

M. Jimmie Killingsworth



The Cambridge **Introduction** to

Walt Whitman

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Walt Whitman*

Walt Whitman is one of the most innovative and influential American poets of the nineteenth century. Focusing on his masterpiece *Leaves of Grass*, this book provides a foundation for the study of Whitman as an experimental poet, a radical democrat, and a historical personality in the era of the American Civil War, the growth of the great cities, and the westward expansion of the United States. Always a controversial and important figure, Whitman continues to attract the admiration of poets, artists, critics, political activists, and readers around the world. Those studying his work for the first time will find this an invaluable book. Alongside close readings of the major texts, chapters on Whitman's biography, the history and culture of his time, and the critical reception of his work provide a comprehensive understanding of Whitman and of how he has become such a central figure in the American literary canon.

M. Jimmie Killingsworth is Professor of English at Texas A&M University. He has published widely on Whitman and on nineteenth-century American literature.

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The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521854566

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First published in print format 2007

ISBN-13 978-0-511-27141-0 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-10 0-511-27141-7 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-85456-6 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-85456-3 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-67094-4 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-67094-2 paperback

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Preface

Walt Whitman (1819–92) is generally regarded as one of the two most innovative and influential US poets of the nineteenth century (the other is Emily Dickinson). A powerful voice for democracy, a bold innovator in verse form, the controversial “poet of the body,” and the consummate individualist who dared to proclaim “I celebrate myself,” Whitman continues to attract the admiration of poets, artists, critics, mystics, political activists, and adventurous readers around the world.

This book serves as an introductory guide for students and first-time readers of Whitman. It covers the style and ideas of the poetry (Chapters 3 and 4) as well as the major prose writings (Chapter 5). It also contextualizes Whitman’s writing and thought with short chapters on biography (Chapter 1), history and culture (Chapter 2), and the critical reception of the work from its first publication to the present (Chapter 6). The book is designed to be read from start to finish for readers needing a fast overview, but the various parts stand more or less on their own. The one exception to this general rule is that readers primarily interested in the study of individual poems should first read the treatment of “Song of Myself” in Chapter 3 to gain an understanding of Whitman’s most important themes and experiments in poetic form. Readings of other poems tend to refer back to this foundational treatment.

To promote readability, citations of secondary critical and biographical works are kept to a minimum and critical controversies are sometimes simplified. A select annotated bibliography, limited mainly to books still in print, is provided for the reader who wishes to take the next step in Whitman studies. In the interest of simplifying references to the many editions and versions of Whitman’s writings, citations in the discussions of Whitman’s works in all chapters refer as much as possible to a single source, selected for its range, dependability, and accessibility. This is the Library of America edition of Whitman’s *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (1982). Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical references cite this edition by page number. Although I will be treating the poems in their order of original publication, beginning with those dating from 1855, I will be using the best-known titles and texts of the poems,

the ones that appeared in the 1891–2 Deathbed Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, largely because these are the titles and texts most available to current readers. Readers interested in the changes Whitman made in each edition – which are considerable and which have stimulated some excellent work in bibliography and textual criticism – should consult the online *Walt Whitman Archive* edited by Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, an essential resource in Whitman studies.

I wish to thank Ray Ryan and the staff at Cambridge University Press for inviting me to contribute to this series of literary introductions and for all their help in producing the book. I am also grateful to those who have read the manuscript and offered valuable suggestions, notably Pete Messent (for the Press), Nicole DuPlessis, Steve Marsden, and my distinguished colleague at Texas A&M University, Jerome Loving. Thanks also go to my wife and frequent co-author Jacqueline Palmer and my daughter Myrth Killingsworth for their editorial help and to Myrth's friends at Rice University, Birte Wehmeier and Matilda Young, who served as trial readers early in the project.

Chapter 1

Life

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The central event of Walt Whitman's life, literally and figuratively, was the publication of *Leaves of Grass*. The first edition appeared in 1855, when the poet was thirty-six years old. For the rest of his life, roughly thirty-six more years, he would revise and expand the book through six more editions, his work culminating in the Deathbed Edition of 1891–92. Whitman identified himself completely with *Leaves of Grass*. In the poem “So Long” at the end of the third (1860) edition, he says, “this is no book / Who touches this touches a man.”¹

Whitman also identified strongly with US history and the American people. What Whitman called his “language experiment” paralleled the experiment of democracy in the new world, as he saw it.² His book appeared first in the troubled years leading up to the Civil War. When war erupted in 1861, his life and his work were deeply altered.

This chapter focuses on the close connection between Whitman's life and his writings. In briefly acknowledging the currents of history that touched Whitman most directly – the momentous effects of modernization in everything from the mass media and democratic politics to gender roles and war – it anticipates Chapter 2, which covers the main historical contexts. The chapter is divided into four parts: youth and literary apprenticeship (1819–50), the emergence of the poet (1851–60), the Civil War and its aftermath (1861–73), and the period of reflection and decline (1873–92). Each part is keyed to different stages in Whitman's literary work and marked by shifts of emphasis in his poetic theories and practices occasioned by personal and historical change.

Youth and literary apprenticeship (1819–1850)

The poet was born Walter Whitman, Jr., on 31 May 1819 in West Hills, Long Island, New York, the second son of Walter and Louisa Van Velsor Whitman. He was four years old when his father, a carpenter, moved the family from the house he had built himself in the village of West Hills to the thriving town of Brooklyn, where he had built a new house. During Whitman's early life, the elder Whitman often shuffled the family from house to house, selling one and occupying another as new houses were built. They moved frequently, alternating between town and country on Long Island.

Patriotism ran high in the Whitman family. Whitman's father was an avid reader who passed on to his son the most radical heritage of Revolutionary-era freethinking and democratic politics. As a sign of his patriotism, he named the sons born after young Walter, in succession, Andrew Jackson, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson Whitman. His mother spiritualized the heritage, introducing Whitman to the practices and doctrines of American Quakerism. In 1829, the family went to hear the famous Quaker preacher Elias Hicks, whose charisma and vocal power Whitman never forgot.

The reading and exposure to intellectual life at home were all the more important because Whitman had little chance for formal education as a boy from a working-class family. He attended school only until about 1830, at which time he went to work and continued an informal education in the circulating library, the printing offices, the public lecture halls, and the debating societies of Long Island.

As a teenager in 1835, unable to count on support from his parents who were struggling to take care of an expanding family (six sons and a daughter, all but one younger than the future poet), he signed on as an apprentice printer in Manhattan. A fire destroyed the heart of New York's printing industry before he could find regular work, but he later used his skills as a printer to work his way into the field of journalism.

Back on Long Island in 1836, Whitman tried his hand at schoolteaching, living with his family or boarding at homes of students. The work left him frustrated and disillusioned. Exposure to big-city life had given him ambitions and attitudes that made him resent the job and feel superior to his rural neighbors. Of one teaching post, he wrote in an 1840 letter, "O, damnation, damnation! thy other name is school-teaching and thy residence Woodbury."³ But Whitman's interest in public education stayed with him well after he gave up teaching. He editorialized on the topic during his newspaper years in the 1840s and kept the pedagogical spirit alive in his greatest poems. "Have you

practic'd so long to learn to read?" he asks in "Song of Myself": "Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems" (189).

Journalism provided some relief from the boredom of teaching and country life. In 1838, he started his own paper, *The Long Islander*, doing all the printing and writing himself. Other papers occasionally reprinted his articles, as well as his first published poem, "Our Future Lot." His paper lasted less than a year, but it led to employment at other papers and to more publications, including the prose series "The Sun-Down Papers," perhaps the first indication of real literary talent in the young Whitman. He wrote and published short stories based on home life and teaching as well as more poems on conventional themes – sentimental treatments of love and death, for example – and on people and events in the news. He would return to writing poems about the news again during the Civil War, and would continue the practice to the end of his life.

The 1840s proved an important decade in Whitman's literary apprenticeship. Beginning in 1841 with a job at the *New World*, he was finally able to support himself primarily as a journalist. In 1842, he became editor of the *Aurora*, a prominent New York daily. He wrote regularly on local politics, literature, education, and entertainment while continuing to contribute to other periodicals. Living in Manhattan boarding houses and immersing himself in the life of the city, he heard lectures or readings by famous authors, including Dickens and Emerson, and developed an interest in theatre and music, particularly opera, which strongly influenced his mature poetry. Increasingly, he caught the attention of important people on the literary scene. He wrote short stories that appeared in such venues as the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, which also published works by Bryant, Whittier, Longfellow, and Hawthorne, some of the most successful authors of the day.

Scholars have traditionally viewed the early fiction as sensationalistic and conventional, though in recent years critics have reassessed the stories, working through the undistinguished style and haze of sentimentality to discover social and psychological themes that would grow to greater significance in *Leaves of Grass*. His favorite topics included sympathy for the common people, the difficulties of childhood and adolescence, family dysfunction, the relations of classes in the emerging democracy, the joys and evils of city life, and above all, the sensual intensity of men thrown together in unfamiliar urban settings. The themes converge in *Franklin Evans, or the Inebriate*, a temperance novel Whitman published in 1842 on the evils of drinking. Though it sold surprisingly well, Whitman later treated his accomplishment dismissively and debunked the temperance movement. He told Horace Traubel that he wrote the novel only for the money, in a fever of productivity fueled by alcohol.⁴

Politics also played a big part in Whitman's life in the 1840s. A speech he gave at a Democratic rally not long after he first arrived in Manhattan was praised in the *Evening Post*, edited by William Cullen Bryant. As a young journalist, his support of the Democrats probably paved the way for some jobs and lost him others in the highly partisan world of the newspapers. The Party was divided between liberals, to whom the independent Whitman was usually drawn, especially in his opposition to slavery, and the conservative wing, which was centered in the south. In 1846, as editor of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, the most important paper in his fast-growing hometown, Whitman intensified his political commitments, writing editorials supporting the Mexican War and objecting to the expansion of slavery into the west.

He had the chance to witness the buying and selling of slaves first-hand in February 1848, when he traveled to New Orleans with his younger brother Thomas Jefferson (Jeff) to take a new job at a New Orleans paper, the *Crescent*. He lasted only three months, driven home by Jeff's homesickness and his own disagreements with the newspaper management. But the opportunity to travel across the country and down the Mississippi and to see a city very different from New York gave Whitman the perspective he needed both to appreciate his home region and to imagine himself reaching out to become the bard of a broad and varied land. The cosmopolitan setting and Old World feel of New Orleans may have contributed to Whitman's newfound interest in transatlantic affairs. The European Revolutions of 1848 caught his attention and encouraged his hope for a worldwide democracy that would look to America as a model. Whitman reflects on the 1848 revolutions in a poem first published in the New York *Tribune* in 1850. Later known by the title "Europe, the 72d and 73d Years of These States," it would become one of two previously published political poems to be included with the poetry written expressly for the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. The other was "A Boston Ballad," which recounts the arrest and trial of a fugitive slave in 1854.

On his return to Brooklyn, Whitman joined the new Free-Soil Party, devoted to keeping the land west of the Mississippi free of slavery. In the Fall of 1848, he was elected as a delegate to the convention in Buffalo to nominate a candidate for President and became editor of a Party paper, the *Brooklyn Weekly Freeman*. With the defeat of the Free-Soil candidate, Martin Van Buren, by the Whig candidate Zachary Taylor, enthusiasm waned, and some party members made their peace with the Democrats. When Whitman resigned from the *Freeman* in September 1849, the paper folded. In 1850, he wrote two poems expressing his bitterness over the politics of compromise. "Blood Money," published in the New York *Tribune Supplement*, compared Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster to Judas Iscariot because of his support for the Fugitive Slave Law,

which imposed fines on federal marshals who failed to arrest runaway slaves and on people who aided the fugitives in free states. “The House of Friends,” also published in the *Tribune*, voiced the poet’s disappointment and frustration over the Compromise of 1850, which expanded the legality of slavery westward.

The emergence of the poet (1851–1860)

In the early 1850s, Whitman withdrew somewhat from the public life that had bitterly disappointed him. He worked off and on as a carpenter with his father. For a while, he ran a bookstore out of his home. And he filled notebook after notebook with a new kind of poetry. With the death of his father coinciding almost exactly with the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, he used the occasion to redefine himself as a man, a poet, and a subject of poetry – “Walt Whitman, an American, a kosmos, one of the roughs,” as he named himself in the 1855 version of “Song of Myself,” leaving aside the “Walter” by which he had been known in all his previous writings and coming before the public as a more urgent and intimate voice (50).

It was on Independence Day, 4 July 1855 (at least according to the poet’s own, probably mythic, dating) that Whitman issued the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The book was a thin green oversized volume with twelve untitled poems – including some that would one day be counted among his most famous, such as “Song of Myself,” “The Sleepers,” and “I Sing the Body Electric,” as they would later be titled – and a ten-page preface on poetic and political principles that was itself something of a prose poem. Whitman not only wrote the book but set some of the type and served as his own publisher.

His career in journalism set him up for the publication, as even the name of the book reveals. “Grass” was a slang term among printers for throw-away print samples that they wrote themselves. “Leaves” referred to pages, of course, but also to bundles of paper.⁵ In addition, the title alluded to the Bible, which Whitman had read attentively from his earliest youth. The prophet Isaiah says, “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, because the breath of the Lord bloweth upon it; surely the people are grass” (Isaiah 40.6). For the poet-prophet Whitman, the beauty of the body – the very fleshiness of human life in its most common experience – was the root experience of democracy and humanity en masse. In proclaiming himself the poet of the body as well as the poet of the soul, Whitman set out to celebrate the material body and the common people, the “grass” that previous poets had neglected.