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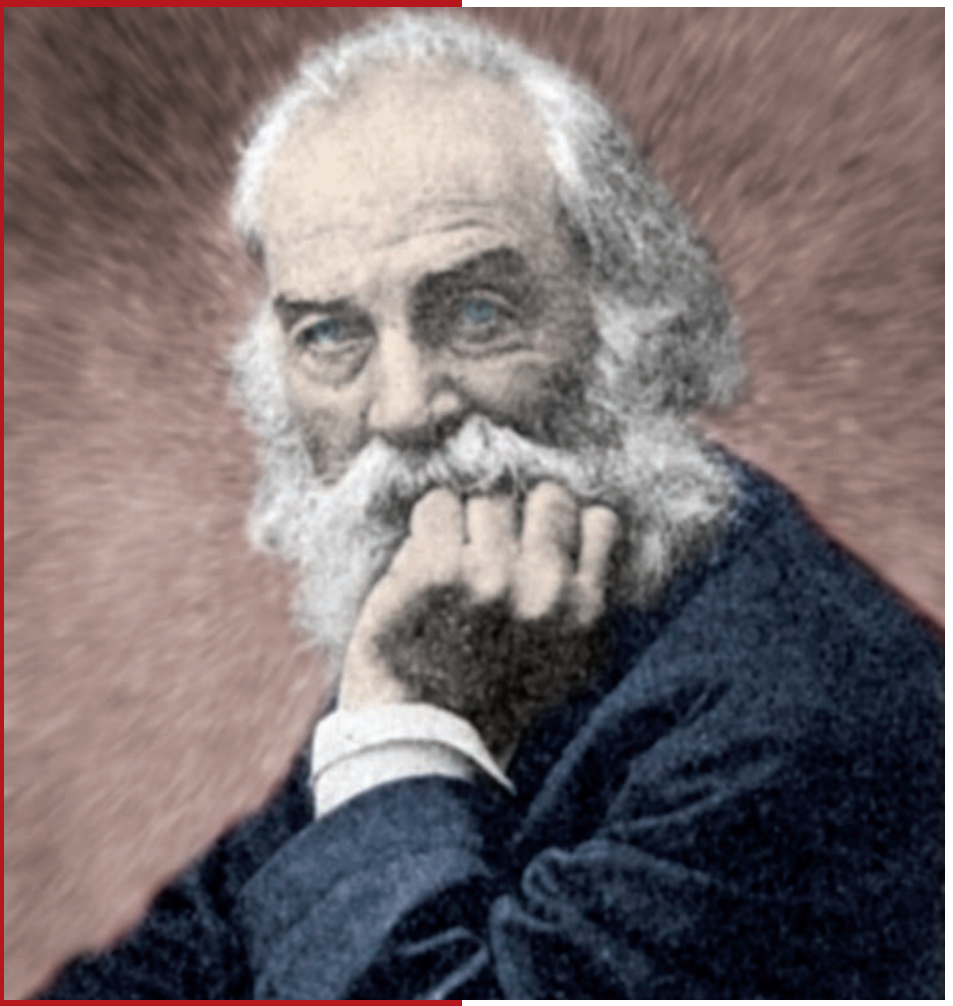
WALT WHITMAN AND THE BIRTH OF MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

COURSE GUIDE



Professor Karen Karbiener
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

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Course Syllabus

Walt Whitman and the Birth of Modern American Poetry

Photo courtesy Karen Karbiener

About Your Professor

Karen Karbiener

Professor Karbiener teaches at New York University and has led special courses on the legacy of Walt Whitman in New York City at Columbia University. A scholar of Romanticism and radical cultural legacies, she is the general editor of the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of American Counterculture*. She is currently curating an exhibit for the 150th anniversary of *Leaves of Grass*, entitled *Walt Whitman and the Promise of America, 1855–2005*. She lives in her hometown, New York City.

Introduction

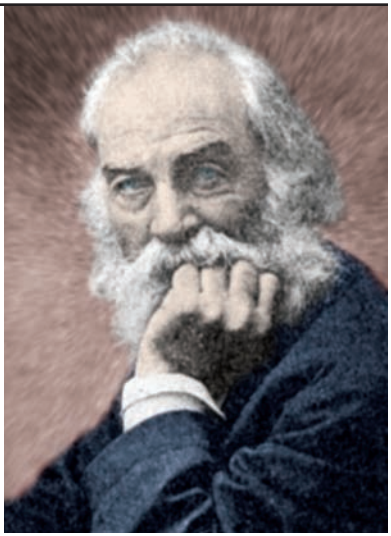
In 1890, Thomas Alva Edison used his latest invention, the phonograph, to record Walt Whitman reading four verses of his great poem "America". On this recording, the aged Whitman summoned his failing energy to project into history a grand vision of the country he'd loved and celebrated in his poetry and his life.

> *Centre of equal daughters, equal sons*
> *All, all alike endear'd, grown, ungrown, young or old,*
> *Strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich,*
> *Perennial with the Earth, with Freedom, Law and Love,*
> *A grand, sane, towering, seated Mother,*
> *Chair'd in the adamant of Time.*

Though Whitman was to die a year later, his voice, like his poetry, would live on, both in the cylinders of Edison's phonograph and in the hearts of every American poet and lover of poetry who came after him. For it was Whitman, according to Karen Karbeiner, who determined what the American poet and American poetry would be. His vision of America informed his verse, exemplifying the best virtues and highest ideals of the country whose birth predated his own by only thirty years.

In this course, *Walt Whitman and the Birth of Modern American Poetry*, we'll explore how Walt Whitman broke with the tyranny of European literary forms

to establish a broad, new voice for American poetry. By throwing aside the stolid conventions and clichéd meters of old Europe, Walt Whitman produced a vital, compelling form of verse, one expressive of the nature of his new world and its undiscovered countries, both physical and spiritual, intimate and gloriously public. Passionate democracy is what Whitman called his invention, and like the inventions of Edison, it would transform not only the practices of its field but also the larger dimensions of American life. Whitman named what it was to be American, he catalogued and indexed and sang and scribed it, and his influence on his contemporaries and his descendants transcends the boundaries of poetry and becomes, in many ways, the story of young America.



Of course, Whitman did not operate in a vacuum. Men like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson had also embarked on the grand project of imagining the scope and promise of the republic. Our course will investigate how Whitman's work tied into so many of the concerns, both philosophic and political, of that generation which took upon its shoulder the task of realizing the responsibilities born of the dreams of the founding fathers.

Walt Whitman's life spans some of the most turbulent days of the new country, from its early years to the Civil War to the invention of electricity. By examining the life of Walt Whitman in the context of broad social and political change, we'll learn why the values we as contemporary Americans prize were often decided and idealized by this period of our history. And, quite frequently, Walt Whitman, and people like Whitman, did the choosing. They crafted our virtues, sang our values, and explained to us what it really meant to be American.

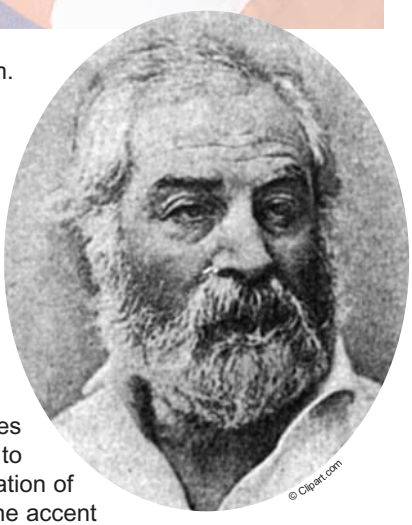
In this course we'll do the same thing. By teaching people what Whitman's poetry means we'll teach them what makes America America. More than just a history of one poet or a study of his work, this course will provide a framework to investigate the cultural formation of the United States—the birth of its spiritual identity. To do so properly, we can't limit ourselves to Whitman. After focusing on his life and work for seven lectures, we'll go on to explore his influences on the poetry and the world that followed. From Hart Crane's "Brooklyn Bridge" to Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance, from the Beat Generation to the high modernists, like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and, in the final lectures, to inspired poets of our own age, such as Adrienne Rich and Yusef Kommanyaka, we'll look at the sweep and diversity of Whitman's message. Every American poet who wrote verse of distinction has in some way been responding to the legacy of Walt Whitman. Anybody who wants to understand American poetry has to understand where it came from. And what better place to start than with its father, Walt Whitman?

Lecture 1:
"Listener up there!":
Whitman Springs Off the Page

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass.*

America.
Centre of equal daughters, equal sons,
All, all alike endear'd, grown, ungrown, young or old.
Strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich
Perennial with the Earth, with Freedom, Law and Love.



Imagine Whitman in 1891 recording this poem. Edison patented the phonograph in 1878. Whitman himself visited New York's Exhibition Building to see displays of Edison's phonograph and telephone in 1879. And a letter signed by Edison on February 14, 1889 expresses the inventor's interest in obtaining a "phonogram from the poet Whitman."

Consider the way he recites "America." The strong beat of the poem's many monosyllabic words demonstrates that Whitman chose the reading for its sound as well as its meaning. The urgency of his voice increases as he moves from the musical cadence of the first two lines to the solemn grandeur of the next. His pronunciation of "ample" as "example" sounds explosive, and the accent perhaps betrays the Dutch heritage of his family and his beloved city. And the luxurious curl in the word "love" is intimate and inviting. The sensual Whitman can still be heard—even felt—well over 100 years after his physical death.

Finally, think of how pleased and surprised he would be to know that we were listening to the recording!

Words That Last More Than a Lifetime

The amazing thing about Whitman is that people are still listening. In fact, over 100 years after his death, the world hears him louder and clearer than ever before. He speaks out in:

- the works of some of America's greatest poets: Allen Ginsberg ("Howl"), Langston Hughes. ("I, Too, Sing America")
- Amy Tam's *Tripmaster Monkey* as "Whitman Ah Sing."

- all over the silver screen, from Sheeler and Strand's "Manhatta" to Robin Williams' character of Mr. Keating in *Dead Poets Society*.
- the songs of Woody Guthrie, in particular "WW's Niece," revived by Billy Bragg and Wilco.

A Key Figure in a Developing American Culture

Whitman is now considered a foundational figure in American culture.

- Roy Harvey Pearce writes in *The Continuity of American Poetry,* "All American poetry since *Leaves of Grass* is, in essence if not in substance, a series of arguments with Whitman."
- Malcolm Cowley: "Before Walt Whitman America barely existed."
- Ezra Pound: "Whitman is America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it is America."

Whitman's name can be found on rest stops, railings of Reagan National Airport and the Fulton Ferry landing, on cigar boxes, whiskey bottles, cans of waxed beans, and in every major language and on every continent.

Though he would have welcomed the attention, Whitman certainly didn't receive it during his lifetime. He wrote his own biography, self-published it and self-reviewed it.

> The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it. (Preface)
>
> That I have not gained the acceptance of my own time, but have fallen back on fond dreams of the future—anticipations—that from a worldly and business point of view LoG has been worse than a failure … That public criticism on the book and myself as author of it yet shows mark'd anger and contempt more than anything else … is all probably no more than I ought to have expected.

From Working-Class Roots to Cultural Legacy

So how does this working-class man—sometime carpenter, printer and penny-daily hack journalist—become the voice of America? That's one of the questions we'll be answering in this series of lectures. What brought him to poetry and made him stay there?

What makes him such an enduring cultural legacy?

Whitman is America. He is the American success story we all hope for. He represents the best that America can be—the promise of the new democracy.

He came from basic stock and loved his mother. It is thought that Whitman's father was an alcoholic. Whitman worked hard all of his life and volunteered for service in the Civil War. A man driven by his own inner taskmaster, Whitman didn't see material reward, but persevered despite poverty.

Unstopped and unwarped by any influence outside the soul within me,
I have had my say entirely my own way, and put it unerringly on
record—the value thereof to be decided by time.

And most importantly, he tried to be the spokesperson for the American people—a poet who speaks to and for the American people. He wanted to break down the barrier of the page itself and confront his reader face to face.

Listener up there! Here you … What have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
Talk honestly, for no one else hears you,
and I stay only a minute longer.

A few notes regarding this course

- Your professor has chosen to call these talks "discussions" because these recordings should be viewed as an opportunity to learn actively, not passively. Take the opportunity to stop, read, question, reevaluate. *"He most honors my style,"* explains the poet in "Song of Myself," *"who learns under it to destroy the teacher."* (81).
- Whitman would have been altogether pleased by how technology enables modern freedoms, so bring these CDs with you outside and on the road.

(for in any roofed room of a house I emerge not—nor in company,
And in the libraries I lie as one dumb, a gawk, or unborn, or dead,)
But just possibly with you on a high hill—first watching lest any person,
for miles around, approach unawares,
Or possibly with you sailing at sea, or on the beach of the sea, or
some quiet island,
Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,
With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss, or the new husband's kiss,
For I am the new husband, and I am the comrade.

In the next discussion

We'll take a look inside Whitman's first collection of poetry, *Leaves of Grass,* discussing what is "so new" about the content.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why is Whitman considered a foundational figure in American culture?
2. What are the reasons for saying that “Whitman is America”?

Suggested Reading

Allen, Gay Wilson. *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985. Originally published 1955.

Other Books of Interest

Kaplan, Justin. *Walt Whitman: A Life*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003. Originally published 1980.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989.

Reynolds, David S. *Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Zweig, Paul. *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984.

Lecture 2:
The Revolution of the First Edition:
Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

The Picture of the Poet

We began the last discussion with a discussion of sound. This one begins with an image—that of the unusual appearance of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

The book has a green cover and gold-embossed, organic-looking lettering. It looked like a book of domestic fiction more than a serious effort. Most surprisingly, no author's name appeared anywhere on the cover or first pages.

A first edition copy of *Leaves of Grass*

Inside, the first image of Whitman is that of a provocative and confident working man looking up from the frontispiece. Second, there were the titles of the poems—or the lack of titles. The first six poems were titled "*Leaves of Grass* " while the other six were untitled.

What is the significance of the title itself? Grass has connotations of an Edenic setting with the book itself, its pages, seen as leaves. "*Leaves of Grass* " was also an obvious metaphor for the unregulated, "organically grown" lines of the poems in the "leaves" of the book. But Whitman was also using "grass" as a symbol of American democracy. Simple and universal, grass represents common ground. Each leaf (Whitman thought the proper word "blade" was literally too sharp) has a singular identity, yet is a necessary contributor to the whole. Likewise, each reader will find that he or she is part of *Leaves of Grass*—a book about all Americans that could have been written by any American (hence, the removal of the author's name).

"Song of Myself"

The equalization of reader and author is the primary point Whitman stresses in the first poem (which gained its title "Song of Myself" in 1881).

Take a look at the first portion of "Song of Myself" on the facing page.

Most outrageous of all was his direct confrontation of the reader—the use of "you" that really meant "you." This personal advancement from writer to

1

I CELEBRATE myself;
And what I assume you shall assume;
For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my Soul;
I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of summer grass.

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes—the shelves are crowded with perfumes;
I breathe the fragrance myself, and know it and like it;
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume—it has no taste of the distillation—it is odorless;
It is for my mouth forever—I am in love with it;
I will go to the bank by the wood, and become undisguised and naked;
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

2

The smoke of my own breath;
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine;
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs;
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore, and dark-color'd sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn;
The sound of the belch'd words of my voice, words loos'd to the eddies of the wind;
A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms;
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag;
The delight alone, or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-sides;
The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun.

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd the earth much?
Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

—"Song of Myself" lines 1-24

reader, this attempt to jump off the page into the audience's immediate space and time, was a new and startling literary technique.

The irregular length and randomness of the lines, along with the use of ellipses of various sizes, looks strange enough to the eye trained on Longfellow's neat verse or Tennyson's stately measures. But the idea of engaging in a conversation with this relaxed figure, who sensually melds with the natural landscape around him (to the point where one is uncertain of the definitions of "loveroot, silkthread, crotch, and vine"), puts a more cautious reader on the defensive.

In 1855, the son of Nathaniel Hawthorne was appalled by the poet's position on the grass, claiming that he "abandons all personal dignity and reserve, and sprawls incontinently before us." One hundred fifty years later, one might still wonder at a man who unabashedly declares that he will "become undisguised and naked"—and what's more, celebrate every "atom" of himself.

Read the remainder of the poem. "Song of Myself" (as the poem was finally titled in 1881) may begin with "I," but the poem's last word is "you."

In between "I" and "you," the poet does inject a great deal of ego; his posture is clearly that of the poet-prophet with instructions and predictions for his listeners. The most important part of his message, however, concerns the reader's intellectual and spiritual independence. Throughout the poems, Whitman encourages the reader's active participation and independent thinking with unpredictable breaks as well as provocative questions without "right" answers (many of them bear a resemblance to Buddhist "koans"). The sense that one is left with at the end of the poem is the poet's spirit not shining over but running under the boot soles of his protégés.

As part of his plan for a new democratic art, he questioned and disrupted many other long-standing cultural boundaries: between rich and poor, men and women, races and religion.

For example in the trapper's wedding:

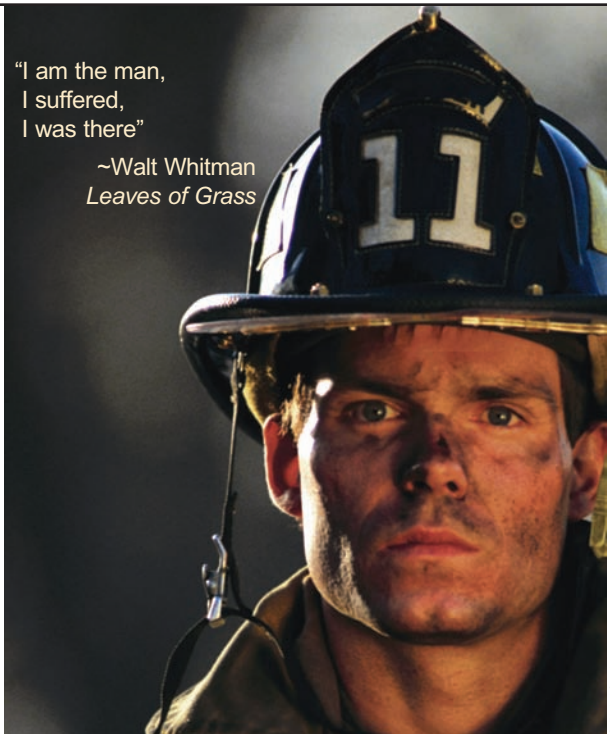
> I saw the marriage of the trapper in the open air in the far west—the bride was a red girl;
>
> Her father and his friends sat near, cross-legged and dumbly smoking—they had moccasins to their feet, and large thick blankets hanging from their shoulders;
>
> On a bank lounged the trapper—he was drest mostly in skins—his luxuriant beard and curls protected his neck—he held his bride by the hand … (lines 177-182)

Or in the story of the swimmers (lines 193-210):

> Which of the young men does she like the best?
> Ah, the homeliest of them is beautiful to her." (lines 198-199)

He even blurred the line between one being and another, as in the fireman episode:

I am the mash'd
fireman with
breast-bone
broken;
Tumbling walls
buried me in
their debris;
Heat and smoke I
inspired—I heard
the yelling shouts
of my comrades;
I heard the distant
click of their picks
and shovels;
They have clear'd
the beams away—
they tenderly lift
me forth.
I lie in the night air in
my red shirt—the pervading hush is for my sake;
Painless after all I lie, exhausted but not so unhappy;
White and beautiful are the faces around me—the heads are bared of their
fire-caps;
The kneeling crowd fades with the light of the torches.
Distant and dead resuscitate;
They show as the dial or move as the hands of me—I am the clock myself.
(lines 843-852)



But Whitman wants to do more than sing the praises of American diversity; he wants to embody each of them. He writes in line 831, *"I am the man, I suffered, I was there."* Part of this strong identification shows Whitman's journalist instinct at work; he had been writing about the great fires in New York City in 1842 and 1845. This section would often be posted on New York City firehouse doors after 9/11, a remarkable tribute to the men who gave their lives.

This sense of reverence that comes despite the moment of tragedy accounts for much of Whitman's popularity with regards to some of these passages. It is Whitman's glorification of the everyday, the sense that becoming a fireman is just as important as becoming a great poet. Every vocation is on the same plane for Whitman, and this distinguishes his work from the other writing of the time.

In the next lecture we'll discuss why Whitman thought a creation such as *Leaves of Grass* was actually *necessary.* He thought, *"The United States needed poets!"* How strange does that sound to us today?

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the significance of the title *Leaves of Grass*?
2. In his poetry, how does Whitman encourage readers' active participation and independent thinking?

Suggested Reading

Whitman, Walt. *Selected Poems 1855–1892, A New Edition*. Ed. Gary Schmidgall. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Allen, Gay Wilson. *Reader's Guide to Walt Whitman*. New York: Syracuse University, 1997.

Greenspan, Ezra, ed. *Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Loving, Jerome. *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Miller, Edwin Haviland. *Walt Whitman's Song of Myself: A Mosaic of Interpretations*. Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1991.

Moore, William L. "The Gestation of the First Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, 1855: Walt Whitman's Early Note-Taking Years, 1847–54." *Calamus* 28 (December 1986), 21–39.

Lecture 3:
Emerson, Whitman, and the Beginnings of an Original American Literature

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Whitman's preface to *Leaves of Grass* and Emerson's "Nature."

"The United States Needs Poets"

Whitman thought a creation such as *Leaves of Grass* was truly necessary. He actually thought, "The United States needed poets!" How strange does that sound to us today?

Indeed Whitman got the idea for the need of poetry from people like Emerson, Longfellow and Thoreau, educated men who had been to university and felt that intellectually the country needed force and direction. Whitman ran with this idea in his own way. Being a man who was for the most part uneducated, with a very different background than his contemporaries in poetry, he still took very seriously the notion that America needed poets.

Though political freedom had been established for decades, America was still a long way from gaining cultural independence. Even Whitman admitted to growing up reading Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron, two of nineteenth-century America's most popular writers. Charles Dickens was all the rage in the 1840s; he even came to America in 1842. And the death of the poet laureate William Wordsworth in 1850 inspired a rush of new American interest in his work.

It is in the preface to *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman explains how he sees a philosophical need for someone to speak out for the country:

> Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest." The twelve-page, double-columned "Preface" that stands between the reader and Whitman's twelve poems remains his definitive declaration of independence: the new American poet would represent and inspire the people, assuming the roles of priests and politicians; the new American poetry would be as strong and fluid as its rivers, as sweeping and grand as its landscape, as various as its people.

The urgent tone of the "Preface" exposes Whitman's desperation over the state of 1850s America—a country corrupted by its own leaders, torn apart by its own people, and facing an imminent civil war.

Historical Perspective of the "Preface."

The 1850s were an unprecedented time of political corruption: vote-buying, wire-pulling, patronage on all levels of state and national government. In New York, Fernando Wood was elected mayor in 1854 as a result of vote fraud.

In the "Bloody Sixth" Ward, there were actually 4,000 more votes than there were registered voters. Three of the most corrupt presidencies ever were at

this time: Fillmore (1850-53), Pierce (1853-57), and Buchanan (1857-1861), "Our topmost warning and shame," according to Whitman. These three exhibited incompetence, mostly over antislavery issues. The slavery issue not only divided the country, but complicated matters even for the North. According to one estimate in 1847, two-thirds of Northerners disapproved of slavery, but only 5 percent went along with abolitionists. Immediate emancipation, it was feared, would flood the North with cheap labor and racial disharmonies (even Lincoln steered a cautious course: until the second year of the Civil War, Lincoln believed that slaves, after being gradually freed, should be shipped out of the country). Both Whitman and Lincoln criticized abolitionism; both were concerned about spreading slavery, and both became gradually more progressive with time.

In the Compromise of 1850 California was admitted into the Union as a free state, but there would be no legal restrictions on slavery in Utah and New Mexico (where, it was argued, the climate was not salubrious to slavery). To satisfy the South, a stringent Fugitive Slave Law was put into effect.

Whitman's Response

Whitman, as a journalist, had a front-row seat to all of this political corruption, and in the "Preface" we see a man who has become fired-up about these issues, and who wishes to instruct people to open up and get rid of these corruptive forces and compromises.

His demands on readers were meant to shake awake a slumbering, passive nation and inspire a loving, proud, generous, accepting union of active thinkers and thoughtful doers.

> This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, reexamine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body. (10)

What is requested here is just as astonishing as how it is stated. The unidentified speaker of the "Preface" possessed an extreme, provocative confidence that could be seen in the eyes and stance of the image on the frontispiece. His prophetic message for America was delivered in lines that evoked the passages and rhythms of holy books; the above section, for example, may be compared with Romans 12:1-19 in the Bible's New Testament. But while the

Comparison of Emerson and Whitman

	Walt Whitman (1819-1892)	Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)
Work	"Song of Myself" (1855)	"Nature"
Family	Father was a talented but not-too-successful carpenter who moved the family around frequently.	Born to a line of ministers. Encouraged by a brilliant, eccentric aunt.
Education	Quit school at age 10 or 11 to work as an office boy and printer's assistant.	Went to Harvard, as did his father and fellow Transcendentalist Thoreau.
Travel	Never went to Europe.	Traveled abroad in Europe.
Teaching experience	Starts teaching grade school on Long Island in 1836; Southold incident in 1840.	Served as a schoolmaster then pastor of Boston's Second Church (Cotton Mather preceded him).
Marriage and home life	Never married; buys a "cheap lot" in Camden in 1874 (for $450).	After settling in Concord, started receiving his wife's legacy.
Social Life	Never a part of New York society or any group of poets.	Most importantly, interacted with a group of artists. Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and others formed core of Transcendentalist movement.

writer had perhaps elevated himself to the status of a prophet, his run-on sentences, breathless lists, and general disregard for proper punctuation suggested that he was not a trained or "proper" writer.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was born into very privileged social, economic and intellectual beginnings. Whitman inherited no such privilege. Whitman's father was a liberal-thinking carpenter who failed in business (and was possibly an alcoholic). Out of the seven siblings who survived childhood, Jesse would lose his mind and die in an insane asylum; Hanna Louisa would become neurotic and possibly psychotic; Andrew was an alcoholic who died young, forcing his wife to become a streetwalker; Edward was retarded at birth, partly crippled, and possibly epileptic.

Whitman suffered from a lack of schooling (about five years in District School #1, the only public school in Brooklyn). Think of Emerson and Thoreau preparing at Harvard, Poe at the University of Virginia, Wordsworth at Cambridge, and even Dickinson at Holyoke. Whitman was self-taught, reading Shakespeare, the Bible, Homer, and Dante on his own time. His mother could barely write, and his father died around the same time that *Leaves of Grass* first came out.

Unlike his peer Emerson, Whitman had a background in journalism. What did he write before 1855? Only nineteen poems and twenty-four pieces of fiction—but countless pieces of journalism.

Whitman was not part of any group of artists like the Transcendentalists. There were other writers in New York—Herman Melville, born the same year, and Edgar Allen Poe—but there was no community between them.

Whitman was on his own, and also an urban poet, so the city was his community. "I was simmering, simmering, simmering … Emerson brought me to a boil," Whitman told John Trowbridge during the Civil War.

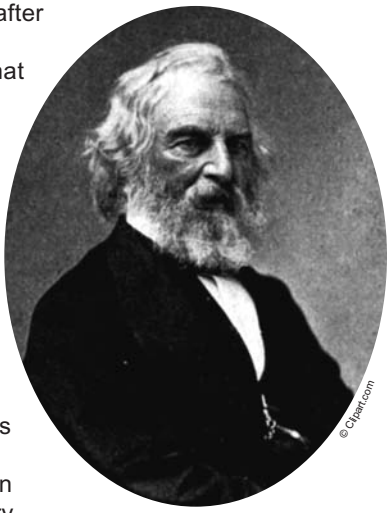
Emerson Calls Whitman to Action

Emerson had called upon American writers to strike an original relation to the universe beginning in the 1840s, and certainly Whitman knew of Emerson during this "seed-time" of *Leaves of Grass*. He even reported on Emerson's New York lectures for the newspapers, the *New York Aurora* and the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.

Emerson's essay "The Poet," published in 1844, seems a perfect job description for Walt Whitman as the new American bard. "Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians, our boasts, and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung."

Whitman seems to respond directly to this call for an American poet, and Emerson seemed to approve: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start,"

Emerson wrote to Whitman a few weeks after the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman was so pleased with the letter that he included it in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* as promotional material, going so far as to imprint the first words on the spine of the book.



Longfellow

As time progressed Emerson did indeed grow more and more critical of the content of Whitman's verse. In 1856, he wrote to Carlyle, "If you think, as you may, that it is only an auctioneer's inventory of a warehouse, you can light your pipe with it." Then in 1860, Emerson asked Whitman to get rid of lines from "Children of Adam." Finally in 1875, Emerson didn't even represent Whitman in *Parnassus*, his anthology of favorite poetry.

Whitman also pulls away from Emerson as evidenced in Whitman's melding of the spiritual and physical—and his glorification of banality and in his radical and subversive messages.

"Hiawatha," Predictability in an Age of Change

While *Leaves of Graves* was far from a success in its initial publication, "Hiawatha" was the big seller in 1855 and made Henry Wadsworth Longfellow quite a bit of money. The poem has a regulated rhythm and predictable forms using a European model called the Kalevala. But was it really what people wanted to hear? It imposed values and beliefs on a nation (even Hiawatha's wish to go "west"). There was also a lack of connection between poet and reader—the poet is telling a story but isn't really "present."

Think about the differences between Longfellow's "Hiawatha" and Whitman's "Song of Myself." "Song of Myself" places an emphasis on nature and organic qualities (of the free, "stream of consciousness" verse itself; of the poet's attitude toward personal or "taboo" subject matter). It provides a sense of intimacy between poet and reader. Whitman expresses a democratic understanding of an individual's importance in a group balance and between the demands of one person and the mass. There is a new "rough simplicity" of style and ideas and unconventional uses of sound, rhythm, and sense to transport readers.

Are there any similarities between the two? In fact there are a few.

- Both pieces are long poems.
- Both talk about "the other" and show America's interest in people who are different
- Both use music to make the poem memorable
- Both depend on repetition, alliteration, and assonance

Comparison of Longfellow and Whitman

	Walt Whitman (1819-1892)	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)
Work	"Song of Myself" (1855)	"Song of Hiawatha" (1855)
Thoughts on each other	Found Longfellow "dapper, dainty, and effeminate … like the lord whose wife was advised to keep him dressed well, but never let him open his mouth."	Not recorded.
Education	Quit school at age 10 or 11 to work as an office boy and printer's assistant.	Graduated from Bowdoin College.
Family	Father was a talented but not-too-successful carpenter who moved the family.	Father sent him to Bowdoin College to train as a lawyer.
Teaching experience	Starts teaching grade school on Long Island in 1836; Southold incident in 1840.	Professor of modern languages at Bowdoin in 1829; professor at Harvard in 1836.
Marriage and home life	Never married; buys a "cheap lot" in Camden in 1874 (for $450).	Married twice, the second time to a Boston heiress whose father bought them Craigie House, a mansion in Cambridge.

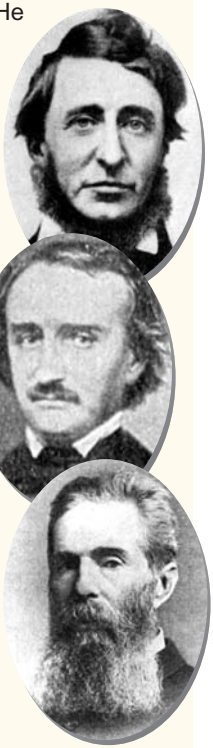
	Walt Whitman (1819-1892)	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)
Social Life	Never a part of New York society or any group of poets.	Part of Boston society; worked with James Lowell and formed the Dante Society. Knew Emerson and Hawthorne.
Travel	Never went to Europe.	Studied languages in Europe for three years.
Sales Figures	795 copies of *Leaves of Grass* were printed in 1855 at $2 per copy (the price was steadily lowered through the first three editions—$1.00 and $.75 editions followed. More than likely sold a few hundred copies.	"Hiawatha" sold 10,000 copies in a month, 30,000 by June 1856; made $3,700 in 1855 and $7,400 in 1856 from poetry sales, thanks to "Hiawatha" success. His salary at Harvard, only $1,500 that year, was up to $1,800 after 1845.
Celebrity	in *November Boughs* (1888), he resigns himself to "future recognition," since he did not gain it in his lifetime; got 40 pounds from his English friends on his 72nd birthday.	Attained a private audience with Queen Victoria in 1868-9; his 75th birthday was celebrated nationally.
Immortality	Many years after his death, finally became recognized as America's first poet. Generations have praised his assault on the conventions of literature and recognized his passion.	After his death the gentleness, sweetness, and purity that made his poetry famous, made it infamous. Throughout his work and his life, he was consistently high-minded, but conventional—untouched by the religious struggles that disturbed his contemporaries.

In fact, Whitman's mother and brother George thought there were great similarities as they leafed through "Hiawatha" and the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. In George's words, "The one seemed to us pretty much the same muddle as the other."

However, what obviously makes the two poems different is that Whitman is much more graphic. There is tension, physicality and sexuality in Whitman's verse. Unlike in "Hiawatha" there seems to be a need for connection, and a need for dialogue between different groups. Whitman's poem presents a very interesting and subtle image of what is going on in the American mindset, and for this reason can be arguably considered the richer poem of the two. Whitman pushed the envelope in ways his contemporaries, like Melville and Poe, did not. None went as far as Whitman in terms of sexually graphic content, in terms of political radicalism, and in terms of fluid boundaries or, in fact, lack of boundaries.

In the next lecture we will look at the very beginnings of Whitman as a poet and ask the question, "What made this man consider a career as a poet?"

Other Poets of the Time and Their Thoughts on New York City



Henry David Thoreau was an individualist, but also a recluse. He came to Staten Island in 1841 and moved in with Emerson. In 1845 he moved to a small hut on the shores of Walden Pond outside the city of Concord, Massachusetts. There he wrote *Walden*, a collection of meditations and observations on nature. In portions of *Walden* he ruminates on why he was unable to stay in the city and his inability to find his way into the literary marketplace. Thoreau was one of the fathers of the Trancendentalist movement.

Edgar Allan Poe also didn't like the city, though he lived in it. Whitman met Poe, who he described as "a little jaded," in the offices of the *Broadway Journal*. Poe disliked New York from the time he arrived and was too busy wrestling with inner demons to make any friends in his adopted home town. Whitman worked for Poe in the 1840s, for the *Broadway Journal*. You might remember his short description of Poe in "Specimen Days." Whitman admired Poe, using "The Raven" in "Out of the Cradle," and Poe's Gothic touches in his early stories.

Herman Melville (1819-1891) was born in New York, left for Massachusetts in 1847, but returned in 1863. He, however, did not enjoy his hometown. Melville, born with Whitman in 1819, never met the poet. After his popularity began to wane with the publication of *Moby Dick* (1855), Melville worked as an outdoor customs inspector for the last two decades of his life.

All in all, Whitman seems to have more in common with great American showmen/entrepreneurs Barnum and Edison than his well-bred literary contemporaries.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why did Whitman think that the United States needed poetry?
2. Discuss the relationship between Whitman and Emerson. Also Whitman and Longfellow.

Suggested Reading

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature/Walking*. Ed. John Elder. New York: Beacon Press, 1994.

Whitman, Walt. *Selected Poems 1855–1892, A New Edition*. Ed. Gary Schmidgall. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Grossman, Jay. *Reconstituting the American Renaissance: Emerson, Whitman, and the Politics of Representation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

Hourihan, Paul. *Mysticism in American Literature: Thoreau's Quest and Whitman's Self*. Redding, CA: Vedantic Shores Press, 2004.

Kennedy, William Sloane. *Henry F. Longfellow: Biography, Anecdote, Letters, Criticism*. New York: MSG Task, 1973.

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Matthiessen, Francis O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Miller, James E. *A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998.

Lecture 4:
Manhattan's Son Rises . . .

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "There Was a Child Went Forth," and "The Sleepers."

In this lecture we discuss how the son of a carpenter, a former typesetter and penny daily editor came to write the poems that would define and shape American literature and culture. Three poems will be used for the basis of this discussion: "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "There Was A Child Went Forth," and "The Sleepers."

Whitman and the Role of New York City on His Work

In 1828 Broadway extended only as far north as 10th Street, and 14th Street was opened from the Bowery to the Hudson. In 1860, commissioners were appointed to lay out streets north of 155th St. In 1820, the city had 123,706 inhabitants. By 1860, there were 813,669 inhabitants—and these residents were from everywhere—from Asia, Europe, and Africa.

While the population was expanding, New York became a city of extremes:

- There was a continuing divide between the rich (the Vanderbilts and Astors of 5th Avenue) and the poor (the immigrants living in Five Points).
- Architectural landmarks were going up all over town:
  - ~ The Crystal Palace exhibition hall, erected in 1853, was a monument to the optimism of the age.
  - ~ Central Park, constructed from 1857 to 1860, was envisioned a quiet place where all citizens could find leisure.
- Cultural life flourished. From P.T. Barnum's American Museum to the elegant Astor Place Opera House, there were all manner of venues for entertainment and inspiration.

New York City was representative of the potential of America. What more perfect place for the new American Adam of poetry to grow up?

Walt Whitman's Origins

Walt Whitman was born in West Hills, Huntington Township, Long Island, New York on May 31, 1819. His family moved to Brooklyn in May of 1823. Whitman Sr. continued to buy and sell property that he fixed up. Whitman Jr. attended District School #1 in Brooklyn until 1830, when he began to work as an office boy in a law office. He got a subscription to a library and it was here that his love for reading began.

In 1831, young Whitman found work in a Brooklyn printing office and continued to work for printers in New York even after his family moved back to Long Island in 1833. The only thing that finally compelled Whitman to leave New

York was a fire that wiped out most of the buildings in Paternoster Row, the printing center of New York, in 1835.

In 1836, Whitman joined his family back on Long Island and taught school until about 1841, when he moved back to New York City and started working in the printing office of the *New York New World*. At this point in his life, Whitman began going to the theater and writing reviews about performances, attending lectures, writing stories, and even penning a temperance novel. The young writer developed a taste for opera through the 1840s and became politically active in the Democratic Party.

He left New York for New Orleans in 1848, but really spent most of his time in New York.

From 1851 to 1854 little is known about Whitman's activities.

After the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman continued to live and work in Brooklyn, where in 1859 he became involved in the first American bohemian circle at Pfaff's. He met actors and freethinkers of all types, including, among others, Henry Clap, editor of the *Saturday Press*.

In 1862 when he found out that his brother had been wounded in the Civil War, he left New York for the South and for years worked as a Civil War nurse. He never really came back to New York to live permanently after 1862. It is between Whitman's early teen years and 1862 that most of his important work took place.

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New York City Helps Create a Poet

Living in New York City was most certainly important to Whitman and his becoming a poet. Whitman's inspiring rite-of-passage poem and paean to New York was stimulated by his workaday life—in fact, his commute

between Brooklyn and New York was by ferry. The Fulton Ferry was something that completely framed Whitman's day and provided him with a unique time for contemplation.

From the "Sun-Down Poem":

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
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, than you might suppose …

This very broad opening, that brings together a number of people, quickly becomes very personal, born out of actual personal and professional crises Whitman experienced between 1855 and 1856. Despite the critical and commercial failure of the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman set to work almost immediately on the revisions and new poems of the second edition. The artist may have felt the need to write, but the man found life getting in the way. "Every thing I have done seems to me blank and suspicious," Whitman wrote in a notebook entry in late 1855. "I doubt whether my greatest thoughts, as I had supposed them, are not shallow—and people will most likely laugh at me. My pride is impotent, my love gets no response" (*Notebooks and Unpublished Manuscripts*, 167). There is the sense that this is a difficult personal time for Whitman. There's a sense he is engaged in an activity that makes him feel "unclean" or dirty.

Continued from later in the "Sun-Down Poem" …

It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,
The dark threw patches down upon me also,
The best I had done seemed to me blank and suspicious,
My great thoughts, as I supposed them, were they not in reality meager?
Would not people laugh at me?
It is not you alone who know what it is to be evil,
I am he who knew what it was to be evil …

Whitman was inspired by his lack of inspiration much as Samuel Taylor Coleridge described this paradox in "Dejection: An Ode." This is a moment of deep introspection for Whitman. How does he get out of this? What we see is him reaching towards his fellow New Yorkers:

Closer yet I approach you,
What thought you have of me, I had as much of you—
I laid in my stores in advance,
I considered long and seriously of you before you were born.

The water cleanses him but the poet must journey through the "dark patches" to a moment of emotional equilibrium and spiritual poise.

He then discusses the role of the city of Manhattan in his personal journey.

> Now I am curious what sight can ever be more stately and admirable
> To me than my mast-henn'd Manhatta, my river and sun-set,
> And my scallop-edged waves of flood-tide, the sea-gulls
> Oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the twilight,
> And the belated lighter …

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," perhaps more successfully than any other poem, unites Whitman and his reader across the "impassable" boundary of time. It also helps explain the process of how Whitman was able to move past trouble and self-doubt to full and free artistic expression. And New York seems to have had a large part in this.

"There Was a Child Went Forth" is another coming-of-age poem that speaks of Whitman's family issues and shows how movement from country to city helps initiate him as an artist. "There Was a Child" is about revisionism, and tells us much about Whitman, the poet of revision. He's also coming to terms with what might be a dark and complicated past. How do you get through a clinging memory of bad experience? Take a look at these lines from "There Was a Child Went Forth."

> There was a child went forth every day,
> And the first object he looked upon and received with wonder
> Or pity or love or dread, that object he became,
> And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part
> Of the day … or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

This poem was one of the public's favorites, but not much to the critics, or to Whitman himself. There are patterns and movements in this poem. We get a good description of the family, but at which point do things get difficult? Where does the poet find joy at the end of this poem?

"The Sleepers"

"The Sleepers" is a poem that caused a great deal of controversy right from the start. For many readers, the poem was simply a mystery. Whitman's friend and admirer John Burroughs wrote in 1896, "There are passages or whole poems in the *Leaves* which I do not yet understand ("Sleep-Chasings" is one of them), though the language is as clear as daylight; they are simply too subtle or elusive for me."

"The Sleepers" has a very different sort of goal and direction than that of "There Was a Child." It was a more challenging poem, supposedly the first surreal poem written in America and maybe the first stream-of-consciousness style.

I wander all night in my vision,
Stepping with light feet … swiftly and noiselessly stepping
and stopping,
Bending with open eyes over the shut eyes of sleepers;
Wandering and confused … lost to myself … ill-assorted …
contradictory,
Pausing and gazing and bending and stopping.

There are many vivid images in the poem that spark discussion. In the line, "I wander all night," why night? Why sleep? What are some of the "dreams" that release Whitman from categories normally defining him?

Throughout the central portions of the poem there are extraordinary moments of the fluidity of identity. Then there are images that equate with loss and loneliness ("Swimmer," "Battle of Brooklyn," "Squaw," and "Black Lucifer"). There are also images of return and renewal. The poem moves from hate to love, darkness to light, winter to spring—what was the way down becomes the way up. In the end, what Whitman longs for is not Nirvana or peace, but the continuing cycles of life.

We have seen Whitman wrestle with social, family and psychological issues in these three poems. In the next lecture, which is about Whitman and sexuality, we'll see him thinking about his own physicality and about the bodies of those around him.

Critical Views on "The Sleepers"

Dr. Richard Bucke, a pioneer in psychiatry, found "the most astonishing parts of the poem" those passages where "the vague emotions, without thought, that occasionally arise in sleep, are given as they actually occur, apart from any idea—the words having in the intellectual sense no meaning, but arousing, as music does, the state of feeling intended." Bucke warned readers that the poem "requires a great deal of study to make anything of it," though to some few readers, he believed, "it would, no doubt, be plain at once."

"The Sleepers" became a favorite of psychological critics like Edwin Haviland Miller and Stephen Black. When Miller offered a long reading of the poem in 1968 as "an evocation of psychic depths" and "a reenactment of ancient puberty rites," he noted that "until recently" the poem "has been neglected and misunderstood" (pp. 72, 78). But seven years later, in offering his own psychoanalytical reading of "The Sleepers" as a revelation of "threats" that inhibited Whitman from "achieving a secure sense of identity," Black described the poem as "one of Whitman's most widely admired and analyzed poems" (p. 125). It was clearly a poem that had to wait over a century for its readers and for the psychological approaches that would open Whitman's words.

As readings of the poem proliferated, Jerome Loving would call it "the most famous dream in American literature" (*Etudes Anglaises*) and post-structural psychological readings based on the ideas of theorists like Julia Kristeva developed the complexities of the poem (see Carol Zapata Whelan, "'Do I Contradict Myself?': Progression through Contraries in Walt Whitman's 'The Sleepers,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 10 (1992), 25-39).

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What role did New York City play in the shaping of Whitman's work?
2. What was notable about Whitman's poem "The Sleepers"?
3. What was public reaction to "The Sleepers"? Did this impact Whitman's next edition of *Leaves of Grass*?

Suggested Reading

Whitman, Walt. *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*. Sculley Bradley, Gay W. Allen, and Edward F. Grier, eds. New York: New York University Press, 1984.

Other Books of Interest

Burrows, Edwin G. and Mike Wallace. *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*. Durham, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Dunbar, David S. *Empire City: New York Through the Centuries*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Whitman, Walt. *Walt Whitman's New York*. Ed. Henry M. Christman. New York: Ira R. Dee Publisher, 1989.

Article of Interest

Whelan, Carol Zapata. "'Do I Contradict Myself?' Progression through Contraries in Walt Whitman's 'The Sleepers,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review,* Volume 10, 1992, pp. 25–39.

Lecture 5:
Sex Is the Root of It All

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Walt Whitman's "To a Common Prostitute," "The Calamus," and "Children of Adam."

"Sex is the root of it all: sex—the coming together of men and women: sex: sex."—Whitman to H Traubel

The American culture of Whitman's time was steeped in Victorian ideas. Sex was a taboo topic that didn't enter polite conversation. The word "underwear" wasn't used; these items were actually called "unmentionables." Piano legs were deemed too sensual to be seen and were often covered. Even arms and legs were called "limbs" or "branches."

However, just as Americans today are full of contradictions, there was a dark underbelly to Whitman's America. From 1820 to 1865, the number of brothels in New York City tripled from 200 to more than 600. By 1865, prostitution was a $6.35-million business, second only to tailor shops in revenue. Prostitution, though frowned upon, was lucrative for the women involved. In the 1840s, women in standard jobs made two to three dollars average per week, but one could make ten to fifty dollars turning a single trick.

Whitman neither wanted to be associated with the tight-lipped behavior of the reformers or the raw obscenity that he saw in some types of American life. He tried to position himself between these two extremes and glorify sex in a fresh and natural way.

Even so, in a repressive environment, it is easy to understand why vice squads banned poems like Whitman's "To a Common Prostitute."

Be composed—be at ease with me—I am Walt Whitman,
liberal and lusty as Nature,
Not till the sun excludes you, do I exclude you,
Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you, and the leaves
to rustle for you, do my words refuse to glisten and
rustle for you.
My girl, I appoint with you an appointment—and I charge
you that you make preparation to be worthy to meet me,
And I charge you that you be patient and perfect till I come.
Till then, I salute you with a significant look, that you do not
forget me.

This was one of the "banned poems" of 1881. His point with this poem is quite clear; Whitman gave to these women, who were considered the lowest of the low in society, a new respect, and dignity. Whitman took great pride in his directness and in his own words, wrote in a journal:

> Avoid all the 'intellectual subtleties' and 'withering doubts' and 'blasted hopes' and 'unrequited loves' and 'ennui' and 'wretchedness' and the whole lurid and artistical and melo-dramatic effects. Preserve perfect calmness and sanity … in the best poems appears the human body, well-formed, natural, accepting itself, unaware of shame, loving that which is necessary to make it complete, proud of its strength, active, receptive, a father, a mother …

For Whitman sexuality is not just a dirty subject that gets talked about in dark corners but is something that is represented by strong, ordinary people like mothers, fathers, and athletes.

However, even with this new openness in mind, there was a fine line to be drawn that Whitman seems to cross at times. Consider "Spontaneous Me," otherwise known as "Bunch Poem," one of the poems "banned in Boston," as discussed in a later lecture.

> The real poems (what we call poems being merely pictures),
> The poems of the privacy of the night, and of men like me,
> This poem, drooping shy and unseen, that I always carry,
> and that all men carry
> (Know, once for all, avowed on purpose, wherever are men like me,
> are our lusty, lurking, masculine poems),
> Love-thoughts, love-joice, love-odor, love-yielding, love-climbers,
> and the climbing sap,
> Arms and hands of love—lips of love—phallic thumb of love—
> breasts of love—bellies, pressed and glued together with love,
> Earth of chaste love—life that is only life after love,
> The body of my love—the body of the woman I love—
> the body of the man—the body of the earth … (lines 7-14)

Notice phrases such as "phallic thumb of love," "love-juice," and "love odor." Consider your own thoughts about this poem and what impact it must have had on Whitman's own world. Should there be a line and if so, where should it be drawn?

In fact, sometimes Whitman himself would censor his own behavior. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 is the most raw, aggressive, and sexual of editions. As time went on Whitman himself decided to excise certain words and phrases, as can be seen in this example:

"I hear the train'd soprano … she convulses me like the climax of my love grip" from the original edition later became, "I hear the train'd soprano … what work with hers is this?"

Even some of Whitman's biggest supporters came down hard on his use of certain words and phases. Emerson in a famous 1860 exchange in Boston Commons about "The Children of Adam" series, asked of Whitman after suggesting certain changes to the poem because of its content, "What have you to say to such things?" Whitman replied, " Only that while I can't answer them

at all, I feel more settled than ever to adhere to my own theory, and exemplify it." Even though Whitman would change some of his content, it is clear from this that philosophically he felt very strongly about preserving the feelings within the poems.

There are other examples of censorship; Whitman's boss at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. where he worked during the Civil War, fired him on June 30, 1865, after Secretary of the Interior James Harlan was told that Whitman's poems were "indecent." In addition, Thoreau, who admired Whitman greatly, was prompted to write to a friend with regards to some of the poems.

> There are two or three passages in the book which are disagreeable, to say the least: simply sensual. He does not celebrate love at all. It is as if the beasts spoke. I think that men have not been ashamed of themselves without reason. No doubt there have always been dens where such deeds were unblushingly recited, and it is no merit to compete with their inhabitants …

What Kind of Sex Life Did This Poet of Sex Have?

In M. Jimmie Killingsworth's book, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body, Sexuality, Politics, and the Text*, he argues that Whitman is the "first gay American"—that he "invented gayness" in literature. Remember, the word "homosexuality" did not appear until Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds coined it in their groundbreaking study, Sexual Inversion (1897).

In his poetry, Whitman suggests that he is heterosexual or sometimes bisexual, though arguably he writes that way to include women's points of view and to appeal to a universal audience. During his life though, certain patterns appear that suggest he was defensive about his sexual orientation and that he had experiences with women. When the English critic John Symonds wrote to him with certain questions about the Calamus poems Whitman wrote back:

> My life, young manhood, mid-age, times South etc., have been jolly, bodily, and doubtless open to criticism. Though unmarried I have had six children—two are dead, one living Southern grandchild, fine boy, writes to me occasionally—circumstances (connected with their fortune and benefit) have separated me from intimate relations.

Research has been done to verify these claims of progeny on Whitman's part, but to date no solid evidence has surfaced to support these suggestions. We can't say though, that Whitman was fearful of being known as a homosexual, it seems far more likely that his concern lay in not being narrowly categorized as a homosexual writer, for he felt this would deny him the universal appeal that he believed so very important for a writer.

Far more distinct patterns in his life seem to illustrate quite soundly that he was indeed a homosexual. Around 1859 Whitman befriended a man named Fred

Vaughn and from his writing from this period it is quite evident that Whitman and Vaughn most likely had a very certain type of friendship Then in 1865, Whitman met Pete Doyle, a former Confederate soldier who became his close companion for many years, and, in essence, the love of his life. In fact, Whitman saw Pete into the 1880s, though their attachment started fizzling out in the mid-1870s. During the late 1850s through the early 1860s, Whitman wrote extensively in his notebooks about meeting dozens of men and his relationships with them.

Whether or not he had sex regularly, Whitman's life and poetry suggest he was a very physical person and deeply interested in the body and its functions. He was fascinated, for example, with the pseudoscience of phrenology (the physical manifestation of spiritual and emotional conditions). He also was interested in other experiments having to do with sexuality, such as the Free Love movement that took root in America in the 1840s. Though he does not seem to have been directly involved, he certainly mingled with participants like Henry Clapp of the Pfaff's circle, who appears to have been active in the Brooklyn branch of the Commune of Free Love. Whitman was also very interested in anatomy and physiology. He was a fan of works such as *The Illustrated Family Gymnasium* (1857), and with the euphemistically titled "Anatomy Museums."

Whatever his sexuality, he was clearly a sexual and physical poet and no work represents this better than the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

The Calamus and Children of Adam Clusters

The 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* is made up of several poem groupings that Whitman termed "Clusters." The two clusters that are most interesting with regards to Whitman's sexuality are:

1. "The Calamus" (A Calamus is a reed-like plant with obvious phallic connotations, making this title appropriate for the homosexual qualities of these poems.)
2. "The Children of Adam" (As the title suggests, these clusters have more to do with procreative/heterosexual concerns.)

Whitman intended that these two collections be juxtaposed. The reasons he includes both these clusters together comes back to his desire to appeal to as universal of an audience as possible. However, there is much more passion and feeling in the "Calamus" cluster than in the "Children of Eden" cluster. In addition, the "Calamus" poems are arguably the strongest evidence to prove that Whitman was indeed a homosexual.

If one compares the first "Children of Adam" poem with the first "Calamus" poem, several important distinctions can be made. "Children of Adam 1" clearly shows Whitman as the universal man of poetry walking through the new Eden of America with Eve both in front and behind him, suggesting that they are all on an equal basis. The poem has an emphasis on the procreative capacity of man and woman and shows Whitman's ideas about heterosexuality and its utilitarian capacities and the beauty of those possibilities. If you compare these with "Calamus 1," which emphasizes homoeroticism and male upon male friendship, the distinction becomes very clear. The poem uses words like "secret" and "need" and has a much more personal and daring feel

to it. You see Whitman talking for the first time to a selective group, even mentioning “young men” and “comrades.” This poem heralds the beginning of a collection that dives to a deeper space within Whitman’s world. As you read on in the “Calamus”ß series the personal passion of Whitman becomes stronger and more direct and highlights directly his deep beliefs and feelings.

Following chronologically from these poems, we find Whitman traveling to the Civil War front in 1862. In the next lecture, Whitman’s involvement and connection with Civil War poetry will be discussed.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are the possible releationships between Whitman's sex life and his poetry?
2. How does *Leaves of Grass* serve as a representation of Whitman's sexuality?

Suggested Reading

Whitman, Walt. *Selected Poems 1855–1892, A New Edition*. Ed. Gary Schmidgall. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Callow, Philip. *From Noon to Starry Night: A Life of Walt Whitman*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992.

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Lecture 6:
Whitman's Civil War

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" and *Drum-Taps.*

Whitman called the Civil War the central event of his life. He told his friend Horace Traubel that the war was "the very center, circumference, umbillicus of my whole career."

He dedicated much of his autobiographical narrative *Specimen Days* to the War. In this lecture we'll look in particular at Whitman's hero, the "redeemer president" Abraham Lincoln. We'll also discuss Whitman's poetry of race, and how his poetry looked beyond color lines and still speaks to African Americans today.

Most people first come to Whitman through his poem "O Captain! My Captain!" which was easily the best loved of all Whitman's short poems during his lifetime and remains today one of his most well known works.

Whitman, it must be noted, was deeply ambivalent about this poem:

I'm honest when I say, damn 'my captain' and all the 'my captains' in my book! This is not the first time I have been irritated into saying I'm almost sorry I wrote the poem.

He felt the poem imperfect and felt it a "concession to the philistines." Nevertheless, Whitman kept this poem in all his collections. It's important when considering why he would do this to understand how Whitman felt about the character on which the poem is based—Abraham Lincoln.

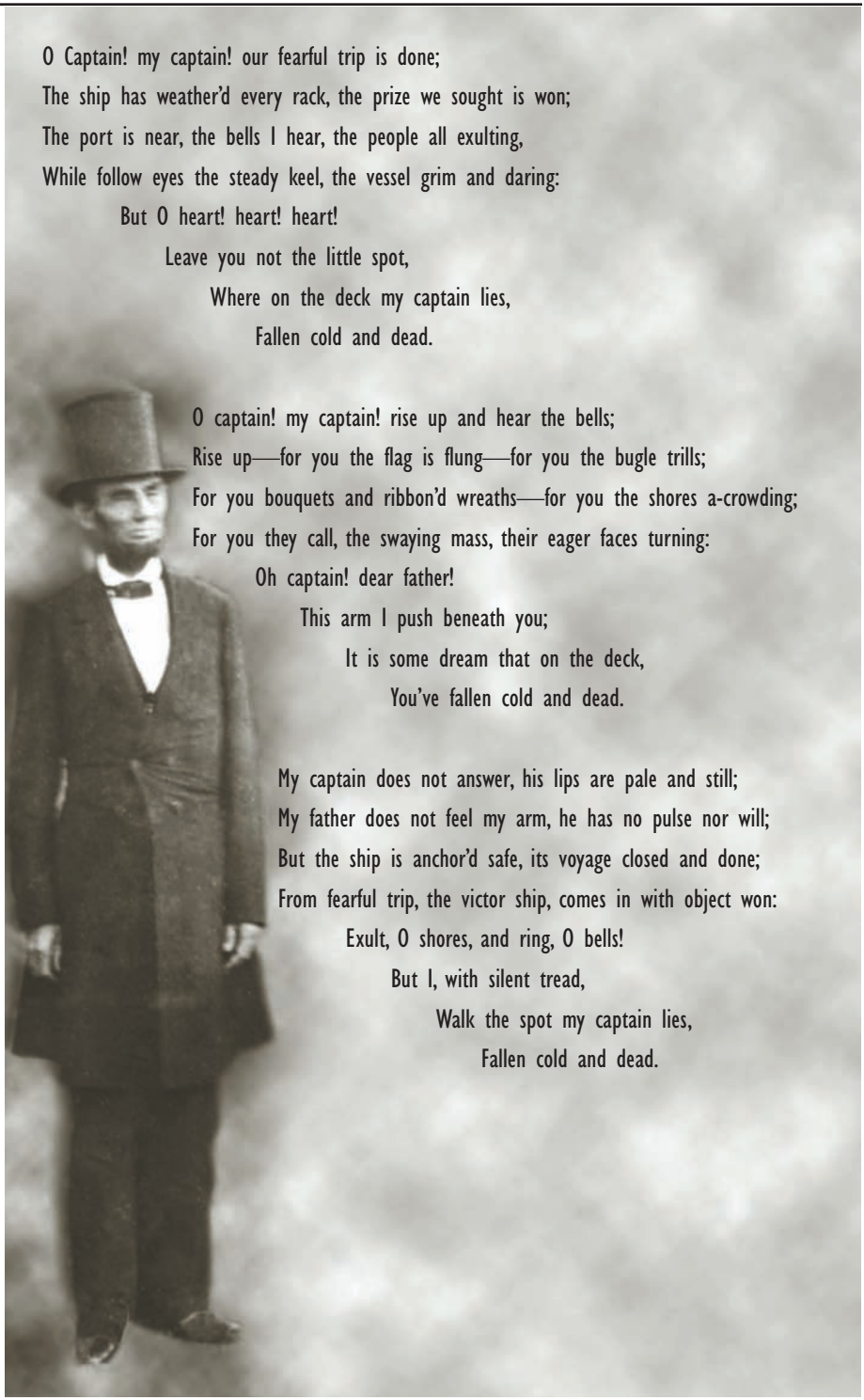
Historical Context of "O Captain! My Captain!"

Lincoln was Whitman's redeemer-president. He called Lincoln "the greatest, best, most characteristic, artistic, moral personality" in American life. Whitman considered the date of Lincoln's assassination by John Wilkes Booth, April 14, 1865, as a day of unequaled influence on the shaping of the Republic. Whitman said of Lincoln at this time: "Lincoln is particularly my man—particularly belongs to me; yes, and by the same token, I am Lincoln's man: I guess I particularly belong to him; we are afloat on the same stream—we are rooted in the same ground." (Epstein 90)

There is a reciprocal relationship between Lincoln and Whitman, and it was he who immortalized Lincoln for Americans. In "O Captain! My Captain!" and other poems of *Drum-Taps*, such as "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman glorifies Lincoln's role as the living embodiment of democracy.

Whitman's connections with Lincoln.

- both rose to greatness from humble backgrounds
- both were self-taught



O Captain! my captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:
But O heart! heart! heart!
Leave you not the little spot,
Where on the deck my captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

O captain! my captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills;
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding;
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning:
Oh captain! dear father!
This arm I push beneath you;
It is some dream that on the deck,
You've fallen cold and dead.

My captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still;
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will;
But the ship is anchor'd safe, its voyage closed and done;
From fearful trip, the victor ship, comes in with object won:
Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!
But I, with silent tread,
Walk the spot my captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

- both liked Shakespeare as well as minstrel shows
- both loved low humor and slang
- both attended séances
- Lincoln, like Whitman, knew the Bible better than any other book, the Bible that Whitman used as a model for his long rolling lines of poetry.
- both loved oratory

Whitman first saw Lincoln when he passed through New York on February 18, 1861 on his way to his inauguration. He saw him many times after this and has described him closely in his journals. After the attack on Fort Sumter, Whitman writes very evocatively about his feelings and sympathies for Lincoln. When Lincoln began mobilizing the army, two companies of the 13th Regiment marched out of the city and George Washington Whitman, Walt's brother, was one of the recruits.

On July 22, 1861, during the Battle of Bull Run, the Union army was handed its first crushing defeat. The routed Union troops began pouring into Washington and the seriousness of the situation dawned on the North, leading Lincoln to immediately set about reorganizing forces. It's at this point that Whitman's admiration for Lincoln increases. Whitman went as far as to write recruiting poems like, "Beat! Beat! Drums!" exhorting the Union to rise up in war.

From 1861, Whitman starts to visit wounded troops in the New York Hospital on Broadway. It had begun to receive soldiers after Bull Run and steadily increased its services to military men as the war continued. By the spring of 1862, this hospital was taking care of several hundred sick and wounded soldiers, and Whitman was regularly spending his Sunday afternoons and evenings visiting them. Then, Whitman settled in Washington in January 1863, where he saw Lincoln twenty to thirty times and continued going to the hospitals. "I think well of the president," Whitman wrote to his friend Fred Gray in 1863."He has a face like a Hoosier Michelangelo, so awful ugly it becomes beautiful, with its strange mouth, its deep cut criss-cross lines, and its doughnut complexion."

The result of these experiences with Lincoln culminated in a number of works: *Drum-Taps* (1865), *Sequel to Drum-Taps* (1866), as well as a stunning series of Civil War letters and lectures.

Whitman's Civil War Letters

The Civil War was America's bloodiest war, and Whitman got to see much of it during his days in Washington. He volunteered as a nurse in the hospitals that sprung up in Washington at this time and saw much of the carnage wreaked by the war.

I saw the vision of armies;
And I saw, as in noiseless dreams, hundreds of battle-flags;
Borne through the smoke of the battles, and pierc'd with missiles,
    I saw them,
And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and bloody;
And at last but a few shreds of the flags left on the staffs
    (and all in silence),

And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.
I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men—I saw them;
I saw the debris and debris of all dead soldiers;
But I saw they were not as was thought;
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,
The living remain'd and suffer'd—the mother suffer'd,
And the wife and the child, and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.—Stanza 18 from "When Lilacs Last"

He helped with practical nursing and lent his emotional and personal support to wounded soldiers. He tried to make the soldiers feel better by keeping them company, buying them last wishes, telling them stories, and recording what they said and did for those who loved them. He played the role of guardian angel to these dying soldiers and often worked as a scribe for those who couldn't write for themselves.

Interior view of a Union hospital during the Civil War

Whitman and the Issue of Race

Whitman's love of Lincoln and the soldiers was rooted in his belief in the Union cause. He, like Lincoln, came to his radical political stance slowly. Lincoln at first disavowed extreme stances. His initial objective was to preserve the Union as it was. He favored the Fugitive Slave Law, gradual emancipation, and colonization back to Africa. Lincoln wanted to remain friendly to the South. In fact, as late as 1862, Lincoln wrote, "My paramount objective is to save the Union and is not either to save or destroy slavery." When Lincoln was elected in 1860, he was a moderate on the slavery issue.

Whitman's strongest statements of freedom of all come from the ten-year period between 1855 and 1865. Though it should be noted here that there were a few lapses—he was more conservative at the beginning and end of his career. Nevertheless, there is widespread admiration for Whitman's message from a distinguished group of African American writers, from Langston Hughes and Richard Wright to Yusef Komunyakaa and Cornel West.

Now known as "I Sing the Body Electric," this poem is a wonderful example of how Whitman from very early on was looking across the boundaries of race. This was originally one of the untitled twelve poems in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In working notes to this poem, he titled it "Blacks."

Flakes of breastmuscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby,
goodsized arms and legs,
And wonders within there yet.

Within there runs his blood … the same old blood …
the same red running blood;
There swells and jets his heart … There all passions and desires …
all reachings and aspirations:
Do you think they are not there because they are not expressed
in parlors and lecture-rooms?

This is not only one man … he is the father of those who shall
be fathers in their turns,
In him the start of populous states and rich republics,
Of him countless immortal lives and countless embodiments
and enjoyments.

How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his offspring
through the centuries?
Who might you find you have come from yourself if you could trace back
through the centuries?

—Stanza 7 lines 94-103 from "I Sing the Body Electric"

This poem was based on Whitman's experience seeing a slave auction in New Orleans in 1848, an event that he claims changed his life. It may be shocking to hear the line "I help the auctioneer" until we understand what Whitman is saying is that there is a reason to value the person on the auction block, that they are priceless and he can help to show the auctioneer and the public this fact. When he says, examine these, "Limbs, red black or white," Whitman reaches out to include all bodies that jostle for freedom. Everybody is the focus of divine and democratic energies in this poem.

He goes on to say "this is not only one man," and this is where Whitman desires to bring Americans out of their lethargy of discrimination and hierarchy and show that all men share a common lineage. For the first time in this poem, Whitman is seeking to become a fully representative voice of all people.

Whitman's hatred of slavery and strong abolitionist feelings increase between the 1855 first edition to the 1865 *Drum-Taps* poems. One of the 1860s poems illustrates this fact beautifully.

Walt Whitman's Caution (regarding enslaved nations)

To the States, or any one of them, or any city of the States,
Resist much, obey little;
Once unquestioning obedience, once fully enslaved,
Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city, of this earth ever
Afterward resumes its liberty.

From "Walt Whitman's Caution"

Whitman is challenging the status quo in a very tenuous time in American History. In this strong, open poetry, we see Whitman's attempt to become a fully representative voice speaking not only for parties and factions, but everyone. In the next lecture, entitled "Banned in Boston," we'll talk about how people tried to silence this voice.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why did Whitman call the Civil War the central event of his life?
2. Discuss the reciprocal relationship between Whitman and Abraham Lincoln.

Suggested Reading

Whitman, Walt. *Selected Poems 1855–1892, A New Edition*. Ed. Gary Schmidgall. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Epstein, Daniel Mark. *Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington*. New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2004.

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Whitman, Walt. *Memoranda During the War*. Ed. Peter Coviello. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Whitman, Walt. *Walt Whitman's Civil War*. Ed. Walter Lowenfels. New York: De Capo Press, 1989.

Article of Interest

Dedmond, Francis B., ed. "'Here Among Soldiers in Hospital': An Unpublished Letter from Walt Whitman to Lucia Jane Russell Briggs." *New England Quarterly* 59 (December 1986), 544–548.

Lecture 7:
Banned in Boston:
Whitman and Censorship

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Walt Whitman's "Poem of Procreation."

Do you think American is sexually repressed or obsessed? We've already mentioned the repression of nineteenth-century American culture, and the curious contradictions of the "seamy side" to Whitman's America. Significantly, there was no real ban on pornography and the popularity of soft-porn novels, "sensation novels," is greatly evidenced at this time. (Whitman himself began writing a city mystery novel titled *Proud Antoinette: New York Romance of Today*, involving a young man lured away from his virtuous girlfriend by a passionate prostitute who causes his moral ruin).

After the Civil War, the stakes in the battle of pornographic writings were raised. In 1871, Anthony Comstock established the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, a group he served until 1915 as the nation's leading foe of so-called vice. It was interesting timing for Whitman. In 1881, James R. Osgood, a prominent publisher in Boston, offered to publish a new edition of Whitman's poems. This was a first for Whitman—being published by a mainstream publisher. It was Whitman's chance to publish a portable, tasteful edition—he hoped that Americans might carry around this smaller version. He'd get twenty-five cents for each copy sold, and ensured Osgood would be his publisher for the next 10 years.

Whitman was demanding about leaving in the "racier" early poems of the 1850s and 1860s.

> Fair warning on one point—the old pieces, the sexuality ones, about which the original row was started and kept up so long are all retained, and must go in the same as ever.

On March 1, 1882, Boston district attorney Oliver Stevens sent James R. Osgood an order to stop publication of *Leaves of Grass* on the grounds that it violated "the Public Statutes concerning obscene literature." Wishing to avoid a suit, Osgood sent Whitman Steven's notice along with the list of poems and passages that were to be deleted or changed for publication to continue.

Deleted in part or completely were: "A Woman Waits for Me," "The Dalliance of the Eagles," "Spontaneous Me," "To a Common Prostitute," "I Sing the Body Electric," "The Sleepers," "Song of Myself," and "Unfolded Out of the Folds."

The Dalliance of the Eagles

Skirting the river road (my forenoon walk, my rest),
Skyward in air a sudden muffled sound, the dalliance of the eagles,
The rushing amorous contact high in space together,
The clinching interlocking claws, a living, fierce, gyrating wheel,
Four beating wings, two beaks, a swirling mass tight grappling,
In tumbling turning clustering loops, straight downward falling,
Till o'er the river pois'd, the twain yet one, a moment's lull,
A motionless still balance in the air, then parting, talons loosing,
Upward again on slow-firm pinions slanting, their separate diverse flight,
She hers, he his, pursuing.

How could this poem be considered obscene?

Whitman was willing to make some changes to the poems; he wrote Osgood that he would revise "Woman Waits," "Body Electric," and "Spontaneous Me." But when Osgood informed him that additional changes would be required, Whitman wrote,"The whole list and entire is rejected by me, and will not be thought of under any circumstances."

Osgood paid him royalties (about 1600 copies had been sold) and gave Whitman the plates; the poet eventually brought the business to a small Philadelphia printer named Rees Welch, who later became David McKay and a major publisher of *Leaves of Grass*.

The banning of the Osgood edition was a culminating moment in America's cultural history. Whitman immediately sent off his anti-censorship essay "A Memorandum at a Venture" to the *North American Review*, defending what he called his natural treatment of sex against the extremes of repressiveness and pornography. It's a very strong statement describing where Whitman finds fault with American culture of his time.

He discusses two prevailing attitudes towards American culture and sexual matters:

- The conventional attitude of "good folks" and the writing he called "good print," which he views as the repressive side of the culture, where any direct statement of sexuality is considered taboo.
- "The wit of masculine circles, and in erotic stories and talk." He's referring here to people or works that aspire to some form of titillation and erotic content.

Whitman sees these two schools developing, identifies them and comes up with his own view on the subject. He called for a new point of view—one in which …

… sexual passion is a legitimate subject for the modern writer … The sexual passion in itself, while normal and unperverted is inherently legitimate, creditable, not necessarily an improper theme for a poet, as confessedly not for a scientist.

One of the major reasons for Whitman arguing that a new attitude toward sex must come out is the Women's Rights Movement. Whitman not only comes out for his own freedom as an artist but also for the freedom of women, who are first beginning to experience equality.

One of the poems that looked directly at women's issues happened to be one of the infamous "banned" poems, "Poem of Procreation," later known as "A Woman Waits for Me."

> A woman waits for me, she contains all, nothing is lacking,
> Yet all were lacking if sex were lacking, or if the moisture
> of the right man were lacking

The use of the word "right" in this context is very interesting. Marriage was not a choice for women at the time. Reformers in the 1850s went as far as to call marriage "legalized prostitution," since countless women were bound to husbands by the law. Marriages were often arranged and based on money, so the concept Whitman puts forth of the "right man" was an enormously radical one. Whitman posited that not just any sex was good, but that sex between partners that liked and deserved and wanted each other was sex that was natural and organic and should not be considered taboo. This form of sexual radicalism gave power to those who were disenfranchised at the time.

How were women otherwise restricted, besides marriage rights?

- an inability to own property once married
- limited education and career possibilities
- physically restricted (no sports or exercise; corsets)

But an idea of the "new woman" was emerging, with the help of activists like Lucretia Mott, a Quaker and founder of the first Female Anti-Slavery Society, and Fanny Wright, who shocked conservatives with her electrifying appeals on behalf of women and workers. Also, Ernestine Rose lectured on women's rights in twenty-three states. Because of her foreign accent, Jewish ancestry, and outspoken infidelity, she met with suspicion everywhere, but she won many to the feminist cause with her forceful speeches. These women were all greatly admired by Whitman, who wrote much praise for them.

"Real" Women vs. "Contained" Women

It was commonly pointed out in Whitman's day that the health of modern American women paled in comparison with that of previous generations, or of women living abroad. In 1858, a writer for *Life Illustrated* pointed out:

> It is notorious, all over the world, that American women are unhealthy, and that the tendency to disease and infirmity is constantly increasing … the ill health of women is one of the leading causes of the ultimate degeneracy of the American people, and the final overthrow of our republican government.

The clothing that was confining women, such as corsets, was a serious contributor to the ill health of women at this time. The perfect waist size for women was eighteen inches. There were movements during the 1850's that went against this idea of women being confined by society and their own accoutrements. A series of articles published by Fowler and Wells in 1857 known as *The Illustrated Family Gymnasium* noted "the artificial deformity of the females" and outlined a rigorous athletic regimen illustrated by pictures of women doing exercises and lifting barbells. The health movement flowered in this period, as seen by works such as Dr. Dio Lewis' *New Gymnastics for Men, Women, and Children* (1863). The censors of Victorian sensibility would find activities like these very undignified for women, and if women were to let go in the way that Whitman was writing about, many thought it could be the possible total degeneracy of American culture.

How do parts of "A Women Waits for Me" work against this idea of female empowerment? Are there sections or words of this poem that seem to herald the stereotypical idea of machismo? If so, why do you think Whitman chooses this view?

For Whitman the procreative capacity of women is an all-powerful concept. It feeds into the idealization he has of the maternal role of women.

> First the man is shaped in the woman, he can then be shaped in himself.
> —From the banned poem "Unfolded out of the Folds"

There was an obvious attempt on Whitman's part to reach out to female readers. The original *Leaves of Grass* even looked like a piece of domestic fiction in the hope that it would appeal to women readers. Women are mentioned in half of the 403 pages of the 1892 Edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

> *Leaves of Grass* is essentially a women's book. The women do not know it. It speaks out the necessities, its cry is the cry of the right and wrong of the women's sex, of the woman first of all, of the facts of creation first of all, of the feminine. (Whitman to his friend Horace Traubel)

We can see now how Whitman was censored, and the reasons why he was censored, particularly this idea that he was talking to a female population, which many sought to control. In the next section, we'll see not only how he speaks to his own contemporary audience, but how he projects his voice into the future.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why was the banning of the Osgood edition of *Leaves of Grass* a culminating moment in America's cultural history?
2. What were Whitman's views on the natural role of women?

Suggested Reading

Whitman, Walt. *Selected Poems 1855–1892, A New Edition*. Ed. Gary Schmidgall. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Aspiz, Harold. *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1980.

Selby, Nick, ed. *The Poetry of Walt Whitman: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

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Scholnick, Robert J. "The Texts and Contexts of 'Calamus': Did Whitman Censor Himself in 1860?" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 21 (Winter/Spring 2004), 109–130.

Lecture 8:
Glancing Back, Looking Forward:
Whitman and the Promise of America

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (the later sections).

Many readers feel that Whitman wrote his best poetry in the first three or four editions of *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1865). Whitman however continued to write up until ten days before he died. This leaves a significant amount of time and work for which Whitman is less well known. Why would this be? How does Whitman change as a man and a poet in his last twenty years? What sort of legacy does Whitman establish for the poets to come in America's history?

Whitman constantly revised and expanded his work and wrote new poems. These revisions and reconsiderations are signs of an active and flexible mind, one unwilling to settle or stagnate despite the appeal of worldly success and acceptance and the burdens of heartache, disease, loss, and age. Throughout his life, he was continually reaching for new ideas and additions to his oeuvre. Even while Whitman is staying active as a poet he's also changing his image of what his poetry should do and what his country represents. The late Whitman is really a different poet from the early Whitman.

There is an essay published in 1888 that illustrates this fact entitled "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads." In it is the idea that Whitman is wrapping up his vision of what his poetic enterprise consisted of. This essay frames his late career in the same way that the "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass* encapsulates his early career in 1855.

In the third paragraph of "A Backward Glance," written not long before his death, Whitman comes out with a statement of what he thinks has been accomplished and what he thinks remains to be done in his career:

> That I have not gained the acceptance of my own time, but have fallen back on fond dreams of the future—anticipations—That from a worldly and business point of view *Leaves of Grass* has been worse than a failure—that public criticism on the book and myself as author of it yet shows mark'd anger and contempt more than anything else … As fulfilled, or partially fulfilled, the best comfort of the whole business is that, unstopp'd and unwarp'd by any influence outside the soul within me, I have had my say entirely my own way, and put it unerringly on record—the value thereof to be decided by time.

This is a Whitman who is disillusioned and who realizes that some of his early hopes would not be realized. From the "Preface" of 1855: "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."

This is what Whitman had hoped for his whole life. When this didn't happen, he felt obliged to talk his way through his life and dreamed as he does in "A Backward Glance." We see in Whitman's later life a modesty that was not before present. The overwhelming "I" of early poems leads to an understanding on his part that he forms part of a poetic lineage and that there may be poets after him that will be influenced by him but who may also be able to speak better to the new and growing America.

> And whether my friends claim it for me or not, I know well enough too, that in respect to pictorial talent, dramatic situations, and especially in verbal melody and all the conventional technique of poetry, not only the divine works that stand ahead in the world's reading, but dozens more transcend (some of them immeasurably transcend) all I have done, or could do.

And from the end of the essay …

> … the strongest and sweetest songs yet remain to be sung.

Whitman's Late Collection: A Poet looking at Post-Bellum America

By studying poems from Whitman's late collection, *Goodbye My Fancy*, especially "To the Sunset Breeze," we can see in this mode that he dwells on what he has done and where he is in the larger scheme of the world of poetry and history. There is the sense that his work is finished and that he must hand the torch to new poets to complete the tasks he originally set for himself. These poems are so different both in content and texture, and to fully explain why this is, it is necessary to return to Whitman and his views on the results of the Civil War.

The Civil War ended in 1865, and did not bring with it the changes for which Whitman had wished. As a poet reflective of his country, what did he now have to write about, when his country had seemed to disappoint him? The America Whitman used to sing to no longer existed, and was being replaced. This seems to have had a profound effect on him.

In the late 1860s, Whitman looked out on a cultural landscape in many ways different from the one he had surveyed a decade earlier. Among the losers of the war were the values of individualism, state autonomy, and local power. Among the winners were federalism, centralized control, technology, and industrialism. The powers of the federal government expanded, and several laws—including the chartering of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads—gave huge boosts to business. The spirit of centralization and organization affected many areas of American life. For example:

- Antebellum fads like the pseudosciences of phrenology, harmonialism, and mesmerism were supplanted by more institutionalized mind-cure movements, ranging from Christian Science (with its highly structured church organization) to theosophy, and were closely connected with consumerism. The seeming experimental, individualized nature of American religion had disappeared.

- Individualism (which in the late 1850s had fostered several forms of anarchism and bohemianism) later became co-opted by capitalism. Consider Henry Clapp, the former Prince of Bohemia. In 1865 Clapp revived his experimental paper, the *Saturday Press*. New York's bohemian culture had been wiped out by the war, however, and the paper quickly failed. Within two years Clapp was working as a clerk in a New York public office, leaving himself open to the jokes of his former friends.
- Urban conditions (still grubby and chaotic) were being dealt with by organizational entities such as New York's Metropolitan Board of Health, which in 1866 posted a momentous victory over cholera through improved sanitation, and the park movement.
- Even radical reform was touched by the institutional spirit. American feminists replaced the rather loose organizations of the antebellum period with the highly organized National Woman Suffrage Association and the competing American Women Suffrage Association.
- The development of colleges and stadium sports.
- Grand three-ring circuses replaced the small circuses from before the war.
- Plays and musicals saw far less direct interaction between performers and audiences than previously.

Due to these developments Whitman found that post-Belllum America was too big, baffling and too complex for the man who once thought he could see the "bigger picture."

The Last Years of America's First Poet

Whitman—the man and the poet—changed dramatically because of the Civil War and related occurrences. The feeling of health and the passionate questionings regarding love were no longer part of his life. In 1858, Whitman started experiencing strokes that would eventually leave him half paralyzed. In 1863, he reported a "bad humming feeling and deafness, stupor-like at times." In 1864, he reported a "deathly faintness." Whitman would later claim that it was the war that changed his life, and many doctors agreed that he had "absorbed hospital sicknesses into his system." Also, at home, there were unhealthy family issues occurring. His brother George returned shell-shocked from the war; Hannah and Heyde carried on endless feuds in Burlington, and in 1868 her thumb had to be amputated because of an infection; Martha coughed up blood and died of tuberculosis in 1873; Andrew's widow Nancy, heartily despised by the family, prostituted and begged on the streets with her children (including her son Andrew, who was run over and killed by a brewery wagon); his other brother Jesse died of a ruptured aneurysm in a lunatic asylum and was buried in a potter's field in 1870.

In addition Whitman's love life was a mess. His relationship with Pete Doyle, whom he met in Washington, D.C. in 1865, when he was 45 and Pete was 21, had deteriorated. Pete was subject to mood shifts. In August 1869, Pete Doyle made a proposition to Whitman that Walt was shocked by. He said, "It seemed to me … that the one I loved, and who had always been manly and sensible, was gone, and a fool and intentional murderer stood in his place."

Doyle went on to say later that “Walt was too clean. He hated anything which was not clean. Not any kind of dissipation in him.” He also complained that Whitman never smoked and drank only very moderately in Washington.

Whitman then, is strongly disappointed with the outcome of the Civil War, as can be seen by his personal life and by his writings, especially in the late essay, “Democratic Vistas” (1871). He speaks of the physical horrors he has seen in the Civil War and of how all the bloodshed does not seem to have been compensated for with any sort of new freedom or vision for America. He condemns Lincoln’s War Department as being corrupt and rotten under Simon Cameron, who gave lucrative government contracts to his business cronies in Pennsylvania and bemoans the fact that the political and social corruption survived the war and was worsening. He is surprised and disappointed that the success of the Union in the Civil War doesn’t begin a new powerful era of democracy.

Whitman, who had so much riding on the idea that America could turn around after the War and fulfill its promise, finds that when this fails to materialize, he begins to espouse a very new form of negativity. He does, however, speak of his hopefulness for the future, for poetry and women and about the unity of the country and the unity of its people:

Poets to come!
Not to-day is to justify me, and Democracy, and what we are for,
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater
    than before known,
You must justify me.

Indeed, if it were not for you, what would I be?
What is the little I have done, except to arouse you?
—beginning of “Chants Democratic 14”

The poem that Whitman wanted to be the last poem in all of his collections from 1860 on is called “So Long” and illustrates that there is still a tremendous amount of strength, depth and challenge to Whitman’s work:

I have pressed through in my own right,
I have sung the body and the soul, war and peace have I
    Sung, and the songs of life and death,
And the songs of birth, and shown that there are many
    Births.

And from the ending:

Remember my words, I may again return,
I love you, I depart from materials,
I am as one disembodied, triumphant, dead.

There is a feeling here that we are alone with Whitman for the final time, and with the feeling that he is ready to leave us. Unlike how Whitman ends many of his poems, here he chooses the word “dead.” Why would he choose this ending? Perhaps the physical Whitman has passed and now he is more of a spiritual presence, so that the body may be gone but the feeling, emotion and spirit continues.

On March 26, 1892 at 6:43, two months and several days short of his 73rd birthday, Whitman died of bronchial pneumonia. It may have been the final complication of tuberculosis that he brought back from his time in the hospitals of the Civil War. Four days later he was buried in Camden, New Jersey. A public viewing of the body was held in his house, where thousands of people attended. There was a strange silence at the funeral where no one spoke; it was a silence that permeated Whitman’s end.

In the remaining lectures we will investigate how intense the response has been to the legacy of Walt Whitman. In the next lecture we’ll look at the first important American critical response to Whitman. In particular Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What effect did the changing cultural landscape have on Whitman and his poetry?
2. What particular disappointments did Whitman have over the outcome of the Civil War?

Suggested Reading

Whitman, Walt. *Selected Poems 1855–1892, A New Edition*. Ed. Gary Schmidgall. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

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Carpenter, Edward. *Days with Walt Whitman*. London: George Allen, 1906.

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Kennedy, William Sloane. *Reminiscences of Walt Whitman*. London: Gardner, 1896.

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Myerson, Joel, ed. *Whitman in His Own Time*. Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1991.

Lecture 9:
Whitman Among the Moderns

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read portions of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," Ezra Pound's "Cantos" and William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*.

In this lecture, we'll look at three early respondents to Whitman's legacy: T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. These Modernist poets were among Whitman's very first American "answerers," so their opinion is particularly important to the history of Whitman criticism. And all three had subtle, tension-fraught relationships with Whitman—all of them different. Eliot's was the most overtly critical, Pound's shifted dramatically over time from very negatively critical to much more positive, and Williams stated outright that "Whitman created the art of poetry in America."

Each of these major poet's work: Eliot's "The Waste Land," Pound's "Cantos" and Williams' *Paterson* are written on an epic scale and show major influences from Whitman's works.

Whitman was the most outrageous, outspoken proponent of a break with tradition in his time. In 1855 when he announced a new point of origin for American literature, he intrigued a lot of people, and yet there was much caution regarding Whitman's self-proclaimed "barbaric yawp." Whitman's earliest reviewers admired this "gross yet elevated, superficial yet profound, this preposterous yet somehow fascinating book" (Charles Eliot Norton in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, September 1855).

We know that Whitman was not appreciated for much of his career, and this was true especially at the outset, which begs the question: When and where was Whitman first appreciated? In fact, the first initial attention Whitman received did not come from America, but from England. The volume of selected poems edited by William Rossetti in 1868 won for the American poet such eminent friends in England as Lord Tennyson and Robert Louis Stevenson. Among his earliest admirers was Algernon Charles Swinburne, who in 1871 wrote a poem entitled "To Walt Whitman in America."

> Send but a song oversea for us,
> Heart of their hearts who are free,
> Heart of their singer, to be for us
> More than our singing can be;
> Ours, in the tempest at error,
> With no light but the twilight of terror;
> Send us a song oversea!
> —from A.C. Swinburne's
> "To Walt Whitman in America"

The irony of this is that, overseas in America, readers were slow to react to Whitman. The first responses on American shores were either words of comfort and hope in the future (think here of Edwin Arlington Robinson, who wrote in *Walt Whitman*, "He shall sing tomorrow for all men.") or parodies (in fact, a whole book of parodies was published).

In the 1920s and 1930s, Whitman caught the attention of American High Modernists poets. Let's begin with the most influential of them all, T.S. Eliot.

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

It's hard to find two more unlike poets that Eliot and Whitman. However, Eliot is important to the discussion here, since he really helped shape modern American poetry.

Eliot was an ardent defender of European cultural tradition as the guiding light of American literature. He was elitist in principle and an ex-patriot (he lived in London, though he had grown up in St. Louis and gone to Harvard). He started writing poetry in college, and eventually turned to writing literary essays. His criticism was published in the *Egoist* and *Criterion* (the magazine that he founded). Eliot had a persuasive, academic style; his friend Ezra Pound had more of a "battering ram" approach. Together, the two of them had a tremendous effect on how poetry of the day was not only written, but also how it was evaluated.

His greatest poem was the "The Waste Land," which he began in 1921 and finished four years later in a sanatorium. Many consider this the definitive cultural statement of his time.

But in the academic world, his criticism was just as important as his poetry. Essays like "Tradition and Individual Talent" provided the groundwork for the New Critics and really brought new attention and importance to the art of poetry. He claimed in the essay that guidance was needed to fully understand the intricate art form of poetry.

Therefore, his ideas and opinions were important through the 20th century, which brings us to his opinions on Whitman. What were they? To Eliot, Whitman was an aesthetic failure. He was sentimental, naively nationalistic, and hopelessly chaotic. Perhaps the worst flaw of his poetry, to Eliot, was its formlessness. Eliot describes how he came to Whitman only in his 20s: "I did not read Whitman until much later (1908-9) in life and had to conquer an aversion to his form, as well as to much of his matter, in order to do so."

A little later in a London *Athenaeum* review of 1919, Eliot wrote that Whitman (along with Hawthorne and Poe) suffered from "the defect of American society … their world was thin; it was not corrupt enough."

Eliot didn't think that Whitman was radical enough, and that, in fact, Whitman didn't want change. In his essay "Whitman and Tennyson" (*The Nation* and *Athenaeum* 1926), Eliot, however has some positive things to say, such as, "Whitman was a man with a message, even if that message was sometimes badly mutilated in transmission; he was interested in what he had to say."

But ultimately, for Eliot, Whitman is representative of an America "which no longer exists." And Eliot described Whitman as "conservative, rather than reactionary or revolutionary; that is to say [he] believed explicitly in progress, and believed implicitly that progress consists in things remaining much as they are."

It seems that Eliot had a very different opinion than most about Whitman's politics. Something stalled for him in Whitman's actual actions. He writes in

an essay entitled “American Literature and the American Language” (1953):

> To Walt Whitman, a great influence on modern literature has been attributed. I wonder if this has not been exaggerated. In this respect, he reminds me of Gerard Manley Hopkins—a lesser poet than Whitman, but also a remarkable innovator in style. Whitman and Hopkins, I think, both found an idiom and a metric perfectly suited for what they had to say; and very doubtfully adaptable to what anyone else has to say.

These are critical comments, and yet there is a suggestion that Eliot was not entirely negative on Whitman. Is it possible there was an influence anyway on Eliot’s work?

Arguably, Whitman’s “Song of Myself”—the first great American personal epic—makes poems like Eliot’s “The Waste Land” conceivable. Would Eliot’s epic have been possible without Whitman’s own language experiment? Maybe, though the way Eliot exploits poetically his emotional experience, and the way he uses his feelings to represent his time and place, and his long lyrical sequences, all point back to Whitman.

Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

Ezra Pound was a highly influential experimentalist with language. He learned to love language from early on, taking Latin in high school, and he planned to be a poet through college and graduate school (he earned a Masters in poetry at University of Pennsylvania). After trying out teaching and getting fired for misconduct, Pound went to Europe in 1908. He was friendly with a literary circle, and even served as secretary to Yeats for a while.

Ezra Pound

Here, Pound first tried to establish a new kind of poetry he called “imagism,” which was an attempt to present an object directly rather than generalizing about it. He also worked on translations, not only from Latin, but also freely from Chinese and Japanese.

The most important thing he concentrated on from 1920 until his death in 1972 was the writing of his “cantos” (he left 116 in all). They reflect the experiences of the years he composed them.

At heart, Pound believed that a great poem had to be long, and he hoped to write such a poem. Toward that end, he started working on his “cantos”—these were separate poems of varying lengths, combining imagination, memory, descriptions, and excerpts from other works. They were forged into a unity by the heart of the poet’s imagination and would somehow, he hoped, form a coherent pattern. What was his model for this? It

seems obvious that Pound was looking back to *Leaves of Grass* for inspiration with these ideas. Whitman, as we know, had a way of making many separate poems cohere in a new kind of long structure that depended completely on the poet's mind and personality.

This bow to Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* is even more odd, considering how critical Pound had always been of Whitman's poetry. In early works, he openly criticized Whitman's style—the long lines, the generalities, the out-of-control movement.

In an early prose work, "The Spirit of Romance" (1910), for example, Pound complained that Whitman was not master of his art or of the emotions within them. However, as early as 1913, Pound started acknowledging his debt to Whitman publishing a poem ("A Pact") in an influential new journal called *Poetry*.

By 1948, his affinity for Whitman was so great that "there is no more callow talk about Whitman's not being 'master of the forces which beat up on him.'" He obviously both hated and loved his "spiritual father." In his late essay, "What I Feel About Walt Whitman," Pound wrote:

> Whitman IS America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but he IS America … he is disgusting. He is an exceedingly nauseating pill, but he accomplishes his mission … I read him (in many parts) with acute pain, but when I write of certain things I find myself using his rhythms. The expression of certain things related to cosmic consciousness seems tainted with this maramis.

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman—
I have detested you long enough.
I come to you as a grown child
Who has had a pig-headed father;
I am old enough now to make friends.
It was you that broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.
We have one sap and one root—
Let there be commerce between us.
—from "A Pact" by Ezra Pound

Pound finally went on to say, "Mentally I am a Walt Whitman who has learned to wear a collar and a dress shirt (although at times inimical to both)."

In the Pisan "Cantos" of 1948, specifically "Canto 80," there is much reference to Whitman. "Dear Walter" appears in the second stanza. Some of Whitman's favorite phrasings appear in this canto: "The warp and the woof with the sky wet as ocean, flowing with liquid slate."

Pound even alludes to Whitman's friends and mentions the likes of Whitman's tastes. Pound, in the end, concedes that Whitman is the "home of tradition."

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

Williams was born in Rutherford, NJ, near Paterson (the city he'd commemorate with his Whitmanesque personal epic titled *Paterson* in 1883). He remained there most of his life, setting up his medical practice and working there until poor health forced him to retire.

Williams met Pound and the poet H.D. (originally Hilda Doolittle) in college and was influenced by their writing experiments, though he stayed on his track to medical school. He eventually went on to specialize in pediatrics—and it's said that he delivered over 2,000 babies over his lifetime.

Williams only wrote at night, and John Keats heavily influenced his first poems.

Gradually, he cultivated a philosophy for his poetry (though he was always opposed to speaking abstractly about it, like Pound and Eliot). He aimed for a simplicity and matter-of-factness in his style. One of his agendas was that he wanted a vocabulary of up-to-date American speech and a poetic line drawn from the cadences of American life. He was very interested in bringing conversations and experience into informing both the sound and sense of his work. It is said that one of the things he aspired to was making poetry actually look easy. He liked to write about things rather than ideas. "No ideas but in things," he said.

Therefore, it's kind of easy to see why Williams, of the three poets discussed here, would most closely follow Whitman's lead. Like Whitman, he was a workingman who cared about his work and humanity. His earthly plainness would probably have been appealing to Whitman too. Williams may have discarded the long poetic line, but he kept the idea of basing a poetry around the rhythms of American language, which was a strong concern of Whitman's. The feeling of spontaneity and naturalness that comes from Williams' poetry is a common link with the poetry of Whitman.

And Williams himself acknowledged that Whitman was "a key man to whom I keep returning." He continued to describe Whitman in *Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist* (1939) as "tremendously important in the history of modern poetry … he broke through the deadness of copied forms … that was basic and good."

So it's also easy to agree with Robert Lowell, who said in 1966, "Williams is part of the great breath of our literature. *Paterson* is our *Leaves of Grass*."

Paterson (1963) is Williams' great epic, and one of the masterpieces of modern American literature. It is divided into five books (with fragments from an unfinished sixth).

It is about New Jersey, and Williams had special sympathy for Whitman, since Whitman had spent his final years in New Jersey.

In a comment on the poem in 1951, Williams wrote that Whitman, "always said that the poems, which had broken the dominance of the iambic pentameter in English prosody, had only begun his theme. I agree. It is up to us, in the new dialect, to continue it by a new construction upon the syllables."

As Williams is piecing together his poem, he realizes that he is answering Whitman's call. By way of introduction, let's consider the Author's Note to *Paterson*: "A man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody."

On a very basic level, Whitman connected strongly with his own city, much as Williams did. What Williams is trying to do in *Paterson* is like a study in miniature of what Whitman tried to do in *Leaves of Grass*.

Williams, in *Paterson*, is talking chronologically about a person's life and connecting it with what happens with place. Consider Whitman's poem, "There Was a Child Went Forth Every Day," which we discussed in an earlier lecture.

This idea of a person in flux, who is constantly "becoming" instead of just "being," was obviously a great influence on Williams.

There are physical reminders in Williams' poetry to that of Whitman's. There are long lists, much like in Whitman's work, as well as newspaper accounts, personal letters, and historical surveys. There are conversations everywhere in the text—sometimes among characters, sometimes between reader and writer. Also, there are efforts to connect with the reader as there is in Whitman's call to himself and his reader in "Song of Myself."

Eliot, Pound, and Williams were interested in matters of style. While they conversed with him over such matters, Whitman was also invoked and argued with by poets who were more socially active and engaged on the political left. During the 1930s, journals like *New Masses* and *Comrades* frequently reprinted Whitman's poems and published new poems about and to Whitman. Whitman's poetry came to be seen by leftist poets as socially powerful, a clarion call to socialist revolution.

In the next lecture, we'll see how one group of radical voices looks to Whitman for inspiration—perhaps the least likely group— the black voices of the Harlem Renaissance, specifically its leading figure, Langston Hughes.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was T.S. Eliot's view of Whitman and his poetry?
2. What is "imagism"?

Suggested Reading

Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land*. Eds. Michael North and Werner Sollors. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.

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Eliot, T.S. *Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry*. New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2004.

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Surette, Leon. *Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and the Occult*. London: McGill-Queens University Press, June 1994.

Williams, William Carlos. *An Autobiography*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1967.

Lecture 10:
I, Too, Sing America:
Black Voices Respond to Whitman

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Langston Hughes' "The Ceaseless Rings of Walt Whitman."

During the 1930s, a number of radical poets discovered that there was a vast body of Whitman's work that seldom was discussed in the classroom or put into anthologies. It was this work that held Whitman's most revolutionary social messages. A number of poets of the Harlem Renaissance discovered him this way, including James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen—and Langston Hughes.

Hughes, the most popular and enduring poet of the Harlem Renaissance, will be our point of focus for our discussion of Whitman talking across race.

Background on the Harlem Renaissance

Harlem is, of course, a section of upper Manhattan, originally settled by the Dutch. It was a residential neighborhood for whites until a large migration of blacks from the south flooded the area from about 1914-1918. In the 1920s, a cultural explosion occurred called the Harlem Renaissance—a flowering of African-American literature and art. Southern black musicians brought jazz up to Harlem; WEB Dubois published *Crisis*, urging racial pride among African Americans; and Langston Hughes gave his songs and voice to the period as its major writer.

Biography of Langston Hughes

In 1902 Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri. In 1921-22, he attended Columbia University, where he was the only African American in his class and soon dropped out.

In 1923, he went to West Africa as a cabin boy, in search of his African roots. On his journey to Africa, he threw all of his textbooks from Columbia overboard except *Leaves of Grass*. "I had no intention of throwing that one away," he wrote in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*. Indeed, he was absorbing Whitman through this time—and Whitman helped Hughes decide that he wanted to be a writer. In 1926, *The Weary Blues*, his first book of poetry, is published. Starting in the 1920s and through the1930s, Hughes became known as the "Bard of Harlem," as a well-known public figure who founded black theater in Harlem, Los Angeles, and Chicago, wrote screenplays and an autobiography, and more poetry. Then in 1946, he edited a book of Whitman's poems called *I Hear the People Singing: Select Poetry of Walt Whitman*, in which he called Whitman the "Greatest of American Poets."

What Hughes is most known for is the important position he played as poet of the Harlem Renaissance, and for the development of a distinctive African-American poetics. For instance, he wrote lyrics about black life and racial protest,

and he presented a very strong social consciousness. Stylistically, Hughes experimented with rhythms and refrains from jazz, the blues, spirituals, and all sorts of work associated with black culture in America. He developed the idea of a "jazz" poem, to encapsulate some of the feelings of jazz into writing. He is very much immersed in the idea of developing a tradition of Black poetry.Nevertheless, Walt Whitman—in many ways the archetypal white male American poet—had a very strong influence on Hughes' work.

Old Walt Whitman
Went finding and seeking,
Finding less than sought,
Seeking more than found.
Every detail minding
Of the seeking or the finding,

Pleasured equally
In seeking as in finding.
Each detail minding,
Old Walt went seeking
And finding.
—from "Old Walt"
by Langston Hughes

One particular sign of this is that Hughes was alive for the Centennial of the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, and he wrote a poem for the occasion entitled "Old Walt."

Hughes himself felt like he was following the implications of Whitman's poetic theory, even in writing his "folk" poems. He put together three anthologies of Whitman's poetry during his life. One of these was for children. He even included several Whitman poems in an anthology on "The Poetry of the Negro." In his lectures and critical writings, he repeatedly encouraged black Americans to read Whitman's work.

It should be noted that even during Whitman's time, African Americans had looked upon Whitman favorably. In 1889, Whitman told Horace Traubel, "a Negro came in the other day; an educated man; very simple; very black skin; he was a reader of *Leaves of Grass*, and said "You will be of great use to our race." Whitman was very proud of this story.

Whitman had befriended several important black writers, and had sympathy for the enslaved during the Civil War, and this no doubt helped fire the sympathies of Hughes and other African Americans. Whitman always held on to the belief that owning people as property was wrong. It's instructive, too, to look at the poems that Hughes really admired. Consider "Song of the Answerer." In that particular poem, we see someone who can talk to all people, presidents and black field workers alike. It's easy to see that Hughes would be attracted to the open and friendly democratic message in these lines. The poet is recognizing that he must appreciate the differences among people and actually become them himself so that he may relate to and understand them.

We can see this clearly if we look again at Whitman's "Song of Myself":

I am the hounded slave … I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me … crack and again crack the marksmen,
I clutch the rails of the fence … my gore dribs thinned with the ooze of my skin,
I fall on the weeds and stones,
The riders spur their unwilling horses and haul close,
They taunt my dizzy ears … they beat me violently over the head with their whip-stocks.

What's striking about the above passage is that Whitman becomes a spokesperson for black subjectivity. The hounded slave is not the OBJECT, but the SUBJECT in his description. Furthermore, as Whitman becomes the fireman, the condemned mother, and all his other "changes of garments," he is bringing everyone together, and becoming a fully representative voice. The "you" is addressed to black and white, male, and female, and he is openly embracing all things.

Hughes also admired Whitman's use of language—specifically, the music of Whitman's language. As a poet who felt the rhythms of blues and spirituals in his work, he was sensitive to the oral quality of Whitman's work—the idea of the "songs" and a voice … but this is perhaps best seen by example. Let's look at two of Hughes' poems that demonstrate Whitman's influence.

One of Hughes' first published poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," published in *The Crisis* in June 1921, when Hughes was only 17, is an example of his early style:

> I've known rivers:
> I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow
> of human blood in human veins.
>
> My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
>
> I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
> I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
>
> I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
> I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went
> down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn
> all golden in the sunset.
>
> I've known rivers:
> Ancient, dusky rivers.
>
> My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

This poem both visually and aurally is in the cadence of the Whitmanesque style of free verse, the sort of orally based poetics with the cadence and diction of a voice on the street. The repetitions and biblical roll of the lines are evocative of Whitman too, as is the listing of the different rivers.

Whitman obviously provided a model for the young black poet looking for the way to sing his own song—and the song of his people. Here we see a very young Hughes who hasn't yet broken into the dialect tradition and strong folk-based poetics he would later employ, but it's clear that Whitman's language showed him the way early on. In terms of content, Hughes' idea that "his soul has grown deep like the rivers," that the poet's soul is incarnate in geography, comes directly from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* preface, where on page four he gives the description of the American poet, whose "spirit responds to his

country's spirit." The central theme here is that the poet's soul is incarnate in the geography of his country.

The difference that one hears with Hughes, though, is that he broadens the scope of his geography. He is, after all, an African American, so the rivers he lists encompass far more of the world. Hughes also does a wonderful thing in allowing himself as the speaker to travel through time. In the poem, he is at the birthplace of civilization, at the Tigris-Euphrates junction; he is on the Nile when the pyramids were built; he is with Lincoln in New Orleans. He's taking Whitman's idea, but taking it a step further, and making his vision even more expansive. Here we can see Hughes' own individualistic black voice and the importance of the past in his poetry.

Another point on the content of the poem that should be noted is the line, "I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young." It evokes Whitman's most famous poem, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry": "I too walked the streets of Manhattan Island, and bathed in the waters around it."

Whitman's line talks of the intimate connection he had with the East River—a river that Whitman saw be crossed "a hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence." This was his way of connecting to his future readers. As the river cease-lessly flows and endures, so does the poet. And this is exactly what Hughes is thinking of in his twice-repeated line, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

I too sing America

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When the company comes
Nobody'll dare
Say to me
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I too am America.

The second poem to look at and connect with Whitman is Hughes' "I, Too." This was a work that Hughes often recited last in his poetry readings and is almost a direct response to Whitman's poem, "I Hear America Singing." While this poem is a celebration of different American voices joining up and singing together—though you may notice that while there are many different people catalogued in the poem—there is no reference to color. Hughes' "I Too" is perhaps a response to this.

Here we have Hughes adding his voice, and his own distinctive poetic identity as a black man and as an American. He is daring others to exclude him and sounds almost defiant. Hughes must have been aware of the section of "Song of Myself" where Whitman has already invited Hughes and all others of color to his table.

This is the meal pleasantly set, this is the meat for natural
hunger,
It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous, I make
Appointments with all,
I will not have a single person slighted or left away,
The kept woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited;
The heavy-lipp'd slave is invited, the venerealee is
Invited;
There shall be no difference between them and the rest

So, perhaps, Hughes' "I Too" is not in defiance of Whitman, but is an acknowledgement and acceptance of Whitman's invitation.

Consider Hughes' description of Whitman's style in his essay, "The Ceaseless Rings of Walt Whitman," in which he emphasizes Whitman's own defiant mode: "Whitman sang without the frills, furbelows, and decorations of conventional poetry, usually without rhyme or measured prettiness. Perhaps because of his simplicity, timid poetry lovers over the years have been frightened away from his *Leaves of Grass*, poems as firmly rooted and as brightly growing as the grass itself."

Here Hughes is associating with someone he feels has a strong message and who needs to get this message across strongly.

Hughes as the representative voice of the Harlem Renaissance was also at the fore of the beginning of a black American poetics. There were other poets to follow him, and other black writers who heard the clarion call present in Whitman's voice. Among those African-American writers who have come to admire Whitman are June Jordan, Calvin Hernton, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Cornel West.

In the next lecture we will look at a literary movement happening about twenty years after the Harlem Renaissance entitled the Beat Movement and concentrate on another artist deeply affected by Whitman's sentiments—Allen Ginsberg.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was Whitman's role in the Harlem Renaissance?
2. How was Whitman's poetry a "clarion call" for African American writers?

Suggested Reading

Hughes, Langston. *Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. David Roessel. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Whitman, Walt. *Selected Poems 1855–1892, A New Edition*. Ed. Gary Schmidgall. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998.

Huggins, Nathan Irvin. *Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

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Lecture 11:
From "Barbaric Yawp" to "Howl"

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Allen Ginsberg's "Howl."

Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) considered himself to be the 20th century incarnation of Whitman. Ginsberg was the leading poet of the Beat Generation and one of the most radical poets of our time. Since he himself testified to Whitman's influence, we'll take a look at how the Whitmanic tradition streams through Ginsberg and his fellow Beats. His answer to Whitman's barbaric yawp in "Song of Myself" was "Howl," a long poem he started writing in 1955, one hundred years after the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published.

Schooled in the Whitmanic tradition, you'll find several aspects of Ginsberg's poetic stance familiar. Firstly, Ginsberg embraced the idea of the poet as seer, revolutionary, and aesthetic rebel. His poetry reflects a lot of Whitman's style, seen in the long, bardic free-verse lines and the content of sexual openness and exploration. Ginsberg was, by the way, also gay and wrote openly about gay issues and feelings. Like Whitman, Ginsberg loved America, though he was overtly critical of where America had gone since Whitman's day.

The Beat Generation

Allen Ginsberg was born in 1926 in Newark New Jersey and he died in New York City in 1997. The literary movement that he helped found in the 1950s, known as the Beat Generation, gained its moniker from a word used after WWII by jazz musicians meaning "down and out" or poor and exhausted. In 1944, as the legend goes, a Times Square hustler named Herbert Huncke used the term Beat and it caught the attention of William Burroughs, a Harvard graduate living in NYC. Through Burroughs, the word was passed on to Columbia students Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Kerouac shared an interest in drugs but also in writing—specifically, in creating a "new vision" of art, a new philosophy that broke from the settled postwar mentality that surrounded them. They admired the work of the Surrealists, of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, and most importantly of Walt Whitman. In 1948 the term "Beat Generation" was coined by Kerouac in a conversation with John Clellon Holmes, another writer who enjoyed theorizing about social trends and cultural changes. The book Holmes was writing was entitled *GO* and was published in 1952. A line from *GO*: "… you know, everyone I know is kind of furtive, kind of beat … a sort of revolution of the soul, I guess you might call it."

Holmes clarified his position in an article entitled "This is the Beat Generation" (*Sunday Times*, November 16, 1952). He characterized the Beat Generation as a cultural revolution in progress, made by a generation of

young people who were coming of age into a Cold War world without spiritual values they could honor.

What the Beats stood for:

- spiritual liberation
- sexual revolution (or liberation, especially gay liberation)
- political and social radicalism and revolution
- liberation of the word from censorship
- experimentation with controlled substances
- spread of ecological consciousness in the West; glorification of the city in the East

In essence, the Beats stood for a return to an appreciation of idiosyncrasy, rather than regimentation. There was belief in freedom and new paths to spirituality that involved an open frankness that differed greatly from the standard middle-class ethics of America.

"Everything belongs to me because I am poor," Jack Kerouac wrote in *On the Road*, the most well-known of Beat literary works that was based on Whitman's "Song of the Open Road": "Afoot and lighthearted, I take to the open road."

The original Beat nucleus was a small, tightly knit group comprised of Ginsberg, Kerouac, Holmes, and Burroughs primarily, but it gradually expanded to include a West Coast contingency of Beats, namely, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen. More recently, there has been an interest in studying women of the Beat Generation, like Diane Di Prima, Joyce Johnson, and Hettie Jones.

Ginsberg's "Supermarket in California"

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the full moon.
In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!
What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!—and you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.
I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?
I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and followed in my imagination by the store detective.
We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting

artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour.
Which way does your beard point tonight?
(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd.)
Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely.

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?
Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?

This is the first of many Ginsberg poems dedicated to Whitman. Allen Ginsberg moved to California in 1955 and this was the first time he was able to live with some space around him and have a new pastoral lifestyle. We also see Ginsberg using one of Whitman's famous cataloguing techniques. However, Ginsberg has adapted this listing technique to encompass a consumerist society. There is something programmed and artificial to this listing. The inclusion of Lorca in his list is telling in that Lorca also took Whitman as a major inspiration for his life and now finds himself and Whitman alienated in this plastic environment that Ginsberg has set forth in the poem. It may be important to note how this alienation comes about. In the poem a homosexual poet (Ginsberg) writes of two other homosexual poets (Lorca and Whitman). No one in this picture seems to fit in with the American culture and society of the 1950s. They also seem alienated because they are not participating in the consumerist, capitalist way of life that Ginsberg enumerates here.

Lots of Whitman's poems are evoked in this work. Think of the movement (wandering, walking, strolling) of "The Sleepers," and also of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." However, here the ferry is stopped, whereas in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," there is the implication that it is the passage, the journey, not the arrival, that is important

What is the "lost America of Love"? Whitman's idealized vision of America is played off of the vision Ginsberg has of America as a country that he loves, but also as a country with which he is deeply disillusioned. "What America did you have?" is an important question for Ginsberg. Even though Ginsberg sees the role of the American poet as seer, revolutionary, and aesthetic rebel, the mid-20th century poet's own poetic practice is more critical of the shortcomings of American society than Whitman's was a century earlier.

Ginsberg's direct response to "Song of Myself"—"Howl"

First it must be noted how contrasting the two titles are themselves. It's easy to be surface-oriented with this poem; indeed, critical attention has focused on the long lines and spontaneous feel of the writing (Ginsberg had Kerouac's "Rules

for Spontaneous Prose" written on the wall of the apartment in which he composed "Howl"). It's also easy to concentrate on the poem's breakthrough use of obscenity and overt gay references, it's also important to remember the results of the "Howl" trial in 1957. "Howl and Other Poems" was seized by the US Customs in San Francisco. Publishers Ferlinghetti and manager Shig Murao are tried, but not convicted of obscenity charges. Judge W.J. Clayton Horn's landmark ruling says that material with "the slightest possible redeeming social importance" is protected by the 1st and 14th amendments. This allowed for publication of D.H. Lawrence's and Henry Miller's works.

But the poem is founded on discipline—it took years for Ginsberg to produce this work. Allen's father Louis was a poet and member of the modernist circle that gathered around Alfred Kreymborg in the 1920s; although he was associated with some of the more experimental and innovative writers of his time, his own work was relatively conservative. As a doctrinaire socialist, he was a careful student of traditional literary form.

Allen Ginsberg, too, started this way. Though he was kicked out twice, he graduated from Columbia and there received the classical "core" education evident in his earliest writings. *The Gates of Wrath: Rhymed Poems, 1948-1952* shows how academic and technically skillful his first poetic attempts were. The models for Ginsberg were poets like Andrew Marvell and Sir Thomas Wyatt.

So "Howl" has a long foreground, much like "Song of Myself." In it, Ginsberg takes chances—perhaps even more chances than Whitman did in *Leaves of Grass*. The poem is graphic and obscene. Ginsberg uses strong language to describe and provoke strong, dark emotion. He, like Whitman, is upset by the state of the union and demands change. He shocks and appalls, but also transfixes—the vulgarity elicits an emotional response from the reader, and that is intended. Even the first line shows this intensity: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked."

The language of "Howl" has an electric quality. The images are striking, but it's really the language that gets under your skin. It begs to be read out loud. It feels urgent and contemporary, though it was written fifty years ago.

The Techniques of Writing "Howl"

There were some important influence and techniques that Ginsberg used in the composing of "Howl":

- Importance of jazz rhythms a la Charlie Parker and Lester Young (esp. "Lester Leaps In"). Kerouac made Ginsberg listen to Young's improvisation, where Young uses the same or a similar initial sounds (or series of notes) to start "catalogues" of thematic associations. Ginsberg began his series with "who." The rhythm of the catalogue, thus, becomes the element of control, freeing the mind for associations without the restriction of trying to make sense or follow a linear flow of thought. The importance has been noted of these ideas of music and rhythm to the poetry of Whitman.
- Rhythmic breathing units: Ginsberg became intrigued by the possibility of catalyzing his consciousness in his reader by arranging the rhythmic units to correspond exactly with this own breathing at the time of composition.

In essence language for Ginsberg is an extension of the physiology of the body. In his own words:

> The words we pronounce do connect finally to our body, connect to our breathing particularly, and breathing connects to our feeling articulated in language. Poetry is a rhythmic, vocal articulation of feeling, and the content of poetry is feeling as well as whatever else you would call it, if it were removed from feeling.

Amazingly, when the reader says the units aloud, in an excited mood, making sure he breathes with each rhythmic break, the experience can actually approach Ginsberg's original breath-mind-feeling patterns. This idea of the body and language connecting has a very clear precedent in the work of Whitman.

- Ginsberg was having fun with language here, making things up, much like Whitman. For example, his onomatopoeic use of repeated words like "boxcar, boxcar, boxcar," and phrases like "waving genitals and manuscripts" recall the tone of Whitman lines like, "The poems that droop shy and unseen" (from "Spontaneous Me").

The Shape of "Howl"

The poem is divided into three main parts and then has a footnote at the end. What is the poem about?

Part I is about feelings of protest, pain, outrage, attack, lamentation, alienation, darkness, suffering and isolation. It is a description of a group of outcasts (probably meant to include Ginsberg himself) seeking transcendent reality. What is the "angry fix" he talks about? Besides a narcotics urge, it could be a general quest, a visionary experience, of a sudden glimpse "into the depths of the universe". The desperate nature of the quest, plus the hostility of the society in which the quest is pursued, alienates and impoverishes the seekers, the "solitary Bartlebies" as Kerouac called them.

It is true that much of Part I is autobiographical, but for Ginsberg, as for Whitman, the personal communicates the universal.

Part II brings a definite mood shift to the poem. Here there is an indictment of modern society. Molloch, the god of abomination, is referenced extensively throughout and is a metaphor for the materialistic condition of Ginsberg's society. What are the consequences of Moloch?—commercialism, militarism, sexual repression, technocracy, soulless industrialization, sexual repression.

Part III is a personal address to Ginsberg's friend, Carl Solomon. Solomon, in the madhouse, is the specific representative of what the author regards as a general condition. Solomon's brave cry from the Rockland Mental Hospital is the essence of the poem's statement: his is the howl of anguished and desperate conviction. There is, however, a new sympathy and identification with the human spirit that prevails in Carl Solomon. There is a new confidence and expansiveness to the ending of this poem and one gets the sense that the human spirit emerges in the end after all of the pain and suffering. The poem actually moves from alienation to communion.

The Footnote has a rhapsodic quality where the inner eye triumphs and we see what we believe and we are what we believe. William Blake's inner vision triumphs here. ("If the doors of perception were cleans'd.") Everything that lives is holy. The essence of everything is holy—only the form may be foul or corrupted, or our vision be distorted. The poet descends into an underworld of darkness, suffering, isolation, and then ascends into spiritual knowledge, blessedness, achieved vision, and a sense of union with humanity and God.

Whitman feels this sense of falling and then rising, of destruction and then reconstruction, of the sleeping and the waking. There is a strong connection for Ginsberg with Whitman's vision of possibility and hope.

> Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore,
> Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
> To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to me,
> Shout, and laughingly dash with your hair.
> —Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," end of stanza 46.

In the next lecture we'll look at Whitman's influence on the visually based poetics of the New York School of the 1950s.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How does Allen Ginsberg's poetry reflect Whitman's poetic stance?
2. What did the Beat Generation stand for?
3. Consider the lasting legacy of the Beat Generation. How did this movement effect modern American culture?

Suggested Reading

Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

Other Books of Interest

Burroughs, William S. and Allen Ginsberg. *The Yage Letters*. New York: City Lights Books, 1972.

Charters, Ann. *Kerouac: A Biography*. With a forward by Allen Ginsberg. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.

Cherkovski, Neeli. *Whitman's Wild Children: Portraits of Twelve Poets*. Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 1998.

Ginsberg, Allen. *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays, 1952–1995*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

Raskin, Jonah. *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2004.

Schumacher, Michael A. Dharma Lion: *A Critical Biography of Allen Ginsberg*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.

Lecture 12:
Whitman, Visual Poetics, and the New York School

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read O'Hara's *Paterson*. View Jackson Pollack's painting "Autumn Rhythm" on-line.

Heirs to the Whitman legacy of this period include not only Frank O'Hara, the leading poet of the New York School, but several of the Abstract Expressionist painters—specifically, Jackson Pollack. Since O'Hara acknowledged that his poetry was a literary version of Pollack's paintings, we'll say a quick word on the Abstract Expressionists and Pollack's relationship to Whitman in particular.

Our main interest here is O'Hara's complex relationship with Whitman, a relationship more nuanced and less direct than Ginsberg's affection for his "courage teacher," and less of Williams' direct response to Whitman, in *Paterson*.

Why is O'Hara's reaction to Whitman more complicated? O'Hara was gay and a proud New Yorker—two characteristics that would suggest a close sympathy with Whitman. But O'Hara, though a poet, is described as maintaining an "anti-poetic stance." He refused to specify how a poem could be significant, and wrote what he called "I do this, I do that" poems. He is often deemed an apolitical, strictly aesthetic poet—a poet whose light, often campy sense of humor plays away from serious meaning, who was supposedly too ironic to be sincere. Could such a poet really be a follower of Whitman, with all his almost ridiculously raw emotion and raging politics? A close look at a few representative O'Hara writings will show that, despite the open mockery of Whitman's broad stance, O'Hara's poetry is clearly Whitmanesque both in terms of its experimental style and its content

Let's begin with a look at the visual roots of the poetics—the Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1950s.

Abstract Expressionism, a style of nonrepresentational painting, is considered America's greatest single contribution to the history of modern art. These painters—who included Jackson Pollack, Robert Motherwell, Larry Rivers, Willem de Kooning, and Philip Guston—helped shape the work of the New York School poets like John Ashberry, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler.

Abstract Expressionism dominated the New York scene for about 15 years after the end of WWII. It was a strong reaction against America's fascination with the European painting of artists like Picasso and Matisse. The abstract expressionists exalted instead in the idea of the individual and an unfettered expression of freedom. The movement was American on a grand scale, with energetic grand paintings. There was a general tendency for a free application of paint with these artists, though their styles all varied wildly and followed no recognizable school of style like the Impressionists had done earlier. Official recognition of the movement came in a major exhibition at MOMA in 1951.

Pollock and Whitman

Already it may feel like these artists will easily compare with Whitman, and indeed, the work of Jackson Pollack is in many ways a visual corollary to the writings of Whitman.

First, think of the sheer size of their productions. *Leaves of Grass* was an oversized book, its first poem ("Song of Myself") was over 60 pages long. Pollack's canvasses too were large. "One (Number 31)," painted in 1950, measures over 17 feet across and over 8 feet high. These were both epic American works. However, despite the size, the works are at the same time very intimate, very personal, seductively close to the bodies of the artists. Whitman writes in "So Long": "camerado, this is no book; who touches this touches a man …"

Pollack described his style of action painting: "On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting."

There is, also, the ceaseless change and flux of their work. Consider "Song of Myself" once again—a poem that flows irregularly, with unpredictable rises and ebbs, and never even ends, thanks to the missing end—punctuation. ("I stop somewhere waiting for you.") Pollack's paintings gyrate all over their huge canvasses—the paint ignores the four corners of the canvas and refuses to be "framed" according to convention.

Pollock and Whitman themselves seem cut from the same cloth. Both were iconoclasts and egomaniacs, inspiring cults of personality around them. They both outraged the establishment and thus received attention for the wrong reasons: as Whitman was censored and harshly critiqued for sexual content, Pollack was termed "Jack the Ripper," probably for his aggressive and brash style. They are two of America's most radical artists.

Whitman broke free of the conventional poetic line, of traditional poetic subject matter, to write the "new American Bible." Pollack destroyed Renaissance and cubist perspectives and planes, and refused to abide by the limitations of canvas and established easel technique. There is something organic and "natural" about this undulating movement. Consider Whitman's description of the ideal poem from his 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* and look also at the undulating, irregular patterning of the spattered paint of Pollack's "Autumn Rhythm" (1950). The title helps you recognize the bending and twisting tree trunks, the wind stirring the branches. There is beauty and truth in all this irregularity, but also an intentional break from convention and established form.

Frank O'Hara

Frank O'Hara openly admired Pollack's work and directly identified his poetry with Pollack's paintings "My poetry is just like Pollack, de Kooning, and Guston rolled into one great verb."

This allows us to introduce O'Hara, a poet who always maintained a strong connection with the arts. After earning his Masters in Comparitive Literature at the University of Michigan in 1951, O'Hara moved to New York to join fellow poet John Ashbery. He looked for a job that would leave him time to write and let him explore his interest in the arts—and what he found was ideal. In

December 1951 he was hired to work at the front desk of the Museum of Modern Art, selling postcards, publications, and tickets. He often wrote poems while he worked at the counter, and his friends in the art world frequently stopped by to visit. O'Hara began writing articles for *Art News*, and in 1953 became an editorial associate. He continued to write for the publication when he returned to the Museum of Modern Art in 1955. The abstract expressionism movement, whose major artists were Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock, was flourishing in New York, and O'Hara, along with John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, all became part of the avant garde art scene there.

In 1952 O'Hara's *A City Winter and Other Poems* was published as a collection of thirteen poems with two drawings by Larry Rivers. The collection was the first of a series of books by poets with artists' drawings published by the Tibor de Nagy gallery.

At this time O'Hara became involved with the "Club," an artists' forum that had been established in the 1940s. Beginning in March 1952, O'Hara appeared on a series of panels on art and poetry.

In 1957, O'Hara was approached by a publisher about collaborating with artist Larry Rivers. The resulting project, a series of twelve lithographs titled "Stones," was produced between 1957 and 1960. For the work, Rivers and O'Hara worked directly on the stones from which the lithographs were made. O'Hara had to write backward so the text would be readable in the finished lithograph.

How does this tie in with Whitman? We've mentioned the aural quality of Whitman's poetry but haven't really talked about visual correlations, though they are there.

Any of Whitman's catalogues and tendency toward listing highlight this point.

The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk of the promenaders,
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor,
The snow sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-balls,
The hurrahs for popular favorites, the fury of rous'd mobs,
The flap of the curtain'd litter, a sick man inside borne to the hospital,
The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows and fall,
The excited crowd, the policeman with his star quickly working his passage to the centre of the crowd,
The impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes,
What groans of over-fed or half-starv'd who fall sunstruck or in fits,
What exclamations of women taken suddenly who hurry home and give birth to babes,
What living and buried speech is always vibrating here, what howls restrain'd by decorum,
Arrests of criminals, slights, adulterous offers made, acceptances, rejections with convex lips,
I mind them or the show or resonance of them—I come and I depart. (from Part 8 of "Song of Myself")

What we have here is an 1855 city scene. Whitman is dwelling on a series of images of what he sees. Whitman floods our mind with these images and they overlap to create a three-dimensional feel for a city. It is a way for Whitman to make New York City come to life.

In comparison, O'Hara's version of the Whitmanesque catalogue comes across in the poem, "The Day Lady Died." The action of this poem takes place on July 14, 1959, when O'Hara heard of Billie Holiday's death. He had heard Holliday sing the previous autumn at the Five Spot Café, where Thelonious Monk regularly played. It was a Monday night, and Mal Waldron—Billie's piano accompanist—was at the keys. Though Billie had lost her cabaret card because of heroin use, she broke the law for just one song while Waldron played, as O'Hara stood leaning against the bathroom door, listening.

Hearing of Holliday's death on Bastille Day 1959, O'Hara went up to his office and typed up the poem. He folded it, put it into his jacket pocket and brought it with him to East Hampton, where he read it aloud to his friends. (This form of spontaneous creation was the spirit in which many of his poems were created. When he died, friends discovered over 500 of his poems, not in "books," but on the backs of postcards or notes, used as bookmarks and slipped inside his wallet. That intimacy alone must make you think of Whitman's attempts to get close to the reader.)

The Day Lady Died

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday
three days after Bastille day, yes
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine
because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner
and I don't know the people who will feed me

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun
and have a hamburger and a malted and buy
an UGLY NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets
in Ghana are doing these days
I go on to the bank
and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)
doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life
and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do
think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or
Brendan Behan's new play or Le Balcon or Les Nègres
of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine
after practically going to sleep with quandariness
and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE
Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and
then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing

O'Hara is very spontaneous and immediate in this poem, explaining exactly what he did. He sought to capture this immediacy of life in his poetry, feeling that the work should be between two people instead of two pages. He called these poems "I do this, I do that" poems because they have a random physical movement to them. The natural feel, the random jumps and loose associations, are the core of these poems. They all tie very closely to Whitman's idea of a "great ramble". John Ashbery said of his friend O'Hara: "O'Hara demonstrates that the act of creation and the finished creation are the same."

For O'Hara, as well as Whitman, the journey is always as important as the destination. O' Hara's assortment of topics in this poem is also interesting. He goes from the most mundane to the least pedestrian. Anything seemed like material that could be used for poetry: telephone calls, buying a newspaper, errands at the bank, his interest in movie stars. Throughout all of this O'Hara come across as a happy poet, and in that he is like Whitman. In terms of the language he uses O'Hara is very much like Whitman in that he employs everyday speech. He often sounds as if he's just speaking (or maybe writing a letter) to you, his audience. The directness of his voice is sometimes disarming, as in the last lines of his best-loved poem, "Steps":

oh god its wonderful
to get out of bed
and, drink too much coffee
and smoke too many cigarettes
and love you so much
—"Steps"

In this poem, as well as "The Day Lady Died," O'Hara refuses to end the poems with any punctuation, leaving the work to hang much as Whitman does in many of his poems. Both poets are saying that there doesn't need to be an end, the end is not the object, and that the continued experience is what is important.

Love of New York City—the Primacy of Experience

Certainly, too, O'Hara and Whitman were both inspired and energized by New York City. O'Hara was known as the "poet of New York" of his own time. He moved to NYC in 1951 to join fellow poet John Ashbery, whom he had met at Harvard. In New York O'Hara was finally free to live openly as a homosexual and to indulge his interest in the arts. "The Day Lady Died" begins with a catalogue of all the city has to offer. And like Whitman, O'Hara saw the city for its good as well as its bad—its corruption as well as its beauties:

This is the city … and I am one of the citizens;
Whatever interests the rest interests me … politics, churches, newspapers, schools,
Benevolent societies, improvements, banks, tariffs, steamships, factories, markets,
Stocks and stores and real estate and personal estate.
City of wharves and stores! City of tall facades of marble and iron!
Proud and passionate city! Mettlesome, mad, extravagant city!
—from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*

It is typical of both Whitman and O'Hara to find beautiful things in the most aggravating parts of the city. Both men fully embrace the city experience.

The Outsider

"The Day Lady Died" also has a "coded queerness," as Whitman's poems do.

Ginsberg would call O'Hara's style "gay talk." A feeling of campiness, maybe—a certain diva—like tone in the descriptions of his activities. However, there is also strong identification with the outsider here, that might hint at O'Hara's own stance as outsider.

The only real connection he has with another in this poem is with a woman—a black woman—a heroin addict. It's similar to Whitman's identification with the lonely voyeuristic female in the Swimmers passage of "Song of Myself." There is also a Whitmanesque union at the end of the poem—between a white man and a black woman, between the singer and his audience, between the living and the dead.

American Art Forms

Exoticism and obsession with the foreign runs through the rest of O'Hara's routine in the poem "The Day Lady Died." He smokes cigarettes from France, buys liquor from Italy, reads poets from everywhere but America. However it's when he hears Holliday sing that his emotions wake up. That's the real core of experience here and that experience is a truly American one.

Personism: O'Hara's Poetic Manifesto

In essence O'Hara is proposing that poems are a medium between two people. They are not just words. Whitman shared this idea that poetry could be something physical, a connective device between the reader and writer. Poetry then can unite people. O'Hara's work, though, has a certain flippancy or ironic detachment. How, for instance, can you have a "manifesto" for organic, spontaneous writing?

"Only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies."—Frank O'Hara

Conclusion

O'Hara, even in his wit and irony, seems to embrace Whitman's own love of immediate and spontaneous experience, of the positive radiant energy of city life and its movement and flux. All of these things show his allegiance to the Whitmanic legacy. As Whitman did, O'Hara enjoyed an effortless chaos with an intensity of purpose. They were both personal and at the same time universal. They were both truly poets of joy.

In the next lecture we will move from visual poetics to musical poetics when we look at Whitman's influence on folk and pop music.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is Abstract Expressionism?
2. How is the work of Jackson Pollack a visual corollary to the writings of Whitman?

Suggested Reading

Allen, Donald (ed.). *Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

Other Books of Interest

Elledge, Jim, ed. *Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990.

Essers, Volkmar. *Jackson Pollack: Works from the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and from European Collections*. Heidelburg, Germany: Kehrer Verlag, 2003.

Perloff, Marjorie. *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977.

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Lecture 13:
Singing the Songs:
Whitman's Impact on Modern American Music

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read *Singing the Songs: Whitman's Impact on Modern American Music.*

In this lecture, we'll discuss the impact a poet can have on musical culture. Whitman's influence on modern American music is possibly one of the most unexpected of the Whitman legacies. Whitman loved the idea of the spoken word—oratory, recitation, and the word springing off the page was a goal of his.

Many of his poems are notably given musical titles: "Song of Myself," "Song of the Broad-Axe," "Song of the Open Road," "Dirge for Two Veterans," "Proud Music of the Storm," "To Get the Final Lilt of Songs." We've seen how affected Whitman was by the human voice: "I hear the trained soprano, she convulses me like the climax of my love-grip."

As much as he was concerned with developing a new American literature, Whitman also felt the urgent need for Americans to develop their own national music. He often editorialized on the topic. In the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of September 8, 1847, he wrote:

> Great is the power of music over a people! As for us of America, we have long enough followed obedient and child-like in the track of the Old World. We have received her tenors and her buffos, her operatic troupes and her vocalists, of all grades and complexions; listened to and applauded the songs made for a different state of society … and it is time that such listening and receiving should cease. The subtlest spirit of a nation is expressed through its music, and the music acts reciprocally upon the nation's very soul. Its effect may not be seen in a day, or a year, and yet these effects are potent invisibly. They enter into religious feelings—they tinge the manners and morals, they are active even in the choice of legislators and magistrates.

Whitman had heard such a spirit gaining voice during his own day, and one can only imagine how enraptured he would have been by the native American songs of the likes of Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, and Bruce Springsteen—all of whom were Whitmanic "working class heroes" who celebrated their roots as he did.

Let's take a look at Whitman's impact on modern American music—not only how he figures into the lyrics of many of our nation's greatest composers, but how his own songs can be heard in their own.

How Do Whitman and Music Tie Together?

Whitman was musically illiterate, and yet he loved vocalism and singing and continued to find moral and artistic inspiration in song. He observed:

> A taste for music, when widely distributed among a people, is one of the surest indications of their moral purity, amiability, and refinement. It promotes a sociality, represses the grosser manifestations of the passions, and substitutes in their place all that is beautiful and artistic.

Whitman was a big fan of opera, probably because of the idea of a gesamtkunstwerk, or that opera encompassed so many art forms. He spoke of his great love for particular composers, specifically the Italians, like Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini. He had favorite singers, such as Marietta Alboni, and Pasquale Brignoli (who became the subject of the Whitman's poetic tribute, "The Dead Tenor"). Whitman even wrote of himself, "Walt Whitman's method in the construction of his songs is strictly the method of the Italian Opera."

He also loved native music like the Hutchinson family singers, which he described as "heart-singing" as opposed to "art-singing." He anticipated that a simple, unadorned music would "supplant" the aristocratic traditions of the "stale, second hand foreign method," which, "with its flourishes, its ridiculous sentimentality, its anti-republican spirit, and its sycophantic influence," was not appropriate for the United States. (Whitman quoted from the *Broadway Journal*)

To Whitman, the uncourtly Cheney Family Quartet of New Hampshire, who he had heard in a Brooklyn saloon, perfected the "true method" of singing. Whitman described the Cheney brothers as "brown faced and stout shouldered … awkward and strangely simple"—like farmers. Whitman noted of the sister who sang in the group that she "disdained the usual clap-trap of smiles, hand-kissing, and dancing school bends." Whitman found the plain style of these family singers "refreshing." They embodied the spirit of democracy in his poems.

The music world, in turn, has really loved Whitman. According to Michael Hovland's *Musical Settings of American Poets* (1999), the poetry of Walt Whitman has been set to music 539 times—more than that of any other American poet, with the exceptions of Emily Dickinson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Other records name over 1000 settings. Here are a few examples: Kurt Weill, *Four Whitman Songs* (1941-47); Charles Ives, *Walt Whitman;* Ned Rorem, *War Scenes* (1969), and *Full of Life Now* (1989); Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Three Whitman Songs* (1925); Ruth Schontha, *By the Roadside* (1975); Leonard Bernstein, *To What You Said* (1976); Charles Naginski, *The Ship Starting* (ca. 1940); and Norman Mathews, *Grand Is the Seen* (1993).

It's folk and pop musicians that have used Whitman as a model the most. One might say they are of two particular "schools":

1. Apollonian: This school is a "thinking man's," more socially directed common man oriented, more concerned with enlightenment, and more about the lyrics than the artist. Well-known proponents of the "Apollonian" school are Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Neil Young, and Steve Earle.
2. Dionysian This school could be seen as more apocalyptic, with a sexual/spiritual and more performative style that is about the artist and what he/she does on stage. This brings to mind musicians like Jim Morrison, Patti Smith, Sonic Youth, PJ Harvey, Ani DiFranco.

What Did Musicians Embrace of Whitman's Legacy?

These musicians embrace the raw sexuality and vivacity of Whitman's lines, like Patti Smith's "whirling dervish" energy on stage. It's also important to recognize the "pose" of certain artists like Jim Morrison to realize that image was important to them, and then to look back at the 1855 lithograph of Whitman from *Leaves of Grass* to see from where this influence may have come.

Woody Guthrie (1912-1967)

Woody Guthrie is an example from the Apollonian school.

A promotional ad for Guthrie that appeared in *Music World* (July 1966) is headed in large letters: "An influence on America as strong as Walt Whitman."

Known for his unkempt appearance and rough, homespun manners, Guthrie resembled Whitman in outward appearance and style. After meeting Guthrie in 1944, novelist Sholem Asch "remembered some early pictures of Walt Whitman" and "saw the resemblance to a great extent of an American expression in terms of a man who struggled, who had a hard time, and who was very sparse in words, but had a lot of things on his mind."

Guthrie, like Whitman, celebrated the freedom of the American open road and shared Whitman's contempt for wealth, and believed his art should articulate the concerns of working people. (He himself came from working-class parents in Oklahoma. Whitman would've loved that Guthrie's father was a firefighter.)

By 1939, around the time Guthrie met Alan Lomax in New York, Guthrie was discussing *Leaves of Grass* at length, and was already involved in Communist Party activities and rallies.

Alan Lomax and his father were assembling a body of American folk music, interpreting it through their leftist political sympathies and their respect for Whitman's democratic project, *Leaves of Grass*. The preface to the Lomax book, *Our Singing Country* (1941), declares Whitman's influence on the book and celebrated individualism, joys of the open road, disdain for bourgeois custom, and the emergence of a distinct American art form. For the Lomaxes, Guthrie embodied the political and cultural tradition they sought to construct and document.

> "Woody really fulfilled Whitman's ideal for a poet who would walk the roads of our country and sing the American story in the language of the people … He felt that songs should wake people up, should help people understand their environment better, and be more willing to do something about it." (Alan Lomax on Woody Guthrie, 1988)

Alan Lomax

In 1940, Alan Lomax convinced RCA Records to record Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads* and strangely, the recording took place in Camden, NJ, where Whitman spent his final years.

Guthrie's best-known composition, "This Land Is Your Land," had strong Marxist origins. Like Whitman's, Guthrie's radicalism was often created and contained by his faith in American democracy. Though in many songs, he stepped

outside of the social order in which he lived (think of the "outlaw" ballads like "Pretty Boy Floyd"). "This Land" has a pronounced nationalism. This was probably because it was written in that crucial period between 1940 and 1945, when he was submerged in a Popular Front culture that, in its attempt to defeat fascism, embraced Franklin Roosevelt. However, when it is sung, it comes across as an unfettered celebration of America, Whitman-style—a broad sweep of landscape, an inviting open road. As Whitman did, Guthrie aims to express a universal American democratic spirit in "This Land Is Your Land."

The song's final, more critical verses were rarely sung, though as the song became more popular towards the end of Guthrie's life, he worried that his intentions might be lost and charged his son, Arlo, with preserving them.

Determined not to compromise his father's intentions, in 1984 Arlo recorded all of the original verses of "This Land" for the soundtrack to the documentary film "Hard Travelin."

Bruce Springsteen (1949–)

Bruce Springsteen began to cover "This Land" in his concerts after he read Joe Klein's biography of Woody Guthrie in 1980. Introducing the song at a 1981 concert, Springsteen mentioned the "excluded last lyrics"—and the little-known idea that "This Land" was not a pure celebration but a critical response. Springsteen sang it "way over yonder in the minor keys" and included a slow dirge on the harmonica—though he didn't add the last lines, he gave the song a sad thoughtfulness. Springsteen said he sang "This Land" even in the face of "large-scale corruption" to "let people know that America belongs to everybody who lives there: blacks, Chicanos, Indians, Chinese, and the whites."

Springsteen was born in Freehold, NJ—just about as far from NYC as was Huntington, Long Island. And the eventual hometowns of these two men—Asbury Park and Camden, NJ—are about 50 miles apart. Whitman and Springsteen are similarly close in other matters: Both were born to working-class families. Springsteen's father worked alternately as a prison guard, factory worker, and bus driver, and Springsteen had a troubled relationship with him, just as Whitman had with his father. Springsteen's Catholic mother was a legal secretary. His hard youth in a working-class town led to two strong emphases on his first few albums: the celebration of the lives of everyday, working people, and a passion for the possibilities of the open road.

As he worked on his music (listening to Woody Guthrie, Hank Williams, Elvis Presley, and other American music icons), he was also reading a lot, primarily great American literature by writers such as John Steinbeck and Flannery O'Connor. One of the more important books he read was *Pocket History of the United States of America* by Henry Commager and Allan Nevins.

When "Born to Run" came out in 1975, Robert Ward of the *New York Times* wrote of Springsteen as a "tough," "democratic" street "punk" who was the "hero" that "Walt Whitman and Jack Kerouac and Otis Redding would have joined hands over." Perhaps the closest in spirit to "Born to Run" of Whitman's poems is "Song of the Open Road."

Springsteen said in 1998, "I think it was Walt Whitman who said, 'the poet's job is to know the soul.' You strive for that, assist your audience in finding theirs."

Like Whitman, Springsteen was a "working-class hero" who was a true believer in the Promised Land, and that Americans were united in pursuing that dream.

Other Pop Uses of Whitman

Billy Bragg and Wilco have been directly related to the Whitman ethos, recording dozens of new melodies for Woody Guthrie lyrics. The String Cheese Incident is a band known to recite Whitman (and even have Whitman impersonators on stage) during their concerts. Even the queen of pop, Madonna, recognizes Whitman. In her song "Sanctuary" (from *Bedtime Stories*), she quotes Whitman's poem, "Vocalism."

It does seem that Whitman spoke in the right voice for many music performers in America today. In the next lecture we will see how Whitman speaks to other voices that up until now have been excluded from our discussions.

Williams, O'Hara, Ginsberg, Springsteen … we've seen that most of the respondents to Whitman have been male and white.

This final lecture will overturn that notion. In recent years, an increasing number of women have responded to him, and American poets of different skin tones, too, have turned to Whitman for guidance. Langston Hughes and his Harlem Renaissance contemporaries were only the beginning of a long line of African-American responses to Whitman. In addition, Native American and Asian-American writers have turned to Whitman for his democratic message and sympathy for an outsider stance. Whitman's dream of speaking for America has been realized. He is the voice not only of mainstream culture, but of the outsider as well. Whitman is America at last.

Women Respond to Whitman

Toward the end of his life, Whitman told his friend Horace Traubel:

> *Leaves of Grass* is essentially a woman's book—the women do not know it, but every now and then a woman shows that she knows it: it speaks out the necessities, its cry is the cry of the right and wrong of the woman sex—of the woman first of all, of the facts of creation first of all—of the feminine: speaks out loud: warns, encourages, persuades, points the way.

We know that Whitman was sensitive to women and to women's issues. His love of his mother and other strong women was intense. As he told Horace, "It is lucky for me if I take after the women in my ancestry, as I hope I do: they were so superior, so truly the more pregnant forces in our family history." And as he wrote, "I am the poet of woman as well as the man … and I say there is nothing greater than to be a mother."

In 1889 he described his friend Mary Whitall Smith Costelloe as "quite a great woman in her way—a true woman of the new aggressive type." He celebrated the strength and intelligence of women's rights activists and freethinkers like Frances Wright, Abbey Price, Paulina Wright Davis, and Ernestine Rose.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why did Whitman feel so strongly about the need for Americans to develop their own national music?
2. What views did Whitman share with Woody Guthrie?

Suggested Listening

Guthrie, Woody. "This Land Is Your Land." *Dust Bowl Ballads*. Buddha/BMG, originally released 1962, this edition 2000.

Springsteen, Bruce. "Born to Run." *Born to Run*. Sony Records, 1995.

Suggested Reading

Lomax, Alan. *Our Singing Country: Folk Songs and Ballads*. New York: Dover Publications, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

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Faner, Robert D. *Walt Whitman and Opera*. Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972.

Garman, Bryan K. *Race of Singers: Whitman's Working Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Klein, Joe. *Woody Guthrie: A Life*. New York: Delta Publishing, 1999.

Lomax, Alan. *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997*. Ed. Ronald D. Cohen. London: Routledge, 2003.

Lecture 14:
I Stop Somewhere Waiting for You:
Whitman's Enduring Presence

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Alicia Ostriker's *Diving Into the Wreck*.

Walt Whitman was sensitive to women's issues, from as early as the 1840s:

> There is a class of pert, thin-brained fools in society … who think they do something very smart, when they say bitter things of women, or when they collect what some other sour-minded ones have uttered, and parade it before the world to tell against the same gentle sex. It has, indeed, come to be a fashion with this class, to lose no opportunity of decrying the character and talents of women. Dolts! It is their own impure hearts which make the ones they insult, appear low. (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 24, 1846).

He is also well aware of history's partiality to men.

> … because women do not appear in history or philosophy with anything like the same prominence as men—that is no reason for treating them less than men … Mention to me the 20 most majestic characters that have existed upon the earth, and have their names recorded.—It is very well.—But for that 20, there are millions upon millions just as great, whose names are unrecorded.—It was in them to do actions as grand—to say as beautiful thoughts—to set examples for their race.—But in each one the book was not opened.—It lay in its place ready.

It's no wonder that Whitman was picked up again by feminists, beginning in the early stages of the movement in the 1970s. Let's look at three leading, living female writers who have responded directly to Whitman.

Erica Jong

Jong is a poet and novelist. Though she is best known for her best-selling novels, including *Fear of Flying*, she came out with a book of poetry entitled *Love Root*. The first poem in this collection is called "Testament, or Homage to Walt Whitman." It is an extraordinary exchange between a man and a woman past and present … she finds her own in Whitman's voice, despite the fact he's male and of the past. There is a crucial moment in which she talks directly to Walt and acknowledges his influence on her changing work. The final stanza alludes to several Whitman ideas (including the book as a physical place, a meeting spot for reader and writer) and poems (including "A Noiseless Patient Spider"). Jong declares herself ready to embrace the Whitmanic spirit for joy. Jong is able to

look beyond the boundaries of gender and connect with Whitman and his democratic ideas of poetry.

Alicia Ostriker

Ostriker is a poet and critic who turns to Whitman's politics for inspiration. She wrote the influential study *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986), in which there is an essay entitled "Loving Walt Whitman, and the Problem of America." This essay best speaks towards how Whitman has had the ability of liberating women's work. Ostriker mentions, "If women poets in America have written more boldly and experimentally in the past thirty years than our British equivalents we have Whitman to thank." In the essay Ostriker notes that Whitman "permitted love, that was the primary thing that I noticed."

Later in the essay she proposes that not only was Whitman ahead of his time with regards to gender politics, but that he may still be ahead of us today. Ostriker speaks of how Whitman's inclusiveness has made American woman poets feel like they are part of a traditionally patriarchal tradition of literature.

Adrienne Rich

Rich is one of America's most controversial and widely respected writers, with a long distinguished career as feminist and poet. She has become one of the most provocative voices on the politics of sexuality, race, and woman's culture, and she is important in our consideration in how Whitman has affected gender politics. Rich is like Whitman in that she serves the role of poet prophet and becomes a radical feminist. She is an activist and cultural figure. She believes in art's ability to bring change and in art's "social presence as breaker of official silences, as voice for those whose voice is disregarded, and as a human birthright."

If you look at the back cover of Rich's 1973 collection of poems, *Diving Into the Wreck*, you'll see it says the book was a co-winner for the National Book Award. She won, but accepted it along with Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, the other nominees, in the name of all women, and said:

> We … together accept this award in the name of all the women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in the name of those who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great personal cost and great pain … we symbolically join here in refusing the terms of patriarchal competition and declaring that we will share this prize among us, to be used as best we can for women … we dedicate this occasion to the struggle for self-determination of all women … the women who will understand what we are doing here and those who will not understand yet; the silent women whose voices have been denied us, the articulate women who have given us strength to do our work …

Rich has declared herself a "woman with a mission, not to win prizes, but to change the laws of history." And in *Diving Into the Wreck*, she demonstrates this—her hopes that her words will incite action and change. With this work, we

really see her change from a lyric poet to a feminist prophet. Around 1970, it has been noted, her work takes on a much more radical turn and becomes overtly ideological. On the original jacket cover, Rich describes the work as:

> A coming-home to the darkest and richest sources of my poetry: sex, sexuality, sexual wounds, sexual identity, sexual politics, many names for pieces of one whole. I feel this book continues the work I've been trying to do—breaking down the artificial barriers between private and public, between Vietnam and the lover's bed, between the deepest images we carry out of our dreams and the most daylight events "out in the world." This is the intention and longing behind everything I write.

In *Diving Into the Wreck*, she also seeks to break down the gender barrier. The poetic consciousness in these poems seeks not to assume man's power, but to develop a wholly different way of being in the world. That's why many of the poems in this collection, including the title poem, are developed around the concept of androgyny. The audience in *Diving Into the Wreck* could be either male or female; the speaker, too, could be male or female, though most of her speakers are women. But this one defies easy sexual categorization.

It's notable that Rich admired Whitman for defying sexual categories as well. She saw, in Whitman, a new personality of a person beyond gender. In the early 1970s, as she was working on *Diving Into the Wreck*, Rich described Whitman as "that prophet, that American, who of all his brothers was most able to accept himself in his bisexual wholeness." She saw him bringing America to a "new bisexuality in poetry written by men, which in claiming its own wholeness would be able to greet wholeness in women with joy instead of death."

Even 20 years later, Rich sang Whitman's praises in an essay entitled "Beginners." According to Rich, Whitman managed to override "Puritan strictures against desire and [insist] that democracy is of the body, by the body, and for the body, that the body is multiple, diverse, and untypic."

American Poets of Color

In addition to the recent feminine embrace of Whitman's poetics, American poets of color have also responded to Whitman. There is more of a struggle here between Whitman as a representative white male poet and these literary outsiders to mainstream culture. Here are some examples.

Yusef Komunyakaa

Komunyakaa is a radical African-American political poet. His books of poetry include *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), many poems of which are about his experiences in the Vietnam War, and his *Neon Vernacular*, which won the Pulitzer Prize. He has a very complicated relationship with Whitman's legacy as a white male father figure. In *Kosmos*, (1992), Komunyakaa talks directly to Whitman, wrestling with this white male figurehead. For him Whitman is almost a museum piece, someone sacred and out of the grasp of this young author.

He sings of Whitman embracing the black experience, but he also writes how Whitman as a white man is claiming to be part of an outsider mentality. When he says, "Whitman thought his heart could run vistas with Crazy Horse and runaway slaves," he is commenting on what he believes is Whitman's desired company. Many poets who follow in the Whitman legacy believe wholeheartedly in this idea of Whitman being one with the outsider, but Komunyakaa is noticeably skeptical of this claim. There is almost a tone of mockery in Komunyakaa's poetry about Whitman. For Komunyakaa, Whitman belongs in the "white space" because he is a white man and it makes reaching out to Whitman very difficult for someone as radically black as Komunyakaa. However, f he felt that perhaps Whitman shanghaied him, there is evidence that eventually he learns something: "You taught me home was wherever my feet took me."

The final lines of "Kosmos" really show the impact of Whitman's work on Komunyakaa's stance: "Everything flew apart, but came back like birds to a tree after the blast of a shotgun."

This image of disassembly and then assembly is, in effect, what Whitman is doing for Komunyakaa. There is somewhere that the black poet and the "old hippie" could find a meeting ground.

Sherman Alexie

Alexie, who is representative of the Native American movement to embrace Whitman, shares the difficulties that Komunyakaa had towards connecting to Whitman. Alexie is a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian and activist for Native American rights. He has written novels as well as poetry. Part of the response that Native American poets have had to Whitman is to think of him as the poet who celebrated the beauty of the native. In fact, it's been claimed that Whitman approximated "so close the Native Americans' conception of the spiritual and the commonplace as one could possibly do." In his poetry, Whitman celebrated the beauty and spirit of the native and the aboriginal. Examples run from his descriptions of a squaw in "The Sleepers" that had befriended his mother, to the late brief poem "Yonnondio" (1884, an Iroquois lament). The poem "Defending Walt Whitman" is from Alexie's collection *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996).

God, there is beauty in every body. Walt Whitman stands
at center court while the Indian boys run from basket to basket.
Walt Whitman cannot tell the difference between
offense and defense. He does not care if he touches the ball.
Half of the Indian boys wear t-shirts damp with sweat
and the other half are bareback, skin slick and shiny.
There is no place like this. Walt Whitman smiles.
Walt Whitman shakes. This game belongs to him.

—Last stanze from "Defending Walt Whitman"

In his poem, Alexie shows that he is not so willing to step into the footfalls of Walt Whitman. Whitman's love of the native is evident, Alexie concedes, but

does Whitman really "get" the native? Alexie suggests that though he may be able to feel the beauty of a native culture Whitman can never, as a white man, be a participant, and must always remain a spectator.

Asian Americans and Whitman

There have been many Asian-American respondents to Whitman. Maxine Hong Kingston in her novel *Tripmaster Monkey* writes of a young Chinese-American poet named Wittman Ah Sing, who reads poetry aloud to the passengers in the buses of San Francisco. Garrett Hongo, a Japanese American poet (born in 1951 in Hawaii), in his essay "On Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*" (1992), describes listening to the jazz musician John Coltrane play "Equinox" while he's trying to understand Whitman. Like Komunyakaa and Alexie, Hongo has trouble understanding Whitman's white male stance, but somehow, listening to Coltrane while reading Whitman opens something for Hongo.

> I heard Whitman. Whitman's "Starting from Paumanok." The barbaric yawp fit like Coltrane's saxophone … you try it sometime … Whitman means Coltrane to me, Coltrane means Whitman. 19th century optimistic ofay runs into 20th century reformed drug-addict cool Negro saxophone genius. They depart as air. Look for them under the bassline. Of all our voices. They are with us, cameradoes.

Conclusions

"The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it," Whitman wrote in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*. In these lectures, we have found proof positive that this exchange has occurred—even if Whitman didn't live to see the day. The dialogue between Whitman and his readers continues. In that spirit, we started this series of lectures with Whitman's voice; it's only fitting he gets the last word. And perhaps his last wish would indeed be to continue to reach audiences—even you.

> Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!
> Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,
> But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known,
> Arouse! for you must justify me.
>
> I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,
> I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness.
>
> I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face,
> Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
> Expecting the main things from you.
>
> —Walt Whitman's "Poets to Come"

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. In what ways was Whitman sensitive to women's issues?
2. Explain why Adrienne Rich saw Whitman as a "person beyond gender."

Suggested Reading

Whitman, Walt. *Selected Poems 1855–1892, A New Edition*. Ed. Gary Schmidgall. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Alexie, Sherman. *The Summer of Black Widows*. Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose Press, 1996.

Hongo, Garrett Kaoru. *River of Heaven*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988.

Jong, Erica. *Becoming Light: Poems New and Selected*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 1990.

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WHITMAN CHRONOLOGY

May 31, 1819: Walt Whitman was born in Long Island, New York.

1823: Whitman family moves to Brooklyn, New York.

1831–1832: Walt Whitman apprentices at *Long Island Patriot*.

1846–1848: Whitman edits *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.

1848: Whitman resigns (or is fired) from the *Daily Eagle* and moves to New Orleans. Same year returns to Brooklyn.

1855: *Leaves of Grass* is copyrighted and printed.

1855-56: Publishes second edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

1860: Whitman goes to Boston for third printing of *Leaves of Grass*.

1861–1862: Civil War begins. Whitman does freelance journalism.

1863–1864: Whitman moves to Washington, D.C. and volunteers at hospitals.

1865: *Drum-Taps* is printed. Whitman begins relationship with Peter Doyle. Whitman works at Bureau of Indian Affairs, but is fired when James Harlan declares *Leave of Grass* "indecent." Rehired by the Attorney General's Office.

1867: Fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass* is printed, which includes the first portion of *Democratic Vistas*.

1868: *Poems of Walt Whitman* is published in London.

1873: Whitman suffers paralytic stroke, then moves in with his brother, George, in New Jersey.

1876: Whitman publishes a seventh edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

1877: Whitman begins lecture tour.

1888: Whitman suffers another stroke followed by a prolonged illness. Publishes eighth edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

1891: Publishes ninth and final edition of *Leaves of Grass* (The Deathbed Edition).

March 26, 1892: Whitman dies at Mickle Street. Buried in Harleigh Cemetery, Camden, New Jersey.