

Walt Whitman

Henry Bunn

*Leaves of Grass, Song of Myself, To Think of Time, O Captain! My Captain!, When Lilacs Last
in the Door-yard Bloom'd*

Walt Whitman was born May 31, 1819 to Walter Whitman and his wife Louisa Van Velsor. At the age of 12 he went to work as a printing apprentice. During this time he taught himself to read and write. He read a lot from the Bible, Homer, Dante and Shakespeare. At the age of 17 he moved to New York City to work as a professional printer but soon after the building burnt down. In 1836 he began his career as a teacher on Long Island. Later, in 1841 he became a full time journalist, he founded the Long-Islander, a weekly newspaper. By 1855 he took a copyright on the first edition of "Leaves of Grass" which only had 12 poems in it. He sent this book of poetry to Ralph Waldo Emerson. With Emerson's response, Whitman published a second edition with 35 poems. Whitman continued to add poems to "Leaves of Grass" for the remainder of his life. These works prompted Emerson to write the essay The Poet.

Whitman is considered to be a romantic poet and an important figure in the transcendentalist movement. Romantics are classified as being individualistic, and having a reverence for the natural world. Whitman was also at the head of the transcendentalist movement along with Emerson and Thoreau. Transcendentalism is described as a movement in the 1800s that puts stress on the self and that divinity pervades all nature and humanity.

A central part of Whitman's earlier works like "Song of Myself" is the childish elements. Whitman's innocent writing style "might have spring from the early autoerotic emotions of his

boyhood” (V.K. 236). These childlike elements exemplifies the purity of his poetry (Donoghue 602). In contrast to other poetry of the time, Whitman was described as having “the innocent style of Adam” (Chapman 560). His work is simple and pure “as if it were written on a clear day” (Donoghue 602).

Whitman’s artistic style developed during the beginning of the transcendentalist movement. His focus of the “self” in works like “Song of Myself” and “To Think of Time” portrays many transcendental themes (V.K. 239). Transentalist leaders like Emerson and Thoreau praised his work and were themselves influenced by it. Whitman was also heavily influenced by Emerson “The most influential in the shaping of his mind and art were the “*transcendental*” ideas of Emerson” (V.K. 239).

The keystone of most of Whitman’s work is the natural world. Whitman felt a deep spiritual connection to nature “Whitman seems to have felt intuitively that nature and the World of objects were in some sense of flowing or fluid and that between himself and the universe there was an intercommunion” (V.K. 236). He was widely regarded as having a connection to nature that was similar to natives “He is somewhat of an Indian Ocean language and emotions; and accordingly he celebrates the sea, the air, the Earth, the grass, the mountains, the rivers, in brief, the natural elements” (Hamsun 554). Whitman often uses natural elements to describe emotions and thoughts (Cowley 581). He believed that an emphasis on nature reflected an emphasis on the self (Hamsun 554).

In much of Whitman’s later works, his focus shifts to politics and different forms of governance with an emphasis on democracy and socialism. He was such a strong believer in democracy that his views became borderline socialist “His work... the Forerunner of the Poetry

of socialism. And this affirmation is inseparably bound up with the poets Democratic illusions” (Mirsky 570). He had a vision of an “ideal democracy” that grew from his experiences with the Civil War, Slavery and the assassination of Lincoln (Rossetti 544). Whitman rebelled against the current form of government within his poetry pointing out its corruption. He believed a true democracy would put emphasis on “outstanding individuals” (Cowley 581). He often represented this conflict with two distinct voices “the plurality of voice in Leaves of Grass as a deliberate image of, and commentary on the predicament of political division” (Breitwieser 255).

As a transcendentalist, Whitman had a great focus on the “self” within his poetry. To Whitman the idea of self was very important, any accurate interpretation of his work should be focused around the concept of self. (V.K. 235). Whitman never failed to include the idea of “self” within his poetry, he never confronted the problem that every other romantic poet did, the self (Donoghue 600). He used two main kinds of self, the complete self and the divided self. Speakers in his poetry are often seen as complete “There is a paradoxical character about Whitman's poems... he sees them so intensely as wholes” (Rossetti 544). There is also the divided self. “The distinction between these two voices... leads us to call them entirely different selves, rather than examples of the variability of mood natural to anyone” (Breitwieser 255).

The Civil War had a profound impact on Whitman which affected his writing style. Whitman’s brother George enlisted in the Union Army in 1861. After the Lincoln Assassination Whitman commemorated two poems to the deceased president, "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd" and "O Captain! My Captain!" After the Civil War Whitman’s style became more “verbose and vague” but still maintained its overall positive attitude towards life (Cowley

581). His post Civil War phase distinctively impacted his writing for “months or years” (Cowley 582).

Whitman also put a heavy emphasis on the common man and commonplace. Whitman brought light to common people and objects “The achievement of Whitman's greatest poems reside here: that they restore the Dignity of the commonplace” (Donoghue 602). His focus on smaller entities rather than large and powerful ones ended up having a greater impact. Whitman was a voice for the common folk we was described as an “American bard” (Dana 536). Walt Whitman was described as the “last great poet of the bourgeoisie era of humanity” (Mirsky 570).

Whitman is often chastised for his lack of rhyme and verse within his poetry. Whitman’s quality of verse is very uneven (Mirsky 571). Some interpret this as an archaic style of writing that “belongs to no culture, his style is the difficult Indian picture writing comma without the pictures, influenced by the ponderous and hard to comprehend Old Testament” (Hamsun 554). However others interpret his style of writing as efficient and simple (Griswold 538). His poetry was very inconsistent comparatively to the other poetry of the time “ First in pure prose, without meter or rhyme. the only way in which it resembles first is that one line may have one, two, or three words, the next 28, 35, or literally up to 43 words” (Hamsun 554).

Whitman often uses multiple voices within his poetry to portray conflicting ideas. There was a common shift within his poetry between two speakers, a timid gentle one and a large powerful one (Breitwieser 255). Whitman also contrasts the view of the observer and the one that is having the experience. (Breitwieser 255). These conflicting voices develop theme by demonstrating the multiple moods and voices within each self (Breitwieser 255).

Whitman has a unique view of the concept of death, he views it in a similar fashion as love and sex. A common theme for Whitman was the “grand triad...love, death, the soul...” (Powys 574). He often compares death and sex. “Sex is infinite, using, equalizing life of the community, as death is, but, like death, it seems to terminate what little a hostile world has let be safe” (Breitwieser 256). He celebrates sex and death in opposite directions within his poetry. (Breitweiser 256). To Whitman the effect of death resembles the effect of love (Powys 574).

Within his poetry Whitman redefines how beauty is commonly viewed. Whitman often finds beauty in simplicity and often uses fewer words to describe beauty (Chapman 561). He often looked to common objects like plants or animals that are typically overlooked because “they restore the Dignity of the commonplace” (Donoghue 602). Throughout “Leaves of Grass” Whitman deliberately challenged the conventional ideas of what was considered beautiful.

Centered around all his poetry is complete and total optimism and love of life. His happiness was confusing and considered “entirely heathen and profane [optimism]” (Powys 572). He was able to carry this optimism throughout all his poetry and his life so that his “Pure intensity of emotion that produced the first edition with carry over into the 20 new poems of the second” (Cowley 582). Whitman dedicated a great portion of his life to spreading “this secret to enjoy an impregnable happiness” through his poetry (Powys 573).

Whitman had a lasting impact on American literature. He was considered to be the ideal American poet. He redefined beauty by emphasizing the common place. He introduced and popularized free verse poetry. Whitman was a very important key figure in the transcendentalist movement, drawing from Thoreau and Emerson and eventually became a source of creativity for

the movement. Many give him credit for being the first American poet that was a voice of the people and cut ties with Europe.

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