

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

*The Cambridge Introduction to
Walt Whitman*

Walt Whitman is one of the most innovative and influential American poets of the nineteenth century. Focusing on his masterpiece *Leaves of Grass*, this book provides a foundation for the study of Whitman as an experimental poet, a radical democrat, and a historical personality in the era of the American Civil War, the growth of the great cities, and the westward expansion of the United States. Always a controversial and important figure, Whitman continues to attract the admiration of poets, artists, critics, political activists, and readers around the world. Those studying his work for the first time will find this an invaluable book. Alongside close readings of the major texts, chapters on Whitman's biography, the history and culture of his time, and the critical reception of his work provide a comprehensive understanding of Whitman and of how he has become such a central figure in the American literary canon.

M. Jimmie Killingsworth is Professor of English at Texas A&M University. He has published widely on Whitman and on nineteenth-century American literature.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Cambridge Introductions to Literature

This series is designed to introduce students to key topics and authors. Accessible and lively, these introductions will also appeal to readers who want to broaden their understanding of the books and authors they enjoy.

- Ideal for students, teachers, and lecturers
- Concise, yet packed with essential information
- Key suggestions for further reading

Titles in this series

Bulson *The Cambridge Introduction to James Joyce*
Cooper *The Cambridge Introduction to T.S. Eliot*
Curnutt *The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald*
Dillon *The Cambridge Introduction to Early English Theatre*
Goldman *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf*
Hayes *The Cambridge Introduction to Herman Melville*
Holdeman *The Cambridge Introduction to W. B. Yeats*
Killingsworth *The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman*
McDonald *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett*
Martin *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*
Messent *The Cambridge Introduction to Mark Twain*
Peters *The Cambridge Introduction to Joseph Conrad*
Robbins *The Cambridge Introduction to Harriet Beecher Stowe*
Scofield *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story*
Thomson *The Cambridge Introduction to English Theatre, 1660–1900*
Todd *The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen*

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman

M. JIMMIE KILLINGSWORTH



Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
 M. Jimmie Killingsworth
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521670944

© M. Jimmie Killingsworth 2007

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Killingsworth, M. Jimmie.

The Cambridge introduction to Walt Whitman / M. Jimmie Killingsworth.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-85456-6 (hardback)

ISBN-10: 0-521-85456-3 (hardback)

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-67094-4 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 0-521-67094-2 (pbk.)

1. Whitman, Walt, 1819–1892 – Handbooks, manuals, etc. 2. Poets, American – 19th century – Biography – Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Title.

PS3231. K55 2007

811'.3 – dc22 2006031964

ISBN 978-0-521-85456-6 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-67094-4 paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	page vii
Chapter 1 Life	1
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
Chapter 2 Historical and cultural contexts	13
Democracy	14
The body	16
The land	19
The culture	21
Chapter 3 Poetry before the Civil War	24
1855: “Song of Myself”	26
Other poems dating from the 1855 <i>Leaves of Grass</i>	40
1856: poems of sexuality and the body	44
1856: poems of the earth	46
1856: “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”	48
1860: Sea-Drift poems	50
1860: gendered clusters – “Children of Adam” and “Calamus”	54

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
	Chapter 4 Poetry after the Civil War	57
	Elegiac poems	60
	The emergence of the image	69
	Minor poetic modes	77
	Chapter 5 Prose works	83
	The 1855 preface	85
	<i>Democratic Vistas</i>	88
	<i>Specimen Days</i>	93
	Chapter 6 Critical reception	105
	The first fifty years, 1855–1905	105
	1905–1955	110
	1955–2005	114
	<i>Notes</i>	123
	<i>Further reading</i>	128
	<i>Index</i>	133

Preface

Walt Whitman (1819–92) is generally regarded as one of the two most innovative and influential US poets of the nineteenth century (the other is Emily Dickinson). A powerful voice for democracy, a bold innovator in verse form, the controversial “poet of the body,” and the consummate individualist who dared to proclaim “I celebrate myself,” Whitman continues to attract the admiration of poets, artists, critics, mystics, political activists, and adventurous readers around the world.

This book serves as an introductory guide for students and first-time readers of Whitman. It covers the style and ideas of the poetry (Chapters 3 and 4) as well as the major prose writings (Chapter 5). It also contextualizes Whitman’s writing and thought with short chapters on biography (Chapter 1), history and culture (Chapter 2), and the critical reception of the work from its first publication to the present (Chapter 6). The book is designed to be read from start to finish for readers needing a fast overview, but the various parts stand more or less on their own. The one exception to this general rule is that readers primarily interested in the study of individual poems should first read the treatment of “Song of Myself” in Chapter 3 to gain an understanding of Whitman’s most important themes and experiments in poetic form. Readings of other poems tend to refer back to this foundational treatment.

To promote readability, citations of secondary critical and biographical works are kept to a minimum and critical controversies are sometimes simplified. A select annotated bibliography, limited mainly to books still in print, is provided for the reader who wishes to take the next step in Whitman studies. In the interest of simplifying references to the many editions and versions of Whitman’s writings, citations in the discussions of Whitman’s works in all chapters refer as much as possible to a single source, selected for its range, dependability, and accessibility. This is the Library of America edition of Whitman’s *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (1982). Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical references cite this edition by page number. Although I will be treating the poems in their order of original publication, beginning with those dating from 1855, I will be using the best-known titles and texts of the poems,

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-67094-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman
M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

viii *Preface*

the ones that appeared in the 1891–2 Deathbed Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, largely because these are the titles and texts most available to current readers. Readers interested in the changes Whitman made in each edition – which are considerable and which have stimulated some excellent work in bibliography and textual criticism – should consult the online *Walt Whitman Archive* edited by Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, an essential resource in Whitman studies.

I wish to thank Ray Ryan and the staff at Cambridge University Press for inviting me to contribute to this series of literary introductions and for all their help in producing the book. I am also grateful to those who have read the manuscript and offered valuable suggestions, notably Pete Messent (for the Press), Nicole DuPlessis, Steve Marsden, and my distinguished colleague at Texas A&M University, Jerome Loving. Thanks also go to my wife and frequent co-author Jacqueline Palmer and my daughter Myrth Killingsworth for their editorial help and to Myrth's friends at Rice University, Birte Wehmeier and Matilda Young, who served as trial readers early in the project.