

About Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman, who was America's most influential and innovative poet, was born into a working class family in West Hills, New York, a village near Hempstead, Long Island, on May 31, 1819, just thirty years after George Washington was inaugurated as the first president of the newly formed United States. Walt Whitman was named after his father, a carpenter and farmer who was 34 years old when Whitman was born. Walter Whitman, Sr., had been born just after the end of the American Revolution; always a liberal thinker, he knew and admired Thomas Paine. Trained as a carpenter but struggling to find work, he had taken up farming by the time Walt was born, but when Walt was just about to turn four, Walter Sr. moved the family to the growing city of Brooklyn, across from New York City, or "Mannahatta" as Whitman would come to call it in his celebratory writings about the city that was just emerging as the nation's major urban center.

Walt Whitman is thus of the first generation of Americans who were born in the newly formed United States and grew up assuming the stable existence of the new country. Pride in the emergent nation was rampant, and Walter Sr.—after giving his first son Jesse (1818-1870) his own father's name, his second son his own name, his daughter Mary (1822-1899) the name of Walt's maternal great grandmothers, and his daughter Hannah (1823-1908) the name of his own mother—turned to the heroes of the Revolution and the War of 1812 for the names of his other three sons: Andrew Jackson Whitman (1827-1863), George Washington Whitman (1829-1901), and Thomas Jefferson Whitman (1833-1890). Only the youngest son, Edward (1835-1902), who was mentally and physically handicapped, carried a name that tied him to neither the family's nor the country's history.

In Walt's childhood, the Whitman family moved around Brooklyn a great deal as Walter Sr. tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to cash in on the city's quick growth by speculating in real estate—buying an empty lot, building a house, moving his family in, then trying to sell it at a profit to start the whole process over again. Walt loved living close to the East River, where as a child he rode the ferries back and forth to New York City, imbibing an experience that would remain significant for him his whole life: he loved ferries and the people who worked on them, and his 1856 poem eventually entitled "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" explored the full resonance of the experience. The act of crossing became, for Whitman, one of the most evocative events in his life—at once practical, enjoyable, and mystical. The daily commute suggested the passage from life to death to life again and suggested too the passage from poet to reader to poet via the vehicle of the poem. By crossing Brooklyn ferry, Whitman first discovered the magical commutations that he would eventually

accomplish in his poetry. In addition, visiting his grandparents on Long Island was one of Whitman's favorite boyhood activities, and during those visits he developed his lifelong love of the Long Island shore, sensing the mystery of that territory where water meets land, fluid melds with solid. One of Whitman's greatest poems, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," is on one level a reminiscence of his boyhood on the Long Island shore and of how his desire to be a poet arose in that landscape. The idyllic Long Island countryside formed a sharp contrast to the crowded energy of the quickly growing Brooklyn-New York City urban center. Whitman's experiences as a young man alternated between the city and the Long Island countryside, and he was attracted to both ways of life. This dual allegiance can be traced in his poetry, which is often marked by shifts between rural and urban settings.

By the age of eleven, Whitman was done with his formal education, and began his life as a laborer, working first as an office boy for some prominent Brooklyn lawyers, who gave him a subscription to a circulating library, where his self-education began. Always an autodidact, Whitman absorbed an eclectic but wide-ranging education through his visits to museums, his nonstop reading, and his penchant for engaging everyone he met in conversation and debate. While most other major writers of his time enjoyed highly structured, classical educations at private institutions, Whitman forged his own rough and informal curriculum of literature, theater, history, geography, music, and archeology out of the developing public resources of America's fastest growing city.

In 1831, Whitman became an apprentice on the Long Island *Patriot*, a liberal, working-class newspaper, where he learned the printing trade and was first exposed to the excitement of putting words into print, observing how thought and event could be quickly transformed into language and immediately communicated to thousands of readers. At the age of twelve, young Walt was already contributing to the newspaper and experiencing the exhilaration of getting his own words published. Whitman's first signed article, in the upscale New York *Mirror* in 1834, expressed his amazement at how there were still people alive who could remember "the present great metropolitan city as a little *dorp* or village; all fresh and green as it was, from its beginning," and he wrote of a slave, "Negro Harry," who had died in 1758 at age 120 and who could remember New York "when there were but three houses in it." Even late in his life, he could still recall the excitement of seeing this first article in print: "How it made my heart double-beat to see my piece on the pretty white paper, in nice type." For his entire life, he would maintain this fascination with the materiality of printed objects, with the way his voice and identity could be embodied in type and paper.

Living away from home—the rest of his family moved back to the West Hills area in 1833, leaving fourteen-year-old Walt alone in the city—and learning how to

set type under the Patriot's foreman printer William Hartshorne, Whitman was gaining skills and experiencing an independence that would mark his whole career: he would always retain a typesetter's concern for how his words looked on a page, what typeface they were dressed in, what effects various spatial arrangements had, and he would always retain his stubborn independence, never marrying and living alone for most of his life. These early years on his own in Brooklyn and New York remained a formative influence on his writing, for it was during this time that he developed the habit of close observation of the ever-shifting panorama of the city, and a great deal of his journalism, poetry, and prose came to focus on catalogs of urban life and the history of New York City, Brooklyn, and Long Island. As he turned 17, the five-year veteran of the printing trade was already on the verge of a career change.

His unlikely next career was that of a teacher. Although his own formal education was, by today's standards, minimal, he had developed as a newspaper apprentice the skills of reading and writing, more than enough for the kind of teaching he would find himself doing over the next few years. Teaching, for him, was an escape but was also clearly a job he was forced to take in bad economic times, and some of the unhappiest times of his life were these five years when he taught school in at least ten different Long Island towns, rooming in the homes of his students, teaching three-month terms to large and heterogeneous classes, getting very little pay, and having to put up with some very unenlightened people. After the excitement of Brooklyn and New York, these often isolated Long Island towns depressed Whitman, and he recorded his disdain for country people in a series of letters that he wrote to a friend named Abraham Leech: "Never before have I entertained so low an idea of the beauty and perfection of man's nature, never have I seen humanity in so degraded a shape, as here," he wrote from Woodbury in 1840: "Ignorance, vulgarity, rudeness, conceit, and dullness are the reigning gods of this deuced sink of despair." By 1841, Whitman's second career was at an end. He had interrupted his teaching in 1838 to try his luck at starting his own newspaper, *The Long Islander*, devoted to covering the towns around Huntington. And, besides, he had a new career opening up: he decided now to become a fiction writer. Best of all, to nurture that career, he would need to return to New York City and re-establish himself in the world of journalism.

By the mid-1840s, Whitman had a keen awareness of the cultural resources of New York City and probably had more inside knowledge of New York journalism than anyone else in Brooklyn. The *Long Island Star* recognized his value as a journalist and, once he resettled in Brooklyn, quickly arranged to have him compose a series of editorials, two or three a week, from September 1845 to March 1846. He dedicated himself to journalism in these years and published little of his own poetry and fiction. However, he introduced literary reviewing to the *Eagle*, and he

commented, if often superficially, on writers such as Carlyle and Emerson, who in the next decade would have a significant impact on *Leaves of Grass*. The editor's role gave Whitman a platform from which to comment on various issues from street lighting to politics, from banking to poetry. But Whitman claimed that what he most valued was not the ability to promote his opinions, but rather something more intimate, the "curious kind of sympathy . . . that arises in the mind of a newspaper conductor with the public he serves. He gets to *love* them."

For Whitman, to serve the public was to frame issues in accordance with working class interests—and for Whitman this usually meant *white* working class interests. He was adamant that slavery should not be allowed into the new western territories because he feared whites would not migrate to an area where their own labor was devalued unfairly by the institution of black slavery.

A pivotal and empowering change came over Whitman at this time of poetic transformation. His politics—and especially his racial attitudes—underwent a profound alteration. As we have noted, Whitman the journalist spoke to the interests of the day and from a particular class perspective when he advanced the interests of white workingmen while seeming, at times, unconcerned about the plight of blacks. Perhaps the New Orleans experience had prompted a change in attitude, a change that was intensified by an increasing number of friendships with radical thinkers and writers who led Whitman to rethink his attitudes toward the issue of race. Whatever the cause, in Whitman's future-oriented poetry blacks become central to his new literary project and central to his understanding of democracy. Notebook passages assert that the poet has the "divine grammar of all tongues, and says indifferently and alike How are you friend? to the President in the midst of his cabinet, and Good day my brother, to Sambo among the hoes of the sugar field."

It appears that Whitman's increasing frustration with the Democratic party's compromising approaches to the slavery crisis led him to continue his political efforts through the more subtle and indirect means of experimental poetry, a poetry that he hoped would be read by masses of average Americans and would transform their way of thinking. In any event, his first notebook lines in the manner of *Leaves of Grass* focus directly on the fundamental issue dividing the United States. His notebook breaks into free verse for the first time in lines that seek to bind opposed categories, to link black and white, to join master and slave:

I am the poet of the body

And I am the poet of the soul

And I am

I go with the slaves of the earth equally with he masters

And I will stand between the masters and the slaves,

Entering into both so that both will understand me alike.

The audacity of that final line remains striking. While most people were lining up on one side or another, Whitman placed himself in that space—sometimes violent, sometimes erotic, always volatile—*between* master and slave. His extreme political despair led him to replace what he now named the "scum" of corrupt American politics in the 1850s with his own persona—a shaman, a culture-healer, an all-encompassing "I."

That "I" became the main character of *Leaves of Grass*, the explosive book of twelve untitled poems that he wrote in the early years of the 1850s, and for which he set some of the type, designed the cover, and carefully oversaw all the details. When Whitman wrote "I, now thirty-six years old, in perfect health, begin," he announced a new identity for himself, and his novitiate came at an age quite advanced for a poet. Keats by that age had been dead for ten years; Byron had died at exactly that age; Wordsworth and Coleridge produced *Lyrical Ballads* while both were in their twenties; Bryant had written "Thanatopsis," his best-known poem, at age sixteen; and most other great Romantic poets Whitman admired had done their most memorable work early in their adult lives. Whitman, in contrast, by the time he had reached his mid-thirties, seemed destined, if he were to achieve fame in any field, to do so as a journalist or perhaps as a writer of fiction, but no one could have guessed that this middle-aged writer of sensationalistic fiction and sentimental verse would suddenly begin to produce work that would eventually lead many to view him as America's greatest and most revolutionary poet.

The mystery that has intrigued biographers and critics over the years has been about what prompted the transformation: did Whitman undergo some sort of spiritual illumination that opened the floodgates of a radical new kind of poetry, or was this poetry the result of an original and carefully calculated strategy to blend journalism, oratory, popular music, and other cultural forces into an innovative American voice like the one Ralph Waldo Emerson had called for in his essay "The Poet"? "Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians, our boasts, and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the Northern trade, the Southern planting, the Western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung," wrote Emerson; "Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres." Whitman began writing poetry that seemed, wildly yet systematically, to record every single thing that Emerson called for, and he began his preface to the 1855 *Leaves* by paraphrasing Emerson: "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." The romantic view of Whitman is that he was suddenly inspired to

impulsively write the poems that transformed American poetry; the more pragmatic view holds that Whitman devoted himself in the five years before the first publication of *Leaves* to a disciplined series of experiments that led to the gradual and intricate structuring of his singular style. Whitman seems, then, to have been both inspired poet and skilled craftsman, at once under the spell of his newly discovered and intoxicating free verse style while also remaining very much in control of it, adjusting and altering and rearranging. For the rest of his life, he would add, delete, fuse, separate, and rearrange poems as he issued six very distinct editions of *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman paid out of his own pocket for the production of the first edition of his book and had only 795 copies printed, which he bound at various times as his finances permitted. He always recalled the book as appearing, fittingly, on the Fourth of July, as a kind of literary Independence Day. His joy at getting the book published was quickly diminished by the death of his father within a week of the appearance of *Leaves*. Walter Sr. had been ill for several years, and though he and Walt had never been particularly close, they had only recently traveled together to West Hills, Long Island, to the old Whitman homestead where Walt was born. Now his father's death along with his older brother Jesse's absence as a merchant marine meant Walt would become the father-substitute for the family, the person his mother and siblings would turn to for help and guidance. But even given these growing family burdens, he managed to concentrate on his new book, and, just as he oversaw all the details of its composition and printing, so now did he supervise its distribution and try to control its reception. Even though Whitman claimed that the first edition sold out, the book in fact had very poor sales. Emerson wrote in his private letter to Whitman, noting that *Leaves of Grass* "meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy nature, as if too much handiwork, or too much lymph in the temperament, were making our western wits fat and mean." Whitman's was poetry that would literally get the country in shape, Emerson believed, give it shape, and help work off its excess of aristocratic fat.

Though it was no secret who the author of *Leaves of Grass* was, the fact that Whitman did not put his name on the title page was an unconventional and suggestive act (his name would in fact not appear on a title page of *Leaves* until the 1876 "Author's Edition" of the book, and then only when Whitman signed his name on the title page as each book was sold). The absence of a name indicated, perhaps, that the author of this book believed he spoke not for himself so much as for America. But opposite the title page was a portrait of Whitman, an engraving made from a daguerreotype that the photographer Gabriel Harrison had made during the summer of 1854. It has become the most famous frontispiece in literary history, showing Walt in workman's clothes, shirt open, hat on and cocked to the side, standing insouciantly

and fixing the reader with a challenging stare. It is a full-body pose that indicates Whitman's re-calibration of the role of poet as the democratic spokesperson who no longer speaks only from the intellect and with the formality of tradition and education: the new poet pictured in Whitman's book is a poet who speaks from and with the whole body and who writes *outside*, in Nature, not in the library. It was what Whitman called "al fresco" poetry, poetry written outside the walls, the bounds, of convention and tradition.

Within a few months of producing his first edition of *Leaves*, Whitman was already hard at work on the second edition. While in the first, he had given his long lines room to stretch across the page by printing the book on large paper, in the second edition he sacrificed the spacious pages and produced what he later called his "chunky fat book," his earliest attempt to create a pocket-size edition that would offer the reader what Whitman thought of as the "ideal pleasure"—"to put a book in your pocket and [go] off to the seashore or the forest." On the cover of this edition, published and distributed by Fowler and Wells, Whitman emblazoned one of the first "blurbs" in American publishing history: without asking Emerson's permission, he printed in gold on the spine of the book the opening words of Emerson's letter to him: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career," followed by Emerson's name.

With four times as many pages as the first edition, the 1856 *Leaves* added twenty new poems (including the powerful "Sun-Down Poem," later called "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry") to the original twelve in the 1855 edition. Those original twelve had been untitled in 1855, but Whitman was doing all he could to make the new edition look and feel different: small pages instead of large, a fat book instead of a thin one, and long titles for his poems instead of none at all. So the untitled introductory poem from the first edition that would eventually be named "Song of Myself" was in 1856 called "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American," and the poem that would become "This Compost" appeared here as "Poem of Wonder at the Resurrection of The Wheat." Some titles seemed to challenge the very bounds of titling by incorporating rolling catalogs like the poems themselves: "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire" appeared as "Liberty Poem for Asia, Africa, Europe, America, Australia, Cuba, and The Archipelagoes of the Sea." As if to counter some of the early criticism that he was not really writing poetry at all—the review in *Life Illustrated*, for example, called Whitman's work "lines of rhythmical prose, or a series of *utterances*"—Whitman put the word "Poem" in the title of all thirty-two works in the 1856 *Leaves*. But, despite his efforts to re-make his book, the results were depressingly the same: sales of the thousand copies that were printed were even poorer than for the first edition.

One of the haziest periods of Whitman's life, in fact, is the first year and a half of the American Civil War. He stayed in New York and Brooklyn, writing some

extended newspaper pieces about the history of Brooklyn for the Brooklyn *Daily Standard*; these pieces, called "Brooklyniana" and consisting of twenty-five lengthy installments, form a book-length anecdotal history of the city Whitman knew so well but was now about to leave—he would return only occasionally for brief visits. It was during this period that Whitman first encountered casualties of the war that was already lasting far longer than anyone had anticipated. He began visiting wounded soldiers who were moved to New York hospitals, and he wrote about them in a series called "City Photographs" that he published in the New York *Leader* in 1862.

Whitman had in fact been visiting Broadway Hospital for several years, comforting injured stage drivers and ferryboat workers (serious injuries in the chaotic transportation industry in New York at the time were common). While he was enamoured with the idea of having literary figures as friends, Whitman's true preference for companions had always been and would continue to be working class men, especially those who worked on the omnibuses and the ferries, where he enjoyed the endless rhythms of movement, the open road, the back-and-forth journeys, with good companions. He reveled in the energy and pleasure of travel instead of worrying about destinations: "I cross'd and recross'd, merely for pleasure," he wrote of his trips on the ferry.

So his hospital visits began with a kind of obligation of friendship to the injured transportation workers, and, as the Civil War began taking its toll, wounded soldiers joined the transportation workers on Whitman's frequent rounds. These soldiers came from all over the country, and their reminiscences of home taught Whitman about the breadth and diversity of the growing nation. He developed an idiosyncratic style of informal personal nursing, writing down stories the patients told him, giving them small gifts, writing letters for them, holding them, comforting them, and kissing them. His purpose, he wrote, was "just to help cheer and change a little the monotony of their sickness and confinement," though he found that their effect on him was every bit as rewarding as his on them, for the wounded and maimed young men aroused in him "friendly interest and sympathy," and he said some of "the most agreeable evenings of my life" were spent in hospitals. Whitman once said that, had he not become a writer, he would have become a doctor, and at Broadway Hospital he developed close friendships with many of the physicians, even occasionally assisting them in surgery. His fascination with the body, so evident in his poetry, was intricately bound to his attraction to medicine and to the hospitals, where he learned to face bodily disfigurements and gained the ability to see beyond wounds and illness to the human personalities that persisted through the pain and humiliation. It was a skill he would need in abundance over the next three years as he began yet another career.

This extraordinary hospital service, which took a tremendous toll on Whitman's own health as he spent countless long nights in the poorly ventilated wards, began spontaneously during his mission to George. He had fully anticipated that he would return to New York after determining that George was safe, but, after telegraphing his mother and the rest of the family that he had found George, he decided to stay with his brother for a few days. During this time he got to know the young soldiers, both Union and Confederate. He assisted in the burial of the dead still lying on the bloody battlefield, where on December 13 there had been 18,000 Northern and Southern troops killed or wounded.

During the days he spent with George's unit, Whitman often went into the makeshift hospital outside of which he had seen the pile of amputated limbs. "I do not see that I do much good to these wounded and dying," he wrote; "but I cannot leave them." As if to underscore his own attempts to hold the Union together, to reconcile rather than punish, to help love triumph over revenge, Whitman found himself particularly attracted to a nineteen-year-old Confederate soldier from Mississippi, who had had a leg amputated. Whitman visited him regularly in the battlefield hospital and then continued to visit him when the soldier was transferred to a Washington hospital. "Our affection is an affair quite romantic," he wrote. It wouldn't be the last intimacy he would experience with a Confederate soldier; at the end of the war, Whitman would enter the longest affectional relationship of his life with a former Confederate soldier named Peter Doyle. Something surprising—and perhaps unexpected even to Whitman—was happening to the *Calamus* emotions that he had described in 1860; the intimate expressions of manly friendship now became generalized, perhaps sublimated, in the poet's many close relationships with injured soldiers over the next three years.

During all the time of his hospital service, Whitman was writing poems, a new kind of poem for him, poems about the war experience, but almost never about battles—rather about the aftereffects of warfare: the moonlight illuminating the dead on the battlefields, the churches turned into hospitals, the experience of dressing wounds, the encounter with a dead enemy in a coffin, the trauma of battle nightmares for soldiers who had returned home. He gathered these poems along with the few he had written just before the war and worked on combining them in a book called *Drum-Taps*, the title evoking both the beating of the drums that accompanied soldiers into battle as well as the beating out of "Taps," the death march sounded at the burial of soldiers. The poems were so different from any that had appeared in *Leaves*, in fact, that Whitman originally assumed they could not be joined in the same book with those earlier poems. It would be a long, slow process that would eventually allow the absorption of *Drum-Taps* into *Leaves of Grass*.

In August and September of 1866, he took a leave from his job to go to New York and arrange for the printing of a new edition of *Leaves*. While there, he experienced the quickly changing and vastly expanding New York City—he wandered Central Park, took boat rides, and rekindled friendships with his stage-driver and ferry-boat-worker friends, and he oversaw the typesetting of *Leaves*, which finally appeared near the end of the year, even though the title page dated the book 1867.

The 1867 *Leaves of Grass* is the most carelessly printed and the most chaotic of all the editions. Whitman had problems with the typesetters, whose work was filled with errors. He bound the book in five distinct formats, some with only the new edition of *Leaves of Grass*, some with *Leaves* plus *Drum-Taps*, some with *Leaves*, *Drum-Taps*, and *Sequel*, some with all of these along with another new cluster called *Songs Before Parting*, and some with only *Leaves* and *Songs Before Parting*. He was obviously confused about what form his book should take. He always believed that the history of *Leaves* paralleled the history of himself, and that both histories embodied the history of America in the nineteenth century, so we can read the 1867 edition as Whitman's first tentative attempt to absorb the Civil War into his book. The Union has been preserved, but this stripped and undecorated volume—the only edition of *Leaves* to contain no portrait of the poet—manifests a kind of forced reconciliation, a recognition that everything now has to be reconfigured. *Leaves of Grass*, like the nation, was now entering a long period of reconstruction.

By 1870, *Leaves* took a radically new shape when the fifth edition appeared. This complex edition, which, like the 1867, appeared in several versions, reveals Whitman's attempt to fully absorb the Civil War and its aftermath into his book, as the *Drum-Taps* poems are given their own "cluster" but also are scattered into other parts of *Leaves*, as the war experience bleeds out into the rest of the poems in sometimes subtle small additions and changes. In the development from the 1867 *Leaves* to the better integrated 1871-1872 *Leaves*, Whitman was aided by the intervening efforts of the English writer William Michael Rossetti who edited *Poems by Walt Whitman* (1868), the first British edition of Whitman's work.

Whitman seemed to endure his final months through sheer force of will. He was in fact very sick, beset by an array of ailments. For some time, he had been making preparations for the end. He had a large mausoleum built in Camden's Harleigh Cemetery, on a plot given to him in 1885, shortly after the cemetery was opened. The large tomb was paid for in part by Whitman with money donated to him so that he could buy a house in the country and in part by Thomas Harned, one of his literary executors. On December 24, 1891, the poet composed his last will and testament. In an earlier will of 1873 he had bequeathed his silver watch to Peter Doyle, but now,

with Doyle largely absent from his life, he made changes, giving his gold watch to Traubel and a silver one to Harry Stafford. The poet died on March 26, 1892, his hand resting in that of Traubel. The cause of death was military tuberculosis, with other contributing factors.

In "Poets to Come" Whitman claimed: "I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face, / Leaving it to you to prove and define it, / Expecting the main things from you." That casual look has had an uncanny impact as countless writers have sought to complete Whitman's project and thereby to better know themselves. To an unusual degree, however, his legacy has not been limited to the genre in which he made his fame. Beyond poetry, Whitman has had an extensive and unpredictable impact on fiction, film, architecture, music, painting, dance, and other arts.

"My book and the war are one," Whitman once said. He might have said as well that his book and the U.S. are one. Whitman has been of crucial importance to minority writers who have talked back to him—extending, refining, rewriting, battling, endorsing, and sometimes rejecting the work of a writer who strove so insistently to define national identity and to imagine an inclusive society. Recent critics sometimes decry Whitman's shortcomings and occasional failure to live up to his own finest ideals. Over a century after his death, Whitman is a vital presence in American cultural memory. Television shows depict him. Musicians allude to him. Schools and bridges are named after him. Truck stops, apartment complexes, parks, think tanks, summer camps, corporate centers, and shopping malls bear his name. Look for him, just as he said you should, under your bootsoles.