



Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass:*

-A Poetic Paradox in Search of American Individualism

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Abstract

The influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson on Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is well known; equally well known are the traces of the Transcendentalist philosophy concerning nature. But Whitman expands upon both these influences as he developed his own individualism based on solidarity rather than independence. Whitman's take on individualism permeates all parts of *Leaves of Grass*, including the aesthetics. The aesthetics were up for much contemporary debate as the book seemed to lack traditional poetic structure and form. However, this was not the case as this study shows. In light of the sociopolitical climate in America when *Leaves of Grass* was first published, there was a demand for change from within literary circles. This need to create a new American spirit was called for by Emerson among others. *Leaves of Grass* was the response. In his book of poetry, Whitman develops a new American spirit with the intention of encouraging the American people to seek individual solitude; although, in this innovative individualism there is a paradox revealed: one must connect with each other and find social belonging at the same time as being self-reliant to have true liberating individualism. Also, the aesthetics in *Leaves of Grass* does show traces of traditional structure. However, the form is altered to represent Whitman's new innovative individualism. Thus, this study shows that the influences of Emerson and the transcendentalists are evident, but Whitman develops his own individualism in support of America, and in this lies a paradox. Whitman's first-person "I" becomes a representation of this paradox in Whitman's individualism, as well as a symbol for his solidarity towards his people: the united American people.

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Introduction

In the middle of the 1800s, in 1855 to be exact, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was published for the first time. It was a book of poetry written in the first-person and in free verse which broke with all the traditional poetic frameworks of the time. *Leaves of Grass* was anything but conventional poetry. Today Walt Whitman's book of poetry is a part of the American canon as one of the most ground-breaking pieces of literature in American history. Still, his work has not gone without criticism, and it was much thanks to Ralph Waldo Emerson's recognition that Whitman was accepted by literary circles in the 1800s despite the negative reviews. Emerson's acknowledgement had a great impact on Whitman, in particular since Emerson's writing had been a major source of inspiration for Whitman. The influence from Emerson's writings was already visible in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

When Whitman was thirty-six years old, *Leaves of Grass* was published for the first time, and he would spend the following thirty-six years, approximately, rewriting his book up until the last edition in 1891-92, the year of his death. All in all, the book was published in seven different editions and it was his life-work, as Whitman "identified himself completely with *Leaves of Grass*" (Killingsworth 1). In 1836 Whitman began as an apprentice at a printer's located in Manhattan. It was this apprenticeship that sparked his interest in journalism. However, he first worked as a teacher before he tried the profession out in 1838. During the years that followed up until 1855 Whitman wrote frequently about the common people, a subject that remained important to him all his life. Whitman was also interested in politics and the political system in America at the time was still in a developing state and was therefore frequently debated. He considered himself a Democrat and his journalistic writing often supported the Democratic Party. Because Whitman was not an activist engaged in stopping the slave trade he did not identify as an abolitionist, although, he was strongly against slavery and showed dedication to end slavery in America (Killingsworth 2-4).

Whitman was highly influenced by Emerson who was eminent in the literary circles of America at the time and whose opinions were highly regarded. In the early 1800s America as a country was still young, and, like a teenager, the country strove for an individual identity liberated from Europe in all aspects of society, even literature. This desire for something new, something "American," was called for by Ralph Waldo Emerson among others. As a front figure of the new Transcendentalist movement Emerson argued for a more romanticized view of the world connected to nature. One of Emerson's most famous essays, *Self-Reliance*, speaks

of the necessity of independence as a means to individualism and Emerson's fundamental opinion was always to be self-sufficient as he despised dependency of all kinds. Whitman's ground-breaking prose-like poetry revolve around the strive for individualism, but also answered Emerson's call for a new American scholar.

Today Walt Whitman's book of poetry is a part of the American canon. However, Whitman's road to recognition was not as simple as one might think, and it was not until Emerson praised his work that he was acknowledged in literary circles, especially among the Transcendentalists. Emerson argues for individual independence in his *Self-Reliance*, but does Whitman's interpretation of individualism display the same features, or does it differ in structure or context? Does Whitman's poetry show traces of the Transcendentalists' philosophical approach and Emerson's writings, or does *Leaves of Grass* develop beyond the boundaries of their influence? Furthermore, one of the most innovative aspects of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, from a historical perspective, was its aesthetics. Are there any similarities between Whitman's individualism and his aesthetics? How does Whitman's aesthetics support the new poetic form asked for by Emerson? Does it surpass what Emerson argued for, and if so, how? Today *Leaves of Grass*' irregular poetic structure is referred to as the free form of poetry, but when the first edition was published this new way of writing poetry was considered to lack form altogether. Hence, does *Leaves of Grass* show any traces of traditional poetic structures? And, how does Whitman's aesthetics depart from the traditional form and subject matter at the time?

This study will explore the extent and nature of Emerson's and the Transcendentalist influence on Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. The specific focus will be on Whitman's view of individualism, which, as the study will show, differs from that of Emerson and the Transcendentalists in several respects. It appears that while Whitman was deeply influenced by Emerson and the Transcendentalists, his innovative prose-like poetry expands upon their definition of individualism by connecting it with profound solidarity to all that surrounds him. Hence, Whitman's individualism becomes a paradox: to have true liberating individualism one must have social belonging at the same time as one is self-sufficient. This study will also examine the aesthetics of *Leaves of Grass* to identify traditional poetic form and point to why *Leaves of Grass* became the first successful example of what would later become the "free form" of poetry. It will also define how Whitman's aesthetics is a representation of his individualism. I intend to show that *Leaves of Grass* speaks of a deep connection between

individuals and that Whitman's poetry evolves past the borders of contemporaneous poetic boundaries and introduced an aesthetic individualism never seen before.

Chapter One: Contextualizing *Leaves of Grass*

It is vital to put *Leaves of Grass* into a historical as well as a social context to work as a framework for the analysis. Therefore, there will first be a brief historical introduction to explain the sociopolitical climate in America, as well as introducing the effect this climate had on the literary world at the time. After that there will be an introduction to the Transcendentalists and how they influenced the literary world as well. Then follows an explanation of Emerson's important role both in the Transcendentalist movement as well as in his relationship with Whitman.

America as a Political and Literary Nation

When the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776 it not only claimed America's liberation, but it also stated all men's equal rights. Hence, America as an independent nation was born. However, the declaration was not immediately accepted by the British. It took approximately another ten years and was not until 1787 that the Constitution was written and most issues concerning the newly established government were resolved. So, despite having some two hundred years of colonial history the United States as a country was new (Henry and Bergström 269).

At this time, many Europeans took a critical stance against America and they questioned if Americans could change the sociopolitical framework which they had inherited from their European roots. The critics in Europe argued that change demanded something to change from, which America, at the dawn of its own history, lacked. There was no Crown to break free from, nor a powerful church to question (Gura 165). However, the notion of all men's equal rights and the "universal sense of right and wrong" that grew out of a desire for an individual identity in America made for developments on all levels of society, even in literary circles (Gura 167). This led American literature into what has later been called the American Renaissance. The borrowing of the term Renaissance refers to the importance of the contemporaneous authors, because they developed an individual style separate from Europe which can be compared to the developments made in the 1600s when Europe left the middle ages behind and entered a new era (Levine and Krupat 446).

The authors of the American Renaissance reflected upon sociopolitical concerns such as conflicting opinions about the legality of holding slaves and the assimilation of multiple

cultures into one unified and well-functioning society (Levine and Krupat 446). There was an attempt to create a nationalist, literary spirit during the American Renaissance as an answer to the lingering call for nationalism, but it did not go without criticism from inside literary circles. The criticism was caused by the growing Abolitionist Movement which called for a more multi-cultural American identity, a movement led by Emerson among others (Levine and Krupat 454). Thus, this group gave America recognition as a melting pot of cultures.

So, in the early 1800s, Americans were still dealing with a contradictory identity crisis. Like a teenager, they wanted on the one hand to be independent and innovative but at the same time the longing for stability and history lingered (Henry and Bergström 275). There was a call for something new to lead the way to a more fundamentally stable future.

Transcendentalism

There was a sense of nostalgia and uncertainty in America, which grew from the sociopolitical instability, that inspired the Romantic Movement in the 1830s. Americans abandoned the rational thinking of the Enlightenment for a more idealized thinking which was promoted by the Romantics. This new philosophical approach was adopted by a few individuals among scholars and intellectuals in New England in 1836. They called themselves the Transcendentalists. Besides Emerson, who had a leading role in the group, there were also George Ripley, Henry David Thoreau, Orestes Augustus Brownson and Bronson Alcott among others (Hively and Loveland n.p.).

The group discussed many different sociopolitical, religious and philosophical approaches from all around the world. But they did not adapt to a specific philosophical approach, at least not unanimously. There were two divisions among the Transcendentalists concerning the social aspects of individualism. One side argued for a more divine approach to human morality, claiming that the ability to make divine judgements lives within each individual. An individual should follow the “moral law within” first and foremost before obeying the law upheld by the society in which they live. Thoreau was an advocate for this approach and wrote about it in his *Civil Disobedience* from 1849. Also, Emerson’s *Self-Reliance* supported this moral belief. The other side of this disagreement within the circle of the Transcendentalists argued for a more socially united society. They believed that collaboration between individuals was more important than individualism (Hively and

Loveland n.p.). Whitman, on the other hand, believed that the combination of both these aspects was essential to be self-assured.

Both divisions did, however, agree that “the term Transcendentalism meant simply that truths exist that go beyond, or transcend, proof. Such truths are known to the heart rather than to the mind; they are felt emotionally, even though they cannot be proved logically” (Hively and Loveland n.p.). Thus, psychological well-being was seen as important as physical well-being among the Transcendentalists, and this was a new innovative view of human health. This meant that qualities such as intuition became highly regarded among the Transcendentalists. According to Hively and Loveland, Ripley considered the Transcendentalists to “believe in a truth that transcends the sphere of external sense.” There were also theological questions raised among the Transcendentalist scholars besides the philosophical ones:

The Transcendental movement emerged out of the Unitarian Controversy of the 1830’s, a theological debate among Boston Unitarians that focused on the question of miracles but ultimately extended to such issues as the divinity of Christ, the supernatural interpretation of Christianity, and the organization of the church. (Hively and Loveland n.p.)

The Transcendentalists took a hostile stance against industrialization and the impact it had on nature. As nature was one of the main subjects in the philosophical discussions within the circle of Transcendentalism, industrialization and nature were placed in opposition. But the Transcendentalists’ inimical attitude against religion and industrialism was not the only criticism against the contemporary society of America. The Transcendentalists also opposed slavery. Ralph Waldo Emerson argued that “to obey the laws of secular governments [...] is not the same as doing what is morally right” and this was the philosophical and moral standpoint which he later took in his essay *Self-Reliance* (Henry and Bergström 276).

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson, frequently referred to as “the father of Transcendentalism” was a highly-regarded scholar and former preacher (Henry and Bergström 276). Emerson believed that nature is not only nature as we define it, but rather, nature is defined as everything else that cannot be considered one’s soul. His philosophical view on life leaned towards a naturalistic

theological interpretation where nature, humans and God were all a part of one universe, and should therefore be seen as one. Thus, Emerson argued that there should be no separation between what we call nature, humankind, and God because it is instead a matter of a “universal whole that includes all three” (Henry och Bergström 276). For Emerson, the naturalistic connection permeated his whole existence and influenced his view on everything including his concept of literature and writing. According to Rosenblum, Emerson believed that: “To create a contemporary poetry and philosophy, all that was necessary was to place oneself in harmony with nature” (n.p.). Emerson disapproved of America’s constant look in the rearview mirror for stability and argued that the focus should be on today, and on connecting with nature.

The calling for something new, lingering from America’s sociopolitical unrest, was consolidated by Emerson in his *American Scholar* written in the late 1830s. Emerson argued that this new American scholar should be more connected to nature in order to cultivate spiritual solitude: “This enlightened individual was to be American as well as scholarly, for the nature he was to take as his mentor was that of the New World rather than the Old” (Rosenblum n.p.). Thus, the reasoning based on the Enlightenment movement should, according to Emerson, be replaced with Romantic reasoning and a connection with nature.

Emerson refined the concept of a universal connection between all (humankind, nature, and God) in his essay *The Over-Soul* written in 1841. Essentially the essay can be considered a declaration of Emerson’s religious beliefs. In *The Over-Soul* Emerson argues that our world and universe exist in pairs of opposites: “space is ample, east and west” and “night and day” (Emerson n.p.). However, the reason behind Emerson's explanation of duality is to emphasize the binary opposition of duality itself: total unity. Thus, according to Emerson, there exists no division between humanity and God.: the presence of a human soul, as that of God, is equally undefinable and, thus, connected: God is in all of us (our souls), and we (our bodies) are nature.

Emerson had a clear sense of how his call for an American Scholar should be answered. In *The Poet*, written in 1844, Emerson states that the people of the new American nation had “listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe.” He took his request further than just a new American scholar by asking for a new innovative form of poetry that parts with the familiar meter and rhyme scheme of the solid European forms such as the sonnet. Emerson declares in *The Poet* that “the theme of the poem must generate the form, not the other way around” (Matterson VII). Rather than letting the need for an end-rhyme decide which words to be used, the original words should be priorities regardless of breaking traditional poetic

structure. Thus, according to Emerson, the traditional form of poetry should not be the most important concern for the poet anymore. This thought of defying the structural hierarchy in traditional poetry was something that Whitman embraced in *Leaves of Grass*.

Emerson's *Self-Reliance*

Emerson argued that individuals should be independent and always acknowledge themselves (Rosenblum n.p.). In Emerson's essay *Self-Reliance*, published in 1841, his interpretation of self-reliance is evident to his readers: that of believing in oneself, "relying on oneself for knowledge and guidance" (Emerson n.p.) Emerson believed that self-reliance is the best ability a person can have, and that it is something everyone should strive for as an ideal to be able truly to become independent and self-sufficient. It is important to notice, however, that he did not count arrogance as a negative attribute of one's character as he states that "To believe that what is true in your own private heart is true for all men - that is genius" (Emerson n.p.). Primarily, Emerson believed that a person's confidence should be grounded in that what is best for oneself must also be what is best for others because, in accordance to his arguments in *The Over-Soul*, we are essentially all connected.

Furthermore, he emphasizes that the opposite of self-reliance is to be dependent: "Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong" (Emerson n.p.). Emerson did not only believe that self-reliance should be a matter of self-concern, but he also seemed to have felt that charity and altruism, regardless of which side one might be on in the matter, is anything but admirable. According to Emerson, self-reliance was to learn how to make individual decisions and to believe in one's own ability to do so in the right way, and he despised those who did not, for any reason. Thus, Emerson did not show solidarity to those he considered weak, so to Emerson, individualism concerned independence and self-reliance.

Emerson and Whitman

Emerson was also one of Whitman's major sources of inspiration and Whitman was deeply influenced by Emerson's writings. In line with Emerson's request of separating the New World from the Old World, Whitman felt a need to answer Emerson's call for a new American scholar:

“The Poet” that would take America in to the new era and once and for all diminish the European influence (Matterson VII-VIII).

Whitman had a genuine interest in his country. This engaged him with current events, kept him up-to-date with politics and had him attending several public rallies (Killingsworth 4). This brought him to listen to a speech about slavery in the 1840s where Emerson infused his own abolitionist opinions with his definition of self-reliance (Killingsworth 15). Emerson had long argued for a more Romantic connection in literature and this belief shaped even his public political appearances. The influence of this speech could later be seen in Whitman’s aesthetic developments.

After Whitman wrote and published *Leaves of Grass* on his own behalf in 1855 he sent a copy of the book to Emerson. This act of self-promotion proved to be very successful as Emerson regarded the book of contemporary poetry very innovative: “I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed” (Emerson Contemporary Reviews n.p.). Thus, it was the influence of Emerson’s words, along with his acknowledgement and calling for an American scholar that gave Whitman the courage to push the literary borders and “pursue his own deepest insights” (Killingsworth 22).

Aestheticism

The aesthetic aspects of *Leaves of Grass* also have to be put into historical, social as well as structural context for clarity. In this essay aesthetics refer to the theme, form, subject matter and structural aspects of poetry. Aesthetics is a central topic since Whitman’s poetry answered Emerson’s call for a new innovative form. Therefore, it is vital for the analysis of the new aspects of poetry in *Leaves of Grass* to first introduce some of the traditional elements which created the framework at that time. There will first be a brief introduction to how Romantic ideals influenced the narrative perspective, followed by changes in the understanding of poetic form.

The Romantic “I”

Up until the beginning of the 1800s, and the Romantic period, most poetry was written in the third person. The typical subject was the lover of the Petrarchan sonnet longing for a beautiful woman. But during the 1700s there was a shift in poetic consciousness, and this change in

poetry from the subject matter of others to contextualize the poet behind the words was something William Wordsworth was well aware of: “This was a shift William Wordsworth registered when in his Preface he located the source of a poem not in outer nature but in the psychology of the individual poet” (Lynch and Stillinger 13). From this notion, the “I” went from being controversial to becoming more common in Romantic poetry. Wordsworth became an important representative of the Romantic Movement as he embodied the new contemporary “I” in his work, as well as showing a more commercial type of poetry which appealed not only to the educated but also to the common man (Lynch and Stillinger 13).

Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* was written in the first person and he adapted to this contemporary way of writing after he had heard Emerson speak in the late 1840s. This speech influenced Whitman to take a new poetic approach which took the form of an experimental “I” and a more prose-like form from that point forward (Killingsworth 15).

Poetic Form

One of the most innovative aspects of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* was its poetic form. Today this lack of visible structure is referred to as the free form of poetry, and is made up of more individualistically shaped stanzas. Walt Whitman is generally considered “the first practitioner of free verse in modern time” (Griffith 159). However, at the time, *Leaves of Grass* was considered lacking any poetic form, and this was the subject of much contemporary criticism. The book was called immoral, ignorant and an insult to poetic form (Killingsworth 106).

A stanza is the poetic version of a paragraph, meaning each break in the text indicates a new stanza. Stichic verse is not broken up into stanzas. It is what differentiates poetry from prose according to Christopher Ricks, and this has to do with the length of the line. In poetry, the line can be broken while in prose the line will continue to the end (Fry 347). Rhyme schemes can be complex or easy, obvious or subtler. Besides regular end-rhymes there are eye-rhymes that only look the same and rich-rhymes that only sound the same: *heard/beard* and *nose/knows*. But there are also the different slant-rhymes: assonance repeats the vowel: *pit/kiss*, partial or full consonance repeats the consonants: *coils/gulls* and *wild/weld* (Fry 168). Perhaps the most significant aspect of poetry from the time before the Romantic Period was the intricate use of rhetorical devices. These “patterns of words” and rhetorical definitions such as alliteration and the anaphora were a central part of all literary education in Europe at the time and dated back as far as the Roman Empire (Lipking and Noggle 367).

Up until the late 1700s and early 1800s poetic structure had been relatively static in the form of the sonnet. The sonnet has a long history; it dates back to Italy in the 13th century where eventually Francesco Petrarca invented the Petrarchan sonnet which has had the biggest influence on poetry in Europe. During the Renaissance literature and poetry were defined by complex linguistic order created by a growing number of rhetorical devices (Fry 281-282). Hence, there was little room for individualism from a structural perspective and the focus was always on the subject matter rather than the author.

Just as the Petrarchan lover was a common subject matter in the sonnet, love was also the most common theme in Renaissance literature along with theological subjects. The sonnet of the Romantic period, even though it contained metaphors and similes as well, was not as complex and difficult to decipher as perhaps the older poetic masters such as Shakespeare. The sonnet is essentially one stanza made up of fourteen lines of a specific pattern of rhyme-schemes, but the free form does not have any linear rules. It is up to the poet to construct his or her own pattern of lineated form, stanzas, meter and rhymes. Thus, what might seem as lack of form is most likely a conscious choice made by the poet as an aesthetic approach (Fry 175-176).

Previous Critical Readings

The opinions about Walt Whitman's poetry and his place in American history are many and divided. This chapter will discuss a few different contemporary critical reviews on the topic of Walt Whitman, his admiration of Emerson along with the aesthetics of *Leaves of Grass*. It will also briefly touch upon the criticism of the latter part of the 1800s.

In the introduction to *The Complete Poems of Walt Whitman* Stephen Matterson starts off by calling Whitman a "revolutionary poet" (V). This opinion is shared by many critics today. Jimmie M. Killingsworth agrees with Matterson in the preface to *The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman* when he calls Whitman a "bold innovator in free form" (vii). They are both referring to the drastic change in form that *Leaves of Grass* introduced in 1855. Matterson even calls *Leaves of Grass* an "American Epic" (VII). He also points out how suitable it was for Whitman, from a sociopolitical perspective, to claim the position as Emerson's "American bard" because the calling for a "national poet" was so eminent (V). According to William E.H. Meyer, Jr. the "instinctive knowledge held by Americans that they had only one chance by which they could develop their own peculiar aesthetics and language" is the main reason why

the breach between Europe and America along with the calling for a national poet was so prominent in the literary world (75). Thus, the social, political and literary climate all asked for something new, and this “new” came in the form of *Leaves of Grass* with its innovative “free form” of poetry.

The correspondence between Whitman and Emerson helped boost Whitman’s confidence as a poet. Emerson acknowledged Whitman’s attempt to become the American scholar Emerson called for in his essay *The Poet* when he wrote his positive review. This intent to embody what Emerson had asked for is recognized by Matterson who writes that “Whitman’s greatness lay in his aspiration” (VIII) and refers to Whitman’s attempt to respond to Emerson. Killingsworth also agrees, as he argues that Emerson must have been “flattered by his obvious influence on the book” (105). Meyer touches upon this subject as well as he quotes Emerson’s initial sentence in the correspondence between Emerson and Whitman where Emerson himself acknowledges the fact: “I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of *Leaves of Grass*” (Emerson Contemporary Reviews n.p.). However, Meyer proceeds by noting that regardless of Emerson’s and Whitman’s initially good relationship, Emerson’s attitude later took a downturn with regards to Whitman due to Whitman’s seemingly compulsive need for good reviews (n.p.). So, Whitman’s admiration of Emerson does not go unnoticed by contemporary critics or Emerson himself at the time.

It was Emerson’s positive review of the book that made it possible for Whitman to establish a relationship with the other Transcendentalists. Alcott and Thoreau thought that the new literary form was different, but they did acknowledge Whitman’s poetic depth in contextualizing some of the ideas of the Transcendentalists (Killingsworth 106). Killingsworth claims the Transcendentalist spirit to be most visible in the preface of the very first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (23). Thoreau in one of his letters wrote the following about *Leaves of Grass*: “Though rude and sometimes ineffectual, [*Leaves of Grass*] is a great primitive poem, - an alarum or trumpet-note ringing through the American camp. Wonderfully like the Orientals, too” (Thoreau 296). Hence, contemporary critics of today do acknowledge *Leaves of Grass* as a text of the transcendentalist movement, at least the first edition. And Thoreau shows an understanding of Whitman’s attempt to present a new innovative poetic approach when he indicated *Leaves of Grass* to work as an alarm bell for the American people.

Regardless of being acknowledged by the Transcendentalists, the literary critics at the time were not as accepting, and the public was even less friendly. According to Killingsworth, the public reviews of *Leaves of Grass* during the time of its first publication attacked not only

the form of the book but also Whitman's own personality, implying he was in need of being institutionalized (106). Whitman even went as far as writing three positive reviews himself to help change the hostile attitude against *Leaves of Grass* (Matterson VII). Matterson acknowledges Whitman's attempt to help contextualize his work as he argues that the self-written reviews should be seen as "helpful in understanding his aesthetic" rather than "mere self-promotion" (VII). Matterson also argues that Whitman's greatest aspiration with his poetry was to "embody democracy itself" and he quotes Whitman: "I resist any thing better than my own diversity" and calls it a declaration of Whitman's own view on democracy as it demonstrates Whitman's thoughts of not only accepting the multitude within oneself but also within a nation (IX). Matterson believes that the contemporaneous reviews published of *Leaves of Grass*' first edition serve as a framework for the expectations on an American poet at the time: "The path Whitman travelled from obscurity to acclaim (even if that acclaim was by no means unanimous) was not an easy one" (VI). Meyer also debates Whitman's tendency to put too much focus on minor details and suggests that Whitman's "hypervisualization," might have been the reason for Emerson's changing attitude towards Whitman (n.p.). Thus, the contemporary attitudes towards Whitman and his book were harsh, and Whitman's own attempt to help the public to understand went unnoticed.

When it comes to the much-debated style in *Leaves of Grass* Killingsworth argues that despite the seeming lack of poetic structure, there are clear traces of, for instance, the King James Bible: "irregular line lengths, alternative rhythms, and highly varied patterns of repetition" (22). Killingsworth praises Whitman's form when he says that Whitman introduced "breathlessly long lines and [...] repetition of words and sounds to create a web-like form to replace the conventional meters used by the most experimental poets before him" (24). Meyer argues that the lack of "verbal/lyrical attributes, is precisely the poem's unique identity," and he claims that the book does not have "the quality of a fine book or poem or any work of art but the quality of a living [...] man" (80). Matterson considers the "incorrect, overburdened" and "bold" form to have, primarily, a thought provoking and provocative intent. Matterson concludes: "The object of authors will be to astonish rather than to please, and to stir the passions more than to charm the taste" (X). Matterson continues to address the difficulties one might have with reading Whitman by remarking on the reader's need to find traditional symbolism in the texts. Matterson believes that this makes it more difficult to comprehend Whitman's poetic style as he has more of a "democratic aesthetic," Whitman tried to "assert full equality of people and things" (X). Thus, critics today seem to agree that the aesthetics in

Leaves of Grass served another purpose than being the trademark of a new American bard; he also wanted to question sociopolitical issues.

Whitman's bold and innovative form met with much criticism in the 1800s as well as in more modern times. But it was also these ground-breaking aspects that placed it in the literary canon of America. Most contemporary critics agree, however, that the free form in *Leaves of Grass* expresses the individualism that seems to have been intended by Whitman.

Chapter Two: *Leaves of Grass*

This chapter will present an analysis of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* starting with the Preface. It will show how Emerson's ideas are manifested in *Leaves of Grass*. It will also show how Whitman's interpretation of self-reliance moves past Emerson's interpretation into a more socially connected individualism. The analysis will identify the paradox where, according to Whitman, one needs to be self-reliant but at the same time socially connected to have liberating individualism. This analysis will also look at the aesthetic aspects of *Leaves of Grass* to identify some examples of traditional poetic structure and how the aesthetics evolve past these structures. The intent of this analysis is to show that *Leaves of Grass* speaks of a deep connection between individuals combined with the self-reliance argued by Emerson. It will also show how *Leaves of Grass* develops its form past contemporaneous poetic boundaries into a new aesthetic individualism.

The Preface

In the preface, Whitman declares his more radical views of the sociopolitical state of America and its need to evolve. He writes more openly, and is more opinionated than he has been as a journalist. He also proclaims that America needs a "new bard" and explains the importance of this bard in a sociopolitical as well as literary context. This American bard is a direct reference to the American Scholar called for by Emerson in *The Poet*.

Whitman believes that the American people linger too much in the past; sticking to outdated European ways without contemplation: "what is past is past" (7) and he argues the need to let the ways of Europe go: "A heroic person walks at his ease through and out of custom or precedent or authority that suits him not" (11). Thus, Whitman points out that people need to challenge the system, not with aggression but with pride, and ignore anything that feels wrong. Through this, Whitman argues, change will appear.

Whitman also reflects upon the notion of America as being made up of not one but many equally important parts. Thus, he wanted to direct the brewing nationalism in the country to embrace the multitude rather than trying to divide the country, and through that find the true American spirit:

The Americans of all nations at any given time upon earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem [...]

Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations [...] The genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures [...] but always most in common people” (3-4)

This quote is also a tribute to the common people regardless of culture and this multitude within the American spirit is essential for true individualism according to Whitman. Therein lies the paradox. In other words, for an American to find his or her own nationalistic individualism one must, at the same time, accept that America, as a country, is not only the culture which he or she belongs to but instead made up by many cultures. It is not until acceptance of all cultures in a society occurs that a national spirit can be achieved and true individualism can be reached. Thus, it is necessary to connect with one’s fellows to be independent: a paradoxical state of being.

Whitman continues by expanding his argument for the need to accept one another and connect as one people by pointing out that it is necessary for a common American spirit to occur:

The Largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen. Not nature nor swarming states nor streets and steamships [...] nor farms [...] nor learning may suffice for the ideal of man ...nor suffice the poet. No reminiscences may suffice either. A live nation can always cut a deep mark and can have the best authority the cheapest...namely from its own soul. (4)

Through the unifying process of accepting people’s differences a connection to a common American spirit is possible and, thus, becoming a true American: “Only the soul is of itself....all else has reference to what ensues” (17). Whitman’s core reasoning in his preface, besides the tribute to an American bard, is the necessity of uniting as a society on equal terms.

He continues to argue for the need to unify America, not only within a city but also on a larger scale: North and South. Americans need to accept all people living in the country on equal terms. So, to truly become an American, one must overcome the division created by the slave trade: “the American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races” (4). Whitman calls for equality for all races and makes a stand against slavery. There should be no difference in how an American is treated and different cultures or different classes should not matter: “The soul of the nation also does its work. No disguise can pass on it .. no disguise can conceal on it. It rejects none, it permits all” (22). This argument for equality is essential,

according to Whitman, because there can be no American spirit without a united people, and without an American spirit there cannot be an American individualism. The soul of America consists of all Americans, regardless of ethnicity and culture.

In his preface, Whitman also writes a great deal about a new American bard, and that “his spirit responds to his country’s spirit” (4). Thus, Whitman again reinforces his call for a united American soul. Whitman describes his American bard as a unified and powerful but honorable person that considers all people equal: “Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man [...] he is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land” (6). And not only for men but for women too: “he sees eternity in men and women” (6) and “the message of great poets to each man and woman” (11). Whitman makes it clear that to him equality reaches above gender, class and race, and they should all be connected by their American bard.

The preface serves several purposes. First, Whitman, just like Emerson, wants to convince the American people to look forward into the future of the land of opportunities instead of holding on to the old and obsolete traditions of Europe. Second, there is a need to accept the diversity that makes up America, before an American spirit can be defined, and only when this national spirit is established can there be individual liberty for the American people. Thirdly, and perhaps most preeminent, the preface declares the qualities of an American bard and answers Emerson’s call for a new American Scholar.

Transcendentalism

Two of the Transcendentalists’ more general concerns were nature, the importance of psychological well-being, and the connection between them. Even though the Transcendentalists disagreed in some areas there was a consensus concerning nature. This sub-chapter will show how these two themes are developed in Whitman’s poetry. It will also show how *Leaves of Grass* expands the subject matter even further beyond what the Transcendentalists did.

The importance of the connection between humans and nature, and Whitman’s own philosophical approach to life, are declared already in the preface: “The land and the sea, the animals, fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forests the mountains and rivers, are not small themes” (8) and “the soundest organic health, large hope [...] with a perfect sense

of the oneness of nature and the propriety of the same spirit applied to human affairs” (16). Here Whitman makes the connection between humans and nature, between the man-made landscape and the landscape of nature, evident. It is illustrated in the constant mix of the two: “The play of shine and shade in the trees as the supple boughs wag,/ the delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields/ and hillsides” (23). Whitman makes no distinction between nature and city, and makes them one in an intricate pattern of mixed references in his preface.

Throughout the book, Whitman indicates a naturalistic and humanly intertwined perception of life: “Leaves are not more shed from the trees or trees from the earth than/ they are shed out of you” (83) as well as a profound belief that all humans are unified as one with connected destinies like roots in the earth: “The threads that were spun are gathered.... the weft crosses the/ warp the pattern is systematic” (92). The tribute to a universal connection continues: “how beautiful and perfect are the animals! How perfect is my soul!/ How perfect the earth, and the minutest thing upon it!” (94). Whitman continues to intertwine his subjects of human nature and culture: “the soul is always beautiful,/ the universe is duly in order Every thing is in its place,/ what is arrived is in its place, and what waits is in its place/ [...] the diversity shall be no less diverse, but they shall flow and/ unite They unite now” (103). Hence, Whitman constantly reminds his readers that a state of true self-liberating individualism must have a deep connection to not only the surrounding society in which one lives, but also to the planet and the surrounding nature.

Whitman shows great admiration for the planet: “the attraction of gravity and the great laws and harmonious/ combinations and the fluids of the air” (82). He also celebrates the circle of life, and uses death as a common denominator to all living things: “not a day passes ... not a minute or second without accouchement;/ not a day passes ... not a minute or second without a corpse” (89). Furthermore, he indicates that in the end we are all the same and become one with the earth we walk on. Thus, death is not so much the end as it is a new birth: “slowmoving and black lines creep over the whole earth They/ never cease They are burial lines,/ he that was President was buried, and he that is now President shall/ surely be buried” (90). There is something larger than the connection between nature and psychological well-being argued by the Transcendentalists revealed here. Whitman not only calls for the equal value of all humankind, but he takes it a step further: he suggests that all lives on earth are connected through the eternal cycle of life and death.

The title *Leaves of Grass* is symbolic of the many sheets of papers that it takes before a final print is handed out to the public, and then without a second thought thrown away. It can also be argued that the title is symbolic of all those common lives that go without recognition; a tribute to all the forgotten ones: “I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars” (50). “Journeywork” is a reference to “journeyman,” thus, Whitman gives entitlement to the common people’s labor by referring to it as the work of stars. In the end of “Song to Myself” Whitman again uses “grass” symbolically for the common people: “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,/ if you want me again look for me under your bootsoles” (78). Through the act of “bequeathing” himself to “the grass I love” Whitman lets people of higher social class know that he entrusts his personal development to the common people (grass) and that he considers the behavior of higher class to be unjust, as he indicates that they step on the common people. Thus, “grass” becomes an expression of the multitudes as it represents Whitman’s love for the average person as well as his respect for Transcendentalism.

It is evident that Whitman shares the Transcendentalist belief that human psychological well-being is connected to nature; one does not feel well unless one can enjoy the pleasurable effects of the outdoors, and this is demonstrated through his constant intertwining of the two subjects. But Whitman takes the relationship between nature and human-made features beyond what the transcendentalists did by making effortless transitions between nature- and city-landscapes in his writings. Thus, Whitman surpasses the already liberating philosophical approach to life established by the Transcendentalists and shows a deep humbleness toward all life on earth. But, Whitman also shows respect for human innovations and the living pulse of a city.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Emerson not only argued for an independent America free from European values to enable the creation of an American spirit, but he also called for independent individuals. In his *Self-Reliance* Emerson exposes not only his view of how individuals need to be self-sufficient but also how he despises those who are dependent on others. This sub-chapter will explore the similarities between Emerson’s texts and Whitman’s poetry, and also show how Whitman diverges from Emerson’s individualism and displays an individualism based on solidarity rather than independence.

The very first sentence in the first poem “Song of Myself” is a tribute to Emerson and his call for an American soul: “I celebrate myself,/ and what I assume you shall assume,/ for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (23). Here Whitman shows the self-assuredness Emerson calls for when he claims it to be genius to “believe that what is true in your own private heart is true for all men” (Emerson n.p.). However, Whitman does not speak of another man but of America, and thus, Whitman connects the two concepts argued for by Emerson. Whitman then develops Emerson’s definition of self-reliance as a definition of an independent and capable individual:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of

all poems,

[...]

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand....nor

look through the eyes of the dead....nor feed on the spectres in

books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself. (24)

This is a declaration of independent individualism that reinforces the manifestation of Emerson’s ideas and their importance, which Whitman had declared in the preface. It relates closely to “Relying on oneself for knowledge and guidance” (Emerson n.p.) and serves as an allusion to Emerson’s words.

Whitman continues by arguing for the need to distance oneself from one’s problems and, in Emerson’s spirit, always to acknowledge oneself and not feel pity: “The sickness of one of my folks – or of myself....or ill-doing..../ or loss or lack of money....or depression or exaltations,/ they come to me days and nights and go from me again,/ but they are not the Me myself” (25). With this Whitman says that it is not the bad circumstances that surround a person that define who they are, and thus, it is within the power of each individual not to let these circumstances define them.

He also responds to Emerson’s wish to stop looking to the past but instead live now in the following section:

But I do not talk of the beginning nor the end.

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. (24)

Whitman focuses on the “now” being more than enough without letting the past cloud one’s mind and distract from what is most important: present time. This theme can be seen throughout *Leaves of Grass* and it is also in the “now” that we learn: “Have you heard that it was good to gain the day?/ I also say it is good to fall battles are lost in/ the same spirit which they are won” (38). He continues: “This minute that comes to me over the past decillions,/ there is no better than it and now” (42). Here Whitman again emphasizes what Emerson already argued, namely, to stop looking back to the past for guidance and start living in the moment.

Despite the many traces of Emerson and his interpretation of individualism in *Leaves of Grass* there are significant differences. Whitman does not despise the one who cannot uplift himself, on the contrary: “I seize the descending man I raise him with resistless will” (64). However, it does not mean Whitman felt he could show a person their own path to individualism: “Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,/ you must travel it for yourself” (73) and “you are also asking me questions, and I hear you;/ I answer you that I cannot answer You must find out for yourself” (73). Whitman shows great compassion for his fellows: “The weakest and shallowest is deathless with me,/ what I do and say the same waits for them,/ every thought that flounders in me the same flounders in them” (67). Thus, Whitman feels solidarity towards the common people and even though he declares he cannot find their individualism for them, nor will he let them fall.

Whitman’s general ideas of individualism support those of Emerson. A person needs to be independent and self-sufficient and not let negative circumstances define who they are. Whitman also agrees with Emerson’s firm belief to not let the past dictate the future to be able to find an American self. However, Whitman surpasses Emerson in humbleness as he does not detest a person who cannot live up to its full potential. Rather, Whitman displays a solidarity towards the fallen people not seen in Emerson’s texts.

The Aesthetic Development

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is its aesthetically developed poetry. At the time, there were several innovative aspects to the form and structure.

This sub-chapter will go over a few of these aspects and explain what made them so unconventional. But it will also show that Whitman did not entirely abandon structure and form; he just altered them with the intent to make his poetry accessible to everyone as an act of solidarity. This act of solidarity towards the common people not only takes Whitman's aesthetics beyond the changes argued for by Emerson, but it also connects *Leaves of Grass'* individualism with its new innovative aesthetics.

The Romantic "I"

The switch from the traditional third-person to the first-person perspective in the Romantic period was a controversial one. At the time of *Leaves of Grass'* first publication it was still an unfamiliar point of view. This sub-chapter will briefly display how Whitman used his "I" in more than one way. Also, through that, put focus on how intricate Whitman's aesthetics are and display how Whitman's "I" has the same contradicting qualities as his individualism.

"I celebrate myself" (23) is the initial line of "Song of Myself" and unequivocally introduces the first-person perspective, but Whitman's "I" takes many forms. Whitman's "I" can be read as representative of the body and soul; thus, the poet of body and soul is the actual first-person form. The first-person form (I) is the voice of humanity(body and soul): "I am the poet of the body,/ and I am the poet of the soul"(40). But it can also be read as a declaration of himself as the poet, in reference to Emerson's soul (spiritually) and nature (physically). He is the poet of the body because he is connected to everyone, thus, through this connection he represents all humans: "in all people I see myself, none more and not one barleycorn less,/ and the good or the bad I say of myself I say of them" (40). But he is also the poet of the soul as he embodies the voice of those who cannot speak for themselves: "it is you talking as much as myself I act as the tongue of you,/ it was tied in your mouth In mine it begins to be loosened" (74). Also, this can be interpreted as Emerson's definition of the soul being connected to God, hence, "I" is the voice of God. The "I" does not always have a dominant nature; at times, it becomes the dependent: "this is the city And I am one of the citizens;/ whatever interests the rest interests me" (67). Thus, Whitman's "I" is also humble and speaks in solidarity with all Americans.

In the end of "Song of Myself" Whitman reveals that his "I" is symbolic of America the nation: "I am large I contain multitudes" (77). He admits that his American spirit, the core of a cultural melting pot, cannot always be considered as one entity. Furthermore, he

displays an awareness of the difficulties to define “I” in *Leaves of Grass*: “You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,/ but I shall be good health to you nevertheless” (78) and “Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,/ missing me one place search another,/ I stop some where waiting for you” (78). Whitman acknowledges his reader’s struggle to follow his unfamiliar poetry in form and context as he both encourages his readers not to give up, while also letting them know he will wait for them if they do not fully understand him. Thus, making it another act of solidarity.

Whitman’s “I” surpasses the Romantic first-person “I” and becomes like a living evolving entity in constant change. It is dominant at one point, only to be submissive and dependent the next. It represents Whitman, the reader, and all of America: “I contain multitudes” (77). Thus, Whitman’s “I” showed a new form of aesthetics in poetry and was perhaps more a representation of the many different perspectives later seen in Realism rather than the argued feature of the Romantic era. Realism reflects reality as multifarious, and with these multiple views comes naturally a divided definition of what reality is, similar to the way Whitman’s “I” has multiple definitions. The “I” in *Leaves of Grass* also supports Whitman’s developing individualism as it, through its constant change, becomes a representation for all Americans, and through that it also represents the American soul. Thus, Whitman’s first-person “I” shows the same qualities, and solidarity, as the paradox of his individualism.

Poetic Form

Even though Whitman’s poetry lacks the traditional form it does not lack form entirely, as some of his contemporary critics argued. This sub-chapter will show a few examples of the way Whitman’s poetry still has poetic form and how he made conscious choices concerning structures and meter. It will also display how Whitman uses rhyme schemes, as well as a few examples of alliteration and anaphora.

In *Leaves of Grass*, the structure is vital to show that Whitman does master the form and structure of his poetry. The intentional control of the lines is seen all through the book with the exception of the Preface which follows the traditional form of prose. In *The Poet* Emerson argued for the theme to control the form of the poem instead of the opposite. Whitman concurs as he does not follow the systematic and repeated breaks seen in traditional poetry but instead he lets the words and subject matter decide:

Come my children,
Come my boys and girls, and my women and household and
intimates,
Now the performer launches his nerve He has passed his
prelude on the reeds within. (66)

By breaking the line after “children” Whitman places more focus on “children” than on the hyponyms “boys” and “girls.” A similar effect is created by letting “intimates” stand alone. So, even though the break of the lines does not follow the traditional structure, like the sonnet for example, it is still a conscious choice made by Whitman to create a certain effect. Also, this innovative control of the lines can be seen as a declaration of Whitman’s own individualism.

There are not many obvious and systematic rhyme schemes in *Leaves of Grass*. Such can, however, be argued to exist even though they are not as visible as they might be in the traditional sonnet: “I lean and loafe at my ease ...observing a spear of summer grass” (23). *Lean/ease/spear* are assonance. Whitman also uses regular end-rhymes sporadically to increase the flow: “my respiration and inspiration” (23). Although the use of regular and obvious rhymes is less than the more ambiguous ones like *lean/ease/spear*, it is still legitimate to say that Whitman gave a great deal of thought to rhyme in his poetic work.

The most systematic use of rhetorical devices in *Leaves of Grass* is alliteration. Whitman uses it to increase the flow in his poetry: “the play of shine and shade” (23), “the smallest sprout shows” (28) and “the deaf and the dumb” (96). Whitman combines alliteration with assonance slant-rhyme: “I love to look on the stars and stripes” (122). Also, there are more subtle combinations of alliterations and assonance: I seize the descending man I raise him with resistless will” (64) and “Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff” (27), as well as alliterations with subtler slant-rhymes: “The friendly and flowing savage Who is he?/ Is he waiting for civilization” (63). The alliteration becomes most evident when the poetic lines in *Leaves of Grass* are read out loud, thus, making it clear that Whitman’s main focus has been on the flow rather than sticking to meter and form according to tradition.

As frequently as he uses alliteration Whitman also takes to anaphora. Here it is visible within the stanza in each new line: “Tenderly will I use you curling grass,/ It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men, / it may be if I had known them I would have loved them;/ It may be you are from old people and from women” (27) and “Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,/ Twenty-eight men, and all so friendly,/ Twenty-eight years of womanly

life, and all so lonesome” (31). Again, the focus seems to be on the rhythm, but it also serves a visual effect.

It is evident that Whitman’s poetic structure differs in great deal from traditional contemporaneous poetry such as the sonnet for example. Nevertheless, it does not lack poetic structure or form. In fact, it is indisputable that Whitman put a great deal of effort into using rhetorical devices and traditional framework as a literary basis for his writing. However, he altered his poetic form to make his poetry representative of his individualism; in solidarity with the common people.

The Paradox

The paradox that appears concerning Whitman’s own interpretations of self-reliance and individualism in comparison to those of Emerson did not go unnoticed by Whitman himself. It can also be argued that the contradictory aspects of the poetry in *Leaves of Grass* are evidence of Emerson’s influence. This short sub-chapter will briefly display how Whitman acknowledges this fact in *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman was aware of the contradictory aspects of his arguments. But, he defends these contradictions in his own arguments as being naturally human: “Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself;/ I am large I contain multitudes” (77). Thus, Whitman argues that to be “large” means to have multiple approaches, which makes it natural for some to stand in opposition to each other.

At the very end of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman again reinforces the natural aspects of things not always standing in agreement by describing the phenomenon one last time:

Great is wickedness I find I often admire it just as much as I
admire goodness.

Do you call that a paradox? It certainly is a paradox.

The eternal equilibrium of things is great, and the eternal overthrow
of things is great,

And there is another paradox. (132)

Whitman talks about two conflicting things, binary oppositions, as having an almost symbiotic relationship: there can be no good unless there is evil, thus, to admire goodness there has to be some acknowledgment of evil as well.

The choice to make this particular part his final message justifies his own contradicting tendencies. Whitman acknowledges that many things in human nature need binary oppositions to be comprehensive. Thus, he contextualizes his poetry one final time. Whitman was aware of the contradictions in his arguments, and because of that, it is also possible that he could have been fully aware of the paradox in his definition of individualism as well.

This analysis shows that Whitman wanted to direct focus on now rather than the past. He argued for the creation of an American spirit to bring the American people individual liberty. Also, the analysis displays that Whitman answered Emerson's request for an American scholar through the declaration of what a true American bard should be like. Furthermore, Whitman paid tribute to the Transcendentalists with his naturalistic approach: connecting human well-being with nature and making the borders between city- and nature-landscapes almost invisible. However, the analysis also shows that Whitman developed the transcendentalists' call for a naturalistic connection for humans by connecting all living things as having equal value. Also, regardless of showing great admiration for Emerson's philosophy it can be argued that Whitman displays a solidarity not seen in Emerson's writings. Thus, Whitman's individualism becomes a paradox in that it also includes a social connection, not seen in Emerson's individualism. To conclude this section on the aesthetics of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's first-person form is at times obscure, and it is complex in that it shows a multitude of definitions. This analysis asserts that Whitman did not abandon poetic form and structure, but rather the opposite as his poetry shows that he gave a great deal of thought to his writing, both visually and to make the reading as easy as possible. And, through this, Whitman made his poetry accessible to everyone not only scholars. Thus, Whitman's aesthetics show the same solidarity as his individualism. Finally, it can be argued that the innovative "I" and the alteration of the poetic structure was intended to support the general theme of an innovative literary form suited to the new American bard.

Conclusion

The preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* from 1855 responded to the contemporaneous request for an American national identity as well as the literary circle's search for an American style of its own. It displays Whitman's own humanitarian awareness of the need for social belonging and the human need to feel connected to one's surroundings. Also, Whitman points to the necessity of acknowledging cultural diversity to become a grounded and self-sufficient individual. But the preface also speaks volumes about a national spirit, and first and foremost, an American bard. Thus, the preface can be argued to be a declaration of American literary independence and a manifesto of Whitman's themes: the valuable common people, the glory of cultural diversity and the tribute to their natural, and inevitable connection to the earth and all its inhabitants. The preface contextualizes Whitman's poetry and serves as a preparation for the unfamiliar new poetic experience the reader will encounter.

The aspects of Transcendentalism in Whitman's poetry are essential and intertwined throughout the entire book. Whitman does not separate the pulse of the city from the pulse of the wilderness. He blends features of the modern world with features of nature, as well as continuously connecting human emotions and well-being to the concept of a cosmic unity. In fact, he develops the idea of human social belonging into a much stronger connection to one's surrounding nature than argued by the Transcendentalists. Whitman depicts a symbiotic relationship between humankind and nature, and compares human emotions to aspects of nature such as the complexity of roots – Emerson's transcendentalism refined.

Emerson's *Self-Reliance* is about using one's potential to the fullest, accepting the situations given, performing to the best of one's ability despite difficulties, believing in oneself and achieving individuality at any given time. However, Whitman, despite having an obvious admiration for Emerson's words saw a deeper need in self-reliance, that individuals have to have a common sense of belonging to be self-assured, a paradox in the definition of individualism. Thus, Whitman developed the definition of individualism into something more socially connected than the definition argued for by Emerson. Together their influence on fellow Americans had a fundamental importance for the creation of the American identity, as they encouraged them to strive for individualism. But Whitman takes the humanitarian awareness, declared already in the preface, and extends it beyond Emerson's philosophy, developing solidarity as a core value for the American society. To Whitman, there cannot be liberating individualism without a social connection to other Americans. Through his poetry

Whitman shows that all Americans, regardless of cultural background have to come together to create an American soul, and only then can true individualism be achieved.

Whitman's interpretation of individualism is grounded in Emerson's writings. However, it expands upon the philosophy of Emerson, who believed in a universal connection rather than a social one and shows a structure that has more humanitarian awareness and solidarity than Emerson's individualism. Similarly, Whitman displays the same belief in the importance of connecting with nature as the Transcendentalists, and thus, Whitman shares their philosophical approach to nature. But again, he expands this influence into his own individualistic approach where all living things exist on equal terms. Even though the innovative form of *Leaves of Grass* seemed controversial, in light of the historical, social as well as aesthetic context thus far, the change in form was not as controversial as one might at first glance think, as it was called for by Emerson among others. A closer look at the structural aspects of Whitman's writings makes it evident that he had not parted with traditional poetical frameworks altogether, only altered them in order to underscore the importance of individualism.

He not only claimed his own identity as a poet, the new American bard and scholar, in every word he wrote, but he also used the new structure as an attempt to embody the American soul he calls for in the representation of his "I." Therefore, the connection between the individual self and all that an individual is part of can most easily be seen in Whitman's constantly changing "I": it is himself, it is everyone he meets and everyone who reads his words, it is you, it is America, it is the body and it is the soul. To find an individual American self it is essential, according to Whitman, to open up to the multitude of cultures that make up America, and this is one of the reasons why Whitman's "I" takes so many forms. Within the plurality of Whitman's "I" lies another paradox similar to the one encountered in his individualism. Thus, Whitman tries to authenticate his poetry by covering a multitude of definitions and Whitman's poetry developed beyond contemporary literary appreciation at the time.

Furthermore, Whitman's innovative aesthetic does not lack poetic structure, but, on the contrary, it contains well thought-through rhetorical devices. However, Whitman lets the subject matter control the form, unlike traditional poetry where the form controls the subject matter and especially the choice of words. Whitman's "I," even though at times ambiguous, shows an aesthetic development only later seen in Realism where often many different perspectives were presented to ensure the best representation of reality. The aesthetic construction of *Leaves of Grass* serves a more complex purpose than traditional aesthetics as it

has a contextualizing effect on his newly established individualism. But also, and equally important, it had the intent of showing solidarity towards all Americans: “I celebrate myself” (Whitman 23).

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