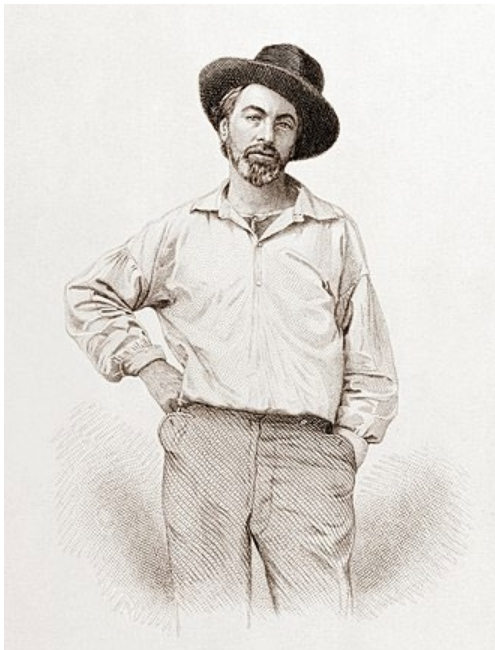
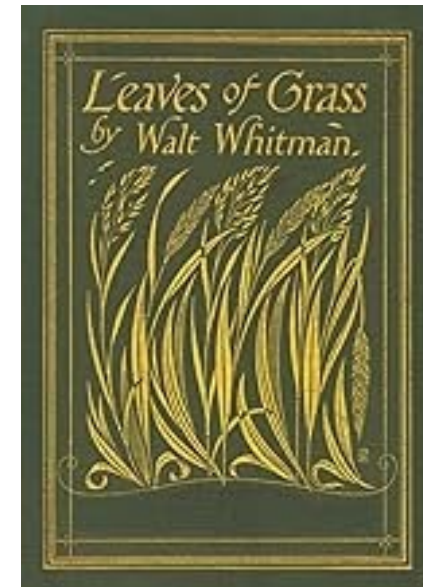


Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman



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Introduction



- ***Leaves of Grass*** is a poetry collection by American poet Walt Whitman. Though it was first published in 1855, Whitman spent most of his professional life writing, rewriting, and expanding *Leaves of Grass* until his death in 1892.
- Six or nine individual editions of ***Leaves of Grass*** were produced, depending on how they are distinguished.
- This resulted in vastly different editions over four decades. The first edition was a small book of twelve poems, published in 1855, and the last was a compilation of over 400, published in 1892.

Introduction



- The collection of loosely connected poems represents the celebration of his philosophy of life and humanity and praises nature and the individual human's role in it.
- Rather than focusing on religious or spiritual matters, ***Leaves of Grass*** focuses primarily on the body and the material world. Its poems do not rhyme or follow standard rules for meter and line length.
- ***Leaves of Grass*** is regarded by many scholars as a completely do-it-yourself project. Whitman chose his idealized self as the subject of the book, created the style in which it was written and worked hard and intelligently to perfect the style over a period of six or seven years, creating the personality of the proletarian bard, the supposed writer of the poems.

Introduction



- ***Leaves of Grass*** is also notable for its discussion of delight in sensual pleasures during a time when such candid displays were considered immoral. The book was highly controversial during its time for its explicit sexual imagery, and Whitman was subject to derision by many contemporary critics. Over time, however, the collection has infiltrated popular culture and became recognized as one of the central works of American poetry.
- Among the works in this collection are "[Song of Myself](#)", "[I Sing the Body Electric](#)", and "[Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking](#)". Later editions would include Whitman's [elegy](#) to the [assassinated](#) President [Abraham Lincoln](#), "[When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd](#)".

First Edition, 1855, 95 pages



- On May 15, 1855, Whitman registered the title ***Leaves of Grass*** with the clerk of the [United States District Court](#), Southern District of New Jersey, and received its copyright. The title is a [pun](#), as *grass* was a term given by publishers to works of minor value, and *leaves* is another name for the pages on which they were printed. The first edition was published in [Brooklyn](#) at the printing shop of two Scottish immigrants, James and Andrew Rome, whom Whitman had known since the 1840s. The shop was located at [Fulton Street](#) (now [Cadman Plaza West](#)) and Cranberry Street, now the site of apartment buildings that bear Whitman's name. Whitman paid for and did much of the [typesetting](#) for the first edition himself.
- A calculated feature of the first edition was that the book included neither the author nor the publisher's name (both the author and publisher being Whitman). Instead, the cover included an engraving by Samuel Hollyer depicting Whitman himself—in work clothes and a jaunty hat, arms at his side. This figure was meant to represent the devil-may-care American working man of the time, one who might be taken as an almost idealized figure in any crowd. The engraver, later commenting on his depiction, described the character with "a rakish kind of slant, like the mast of a schooner".
- The first edition contained no table of contents, and none of the poems had a title. Early advertisements appealed to "lovers of literary curiosities" as an [oddity](#). Sales of the book were few, but Whitman was not discouraged.

Sections in Later Editions

- Inscriptions
- Children of Adam
- [Calamus](#)
- Birds of Passage
- [Sea-Drift](#)
- By the Roadside
- [Drum-Taps](#)
- [Memories of President Lincoln](#)
- Autumn Rivulets
- Whispers of Heavenly Death
- From Noon to Starry Night
- Songs of Parting
- First Annex: Sands at Seventy
- Second Annex: Good-bye My Fancy¹



Analysis



- Whitman's collection of poems in ***Leaves of Grass*** is usually interpreted according to the individual poems contained within its individual editions. Discussion is often focused upon the major editions typically associated with the early respective versions of 1855 and 1856, to the 1860 edition, and finally to editions late into Whitman's life. These latter editions would include the poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd", Whitman's elegy to Abraham Lincoln after his death.
- While Whitman has famously proclaimed (in "Song of Myself") his poetry to be "Nature without check with original energy", scholars have discovered that Whitman borrowed from a number of sources for his ***Leaves of Grass***. For his Drum-Taps, for instance, he lifted phrases from popular newspapers dealing with Civil War battles. He also condensed a chapter from a popular science book into his poem "The World Below the Brine".
- In a constantly changing culture, Whitman's literature has an element of timelessness that appeals to the American notion of democracy and equality, producing the same experience and feelings within people living centuries apart. Originally written at a time of significant urbanization in America, *Leaves of Grass* also responds to the impact such has on the masses. The title metaphor of grass, however, indicates a pastoral vision of rural idealism.

Analysis



- Particularly in "Song of Myself", Whitman emphasizes an all-powerful "I" who serves as narrator. The "I" attempts to relieve both social and private problems by using powerful affirmative cultural images; the emphasis on American culture in particular helped reach Whitman's intention of creating a distinctly American epic poem comparable to the works of Homer.
- As a believer in phrenology, Whitman, in the 1855 preface to ***Leaves of Grass***, includes the phrenologist among those he describes as "the lawgivers of poets." Borrowing from the discipline, Whitman uses the phrenological concept of adhesiveness in reference to one's propensity for friendship and camaraderie

Legacy



Its status as one of the more important collections of American poetry has meant that over time various groups and movements have used ***Leaves of Grass***, and Whitman's work in general, to advance their own political and social purposes. For example:

- In the first half of the 20th century, the popular [Little Blue Book](#) series introduced Whitman's work to a wider audience than ever before. A series that backed socialist and progressive viewpoints, the publication connected the poet's focus on the common man to the empowerment of the working class.
- During [World War II](#), the American government distributed for free much of Whitman's poetry to their soldiers, in the belief that his celebrations of the American Way would inspire the people tasked with protecting it.
- Whitman's work has been claimed in the name of racial equality. In a preface to the 1946 anthology *I Hear the People Singing: Selected Poems of Walt Whitman*, [Langston Hughes](#) wrote that Whitman's "all-embracing words lock arms with workers and farmers, Negroes and whites, Asiatics and Europeans, serfs, and free men, beaming democracy to all."
- Similarly, a 1970 volume of Whitman's poetry published by the [United States Information Agency](#) describes Whitman as a man who will "mix indiscriminately" with the people. The volume, which was presented for an international audience, attempted to present Whitman as representative of an America that accepts people of all groups.