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Walter B. Greene  
*Grant High School*

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**From Mantra to Prose:  
The Influence of the Mundaka Upanishad on Western Poetry and  
Writing**

Walter B. Greene

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The numerous philosophies and religions of the East have long captured the interest of Western scholars and intellectuals, yet their reach is by no means limited to the realm of academia. This rich culture and history has been engaged with by many other groups in the West, from artists to philosophers. As home to one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations, India has long been the nexus of deep exploration into the nature of reality and the various processes of thought and is the origin of many of the religions, philosophies, and schools of thought that have inspired much of humanity. India's context is one that has produced some of the world's most influential texts such as the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, and the study of the *Mundaka Upanishad*, in particular, offers historians a valuable opportunity to look into, some of the most influential ideas behind Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Indian schools of thought that have had a significant influence on both poets and writers in the West.

The *Mundaka Upanishad* (*M.U*) comes from the body of philosophical and religious works known as the *Upanishads*—ancient texts also referred to as the *Vedanta*, (meaning “end of the *Veda*”) that were originally composed orally and then written in Sanskrit between about 700 B.C.E and 300 B.C.E during the later stage of the Vedic period in India—a period that gave rise to the Vedic religion, which later evolved into Hinduism. The social structure, ritual life, diversity of the arts, and economy of the early Vedic period grew significantly more complex in nature as technology advanced during the later Vedic period, making the content within the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and other texts written during the early and late Vedic periods noticeably different from one another.<sup>1</sup> The *Vedas* and *Upanishads* make up the fundamental texts of Hinduism and

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<sup>1</sup> R.S Sharma, *The Later Vedic Phase: Transition to State and Social Orders*, (Oxford University Press, 2007).

address key themes of the religion such as *Brahman* (the ultimate reality behind all things and the cause of all that exists), *Maya* (the illusion of reality created by the ego and sense of Self), *Atman* (which is synonymous with *Brahman*), *Samsara* (the perpetual cycle of life and death to which all beings are bound), and Karma (the positive and negative consequences driven by one's past actions). The creation of the *Upanishads* also served as a way to affirm the social, economic, and ritual changes brought about in the later Vedic period. One example of this is that starting with the later Vedic period, there began to be an increase in the complexity and extravagance of ritual sacrifices, a practice which quickly grew unpopular among those in society who were required to offer up their own possessions for the ceremonies—offerings being at times as valuable as cattle, horses, and large amounts of food or luxury items. In order to prevent opposition to this change in ritual, the *Upanishads* advocated for a path of good conduct and self-sacrifice in order to achieve true happiness and wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> This is just one of the many ways the *Upanishads* and other Vedic texts were used to enforce social norms. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that while “the Upanisads were composed in a ritual context . . . they mark the beginning of a reasoned enquiry into a number of perennial philosophical questions”.<sup>3</sup> This break-away from traditional reasoning is key to distinguishing the *M.U.*, as the primary approach that the text takes is to “move completely away from the ritual setting into naturalistic and philosophical inquiry about the processes of life and death, the workings of the body, and the nature of reality”.<sup>4</sup>

In order to understand the fundamental nature of the *M.U.* one needs to look no further than the text's title. Guru Swami Krishnananda explains that the word

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<sup>2</sup> NIOS, *The Vedic Age (1500BC-600BC)*, (New Delhi, National Institute of Open Schooling), 57.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Black, *The Upanishads*, (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

*Upanishad* “means the Knowledge that destroys ignorance or that which leads to perfection or the means of attuning oneself with the true Existence”.<sup>5</sup> Attaining the knowledge that puts an end to ignorance and allows one to attune themselves with the true existence is the absolute goal outlined in the *M.U.* While “*Upanishad*” refers to the goal that the text addresses, “*Mundaka*” describes the means of attaining this Knowledge (albeit in a highly abstract fashion).

When translated into English, the Sanskrit word “*Mundaka*” literally means “shaver”. While this appears curious at first, it’s quite fitting as “‘Cutting’ or ‘shaving’ is the text’s central metaphor. The ‘cutting’ takes place both on the spiritual and the physical level”.<sup>6</sup> What this cutting refers to is the cutting of “the knot of ignorance”—a phrase used multiple times throughout the text. The name “shaver” also relates to the ceremony of *sirovrata* that’s alluded to within the text. *Sirovrata* (or “the vow of the head” as it translates in English) is the religious act of shaving one’s head, a common theme among the most devout members of most of the world’s spiritual traditions. Additionally, the text’s use of the term “shaver” for both metaphorical and literal reasons not only helps determine the fundamental nature of the *M.U.*, but it also helps in determining the source of the text, as “This recommendation of the ascetic life, along with the text’s disparaging attitude towards Vedic rituals, suggests that the [*M.U.*] has its origin in an ascetic environment”.<sup>7</sup>

However, while the text’s title and the themes discussed within it can help in determining the environment that the *M.U.* was written in, there remain significant obstacles with regards to determining both the authorship and chronology of the text.

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<sup>5</sup> Swami Krishnananda, *The Mundaka Upanishad*, (Rishikesh, The Divine Life Society, 2001), 12.

<sup>6</sup> Signe Cohen, *The Relative Chronology of the Older Upanisads: A Metrical and Linguistic Approach*, (ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 1999), 76.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

The first obstacle in determining authorship is the scholarly consensus that the *M.U* was the work of more than one author, as “It has been suggested that the [*M.U*] in its present form is a heterogeneous text. . . . The text sometimes regards atman and brahman as different, and sometimes not, suggest[ing] that the inconsistencies may be explained if one . . . added portions to an original text”.<sup>8</sup> It’s important to acknowledge that regardless of whether or not the text was written by multiple authors, the *M.U* has gone through many additions and adjustments as its been translated over the centuries that may account for these discrepancies in terminology.

Yet another obstacle remaining with regards to determining authorship is that the *M.U* shares the same impersonal nature towards acknowledging authorship that is consistent throughout most Vedic texts. When composing the sacred works, “The hymns were said to be ‘seen,’ ‘learned’ and found rather than made or composed by their human authors”.<sup>9</sup> While this lack of connection to a mortal author helps affirm the eternal and sacred nature of the truths outlined in the texts, the anonymity behind the Vedic texts serves yet another purpose, as “This revealed and apaurusheya (impersonal, without a human authorship) character attributed to the . . . Vedas . . . did away with the need for, or possibility of, admitting doubt in the knowledge of reality”.<sup>10</sup> This impersonal writing style paired with the possibility of multiple authors makes any attempt at determining the exact authorship of the *M.U* highly unlikely.

However, by finding a chronology of the text we can examine the context in which the writing of the *M.U* took place, enabling us to determine the ideas and other factors that may have influenced the author(s) and their writing. Unfortunately, all that

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>9</sup> Kurian Kadankavil, *METAPHYSICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL PLURALISM IN MUNDAKOPANISHAD*, (ProQuest Dissertation and Theses, 1974), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 19.

is possible is to determine a rough chronology of the text, as “Until further archeological or historical evidence for the date of the composition of the older Upanisads is uncovered, a relative chronology is, unfortunately, the best we can come up with”.<sup>11</sup> In her paper, *The Relative Chronology of the Older Upanisads: A Metrical and Linguistic Approach*, Dr. Signe Cohen establishes a rough chronology for each of the primary *Upanishads* by analyzing the meter, euphonic combination of sounds, linguistic forms, and internal coherence of each text. Using her own rhythmic analysis and then comparing the previously mentioned factors throughout each of the *Upanishads*, she determines that the *M.U* is from roughly the same time period as the *Katha* and *Svetasvatara Upanishads*, or perhaps slightly older.<sup>12</sup> These two texts belong to the middle and late *Upanishads*, this rough chronology placing the *M.U*'s time of writing so that “It does not come too late as to be accused of projecting a later reflection to the past antiquity”.<sup>13</sup>

In his own metrical analysis of the *M.U*, Dr. Richard G. Salomon writes that the text contains grammatical forms that diverge significantly from classical Sanskrit, occurring more frequently than in any other *Upanishad*.<sup>14</sup> Salomon determines that the *M.U*'s language is closer to Buddhist Sanskrit than the Sanskrit of the older *Upanishads*. However, this “does not conclude that the [*M.U*] is younger than the other older Upanisads, but merely that its language is closer to the spoken Sanskrit of its time than to the formal language”.<sup>15</sup> Taking the work of both scholars into consideration, we arrive at a general consensus “which dates the second stage of Vedic Upanisads, which

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<sup>11</sup> Cohen, *The Relative Chronology*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, *The Relative Chronology*, 86.

<sup>13</sup> Kadankavil, *METAPHYSICAL*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Richard G. Salomon, *A Linguistic Analysis of the Mundaka Upanisad*, (University of Vienna, 1981), 92-94.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, *The Relative Chronology*, 86.

includes the . . . *Muṇḍaka* . . . between 300-100 B.C.E".<sup>16</sup> If these sources are correct, this reveals that the *M.U* was written during the time of the Mauryan Empire in India, the time in which Ashoka the Great ruled. As Ashoka was a great patron of Buddhism and is credited with expanding the religion throughout India, it is very likely that the *M.U*'s Buddhist themes are a direct result of it being constructed during this time.

Aside from this connection between this rough chronology and the rule of Ashoka the Great, Dr. Cohen's analysis of the language within the *M.U* reveals a deviation from classical Sanskrit and a great influence by Buddhist language, as the *M.U* discusses the concepts of *samsara*, *karma*, and the self—all fundamental aspects of Buddhist philosophy.<sup>17</sup> This shows that the author of the text was at least somewhat conditioned by philosophical thought very similar to that of Buddhism, if not Buddhism itself.

In addressing the context in which the *M.U* was written, it is also important to acknowledge that those composing the *Upanishads* shared a historical tradition much different from the Western view of history as a series of developments. The writers of the *Upanishads* belonged to a culture that viewed history as an eternal reality, with the legends and traditions being viewed with equal validity as established truth.<sup>18</sup>

## The Mundaka Upanishad's Teachings

As briefly addressed when explaining the *M.U*'s name, achieving the knowledge which destroys ignorance and allows one to recognize the universal Oneness (Brahman) is the primary concern of the text. The *M.U* revolves around this single question as

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<sup>16</sup> Black, *The Upanishads*.

<sup>17</sup> Cohen, *The Relative Chronology*, 84.

<sup>18</sup> Kadankavil, *METAPHYSICAL*, 3.

proposed in the third mantra of the first *khandā* in the first *Mundaka*<sup>19</sup>: “Sir, what is that through which, if it is known, everything else becomes known?”(1.1.3). Going off from this question, the *M.U* outlines “an intellectual process which gradually leads the self into *paravidya* or liberating knowledge”, including a detailed examination of the opposition and connection between what the text refers to as “higher” and “lower” knowledge.<sup>20</sup>

The argumentative structure of the text itself shares several similarities and differences with the other *Upanishads*. Moving from the early *Upanishads* to the Middle and Late *Upanishads* there is a transition from the use of reasoning and theorization as the primary means of thinking to the use of intuition and direct perception. This is the sentiment that is carried in the *M.U*, as it is clear from the text’s language that the “Mundaka . . . accepted the tradition which gave great importance to learning from a teacher and acquiring knowledge by intuition”.<sup>21</sup> The mantra (1,1,2) and (1,1,3) clearly illustrate this.<sup>22</sup> However, “while accepting the special role of intuition in knowing Brahman, [the] Mundaka did not deny the validity of other means of knowledge”.<sup>23</sup>

With regards to the structure of the text’s argument, The *M.U* is arranged in a way that represents the stages in the development of thought followed by one seeking higher Knowledge. Kurian Kadankavil outlines the structure as follows: “First the emphasis was on the object out there. Slowly the attention was turned to the self and its

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<sup>19</sup> The text is divided into three sections: the first, second, and third *Mundaka*, each with two *khandas* or subsections which contain roughly ten mantras each.

<sup>20</sup> Kadankavil, *METAPHYSICAL*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Kadankavil, *METAPHYSICAL*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> (1.1.2): “Whatever Brahma told Atharvan, that knowledge of Brahman Atharvan formerly told to Angir; he told it to Satyavaha Bharadvaga, and Bharadvaga told it in succession to Angiras”, (1.1.3): “Saunaka, the great householder, approached Angiras respectfully and asked: ‘Sir, what is that through which, if it is known, every else becomes known?’”. These mantras both reflect a theme of a strong connection between the transmission of knowledge through the teacher/disciple relationship.

<sup>23</sup> Kadankavil, *METAPHYSICAL*, 25.

interiority as a source of stability (and truth). Finally, a transcendental attitude developed in which neither the subjective nor the objective vision of the reality was valid".<sup>24</sup> This change in awareness throughout the *M.U* is supposed to mirror the change to the individual as they contemplate its mantras.

Aside from knowledge and the various types thereof, the *M.U* makes a strong argument for the rejection of objective reality. The argument made here is that as something eternal and selfless, the higher knowledge of *Brahman* cannot be attained through things that are impermanent and tied to the self. In other words, "Love for the world is not consistent with love for the Absolute. Therefore, true spiritual knowledge is found only in those who find no value in anything that is objective".<sup>25</sup> Swami Krishnananda makes this point even clearer in his commentary of the *M.U* through the use of the metaphor "As a mirror covered over by dust is not able to reflect an object, knowledge, though it is present within, is not experienced, as the mind is disturbed by objectivity".<sup>26</sup> This captures the *M.U*'s view of attachment and desire as synonymous with blindness, expressed in the mantra "Fools dwelling in darkness, wise in their own conceit, puffed up with vain knowledge, go round and round staggering to and fro, like blind men led by the blind"(1.2.8).

The *M.U*'s focus on knowledge is manifested most clearly in its description of the balance and conflict between what it refers to as "higher" and "lower" knowledge. The text primarily takes a very negative view on "lower" knowledge, which is interesting as "In this scheme all the four Vedas and the six Vedangas belong to the category of the lower knowledge", a collection of texts that the *M.U* itself belongs to.<sup>27</sup> At the very

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>25</sup> Krishnananda, *The Mundaka*, 9-10.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>27</sup> Kadankavil, *METAPHYSICAL*, 35.

beginning of the text, it is written that “The lower knowledge is the *Rig-veda*, *Yagur-veda*, *Sama-veda*, *Atharva-veda* . . . but the higher knowledge is that by which the Indestructible (Brahman) is apprehended”(1.1.5).<sup>28</sup> This mantra effectively establishes that “The lower one is an insufficient means to the realization of Brahman”.<sup>29</sup> The fallbacks of lower knowledge are also extensively discussed in the second *Khanda* of the first *Mundaka*. In describing lower knowledge, the *M.U* takes a stance on attachment and desire very similar to that of Buddhism, making the claim that “Desires of all kinds . . . are detrimental to the consciousness of oneness and, hence, the realization of Oneness, or Brahman, follows the practice of absolute desirelessness”.<sup>30</sup> This is identical in theory to the Buddhist concept of “non-attachment”, one of the Buddha’s most prominent teachings being that “the root of suffering is attachment”. The *M.U* claims that ignorance and delusion alone are what makes one believe perfection and happiness can be had through intellect, the mind, and the senses, as all these instruments of knowledge and action function in the relative plane alone.<sup>31</sup> These statements establish the necessity of higher knowledge.

Many of the *Upanishads* address the subject of knowledge and make a clear case for how higher knowledge is achieved. However, the *M.U*’s approach is unique, as the “Mundakopaniṣad adopted a synthetic method. It holds within its method the various approaches of the other *Upanishads*”.<sup>32</sup> To someone unfamiliar with the rest of the *Upanishads*, this unique approach can be confusing, as it fails to establish a clear path to take for achieving higher knowledge, opting instead for just a general set of guidelines. What the *M.U* does establish about attaining higher knowledge is that it requires a

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<sup>28</sup> The *M.U* itself is housed in the *Atharva-Veda*.

<sup>29</sup> Krishnananda, *The Mundaka*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Kadankavil, *METAPHYSICAL*, 34.

complete dismissal of lower knowledge, as “Higher Knowledge means the renunciation of all forms of experience and existing as an absolutely attributeless being which is not in relation to anything external”.<sup>33</sup> Higher knowledge is seen as full disillusionment and rejection of objectivity.

The title “higher knowledge” holds auspicious connotations on its own, but the true desirability of higher knowledge is explained in detail within the *M.U.* Higher knowledge’s benefit stems from its ability to end *samsara*—the cyclic process of life and death to which all sentient beings are bound.<sup>34</sup> Swami Krishnananda summarizes the *M.U.*’s argument for the value of higher knowledge by stating that “The Knowledge of the Supreme Being, which is Omniscient and free from the attributes of Samsara, in the form of the identity of oneself with it, removes the fetters caused by ignorance, desire, and action. Having uprooted these causes of Samsara, the individual merges into the Absolute”.<sup>35</sup> This is what higher knowledge ultimately brings about, a merging into Brahman (the one universal principle) as the sense of self dissolves. According to the *M.U.*, the freedom of the individual is achieved through the absorption of the consciousness of the self into the consciousness of the general essence underlying all individualities, *Brahman*. It is this breaking of the barrier of limited consciousness that constitutes the movement towards perfection.<sup>36</sup>

However, while the *M.U.* makes a strong case for higher knowledge, it also addresses the value of lower knowledge in the process of attaining it. The text makes it clear that “No one attains this [higher] knowledge without taking the pain to acquire

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<sup>33</sup> Krishnananda, *The Mundaka*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> A central concept of both Buddhism and Hinduism.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>36</sup> Krishnananda, *The Mundaka*, 27.

the lower or the non-transcendental knowledge".<sup>37</sup> Both higher and lower knowledge must be known, as each plays a significant role in the process of developing the mind.

### ***Mundaka Upanishad Influence***

After analyzing the *M.U* and the nuances of its argument for and against the various forms of knowledge it is clear that in order to have a full comprehension of the *M.U* and its teachings, one must possess a certain degree of familiarity with the other *Upanishads*. As a whole, the *Upanishads* contain some of the oldest discussions about key philosophical concepts such as the self, *Brahman* (ultimate reality), *karma*, *yoga*, *Samsara* (worldly existence), enlightenment, person, and nature—all of which are central to later philosophical and religious traditions within India and across the world.<sup>38</sup> Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism—as well as several other Indian schools of thought such as the *Yoga* and *Vedanta* traditions—all carry rich similarities in both their terminology and philosophy to that of the *M.U*.

The *Upanishads'* influence on the six schools of Indian thought known as the *Darshanas* (the *Sankhya*, *Yoga*, *Nyaya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Minamsa* and *Vedanta* schools) isn't directly noticeable or acknowledged, yet the terms and phrases used throughout the schools correspond directly to those used in the *Upanishads*. For example, the *Nyāya* and *Mīmāṃsā darśanas* both discuss the concept of the self and develop a very similar view as that of the *M.U*. They describe the self as an immaterial substance which resides in and acts through the body, the same view that's adopted in the *M.U*.<sup>39</sup> What this implies is that while they didn't directly acknowledge or reference the *Upanishads* in their work,

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<sup>37</sup> Kadankavil, *METAPHYSICAL*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Black, *The Upanisads*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*.

“The philosophers of classical Hindu philosophy knew the Upaniṣads quite well and would dip into the texts from time to time”.<sup>40</sup>

With regards to Buddhism, while the connection between the religion and the *M.U* has already been pointed out, further examples of the relationship between the two remain that are worth mentioning. In the *M.U* it is written that *Atman* dwells within the body when it is alive and is what causes it to be alive, but unlike the mortal body, *Atman* does not die when the body dies. *Atman* instead finds a dwelling place in another body. When examined alongside Buddhism, it is likely this concept of *Atman* was responsible for or was developed alongside the early Buddhist conceptions of selfhood. Buddhism explicitly rejects the notion of an indivisible and unchanging self, both using the term “not-self” to describe the lack of any fixed state of identity and explaining the process of karmic continuity from one lifetime to the next.<sup>41</sup> The belief that all actions and desires in one lifetime carry over and influence the next as described in the *M.U* is a very common theme in most Indian religions and philosophical schools, showing just how influential the ideas held within the *M.U* were in India.

As mentioned earlier, in order to fully grasp the teachings of the *M.U* one must be familiar with the other *Upanishads*, so it comes as no surprise that the *M.U* had a significant influence within India. Indian scholars, religious figures, and other members of society would certainly have had access to many (if not all) of the *Upanishads*, making their comprehension and assimilation of the text a fairly easy task. However, while access to the *Upanishads* was severely limited outside of India for centuries (especially translated copies) the *M.U*'s overall influence is not contained solely to the area of its origin. Sanskrit—the language that the *M.U* was written in—wasn't known as a

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Black, *The Upanishads*.

language to those in the West, and it wasn't until much later that the text was translated into another language, it eventually being "a Persian translation of the Upanishads that first exposed the west by making it available in a language many were proficient in".<sup>42</sup> This translation was done by the Persian Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh in 1657 and was known as the *Sirr-i Akbar* (the *Great Secret*), consisting of fifty texts, including the Vedic *Upanishads*.<sup>43</sup> This Persian translation of the *Upanishads* made its way to Europe through prince Dara Shikoh's personal physician, a Frenchman by the name of Francois Bernier. Reaching Europe, the *Sirr-i Akbar* was then translated into Latin by Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron in 1775 under the title *Oupnek'hat*. However, the writing was of very poor quality and "was mere gibberish to the un-initiated".<sup>44</sup> It wasn't until Max Muller's translation of the *Upanishads* that the texts' ideas were made truly accessible.<sup>45</sup> Max Muller was one of the greatest philologists and scholars of Asian studies of his time and was fully devoted to the study of Indian culture, believing "that to study a language or religion one needs to go to the oldest texts, which tend to retain their originality and culture in unadulterated form".<sup>46</sup> As an ancient document that went through very few translations before Muller's encounter with it, the *M.U* offered itself as the ideal text for his study.

Following Muller's translation of the *Upanishads*, the ideas within the texts spread further and further across the Western world, inspiring many men with concepts much different from their own established beliefs and traditions. Men are noted as the ones inspired by these ideas because, during the 18th, 19th and early 20th century, the only individuals who were coming into contact with translated copies of

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<sup>42</sup> Neria H. Hebbar, *Influence of Upanishads in the West*, (Boloji.com, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Black, *The Upanishads*.

<sup>44</sup> Hebbar, *Influence*.

<sup>45</sup> Hebbar, *Influence*.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

the *Upanishads* would be those who received higher education or had some other privileged means to access the texts. Additionally, during these times there were little to no available platforms for women to express their own opinion or take on things in general, not to mention a way for them to transmit their thoughts if they were somehow able to come across a copy of the *Upanishads*.

Where we largely see the influence of the *Upanishads* on Western thought is in the work of poets and writers, as “The concept of soul and the Supreme Being, as well as reincarnation and the doctrine of karma, caught the attention and the fascination of many western philosophers and poets”, an influence clearly reflected in the works of several American writers.<sup>47</sup> The study of written works lends itself especially well to tracing the *M.U.’s* influence because the ideas within and behind a written text are much more tangible than the actions and products of politicians, visual artists, musicians, etc.

The influence of the *Upanishads* in the West can be clearly seen in the works of American poets Ralph W. Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, transcendentalists who laid the groundwork for the acceptance of the *Upanishads* in America and reflected an influence by the texts in many of their poems.<sup>48</sup> With regards to the work of Emerson, the *M.U.’s* influence is reflected clearly in his poems *Celestial Love*, *Woodnotes*, and *Brahma*. For example, examine these lines from *Celestial Love*:

*Thou must mount for love,—*  
*Into vision which all form*  
*In one only form dissolves;*  
*In a region where the wheel,*  
*On which all beings ride,*

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

*Visibly revolves;*  
*Where the starred eternal worn*  
*Girds the world with bound and term;*  
*Where unlike things are like,*  
*When good and ill,*  
*And joy and moan,*  
*Melt into one.*  
  
*There Past, Present, Future, shoot*  
*Triple blossoms from one root*  
*Substances at base divided*  
*In their summits are united,*  
*There the holy Essence rolls,*  
*One through separated souls.*

The “one” in which “*only form dissolves*” alludes to *Brahman*, the universal principle that is behind all in existence. In the *M.U.*, the attainment of higher knowledge leads to the realization of “*oneness*” that brings the dissolution of the self and a full merging into *Brahman*. “*The wheel on which all beings ride*” refers to *Samsara*, the cycle of life and death to which all sentient beings without higher knowledge are bound, while the remaining lines address of the concept of all seemingly opposing elements (in this case “*unlike*” and “*like*”, “*good*” and “*ill*”, “*joy*” and “*moan*”, as well as past, present, and future) sharing a single source—either expressed by Emerson through the simple pairing of antonyms or the use of metaphor. This theory of “a single source of all” is identical to the concept of *Brahman* as discussed in the *M.U.* There are no personal admissions by Emerson with regards to the *Upanishad*’s influence on him, yet Henry David Thoreau openly acknowledged the influence of the *Upanishads* on his writing,

stating that “What extracts from the Vedas I have read fall on me like alight of a higher and purer luminary”.<sup>49</sup>

The *Upanishad*'s influence only grew as time progressed, and their influence can be seen in many modern writers and poets, one example being Jack London's science-fiction novel *The Star Rover*. The premise of London's novel is the false conviction and imprisonment of college professor Darrell Standing who learns from a fellow inmate that the only way to escape his torturous prison is to abandon his body, that “The trick . . . is to die. . . . When your body is all dead and you are all there yet, you just skin out and leave. . . . Stone walls and iron doors are to hold bodies in. They can't hold the spirit in”.<sup>50</sup> *The Star Rover* revolves around the concept of reincarnation and the soul and represents a clear understanding of *Atman*—of an essence of the self that does not die when the body dies and instead finds a dwelling place in another body. In his article *Influence of Upanishads in the West*, Dr. Neria H. Hebbar points out another clear example of the *Upanishad*'s influence on Jack London when the main character Darrel Standing states “I did not begin when I was born, or when I was conceived, I have been growing, developing through incalculable myriads of millenniums - all my previous selves have their voices, echoes, promptings in me - Oh, incalculable times again shall I be born, and yet the stupid dolts about me think that by stretching my neck with a rope they will make me cease”.<sup>51</sup> The line “all my previous selves have their voices, echoes, promptings in me” demonstrates an understanding of *Karma* and the *M.U.*'s claim that the consequences of actions and desires in one life carry over into the next, whether they be positive or negative. *The Star Rover*'s unique plot

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<sup>49</sup> Ashok K. Sinha, *Glimpses of the Scriptures of Major World Religions*, (Xlibris Corporation, 2014), 307.

<sup>50</sup> Jack London, *The Star Rover*, (Toronto, The Macmillan Company, 1915), 65.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

makes it particularly easy to notice the *Upanishad's* influence on London, as it notably stands out from other writing of the early 20th century.

Another excellent example of the *Upanishad's* influence in the modern age is Jack Kerouac's writing, which reflects a strong influence by Buddhist and Hindu philosophy, including the teachings of the *Upanishads*. His 1965 novel *Desolation Angels* includes many references to the ideas within the *M.U.*, with Nelson Algren writing that "*Desolation Angels* explains perhaps even better than the other Kerouac novels what the place of religion may have been in the Beat Mystique"<sup>52</sup>. In *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac writes that "We all wander thru flesh, while the dove cries for us, back to the Dove of Heaven"<sup>53</sup>. This relates to the journey of all souls back to *Brahman*, wandering through one life to another (from flesh to flesh) in suffering until the soul merges with the universal Self, *Brahman*. It also shows an acceptance of the idea of reincarnation. When discussing the deaths of his brother and father in another section of the novel, Kerouac writes that "I never revisited their graves knowing that what's there is not really Papa Emil or Gerard, only dung. For if the soul can't escape the body give the world to Mao Tse-tung"<sup>54</sup>. This demonstrates Kerouac's conviction towards the idea of reincarnation and *Atman*, as he even bets the world on its truth—a gesture obviously symbolic but nonetheless reflective of his belief in the ideas within the *M.U.*

The examples addressed above constitute only a small portion of the wide range of literary works produced in the West which reflect an influence by the *M.U.* Additionally, the literary arts are just one field out of many that have been reached by the ancient text. However, by tracing its influence specifically through as unconventional a unit of analysis as Western poetry and writing, one can truly get a

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<sup>52</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, (London, Penguin, 2012), 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

sense of how broad the *M.U.*'s influence has been. This text presents itself as an ideal means to look into some of the most fundamental ideas behind Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Indian schools of thought, and is an excellent opportunity to examine some of the concepts that have left a significant mark on many poets and writers throughout the West. While composed over 2,300 years ago, the *Mundaka Upanishad* is still of great relevance and value to those in the fields of history, cultural anthropology, comparative literature, and anyone else interested in tracing the influence of fundamental expressions of thought and rationale for the universe throughout history.