

Guide to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*

I. BIOGRAPHY

Born on May 31, 1819, Walt Whitman was the second son of Walter Whitman, a housebuilder, and Louisa Van Velsor. The family, which consisted of nine children, lived in Brooklyn and Long Island in the 1820s and 1830s. At the age of twelve Whitman began to learn the printer's trade, and fell in love with the written word. Largely self-taught, he read voraciously, becoming acquainted with the works of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and the Bible. Whitman worked as a printer in New York City until a devastating fire in the printing district demolished the industry. In 1836, at the age of 17, he began his career as teacher in the one-room schoolhouses of Long Island. He continued to teach until 1841, when he turned to journalism as a full-time career. He founded a weekly newspaper, *Long-Islander*, and later edited a number of Brooklyn and New York papers. In 1848, Whitman left the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* to become editor of the New Orleans *Crescent*. It was in New Orleans that he experienced firsthand the viciousness of slavery in the slave markets of that city.

On his return to Brooklyn in the fall of 1848, he founded a "free soil" newspaper, the *Brooklyn Freeman*, and continued to develop the unique style of poetry that later so astonished Ralph Waldo Emerson. In 1855, Whitman took out a copyright on the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which consisted of twelve untitled poems and a preface. He published the volume himself, and sent a copy to Emerson in

July of 1855. Whitman released a second edition of the book in 1856, containing thirty-three poems, a letter from Emerson praising the first edition, and a long open letter by Whitman in response. During his subsequent career, Whitman continued to refine the volume, publishing several more editions of the book.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Whitman vowed to live a "purged" and "cleansed" life. He wrote freelance journalism and visited the wounded at New York-area hospitals. He then traveled to Washington, D.C., in December 1862 to care for his brother who had been wounded in the war. Overcome by the suffering of the many wounded in Washington, Whitman decided to stay and work in the hospitals. Whitman stayed in the city for eleven years. He took a job as a clerk for the Department of the Interior, which ended when the Secretary of the Interior, James Harlan, discovered that Whitman was the author of *Leaves of Grass*, which Harlan found offensive. Harlan fired the poet.

Whitman struggled to support himself through most of his life. In Washington he lived on a clerk's salary and modest royalties, and spent any excess money, including gifts from friends, to buy supplies for the patients he nursed. He had also been sending money to his widowed mother and an invalid brother. From time to time writers both in the States and in England sent him "purses" of money so that he could get by.

In the early 1870s, Whitman settled in Camden, NJ, where he had come to visit his dying mother at

his brother's house. However, after suffering a stroke, Whitman found it impossible to return to Washington. He stayed with his brother until the 1882 publication of *Leaves of Grass* gave Whitman enough money to buy a home in Camden. In the simple two-story clapboard house, Whitman spent his declining years working on additions and revisions to a new edition of the book and preparing his final volume of poems and prose, *Good-Bye, My Fancy* (1891). After his death on March 26, 1892, Whitman was buried in a tomb he designed and had built on a lot in Harleigh Cemetery.

II. INTRODUCTION TO LEAVES OF GRASS

On July 4, 2005, we will celebrate the 150th anniversary of what is possibly the greatest book of American poetry ever written. In a celebratory article in the *New York Sun*, poet J. D. McClatchy calls Walt Whitman's vision "mystical" and "too uncanny to have resulted from mere literary musings." McClatchy writes, "No one has been able to adequately describe how Walter Whitman came to write his book. Certainly nothing in his past could have predicted it." By some fortunate conversion of mysticism, talent, and singular vision of humanity in 1855, Walt Whitman published his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, a slim volume consisting of twelve untitled poems and a preface. He designed the cover, and typeset and paid for the printing of the book himself. Well-known poems in the 1855 edition include "I Sing the Body Electric," "The Sleepers," and "Song of Myself," a long poem in fifty-two sections, which is considered by many to be his masterpiece. It contains such notable lines as "I am large, I contain multitudes" and "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles."

Upon publication, he sent a copy to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who praised it so highly that Whitman reprinted the letter, in subsequent editions—without

obtaining Emerson's permission. The letter from Emerson included the now famous line: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career."

A year later, in 1856, Whitman released a second edition of the book with a total of thirty-three poems. Over the course of his life, Whitman continued to rework and enlarge the volume, publishing several more editions of the book. The version left in 1892, at the time of his death, contained 383 poems, in fourteen sprawling sections: "Inscriptions," "Children of Adam," "Calamus," "Birds of Passage," "Sea-Drift," "By the Roadside," "Drum Taps," "Memories of President Lincoln," "Autumn Rivulets," "Whispers of Heavenly Death," "From Noon to Starry Night," "Songs of Parting," "First Annex: Sands at Seventy," and "Second Annex: Good-bye My Fancy." Each section is self-contained, as if it were a book in itself. Famous poems from the "Deathbed" edition include two poems written to memorialize President Lincoln: "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd" and "O Captain! My Captain!" as well as "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand," and "America," which is the poem that Whitman chose to record lines from in his own voice. A 36-second clip of this poem, recorded on a wax cylinder, is available online at the Whitman archive (www.whitmanarchive.org/audio/).

Whitman's great subject was America, but he wrote on an expansive variety of smaller subjects to accomplish the task of capturing the essence of this country. Some of his many subjects included slavery, democracy, the processes of reading and writing, the various occupations and types of work, the American landscape, the sea, the natural world, the Civil War, education, aging, death and immortality, poverty, romantic love, spirituality, and social change. "I Hear America Singing" is one of Whitman's most beloved poems, and is an excellent example of how he uses these disparate subjects to create an inclusive portrait of America:

I Hear America Singing

I hear America singing, the varied carols I
hear,
Those of mechanics—each one singing his, as
it should be, blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his, as he measures his
plank or beam,
The mason singing his, as he makes ready for
work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in
his boat, the deckhand singing on the
steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench,
the hatter singing as he stands;
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's, on
his way in the morning, or at the
noon intermission, or at sundown;
The delicious singing of the mother—or of
the young wife at work—or of the girl
sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to her, and to none
else;
The day what belongs to the day—at night,
the party of young fellows, robust,
friendly,
Singing, with open mouths, their strong
melodious songs.

Whitman's greatest legacy is his invention of a truly American free verse. His groundbreaking, open, inclusive, and optimistic poems are written in long, sprawling lines and span an astonishing variety of subject matter and points of view—embodying the democratic spirit of his new America. He uses a number of literary devices to accomplish his work. Although written in free verse, meaning that it is not strictly metered or rhymed, sections of *Leaves of Grass* approach *iambic meter*, which is the same meter as in a traditional sonnet (as in, “Come live with me and be my love”). Since iambs closely mimic the patterns of natural speech and are pleasing to the ear, Whit-

man used them for sections of his poems, without exclusively writing metered verse. Whitman's *catalogs*, or lists, are used in many of his poems to indicate the breadth of types of people, situation, or objects in a particular poem. Whitman's mastery of the catalog has caused critics to praise his endless generative powers, his seeming ability to cycle through hundreds of images while avoiding repetition and producing astounding variety and newness. *Anaphora* is a literary device used by Whitman which employs the repetition of a first word in each phrase; for example, each line will begin with “and.” Whitman uses anaphora to mimic biblical syntax and give his work a weighty, epic feeling, but also to create the hypnotic rhythms that take the place of more formal verse. Whitman's poetics also rely on careful control of the indicative and imperative moods (described in a recommended essay by Galway Kinnell; see below).

The critical and popular response to *Leaves of Grass* was mixed and bewildered. *Leaves of Grass* was most harshly criticized because Whitman's free verse didn't fit into the existing British model of poetry, which was a tradition of rhyme, meter and structure. One critic noted, in an 1855 review in *Life Illustrated*, “It is like no other book that ever was written, and therefore, the language usually employed in notices of new publications is unavailable in describing it.” Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Since I have seen him, I find that I am not disturbed by any brag or egoism in his book. He may turn out the least of a braggart of all, having a better right to be confident.” Matthew Arnold wrote, “. . . while you think it is his highest merit that he is so unlike everyone else, to me this seems to be his demerit.” In the early 20th century, Ezra Pound expressed his admiration in mixed terms: “[Whitman] is America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it is America. He is the hollow place in the rock that echoes with the time. He does ‘chant the crucial stage’ and he is the ‘voice triumphant.’ He is disgusting. He is an exceedingly nauseating pill, but he accomplishes his mission.” Since then, reactions to Whitman have been at both extremes: his book

has been banned for sensuality one decade, and then praised as the cornerstone of American poetics the next. With the upcoming 150th anniversary, America's poets and critics have found unmediated love for our most American poet, the man who came to shape our ideas of nationhood, democracy, and freedom.

III. A CLOSE READING OF "CROSSING BROOKLYN FERRY"

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is a poem about a man taking the Brooklyn ferry home from Manhattan at the end of a working day. It is one of Whitman's best-known and best-loved poems because it so astutely and insightfully argues for Whitman's idea that all humans are united in their common experience of life. A long poem in nine sections, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" prepares us for the final poem of *Leaves of Grass*, when Whitman writes, "Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,/ Missing me one place search another,/ I stop somewhere waiting for you." Whitman achieves, in these two poems, an intimacy of address and commonality of experience that bridge the gap between writer and reader.

Whitman's narrator begins the poem "seeing" the flood tide and the setting sun more clearly than his fellow passengers on the ferry; he regards the crowds as so removed from him that he cannot understand them:

Crowds of men and women attired in the
usual costumes, how curious you are
to me.

On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds
that cross, returning home, are more
curious to me than you suppose,

And you that shall cross from shore to shore years
hence are more to me, and more in my
meditations, that you might suppose.

As the speaker shifts from addressing the crowd to the second person, something strange happens: the crowds become not only the literal crowds of commuters on the ferry, but also, more expansively, everyone who has ever rode the ferry, and then, finally everyone who has returned home, including the reader of the poem. Throughout the poem, he alternately despairs of his distance from his fellow men, and then feels himself coming to know them, as in the fifth section where he writes, "Closer yet I approach you."

As if to mimic the "ebb-tide" and the "flood tide" that Whitman continually refers to in the poem, the poem itself moves closer, as in the intimate address of the first section, and then farther away, as in the second section, where Whitman begins to list a series of abstract, meditative observances, each beginning with "the" and using passive, verb-less syntax. With phrases like "The similitudes of the past and those of the future," and "the others that are to follow me, the ties between them and me," he creates a rocking motion within each line, as well as a kind of distance between the speaker and the reader. In addition, the expansive anaphoric lines mimic the movement of the boat and the ebb and flow of the tides, which is at once comforting, mesmerizing, and even, in its repetition, numbing.

The third section is a detailed description of the sights and sounds of the ferry ride that the speaker claims will be shared by every future rider of the ferry. The repetition of syntax is shown here to its full advantage and scope, where he begins each line with the word "just," invoking both the Bible and Shakespeare, and serving the greater purpose of uniting the disparate elements of the scene around him.

Just as you feel when you look on the river
and sky, so I felt,

Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I
was one of a crowd,

Just as you are refreshed by the gladness of
the river and the bright flow, I was
refreshed,

Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet
hurry with the swift current, I stood
yet was hurried,

Just as you look on the numberless masts of
ships and the thick-stemmed pipes of
steamboats, I looked.

He gives equal weight to both natural and manmade images in this section, noticing the “numberless masts of ships” as well as “the swift current.” Whitman writes of “The simple, compact, well-join’d scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme.” The repetitive phrasing in this poem is an enactment of the poem’s subject matter (e.g., crossing back and forth). Each individual on the ferry, but also in the past, present and future of Whitman’s world, as well as each disparate image, is at once completely separated and joined to a greater purpose, what he comes to call later “the soul.” The ferry journey at the close of day brings to mind Charon carrying his passengers across the River Styx; though this is not a poem only about mortality, this layer of image and myth lends weight and gravity to the very real and very commonplace experience of the daily journey home.

It is in the third section that the first of two central images of the poem are established, the seagulls:

Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw
them high in the air floating with
motionless wings, oscillating their
bodies,

Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of
their bodies and left the rest in strong
shadow, . . .

This is one of several “split” images in the poem representing both the speaker and the crowds from whom he feels distanced. Like the seagulls, the speaker himself is split, somehow between the past and the future (living in his own time, but apparently able to imagine the future), and is neither in Manhattan or Brooklyn,

but between the two, both distanced from the world around him and inside it. Throughout the poem, he will refer to shadows as the “dark patches” that have fallen upon him, comforting us that “It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall.” For Whitman the light is purity and the dark is weakness. While much of the poem is a celebration of beauty, he berates himself for having “Blabb’d, blush’d, resented, lied, stole, grudg’d/ Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dare not speak.” The rhythm of these lines is quicker than the pace of the rest of the poems, with continual, unremitting stresses, lending the lines a sense of authentic and painful passion and regret. It is not that the seagull he sees is either “bright” or “dark” but equally both, two opposites existing in one body, a contradiction.

The second central image of the poem is that of the speaker leaning over the edge of the boat with the sun behind his head and, seeing spokes of light surrounding his face, imagining that another passenger, endless numbers of other passengers, will someday look into the water and see the same thing. “Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water/ Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams/ Look’d at the fine centrifugul spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water.” By the end of the poem, he treats this image rather differently: “Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or anyone’s head, in the sunlit water.” Throughout this poem, the speaker becomes somewhat casual about physical identity, and ownership of a particular body. If he claims that we will see what he sees, then we must, in some sense, be the same person—so that ultimately it doesn’t matter whose head he sees there in the water. The circle in the water is his head, the reader’s head, and the sun itself at the same time, and so the experience of looking into the water is both great and small. Because he is describing such a particular angle, no onlooker would be able to see what he saw, but at the same time, the sun itself might see it, or anyone looking into the water might see it with his own face. The light at his back divides him in two,

like the seagulls; his back is dark while his face is lit. There is something about this vision that is disorienting as well. He claims to be “dazzled” by the “shimmering track of beams” as if it is the light that has made him momentarily lose reason and imagine himself to be a kind of ambassador to the future, telling us that he is thinking of us, that he has, as he says in Part 7, “consider’d long and seriously of you before you were born.”

The ninth and final section of the poem revisits each imagistic line, almost word for word, as if in an incantation, but transforms the simple fragments to imperatives:

Be firm, rail over the river, to support those
who lean idly, yet haste with the
hasting current;
Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in
large circles high in the air;
Receive the summer sky, you water, and
faithfully hold it till all downcast eyes
have time to take it from you!

It is strange and beautiful here that Whitman, known for his endless generative powers, would return to each image, almost in comfort, hypnotically, to remind us of the connection between past and present, writer and reader, and to enact the scene that he is setting, where the same visions might be seen twice, one passively (reading about it) and one actively (seeing it for oneself). This section, and the poem, culminates in a final stanza where Whitman uses the pronoun “we” for the first time, as if reader and writer have finally been joined together, but also literally referring to how the passengers are seeing, at last, those on the shore who are waiting for them:

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb,
beautiful ministers,
We receive you with free sense at last, and are
insatiate henceforward,
Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or

withhold yourselves from us,
We use you, and do not cast you aside—we
plant you permanently within us,
We fathom you not—we love you—there is
perfection in you also,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward
the soul.

As the reader, we are at once the future “perfection,” waiting for the arrival of the ferry, but because we are now presently living, we are the travelers as well. In the final line, Whitman refers to “the soul,” as if there were only one, without ownership (i.e., not your soul, and not my soul). There is also a slight echo with the unwritten word “whole” (parts toward the whole) as if the words might mean the same thing. Whitman has united the disparate elements of the crowd, and has drawn closer to his fellow travelers by imagining a unified whole. The dualities of the poem are resolved: light and dark, reader and writer, past and future, life and death—all become momentarily the same as the ferry approaches the shore.

IV. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1 Walt Whitman is often considered to be a larger-than-life poet, writing expansive lines and embracing the whole of America as his inspiration. In “Song of Myself” (Part 31), however, he writes, “I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars.” How does Whitman call attention to small objects in “Song of Myself”? Why do you think he called his life’s work *Leaves of Grass*? What does “a leaf of grass” mean to Whitman? To you?

2 Walt Whitman writes in “Song of Myself,” “Do I contradict myself?! Very well then I contradict myself,/ I am large, I contain multitudes.” Discuss some of the contradictions you discover while reading. How do these contradictions resonate for you?

3 In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman imagines that each subsequent traveler on the ferry would look into the water and see the same visions that he saw. “Closer yet I approach you . . . I consider’d long and seriously of you before you were born,” he writes. In this and many other poems in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman seems to be talking directly to you, the future reader of his poems. How does it feel to be directly addressed? Does this change the way you read the book?

4 Two of Whitman’s most famous poems, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” and “O Captain! My Captain!”, are about the assassination of President Lincoln. Compare the types of speech in each poem. What differences do you hear between the two poems?

5 In “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” Whitman begins with a mockingbird, “Out of the mocking-bird’s throat, the musical shuttle,” and continues to come back to the mockingbird, a native American bird, throughout the poem. What images and associations does the idea of a mockingbird conjure for you? Does Whitman imitate other sounds in this poem? What role does the mockingbird play in the poem?

6 When Whitman had the opportunity to create an audio recording of one of his poems, he chose the poem “America.” Read the poem silently and then aloud. If possible, listen to the recording of Whitman reading it at <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/audio>. Does he sound like you expected him to sound? How is sound important to the meaning in the poem? What poems would you want to hear in Whitman’s voice?

7 In “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand” Whitman implores us to “Carry me when you go forth over land or sea;/ For thus merely touching you is enough, is best,/ And thus touching

you would I silently sleep and be carried eternally.” He also warns us that “For it is not for what I have put into it that I have written this book,/ Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it.” What does the poem suggest about the physical act of reading? And of writing? And of speaking to another? What do these things mean to you?

V. SUGGESTED READING

WHITMAN’S POETRY AND PROSE

- Whitman, Walt. *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose*. New York: The Library of America, 1996. *The New York Times* called this edition “the most comprehensive volume ever published of the works of Walt Whitman.”
- *Democratic Vistas* (1871). Whitman’s thoughts and criticisms concerning the nature of democracy as it exists in America.
- *Memoranda During the War* (1875). Walt Whitman’s journal entries during the Civil War, from 1862 through 1865, including his encounters with soldiers and doctors, as well as his meetings with President Lincoln.
- *Specimen Days and Collect* (1881). A collection of biographical meditations on childhood and adulthood.
- *November Boughs* (1888). A collection of short literary pieces and essays on Shakespeare, the Bible as literature, Robert Burns, Tennyson, American slang, and more.

BIOGRAPHIES

- Kaplan, Justin. *Walt Whitman: A Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980. Pulitzer Prize winner and National Book Award recipient creates a portrait of Whitman’s multiple selves or personas.
- Reynolds, David S. *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. A cultural and social biography that puts Whit-

man's life into the context of the politics and pop culture of his time.

- Loving, Jerome. *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999. Supplemented by recent discoveries of Whitman's journalistic writings, this biography augments a detailed account of Whitman's life with selections from his poems.

CRITICISM

- Creeley, Robert. "Introduction" from *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*. Duluth, MN: Holy Cow! Press, 1995. An essay on Whitman's desire for "absolute communion with others." Creeley claims that Whitman taught him much "against his own will."
- Kinnell, Galway. "Whitman's Indicative Words," from *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*. Duluth, MN: Holy Cow! Press, 1995. An essay by an American poet who has called Whitman his "principle master," on the use of imperative and indicative moods in sections of *Leaves of Grass*.
- Tayson, Richard. "Back Down to Earth: Richard Tayson on Walt Whitman's Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*." An essay that applies Whitman's poetic philosophies and body of work to argue against our contemporary tradition of language poetry. Available at www.poets.org.
- Lawrence, D.H. "Whitman," from *Studies in Classic American Literature*. New York: Penguin, 1991. A poetic dialectic between Lawrence and Whitman, where Lawrence argues against the value of becoming all-encompassing, embodying everything. The final chapter in Lawrence's pivotal critical work, *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Available online at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/LAWRENCE/dbltoc.htm>
- Moon, Michael. *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. A landmark revisionist essay on Whitman as a major force in nineteenth-century sexual politics.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The Walt Whitman Archive, www.whitmanarchive.org, includes manuscripts, criticism, biographical information, images, and audio recordings.
- The Walt Whitman Special Issue of *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring 2005, includes essays by scholars and poets, including Galway Kinnell, Ed Folsom, Rafael Campo, Mark Doty, Jane Hirshfield, Meena Alexander, Edward Hirsch, and Robert Creeley, as well as rare photographs.
- Folsom, Ed. "The Whitman Recording," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 9 (Spring 1992), 214–16. An article about the Walt Whitman's famed recording of four lines from the poem "America."

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