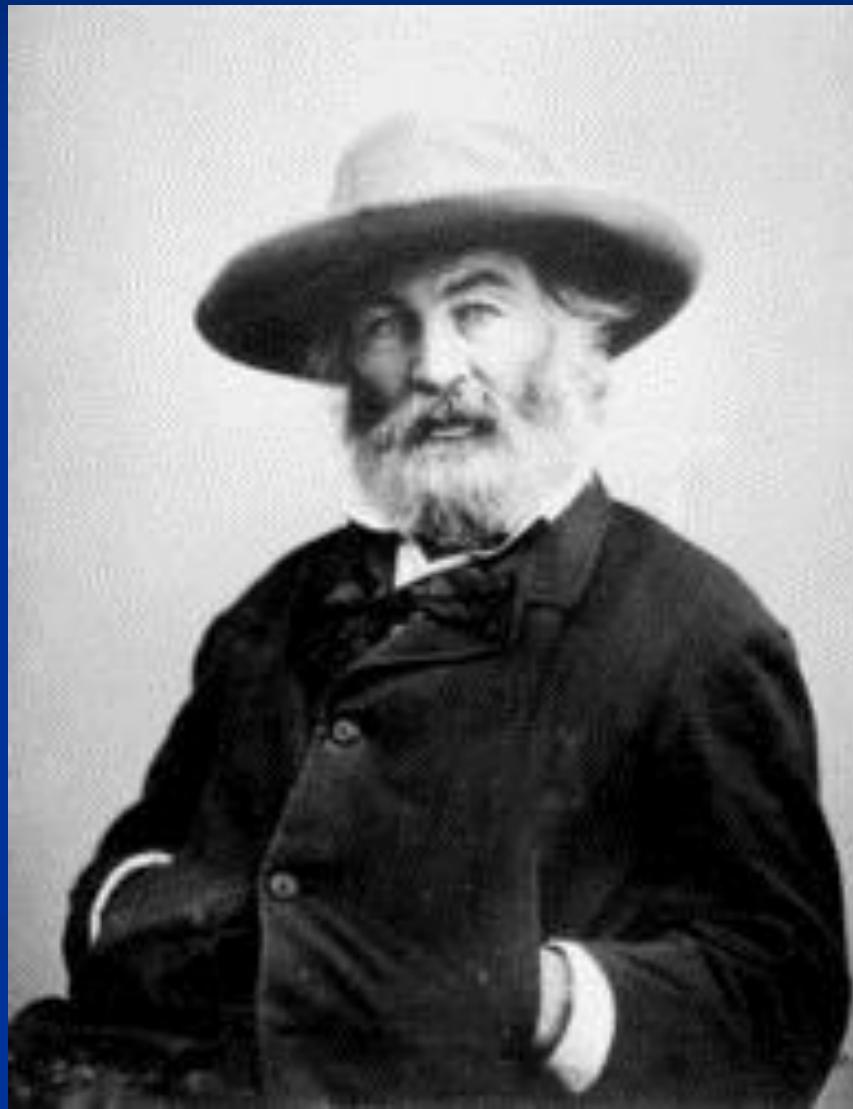


Walt Whitman: The American Bard

Dr. Alan Haffa

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

- Printer, teacher, journalist, editor; Traveled extensively
- 1855: First edition of Leaves of Grass (12 poems); reissued many different times with more poems
- Banned for indecency
- Nurse in Army during Civil War and wrote for NY Times
- 1865 as *Drum Taps*; Later part of Leaves of Grass



Style

- Long lines of free verse
- Repetition of words and phrases
- Parallel construction
- Influence of King James Bible
- Allegory
- Everyday language
- Powerful and Prophetic

Emerson

- Sent Emerson a copy as a response to Emerson's call for a uniquely American poet
- Emerson wrote a letter that praised it; but the public did not
<http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap4/whitman.html#letter>
- Was advised to tone down the sexuality, especially the homosexual content
- Refused: to take the body and sex out of the Leaves of Grass would be to deny it; His idea of completeness
- “Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean/
Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none
Shall be less familiar than the rest.”

Description of Whitman's Poetry

- Catalogues the greatness of America, big and small
- Spiritual
- Nature
- Sensuality and physical Eroticism
- America's industry and trades
- Spirit of America: young, on the move, restless, powerful, still discovering itself, idealistic, practical, commonplace, democratic,

One's Self I Sing

One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse

Of physiology from top to toe I Sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse,
I say the form complete is worthier far,
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse and power,
Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,
The Modern Man I sing.

Observations

- Alliteration gives a sense of universal truth to the lines
- Long lines to express complex thoughts
- His objective: to express the complete human; not just the external appearance nor simply the inner form; not just the male, but also the female; not just the individual, but also the democratic, concerted being

Church of the Body and Soul

■ “Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part
and tag of me is a miracle.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever
I touch

The scent of those arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the
creeds.” (p. 44)

I Hear America Singing

I hear America Singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing
on the steamboat deck,
The Shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he
stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning,
or at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work,
or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The daywhatbelongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows,
robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

Observations

- Wordsworth talked about the common man; but Whitman truly speaks for him and to him and like him
- He celebrates workers from all walks of life; nothing is too menial, nothing is without value
- America is a land of workers; that is what defines us and what gives us strength

Song of the Open Road (117)

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I
choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-
fortune,

Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more,
need nothing,

Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous
criticisms,

Strong and content I travel the open road.

Observations

- Gives voice to the American spirit of wanderlust
- Optimism
- Forward looking, rather than lost in the past
- Self-sufficient (“I ask not good fortune; I myself am good fortune”); We Americans like to think of ourselves as self-made and self-reliant

Inclusive of All People

■ “The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses,
the block swags
Underneath on its tied-over chain,
The negro that drives the long dray of the stone-yard, steady and tall
he stands pois’d on one leg on the string-piece
His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens over his
hip-band,
His glance is calm and commanding, he tosses the slouch of his hat
away from his forehead,
The sun falls on his crispy hair and mustache, falls on the black of his
polish’d and perfect limbs.

I behold the picturesque giant and love him, and I do not stop there,
I go with the team also.” (p. 33)

Man Not God

“I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one’s self is,
...And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God,
For I who am curious about each am not curious about God,
(No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God
and about death.)

I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not
in the least,

Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than
myself.

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?” (71)

Lincoln's Death

Coffin that passes through lanes and
streets,

Through day and night...

With the pomp of flags ...

With the processions long and
winding...

With the waiting depot...

With dirges through the night..

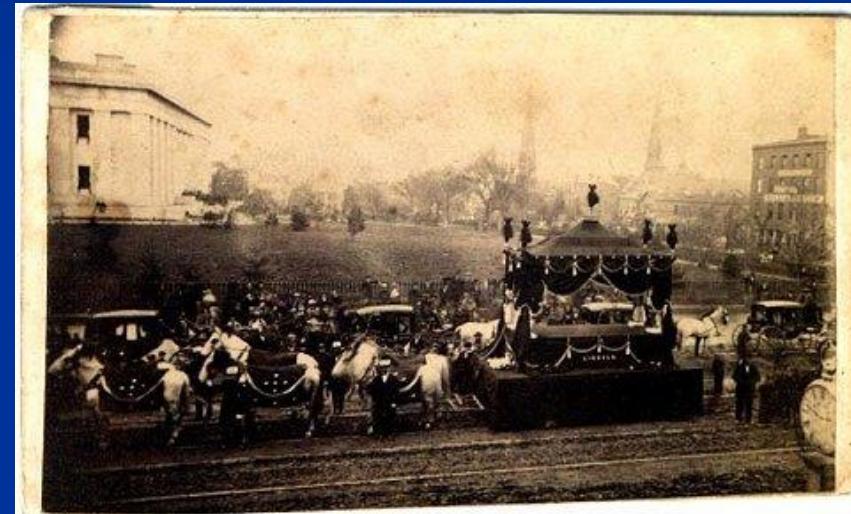
With all the mournful voices...

The dim-lit churches and the shuddering
organs—

Where amid these you journey,

With the tolling, tolling bells' perpetual
clang,

Here coffin that slowly passes,
I give you my sprig of lilac.” (261)



Civil War

“EIGHTEEN SIXY-ONE
Arm'd year—year of the struggle,
No dainty rhymes or sentimental love verses for you terrible year,
Not you as some pale poetling seated at a desk lisping cadenzas piano,
But as a strong man erect, clothed in blue clothes, advancing, carrying a rifle on your
shoulder,
With well-gristled body and sunburnt face and hands, with a knife in the belt at your side,
As I heard you shouting loud, your sonorous voice ringing across the continent,
Your masculine voice O year, as rising amid the the great cities,
Amid the men of Manhattan I saw you as one of the workmen, the dwellers in Manhattan,
Or with large steps crossing the prairies of Illinois and Indiana,...
Saw I your gait and saw I your sinewy limbs clothed in blue, bearing weapons, robust year,
Heard your determin'd voice launch'd forth again and again,
Year that suddenly sang by the mouths of the round-lipp'd cannon,
I repeat you, hurrying, crashing, sad, distracted year.”

Summary

- Whitman's poetry represents the Bold, expansive, adventurous, optimistic, all-inclusive beauty and greatness of America
- Whitman: "Leaves of Grass ... has mainly been . . . at attempt . . . to put 'a Person' a human being (myself in the latter half of the nineteenth century, in America) freely, fully, and truly on record. I could not find any similar personal record in current literature that satisfied me."
- At a time of conformity and prudishness, he praised the individual and the body
- Pre-cursor to the 1960s and poets like Allen Ginsburg
- Unlike any other poet, combines the power and breadth and universality of Epic with the individualism, sensitivity, and passion of the Lyric
- Although he is America's poet, he is not provincial; he is a world poet who sings for all people; a true Integral Poet