Walt Whitman was born in West Hills, Long Island, New York, on May 31, 1819, at a time of economic depression and increasing conflict over the issue of slavery. His mother was a Quaker, whose spiritual temperament and working-class values had a profound influence on his poetry. His father was a housebuilder and ardent Jacksonian Democrat, who embraced the political philosophy of Tom Paine and subscribed to the *Free Inquirer*, a radical working-class journal edited by Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen. Raised among seven brothers and sisters, some of whose very names—Andrew Jackson, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson—embodied the revolutionary and democratic ideals of his family, Whitman early developed a sense of self that was bound up with the political ideals of the nation.

Although he attended school in Brooklyn between 1825 and 1830, Whitman's primary education came through the public world of journalism and print. During the 1830s he served as a printer's apprentice, taught in Long Island schools, wrote for several newspapers, and became actively involved in Democratic Party politics. At the New York *New World*, a mass-circulation newspaper where Whitman worked as a printer in 1841, he published “The Child's Champion” and a best-selling temperance novel, *Franklin Evans; or, The Inebriate, a Tale of the Times* (1842). Throughout the 1840s he contributed poems and stories to various newspapers and journals, including the *Democratic Review*, the literary organ of the Democratic Party. As editor of the *Aurora* (1842) and later of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* (1846–1847), Whitman placed himself at the center of the political struggles over labor, capital, slavery, states’ rights, women's rights, the Mexican War, and the territorial expansion that marked his time.

Puzzled by the apparent split between the early political journalist and temperance writer and the later American bard, past critics have tended to emphasize the Emersonian, transcendental, and essentially spiritual sources of Whitman's art. In later years, however, critics have sought to relocate Whitman's democratic art fully within the political, sexual, and popular culture of his time.

It was in his early work as a journalist and newspaper editor that Whitman first began to conceive of himself as a writer for the American people, a representative “I,” who sought to embody and call forth the democratic ideals of the nation. In early temperance tales such as “The Child's Champion” and *Franklin Evans*, Whitman also began to give voice to the pleasures of the body, sex, the city, and the socially taboo bonds of attraction and love between men that were at the very source of his democratic verse and vision.

The publication of *Leaves of Grass* on or about July 4, 1855, was an act at once of cultural revolution and a continuation of politics by other means. The green, quarto-sized volume bears no author's name, only a daguerreotype engraving of the poet dressed in workingman's clothes, which appears opposite the title page. The twelve untitled poems are introduced by a prose preface in which the poet declares America's literary independence. In the first and longest poem (later entitled “Song of Myself”), the poet names himself:

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Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos, / Disorderly fleshy and sensual ... eating
drinking and breeding, / No sentimentalist ... no stander above men and women or apart/from them ...
no more modest than immodest. / Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves
from their jambs!

Moving fluidly through time, space, identity, and the "kosmos," Whitman's democratic poet is a breaker
of bounds: he is male and female, master and slave, farmer and factory worker, mystic and materialist,
citizen of America and citizen of the world. Breaking down the distinction between prose and poetry,
his verse rolls freely and rhythmically across the page, without meter, rhyme, or stanza division. He
celebrates himself, sex, and the city. He sings of masturbation, the sexual organs, and the sexual act; he
writes of the body "electric," homosexual love, female eroticism, and the "ill-assorted" fantasies of the
dream state.

The six editions of *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman published between 1855 and 1881 are linked by a
common experiment in the poetics of democracy, at the same time that each is shaped by the
urgencies of its particular historical moment. The 1856 edition of *Leaves*, which includes a letter to
Ralph Waldo Emerson in which Whitman announces his determination “publicly to name” sex and the
body, is also marked by an underlying concern with the problem of political union. The 1860 edition of
*Leaves*, which was published commercially on the eve of the Civil War, contains a sequence of
homoerotic love poems entitled “Calamus,” in which Whitman seeks to resolve the political crisis of the
nation through an appeal to homosexual love: “The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers, / The
continuance of Equality shall be comrades. / These shall tie and band stronger than hoops of iron.”

During the Civil War, Whitman served as a volunteer in the Washington hospitals, an experience that
enabled him to express and share his tender feelings for men. He worked part-time in the army
paymaster’s office and later in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. After he was fired in 1865 for moral
turpitude by Secretary of State James Harlan, he was reemployed in the attorney general’s office. In
1865 he met Peter Doyle, a Washington streetcar conductor, with whom he formed an intense and
loving relationship that lasted many years.

In *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel to Drum Taps* (1865–1866), which contains Whitman's moving elegy on the
death of President Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," the poet seeks to come to
terms with the massive carnage of the war by placing its apparent unreason within some larger
providential scheme. Although *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel* were added in the 1867 *Leaves*, it was not until
the publication of the 1871 edition of *Leaves* that Whitman was able to incorporate his war poems into
the body of his poetic work.

In the post-Civil War period, Whitman undertook a sustained meditation on the diseases and uncertain
future of democracy in America in his important political pamphlet, *Democratic Vistas* (1871). Grappling
with the aggressively selfish materialism and corruption of the Gilded Age, he looks to the visionary and
spiritual power of the poet and what he calls that “intense and loving comradeship, the personal and
passionate attachment of man to man” as “the most substantial hope and safety of the future of these
States.”

Whitman revised and reintegrated all of his poems into the final edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1881. In
1882 he published *Specimen Days and Collect*, a prose companion to his poems that collects his early
tales and other prose pieces along with his memoranda of the Civil War and personal reflections on his

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life and times. Despite Whitman's disillusionment with material conditions in America in the two decades before his death, in Camden, New Jersey, on March 26, 1892, he continued to insist on the power of the poet to bring an “other” America of the imagination into being through the transformative power of song.

Like the luxuriance and “multitudes” of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's impact on later American writing has been multiple and diverse: from the modernist poetic experiments of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams to Charles Olson's projective verse and the “open forms” of Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, and Denise Levertov; from Langston Hughes's “I, too, sing America” to the evocations of the ordinary and unvoiced in women's lives in the poetry of Adrienne Rich and Sharon Olds; from the homosexual dream-songs of Hart Crane and Allen Ginsberg to John Ashbery's “Flow-Chart” and the gender-bending poetic performances of Frank O'Hara. Whether through affirmation, elaboration, or disavowal, all American poetry has in some sense been a response to Whitman's radical experiments in poetic line, form, and subject.


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Walt Whitman (age 37). Frontispiece to first edition of Leaves of Grass. 1855. Samuel Hollyer, engraver. (Based on photo by Gabriel Harrison.) Wikimedia Commons.
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