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Chapter 5

Criminals' Responses to Religious Themes in Whitman's Poetry*

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Dr. Jack J. Leedy, first president of The National Association for Poetry Therapy and editor of two books on poetry therapy, defines "bibliotherapy" (of which poetry therapy is a part—cf. Hynes, 1981) as "the process of assimilating the psychological, sociological, and aesthetic values from books into human character, personality, and behavior" (1969a, p. 11). This definition would apparently include the assimilation of religious and moral values from poetry (Brown, 1975; Bell, 1982; Christensen & Moss, 1981). This chapter describes research on criminals' perceptions of religious themes in the poetry of Walt Whitman.

The use of poetry therapy in correctional institutions has been advocated by numerous psychiatrists, including such notables as Theodor Reik (1969). Clinical psychologist Maurice Flock notes that most prisoners have an extraordinary interest in themselves and their own mental processes. He quotes two inmates (cited in Brown, 1975, p. 155):

We know that somewhere we have taken a wrong turn, and we want books to help us understand where and why.

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Books can sometimes change a man's life, especially his way of thinking. My incarceration and reading good books here have done this for me. I have plans for a much better and more wholesome life.

According to Dr. Bill Barkley, Chief Staff Clinical Psychologist at the California Men's Colony at San Luis Obispo in 1973, "Poetry therapy is not only possible, but a most important adjunct to the other psychiatric treatments offered in a correctional setting" (1973, p. 1). If this claim is true, then "poetry therapy" is not only useful, but important in the rehabilitation of criminals.

Barkley insists that "No matter how sick, hardened, and institutionalized an individual is there resides a heart, and that heart needs to be heard" (p. 1). He continues with an example (pp. 14-15): "Compassion, empathy, sensitivity, and fear all are expressed in a poem dealing with the gas chamber at San Quentin. The following poem was written many years ago, but it expresses the marked degree of empathy that is supposedly beyond the capacity of the anti-social personality."

RED LIGHT OF DEATH

Behind the high gray walls of Quentin
 Trying to beat the still hot air
 I gazed into a Summer sky
 Saw a red light shining there.

Down below walked a dear old Padre
 Slowly walking down the hall
 While behind him strolled a convict
 His foot-steps very slow.

The convict's eyes were filled with tears
 So full he could not see
 As the dear Old Padre sang his song
 Nearer my God to thee.

Not far ahead stood a great steel door
 The color, it was green
 The gates of hell stood behind that door
 For a convict, whom we'll call Gene.

They sat him in a big arm chair
 Strapped his arms down nice and tight
 Now all he had to do is wait
 As the gas shut out the light.

In my hand I hold a paper
 On front page, you'll find his name
 Yes, the Governor sent his pardon
 But the postman never came.

They dug a hole on yonder mountain
 Three foot wide and six feet deep
 They carved his name upon an oaken board
 To mark where this convict sleeps.

As I set here, how I wonder
 How many tears he cried
 As he watched the creeping darkness
 Fold around his [sic] as he died.

Now who can say I'm sorry
 His innocence plainly seen
 Just who now stands in judgment
 Of a convict we'll call Gene.

Now I know what the red light meant
 Against the clear blue sky
 I did not know the man who died
 But a tear fell from my eye.

I no longer set in the big big yard
 Trying to bear the Summer air
 I don't like to gaze into a Summer sky
 And see a red light shining there.¹

Not everyone would agree with the claims of Leedy and Barkley, however. Although research has demonstrated that poetry therapy can relieve certain psychiatric conditions (Edgar & Hazley, 1969), to our knowledge the effectiveness of poetry therapy in the rehabilitation of criminals has not been tested empirically. Yochelson and Samenow (1976) present arguments for why poetry therapy would *not* work for criminals. They first state that criminals' thinking is too simplistically concrete and literalistic (pp. 297-298). They claim, for example, that criminals believe that a few concrete acts, such as going to church and praying, make them religious. For criminals, the rituals of religion may satisfy certain emotional needs without providing an ethical or moral system. They may be impressed by the power of fundamentalist, hell-fire preachers, or may simply feel nostalgia upon hearing the music and psalms from their childhoods. (It is interesting to note that psychologist William James (1929, p. 258) came to the same conclusion 80 years ago).

Yochelson and Samenow do agree with psychologists like Barkley that underneath a tough exterior, many criminals are sensitive and sentimental (pp. 289-297). Prison publications often contain high quality poetry expressing idealistic and humanitarian values. Criminals have been observed

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reading Kipling, Baudelaire, existential philosophy, and religious works. At the same time, Yochelson and Samenow claim, the concrete, literalistic thought patterns of felons cause them to miss the subtler conceptual points in literature. Rather than act as a deterrent to crime, sentimentality may instead contribute to its continuation. Yochelson and Samenow state that any kindness, charity, and aesthetic interests and talents a criminal might have only add to his belief that he is a good person and ultimately give him greater license for crime. Therefore, sensitivity and sentimentality do not form a basis for rehabilitation. If these claims are true, then poetry therapy may not only be a waste of time, it may even be dangerous. Brown (1975) in fact devotes an entire chapter of her book to possible adverse effects of bibliotherapy.

Yochelson's and Samenow's work has in turn been criticized. Their conclusions were based upon interviews with inmates, and many persons dismiss this kind of phenomenological methodology for being too subjective. We agree with Yochelson's and Samenow's critics about the subjectivity of their methods. On the other hand, as far as we know, persons advocating poetry therapy in prisons are working on faith and intuition rather than upon research evaluating the rehabilitating effectiveness of poetry.

Clearly, only large-scale, expensive, program evaluation research can definitively assess the effectiveness of poetry therapy in prisons. Our research is much less ambitious. It is predicated on the assumption that, in order to have a rehabilitating effect, the essential meanings of the poetry must be understood by the reader. Part of our research consisted of presenting passages of poetry to prisoners for their interpretation. Finding that criminals do not see the subtler interpretations in the passages would suggest that Yochelson and Samenow are correct that criminals' concrete thinking precludes instilling moral values through the use of poetry.

Our research corrects for the subjectivity in Yochelson and Samenow's research by evaluating their claims with objective questionnaire methodology. We constructed the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire to assess whether criminals see the subtler religious themes in poetry and also administered Hogan's (1969) Empathy Scale to objectively assess the sensitivity of criminals.

Even before we conducted our research, we were somewhat more optimistic than Yochelson and Samenow concerning criminals' ability to perceive subtle religious concepts in poetry and in the possible therapeutic value of poetry. An earlier literature review by the first author (Johnson, 1983) has shown that the personality and thought patterns of criminal and creative persons are similar, indicating that criminals may respond to certain poetry.

Johnson's argument is that a small percentage of the general population is born with a predisposition to deviance, but that the deviance can be ex-

pressed in constructive or destructive ways. Criminality is unacceptable deviance; artistic creativity is acceptable deviance. The key to reform, under this view, is not to make criminals conformists. Rather, successful reform would entail resocializing criminals into careers that are on the one hand consistent with their deviant personalities, yet on the other hand socially acceptable (e.g., art). Poetry, as an art form, may therefore play a useful role in the resocialization process.

Whitman's poetry was chosen for the present research for three reasons. First, Whitman's works appear on a list of poems that Leedy (1969a, p. 280) describes as suitable for use in poetry therapy. Second, we followed Leedy's (1969b) "isoprinciple" of poetry selection, which means that the most useful poems will reflect the feeling and mood of the population being treated. Though not a criminal, Whitman certainly was a nonconformist and in his time was considered deviant; therefore, he might appeal to a criminal population. Finally, critics generally agree that Whitman was a mystic and that he expressed his religious mysticism in his work. Whitman scholar Gay Allen (1957) has compiled a number of Whitman passages that illustrate mystical religious themes; Allen's book guided our selection of Whitman passages. Whitman scholarship indicates that his poetry has multiple layers of meaning from the commonplace to the sublime. Thus, Whitman's poetry seemed ideal for testing whether or not criminals will actually perceive subtle religious themes in poetry.

METHOD

The Whitman Poetry Questionnaire

Nearly all critics agree that Walt Whitman was a mystic, and that some sort of mystical experience was responsible for his sudden acquisition of creative power in the 1850s (Allen, 1957). While Whitman did not intend to express a formal philosophical doctrine of mysticism in his poetry, he nonetheless felt compelled to express his mystical insights through his poetry. (William James, 1929, describes "noetic quality"—the desire to communicate the mystical experience—as one of the four major characteristics of a person who has had a mystical experience.)

Allen devotes a chapter of his book to describing the characteristics of mysticism and the related doctrine of pantheism. He illustrates Whitman's affinity for these doctrines by citing relevant passages of poetry. We chose among these passages ten that represented the essential points of mysticism and pantheism and then wrote two alternative interpretations for each passage. The "correct" interpretation was based on Allen's explanation. The "incorrect" interpretation was constructed along three guidelines. It either (a) stated some obvious, superficial, concrete meaning of the passage; (b) presented a cliché from Judeo-Christian thought; or (c) reflected a

personality trait that Yochelson and Samenow (1976) said is common in a criminal population.

Below we present the ten passages, their alternative interpretations, and explanations for each interpretation.²

I

There is something that comes home to one now and perpetually,
It is not what is printed, preach'd, discussed, it eludes discussion and print,
It is not to be put in a book, it is not in this book. . .

- A. Knowledge can not always be put into words.
- B. Certain thoughts are so bad that you can't talk or write about them.

This passage (lines 44–46 of “A Song for Occupations”) reflects what William James calls the *ineffability* of a mystical experience (Allen, 1957, p. 243); thus “A” is the correct answer. If criminals are preoccupied with sin (Yochelson & Samenow, 1976, pp. 297–298), however, they may be more likely to choose option “B.”

II

I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
And discurrup them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul.

- A. Love is power.
- B. All souls are connected through love.

This passage (“I Sing the Body Electric”, lines 1–4) reflects what Bertrand Russell calls the doctrine of *unity* in mysticism (Allen, 1957, p. 246). The principle of unity states that plurality, division, and opposites are illusory, that all things, both spiritual and physical, are connected in God. Option “B” is therefore correct. Interpretation “A” was designed to tap criminals’ alleged preoccupation with power (Yochelson & Samenow, 1976, pp. 276–289).

III

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my
bare-stripped heart,

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And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.

- A. I am being held by a greater spiritual power.
- B. I am letting a woman make love to me.

This passage (lines 87–90 of “Song of Myself”) reflects William James’s principle of *passivity* in the mystical experience (Allen, 1957, p. 243; pp. 249–250). The experience of passivity involves the sensation of being penetrated and permeated by the supernatural; thus “A” is the correct answer. Response “B” simply reflects a more superficial, obvious, concrete interpretation for the passage.

IV

Divine is the body—it is all—it is the soul also.
How can there be immortality except through mortality?
How can the ultimate reality of visible things be visible?
How can the real body ever die?

- A. The body dies, but the soul lasts forever.
- B. We know the soul through the body.

This passage (“Divine is the Person”, lines 1–3) reflects the doctrine of *materialistic pantheism* (Allen, 1957, p. 261). This doctrine states that because God is all, indivisible, and immanent, matter and spirit are one; therefore the body is the soul and the soul is the body. Option “B”, the correct answer, was adapted from a quotation by Goethe, “We know the soul only through the medium of the body, and God only through Nature” (Allen, 1957, p. 259). Interpretation “A” reflects the traditional Christian view concerning the relationship between soul and the body.

V

Omnes! omnes! let others ignore what they may,
I make the poem of evil also, I commemorate that part also,
I am myself just as much evil as good, and my nation is—and I say there is in
fact no evil,
(Or if there is I say it is just as important to you, to the land, or to me, as any
thing else.

- A. Almost everyone has some sin in them.
- B. All real things are equally valuable.

This passage (“Starting from Paumanok”, lines 98–101) again illustrates the mystical notion of *unity*. God [read good] is all, therefore the perception of all opposites, including good and evil, is an illusory construction of our imagination. “The key to Whitman’s attitude is the above *omnes*; he is the poetry of *all*—all life, all existence, every object and particle in the uni-

verse equally necessary, perfect and therefore good" (Allen, 1957, p. 273). This means that option "B" is correct. Option "A" was designed once again to assess whether criminals are preoccupied with sin.

VI

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's
name,

And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er I go,
Others will punctually come for ever and ever.

- A. God made man in his own image.
- B. God is in everything.

This passage ("Song of Myself," lines 1284-1288) reflects the mystical and pantheistic doctrine of *signatures*, seen also in the writings of Emerson, Goethe, and Carlyle (Allen, 1957, pp. 261-262). The notion of signatures states that every object in nature bears the imprint or sign of God; this makes "B" the correct answer. The parallel and more well-known Hebraic teaching appears in option "A."

VII

One world is aware and by far the largest to me, and that is myself,
And whether I come to my own to-day or in ten thousand or ten million years,
I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheerfulness I can wait.
My foothold is tenon'd and mortis'd in granite,
I laugh at what you call dissolution,
And I know the amplitude of time,
And as to you Life I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths,
(No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.)

- A. I have had many past lives.
- B. People try to kill or control me, but I am too strong—I'll survive.

This passage (lines 416-421 and 1297-1298 of "Song of Myself") expresses the doctrine of *pantheistic transmigration* or reincarnation of the soul (Allen, 1957, pp. 267-268). Option "A" reflects this interpretation. Interpretation "B" reflects the "number one everywhere" aspect of the criminal power motive (Yochelson & Samenow, 1976, pp. 281-283). This aspect of the power motive is a criminal's strong need to come up on top in every situation.

VIII

The soul is of itself,
All verges to it, all has reference to what ensues,

All that a person does, says, thinks, is of consequence,
Not a move can a man or woman make, that affects him or her in a day,
month, any part of the direct lifetime, or the hour of death, but the same
affects him or her onward afterward through the indirect lifetime.

- A. Whether you are good or bad depends on how pure your soul is.
- B. Good and bad deeds affect the development of the soul.

This passage ("Song of Prudence," lines 5-9) refers to *karma*, the mystical law of cause and effect (Allen, 1957, pp. 274-275). Karma, reflected in interpretation "B," states that the choices one makes affect the evolution of the soul through birth and rebirth. Choice "A" deals with criminals' concern with purity and preoccupation with sin (Yochelson & Samenow, 1976, p. 298).

IX

Sex contains all, bodies, souls,
Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results, promulgations,
Songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery, the seminal milk,
All hopes, benefactions, bestowals, all the passions, loves, beauties, delights
of the earth . . .

- A. Some people choose sex instead of religion.
- B. A person can feel very religious during sex.

This passage ("A Woman Waits for Me," lines 3-6) clearly contains both a mundane and a mystical meaning. The mundane interpretation ("A") polarizes the material and spiritual, such that one can choose only one or the other. Interpretation "B," on the other hand, carries with it the notion that sex is holy. Interpretation "B" derives from the mystic belief that the soul receives its identity from sex and thus "perpetually fulfills the cosmic plan" (Allen, 1957, p. 269).

X

Silent and amazed even when a little boy,
I remember I heard the preacher every Sunday put God in his statements,
As contending against some being or influence.

- A. As a boy I felt the power and influence of God.
- B. As a boy I felt God in harmony with everything.

The correct interpretation of the final passage ("A Child's Amaze") is obvious if one reads it carefully. Whitman's amazement about the preacher's words show that, even as a boy, he saw God in loving harmony with everything (interpretation "B"). This is part of the *unity* doctrine of mysticism. The alternative ("A") plays both upon the criminal's preoccupation with power (Yochelson & Samenow, 1976, pp. 276-289) and upon crimi-

nal's fear of God as an "all-powerful, all-knowing being" (Yochelson & Samenow, 1976, p. 297).

In essence, the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire is a semi-projective personality test. Like any projective personality test, it contains ambiguous stimuli, that is, stimuli that can be interpreted in more than one way. Technically, the test is semi-projective because interpretations are limited beforehand to two alternatives. A complete review of the major journal of projective personality testing, *Journal of Personality Assessment*, did not reveal any previous studies using poetry in projective assessment. However, one article (Bailey & Edwards, 1973) described research using proverbs as a projective test. The proverbs successfully elicited a number of interpretable responses, including concrete thinking, psychotic thought processes, displacement hostility, and many other features of personality.

If Yochelson and Samenow are correct, criminals will tend to choose the incorrect interpretations on the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire for two reasons. First, criminals supposedly read aesthetic literature concretely and literalistically, which will cause them to overlook the subtler, mystical interpretation. Second, they possess certain "criminal" personality traits (preoccupation with power, sin, etc.), and would tend to project these traits onto the incorrect answers, just as passive-aggressive patients project their hostility onto inkblots. On the other hand, if criminal and creative thought processes are similar (Johnson, 1983), criminals should be able to perceive the correct, subtler interpretations.

The Empathy Scale

Hogan (1969) developed his Empathy Scale by comparing the responses of 57 men with high ratings and 57 men with low ratings for empathy across the combined item pool of the California Psychological Inventory (Gough, 1975), Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Hathaway & McKinley, 1943) and a set of items used at the University of California's Institute of Personality Assessment and Research (IPAR). The 64 items that best discriminated between the high-empathy and low-empathy groups were retained as the final Empathy scale. A three-month test-retest reliability of .84 was found for the scale, and substantial correlations were found with social acuity ratings, likability ratings, communication competence, level of moral maturity, and effective social functioning (Greif & Hogan, 1973; Hogan, 1969).

A further review of the literature by Johnson, Cheek, and Smither (1983) showed that Empathy Scale scores correlated with sociopolitical intelligence, therapist effectiveness, effective parenting, freedom from anxiety, tendency to feel what others feel, and accuracy in person perception. Noting that measurements of internal consistency for the scale are not ex-

tremely high (from .61 to .71—see Cross & Sharpley, 1982; Hogan, 1969), Johnson et al. performed a factor analysis of the scale and found four unique factors. They labeled these factors Social Self-Confidence, Even Temperedness, Sensitivity, and Nonconformity. Of the four factors, Sensitivity and Nonconformity best discriminated between the high- and low-empathy groups in Hogan's original sample, though all four components accounted for unique variance in the empathy criterion.

The evidence for the validity of Hogan's scale suggests that it is one of the best available measures of empathic sensitivity. Administering the scale to a group of criminals would objectively assess Yochelson and Samenow's claim that criminals essentially are sensitive. In his original article, Hogan (1969) found that, contrary to Yochelson and Samenow's position, prison inmates scored lower on his Empathy Scale than all non-criminal groups tested. The 92 inmates tested had a mean score of 30.4 compared to 42.4 for 70 medical students, 39.1 for 90 college students, 37.7 for 100 military officers, and 31.0 for 51 junior high school students. The present study seeks to replicate that finding.

In addition to comparing Empathy Scale scores of criminals and non-criminals, this study examines whether scores on the Empathy Scale predict scores on the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire. Because the Empathy Scale measures the tendency to imaginatively place one's self in another's position high scorers should be able to identify with Whitman and see his meanings.

The present study also looks at the four factor components of the Empathy Scale separately. For several reasons, the Sensitivity and Nonconformity factors were of particular interest. First, these factors accounted for the most variance in empathy ratings in Johnson et al.'s analysis. In addition, the Sensitivity factor seemed important because it is closest to Yochelson and Samenow's conception of criminal sensitivity or sentimentality. Two items in this factor refer to poetry. They are: "I like poetry" and "I have at one time or another tried my hand at writing poetry." The Nonconformity factor seemed particularly relevant to the present study because high scorers on this scale have an open, perceptive, intrareceptive cognitive style, while low scorers have a biased, judgmental, projective cognitive style. This means, among other things, that high scorers on this factor should be more open to Whitman's mystical meanings in his poetry, while low scorers will project their own personalities into the interpretation task.

Subjects

Ninety-six male subjects participated in the study. The first group consisted of 50 freshman and sophomore college students enrolled in the authors' courses at the Pennsylvania State University's DuBois Campus. The second

group consisted of 46 prison inmates at the Clearfield County Prison in Clearfield, Pennsylvania. The offenses of the inmates were as follows: theft (11), drug offenses (7), robbery (6), burglary (5), assault (3), driving under influence (3), rape (3), forgery (2), attempted murder (1), murder (1), escape (1), criminal trespass (1), and unknown (2).

All subjects volunteered to complete the questionnaires. The purpose of the study was explained to all subjects as an investigation of the way prison inmates and non-prison inmates interpret poetry. The students were tested in two groups; the prisoners, in three groups. The students completed the entire procedure on their own. The poetry passages were read orally to the prisoners as they followed along on their questionnaires to help overcome the poorer reading skills of some of the prisoners. (The Empathy Scale items are at a 6-grade reading level and presented no problems.) After subjects completed the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire and the Empathy Scale, they responded to the following demographic items on the last page: age, education, and religious preference. They were also encouraged to respond freely to the question, "Is there anything else you would like to say?"

RESULTS

Influence of Demographic Variables

The criminals and students differed on all three demographic variables. A chi-square value of 14.95 (4 degrees of freedom) indicated that the two groups differed in their religious affiliation. The criminal group showed 15% Catholic, 28% Protestant, 4% other denominations, 35% religious without denomination, and 18% nonreligious. The student group showed 44% Catholic, 32% Protestant, 6% other denominations, 12% religious without denomination, and 6% nonreligious. Thus, a relatively higher proportion of students were Catholic, and a relatively higher proportion of criminals were either nondenominationally religious or nonreligious. The age of the prisoners ranged from 19 to 49 ($M = 26.8$, $SD = 7.4$), while the age of the students ranged from 18 to 38 ($M = 20.5$, $SD = 4.1$). This difference was significant at the .0001 level ($F(1,94) = 27.07$). Obviously the students were better educated than the prisoners. All students but 3 (who were high school students sitting in on the course) had at least a year of college; only 5 prisoners had attended college. Of the remaining prisoners, 8 had grade school educations, 24 had high school educations, and 9 had completed technical school.

To determine whether the demographic differences between the two groups might influence group differences in poetry or empathy scores, the relationship between demographic variables and poetry and empathy scores was assessed within each group. Because the Poetry Questionnaire

covered a wide range of religious themes, separate chi-square analyses for religion were computed for each item. For the students, only one significant result was found. On passage number five, which dealt with evil, 75% of the Catholics chose the wrong answer ("Almost everyone has some sin in them"), while 75% of the Protestants chose the right answer ("All real things are equally valuable"). The criminals showed the same trend for this item, though the result of the chi-square was not quite statistically significant ($p = .109$). None of the responses to other items were related to religious affiliation; overall, these results suggest that religious affiliation did not affect responses to the Poetry Questionnaire. Analyses of variance showed that religious affiliation was not related to scores on the Empathy Scale or its four factor-subcales. One can therefore conclude that the different religious composition of the criminals and students does not confound interpretation of group differences on the Poetry Questionnaire and Empathy Scale.

Age and level of education were correlated with total scores on the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire and with the full Empathy scale and its four factor-subcales. To determine whether using a total score on the Poetry Questionnaire was justified, an alpha reliability coefficient was computed for all cases. The value of alpha measure of internal consistency was .37, which is quite low, even for a short scale. While it is possible to use a scale with such low internal consistency in research (Cheek, 1982), one should certainly interpret the results with caution.

Age did not correlate significantly with total Poetry Questionnaire scores, Empathy scores, or Empathy factor-subscale scores in the full sample or either group separately. In the full sample, level of education (1 = grade school, 2 = high school, 3 = technical school, 4 = college) correlated significantly with Empathy ($r = .34$), Social Self-Confidence ($r = .24$), Even Temperedness ($r = .22$), and Nonconformity ($r = .30$), but not with the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire nor with the Sensitivity factor-subscale. Restriction of range precluded correlating education with the Poetry and Empathy scores for students alone. When these correlations were computed for criminals, a positive relationship was found between education and Poetry Questionnaire scores ($r = .26$, $p < .05$), full Empathy Scale scores ($r = .34$, $p < .05$), and Nonconformity subscale scores ($r = .32$, $p < .05$). This means that when testing for differences between the criminals and students on the Poetry Questionnaire and Empathy Scale, education should be statistically controlled.

Group Differences

The central statistical analyses compare criminals' and students' scores on the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire and the Empathy Scale. These results

are summarized in Table 1. Table 1 shows that chi-squares indicate no difference between the percentage of correct responses in the two groups for 7 of the 10 Whitman Poetry items. The students did better on items 6 and 9, and the criminals did better on item 10. Analysis of variance replicated this result. However, when an analysis of covariance was run for items 6, 9, and 10, controlling for the effects of education level, no differences were found between the criminals and students. An analysis of variance and covariance on the total Whitman Poetry Questionnaire scores indicated no difference between the groups. We realize that finding no differences between the groups could be due to the low reliability of the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire, and, without a power analysis, one cannot make

TABLE 1. Comparison of Criminals' and Students' Scores on Poetry and Empathy Scales

Poetry Item and Theme	Percent Choosing Correct Answer		Chi-Square (1 df)
	Criminals	Students	
1. Ineffability	80	82	.04 ns
2. Unity	70	67	.14 ns
3. Passivity	24	26	.06 ns
4. Pantheism	37	24	1.91 ns
5. Illusion of Evil	41	44	.07 ns
6. Signatures	72	88	3.99*
7. Transmigration	57	56	.00 ns
8. Karma	80	78	.09 ns
9. Oneness of Body & Spirit	46	72	6.90**
10. Unity and Harmony	52	32	4.01*

Scale	Mean and Standard Deviation		ANOVA (1,94 df) & ANACOVA (1,93 df)
	Criminals	Students	
Whitman Poetry Questionnaire	5.59 (1.81)	5.68 (1.68)	$F = .07$ ns .84 ns
Empathy Scale	32.13 (6.11)	35.80 (5.98)	8.84** .26 ns
Social Self-Confidence	6.93 (2.30)	7.86 (2.60)	3.38 ns .00 ns
Even Temperedness	6.54 (3.22)	8.02 (3.15)	5.16* .91 ns
Sensitivity	5.63 (1.27)	5.56 (1.79)	.05 ns .02 ns
Nonconformity	5.07 (1.91)	6.36 (2.07)	10.09** 1.79 ns

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

categorical null statements. Nonetheless, it does appear that criminals can perceive the subtle religious themes in Whitman's poetry just as well as college freshman and sophomores. Any slight differences in performance between the two groups can be attributed to educational level.

Table 1 also shows that analyses of variance indicate that the students are more empathic, even tempered, and nonconforming than the prisoners (recall that "nonconforming" refers to an open, malleable cognitive style rather than social deviance). However, when educational level is controlled in an analysis of covariance, no differences can be found between the groups on Empathy or its four subcomponents. This finding indicates that, according to an objective measure of empathy, criminals are definitely less empathic than college students (this replicates Hogan's, 1969, results). This deficit in empathy is related to a lower level of educational achievement on the part of the criminals.

Relation between Empathy and Poetry Interpretation

Table 2 summarizes the relationships between Whitman Poetry scores and scores on the Empathy, Social Self-Confidence, Even Temperedness, Sensitivity, and Nonconformity scores. For the total sample, higher scores on the Poetry Questionnaire were associated with higher scores on Empathy, Even Temperedness, Sensitivity, and Nonconformity. The same pattern was found for the students considered alone. For the criminals, higher scores on the Poetry Questionnaire were associated with higher scores on Empathy, Social Self-Confidence, and Nonconformity. Controlling for

TABLE 2. Correlations between Poetry Questionnaire and Empathy Scales

Scale	Full and Partial Correlations ^a		
	Criminals	Students	Total
Empathy Full Scale	27**	45****	35****
	20*	45****	34****
Social Self-Confidence	26**	00	12
	21*	00	10
Even Temperedness	04	38***	21**
	01	37***	19**
Sensitivity	03	29**	18**
	00	29**	18**
Nonconformity	25**	34***	29***
	18	33***	27***

^a Decimals omitted from all correlation coefficients. Upper coefficient is regular correlation; lower coefficient is partial correlation, controlling for the effects of educational level.

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

**** $p < .001$.

education, partial correlations show the same pattern of results, although the significance of the relationships for the criminals was marginal (p 's near .10). Overall, the results say that within both a normal and criminal population, we find a range of empathic dispositions, and that, as predicted, the more empathic individuals are more likely to perceive the subtler religious themes in Whitman's poetry.

DISCUSSION

One can summarize the results of the study briefly as follows:

1. Neither religious affiliation nor age is related to empathy or the ability to see subtle mystico-religious themes in our Whitman Poetry Questionnaire.
2. Educational level is related to both empathy and to the discernment of subtle religious themes in poetry. The better educated criminals were found to be more empathic, to be more open and perceptive in cognitive style, and to perform better on the Poetry Questionnaire.
3. College students are more empathic than criminals; this difference is related to the educational differences between the two groups.
4. The criminals as a group performed just as well as the students on the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire. Differences on three individual items were due to differences between students and criminals in educational level.
5. Level of empathy predicted performance on the Poetry Questionnaire for both students and criminals, and was partially confounded with educational level, yet apparently was real.

What are the implications of these findings? Will criminals react favorably to poetry? Will it help them in any way? Are they truly empathic enough to absorb religious and moral values from poetry into their character?

Based upon the present study, we are willing to reply to the above questions with a cautious "yes." As a group, the prisoners were just as capable as college students of perceiving the subtle religious themes in Whitman's poetry. The prisoners displayed neither the level of concrete thinking nor "criminal" personality traits that Yochelson and Samenow (1976) suggested would keep their sensitivity from manifesting into genuine empathy. This is not to say that poetry therapy would help all criminals. The prisoners who were less educated and who received lower empathy score performed more poorly on the Poetry Questionnaire. The relationship between education and empathy supports educators' contention that learning promotes a humane attitude.

The scores on the Empathy Scale indicate that criminals as a group are indeed less empathic than college students, scoring almost four points lower on the scale, and that this deficit is related to their lower educational level. Further evidence that empathy is related to socioeconomic factors can be found by comparing empathy scores from the present study to those found in Table 3 of Hogan's (1969, p. 313) original paper on the Empathy Scale. The prisoners' average score on the scale is a just point higher than the junior high school students tested by Hogan. Furthermore, the DuBois Campus students (many of whom come from working class backgrounds) scored six to nine points *lower* than three groups of socioeconomically-advantaged college students tested by Hogan at the University of California at Berkeley. This evidence, coupled with the finding that educational level *alone* predicted criminals' performance on the Poetry Questionnaire, indicates that educational level would moderate the effectiveness or usefulness of poetry therapy.

Some final comments concern our clinical impressions of the prison inmates based upon their free written responses at the end of the questionnaire and upon our discussion with them after the testing. On the whole, the prisoners were remarkably enthusiastic about responding to two short questionnaires. Some written comments included: "Come back & do this again," and "enjoyed the test. bring more to prison." Most prisoners appeared to be very interested in what was going on. A few demonstrated an empathic concern for us by writing comments such as "I hope you find what your [sic] looking for," and "I hope this test helps youn's [sic] in someway [sic], and I would like to thank youn's for letting me take part!"

Many prisoners talked openly about feelings and self-understanding. The following are some examples:

I think people [sic] do have the same feelings

... more people should have taken this, rather than just the handful that was here, for a better understanding of it for your benifent [sic].

I think this is a good thing for not just people in jail but for all the people in the world i really enjoy writing things and like to write and i can write but i done this in a hurry

I feel that if someone were to help each person individually to know themselves and there [sic] true feeling it would help prisoner's [sic] very much.

... I feel this test would greatly be helpfull [sic] on the understanding of prison inmates feelings.

I think it is a good Idea because Inmates are more in touch with theyre [sic] feelings cause they have more time to think.

Most people who visit prisons find that the prison environment feels uncomfortable and strange. What discomfited us was not the "criminality"

of the prisoners we interviewed, but rather our inability to perceive any major differences between their personalities and the personalities of the students we teach. It is true that, as predicted by Johnson (1983) and Yochelson and Samenow (1976), many prisoners were unusually choleric, animated, and impulsive. (This was also reflected on their low scores on the Even Temperedness factor subscale.) Nonetheless, at least 20% of our students are not especially even tempered. We found the major difference between the students and prisoners to be their educational level. The above quotations from the prisoners illustrate their good intentions but lack of writing skills. Perhaps if these persons were better educated they could find a socially appropriate outlet for their choleric temperament. The problem is summed up nicely by one of the inmates: "I don't know if poetry will help *Inmates* most don't even know how to read or write."

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