

Walt Whitman

Poet,
1819-1892

by David Rosen

*Inside these breast-bones I lie smutch'd
and choked,
Beneath this face that appears so
impassive hell's tides continually run,
Lust and wickedness are acceptable to
me,
I walk with delinquents with passionate
love.
I feel I am of them—I belong to those
convicts and prostitutes
And henceforth I will not deny them—
for how can I deny myself.*

"Your Felons on Trial in Courts"
Leaves of Grass

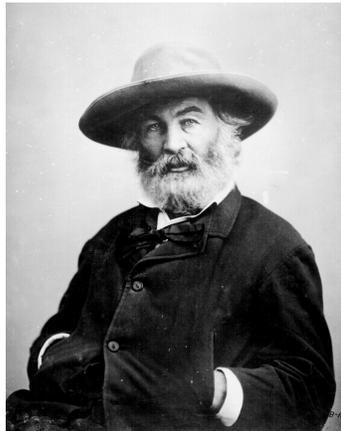
Walt Whitman gave voice to the new America taking shape between the Revolution and the Civil War. His most celebrated works, *Leaves of Grass* and "O Captain! My Captain!" are cornerstones of the nation's literary canon.

Whitman was the great American *flâneur*, a stroller, an urban explorer, a connoisseur of city street life. What Paris was for Charles Baudelaire, Brooklyn and New York – which were two separate cities until 1898 – were for Whitman.

They were cities of working men and women; of ferry pilots, horsecar conductors and washerwomen; of the first plate-glass store windows and department stores; and an every-increasing immigrant poor and the notorious Five Points ghetto slum. Between the four decades from 1820 to 1860, New York's population jumped seven fold, to 814,000 from 124,000. As he lyrically wrote in "Son of Myself":

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

And this was an era of urban stench. There was no in-house plumbing, limited opportunities to bathe and few means to dispose of refuse. There was no sanitation department to clean up either human or animal waste. In an era of horse-drawn transportation, streets reeked from the 24 pounds of manure accumulated each day from each draft horse, let alone the carcasses of dead animals left to rot.



Whitman was born in West Hills, Town of Huntington, Long Island, and was called "Walt" to distinguish him from his father, Walter. The family moved to Brooklyn when he was 4 years old and, in his teens, he was apprenticed to a printer and slowly acquired a love of the written word and spoken language. As

a youth, he read the classic, from the Bible to Homer, Dante and Shakespeare. In his youth, Walt Whitman attended Francis Wright's lectures on birth control and, her lectures and, looking back at his youth, he fondly recalled Wright: "I never felt so glowingly toward any other woman. ... She possessed herself of me body and soul." At age 17, he moved back to Long Island and became schoolteacher. In the early 1840s, he returned to Brooklyn and became a journalist and author. He founded *Long-Islander*, a weekly, and was editor of editor of *Aurora* and the

Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*.

In '48, he traveled to New Orleans to serve as editor of the *Crescent* and was revolted by the slave markets he saw for the first time. Later that year, he returned to Brooklyn and founded a "free soil" newspaper, the *Brooklyn Freeman*. The Free Soil Party called for an end to the expansion of slavery into the territory acquired from the Mexican-American war and its slogan was simple: "free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men." In '48, it backed former President – and New Yorker -- Martin Van Buren; he lost the election and the insurgent party dissolved.

Whitman's attitudes toward African-Americans and slavery were inconsistent and contradictory, not dissimilar to Abraham Lincoln and much of Northern whites living of the time. In his famous 1858 debates with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln argued that blacks and whites were not equal, blacks should not receive any civil service and that the races should not intermarry. Whitman opposed the expansion of slave states and offered sympathetic portraits of African-Americans, even voicing strong support for slave uprisings in *Leaves of Grass*.

Yet, he was did not have a high opinion of the 10 percent of Brooklynites who were of African descent. Whitman's great grandfather had been a slave owner; slavery was legal in New York until 1828. Especially early in his professional life, he felt blacks were inferior to whites and, as in his 1842 novel, *Franklin Evans, or the Inebriate*, he wrote that blacks drank too much.

In 1855, he published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* that consisted of three principle works, "I Sing the Body Electric," "The Sleepers" and "Song of Myself." His original style of poetry

drew initial praise from America's dean of letters, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Over the next forty years, he would repeatedly revise and release new editions of his life's work. For example, the second edition, which came out in 1856, included 20 new poems; the third edition, released in 1860, had 126 new poems; while the final formal edition came out in 1882, Whitman further tweaked it in '92, the year of his death.

Leaves of Grass was the subject of one of the most memorable censorship battles of the 19th century, this one pitting Anthony Comstock, the nation's leading moralists, against Whitman. Comstock long hated Whitman's verse, once insisting that he had never read more than 40 lines of his poetry, and repeatedly attempted to stop Whitman's creative expression. The "Calamus" poems may well have particularly offended Comstock as the dealt with male-male affectional relationships. What we in the 21st century call homo-erotic relations, were in Whitman's day considered "manly attachments" and could express sexual or deeply personal same-sex friendships.

Whether or not Comstock never read more than 40 lines of Whitman, the censor was obsessed by the poet's erotic sensibility. In 1881, Comstock assisted Boston District Attorney Oliver Stevens in an effort to suppress the publication of *Leaves of Grass* by the Boston publisher, James R. Osgood & Co. Aided by the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice, Stevens formally requested that Osgood edit the manuscript, removing what he—and Comstock—considered obscene passages. Ironically, *Leaves* had been originally published 26 years earlier. Osgood requested changes from Whitman, who refused. Osgood pulled the book; America's greatest work of verse was suppressed. After further litigation, charges against *Leaves* were

ultimately dropped.

When the Civil War broke out, Whitman was 41 years old and did not volunteer to serve, but rather working as a journalist and regularly visiting wounded soldiers in area hospitals. In 1862, he received a report that his younger brother, George, who had enlisted in the Union Army in 1861, had been wounded and was recovering in Washington, D. C. The elder brother traveled to the nation's capital only to find his brother in fit condition and decided to remain there.

He initially got a job as a clerk for the Department of the Interior, but was fired after Comstock intervention over *Leaves of Grass* alleged "obscenity." Nevertheless, during the war, Whitman made his legendary visits to hospitals offering fruit, candy, books, pencils, paper and, most importantly, tender comradeship to many wounded soldiers.

In April 1865, Whitman had returned to Brooklyn when Lincoln was assassinated. Shortly thereafter, he wrote, "O Captain! My Captain!" In '73, he suffered a stroke, he relocated to Camden, NJ, living at his brother George's house and attending to his dying mother. He remained in Camden until his death in 1892.

For more information:

David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass, The Complete 1855 and 1891-92 Editions* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

Walt Whitman Archives
<http://www.whitmanarchive.org>