

Walt Whitman

from <http://www.poemhunter.com/walt-whitman/biography/>
“Walt Whitman” by RWB Lewis in *Major Writers of America*
and http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/whitman/more/e_war.html

Walt Whitman was an American poet, essayist and journalist. A humanist, he was a part of the transition between transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his works. Whitman is among the most influential poets in the American canon, often called the father of free verse. His work was very controversial in its time, particularly his poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*, which was described as obscene for its overt sexuality.



The first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, was published in 1855 with Whitman’s own money. The work was an attempt at reaching out to the common person with an American epic. He continued expanding and revising *Leaves of Grass* until his death in 1892.

Whitman was concerned with politics throughout his life. He supported the Wilmot Proviso and opposed the extension of slavery generally. His poetry presented an egalitarian view of the races.

Early life

Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, on Long Island, to parents with interests in Quaker thought. The second of nine children, he was immediately nicknamed “Walt” to distinguish him from his father, an unsuccessful builder. Whitman looked back on his childhood as generally restless and unhappy, given his family’s difficult economic status. At age eleven Whitman concluded formal schooling. He then sought employment for further income for his family; he was an office boy for two lawyers and later was an apprentice for the weekly Long Island newspaper the *Patriot*. There, Whitman learned about the printing press and typesetting. He may have written “sentimental bits” of filler material for occasional issues.

Early career

During the 1830s, Whitman moved back and forth between Long Island and Brooklyn, holding various jobs as a teacher, editor, typesetter, and even owning a newspaper for about ten months. During his second try at teaching, Whitman published a series of ten editorials called “Sun-Down Papers—From the Desk of a Schoolmaster” in three newspapers between the winter of 1840 and July 1841. In these essays, he adopted a constructed persona, a technique he would employ throughout his career.

Whitman moved to New York City in May of 1841, working as a journalist and an editor for various newspapers and supporting the Free Soil Party.



Leaves of Grass

Whitman claimed that after years of competing for “the usual rewards,” he determined to become a poet. He first experimented with a variety of popular literary genres which appealed to the cultural tastes of the period. As early as 1850, he began writing what would become *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poetry which he would continue editing and revising until his death. Whitman intended to write a distinctly American epic and used free verse with a cadence based on the Bible.

Whitman paid for the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* himself and had it printed at a local print shop during their breaks from

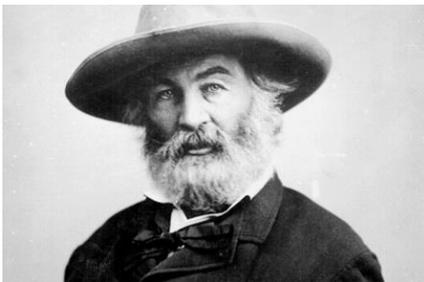
commercial jobs. The inaugural volume of poetry was preceded by a prose preface of 827 lines. The succeeding untitled twelve poems totaled 2315 lines—1336 lines belonging to the first untitled poem, later called “Song of Myself.” The book received its strongest praise from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote a flattering five page letter to Whitman and spoke highly of the book to friends. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was widely distributed and stirred up significant interest, in part due to Emerson’s approval, but it was occasionally criticized for the seemingly “obscene” nature of the poetry. Geologist John Peter Lesley wrote to Emerson, calling the book “trashy, profane & obscene” and the author “a pretentious ass.” On July 11, 1855, a few days after *Leaves of Grass* was published, Whitman’s father died at the age of 65.

Whitman’s sexuality is often discussed alongside his poetry. Though biographers continue to debate the issue, he is usually described as either homosexual or bisexual in his feelings and attractions. Few modern biographers deny that Whitman’s love interests were male; some relationships were short-lived but others—such as those with Fred Vaughan, Peter Doyle and Harry Stafford—endured for years.

In the months following the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, critical responses began focusing more on the potentially offensive sexual themes. Though the second edition was already printed and bound, the publisher almost did not release it. In the end, the edition went to retail, with 20 additional poems, in August 1856. *Leaves of Grass* was revised and re-released in 1860 again in 1867, and several more times throughout the remainder of Whitman’s life. Several well-known writers admired the work enough to visit Whitman, including Bronson Alcott and Henry David Thoreau.

During the first publications of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman had financial difficulties and was forced to work as a journalist again, specifically with Brooklyn’s *Daily Times* starting in May 1857. As an editor, he oversaw the paper’s contents, contributed book reviews, and wrote editorials. He left the job in 1859, though it is unclear if he was fired (most likely for his openly-expressed Free Soil views) or chose to leave. Whitman, who typically kept detailed notebooks and journals, left very little information about himself in the late 1850s.

Civil War years



As the American Civil War was beginning, Whitman published his poem “Beat! Beat! Drums!” as a patriotic rally call for the North. Whitman’s brother George had joined the Union army and began sending Whitman several vividly detailed letters of the battle front. On December 16, 1862, a listing of fallen and wounded soldiers in the New York Tribune included “First Lieutenant G. W. Whitmore,” which Whitman worried was a reference to his brother George. He made his way south immediately to find him, though his wallet was stolen on the

way. “Walking all day and night, unable to ride, trying to get information, trying to get access to big people,” Whitman later wrote, he eventually found George alive, with only a superficial wound on his cheek. Whitman, profoundly affected by seeing the wounded soldiers and the heaps of their amputated limbs, left for Washington on December 28, 1862 with the intention of never returning to New York.

While in Washington, D.C., Whitman discovered that he had something to contribute to the war effort—himself. In Washington, D.C., Whitman’s friend Charley Eldridge helped him obtain part-time work in the army paymaster’s office, leaving time for Whitman to volunteer as a nurse in the army hospitals. Hospitals were not new to him; after spending time at the bedsides of injured New York stagecoach drivers, Whitman had written about conditions in the local medical wards. In the nation’s capital, Whitman began making the rounds of the hospitals offering modest gifts of fruit, candy, books, pencils and paper to the hospitalized soldiers. More importantly, he lent an ear to the young men who needed a friend. These small charities cost money. Whitman solicited donations from friends and strangers, as well as contributing his own modest salaries from clerking jobs at the Army Paymaster’s Office, the Department of the Interior and Attorney General’s office. He at one point contacted Emerson, this time to ask for help in obtaining a government post. Another friend, John Trowbridge, passed on a letter of

recommendation from Emerson to Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury, hoping he would grant Whitman a position in that department. Chase, however, did not want to hire the author of such a disreputable book as *Leaves of Grass*.

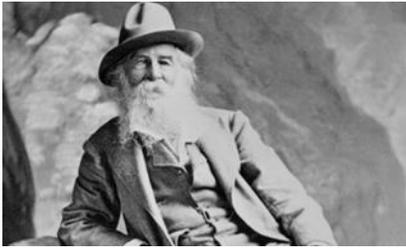
Whitman also sold articles about his experience. In a piece in the *New York Times* on February 26, 1863, he wrote about ministering to a despairing Pvt. John Holmes: "I sat down by him without any fuss; talked a little; soon saw that it did him good; led him to talk a little himself; got him somewhat interested; wrote a letter for him to his folks in Massachusetts." When Holmes told him he would like to buy some milk, Whitman gave him some change, and the young man burst into tears. Later the soldier would tell Whitman that his visit had saved his life. His notebook from this period bore the name of "Walt Whitman, Soldiers' Missionary." He would write of this experience in "The Great Army of the Sick," published in a New York newspaper in 1863 and, 12 years later, in a book called *Memoranda During the War*.

The Whitman family had a difficult end to 1864. On September 30, 1864, Whitman's brother George was captured by Confederates in Virginia, and another brother, Andrew Jackson, died of tuberculosis compounded by alcoholism on December 3. That month, Whitman committed his brother Jesse to the Kings County Lunatic Asylum. Whitman's spirits were raised, however, when he finally got a better-paying government post as a low-grade clerk in the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the Department of the Interior, thanks to his friend William Douglas O'Connor. O'Connor, a poet, daguerreotypist and an editor at the *Saturday Evening Post*, had written to William Tod Otto, Assistant Secretary of the Interior, on Whitman's behalf. Whitman began the new appointment on January 24, 1865, with a yearly salary of \$1,200. A month later, on February 24, 1865, George was released from capture and granted a furlough because of his poor health. By May 1, Whitman received a promotion to a slightly higher clerkship and published *Drum-Taps*, his collection of poetry focusing on the Civil War (eventually incorporated into *Leaves of Grass*).

Effective June 30, 1865, however, Whitman was fired from his job. His dismissal came from the new Secretary of the Interior, former Iowa Senator James Harlan. Though Harlan dismissed several clerks who "were seldom at their respective desks," he may have fired Whitman on moral grounds after finding an 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. O'Connor protested until J. Hubley Ashton had Whitman transferred to the Attorney General's office on July 1. O'Connor, though, was still upset and vindicated Whitman by publishing a biased and exaggerated biographical study, *The Good Gray Poet*, in January, 1866. The fifty-cent pamphlet defended Whitman as a wholesome patriot, established the poet's nickname and increased his popularity. Also aiding in his popularity was the publication of "O Captain! My Captain!," a relatively conventional poem on the death of Abraham Lincoln, the only poem to appear in anthologies during Whitman's lifetime. Unfortunately, O'Connor's portrayal of the poet also smothered "the genuine Whitman for almost a century," according to critic and biographer RWB Lewis.

Part of Whitman's role at the Attorney General's office was interviewing former Confederate soldiers for Presidential pardons. "There are real characters among them," he later wrote, "and you know I have a fancy for anything out of the ordinary." In August 1866, he took a month off in order to prepare a new edition of *Leaves of Grass* which would not be published until 1867 after difficulty in finding a publisher. He hoped it would be its last edition. In February 1868 *Poems of Walt Whitman* was published in England thanks to the influence of William Michael Rossetti, with minor changes that Whitman reluctantly approved. The edition became popular in England, especially with endorsements from the highly respected writer Anne Gilchrist. Another edition of *Leaves of Grass* was issued in 1871, the same year it was mistakenly reported that its author died in a railroad accident. As Whitman's international fame increased, he remained at the attorney general's office until January 1872. He spent much of 1872 caring for his mother who was now nearly eighty and struggling with arthritis. He also traveled and was invited to Dartmouth College to give the commencement address on June 26, 1872.

Health decline and death



After suffering a paralytic stroke in early 1873, Whitman moved to Camden, New Jersey, at first living with his brother George, an engineer, and then buying his own home at 328 Mickle Street (now 330 Mickle Street). He was last fully physically active at his brother's house, receiving, among other luminaries, both British playwright Oscar Wilde and American painter Thomas Eakins as guests. First taken care of by tenants, he was completely bed ridden for most of his time at Mickle Street. Whitman continued to produce further editions of *Leaves of Grass* in 1876, 1881, and 1889.

As the end of 1891 approached, he prepared a final edition of *Leaves of Grass*, an edition which has been nicknamed the "Deathbed Edition." He wrote, "L. of G. at last complete—after 33 y'rs of hackling at it, all times & moods of my life, fair weather & foul, all parts of the land, and peace & war, young & old." Critics, however, generally agree that the most authentic version *Leaves of Grass* exists in the 1860 edition. Reading Whitman's poems about the Civil War and Lincoln along with the 1860 edition reveals the truest picture of the poet and his work. Evidently starting to internalize the criticisms of late Victorian society towards the end of his life, Whitman shuffled the contents of sections and even dropped entirely some of the most personally revealing of his poems. If we look for the true Whitman in the 1891 edition— though it is generally the only edition available on bookstore shelves—we will find instead "a persona radically other than the being that lay at the heart of" Whitman's best work, in the words of Lewis.

Preparing for death, Whitman commissioned a granite mausoleum shaped like a house for \$4,000 and visited it often during construction. In the last week of his life, he was too weak to lift a knife or fork and wrote: "I suffer all the time: I have no relief, no escape: it is monotony — monotony — monotony — in pain." Whitman died on March 26, 1892. An autopsy revealed his lungs had diminished to one-eighth their normal breathing capacity, a result of bronchial pneumonia, and that an egg-sized abscess on his chest had eroded one of his ribs. The cause of death was officially listed as "pleurisy of the left side, consumption of the right lung, general miliary tuberculosis and parenchymatous nephritis [kidney disease]." A public viewing of his body was held at his Camden home; over one thousand people visited in three hours and Whitman's oak coffin was barely visible because of all the flowers and wreaths left for him. Four days after his death, he was buried in his tomb at Harleigh Cemetery in Camden. Another public ceremony was held at the cemetery, with friends giving speeches, live music, and refreshments. Whitman's friend, the orator Robert Ingersoll, delivered the eulogy. Later, the remains of Whitman's parents and two of his brothers and their families were moved to the mausoleum.