

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 4: Walt Whitman (May 31, 1819 - March 26, 1892)

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"I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil." -
WW

"Reminiscences of Walt Whitman," by John Townsend Trowbridge, [The Atlantic Monthly](#), February 1902



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Old Walt

Old Walt Whitman
Went finding and seeking,
Finding less than sought
Seeking more than found,
Every detail minding
Of the seeking or the finding.

Pleased equally
In seeking as in finding,
Each detail minding,
Old Walt went seeking
And finding.

from *A Supermarket in California*

Where are we going Walt Whitman? The doors close
in an
hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?
(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the
supermarket and feel absurd.)

Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The
trees
add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll
both be
lonely.

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love
past

automobiles in driveways, home to our silent
cottage?

Ah, dear father graybeard, lonely old courage-
teacher, what

America did you have when Charon quit poling his
ferry and

Allen Ginsberg, 1956

Emerson's Letter to Whitman

21 July Concord Mass. 1855

Dear Sir,

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of "Leaves of Grass." I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile & stingy nature, as if too much handiwork or too much lymph in the temperament were making our western wits fat and mean. I give you joy of your free brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment, which so delights us, & which large perception only can inspire. I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely of fortifying & encouraging. I did not know until I, last night, saw the book advertised in a newspaper, that I could trust the name as real and available for a post-office. I wish to see my benefactor, & have felt much like striking my tasks, & visiting New York to pay you my respects.

R. W. Emerson

Mr. Walter Whitman.

(from the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Shorter Fourth Edition, 546-547)

[Top](#) Primary Works

Leaves of Grass - publication chronology

1855 July published by Fowler & Wells, NY [E-Text](#)

1856 Second Edition published by Fowler & Wells, NY [E-Text](#)

1860 Third Edition published by Thayer and Eldridge, Boston [E-Text](#)

1867 Fourth Edition published by William Chapin, NY [E-Text](#)

1868 Second Issue of the Fourth Edition (contains *Drum-Taps and Sequel* including "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd")

1871 Fifth Edition published by J. S. Redfield, NY [E-Text](#)

1876 Sixth Edition published by WW in Camden

1881 Seventh Edition, published by James R. Osgood & Co., Boston [E-Text](#)

1882 Eighth Edition, published by David McKay, Philadelphia (includes *Specimen Days*)

1892 Ninth Edition published by David McKay, Philadelphia [E-Text](#)

Contributions of Whitman

Richard Chase (in *Walt Whitman Reconsidered*, 1955) discusses the following contributions of the author and his book:

1. First poetic writing which combines lyric verse and prose fiction - modern poetry thrives on this combination.
2. Whitman made the city and urban living conditions suitable settings for poetry.
3. In his remarkable use of sex and sexual imagery, Whitman broke new ground in American writing.
4. The central metaphor, the unity of self with all other selves, is unique in American literature.

[Top](#) *Leaves Of Grass* (1855)

From its first publication in 1855, Whitman continued to add and expand the *Leaves of Grass*. He published nine books with this same title - the last one appeared in 1892, the year of his death. His poems capture the sweeping expanse of America. Among the numerous themes, Whitman discussed the unity of I and you; good and evil; sex; death, the divine average, and democracy.

Whitman on *Leaves Of Grass*:

1. "Remember, the book arose out of my life in Brooklyn and NY from 1838 to 1853, absorbing a million people for 15 years, with an intimacy, an eagerness, an abandon, probably never equalled."
2. "I saw, from the time my enterprise and questionings positively shaped themselves (how best can I express my own distinctive era and surroundings, America, Democracy?), that the trunk and center whence the answer was to radiate, and which all should return from straying, however far a distance, must be identical body and soul, a personality, after many considerations and pondering, I deliberately settled should be myself - indeed could not be any other."
3. "An attempt of a naive, masculine, affectionate, contemplative, sensual, imperious person to cast into literature not only his grit and arrogance, but his own flesh and form, undraped, regardless of models, regardless of modesty or law; and ignorant as at first it appears, of all outside of the fiercely loved land of his birth. ... The effects he produces in his poems are no effects of artists or the arts, but the effects of the original eye, or the actual atmosphere, or tree, or bird."
4. "*Leaves of Grass* ... has mainly been . . . at attempt . . . to put 'a Person' a human being (myself in the latter half of the nineteenth century, in America) freely, fully, and truly on record. I could not find any similar personal record in current literature that satisfied me."

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[Top](#) "The Song of Myself":

Its Structure:

- I. Paragraphs 1-18 the self; mystical interpretation of the self with all life and experience.
- II. Paragraphs 19-25 definition of the self; identification with the degraded and transfiguration of it; final merit of self withheld; silence; end of first half.
- III. Paragraphs 26-38 life flowing in upon the self; evolutionary interpretation of life.
- IV. Paragraphs 39-41 the superman.
- V. Paragraphs 42-52 larger questions of life - religions, faith, God, death; immortality and happiness mystically affirmed

Its Meaning:

"Song of Myself" is hardly at all concerned with American nationalism, political democracy, contemporary progress, or other social themes that are commonly associated with Whitman's work. Its subject is a state of illumination induced by two (or three) separate moments of ecstasy. In more or less narrative sequence it describes those moments, their sequels in life, and the doctrines to which they give rise. ... they are presented dramatically, that is, as the new conviction of a hero, and they are revealed by successive unfolding of his states of mind. The hero - "I" - should not be confused with the Whitman of daily life ... he is put forward as a representative workingman, but one who prefers to loaf and invite his soul. Thus he is rough, sunburned, bearded; he cocks his hat as he pleases, indoors or out ... his really distinguishing feature is that he has been granted a vision, as a result of which he has realized the potentialities latent in every American and indeed, he says, in every living person. ... a feeling seems to prevail that it has no structure properly speaking; that it is inspired but uneven, repetitive, and especially weak in its transitions from one theme to another. ... The true structure of the poem is not primarily logical but psychological, and is not a geometric figure but a musical progression. ... There is also a firm narrative structure, one that becomes easier to grasp when we start by dividing the poem into a number of parts or sequences.

First Sequence (chants 1-4): the poet or hero introduced to his audience - presents himself as a man who lives outdoors and worships his own naked body, not the least part of which is vile. He is also in love with his deeper self or soul. His joyful contentment can be shared by you, the listener.

Second Sequence (chant 5): the ecstasy. This consists in the rapt union of the poet and his soul, and it is described figuratively, on the present occasion, in terms of sexual union.

Third Sequence (chant 6-19): the grass symbolizing the miracle of common things and the divinity (which implies both the equality and the immortality) of ordinary persons. The keynote of the sequence is the two words "I observe."

Fourth Sequence (chants 20-25): the poet in person. "Hankering, gross, mystical, nude", he venerates himself as august and immortal, but so, he says, is everyone else. The sequence ends with a dialogue between the poet and his power of speech, during which the poet insists that his deeper self - "the best I am" - is beyond expression.

Fifth Sequence (chants 26-29): ecstasy through the senses. The poet decides to be completely passive: "I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen."

Sixth Sequence (chants 30-38): the power of identification. After his first ecstasy, the poet had acquired a sort of microscopic vision that enabled him to find infinite wonders in the smallest and the most familiar things. The second ecstasy (or a pair of them) has an entirely different effect, conferring as it does a sort of vision that is both telescopic and spiritual. ... "afoot with my vision" he ranges over the continent and goes speeding through the heavens among tailed meteors. His secret is the power of identification. Since everything emanates from the universal soul, and since his own soul is of the same essence, he can identify himself with every object and with every person living or dead, heroic or criminal.

Seventh Sequence (chants 39-41): the superman. When Hindu sages emerge from the state of samadhi or

absorption, they often have the feeling of being omnipotent. It is so with the poet, who now feels gifted with superhuman powers. He is the universally beloved Answerer (chant 39), the Healer, raising men from their deathbeds (40), and then the Prophet (41) of a new religion that outbids "the old cautious hucksters" by announcing that men are divine and will eventually be gods.

Eighth Sequence (chants 42-50): the sermon. He proclaims that society is full of injustice, but the reality beneath it is deathless persons (42); that he accepts and practices all religions, but looks beyond to "what is untried and afterward (43); that he and his listeners are the fruit of ages, and the seed of untold ages to be (44); that our final goal is appointed: "God will be there and wait till we come" (45); that he tramps a perpetual journey and longs for companions, to whom he will reveal a new world by washing the gum from their eyes - but each must then continue the journey alone (46); that he is the teacher of men who work in the open air (47); that he is not curious about God, but sees God everywhere, at every moment (48); that we shall all be reborn in different forms ("No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before"); and that the evil in the world is like moonlight, a mere reflection of the sun (49). The end of the sermon (50) is the hardest passage to interpret in the whole poem. He seems to remember vague shapes, and he beseeches these Outlines to let him reveal the "word unsaid".

Ninth Sequence (51-52): the poet's farewell. Having finished his sermon, the poet gets ready to depart, that is to die and wait for another incarnation or "fold of the future" while still inviting others to follow. At the beginning he had been leaning and loafing at ease in the summer grass. Now, having rounded the circle, he bequeaths himself to the dirt "to grow from the grass I love." I do not see how any careful reader, unless blinded with preconceptions, could overlook the unity of the poem in tone and image and direction.

(from Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction to *Leaves of Grass*," 1959 in *Walt Whitman* edited by Francis Murphy, 1969, Penguin Critical Anthologies.)

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[Top](#) Walt Whitman (1819-1892): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Jodie Quiñonez

The farm known as West Hills had been in the Whitman family for over a century before Walter Whitman Sr. decided at the age of fifteen to leave the farm and apprentice himself to carpentry in New York. He returned to the country a "first-rate craftsman" (Bazalgette 19-21) and married Louisa Van Velsor a simple and illiterate woman on June 8, 1816. Soon after, Walter Whitman Jr., the second of four children was born on May 31, 1819 at West Hills, Huntington Township, Long Island (Bazalgette 23). The family soon began to distinguish him from his father by simply calling him Walt. At the age of four Walt made the first, of what was to become many, moves to Brooklyn. As a boy Walt often explored the streets of his neighborhood and would take ferry rides. On July 4, 1825, when Walt was only five years old, General Lafayette visited Brooklyn. Lafayette had consented to stop on his way through the city and lay the corner stone for the town's public library. Lafayette picked up Walt, among the numerous children, and held him momentarily before giving him a kiss and setting him back down (Bazalgette 31). This was to become "one of the poet's most cherished memories" (Allen xi).

At the age of five Walt began attending public school. Considered the son of a commoner Walt was only allowed to attend school in Brooklyn for six years. Walt, however, would also go to Sunday school at St. Ann's. The education that Walt received at St. Ann's would remain his "only foundation of methodic and formal instruction" throughout his life (Bazalgette 31).

In 1830 Walt became an office boy in a law firm before moving on to work for a doctor. Soon after, Walt began working in printing offices. It is here that Walt began to learn the trade and became a printer's apprentice at the *Long Island Patriot*. During the summer of 1832 Walt worked at Worthington's printing establishment. He then went on in the fall to work as compositor on the *Long Island Star*. In 1833 the Whitman family moved back to the country while Walt stayed behind and contributed pieces to the *Mirror*, one of Manhattan's best papers (Parker 916). By the time Walt was sixteen he had become a journeyman printer and a compositor in Manhattan (Parker 916).

Due to a disruption in the printing industry in 1835, Walt rejoined his family. (Parker 916) Whitman then went on to teach in various schools on Long Island throughout 1836-1838. During this time Whitman also participated in debating societies, worked briefly on a Long Island paper, and started a paper of his own (Parker 916).

Whitman began the series "Sun-Down Papers from the Desk of a School Master" for the *Long Island Democrat* in 1840. He also began campaigning for Van Buren in the fall of the same year. Whitman began speaking at Democratic rallies, and publishing stories in the *Democratic Review* (Parker 917). In 1842 Whitman began editing for *The Aurora* and *The Tattler*. Walt then returned to Brooklyn in 1845 and began contributing to the *Long Island Star*.

In 1846 Whitman took over as editor for the *Brooklyn Eagle*. Whitman was responsible for a majority of the literary reviews featuring authors such as Carlyle, Melville, Emerson, Goethe, and several others. Whitman was fired, however, from the *Eagle* in 1848 for opposing the acquisition of more slave territory (Parker 917). So on February 11, 1848 Walt and his favorite brother Jeff left for New Orleans to become editors on the *Crescent*. Whitman went back to New York in the summer of 1848 and began experimenting with poetry (Parker 917). He also served at this time as delegate to the Buffalo Free-Soil convention.

In 1851 Whitman began building houses in Brooklyn. Now back with his family once again Whitman would spend his days reading at libraries, taking strolls, and writing in the room he shared with his brother (much to their annoyance). He became a student of Egyptology and astronomy. Whitman also began to annotate and argue in the margins of articles featured in the British monthlies. He began to develop and formulate his ideas on pantheism. By the end of 1854

Whitman had given up carpentry and newspaper work for writing (Parker 917).

In July of 1855 Whitman's first edition of *Leaves of Grass* went on sale. Soon after its release Whitman's father died and he became responsible for his mother and youngest brother Edward. Upon having received a copy of Whitman's book, Emerson responded with a letter proclaiming Walt to be at "the beginning of a great career (Parker 918). After weeks of few reviews Whitman "wrote a few himself to be published anonymously" (Parker 918). Whitman also sent presentation copies featuring Emerson's letter to writers such as Longfellow (Parker 918). Soon after, Whitman would be visited in Brooklyn by Emerson, Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, and others.

After lecturing locally for a time, Whitman would go on to write *Live Oak, with Moss*. The twelve poem collection proclaiming his love for another man, which would later be revised and renamed *Calamus*, was hidden among a cluster of counterbalancing poems along with *Enfans d' Adam (Children of Adam)* in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* (Parker 919).

On December 14, 1862, Whitman read that his brother George was among the list of wounded soldiers on the war front in Virginia. He left immediately to be with his brother and upon his return to Washington he began to visit soldiers in the Brooklyn hospitals (Parker 920). This led to a series of war poems collected in *Drum-Taps* in 1865.

Whitman clerked for several years in the attorney general's office while continuing to rework *Leaves of Grass*. In London 1868, a volume of Whitman's poetry was published by William Michael Rosetti creating many English admirers (Parker 921).

After a severe stroke and the death of his mother in 1873, Whitman moved to Camden, New Jersey to live with his brother George. He would later die in Camden, after publishing more editions of *Leaves of Grass*, on May 26, 1892.

"Of all the American writers of the nineteenth century, Whitman offers the most inspiring example of fidelity to his art" (Parker 922). Though many viewed Whitman's work as obscene he refused to compromise himself or his work. He died as he lived, a man of great compassion, perseverance, and dedicated to his work.

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Study Questions

1. Notice that Whitman's "Song of Myself" begins with "I" and ends with "you." To what extent can the poem be understood as a transaction from an "I" (eye?) to a "you"? Consider too the first activity of the "I" in this regard: he loafs and observes a spear (why a single spear?) of summer grass. In what sense is this observation typical of the movement leading from "I" to "you"?
2. Whitman has often been accused of being egotistical. Discuss his use of "I" and its relation to the country at large. Why does he appear egotistic? What is his purpose?
3. What is Whitman's view of his physical self? Why does he stress it so much?
4. Discuss Whitman's poetry as a culmination point in the development of American identity. How does Whitman contribute to the ongoing evolution of self-reliance? of human freedom? of concepts of democracy?

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