Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Excerpt
More information

Chapter 1

Life

Youth and literary apprenticeship (1819–1850) *2*
The emergence of the poet (1851–1860) *5*
The war and its aftermath (1861–1873) *8*
The period of reflection and decline (1873–1892) *11*

The central event of Walt Whitman's life, literally and figuratively, was the publication of *Leaves of Grass.* The first edition appeared in 1855, when the poet was thirty-six years old. For the rest of his life, roughly thirty-six more years, he would revise and expand the book through six more editions, his work culminating in the Deathbed Edition of 1891–92. Whitman identified himself completely with *Leaves of Grass.* In the poem "So Long" at the end of the third (1860) edition, he says, "this is no book / Who touches this touches a man."[1]

Whitman also identified strongly with US history and the American people. What Whitman called his "language experiment" paralleled the experiment of democracy in the new world, as he saw it.[2] His book appeared first in the troubled years leading up to the Civil War. When war erupted in 1861, his life and his work were deeply altered.

This chapter focuses on the close connection between Whitman's life and his writings. In briefly acknowledging the currents of history that touched Whitman most directly – the momentous effects of modernization in everything from the mass media and democratic politics to gender roles and war – it anticipates Chapter 2, which covers the main historical contexts. The chapter is divided into four parts: youth and literary apprenticeship (1819–50), the emergence of the poet (1851–60), the Civil War and its aftermath (1861–73), and the period of reflection and decline (1873–92). Each part is keyed to different stages in Whitman's literary work and marked by shifts of emphasis in his poetic theories and practices occasioned by personal and historical change.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Excerpt
More information

Youth and literary apprenticeship (1819–1850)

The poet was born Walter Whitman, Jr., on 31 May 1819 in West Hills, Long Island, New York, the second son of Walter and Louisa Van Velsor Whitman. He was four years old when his father, a carpenter, moved the family from the house he had built himself in the village of West Hills to the thriving town of Brooklyn, where he had built a new house. During Whitman's early life, the elder Whitman often shuffled the family from house to house, selling one and occupying another as new houses were built. They moved frequently, alternating between town and country on Long Island.

Patriotism ran high in the Whitman family. Whitman's father was an avid reader who passed on to his son the most radical heritage of Revolutionary-era freethinking and democratic politics. As a sign of his patriotism, he named the sons born after young Walter, in succession, Andrew Jackson, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson Whitman. His mother spiritualized the heritage, introducing Whitman to the practices and doctrines of American Quakerism. In 1829, the family went to hear the famous Quaker preacher Elias Hicks, whose charisma and vocal power Whitman never forgot.

The reading and exposure to intellectual life at home were all the more important because Whitman had little chance for formal education as a boy from a working-class family. He attended school only until about 1830, at which time he went to work and continued an informal education in the circulating library, the printing offices, the public lecture halls, and the debating societies of Long Island.

As a teenager in 1835, unable to count on support from his parents who were struggling to take care of an expanding family (six sons and a daughter, all but one younger than the future poet), he signed on as an apprentice printer in Manhattan. A fire destroyed the heart of New York's printing industry before he could find regular work, but he later used his skills as a printer to work his way into the field of journalism.

Back on Long Island in 1836, Whitman tried his hand at schoolteaching, living with his family or boarding at homes of students. The work left him frustrated and disillusioned. Exposure to big-city life had given him ambitions and attitudes that made him resent the job and feel superior to his rural neighbors. Of one teaching post, he wrote in an 1840 letter, "O, damnation, damnation! thy other name is school-teaching and thy residence Woodbury."[3] But Whitman's interest in public education stayed with him well after he gave up teaching. He editorialized on the topic during his newspaper years in the 1840s and kept the pedagogical spirit alive in his greatest poems. "Have you

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Excerpt
More information

practic'd so long to learn to read?" he asks in "Song of Myself": "Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems" (189).

Journalism provided some relief from the boredom of teaching and country life. In 1838, he started his own paper, *The Long Islander*, doing all the printing and writing himself. Other papers occasionally reprinted his articles, as well as his first published poem, "Our Future Lot." His paper lasted less than a year, but it led to employment at other papers and to more publications, including the prose series "The Sun-Down Papers," perhaps the first indication of real literary talent in the young Whitman. He wrote and published short stories based on home life and teaching as well as more poems on conventional themes – sentimental treatments of love and death, for example – and on people and events in the news. He would return to writing poems about the news again during the Civil War, and would continue the practice to the end of his life.

The 1840s proved an important decade in Whitman's literary apprenticeship. Beginning in 1841 with a job at the *New World*, he was finally able to support himself primarily as a journalist. In 1842, he became editor of the *Aurora*, a prominent New York daily. He wrote regularly on local politics, literature, education, and entertainment while continuing to contribute to other periodicals. Living in Manhattan boarding houses and immersing himself in the life of the city, he heard lectures or readings by famous authors, including Dickens and Emerson, and developed an interest in theatre and music, particularly opera, which strongly influenced his mature poetry. Increasingly, he caught the attention of important people on the literary scene. He wrote short stories that appeared in such venues as the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, which also published works by Bryant, Whittier, Longfellow, and Hawthorne, some of the most successful authors of the day.

Scholars have traditionally viewed the early fiction as sensationalistic and conventional, though in recent years critics have reassessed the stories, working through the undistinguished style and haze of sentimentality to discover social and psychological themes that would grow to greater significance in *Leaves of Grass*. His favorite topics included sympathy for the common people, the difficulties of childhood and adolescence, family dysfunction, the relations of classes in the emerging democracy, the joys and evils of city life, and above all, the sensual intensity of men thrown together in unfamiliar urban settings. The themes converge in *Franklin Evans, or the Inebriate*, a temperance novel Whitman published in 1842 on the evils of drinking. Though it sold surprisingly well, Whitman later treated his accomplishment dismissively and debunked the temperance movement. He told Horace Traubel that he wrote the novel only for the money, in a fever of productivity fueled by alcohol.[4]

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Excerpt
More information

Politics also played a big part in Whitman's life in the 1840s. A speech he gave at a Democratic rally not long after he first arrived in Manhattan was praised in the *Evening Post*, edited by William Cullen Bryant. As a young journalist, his support of the Democrats probably paved the way for some jobs and lost him others in the highly partisan world of the newspapers. The Party was divided between liberals, to whom the independent Whitman was usually drawn, especially in his opposition to slavery, and the conservative wing, which was centered in the south. In 1846, as editor of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, the most important paper in his fast-growing hometown, Whitman intensified his political commitments, writing editorials supporting the Mexican War and objecting to the expansion of slavery into the west.

He had the chance to witness the buying and selling of slaves first-hand in February 1848, when he traveled to New Orleans with his younger brother Thomas Jefferson (Jeff) to take a new job at a New Orleans paper, the *Crescent*. He lasted only three months, driven home by Jeff's homesickness and his own disagreements with the newspaper management. But the opportunity to travel across the country and down the Mississippi and to see a city very different from New York gave Whitman the perspective he needed both to appreciate his home region and to imagine himself reaching out to become the bard of a broad and varied land. The cosmopolitan setting and Old World feel of New Orleans may have contributed to Whitman's newfound interest in transatlantic affairs. The European Revolutions of 1848 caught his attention and encouraged his hope for a worldwide democracy that would look to America as a model. Whitman reflects on the 1848 revolutions in a poem first published in the New York *Tribune* in 1850. Later known by the title "Europe, the 72d and 73d Years of These States," it would become one of two previously published political poems to be included with the poetry written expressly for the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. The other was "A Boston Ballad," which recounts the arrest and trial of a fugitive slave in 1854.

On his return to Brooklyn, Whitman joined the new Free-Soil Party, devoted to keeping the land west of the Mississippi free of slavery. In the Fall of 1848, he was elected as a delegate to the convention in Buffalo to nominate a candidate for President and became editor of a Party paper, the *Brooklyn Weekly Freeman*. With the defeat of the Free-Soil candidate, Martin Van Buren, by the Whig candidate Zachary Taylor, enthusiasm waned, and some party members made their peace with the Democrats. When Whitman resigned from the *Freeman* in September 1849, the paper folded. In 1850, he wrote two poems expressing his bitterness over the politics of compromise. "Blood Money," published in the New York *Tribune Supplement*, compared Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster to Judas Iscariot because of his support for the Fugitive Slave Law,

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Excerpt
More information

which imposed fines on federal marshals who failed to arrest runaway slaves and on people who aided the fugitives in free states. "The House of Friends," also published in the *Tribune*, voiced the poet's disappointment and frustration over the Compromise of 1850, which expanded the legality of slavery westward.

The emergence of the poet (1851–1860)

In the early 1850s, Whitman withdrew somewhat from the public life that had bitterly disappointed him. He worked off and on as a carpenter with his father. For a while, he ran a bookstore out of his home. And he filled notebook after notebook with a new kind of poetry. With the death of his father coinciding almost exactly with the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, he used the occasion to redefine himself as a man, a poet, and a subject of poetry – "Walt Whitman, an American, a kosmos, one of the roughs," as he named himself in the 1855 version of "Song of Myself," leaving aside the "Walter" by which he had been known in all his previous writings and coming before the public as a more urgent and intimate voice (50).

It was on Independence Day, 4 July 1855 (at least according to the poet's own, probably mythic, dating) that Whitman issued the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The book was a thin green oversized volume with twelve untitled poems – including some that would one day be counted among his most famous, such as "Song of Myself," "The Sleepers," and "I Sing the Body Electric," as they would later be titled – and a ten-page preface on poetic and political principles that was itself something of a prose poem. Whitman not only wrote the book but set some of the type and served as his own publisher.

His career in journalism set him up for the publication, as even the name of the book reveals. "Grass" was a slang term among printers for throw-away print samples that they wrote themselves. "Leaves" referred to pages, of course, but also to bundles of paper.[5] In addition, the title alluded to the Bible, which Whitman had read attentively from his earliest youth. The prophet Isaiah says, "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, because the breath of the Lord bloweth upon it; surely the people are grass" (Isaiah 40.6). For the poet-prophet Whitman, the beauty of the body – the very fleshiness of human life in its most common experience – was the root experience of democracy and humanity en masse. In proclaiming himself the poet of the body as well as the poet of the soul, Whitman set out to celebrate the material body and the common people, the "grass" that previous poets had neglected.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Excerpt
More information

Whitman used his connections in journalism not only to print but also to promote his book. He placed anonymous self-reviews of *Leaves of Grass* in three New York periodicals. In the *United States Review*, he announced "An American bard at last!" In the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, he praised the artistic originality of this hometown poet whose writing "conforms to none of the rules by which poetry has ever been judged." And in the *American Phrenological Journal*, he welcomed a poetry for the common people and declared American literature's independence from the English, whose poetry, for all its greatness, still emitted an "air which to America is the air of death."[6]

The book did not sell many copies, but the efforts of Whitman and the publishing firm of Fowler and Wells, which agreed to serve as his main distributor, did make an impression on the literary scene. Critical responses in the press (excluding Whitman's own) ranged from utter indignation to mild appreciation (see Chapter 6). The most important response – and perhaps the most famous encounter of one writer with another in American literary history – came not in a public review but in a private letter from Ralph Waldo Emerson, the renowned philosopher, poet, and essayist, to whom Whitman had boldly sent a personal copy. Emerson responded to the relatively unknown writer almost immediately and with great enthusiasm in a letter on 21 July 1855: "I find [your book] the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy."[7]

This encouragement from Emerson in literary Boston, as well as the support of Fowler and Wells in New York, sent Whitman into a fever of composition. By 1856 he had greatly expanded the number of poems and was ready to bring out a new edition. The second edition of *Leaves* was a compact, pocket-sized book of poems – all including the word "poem" in their titles, lest anyone try to second-guess his intention to create a new kind of poetry in free verse and not just oddly lineated prose. The formerly untitled works now appeared under such titles as "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" (later "Song of Myself") and "Poem of the Body" ("I Sing the Body Electric"). The new poems included some of the most infamous, such as "Poem of Procreation" ("A Woman Waits for Me"), which augmented Whitman's poetry of the body, perhaps under the influence of Fowler and Wells, who were themselves the authors and publishers of faddish books on health and human reproduction. Among the most inspired works in the new book was "Sun-Down Poem," later titled "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." The 1855 Preface was gone, but at the end of the book, Whitman printed, without permission, the complete text of Emerson's letter and a long response of his own, which began "Dear Master" and lectured at length on his poetic theories and ambitions. If that was not enough, Whitman had the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Excerpt
More information

opening words of Emerson's letter printed on the book's spine – "I greet you at the beginning of a great career. – R. W. Emerson" – and thus introduced the practice of using promotional "blurbs" into American literary history. Not surprisingly, Emerson took offense and cooled somewhat toward Whitman. Even so, he generously continued to support the younger poet with advice and encouragement throughout his career.

Whitman's poetic ambitions continued to expand. In 1857, he projected a new volume of his poems. In one note, he referred to this work in progress as "the Great Construction of the New Bible."[8] But poetry was not paying the bills, so he continued to work at journalism. By this time, however, he was no longer driven by journalistic ambition or political interest but by economic necessity. His self-image now centered on his role as the poet of democracy.

Whitman also may have begun to question his own sexual identity. Some biographers have suggested that he experienced a deep and disturbing love affair with another man in the late 1850s. One name frequently mentioned in this connection is Fred Vaughan, an omnibus driver whom Whitman certainly befriended. Though the evidence for this particular connection is weak, there is little doubt that Whitman worried over his erotic attraction to other men. He produced a manuscript of intensely emotional poems, a kind of sonnet sequence he called "Live Oak, with Moss," which he never published as such but developed into the first group of poems arranged as a "cluster" in *Leaves of Grass*, the "Calamus" poems of the third edition. These poems preserve a fascinating tension between celebration of the joy of same-sex friendship and anxiety over the fear of loss and the nature of the erotic bond. The psychological darkness offers a new complexity to the 1860 *Leaves*.

The expanded edition, which swelled to 456 pages, adding 146 new poems to the 32 of 1856, continued to celebrate America with hope and energy. Whitman's commitment to the poetry of the body and the physical foundation of human attraction remained intact, especially in the two new clusters of poems – the "Calamus" poems on the love of comrades and "Enfans d'Adam" (later "Children of Adam") on the attraction of man to woman. But the new book also had its special character and differences. Above all the darker emotions that colored some of the "Calamus" poems also appeared elsewhere, most notably in the poems ultimately known as "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," Whitman's great poem of spiritual autobiography, and the melancholy "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life." The ebb-tide tone of the new poems – in contrast to the optimistic energy of 1855 and such 1856 poems as "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," which celebrates the flood-tide ecstasy of a deathless life – suggests that Whitman experienced serious doubt and depression during these years, in which he questioned his vocation as the poet of democracy and all

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Excerpt
More information

but abandoned his mission. He had no steady employment and felt increasing responsibility to provide money and emotional support for his widowed mother who was keeping house for siblings beset with mental illness, debilitation, marital troubles, alcoholism, and disease.

Things only got worse when it became time to publish the book. In Thayer and Eldridge of Boston, Whitman had found a young publishing firm with great enthusiasm for his poetry. The publishers sought him out in New York, signed a contract, allowed Whitman the freedom to influence the details of publication, and energetically promoted the new *Leaves of Grass*. But the book had barely been released when, in 1861, war erupted. Like many companies, Thayer and Eldridge were thrown into bankruptcy.

The war and its aftermath (1861–1873)

Whitman came to view the Civil War as the spiritual and moral center of his life and work. When the war began, he first responded with "recruitment poems," such as "Beat! Beat! Drums!" published in September 1861 in *Harper's Weekly* and the New York *Leader*. But for most of the year 1862, he appeared at loose ends. He retreated to Long Island and seems to have worked at avoiding the reality of war. Many of his fellow New Yorkers questioned the way the conflict was being managed, especially after the bad beginning for the Union troops at Bull Run and other battles. Whitman may have had his own doubts.

It was family duty that finally brought him face to face with the war. On 16 December 1862, the New York *Herald* published a list of New York soldiers wounded at the tragic battle of Fredericksburg in Virginia. The list included the misspelled name of Whitman's brother George. Propelled into action, Whitman left that very day and, with the help of friends in Washington, made his way to the place the army was camped in Falmouth, Virginia. The grim reality of the war greeted him in a pile of amputated limbs he saw outside a surgeon's tent. But he found his brother safe, his wound already healing. George would go on to have a distinguished service record, which included serving time as prisoner of war.

On 29 December, Whitman wrote to tell his mother that George was well and that he had decided to seek employment in Washington and stay close to the war. On the same day, he wrote to Emerson, requesting letters of introduction to key figures associated with Abraham Lincoln's Republican administration, including the abolitionist Charles Sumner, one of the founders of the Party and one of the few senators who had voted against measures like the Fugitive Slave Act. With Emerson's letter and with the help of his former publisher

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Excerpt
More information

Charles Eldridge, as well as the support of the people who would become his most valuable friends in Washington, William Douglas O'Connor and his wife Ellen, Whitman was hired as a copyist in the Army Paymaster's office and made his home in Washington, where he would live for the next ten years.

Within days of moving to Washington, the poet realized his truest wartime vocation as he began to make visits to the wounded and dying in the war hospitals. Moved by the bravery and personal beauty of these young men, mostly uneducated boys from the farms and towns of America, Whitman became something of an institution in the hospitals. He brought refreshments for the soldiers, read the Bible to them or whatever else they requested, wrote letters home on their behalf (and wrote to them once they returned to the front or to home), stood by during some fearsome medical treatments, and sat many a death watch as gangrene or illness wore away at the unlucky ones. He felt no animosity toward the Confederate wounded, whom he treated the same as the Union soldiers. Once, upon seeing a group of the rebels marching to prison, he was stirred with compassion and called them, in his notebook, "brothers . . . Americans silent proud young fellows."[9] He solicited funds from friends, acquaintances, and well-known public people to support his work and used his own money as well. He became deeply involved with some of the soldiers, exchanged kisses and hugs with them, which most received gladly, and expressed his affection in letters. The hopes he had vented in "Calamus" for a society rooted in "the dear love of comrades" no doubt seemed well-founded to him in these conditions only one step removed from the battleground. And yet the hard reality of the war pressed in upon him and may have made his earlier life and writing seem frivolous. The war "was not a quadrille in a ball-room," he would eventually write (779); it was "about nine hundred and ninety nine parts diarrhea to one part glory."[10]

He poured himself into the hospital work, to the point that the friends he made among the military doctors began to worry about his health. At midyear in 1864, he had to return for a time to Brooklyn to recover from weakness and a bad sore throat. By the end of the war, he was a physical wreck. If the war "saved" him in a spiritual sense, it may have destroyed him physically.

Whitman dedicated his writing in those years to recounting the terrible power of the war. As early as 5 January 1863, he dispatched an article to the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, "Our Brooklyn Boys in the War," in praise of his brother's regiment. In February he published "The Great Army of the Sick: Military Hospitals in Washington" in the New York *Times*. He continued to produce articles for the New York papers throughout the national crisis. He later collected his Civil War journalism and unpublished prose reflections in *Memoranda During the War* (1875) and *Specimen Days and Collect* (1882) (see Chapter 5).

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Excerpt
More information

Whitman was writing new poems as well. Not long after his article on the Brooklyn regiment was published, he wrote to Emerson about his idea of producing a short book of poetry on the war. The idea grew into *Drum-Taps*, which was first published as an independent book in 1865, then expanded with a "Sequel" in 1866 after the assassination of Lincoln, and finally incorporated as a cluster in *Leaves of Grass*. *Drum-Taps* stands with Herman Melville's *Battle Pieces* as the best poetry the war produced. Whitman told William O'Connor, "I consider Drum Taps superior to *Leaves of Grass*," adding: "I probably mean as a work of art."[11] Largely composed of short poems marked by vivid imagery and the elegiac tone that Whitman had experimented with in 1860 but now found better suited to his subject matter, the book would also include the poem that many critics consider his crowning achievement, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," an extended elegy on the death of Lincoln, as well as the more conventional "O Captain! My Captain!" – which would become Whitman's most popular poem in his own lifetime.

President Lincoln filled a special place not only in Whitman's poetry but also in his understanding of America. During the war, Whitman frequently saw Lincoln passing through the streets. He admired the rough-hewn look of the President, his western background, and his determination in the face of adversity. By the time Lincoln was assassinated just after the end of the war in April 1865, Whitman felt a special bond with him. "I love the president personally," he had written in his diary on 31 October 1863.[12] There is some slight evidence, taken as gospel truth by some biographers, that the feeling was mutual, that Lincoln read *Leaves of Grass* in his Springfield, Illinois, law offices and that he once remarked on seeing Whitman on the streets, "Well, *he* looks like a *man*."[13] The "Lilacs" elegy used the death of Lincoln to commemorate the sacrifice of all those who died in the war and to proclaim the need for the living to honor their memory by preserving the deepest form of spiritual (and political) union.

Toward the end of the war, Whitman met a former Confederate soldier, Peter Doyle, at the time a twenty-one-year-old streetcar conductor in Washington and later a railroad man, who came to be Walt's closest companion at mid-life. Doyle's family had emigrated from Ireland when he was eight years old and settled in Alexandria, Virginia. At the outbreak of the war, the seventeen-year-old Doyle enlisted and served for eighteen months as a Confederate artilleryman. At the battle of Antietam, he was aligned against forces that included Whitman's brother George. Doyle was apparently wounded in the battle and shortly thereafter discharged. He was arrested as he crossed Union lines going into Washington and put in prison but was soon released on his testimony that he was a British subject escaping the Confederacy and on promise that he would

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org