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Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was born on May 31, 1819, to a large, working-class family in Long Island. However, when Whitman was just four years old the family relocated to the growing city of Brooklyn. By the age of eleven he had finished his formal education and started work as a labourer. His first paid position was the role of office boy for a group of prominent Brooklyn lawyers, who gave him a subscription to a circulating library. Whitman subsequently became an avid reader, and would frequently visit the cities museums, self-educating himself across a variety of disciplines through the developing public resources of America's fastest growing city. Throughout his adult life he worked in a variety of different roles: teacher, printer, and writer, contributing to newspapers and magazines across the United States. During the American Civil War (1861-1865) he volunteered as a nurse, working amongst the wounded in field hospitals. This experience influenced his wartime poems *Drum Taps* (1865), and his later autobiographical prose work *Specimen Days* (1882).

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Walt Whitman archive.org/multimedia/images/large/030.jpg

Walt Whitman, from Ohio Wesleyan University, Bayley Collection via The Walt Whitman Archive

Leaves of Grass

Whitman's most famous work is the collection of poems entitled *Leaves of Grass* [2]. These poems were constantly expanding and evolving; after the first publication in 1855, the book went through six further editions as Whitman continued to revise and edit the collection right up until his death in 1892.

The title *Leaves of Grass* reflects the content of the poems it contains; Whitman uses the word 'leaves' as a pun to symbolise both the natural world and the pages of the printed text itself. This pun represents the poetic voice contained within the pages of the book, which appears preoccupied by visible, physical things such as the human body.

Physicality is evident in the detailed anatomical imagery Whitman uses in the poems 'I Sing the Body Electric' and 'Song of Myself'. Whitman's poetic intrigue with anatomy and the consistent use of sex references in his poetry, upset and unsettled the moral standards of Victorian America, departing from what was then termed 'the standard of the evening lamp'.

Whitman's allusions to anatomy and sex were not the only aspects of his poetry to upset the critics. His departure from conventional poetry via the use of free verse and the words found in the everyday American

vernacular, were also considered radical and problematic to many readers.

In 1873 Whitman suffered a stroke, and moved to Camden, New Jersey. In 1882, Oscar Wilde [3] visited Whitman in Camden where the pair shared a glass of elderberry wine. Wilde later declared of Whitman that there was "no one in this great wide world of America whom I love and honour so much".

Whitman died on the March 26 1892. His poetry was hugely influential, revolutionising the poetic form in the use of free verse and the celebration of things previously treated as mundane. His work was discussed by many of his contemporaries in the late-nineteenth century and beyond; D.H.Lawrence praised Whitman's work and his depiction of the soul as a physical entity located within the body, and Robert Louis Stevenson [4] also read and reviewed Whitman's poetry.

In a letter to his friend Robert Bridges, dated 28 October 1882, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote that though he acknowledged the similarity between Whitman's poetic style and his own, the controversial nature of Whitman's personality was too great a contrast to comfortably bear:

"I always knew in my heart Walt Whitman's mind to be more like my own than any other man's living. As he is a very great scoundrel this is not a pleasant confession".

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