorne, he preaches his faults to the unknowing. Thus done, he fears the outcome of his sharing.

Whitman continues his analysis of his past revelations, as he confesses the "the real Me" stands in from them as "yet untouch’d."

But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch’d, untold, altogether unreach’d,

Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs and bows,

With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have written,

Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand beneath.

(ll. 28-31)
Perhaps his intention is to hide his true self, to perpetuate the "public persona" of himself; however, what he does is reveal his vulnerabilities and fears upon closer scrutiny of the works. Without knowing it, he reveals this misunderstanding of his poetic expressions.

I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a single object, and that no man ever can,

Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart upon me and sting me,

Because I have dared to open my mouth to sing at all. (ll. 32-34)

He sums up his feelings of himself, as he states, "I too am but a trail of drift and debris" (l. 43). His words reflect the self-doubting, identity-questioning uncertainty that makes Whitman the dark contemplator in an age of uncertainty and questioning and doubtful Romanticism.

In Autumn Rivulets, Whitman ponders the decadence and inevitable downfall of humankind to Death. One example of this preponderence appears in "The City Dead-House." The title seems to indicate the author's passing by the morgue. Yet what it really refers to is the body of a woman lying dead beside the gate to it. Not only is this the body of a woman, but it is the body of a prostitute. Whitman examines the depths to which a human can fall from innocence.

[A]n outcast form, a poor dead prostitute brought,

Her corpse they deposit unclaim'd, it lies on the damp brick pavement,
The divine woman, her body, I see the body, I look on it alone . . . .

(ll. 3-5)

Whitman reflects that at one time the corpse held life, was beautiful, delicate, fair, and innocent, but has now fallen to a ruinous state.

That house once full of passion and beauty, all else I notice not,
Nor stillness so cold, nor running water from faucet, nor odors morbific impress me,
But the house alone—that wondrous house—that delicate fair house—that ruin! (ll. 6-8)

Whitman focuses on the corpse as symbolic of all humanity. Referring to the body as a house, Whitman sees that in Death it is avoided, abandoned, alone.

That little house alone more than them all—poor, desperate house!
Fair, fearful wreck—tenement of a soul—itsel' a soul,
Unclaim'd, avoided house . . . . (ll. 11-13)

Whitman recognizes the body as the “tenement,” the Biblical temple, of the soul (I Cor. 6.19). He laments that it with its inclusive soul is alone. He mourns for not only for this one dead woman but for all humanity as it must and will fall inevitably to Death.

[T]ake one breath from my tremulous lips,
Take one tear dropt aside as I go for thought of you,
Dead house of love—house of madness and sin, crumbled, crush'd,
House of life, erewhile talking and laughing—but ah, poor house,
dead even then,
Months, years, an echoing, garnish'd house—but dead, dead, dead.

(II. 13-17)

Whitman acknowledges that the living fall prey from innocence to decadence as they mature, that they sin and are “crumbled” and “crush’d,” he mourns that regardless of the joy in life, the “talking and laughing,” that each “garnish’d house” dies; everyone is conquered by Death. Whitman lingers on thoughts of an overpowering, indifferent, indiscriminating Death in his last line, as he repeats the adjective “dead, dead, dead.”

Also from Autumn Rivulets comes Whitman’s “This Compost” (1856), in which Whitman ponders the indifference of Nature to the death of humanity, to the decay through which the human body processes, to the contamination of earth with the bodies of the dead. Whitman lingers on the depraved state of those who have died and the manner in which human flesh disintegrates.

O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?

How can you be alive you growths of spring?

How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grain?

Are they not continually putting distemper’d corpses within you?

Is not every continent work’d over and over with sour dead? (II. 6-10)

The third stanza presents images of nature as it comes alive every year with new growth, despite its contamination with decaying human flesh.

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 . . . .

(ll. 17-20)

Whitman continues his observations of Nature and its luxurious growth, mentioning apple-buds, willow-trees, bird and their songs, but returns this catalog of growth to our decayed state at the end of the stanza.

The new-born of animals appear, the calf is dropt from the cow,

the colt from the mare,

Out of its little hill faithfully rise the potato’s dark green leaves,

Out of its hill rises the yellow maize-stalk, the lilacs bloom in the dooryards,

The summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead. (ll. 27-30)

Contemplating Nature’s indifference to the decay to which the human race falls to,

Whitman recants his devotion to Nature in its oblivious continuation and ignorance of the human condition and its subsequent contamination of the earth.

Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,

It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions . . . . (ll. 42-43)

Whitman calls humans “corruptions,” and in so doing, acknowledges his obsession with the fall of the innocent to the decadent, the corrupt, the destroyed and fallen in their
maturation. He ends the poem with a final acknowledgement of nature's indifference to humankind's fall.

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. (ll. 46-47)

Whitman, without knowing it, has in this work illustrated his fear and disgust with the fall of humans, his fear of Death, and his baffled understanding of the indifference of an unfeeling Nature. One wonders whether or not he titles the work as he does in bitter reference to Nature or in accepting but mournful disgust at humanity.

In conclusion, Whitman's poetry serves as a major tool in decoding its author's darker side. His works serve as the major source of evidence of Whitman's fears of loneliness, Death, the unknown, his condemnation of humanity and its depravity, his observations of cruelty between humans, the indifference of Nature to the human plight.

In one of his shortest works, "Here the Frailest Leaves of Me" (1860) from Calamus, Whitman acknowledges that his poetry (specifically that in Calamus) will in fact illuminate the darker qualities of its creator:

Here the frailest leaves of me and yet my strongest lasting,

Here I shade and hide my thoughts, I myself do not expose them,

And yet they expose me more than all my other poems.

Admitting to his attempt at hiding thoughts, Whitman acknowledges that the best attempts at disguising true feelings will always be revealed by language and tone in a
writer's poetry. This is indeed the case in the poetic canon of Walt Whitman. He finally acknowledges the possibility openly in a poem in First Annex: Sands at Seventy. In "As I Sit Writing Here" (1888), Whitman wonders if he has adequately hidden the doubtfulness, the darkness of his thoughts in his writing. In its entirety is his poem and its ponderings.

As I Sit Writing Here

As I sit writing here, sick and grown old,

Not my least burden is that dulness of the years, querilities,

Ungracious glooms, aches, lethargy, constipation, whimpering ennui,

May filter in my daily songs.

The darkness of Whitman's thoughts has indeed filtered into his work and proven him to be a contemporary of the Dark Romantics.

Throughout much of his poetry Whitman displays an attitude of terror toward Death. In "contemplating the eventual dissolution of flesh" (Butscher 16), he observes indifferent nature, humankind's inhumanity to each other, the inability to control fate, specifically Death. In poems such as "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," his "subtle undercurrents of sadness and protest against man's mortal fate seem at their strongest" (Butscher 16). He specifically moves from melancholy to Death in these poems. Yet these same undercurrents of sadness and fear crop up subtly in many of his poems. He obsesses over the past and the downfall of humans as they mature. He also reflects on the decadence humans participate in as they
mature. In “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Whitman “curses Death vehemently as ‘the black murk that hides the star!’” (18). Whitman’s elegy of Lincoln’s Death progresses from the Death of one man to the Death of humanity, the loss of self and selves, the indifference of Death and nature to humanity. Perhaps his obsession with Death is poetically motivated, as Kinkead-Weekes claims. “[T]he intuition of Death brings both the poet and his poetry to life” (55). However, while many of his poems appear to aspire to a loftier purpose, the rise of Death imagery, the recollection of human evil on itself, the hint of fear at alienation and impotence cause the poems to become “journeys into chaos” (Black 15). As D. H. Lawrence says, “Whitman is a very great poet, of the end of life . . . . [He is] the poet of the soul’s last shout and shriek, on the confines of death” (182-83). Intending to seek and celebrate unity, Whitman falls prey to his fears and illustrates his darker tendencies in the bulk of his work. “Whitman’s poems of doubt exist as part of a wholly distinct register of meaning, foregrounding the very self and condition Whitman’s myth represses” (Clarke 16). In one of the last collections of his poetry, First Annex: Sands at Seventy, Whitman acknowledges Death in a doubtful, questioning, even panicking poem. In “Queries to My Seventieth Year,” Whitman addresses the end of his life.

Approaching, nearing, curious,

Thou dim, uncertain spectre---bringest thou life or Death?

Strength, weakness, blindness, more paralysis and heavier?

Or placid skies and sun? Wilt stir the waters yet?

Or haply cut me short for good? Or leave me here as now,
Dull, parrot-like and old, with crack'd voice harping, screeching?

The uncertainty of the future denies Whitman the calmness to halt his "screeching."

Whitman’s obsession with Death abounds from the beginning of his poetic attempts to his final masterpieces and reveals itself as the “private history” (Clarke 17) of the writer’s fears. The obsession with Death and the accompanying fears pervade much of Whitman’s poetry and give *Leaves of Grass* and the rest of Whitman’s works their darker tint.
CHAPTER 5

THE PROSE OF MISERY

[R]emorse . . . for a mere worldly life—that aspiration towards the ideal, which, however overlaid, lies folded latent, hidden, in perhaps every character. ("Elias Hicks" 1239)

Whitman also considered three sources that compile and make up his character in Specimen Days. He reflects that "the maternal nativity-stock," the paternal "obstinacy, wilfulness," and his Long Island birth-place combined with the secession outbreak make up his personality. When he confessed this, he seemed to have forgotten that period of his teaching career that he tries to ignore (as evidenced by the seven-month hiatus in his writing), and he had not yet reached the introspective, reflective days to come during bouts of severe ill health in his old age.

Yet his self-admission that the war affected his personality seems accurate as is reflected in Specimen Days. This work covers three subjects: a brief autobiography, war memoranda, and nature notes (Allen, WWH 220). The part of Specimen Days that deals with the war has been called "a bittersweet evocation of [Whitman's] young manhood and his wartime labors" (Aspiz 13). The war gave rise to Whitman's doubting of the goodness of men, particularly those in political power. His journalism (see Chapter 3) and his admissions in his prose works illustrate that evidence. "Atrocities are told with great anguish of spirit" (Allen, WWH 221). He criticizes past presidents as having
“show’d how the weakness and wickedness of rulers are just as eligible here in America under republican, as in Europe under dynastic influences” (Whitman, Prose Works 21). Gay Wilson Allen summarizes of Specimen Days:

[Whitman] concludes that, ‘the real war will never get in the books,’ and adds that it was so horrible that perhaps it should not. But he comes nearer telling it than anyone else in America was to do for nearly a century to come, and he tells it all without the sentimentality or propaganda for pacifism which followed World War I. (221)

Other critics too have commented on the content of this work. Aarnes asserts that Specimen Days is a vehicle to commune with the unknown. In other words, through this work, Whitman examines death. “In the war memoranda Whitman emphasizes not the noise of soldier killing soldier but the silence . . . of death” (“Almost Discover” 85).

His criticism of war and its atrocities is veiled yet shows contemplation of past events and man’s inhumanity to man. He tries to celebrate “the grandest and most encouraging spectacle yet vouchsafed in any age, old or new, to political progress and democracy” (Complete Poetry and Collected Prose 707). Although he tries to applaud the initial and perpetuating cause of the war, his observation of the means that led to that noble end reflect his doubt of men’s ability to love one another. After the Battle of Bull Run, Whitman questions the northern troops,

all the men with this coating of murk and sweat and rein, now recoiling back, pouring over the Long Bridge—a horrible march of
twenty miles, returning to Washington baffled, humiliated, panic-struck. Where are the ... proud boasts ... your banners, and your bands of music ... ? Well, there isn't a band playing—and there isn't a flag but clings ashamed and lank to its staff. (Whitman, Prose Works 23)

Whitman indicates his disdain at an effort so obviously destructive and with nothing presently to show for it—no valor, no victory, no achievement whatsoever for humankind. He continues to see little benefit from war as he recalls a scene "Down at the Front" in Virginia.

I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c., a full load for a one-horse cart. Several dead bodies lie near, each cover'd with its brown woolen blanket. In the door-yard, towards the river, are fresh graves, mostly of officers, their names on pieces of barrel-staves or broken boards, stuck in the dirt . . . . [A]ll the wounds [are] pretty bad, some frightful, the men in their old clothes, unclean and bloody . . . . Some of the men were dying. (Complete Poetry & Collected Prose 712)

Whitman regrets his lack of ability to comfort them more than he can. "I had nothing to give at that visit, but wrote a few letters to folks home, mothers, &c" (712).

His experience in war hospitals also illustrates his contemplations of man's treatment of others, of the past, of death and man's transient state. He meets and cares for all types of men—"A poor fellow . . . with a fearful wound . . . was having some loose
splinters of bone taken from the neighborhood of the wound. The operation was long, and one of great pain . . .” (Prose Works 29); “a poor fellow who . . . had . . . bad hemorrhage . . . so weak he could only just turn his head” to cough up blood (30); a young New Yorker “. . . [a] bullet had shot him right through the bladder . . . so that he lay almost constantly in a sort of puddle” (30). He questions the troops’ internal devotion as he recalls one soldier who had been left for dead. In “Fifty Hours Left Wounded on the Field,” Whitman notes a soldier who

got badly hit in his leg and side at Fredericksburgh . . . . He lay the succeeding two days and nights helpless on the field, between the city and those grim terraces of batteries; his company and regiment had been compell’d to leave him to his fate. To make matters worse, it happen’d ’e lay with his head slightly down hill, and could not help himself . . . . (Complete Poetry & Collected Prose 715)

Whitman wonders if human goodness truly exists in a people so inclined to leave one of its own to die without comfort or aid. He further focuses on the injuries that his country’s young men have wrought upon each other. In

Whitman’s description of the typical death, the subject of some of his notes is the dismemberment of the human body. His fragmentary notes are an apt form for recording such incidents and their larger historical context—what Whitman sees as a war that
attempts to split, cripple, and dismember the Union. (Aarnes, “Almost Discover” 91)

While not commenting other than adjectively nor reflecting on the circumstances of their conditions, Whitman's recounting their injuries and the conditions resulting from war gives evidence of his consideration of man's past actions, their consequences, man's inhumanity to man, and man's transient state in this life.

In "A Night Battle, Over a Week Since" (1863), Whitman exclaims at the camps of the wounded, "Oh heavens, what scene is this?—is this indeed humanity—these butchers' shambles?" (Prose Works 35). In the same passage, Whitman reflects on nature's ongoing negligence of the atrocities of war. While soldiers cry out in pain and others die at the hands of their enemies, the land with its living uncaringly perpetuates itself while humanity wars against itself as savagely as before.

Some have their legs blown off—some bullets through the breast—some indescribably horrid wounds in the face or head, all mutilated, sickening, torn, gouged out—some in the abdomen—some mere boys—many rebels, badly hurt . . . . Such is the camp of the wounded—such a fragment, a reflection afar off of the bloody scene—while over all the clear, large moon comes out at times softly, quietly shining. Amid the woods, that scene of flitting souls—amid the crack and crash and yelling sounds—the impalpable perfume of the woods—and yet the pungent, stifling smoke—the radiance of the moon, looking from heaven at
intervals so placid—the sky so heavenly—the clear-obscure up there, those buoyant upper oceans—a few large placid stars beyond, coming silently and languidly out, and then disappearing . . . . And there, upon the roads . . . that contest, never one more desperate in any age or land—both parties now in force . . .
fierce and savage demons fighting there . . . . (35)

Not only does Whitman acknowledge the inhumanity of people to each other during battle but also during relatively peaceful time as well. In “Death of a Wisconsin Officer,” Whitman notes that on a “hot but pleasant summer day” a young lieutenant who had seemed to be healing “will die here in an hour or two, without the presence of kith or kin.” He notes that no one around this young man seems to care. “Meantime the ordinary chat and business of the ward a little way off goes on indifferently. Some of the inmates are laughing and joking, others are playing checkers or cards . . .” (45-46).

Recalling the environment of “An Army Hospital Ward,” he further notices the absence of warmth or sympathy among the casualties.

You may hear groans or other sounds of unendurable suffering from two or three of the cots, but in the main there is quiet—almost a painful absence of demonstration; but the pallid face, the dull eye, and the moisture on the lip, are demonstration enough. Most of these sick or hurt are evidently young fellows from the country, farmers’ sons, and such like . . . . Most of them are entirely without friends or acquaintances here—no familiar face,
and hardly a word of judicious sympathy or cheer, through their
sometimes long and tedious sickness, or the pangs of aggravated
wounds. (Complete Poetry & Collected Prose 719)

The bulk of Whitman’s diary entries in Specimen Days reflects the inhumanity of men to
each other despite certain conditions such as unavoidable suffering and assured death. In
“A Glimpse of War’s Hell-Scenes,” Whitman tries to impress the horror of war and the
cruelty that humans inflict upon each other. He recounts an event in which the Southern
troops toward the end of the war attacked and captured an ambulance train of wounded
soldiers. After robbing the train, the “rebels” arrested two distinguished officers, stabbed
them en masse until dead. Following this account and the subsequent murdering of the
wounded aboard the train, Whitman recounts the northern troops gaining revenge on the
train-robbing troop. They captured seventeen of the Southern troop, marched them to a
hollow square in the city, surrounded them, and shot them en masse. Whitman concludes
this rather morbid report with a warning.

Multiply the above by scores, aye hundreds—verify it in all the
forms that different circumstances, individuals, places, could
afford—light it with every lurid passion, the wolf’s, the lion’s
lapping thirst for blood—the passionate, boiling volcanoes of
human revenge for comrades, brothers slain—with the light of
burning farms, and heaps of smutting, smouldering black embers—
and in the human heart everywhere black, worse embers—and you
have an inkling of this war. (57)
Whitman notes how the nation would remember the efforts of many young soldiers with families, girlfriends, children, those who—thinking of the national best interest—thought they were fighting for a higher good, the best interest of a nation who would appreciate their efforts. In “The Million Dead, Too, Summ’d Up,” Whitman recalls that

Everywhere among these countless graves—everywhere in the many soldier Cemeteries of the Nation, (there are now, I believe, over seventy of them)—as at the time in the vast trenches, the depositories of slain, Northern and Southern, after the great battles—not only where the scathing trail passed those years, but radiating since in all the peaceful quarters of the land—we see, and ages yet may see, on monuments and gravestones, singly or in masses, to thousands or tens of thousands, the significant word Unknown. (777)

Of course, Specimen Days is not wholly concerned with war. After the war, Whitman continued to write entries of his day-to-day experiences. He examined various subjects that lend credence to his being a Dark Romantic such as nature, the deaths of fellow writers, the western frontiersmen, and finally morality. He admires the strength and perpetuity of nature as in “The Lesson of a Tree.” “How [the tree] rebukes by its tough and equable serenity all weathers, this gusty-temper’d little whiffet, man, that runs indoors at a mite of rain or snow” (Prose Works 89). He studies the sky, bumble bees, birds, and in fact dedicates the “last half of these Specimen Days to the bees, black-birds,
dragon-flies, pond-turtles,” and the rest of the natural environment he has witnessed in its imperturbable state. We see this again in Democratic Vistas when he comments on “Nature’s stomach . . . fully strong enough not only to digest the morbific matter . . . but even to change such contributions into nutriment . . .” (Complete Poetry & Collected Prose 949). While Whitman seems to be celebrating nature and its beauty, he is also commenting indirectly on its imperturbability at the plight of man.

Whitman examines the human race in his Democratic Vistas. As Tanner says, “Readers of Democratic Vistas (1871) know that Whitman was not politically naïve . . .” (36). Whitman makes “references to hollowness of heart, disbelief, lack of faith in the principles of the American union, hypocrisy, distrust, bribery, falsehood, and maladministration” (36). Chase claims that this work is evidence of Whitman’s “lifelong distrust of government” (153). The purpose of this book is to “appeal to his countrymen to turn their professed democratic ideals into reality” (Allen, The Walt Whitman Handbook 188). He questions in his introduction if this is possible and also whether or not there is a humanity worthy of its name. He urges his reader,

Confess that to severe eyes, using the moral microscope upon humanity, a sort of dry and flat Sahara appears, these cities,
crowded with petty grotesques, malformation, phantoms, playing meaningless antics. Confess that everywhere, in shop, street,
church, theatre, barroom, official chair, are pervading flippancy
and vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity—everywhere the youth puny, impudent, foppish, prematurely ripe—everywhere an
abnormal libidinousness, unhealthy forms, male, female, painted, padded, dyed, chignon’d, hood deceasing or deccas’d, shallow notions of beauty, with a range of manners, or rather lack of manners, (considering the advantages enjoy’d,) probably the meanest to be seen in the world. (Complete Poetry & Collected Prose 939)

Whitman admits to feeling doubtful, even disdaining, of his people and their ability to unite themselves to a common goal. “Subjection, aggregation of that sort, is impossible to America; but the fear of conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and the lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close, continually haunts me” (935). He diagnoses a national problem in this work as one of “some deep disease . . . [a] hollowness at heart” (937). It seems that while Whitman claims to be the unifier of life and death, good and evil, war and peace, his views of humanity as crude and wholly unsavable pervade his work. “Whitman observes almost everywhere low morals, poor health, and bad manners” (Allen, The Walt Whitman Handbook 188). He claims that humanity is “full of perverse maleficence” (Prose Works 218). He points out that all have the “crude, defective streaks” possible. While he tries to illuminate the purpose of government in this work, he only furthers the fact that he sees very little merit in the human race. He applauds the democratic purpose—“supplanting old belief in the necessary absoluteness of establish’d dynastic rulership, temporal, ecclesiastical, and scholastic, as furnishing the only security against chaos, crime, and ignorance” (Collected Poetry and Complete Prose 942). He claims it to be the “only scheme worth working from” (942). Whitman applauds
democracy in its intent, its goal toward a nobler, gentler humanity which takes into account the equality of men and women in the world. Yet based on his observations of humanity at his present time, he claims “that the fruition of democracy, on aught like a grand scale, resides altogether in the future” (226).

In this work he recognizes the ideal motive behind war.

We have seen the alacrity with which the American born populace, the peaceablest and most good-natured race in the world, and the most personally independent and intelligent, and the least fitted to submit to the irksomeness and exasperation or regimental discipline, sprang, at the first tap of the drum, to arms—not for gain, nor even glory, nor to repel invasion—but for an emblem, a mere abstraction—for the life, the safety of the flag. (944-45)

Yet while he recognizes the nobility of the ideals behind war, Whitman continues to recognize the ability of humans to commit harm against each other.

We have seen this race proved by wholesale by drearier, yet more fearful tests—the wound, the amputation, the shatter’d face or limb, the slow hot fever, long impatient anchorage in bed, and all the forms of maiming, operation and disease. Alas! America have we seen, though only in her early youth, already to hospital brought. (945)

Whitman reiterates the evil he sees in humanity.
I myself see clearly enough the crude, defective streaks in all the strata of the common people; the specimens and vast collections of the ignorant, the credulous, the unfit and uncouth, the incapable and the very low and poor. The eminent person just mention'd sneeringly asks whether we expect to elevate and improve a nation's politics by absorbing such morbid collections and qualities therein. The point is a formidable one, and there will doubtless always be numbers of solid and reflective citizens who will never get over it. (946)

Whitman further admits to one period of conscious despair. "Once, before the war, (Alas! I dare not say how many times the mood has come!) I, too, was fill'd with doubt and gloom" (953). The fact that he peripherally claims not to dare to admit to other times of gloom proves that he could if he did dare. What he has tried to disguise in his works, his "mind-gloom," has sprung forth in his recollections of war. Whitman questions the ability of man to attain the ideals of "the lofty aim, surely the proudest and the purest" democracy (982). He summarizes the challenges of humanity in the pursuit of these ideals.

We sail a dangerous sea of seething currents, cross and under-currents, vortices—all so dark, untried—and whither shall we turn? It seems as if the Almighty had spread before this nation charts of imperial destinies, dazzling as the sun, yet with many a deep intestine difficulty, and human aggregate of cankerous
imperfection,—saying, lo! The roads, the only plans of
development, long and varied with all terrible balks and
ebullitions. (990)

These doubts abound in the Whitman prose, Specimen Days and Democratic Vistas, and
further contribute proof of his existence as a Dark Romantic. His summation of
humanity abounds as one of imperfect “distraction, heat, smoke and excitement.... The
war itself, with the temper of society preceding it, can indeed be best described by that
very word convulsiveness” (775). The morbid imagery that recurs in Whitman’s prose
indeed qualifies him as a somber, sometimes miserable, worrier of the times.
[T]rembling, I listened to the sounds of this awful voice. I had sunk to the earth in fear, for a strange and pervading terror had filled my frame, while the unseen spirit had given utterance to his words . . . . The agitations of my thoughts . . . broke my slumbers.

(Sun-Down Papers—[No. 8], Long Island Democrat, October 20, 1840)

Probably more than any of his literary endeavors, Whitman’s fiction reflects his darker tendencies. The tragedies he experienced as teacher and as nurse in addition to his health problems are illuminated in his mature work.

The same psychological conflicts that in 1855 generated the first Leaves of Grass motivated the fiction published between 1841 and 1848. In other words, a clear line of psychological continuity links Whitman’s earliest known literary writing to his mature work . . . .

The stories, sketches, and reminiscences . . . reveal . . . the subtle and complex psychological patterns and conflicts underlying Leaves of Grass. (Black 16)
His short stories reflect his contemplations on the victimization of one human by another, the transient state of humanity, and the nature of death. His only novel, considered by many critics to be worthless, upon deeper inspection gives light to the darker reflections Whitman entertains on the concepts of maturity, peer pressure, strength (or lack of) in people, and an overall doubt in the goodness in humanity.

When asked about his *Pieces in Early Youth*, Whitman said of his work, “Pretty bad—pretty bad” (Hartmann 29). But perhaps his harshness of himself is because he recognized his overt tendency toward the darkness of human nature, the tendency to dwell on the transitory nature of humankind, the indifference of Death and of Nature, the inhumanity among humankind. In “The Boy Lover,” Whitman illustrates the transience of humanity in the quick and quiet passing of two young people, both unexpected by their peers. Whitman also alludes to man’s capability of dismissing death quickly and continuing on without much lingering reverence for the deceased. In the story, a narrator, his brother Matthew, and two friends Frank Brown and Wheaton gather at a tavern quite frequently and flirt with the tavern owner’s daughter Ninon, a girl of sixteen. One day, while at the tavern, the boys ask to see Ninon. The waitress shows them a field some distance from the tavern.

At some thirty rods distant from the tavern, nigh one of those clumps, the larger tree whereof was a willow, Margery stopp’d, and pausing a minute, while we came up, spoke in tones calm and low: ‘Ninon is there!’ She pointed downward with her finger.
Great God! There was a grave, new made, and with the sods
loosely join’d, and a rough brown stone at each extremity!

(Whitman, PW 360)

The narrator, Frank, and Wheaton outwardly show their dismay and heartache over the
loss of the girl each of them knew he’d captured the heart of. Only Matthew remained
calm. Yet seven days after this event, and despite his calm demeanor,

Matthew—the delicate one, who, while bold men writhed in
torture, had kept the same placid face, and the same untrembling
fingers—him that seventh day saw a clay-cold corpse, carried to
the repose of the churchyard. The shaft, rankling far down and
within, wrought a poison too great for show, and the youth died.

(361)

Whitman contemplates the nature of death, its unfeeling victimization of humanity, its
unpredictability, man’s transient state, his inability to fight death, and the insensitivity of
humans to each other beyond mere minutes.

In a little noted story, “A Legend of Life and Love,” Whitman illustrates another
“mean” father figure whose deathbed advice virtually ruins his grandson’s life. Whitman
presents the human folly of both obedience and disobedience in two brothers—one who
adheres to the advice that “Evil men swarm in every place... and twine no bands of love
about your hearts. For love is the ficklest of things in life” (The Uncollected Poetry &
Prose 79) and one who guiltily defies his grandfather’s deathbed instruction.
Even before the period in which his family suffered such crises with health, insanity, the worry over a missing brother, and domestic abuse, Whitman wrote a short story entitled “My Boys and Girls” (1835 or 1836). Black claims that this story supports Whitman’s denial of the abusive father and that he imagines “himself filling the role of dominant supporting male in his mother’s household, a role vacated by his taciturn father... [that he] protected his mother and the younger children from a harsh, unloving, and unfair father...” (29). Black asserts an Oedipal complex exists in Whitman toward his mother (19). This critic calls the tale “a plotless series of impressions of twelve children, seven of whom can be identified as Whitman’s younger brothers and sisters” (26).

While he claims them as “his own,” they are indeed his brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. “He was their companion, playmate, and counselor... but he entertained explicit fantasies about being their parent as well” (Kaplan 85). In this work, Whitman reflects on children and childhood and on maturity and the toll it takes on the human sense of morality. He forecasts the evils that face children as they mature. Not only does he recognize the evils that the innocent child must endure, but he also acknowledges the evil tendencies of those who, in an ideal world, should know better.

Black claims that although Whitman’s study focuses on “innocence being tempted into evil, there are implications that the author is fighting some ‘evil’ thoughts of his own, awakened by or projected toward his sister [Mary]” (27). The unwritten but implied hints at incestuous tendencies define a darker side of humanity, a side Whitman may not intend to portray but that he reveals subconsciously. While the tale ends with hope of a rescuing death, Whitman’s contemplations of life overwhelm the piece.
Although the narrator calls himself “the hero of the tale,” Franklin Evans puts himself forth as a human who, during maturation, suffers the pressure of his peers, the lack of strength to follow what he knows is right, and consequently the failure as a result of his choices. While Whitman was at first ashamed of the work and claimed he wrote it for monetary reasons only, it is in this work, Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate, that we see Whitman’s most blatant contemplation of the darkness that dwells in the human breast. Franklin Evans’ intemperance veils his weak will, his lack of selfhood, the evil Whitman considers an innate part of the human experience. While Franklin Evans may not have been Whitman’s best work, or one into which he put forth the most effort, its study of human behavior reveals Whitman’s belief in the human attempt at justifying, or veiling, human weakness and therefore connects Whitman to the Dark Romantics, such as Hawthorne and Melville.

In the first chapter, Evans, on his way to New York to seek his fortune, waits for his coach and describes his landlord’s fortune—or misfortune—as the result of growing intemperance. Evans concludes that, after his children had left him and his business had fallen to ruins—that “Intemperance is the parent of peevishness and quarrels, and all uncharitableness” (12). This account with its following evaluation foreshadows the ironic twist of fate to which Evans falls. It also prefaces Whitman’s contemplations of man’s temptations as he matures, the victimization and downfall he suffers as he ventures into society, society’s evils—all darker contemplations that reflect Whitman’s Dark Romantic tendencies.
Whitman's second chapter is one of the finest pieces of proof of his darker reflections. Aspiz recounts that Whitman "boasted that native white Americans know instinctively how to exploit the Mexican lands (much as James Fenimore Cooper had maintained that educated whites possess 'civilizing gifts')" (188). In this chapter, Whitman illustrates how different tribes exploit and victimize each other as much.

Stephen Lee—the businessman referred to as the antiquarian—participates in story telling to make the coach ride less tiresome. An avid historian of the American Indians, Lee recounts a tale of an Indian chief called The Unrelenting who had lost his entire family save one son, Wind-Foot, to an attacking tribe—the Kansi. While retelling this tale to his young son, The Unrelenting notices his anonymous houseguest listening as he related that he gained revenge by killing a Kansi warrior but spared the warrior's son so that he may return to the Kansi tribe and let them know The Unrelenting had avenged the deaths of his two sons with this warrior's life. The houseguest, of course, was Kansi, and the slain warrior of so many years ago had been his father. The Kansi warrior lured young Wind-Foot away. The Unrelenting and his tribe tracked the warrior and Wind-Foot. However, though The Unrelenting had fatally wounded the Kansi, the Kansi still possessed some strength.

His strength, however, was not yet gone. Hate and measureless revenge—the stronger that they were baffled—raged within him, and appeared in his glaring countenance. Fiend-like glances shot from his eyes, glassy as they were beginning to be with the death damps; and his hand felt to his waistband, and clutched the poniard
handle. Twisting his body like a bruised snake, he worked himself close up to the bandaged Wind-Foot. He raised the weapon in the air—he shouted aloud—he laughed a laugh of horrid triumph—and as the death-rattle shook in his throat, the instrument (the shuddering eyes of the child saw it, and shut their lids in intense agony) came down, driven too surely to the heart of the hapless Wind-Foot.

When the Unrelenting came up to his son, the last signs of life were quivering in the boy's countenance. His eyes opened, and turned to the chief; his beautiful lips parted in a smile, the last effort of innocent fondness. On his features flitted a transient lovely look, like a passing ripple of the wave—a slight tremor shook him—and the next moment, Wind-Foot was dead! (35-36)

This story-within-a-story reflects Whitman's interest in the past. Not only does he display an interest in "the treatment the hapless red men had received from those who, after dispossessing them of land and home, now occupied their territory" (18), but he also displays an interest in the victimization of men between and within similar societies. He observes the inhumanity of each to the other, the evil tendencies that possess humans beyond reason, and the unfeeling and unavoidable fate, Death. Whitman observes in this story the inhumanity that plays upon the most innocent in society—its children—a theme he reflects on often in his shorter works such as "My Boys and Girls" and "Death in the School-Room."
Whitman further notices the unfeeling callousness of humanity as he returns to his narrator’s observations of his travelling companions. In observing Demaine, Evans notices that upon their arrival, Demaine was completely absorbed in himself instead of offering the one female traveler assistance from the coach upon their arrival.

The country woman also made a movement forward. She was a fat and somewhat clumsy dame; and we thought the least Demaine could do would be to offer her some assistance in getting down upon the ground. He stood in such a position himself, that he effectually precluded any one else from offering that assistance. But he continued his contemptuous stare, and paid, apparently, not the least attention to what was going on around him. (38)

Even when she began to fall from the coach, “Demaine, with his arrogant look, offered her no assistance!” (39) Evans claimed an immediate dislike for Demaine as he sees no cause for such indifference to another. Yet how ironic is Evans in his young, innocent, rural state as opposed to the matured version seen later in the novel.

Also in the third chapter is Lee’s warning to Evans about the evils of the city.

The place in which you are about to fix your abode, is very wicked, and as deceitful as it is wicked. There will be a thousand vicious temptations besetting you on every side, which the simple method of your country life has led you to know nothing of. . . . It is indeed a dangerous step! (40-41)
Evans laughs off the older man’s warnings as too exaggerated to possibly be true—or too ridiculous in any event to happen to him. In the following chapter, however, Evans encounters proof of Lee’s warning during his first outing to a bar with Colby. A young man in the tavern was “... not much older ... yet his face was bloated, his eyes inflamed, and he leaned back in that state of drowsy drunkenness which it is so disgusting to behold ... . And yet I was not warned” (58).

Evans sees the pitfalls of humanity, yet ignores them. Is not Whitman lingering on human denial of evil? While Evans claims, after meeting an actress in whom he had previously from afar been enamored and seeing her “sickly bleared appearance” (68) up close, that he had learned “to question the reality of many things” (68), his maturation does not lead him to choose goodness as is later seen in the work. Whitman presents these ironies as he studies man’s tendencies toward evil.

Whitman presents further examples of human blackness in several secondary characters. Dennis falls to intemperance and subsequently to poverty, theft of food, incarceration, and death. Andrews—Evans’s first employer—plots to embezzle funds from an investment institute. Mr. Fanning, the teacher who begins drinking, loses his job and the respect of children “who formerly loved and respected him, now looked upon him with disgust” (129).

Whitman presents the initial crisis in the seventh chapter when Evans chooses drink and the companionship of his drinking crew over a promised delivery for his employer.
Forgetful of my own duty—of my master's honor, and the crisis which would turn against him, if I continued sitting there a little while longer, I drank, and drank, and drank; until, as the night advanced, lost to the slightest vestige of remembrance with regard to the pacquet, I was the wildest and most exhilarated of the party.

(89-90)

Evans loses a promising job because of his "remissness, [and] the irritability, which is one of the results of intemperate habits" (93). When Evans assumes the duties of a bartender, he encounters another example of the evils to which humans fall. He meets a drunken mother of a boy who buys alcohol for her, as she lies on her deathbed. It is at this point that we see Whitman's contemplation of death.

Her head turned slowly, and fell on its side with a kind of leaden sound; her arm relaxed its hold, and the guilty creature lay there a corpse—her last prayer smothered in its utterance, and her immortal part starting from its now useless tabernacle, to waft itself on the journey for the Strange Land. (100)

The downfallen state, the passing of this human to the "Strange Land" indicates Whitman's lingering on thoughts of decay and death and on the transient state of humanity.

The evils to which Evans falls, despite these observations, cause him to lose everything, including his own sense of responsibility for his own actions. "I disregarded my business; and, before long, grew so heedless of my wife’s comforts, that I neglected
to provide even those matters which are indispensable to subsistence” (107). After his wife dies and his business falls to ruins, he attempts murder. His attempted murder of Colby illustrates the evil to which he has fallen from the young, inexperienced country youth to the matured and “civilized” urbanite. Whitman does not paint a pretty picture of the influences of the city.

After his fall, Evans has “a desire to leave the city, where [he] had come merely to go astray from the path of honor and happiness” (112). However, the evils of the city remain with him. Even as he claims to know his past weakness and after having suffered so deep a loss as that of his wife, his business, and his good name, he returns to the “oblivion-causing cup” (117). He returns to New York and to his drinking ways. Upon waking at the wharf, hung over, missing a shoe, penniless, Evans considers but refrains from suicide. He must beg for food. Evans falls in with another crowd—only this time of thieves—and is arrested for attempting burglary of a Wall Street business.

Evans claims, toward the end of the work, “I have noticed that the bad are always short-sighted: in the plots they form, and the manoeuvres they engage in, some little thing or other escapes their view, and proves after a while, to be a seed of punishment and remorse” (223). Does he recognize this in himself? Perhaps at the end of his life, he realizes the hurts he has caused because of his lack of strength of character. While callously called worthless by many critics, Franklin Evans reveals its author’s misgivings about humanity. While the claim is that Whitman intends to encourage love among humans, he contradicts his purpose by displaying the “intemperate power of love.” Although the main character begs for indulgence for himself as a weak-willed human,
"Evans himself fails in the very virtue he asks others to exhibit" (Dalke 18). Whitman hopes to discourage man's inhumanity and encourage a higher good between humans.

Several of Whitman's short stories reflect his darker contemplations. In "Bervance: or Father and Son" (1841), Whitman examines the inhumanity of a father against his younger son. Told in the first person, the narrator—the father—recounts his treatment of his second son, Luke. This tale "exposes rather than announces . . . expelling a burden and nightmare of which it would be free" (Clarke 42). "Strange as it may seem, notwithstanding a decided personal resemblance to myself, he never had his father's love. Indeed, it was only by a strong effort that I restrained and concealed a positive aversion" (Whitman, The Uncollected P&P 53). After taking all his children except Luke to the theater and seeing the boy there despite his forbiddings, the father fought with Luke and, as a result, derived a fate, "a scheme so cruel that, as I think of it now, my senses are lost in wonder that any one less than a fiend could have resolved to undertake it" (56). The father had his son incarcerated in an insane asylum, thus forcing the boy to actually become somewhat insane. Kaplan summarizes that the father's actions result from jealousy of his son's "intimacy with a resident tutor" (87). Clarke concludes this tale to be like Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher" as it "enclosed and incarcerated in its own guilt from past actions . . . threatens to fall in upon itself" (43). And, while Whitman claimed an antipathy for Poe's works as having "no heat" (Specimen Days, "Edgar Poe's Significance" 157), Whitman in tales of this sort is attracted to Poe's world of "cold, evil, dark" shapes and morbid thoughts (119).
Allen aptly observes that “The young author seemed to have almost a compulsion to write about cruel fathers” (*The Solitary Singer* 44). In addition to “Bervance,” “The Legend of Life and Love,” and the poem “There was a Child Went Forth,” Whitman penned another tale “Wild Frank’s Return” in which the title character leaves home “because of a stern, unfeeling father” (*Allen, The Solitary Singer* 44). This short story, presents a father figure/teacher who commits a heinous act against a sickly student.

Perhaps the most revered of Whitman’s short stories is his “Death in the School-Room.” Published in the *Democratic Review* in August of 1841, it recounts the brutish treatment of a sickly student by an overly powerful teacher. “[T]he entire story suggests a tortured (and difficult) psychological condition” (Clarke 34). Much speculation exists that this tale was influenced by Whitman’s teaching career and was perhaps a part of his teaching experience. In this story, Whitman contemplates man’s disregard for children during the nineteenth century and the inhumanity and intolerance between humans. There is no emotional kindness toward the child in this tale. “There is no warmth, no touch, no feeling for another. All is restrictive, violent and disjointed. All is cold and dead....”
The focus on innocence is “here displaced by intimations of flagellation and sadomasochism” (Clarke 33). So as not to overlook the import of and the impression left by this work, I quote here the lengthy final passage.

Lugare smiled again as he made the last observation. He grasp’d his ratan firmly, and descended from his seat. With light and stealthy steps he cross’d the room, and stood by the unlucky sleeper. The boy was still as unconscious of his impending
punishment as ever. He might be dreaming some golden dream of youth and pleasure; perhaps he was far away in the world of fancy, seeing scenes, and feeling delights, which cold reality never can bestow. Lugare lifted his ratan high over his head, and with the true and expert aim which he had acquired by long practice, brought it down on Tim’s back with a force and whacking sound which seem’d sufficient to awake a freezing man in his lethargy. Quick and fast, blow follow’d blow. Without waiting to see the effect of the first cut, the brutal wretch plied his instrument of torture first on one side of the boy’s back, and then on the other, and only stopped at the end of two or three minutes from very weariness. But still Tim show’d no signs of motion; and as Lugare, provoked at his torpidity, jerk’d away one of the child’s arms, on which he had been leaning over the desk, his head dropp’d down on the board with a dull sound, and his face lay turn’d up and exposed to view. When Lugare saw it, he stood like one transfixed by a basilisk. His countenance turn’d to a leaden whiteness; as at some monstrous spectacle of horror and death. The sweat started in great globules seemingly from every pore in his face; his skinny lips contracted, and show’d his teeth; and when he at length stretch’d forth his arm, and with the end of one of his fingers touch’d the child’s cheek, each limb quiver’d like the
tongue of a snake; and his strength seemed as though it would momentarily fail him. The boy was dead. He had probably been so for some time, for his eyes were turn’d up, and his body was quite cold. Death was in the school-room, and Lugare had been flogging a corpse. (Prose Works 344-5)

This Poe-like tale reflects a sense of anxiety about the classroom and the practice of corporal punishment. “The imagery of the entire passage has . . . a quality of nightmare and dread” (Clarke 33). Did Whitman experience anything like this in the classroom? Or did he perhaps witness this kind of treatment in a home in which he stayed? This tale depicts a psychic world similar to the gothic works of Poe. Its imagery of terror at the beating of a corpse provides a horrible glimpse into the darker contemplations of Whitman and the impressions his teaching career left upon him. This tale reflects Whitman’s “mind-gloom,” his fixation on human victimization of others and on death.

In “One Wicked Impulse!” Whitman observes nature’s uncontrollability and an insurmountable human egocentrism. Again, this tale depicts a controlling father figure who as executor of a father’s meager estate to his children plots to squelch the small inheritance for his own means. Although it seems that Whitman contemplates the quality of judgment, he truly contemplates the selfish barbarity of one human and the total disregard for anyone else. He once claimed this tale was the result of a brief retreat from one of these country homes with little privacy to the schoolroom teacher’s desk where he would drink “hot toddies and play doublehanded checkers” (Kaplan 83). In a little known tale included among his fiction, “Some Fact Romances,” Whitman depicts a
husband who abandons a dying wife to tramp through a swamp. In this story, Whitman
again shows the egocentric characteristic of one of his male characters. This focus
reflects the doubt Whitman has in the goodness of mankind.

In his fiction, particularly in his early fiction, Whitman exhibits tendencies to
study the darker side of human nature, the uncontrollable indifference of Nature, and the
unknowable and often frightening prospect of Death. In his study of human nature and
the evils humans commit against each other, Whitman focuses on severe father figures.
“In his fantasies Whitman not only usurped his father’s place but also protected his
mother and the younger children from a harsh, unloving, and unfair father . . . .” (Black
29). Examples of such imaginings include “Bervance,” “My Boys and Girls,” “The
Legend of Life and Love,” and “One Wicked Impulse.” “Whitman’s fiction often defines
the kind of father he does not want to be to his boys and girls” (Black 31). In so doing,
Whitman inadvertently reveals the evil tendencies he feels and also those he knows exist
in the fathers of his imagination. Whitman contemplates the indifferent nature of Death
and its victimization of humanity in tales such as “The Boy Lover” and occasionally in
Franklin Evans.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

What is a human being—but a struggle between conflicting,
paradoxical, opposing elements—and they themselves and their
most violent contests, important parts of that One Identity and of
its development? (Kaplan 300)

In his admiration of the American language, Walt Whitman aspired to his own art. In An American Primer, he observes that “There are just as many words in daily use, not inscribed in the dictionary, and seldom or never in any print . . .” (5-6). So too are Whitman’s thoughts obscured. Yes, he reveals a profound optimism, evident in much of his work. Yet, beneath the lush language of some of his weightier pieces lies a quieter, darker, murkier contemplation of mysteries not so lovely. Whitman easily identifies and qualifies as a Dark Romantic. He illustrates all the qualities in his work characteristic of the Dark Romantic rubric: nightmarish depictions, feelings of isolation or abandonment from family/society, an overwhelming obsession with death, fear of the uncontrollability and indifference of Nature, an interest in Gothicism, and an interest in past violations of laws and moral codes of humans against each other. The three periods of Whitman’s life that influenced him to exhibit these characteristics in his work include his brief teaching career (1836-1842), the Civil War and his concurrent family crises, and the severe bouts of ill health he suffered from about 1863 until his death. While not intending to obsess
about the gloomier aspects of life, Whitman could not help but acknowledge the tragic periods of his life through unintentional descriptions, observations, and wonderings.

Each characteristic of the Dark Romantic arises in each of the genres to which he contributed and reflects at least one of the tragic periods of Whitman’s life from which he acquired such feelings of despair.

One of the more minor Dark Romantic characteristics appearing in the Whitman canon is his feeling of abandonment or isolation from family/society. Perhaps most prevalent a feeling during his teaching career, abandonment appears subtly in his correspondence, in the journalism both by and about him, in some of his poetry, and in his fiction. The mere number of letters Whitman wrote to his mother reflects that Whitman needed correspondence, a tie of some sort, to other human beings. He saw young soldiers experiencing such horrors during the Civil War that he had to have an outlet from the tragedy. While he visited over 80,000 soldiers during the War, he never fully felt tied to any of the young men despite their subsequent letters, gifts, and naming of their children after him following the war. He also admitted to his mother that he feels a bit homesick on several occasions. His journalism about teaching conditions reflects the isolation a teacher had to suffer during the nineteenth century. His revelation of once being asked to share the barn with a sick cow gives evidence enough that his human connections were rare indeed. Of course, also moving from one pupil’s home to another after a period of three or four days stay during a teaching term could also give him no sense of permanence or belonging. In his poetry, he reflects feelings of abandonment or of isolation in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” when a bird loses its mate and
laments the loss. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," he analyzes the isolation of one in his transience from life to death. And finally, in his fiction, specifically in his short stories, Whitman reveals the isolation of sons or students from their fathers or teachers. In "Wild Frank's Return," a boy is forced by his father to leave home. This also occurs in "Bervance: or Father and Son" when a father commits a son to an insane asylum. In "The Legend of Life and Love," a grandfather advises his grandsons to stave off love, to affect no ties with the rest of humanity as love is so fickle. In "Death in the School-Room," a teacher flogs a misunderstood student to death. And in "One Wicked Impulse," Whitman illustrates the dire circumstances of children who are suddenly orphaned. The feeling of isolation and abandonment is evident in much of Whitman's work. While it is not a major characteristic of the Whitman canon, it exists just the same and contributes to his being a Dark Romantic.

Observations of the uncontrollability and imperturbability of Nature also abound in Whitman's works. These observations most often appear in the literature produced as a result of the Civil War, specifically in his correspondence and poetry. In much of his correspondence, Whitman reviews battles between troops who fight in the lushest of forests. While soldiers die, the sun continues to shine and the flowers continue to grow. The wild abandon of nature does not cease just because human life does. In poems such as "The Death of the Nature Lover," we see a specific example of this indifferent nature. Also in "The Love that is Hereafter," we see the same type of undisturbed nature despite the occasion that "Man faints with grief... till Death/Cuts short his transient, panting breath,/And sends him to his sleep" (ll. 31-35). In "Out of the Cradle Endlessly
Rocking," Whitman illustrates nature as "savage." The sea and the wind do nothing to comfort the suffering boy but whisper "death." Nature takes no pity on humanity and its useless fight against death, nor does it care for the goings-on of war. In his prose Whitman wrote a piece, "The Weather.—Does it Sympathize with these Times?" In it, Whitman observes that while the Civil War rages on, he comments that from the weather "[s]uch caprices, abruptest alternation of frowns and beauty, I never knew" (Prose Works 65). Nature turns according to its whim, regardless of human activity, happiness, or tragedy. It is wishful thinking in Whitman as he addresses Nature and agrees to exchange knowledge with it. "Babble on, O brook, with that utterance of thine! I too will express what I have gather'd in my days and progress, native, subterranean, past—and now thee" (83). Whitman observes Nature's imperturbability and illustrates his observations in his work.

Another characteristic that appears in the Whitman canon is the nightmarish obsession with the grotesque, the Gothic. Whitman incorporates elements of mystery and decadence in much of his work. In his correspondence, Whitman explains and describes in detail the "horrors of soldiers' life" (Collected Poetry and Selected Prose 945), illustrating again the nightmarish conditions of the Civil War and the inhumanity of people against themselves. In his journalism about corporal punishment, he summarizes the duties of the whip in matter-of-fact, but violent fashion: "the quick and sharp infliction of physical pain, is the great cure-all and punish-all" (Freedman 75); "sharp taunts, blows, and frowning looks" (Reynolds 59). These descriptions of classroom punishment illustrate the decadence Whitman believes teachers who have lost their
senses of justice feel when wielding the all-powerful whip. However, the grotesque, the
grotesque, the
nightmarish qualities of the Dark Romantic abound in much of Whitman's poetry. In
"The Sleepers," Whitman opens the poem with visions of humanity, all in death-like
poses with "the white features of corpses, the livid faces of drunkards, the sick-gray faces
of onanists . . ." (l. 8). He further recounts the human suffering of this vision during a
shipwreck: "I hear the howls of dismay . . ." (l. 85). In "A Hand-Mirror," the reflection
Whitman contemplates is ghoulish, to say the least, as he sees in the mirror "A
drunkard's breath, unwholesome eater's face, venerealee's flesh" and more (l. 5). Not
least of Whitman's nightmares is the recounting of his suffering in the much acclaimed
"Song of Myself." In section thirty-three, we wonder if perhaps his clutching "the rails
of the fence" as "The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close, Taunt my dizzy ears
and beat me violently over the head with ship-stocks" is not a reminiscence of a
nightmarish experience he underwent as a young school teacher. In his war poetry, "The
Wound Dresser" and "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown," he
examines the atrocities of war. Whitman does not refrain from presenting the Gothic side
of life, the mystery of circumstance, the decadence of humans in their acts against each
other, the nightmarish quality of life he sees as a result of his experience.

Whitman also reveals his obsession with death in the majority of his work.
"[T]he terror inspired by contemplating the eventual dissolution of flesh had to be
conquered" (Butscher 16). Whitman scholars claim that the poet's obsession with death
is celebratory in nature. For example, Amyot asserts that "Death, the last merging, that
was the goal of his manhood" (103). He continues to analyze Whitman's contemplation
of Death. "Death . . . is not the dreaded intruder which systematically annihilates the
creative force of sexuality but is the means by which a genuine love is achieved" (110).
His correspondence obviously reveals his observations of the dead and the dying. As the
largest amount of his correspondence dealt with his duties as self-proclaimed missionary
at the Armory Square Hospital in Washington, D. C., during the Civil War, he frequently
describes the young soldiers who die both expectedly, though gruesomely, and
unexpectedly. His poetry often presents one who faces death as in "The Death of the
Endlessly Rocking," and of course "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" as does
the rest of his war poetry. His "The Sleepers" most ferociously depicts humanity as the
walking dead. His fiction likewise reveals Whitman's contemplation with death and
dying. Obviously, in "Death in the School-Room," Whitman observes a gruesome death
of an innocent, as he does in "Wild Frank's Return" and in various passages of Franklin
Evans. Although critics assert that Whitman accepted and celebrated death and that he
somehow reconciles life, love, and death in blissful unity, this celebration appears more
as a deep contemplation, even obsession, with an unknowable and inevitable, and even
frightening fate. "The city of dreadful night . . . is Whitman's reality" (Clarke 124).
Whitman makes no secret of his contemplations of death in his work, and his subsequent
tones of gothic terror at and the dreadful inevitability of death abound in his literature.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, Whitman reveals his doubts about
humanity and his observations of human depravity, of human cruelty and victimization of
humans against each other. Several critics acknowledge Whitman's discussions of
human depravity as part of his celebration of unity. “Evil in human nature does not negate or oppose the good, he believes; it contributes in part to the whole just as good does; and is hence equal to the good” (Goodson 47). Yet, these observations often reveal a troublesome scrutiny of humankind, a criticism of a race who should enjoy one another rather than abuse each other on their road toward an inevitable death. Obviously the Civil War played a large part in his observation of human cruelty as he saw so much victimization, suffering, violence, and dying in the war hospitals following battles. Whitman’s vast amount of correspondence with his mother reflects these observations. However, much of his obsession with the human condition of innate depravity arose from his feelings of fear toward a “mean” father and experiences either as a school teacher or as witness to a crime committed against a child by either a father or fellow school teacher. His journalism regarding the “whip in schools” and the journalism about him as possibly suspect in a crime against a child, along with an interview he agreed to late in life about his beating of a young boy in a fishing incident, also indicate his contemplation of the evils humans perform against each other. His poetry reflects that he sees depravity and cruelty between different races and social groups as in “The Inca’s Daughter” and between opposing troops as in “The Death of the Nature Lover.” His prose, specifically Specimen Days and Democratic Vistas, reflects his observation of human cruelty. His Specimen Days entries reflect that which he witnessed during the Civil War. “[I]t was the suffering, not the glory, that he emphasized in his poetry and in Specimen Days” (Tanner 41). Democratic Vistas reflects his feelings that humanity cannot possibly reach the ideals it has set out to accomplish as a government because of human depravity and
the inability to overcome it. Finally, Whitman’s fiction reveals the majority of Whitman’s contemplations of the human tendency toward evil. Primary in his short fiction is the evil father and the crimes he commits toward his son/children. Perhaps this frequent retelling is a result of his school-teaching days or of his relationship with his father. However, it occurs in “Wild Frank’s Return,” “Bervance: or Father and Son,” “One Wicked Impulse,” “Death in the School-Room,” and “The Legend of Life and Love.” “The situation here of a son alienated from a once-unified home... seems yet another variation on Whitman’s downward pattern during his teaching years” (Reynolds, Walt Whitman’s America 78). Evil between people occurs also in Whitman’s only novel Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate. “This short novel is an outrageous piece of vulgarity and was written as hackwork by an author who had already lost some of his earlier prudery” (Chase 31). While critics condemn the work, it is extremely revealing of Whitman’s concept of human cruelty. Evans constantly asks for others to understand and help the weak-minded such as he. However, “Evans himself fails in the very virtue he asks others to exhibit” (Dalke 18). From the second chapter in which native tribes war with the pioneers to the last chapters in which Evans causes heartache in the women around him, this novel presents concrete evidence of Whitman’s belief in the human tendency toward evil. “Although the violence we find in Whitman’s early fiction seems at odds with the calm serenity that the poet insisted was his normal state, there are biographical hints that the poet had a temper” (Black 39-40). These reports of ill temperament lend strong credence to the theory that Whitman studied and depicted evil but that he recognized it in himself. Perhaps his “barbaric yawp” responds to this
regretful human depravity. Like Thoreau, Whitman recognized and expressed in himself the “instinct . . . toward a primitive rank and savage one.” And, perhaps like Thoreau, he found that he “love[d] the wild not less than the good” (Thoreau 1566-67). However, his expressions tend toward the darker, more fearful observation of this human depravity and further toward a condemnation of the imperfect in himself as well as in all humanity.

Because of his experiences during the Civil War and previously during his teaching career, Whitman developed the qualities of a Dark Romantic. While perhaps not intending to illustrate these darker obsessions and attempting to disguise these feelings of “mind-gloom,” Whitman could not hide the characteristics of the literature of the Dark Romantic. He is equally as dark as any of his colleagues: Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Cooper, Brown. His ill health only exacerbated the gloom Whitman illustrated during the last twenty years of his life.

Whitman died on March 26, 1892. During his autopsy, the doctors made some startling discoveries. Whitman’s brain during these last months had atrophied and showed symptoms of arteriosclerosis. His lungs had been ravaged by tuberculosis and only about an eighth of the right one was usable for breathing. The intestines and liver had also been attacked by tuberculosis, and tubercular abscesses, invisible from the outside, had formed under the sternum and the fifth rib and in the left foot . . . . One of his suprarenal glands contained a cyst and his kidneys were in very
bad condition. The prostate was enlarged and the bladder contained an enormous stone. (Asselineau 268)

For at least twenty years, Whitman had fought ill health. His autopsy revealed why he had felt as poorly as he had. Determined by doctors, Whitman’s state of ill health “would have been enough to kill another man” (268).

Whitman is one of the most celebrated American Romantic writers. Most critics applaud him as an optimist who lauds the unity in all things. As Kinkead-Weekes asserts, Whitman recognizes that “Death is part of a continuous cycle, and must be celebrated along with life, ever joyfully” (49). I contend that this claim was his goal, that he incorporated an optimism in his works to allure readers toward his public persona—that of the good gray poet who celebrates life, love, birth, and death. Yet his turns toward darkness cause “problematic meaning at the centre of the whole question of Whitman’s identity” (Clarke 31). His work, to several critics, seems “inconsistent” (Hughes 241). “Whitman offers a vision that is simultaneously hopeful, despairing, realistic, romantic, earthy, transcendent, material, spiritual” (Kornblatt 89). His continued illustrations of doubt of the human spirit, his exhibitions of human depravity, his obsessions with the nature of Death and the imperturbability of Nature all combine and contribute to the undeniable fact that, while he may not have wished it to be so, Walt Whitman is a Dark Romantic. While Whitman tried to establish himself as very distant from Edgar Allan Poe, his public persona exuding optimism and a celebratory look at humanity, his works reflect a tighter connection to Poe and the other Dark Romantics. The ‘nocturnal’ and the ‘demonic’ in Poe attract Whitman. “Taken together they suggest the ‘world’ to which
Whitman is drawn—cold, evil, dark, yet attractive” (Clarke 119). From the graphic horror of wartime atrocities he describes in his correspondence to the violent acts of father/teacher figure toward a child, from the descriptions of Death’s onward march and Nature’s continuing sunny days to the Gothic nightmare of corpses lying about, from the reflection of self and the observation of humans to the illness that overcomes him in his older age and incapacitates him, Walt Whitman cannot help but participate in the rubric of Dark Romanticism.

Perhaps the most appropriate way to bring to a close this study of Whitman’s darkness is to provide, at last, his first poem. In “Our Future Lot” (1838), Whitman reveals his obsession with and trepidation at the destiny of humanity.

Our Future Lot

This breast which now alternate burns

With flashing hope, and gloomy fear,

Where beats a heart that knows the hue

Which aching bosoms wear;

This curious frame of human mold,

Where craving wants unceasing play—

The troubled heart and wondrous form

Must both alike decay.

The cold wet earth will close around
Dull senseless limbs, and ashy face,

But where, O Nature! Where will be

My mind's abiding place?

Will it ev'n live? For though its light

Must shine till from the body torn;

Then, when the oil of life is spent,

Still shall the taper burn?

O, Powerless is this struggling brain

To pierce the mighty mystery;

In dark, uncertain awe it waits,

The common doom—to die!
NOTES

1 Kaplan says this poem was published in the Mirror in 1835; Holloway reports that it was first published in the Long Island Democrat on May 9, 1840.

2 Kaplan recounts from Sherwood Anderson’s story “Hands” that “A half-witted boy of the school became enamored of the young master. In his bed at night he imagined unspeakable things and in the morning went forth to tell his dreams as facts. Strange hideous accusations fell from his loose-hung lips.” This tale is similar to Molinoff’s account of the Southold incident after which Whitman was allegedly tarred and feathered (87).

3 “The Civil War undoubtedly put the poet’s cosmic optimism to a severe test” (Hughes 240).
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