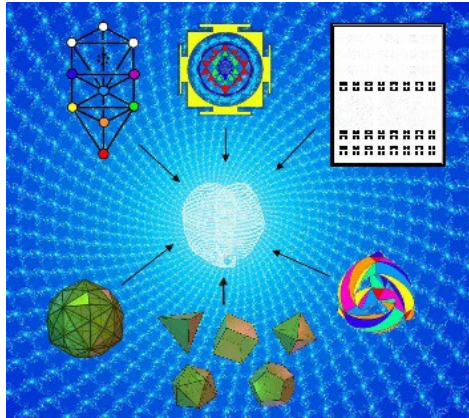
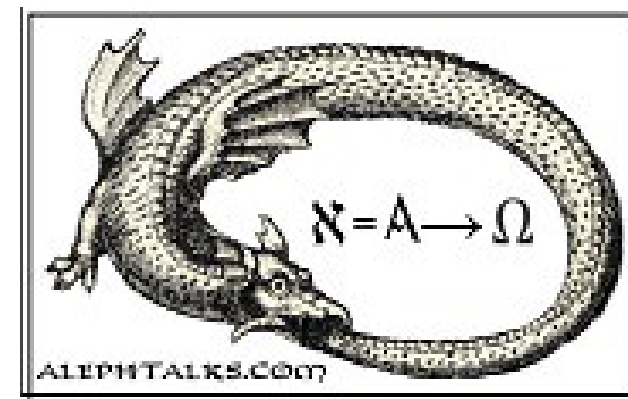
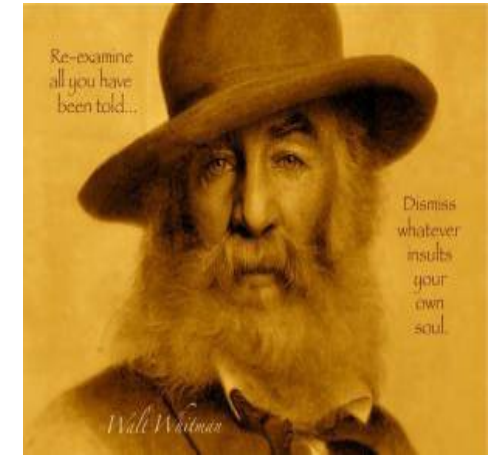


# Is Mysticism Where Science, and Religion Meet?



**Subject Four**  
**Mysticism East and West**  
**Walt Whitman**  
**©AlephTalks 2022**  
**5 January 2022**

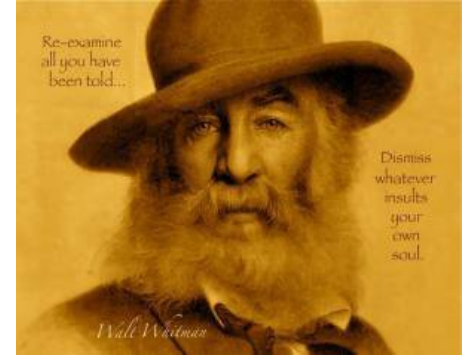


# Walt Whitman

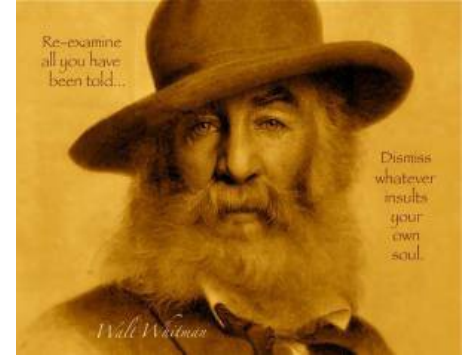
Walter “Walt” Whitman (May 31, 1819 – March 26, 1892) was an American mystic poet, essayist, and journalist. A humanist, he was a part of the transition between transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his works.

Whitman is among the most influential poets in the American canon, often called the father of free verse. His work was very controversial in its time, particularly his poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*, which was described as obscene for its overt sexuality.

Walt Whitman left school at eleven and worked at a variety of trades — he was a printer, a teacher, a newspaper writer and editor, a stationer, and a real estate speculator. One never would have guessed he was destined to become America’s seer.

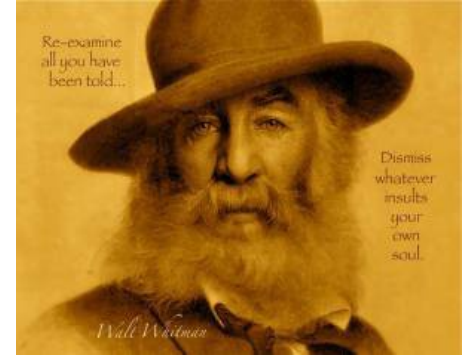


# Walt Whitman



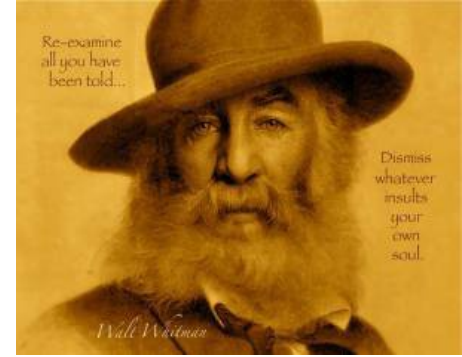
- In his early thirties, he began to have experiences that transformed him. In 1855, when he was 36, he published his collection of poems *Leaves of Grass*. The poems seemed so radical in form and content that he became a revolutionary figure in American literature. In fact, he was initially acclaimed more as a prophet of democracy and of the “common man” in the Western world than as a poet.
- His aim, he states in the book’s preface, is to “well nigh express the inexpressible.” “I celebrate myself,” he sings at the beginning of “*Song of Myself*” — but, as quickly becomes clear, the self he celebrates is not the ordinary self we usually experience. It is far more expanded.

# Walt Whitman



- *Song of Myself*
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjMoRb5f-EQ> (excerpt)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQczupMTBSo> (complete)

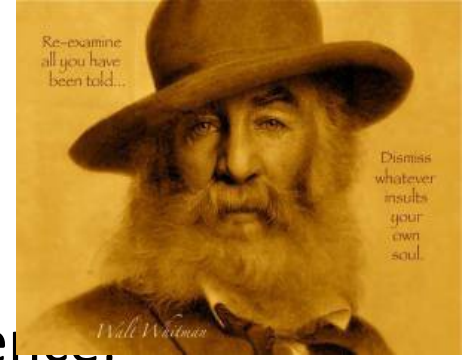
# Walt Whitman



In his prose work *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman describes the kind of experience he enjoys:

*“There is, in sanest hours, a consciousness, a thought that rises, independent, lifted out from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal. This is the thought of identity — yours for you, whoever you are, as mine for me. Miracle of miracles, beyond statement, most spiritual and vaguest of earth’s dreams, yet hardest basic fact, and only entrance to all facts. In such devout hours, in the midst of the significant wonders of heaven and earth, (significant only because of the Me in the centre), creeds, conventions, fall away and become of no account before this simple idea. Under the luminousness of real vision, it alone takes possession, takes value. Like the shadowy dwarf in the fable, once liberated and look’d upon, it expands over the whole earth, and spreads to the roof of heaven.”*

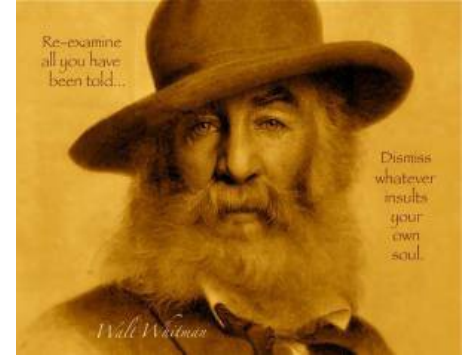
# Walt Whitman



- Whitman is clearly describing an experience of transcendence. The experience, he tells us, is “independent, lifted out from all else.” It is unbounded — “it expands over the whole earth, and spreads to the roof of heaven.”
- It is highly abstract, the “most spiritual and vaguest of earth’s dreams.” Yet it is the ultimate reality, Whitman asserts, the “hardest basic fact, and only entrance to all facts.”
- What exactly is Whitman talking about? He is describing the experience of the fourth state of consciousness, beyond the familiar states of waking, dreaming, and sleeping — the state some Eastern yogis call Transcendental Consciousness, or the experience of the Self. In this state, the mind has settled inward. Moving beyond all perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, one experiences consciousness by itself, consciousness knowing itself alone — pure consciousness, unbounded and fully awake within itself.



# Walt Whitman

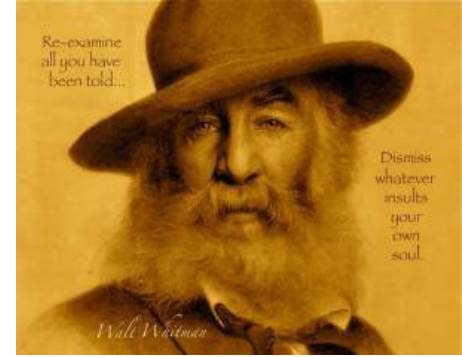


Whitman goes on to describe the nature of this unique experience:

*“Only in the perfect uncontamination and solitariness of individuality. . . . Only here, and on such terms, the meditation, the devout ecstasy, the soaring flight. Only here, communion with the mysteries. . . . The soul emerges, and all statements, churches, sermons, melt away like vapors. Alone, and silent thought and awe, and aspiration — and then the interior consciousness, like a hitherto unseen inscription, in magic ink, beams out its wondrous lines to the sense. Bibles may convey, and priests expound, but it is exclusively for the noiseless operation of one’s isolated self, to enter the pure ether of veneration, reach the divine levels, and commune with the unutterable.”*

Whitman talks about the transcendental quality of this experience: “the perfect uncontamination and solitariness of individuality,” the mind is awake but unshadowed by thoughts or perceptions — the Self stands alone by itself. This is a state of “devout ecstasy.”

# Walt Whitman



- Whitman makes clear that this “interior consciousness” is the most important thing we can experience in life. In comparison, he says, all intellectual beliefs, all creeds and conventions, “become of no account.” “All statements” about the nature of reality “melt away like vapors.” Direct experience alone matters, he says — and full direct experience takes place exclusively through “the noiseless operation of one’s isolated self.”
- The central, inner reality of life, for mystics, is pure consciousness, the Divine, or the Self. Whitman seeks to convey precisely this knowledge — and the fact that one can experience it directly. In the following lines, from his poem “*Passage to India*,” Whitman eulogizes this transcendental field of life:



# Walt Whitman

*“O Thou transcendent,*

*Nameless, the fibre and the breath,*

*Light of the light, shedding forth universes, thou center of them,*

*Thou mightier center of the true, the good, the loving,*

*Thou moral, spiritual fountain — affection’s source — thou reservoir,*

*(O pensive soul of me — O thirst unsatisfied — waitest not there?*

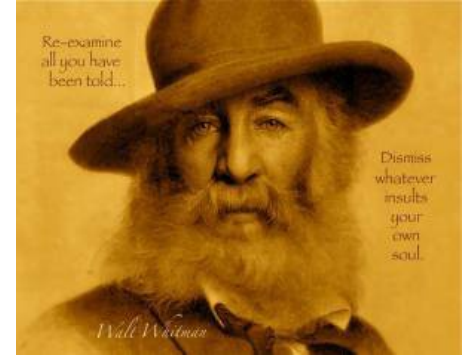
*Waitest not haply for us somewhere there the Comrade perfect?)*

*Thou pulse — thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,*

*That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,*

*1/6/22*

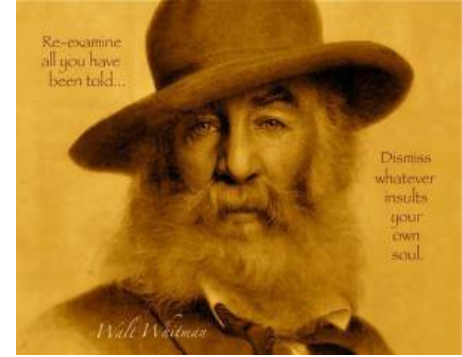
*Athwart the shapeless vastnesses of space*



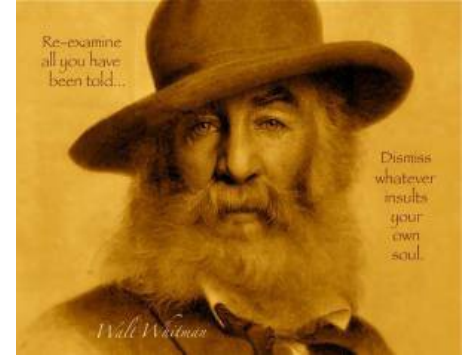
# Walt Whitman

This is what you shall do:

Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for [people who are called stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown, or to any man or number of men-- Go freely with powerful uneducated persons, and with the young, and with the mothers or families-- Re-examine all you have been told in school or church or in any book, and dismiss whatever insults your own soul-- And your very flesh shall be a great poem, and have the richness of fluency, not only in its words, but in the silent lines of its lips and face, and

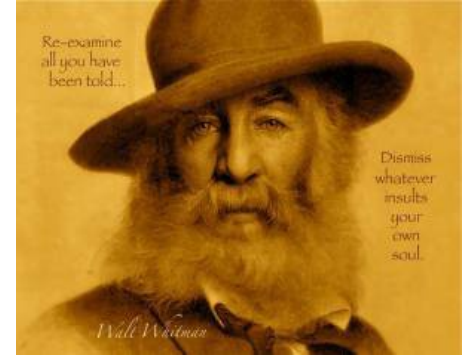


# Walt Whitman



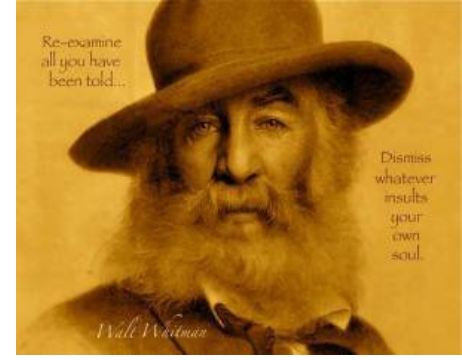
- Whitman worked as a journalist, a teacher, a government clerk, and—in addition to publishing his poetry—was a volunteer nurse during the American Civil War. Early in his career, he also produced a temperance novel, *Franklin Evans* (1842). Whitman's major work, *Leaves of Grass*, was first published in 1855 with his own money. The work was an attempt at reaching out to the common person with an American epic. He continued expanding and revising it until his death in 1892. After a stroke towards the end of his life, he moved to Camden, New Jersey, where his health further declined. When he died at age 72, his funeral became a public spectacle.

# Walt Whitman



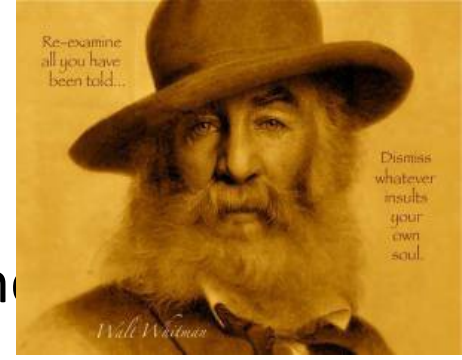
Whitman was deeply influenced by deism. He denied any one faith was more important than another, and embraced all religions equally. In *"Song of Myself"*, he gave an inventory of major religions and indicated he respected and accepted all of them—a sentiment he further emphasized in his poem *"With Antecedents"*, affirming: *"I adopt each theory, myth, god, and demi-god, / I see that the old accounts, bibles, genealogies, are true, without exception"*. In 1874, he was invited to write a poem about the Spiritualism movement, to which he responded, "It seems to me nearly altogether a poor, cheap, crude humbug." Whitman was a religious skeptic: though he accepted all churches, he believed in none. God, to Whitman, was both immanent and transcendent and the human soul was immortal and in a state of progressive development. American Philosophy: An Encyclopedia classes him as one of several figures who "took a more pantheist or pandeist approach by rejecting views of God as separate from the world."

# Walt Whitman



Whitman's poetry has been set to music by a large number of composers; indeed it has been suggested his poetry has been set to music more than any other American poet except for Emily Dickinson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Those who have set his poems to music have included John Adams, Leonard Bernstein, Benjamin Britten, Rhoda Coghill, Ronald Corp, George Crumb, Frederick Delius, Karl Amadeus Hartmann, Hans Werner Henze, Paul Hindemith, Ned Rorem, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Kurt Weill, and Roger Sessions.

# Walt Whitman



- Mysticism is not really a coherent philosophy of life, but more a temper of mind. A mystic vision is intuitive; he feels the presence of divine reality behind and within the ordinary world of sense of perception. He feels that God and the supreme soul animating all things are identical. He believes that all things in the visible world are but forms and manifestations of the one Divine life, and that these phenomena are changing and temporary, while the soul that informs them is eternal.” The human soul too is eternal. Transcendentalism is closely connected to mysticism, for it emphasizes the intuitive and spiritual above the practical.

*“And I know the hand of God is the promise of my own*

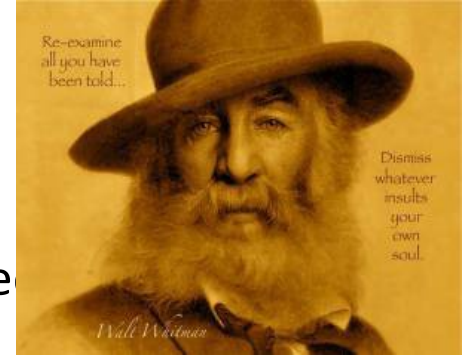
*And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own*

*And that all — of the creation of love.”*

- As a mystic, Whitman believed that there is no deference between creator and the creation. His “self” is a universal self. He sees people of both sexes, all ages



# Walt Whitman



Walt Whitman is basically a transcendentalist; *Song of Myself* has been regarded as a prolonged expression of an experience that is essentially mystical. It is believed that Whitman is greatly influenced not only by Emerson but by oriental mysticism. But there is a big difference between Whitman's mysticism and the mysticism of Orient. Oriental mystic believes that communication between soul and god is possible only through the mortification or conquest of the senses and the physical appetites. On the other hand Whitman believes that spiritual experiences are possible without sacrificing the physical appetites. There is a great deal of sexual elements in Whitman's poetry, especially in the early poetry- section-5 of "*Song of Myself*" is a case in the point where the sexual connotations are inseparable from the mystical experience. Here Whitman's overjoyed revelation of union of his body with his soul has been depicted mystic expression. The poet has a feeling of fraternity and oneness with God and his fellowmen. He says:

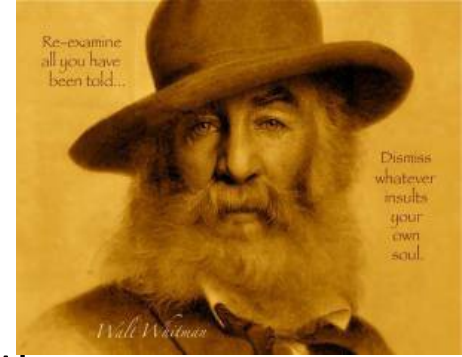
***"And I know the hand of God is the promise of my own***

***And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own***

***And that all — of the creation of love."***

As a mystic, Whitman believed that there is no deference between creator and the creation. His "self" is a universal self. He sees people of both sexes, all ages, many different walks of life; even

# Walt Whitman

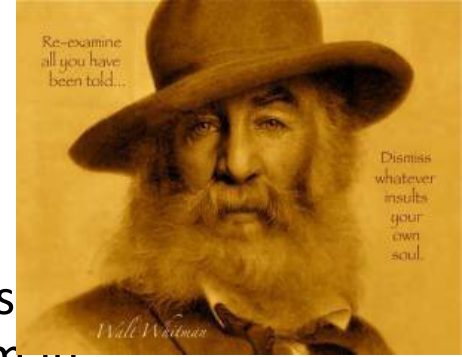


- In section 11 of *Song of Myself*, once again a mystical experience is symbolically conveyed through a piece of sensuous experience. In section 24, the poet becomes the spokesman of the “forbidden voices” of ‘sexes and lusts voices indecent.’ He loves his body and is sensitive to another’s touch. Both the lady and the prostitute enjoy equal position in his poetry, for the inner reality, the soul has been created by the same God. “*If anything is sacred, the human is sacred,*” he says in “*I Sing the Body Electric.*” He celebrates all the organs of the body- male and female.
- Whitman does not reject the material world. He seeks the spiritual through the material. He does not subscribe to the belief that objects illusive. There is no tendency on the part of the soul to leave this world for God. Whitman does not belittle the achievements of science and materialism. In section 23 of *Song of Myself*, he accepts the reality of materialism and says-

*“Hurrah for positive science! Long live exact demonstration.”*

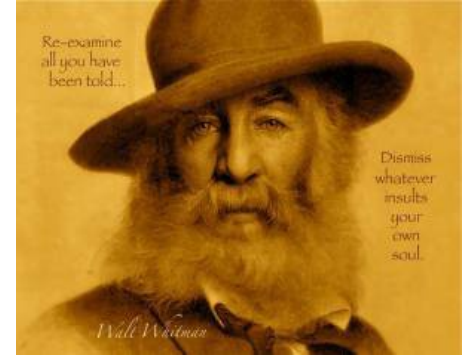
- Whitman praises not merely life, but absolute worth of every particular and individual person. Thus, his comic consciousness in the result of the expansion of the ego. The “I” assumes an enlarged universal connotation embracing the smallest and the greatest things in the universe as a perfect and of great value.

# Walt Whitman



- *Song of Myself* bears an inverted mystical experience. While the traditional mystic attempts annihilate himself and mortify his senses in preparation for his union with the divine; Whitman magnifies the self and glorifies the senses in his progress towards the union with the absolute. In this poem, the poet enters a mystical trance by observing a spear of summer grass.
- Whitman seldom lost touch with the physical reality even in the mist of his mystical experience. Physical phenomena for him were symbols of spiritual reality. He believed that “the unseen is proved by seen”; thus he makes use of highly sensuous and concrete imagery to convey his perception of divine reality. He finds a purpose behind any natural objects- grass, sea, birds, flowers animals etc.
- Whitman is a mystic as much as he is a poet of democracy and science, but a “mystic without a creed.” Whitman’s mystical experience of his self comes through various stages. The first stage may be termed “Awakening of self”, the second “the purification of self. “Purification involves an acceptance of the body and all its functions. This acceptance reflects the poet’s goal to achieve mystical experience through physical reality. True, Whitman’s brand of mysticism is not identifiable with the selflessness of the Christian variety or the passivity of the Oriental. What we may call Whitman’s mysticism is “democratic” mysticism- available to every man on equal terms and embracing contradictory elements. Thus *Song of Myself* is perhaps the best illustration of Whitman’s mysticism.

# Walt Whitman Mysticism References



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- <http://galaxyeducare.blogspot.com/p/comment-on-whitmansmysticism.htm>
- For an extended appreciation of Whitman's mysticism in the groundbreaking masterpiece, *Cosmic Consciousness*, by Richard Maurice Bucke, [1901], see:
- <http://www.sacred-texts.com/eso/cc/cc22.htm>
- The complete text of "Song of Myself":
- [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s\\_z/whitman/song.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/whitman/song.htm)