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Whitman's Life and Work, 1819–92

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Childhood and Adolescence, 1819–36

With its free verse form that abandoned traditional metrical systems and regular patterns of rhyme, *Leaves of Grass* dramatically altered the history of poetry in English and made Walt Whitman the most famous and influential poet in American literature. The facts of his early life may not immediately announce the arrival of one who would reshape literary history, but Whitman saw in his boyhood – especially in “the locality itself” (*PW*, 1: 10), Long Island – the genesis of a poet.

Born on May 31, 1819, in West Hills, Long Island, Walter (later Walt) Whitman, Jr. was the second child of Walter Whitman, Sr. (1789–1855) and Louisa Van Velsor Whitman (1795–1873). Married in 1816, the couple had their first child, Jesse, in 1818. After two boys, Louisa gave birth to two girls, Mary Elizabeth (1821–99) and Hannah Louisa (1823–1908), and a child who died in infancy and was never named. The next three boys were named after American presidents: Andrew Jackson (1827–63), George Washington (1829–1901), and Thomas Jefferson (known as Jeff, 1833–90). At the age of 40, Louisa gave birth to her last child, Edward (1835–92), who lived with significant mental and physical disabilities.

Walter, Sr.'s English ancestors had lived on Long Island since the seventeenth century, though the previously well-off Whitmans were in economic decline by the nineteenth century. A large man and a heavy drinker, Walter Sr. could be serious, private, and angry. He worked as a farmer and later a house builder in Brooklyn, but his financial instability forced the family to move several times. The poet was never close to his father, yet Walter, Sr.'s admiration of freethinkers and radicals left an unmistakable influence on his namesake's early intellectual development.

Walter, Jr. deeply loved his mother and thought of her as “a perfect mother” (*LG*: 15). She never appreciated his poetry, yet he saw her as the primary influence on his work, saying, “Leaves of Grass is the flower of her temperament active in me” (Traubel

1906–96, 2: 113). She was born on the Van Velsor's Long Island homestead to a family of Dutch ancestry. A homemaker with no formal education, Louisa was a lively, hard-working woman. Walt took pride in his mother's "Quaker lineage" (Traubel 1906–96, 1: 78) and believed it shaped his own life.

A few days before Walter, Jr.'s fourth birthday, Walter, Sr. moved the family to Brooklyn where he hoped to purchase empty lots, build houses on them, and sell them at a profit. Never quite successful in this business, he moved the family several more times to various addresses throughout Brooklyn. Walter, Jr. attended the city's public elementary school, though he does not seem to have excelled in his studies.

School may not have left a strong impression, but Whitman's childhood encounters with the Marquis de Lafayette and Elias Hicks became enduring memories. At six, Whitman was among a group of schoolchildren who welcomed the Revolutionary War hero at an Independence Day celebration. Lafayette picked up Whitman and gave him a hug and kiss before setting him back down to watch the ceremonies. For a boy whose family so admired the young nation's heroes, this memory merged personal affection with a celebration of democratic independence. Four years later, he joined his parents to hear Quaker minister Elias Hicks whose powerful eloquence moved the boy deeply that night. For decades, he remembered Hicks for his willingness to stand by unpopular convictions and his strong belief in individual divine inner light.

At 11, Whitman left school to work as an errand boy for a lawyer named James Clark. It was not, however, the end of Whitman's education. Clark's son, Edward, provided Whitman with a library membership, which allowed him to read and revel in the *Arabian Nights* and Walter Scott. After working as an office boy for a local doctor, Whitman took his first job with a newspaper, the *Long Island Patriot*, where he learned typesetting and wrote his first published work. The education in printing led to a succession of newspaper jobs and a lifelong appreciation for the materiality of printed pages. Whitman worked for a printer named Erastus Worthington in 1832, before moving on to a position as a compositor for the *Long Island Star*, where he stayed for almost three years. As he honed his printing skills, the rest of his family, struggling financially, moved back to the country. Employed and on his own, Whitman developed an interest in theatre, joined debating societies, and read voraciously. In 1835, as an experienced compositor who occasionally wrote for various newspapers, he moved across the East River to work in Manhattan. His career seemed set, when a fire swept through New York's printing district in August and left Whitman unemployed. He returned to rural Long Island in May 1836 and rejoined his family.

Early Adulthood, 1836–48

A month after his return, Whitman began a second career and became, out of financial necessity, a schoolteacher for villages across Long Island. His first position was in East Norwich in the summer of 1836, but he moved on to teach in Babylon when his

parents moved there that autumn. In 1837, he was teaching in Long Swamp during the spring and in Smithtown by the fall.

Whitman took a hiatus from teaching in 1838 and started his own newspaper, the *Long-Islander*. He purchased a printing press and hired his brother George to help. This enterprise kept Whitman out of the classroom and provided him the pleasure of delivering newspapers on horseback. He enjoyed his new work but left the *Long-Islander* after about 10 months. In August 1839, he joined the *Long Island Democrat*. Its editor, James Brenton, appreciated Whitman's literary talents and published his articles and poems – rhymed, metrical pieces that often took death as their theme.

After this return to newspapers, Whitman was again teaching, in Flushing Hall for six months and then in Little Bay Side at the end of 1839, moving from teaching post to teaching post. In the spring of 1840, he moved to a position in Trimming Square. He then taught at Woodbury, before going to Whitestone in 1841. In May, however, Whitman gave up teaching, a profession he never really enjoyed. He was not a careless, mean, or unskilled educator. Rejecting rote memorization and corporal punishment, he preferred the pedagogical use of activities, games, and conversations. Still, the life of a country schoolteacher with its low pay, long hours, and numerous students did not suit Whitman; and the pupils, their parents, and these rural communities annoyed him. "I am sick of wearing away by inches," he wrote to a friend, "here in this nest of bears, this forsaken of all Go[d]'s creation; among clowns and country bumpkins, flat-heads, and coarse brown-faced girls, dirty, ill-favoured young brats, with squalling throats and crude manners" (*Corr*, 7: 2).

Seizing a chance to leave teaching, Whitman re-entered New York's newspaper world in 1841. In May, he started work as a compositor for the *New World*, a weekly owned by Rufus Griswold and Park Benjamin. He also continued his efforts on behalf of the Democratic Party. In 1840 on Long Island, he had worked for Martin Van Buren in his unsuccessful bid for a second presidential term. The following summer in Manhattan, Whitman delivered a speech at a Democratic Party rally in City Hall Park.

He also began writing and publishing fiction. His first published piece was an educational reform story, "Death in the School-Room" (1841). Like most of the two dozen stories Whitman published from 1841 to 1848, "Death in the School-Room" has a loosely autobiographical relationship to his own life. "Wild Frank's Return" (1841) takes place in rural Long Island and dramatizes the conflict between a young man and his family, while "Bervance" (1841) tells the story of an eccentric second son committed to an insane asylum by his callous and unloving father. Written in 1836, "My Boys and Girls" (1844) focuses on his siblings. Whitman's final piece of short fiction – "The Shadow and the Light of a Young Man's Soul" (1848) – recounts his experience of leaving New York to teach at a country school.

Whitman's best-selling work and only novel, *Franklin Evans*, first appeared as an extra to the *New World* in 1842. A temperance novel that sold some 20,000 copies, *Franklin Evans* tells the story of an orphan whose drinking initiates a chain of horrible events. Whitman later dismissed the novel as "damned rot," claiming he wrote it in three days "with the help of a bottle of port" (Traubel 1906–96, 1: 93). *Franklin Evans*

was not, however, Whitman's only foray into temperance literature. Three earlier stories – “The Child's Champion” (1841), “Reuben's Last Wish” (1842), and “Wild Frank's Return” – depict the fatal results of heavy drinking. Whitman also explored temperance themes after *Franklin Evans*, starting but never finishing a novel called *The Madman* and eventually incorporating temperance discourse into *Leaves of Grass*.

In 1842, Whitman became a writer and editor for the *Aurora*, a patriotic daily that allowed Whitman to cover politics, society, theatre, and music. By May, he had moved to the *Evening Tattler*, though he remained only through the summer. Living in boarding houses and writing for various periodicals, Whitman worked for several different New York newspapers in the early 1840s, including the *Daily Plebeian*, the *Sunday Times & Noah's Weekly Messenger*, the *Subterranean*, the *New York Sun*, and the *New Mirror*. He took a position as editor of the *Statesman*, a Democratic Party paper, for a short time in 1843 and served another short editorship for the *New York Democrat* in 1844, before being turned out by conservative party members.

Although he moved from job to job, Whitman published journalism and short fiction on a regular basis. For the *Columbian*, Whitman wrote sentimental stories such as “Dumb Kate” (1844) and “The Little Sleighers” (1844). More exotic fiction became his focus in 1845, as he contributed stories on American Indians, the Holy Land, and a mutiny in the British Navy for the *Aristidean*. Whitman also produced sensation-alistic, reform stories, including “The Boy Lover” (1845), which revisited temperance themes, and “Revenge and Requitall” (1845), which echoed his opposition to capital punishment. In August 1845, however, a financially strapped Whitman returned to Brooklyn and moved in with his family again.

In Brooklyn, Whitman wrote theatre and music articles for the *Long Island Star*. With no permanent position but enjoying all that Manhattan and Brooklyn had to offer, the freelancing Whitman penned an essay titled “Art-Music and Heart-Music” for the *Broadway Journal*, edited by Edgar Allan Poe, whom Whitman remembered as a quiet Southerner. Although this piece protested Europe's influence on American music, Whitman was actually developing a fascination with opera, particularly Italian opera. He took in Verdi and Donizetti, became an enthusiastic fan, wrote reviews, and started to attend the opera regularly when the Astor Place Opera House opened in 1847.

In March 1846, Whitman assumed editorship of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, a Democratic Party paper, and held the position for two years. He wrote editorials, reviews, and articles on a wide variety of topics. He even contributed a couple of conventional poems during his tenure at the *Eagle*, though he had also started to experiment with prose poetry. National topics, like the Mexican War and slavery, also drew Whitman's attention. A critic of radical abolitionism but proponent of the war in Mexico, Whitman used the *Eagle* to back a Free Soil position on slavery – that is, opposition to slavery's extension into the western territories. His boss, Isaac Van Anden, probably fired Whitman in January 1848 because of his support of the Wilmot Proviso, proposed legislation to exclude slavery from the territories. Whitman was again out of a job.

Wandering and Experimenting, 1848–55

The next month, J. E. “Sam” McClure, part-owner of the *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, met Whitman at a Broadway theatre and offered him and his brother Jeff a chance to work for his newspaper. With \$200 from McClure, the Whitman brothers left New York two days later and traveled by train, stagecoach, and riverboat to New Orleans, arriving on February 25. Though at times lonely, Jeff was happy to make five dollars a week as an office boy and amazed by New Orleans’s sights and sounds. Walt supervised the *Crescent*’s small staff, wrote articles, and compiled news that appeared in newspapers from around the country. New Orleans was Whitman’s first opportunity to travel beyond his two-island home of Manhattan/Long Island. In this diverse and lively city, he took walks in the French Quarter and wandered through the city’s markets, theatres, saloons, hotel lobbies, and bars. He also witnessed slave auctions, an experience that he later represented in *Leaves of Grass*. By the end of May, however, the *Crescent*’s owners began to reveal “a singular sort of coldness” (Loving 1999: 134) toward Whitman. Whether the chill was over money or a conflict between the Whitmans’ Free Soil views and the paper’s proslavery stance, Whitman and the *Crescent* parted ways. On May 27, Walt and Jeff were on a steamboat headed north.

Back in Brooklyn on June 15, Whitman looked for work and perhaps some direction in his life. In August, the Free Soil Party selected Whitman as a delegate to the state convention in Buffalo. Upon his return, he began to edit Brooklyn’s Free Soil newspaper, the *Freeman*. Although a fire destroyed the newspaper’s offices the day after his first issue, the paper and its editor were back in business with a second issue in November. Whitman had not yet found his calling, however. He tried to run a bookstore-stationery shop but eventually abandoned that enterprise and gave up the *Freeman* as well in September 1849. In July, perhaps in an effort to learn about himself and his future, Whitman had visited phrenologist Lorenzo Niles Fowler to have his skull examined, a then popular way of analyzing personality and destiny. Fowler wrongly predicted an early marriage for his client, but rated him high in Friendship, Sympathy, Self-Esteem, and Caution. The analysis also revealed Whitman’s capacity for Adhesiveness (same-sex love), Amativeness (opposite-sex love), Combativeness, and more. Whitman seems to have accepted the report as a reliable picture of himself and found in phrenology a vocabulary to describe the kinds of love he later celebrated in *Leaves of Grass*.

During the early 1850s, Whitman still had no permanent newspaper position. He did, however, contribute four poems to the *New York Evening Post* and the *New York Tribune* in 1850. These poems celebrated revolution, expressed dismay and anger over the political compromises surrounding slavery, and revealed an increasingly radical antislavery position. One of these poems, “Resurgemus,” was later included in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the only previously published poem in the volume. Thus these poems are clues to Whitman’s changes as a writer during the early 1850s – the moment in which this intermittently employed journalist, printer, and author of

conventional short fiction remade himself into “The American bard” (*PW*, 2: 446). Biographers know relatively little about Whitman’s life in this period. He worked as a printer, house builder, and occasional journalist. He delivered a lecture on art at the Brooklyn Art Union in 1851, visited the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1853, and attended the opera. None of these facts quite explain this most remarkable change, however. Indeed, the transformation seems so radical that some have suggested that Whitman must have had a mystical experience that accounts for the ecstasies, insights, and revelatory nature of a poem like “Song of Myself.” But mystical experiences are difficult to document. What biographers do know is that Whitman thought about politics (especially slavery) and popular culture, took notes toward a never-completed study of language, experimented with words in his notebooks, and wrote poems.

Leaves of Grass, 1855–61

In 1855, Whitman pulled together 12 of these untitled poems, composed a prose preface, and applied for a copyright. With the help of Andrew and James Rome, Whitman printed his new book at the Rome Brothers shop in Brooklyn. The homemade, self-financed volume appeared for sale around July 4 with Fowler & Wells, publishers of phrenology titles, as its distributor. Whitman turned out 795 copies of the 95-page, oversized volume and bound them in a green cover with gold lettering that read “Leaves of Grass,” a cover that resembled Fanny Fern’s best-selling *Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Portfolio* (1853).

During the month that followed, the poet experienced emotional lows and highs. A failing Walter, Sr. died on July 11. Ten days later, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote to acknowledge the copy of *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman had sent. Full of appreciation for Whitman’s achievement, the letter opened: “I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of ‘Leaves of Grass.’ I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed” (*Corr*, 1: 41). The praise elated Whitman, who carried the letter with him for the rest of the summer, published it in the *New York Daily Tribune*, and added to the spine of the next edition of *Leaves of Grass* an excerpt that read: “I greet you at the beginning of a great career. R. W. Emerson.” Emerson followed with a visit to Brooklyn in December. Other writers and critics publicly praised the book as well, including Edward Everett Hale in the prestigious *North American Review* and the widely read Fanny Fern. Whitman even wrote a few anonymous reviews himself.

Despite the positive press, hostility and neglect were common responses to the poems. The book sold few copies, and some critics wrote savage reviews. In the *Criterion*, for example, his former boss Rufus Griswold openly wondered “how any man’s fancy could have conceived such a mass of stupid filth” (Griswold 1983: 25).

Poor sales and negative reactions did not deter the poet, who soon began writing new poems, while contributing articles to *Life Illustrated* and working on a political

tirade called “The Eighteenth Presidency!” By September 1856, a second edition of *Leaves of Grass* had arrived, complete with poem titles and 20 new poems, including “Sun-Down Poem,” later titled “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” The new edition sold poorly, perhaps worse even than the first. Whitman continued to draw literary admirers, however, including Bronson Alcott and Henry David Thoreau that fall.

From 1857 to 1859, Whitman worked for the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, writing reviews and editorials. Upset with how Fowler & Wells handled the distribution of the first two editions, Whitman made plans for a third edition, a project he saw as “*The Great Construction of the New Bible*” (NUPM, 1: 353). By June 1857, he had written about 68 new poems, though he hadn’t yet located a publisher.

During this period, Whitman was spending time at Pfaff’s, a restaurant-saloon in Manhattan, and socializing with literary bohemians – editors John Swinton and Henry Clapp, daring feminist celebrities Ada Clare and Adah Isaacs Menken, famous humorist Artemus Ward, and writers Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Fitz-James O’Brien, and Edmund Clarence Stedman. Pfaff’s was perhaps also the place where Whitman met Fred Vaughn, a young, working-class Irish-Canadian with whom he had a romantic relationship in the late 1850s. Vaughn may have been the inspiration for “Live Oak, with Moss,” a 12-poem sequence that details the speaker’s affection for his unnamed male lover, his powerful delight in their relationship, and his reflections on their bond. Whitman never published the poems as a series but folded them into the “Calamus” cluster that emerged in the next edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Another of his memorable pieces from this period appeared as “A Child’s Reminiscence” (later “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”) in the December 24, 1859, issue of the *Saturday Press*, the literary journal edited by Pfaff’s regular, Henry Clapp. A deeply moving piece about love, death, and poetic creation, “A Child’s Reminiscence” recounts a memory of a mockingbird couple along a Long Island beach and a boy’s first encounter with death.

In February 1860, Whitman received an unexpected offer from Boston publisher Thayer & Eldridge to publish a new edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The parties quickly negotiated a contract, and Whitman went to Boston to oversee the printing. Thayer & Eldridge released the book in May 1860. To the previous poems, Whitman added 146 new poems, altered earlier ones, and revised titles. He also began placing poems into distinct, thematic clusters, a sign of increased attentiveness to the organization of *Leaves of Grass*. The volume’s principal themes are religion, democracy, and love, and “Calamus” brings together all three. The “Calamus” poems focus on love between men, but Whitman insisted they were political. He imagines in these poems of homoerotic affection a spiritualized comradeship, which he imagines as the basis for democracy. The third edition is also darker and more melancholy than previous editions. In contrast to the confident “I” of the opening poem in the 1855 edition or the “Poem of the Road” in 1856, the disconsolate speaker in 1860 often expresses sadness, woe, and painful uncertainty about relationships, personal identity, national destiny, and metaphysical order.

The well-publicized third edition received more attention and critical acclaim than previous editions, and it sold far more copies. The contemporary reviews were mostly

positive, and a number of women expressed their enthusiasm. Menken, for example, declared him “centuries ahead of his contemporaries” (Menken 1860: 1). The book’s new sense of structure, all of the new poems, its wider readership, and the critical praise, made it one of Whitman’s most successful books.

Unfortunately, Thayer & Eldridge went bankrupt in January 1861. Whitman had received about \$250 in royalties, which abruptly stopped. During the bankruptcy, the book’s plates were transferred to Boston publisher Richard Worthington who began printing pirated editions.

The Civil War, 1861–65

Shortly after war broke out in April 1861, Whitman’s 31-year-old brother George joined the Union army and relocated to the Washington-Baltimore area with his regiment. Like many Americans, George, Walt, and their mother were hoping the conflict would pass quickly. Not regularly employed and not finished with *Leaves of Grass*, Walt continued to write poetry and journalism. Following Union defeat at the First Bull Run in July, he began to compose poems with martial images and patriotic tones, “Beat! Beat! Drums!” and “Eighteen Sixty-One,” among others. Articles on Brooklyn and a series called “City Photographs” occupied Whitman journalistically in 1861–2, as did visits to the wounded and sick soldiers at the New York Hospital and at Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn. He had been visiting injured stage drivers in the years leading up to the war, and these hospital calls were a continuation of that work and an expression of the poet’s concern for ordinary, working-class men. Whitman and his mother regularly checked newspapers for information about the war. On December 16, 1862, three days after the battle of Fredericksburg, they were alarmed to come across the name “First Lieutenant G. W. Whitmore” (Allen 1985: 281) listed among the wounded, and worried it was a misprinting of George’s name. George had written a letter that very day to let them know he was “safe and sound” (Whitman 1975: 75) except for a cheek wound, but Walt had already left to find his brother.

On his way to the Washington army hospitals, Walt had his money stolen in Philadelphia. George, moreover, seemed to be in none of those hospitals. Luckily, Walt stumbled upon an abolitionist he had met in Boston while preparing *Leaves of Grass*, William Douglas O’Connor, who now worked for the federal government. O’Connor lent him money, and Walt left for Falmouth, Virginia, to look for his brother among the Union soldiers camped there. When he arrived, a disturbing sight greeted him – dead bodies covered with blankets and “a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c.” (*PW*, 1: 32). The mental picture stayed with him for years, shaping his attitude toward the war and images in his letters, poems, and nonfiction. Finding his “dear brother George . . . alive and well” (*PW*, 1: 62), Walt stayed with the army through the holidays.

Whitman had returned to Washington by January. He was living in a small bedroom in O’Connor’s apartment, looking for a job, drafting poems, and visiting

the sick and wounded in the army hospitals. With a daypack full of paper, stamps, tobacco, candy, cookies, fruit, and other small items, he distributed gifts to soldiers and offered consolation and cheer in whatever ways he could, writing letters for them, reading to them, sitting by them, talking, and listening. With some soldiers, he developed close, loving relationships. Lewis Brown, for example, cherished Whitman's picture and longed to be with him again after they parted, saying in his letters, "I feel quite lost without you hear [sic]" (Shively 1989: 124). To such expressions, Whitman responded with emotion and reassurance, "O Lewy, how glad I should be to see you, to have you with me" (*Corr*, 1: 121).

To continue his unpaid hospital work, Whitman took a position in the Army Paymaster's Office. As he settled into his job and new circle of friends that included O'Connor and the naturalist John Burroughs, his family underwent a series of crises. His brother Jesse, struggling with deep emotional problems, had become violent, while Andrew grew seriously ill with tuberculosis and alcoholism. In November 1863, Walt returned to Brooklyn for a month-long stay; shortly after the visit ended, Andrew died. Even with multiple family problems, a new job, and hospital visitations, Whitman worked on a prose project about his wartime experiences and pitched the idea to James Redpath, publisher of Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* (1863). He was also developing a collection of poems about the war. The stress of these multiple demands, long hours in the hospitals, and ongoing anxiety about the war and family led to a collapse in Whitman's health in June 1864. At the urging of friends and physicians, Whitman moved back to Brooklyn to recover and to finish his new book of poems. Although Brooklyn provided him with a much-needed break from Washington and the war, hospital visits and family problems continued to preoccupy him. During the course of 1864, Jeff and Walt arranged for an increasingly unmanageable Jesse to be committed to a lunatic asylum. George, moreover, had disappeared, captured by Confederate troops in September 1864, though the anxious family heard no news about him until the following January. These wartime stresses and maladies eventually left the once hearty Walt in poor health for the rest of his life.

Whitman returned to Washington in January 1865 and, with O'Connor's help, landed a position as copyist at the Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs. Because of poor health, Whitman visited area hospitals less frequently but continued such trips nonetheless, bringing gifts and writing letters for soldiers long after the war ended.

In February or March, as a passenger on a horsecar, Whitman met a 21-year-old former Confederate soldier turned conductor named Peter Doyle. The two fell in love almost immediately. Years later, Doyle remembered their first meeting vividly:

He was the only passenger, it was a lonely night, so I thought I would go in and talk with him. Something in me made me do it and something in him drew me that way. He used to say there was something in me had the same effect on him. Anyway, I went into the car. We were familiar at once – I put my hand on his knee – we understood. He did not get out at the end of the trip – in fact went all the way back with me. (Shively 1987: 116)

Whitman often joined Doyle on his streetcar, and the regular passengers soon became well-known acquaintances as well. The two took long walks together, went out for drinks, and talked at great length about everything from music and literature to stars and animals and presidents and politics.

Soon after their relationship began, Whitman returned to Brooklyn to see George (no longer a prisoner of war) and finish his new book, *Drum-Taps*. On April 1, 1865, he signed a contract with New York printer Peter Eckler for five hundred copies of the new book. On April 14, while Whitman was in Brooklyn, John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln during a performance at Ford's Theatre, which Doyle happened to have been attending. Because Whitman had so intensely admired Lincoln, saying at one point, "After my dear, dear mother, I guess Lincoln gets almost nearer me than anybody else" (Traubel 1906–96, 1: 38), his death had a profound impact. Some copies of *Drum-Taps* were bound and distributed, but the poet realized that his book needed something on Lincoln's death. Delaying further distribution, Whitman began work on a *Sequel to Drum-Taps*. These 18 new poems included one of his most highly regarded pieces, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," and perhaps his most famous and most memorized poem, "O Captain! My Captain!" By October, Whitman had finished the sequel totaling 24 pages and bound it with the previously printed pages from *Drum-Taps*.

Post-War Washington, 1865–73

The Bureau of Indian Affairs promoted Whitman on May 1, 1865, shortly after his return to Washington. Two months later, Whitman was fired. Purging his department of employees who possessed questionable moral character, Interior Secretary James Harlan discovered at Whitman's desk a book he thought obscene, *Leaves of Grass*. The unemployed Whitman went for help to O'Connor, who quickly found his friend a copyist position in the Attorney General's office, a job Whitman held until 1874. Though all seemed put right, O'Connor remained outraged about Harlan's narrow-minded judgment – so outraged that he composed a passionate, 46-page apology, *The Good Gray Poet* (1866), that defends Whitman as a patriotic, humane, healthy-minded, and misunderstood poetic genius who could hardly have intended anything filthy. While it did nothing to change Harlan's views or the opinions of conventional critics, the pamphlet helped transform Whitman's reputation and make his poetry acceptable to mainstream audiences.

Other public defenses of Whitman ensued. Burroughs published an insightful essay titled "Walt Whitman and his 'Drum-Taps'" (1866) in the *Galaxy* and followed up with *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person* (1867). In England, Moncure Conway published in 1866 an essay that openly endorsed Whitman's poetic achievements. William Michael Rossetti followed in 1867 with his own essay on "Walt Whitman's Poems," before putting together a British edition of the *Poems of Walt Whitman* in 1868. Rossetti's edition paved the way for an expanding appreciation of Whitman's work throughout the British Isles and into Europe.

Nevertheless, just as Whitman's reputation was improving, his poetic powers and productivity declined. After a decade of remarkable literary output that would change the history of poetry, Whitman added just six new poems to the fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1867). The oddly patched-together book collected under one cover four separate volumes: a re-edited version of *Leaves of Grass*, *Drum-Taps*, *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, and *Songs Before Parting*, a new section made up of previous poems.

In several respects, Whitman turned his attention not to poetry but prose after the war. In response to a Thomas Carlyle critique of democratizing cultural developments, Whitman authored an essay called "Democracy" (1867). "Personalism" (1868) and a never published piece called "Orbic Literature" followed. He eventually combined and revised these prose pieces on democracy and individualism into *Democratic Vistas* (1871). In this examination of American culture and ideology, Whitman scrutinizes the conflict "between democracy's convictions, aspirations, and the people's crudeness, vice, caprices" (PW, 2: 363). Not always smoothly articulated, his hope-filled solution in *Democratic Vistas* is not so much political as spiritual, cultural, and artistic.

Whitman continued to write poems, however, though they were only rarely as inspired and powerful as his 1855–65 verse. A fifth edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1871, or, rather, versions of it started to appear. Printed in New York, the first issue was a 384-page volume with 10 new poems. A 504-page version published in Washington emerged in 1872; it included a separately paged "Passage to India" section of 24 new poems and 51 older ones. A third version published in 1872 added another supplement titled "After all, Not to Create Only." The final 1872 issue appended one more separate "book" of poems, "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free," which included seven new poems and a preface. This succession of issues and supplements suggests that Whitman was not entirely certain about the shape, organization, and direction of *Leaves of Grass* in the 1870s. The fifth edition also demonstrates that Whitman was not finished as a poet: he started seeing new creative possibilities for *Leaves of Grass* and cultivating "the ambition of devoting yet a few years to poetic composition" (PW, 2: 459).

In postbellum poems like "A Carol of Harvest, For 1867," and "A Passage to India" (1870), Whitman celebrates modernity and technological progress – which is also the theme of "After all, Not to Create only" (1871), later retitled "Song of the Exposition" after the American Institute's Industrial Exhibition, where he first recited it. "After all" was the first of the occasional pieces Whitman presented publicly during Reconstruction. In June 1872, he traveled to Dartmouth College to read a commencement poem, "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free" (retitled "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood"). A couple of years later, a convalescing Whitman wrote a second commencement poem, "Song of the Universal" (1874), and had it read on his behalf for the graduates at Tufts.

Despite this public recognition and professional success, Whitman's personal life became increasingly sad and difficult. Jeff and his family had moved to St Louis in 1868. Later that same year, a nephew died in a cart accident while playing in the street. An institutionalized Jesse passed away in the winter of 1870. Whitman also

worried at times that his feelings for Doyle were not entirely mutual. Someone was deeply in love with Whitman, however. Anne Gilchrist, a widowed mother of three and devoted defender of Whitman in England, was sending him letters expressing her desire to be his bride and wife. Whitman's responses were affectionate, but they attempted to redirect her feelings away from hope for a conventional marriage.

Whitman then had the worst year of his life. In the summer of 1872, high blood pressure exacerbated Whitman's already poor health. That fall, he and O'Connor had an angry dispute (probably about African American suffrage) that led to an estrangement in which the two would not talk to each other for 10 years. In January 1873, Whitman suffered a stroke that paralyzed the left side of his body and forced him eventually to give up his clerkship at the Attorney General's office. The experience was deeply frustrating: "it [is] so slow, so aggravating, to be disabled, so feeble, cannot walk nor do any thing" (*Corr*, 2: 208), he wrote to his mother. Around this time, his close friend John Burroughs left Washington for New York. It had been a terrible series of months, and then in the spring, on May 23, 1873, his mother died. Her passing devastated Whitman, who called it "the great dark cloud of my life" (*Corr*, 2: 242).

Camden, 1873–84

In mourning, in poor health, and unable to work, Whitman moved to Camden, New Jersey to live with his brother George and George's wife, Lou. After a succession of painful losses, he now found himself also separated from his beloved, Peter Doyle, who remained in Washington. From Camden, he wrote Doyle almost cheerful letters of consolation that talked of reunion but revealed real sorrow. Whitman never moved back to Washington, and the two gradually saw less of each other. He felt "very lonesome" (*Corr*, 2: 267). Whitman's "Prayer of Columbus" (1874) portrays the explorer as "A batter'd, wreck'd old man, / Thrown on this savage shore, far, far from home" (*LG*: 421) – an image of Whitman himself during his first sad, sad year in Camden.

Ill throughout 1874, he suffered another stroke in the winter of 1875, this one paralyzing his right side. Yet he did his best to carry on with his work. He returned to his Civil War notebooks and produced *Memoranda During the War* (1875), a 68-page prose account of his war experiences. He also planned a two-volume set that included a "Centennial Edition" of *Leaves of Grass*, a reissue of the fifth edition, and an extraordinary new book titled *Two Rivulets*. Mixing poetry and prose and experimenting with page layout, *Two Rivulets* collected Whitman's postbellum writings – poems, prefaces, *Democratic Vistas*, *Memoranda During the War*, and more. This two-volume complete works appeared in 1876. Expensively priced at 10 dollars a set, it still sold relatively well because of Whitman's growing reputation and a perception that he was in financial need. Sales were brisk and provided some income to the poet.

In September 1876, despite Whitman's attempts to discourage her plans and matrimonial hopes, Anne Gilchrist and her children arrived in the United States. The Gilchrists rented a house in Philadelphia and provided the poet with his own

room. Although it became clear a marriage would not work, Whitman and the Gilchrists became close friends and remained so, even after the Gilchrists returned to England in 1879.

During this period, Whitman met Harry Stafford and began an intense relationship with the moody young man. The two became friends during the preparation of the “Centennial Edition,” as Whitman oversaw the printing process and Stafford worked as an errand boy for the printer. Whitman became the Staffords’ regular guest at the family farm, Timber Creek, south of Camden. The war, family troubles, and poor health had devastated Whitman; but these visits from 1876 to 1884 and his relationship with Harry brought him back to life. He told Harry:

I realize plainly that *if I had not known you* – if it hadn’t been for you & our friendship & my going down there summers to the creek with you – and living there with your folks, & the kindness of your mother, & cheering me up – I believe *I should not be a living man to-day*. (*Corr*, 3: 215)

He loved the open air, the Stafford family, and especially Harry. Despite the great affection each had for the other, the two sometimes quarreled. Harry was self-confessedly “lovin, but bad-tempered” (Shively 1987: 151). Whitman gave him a ring, which was repeatedly returned and regiven, as their relationship went through its emotional ups and downs. Stafford married in 1884, but the two remained friends.

During the late 1870s and early 1880s, as his health improved, Whitman’s public and social life expanded again. He lectured on Tom Paine in Philadelphia in 1877 and then developed a lecture on the “Death of Abraham Lincoln” that he later delivered at various venues along the east coast from 1879 to 1890. In it, using Doyle’s first-hand account, Whitman depicts the assassination with dramatic immediacy and imagines Lincoln’s murder as a sacrificial event that heals the nation’s conflicts. He typically ended these evenings with a reading of “O Captain! My Captain!” These lectures provided the poet with income and deepened in national memory the association of Whitman with the dead President.

Canadian physician Richard Maurice Bucke came to Camden in 1877 to see the poet and began his long friendship with Whitman. Writers from England also began to call. Edward Carpenter – a champion of Whitman’s work in England and author of works on same-sex love and democracy – visited in 1877 and again in 1884. Oscar Wilde dropped by in 1882, and Whitman described him to Stafford as “a fine large handsome youngster” (*Corr*, 3: 264).

By 1879, Whitman felt well enough to travel again. As the guest of former antislavery advocates in Kansas, he journeyed west to St Louis, Kansas City, Lawrence, through Kansas as far as Denver. On the return trip, he stayed with his brother Jeff and family in St Louis, extending his visit by a few months for health reasons. In January 1880, a healthier Whitman returned to Camden and made plans for a second journey, this time to Canada to see Bucke in June. During the trip to Canada, the two discussed Bucke’s plans for a biography of Whitman, visited the London, Ontario

asylum that Bucke oversaw, and traveled through Ontario to Québec. Bucke returned to America in 1881 and traveled to Long Island with Whitman to see the poet's childhood haunts.

In 1881, Whitman was working on a new edition of *Leaves of Grass* with Boston publisher James Osgood. In a massive restructuring, Whitman created five new clusters, shifted and regrouped poems, included 17 new ones, deleted 39 previous pieces, and edited or tinkered with most of the others. Always concerned with the material look and feel of his books, he traveled to Boston to oversee the printing that summer. With a respected publisher behind it, the new 382-page edition seemed to have a promising future and soon sold 1,500 copies. When faced with possible prosecution for distributing obscene literature, however, Osgood discontinued the volume. During the ensuing controversy that generated a great deal of interest in the book and stirred ardent denunciations and defenses of the poems, Whitman found a new publisher – Rees, Welsh of Philadelphia (David McKay would later acquire the rights). On July 18, 1882, the first Philadelphia printing of 1,000 copies was completely bought up within the first day; the second printing took just a week.

Later that year, Rees, Welsh published a companion volume titled *Specimen Days & Collect* – a volume that contained a fragmentary autobiography and other prose pieces. Bucke's biography, *Walt Whitman* (1883), appeared the following summer. In many respects, with a full-length biography and comprehensive editions of his poetry and prose published, Whitman's career seemed complete.

Mickle Street, 1884–92

In the period following publication of these volumes, Whitman felt at times that he lacked direction but kept writing poetry, memoirs, and criticism. Impeded periodically by summer heat or his own poor health, he still published his writings in a number of venues, and by 1886 he was at work on a new book titled *November Boughs*.

His brother George and family moved from Camden in 1884, leaving the poet with instructions to find a new place before April when new tenants would arrive. Refusing to leave the city and without family, Whitman bought a two-story house at 328 Mickle Street. Mary Davis moved in the following year as his housekeeper and later brought her foster son, Warren Fritzingler, who became Whitman's nurse. Gifts from all over – money, furniture, home furnishings – arrived at Mickle Street to help the poet settle into his new surroundings. Thirty well-wishers chipped in to buy him a horse and buggy, and a young man named Bill Duckett soon became Whitman's companion and driver on these excursions.

From Mickle Street, Whitman received and added to his circle of friends and disciples, including journalist/editor Talcott Williams and lawyers Thomas Harned, Thomas Donaldson, and Robert Ingersoll. Whitman had also generated a following in England, and English disciples such as John Johnston and J. W. Wallace made pilgrimages to see Whitman at Mickle Street. One of Whitman's British readers,

the poet John Addington Symonds, had been asking for years about the “Calamus” cluster and its portrayal of homosexual love. In an 1890 letter, Whitman responded to what he called Symonds’s “morbid inferences” (*Corr*, 5: 72–3) with an outrageously unconvincing story of having fathered six children. Whitman also circulated in these years among artists, some of whom wanted to capture his image: John W. Alexander, for instance, asked Whitman to sit for a portrait in 1886, sculptor Sidney Morse created a bust in 1887, and Thomas Eakins finished a portrait in 1888. During Whitman’s final years, however, Horace Traubel proved to be his steadiest friend. From March 1888 until the moment of the poet’s death, Traubel visited Whitman daily and recorded their conversations in astounding detail.

In 1887–8, a flurry of new work appeared in *McClure’s*, the *Critic*, *Lippincott’s*, and the *New York Herald*. By the fall of 1888, Whitman had finished *November Boughs*, a 140-page book of prose pieces written over the 1880s with a preface titled “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads” and a new poem cluster called “Sands at Seventy.” A stroke in 1888 left Whitman feeble and quite dependent, though another collection of prose and verse titled *Good-Bye My Fancy* appeared in 1891. Even as he drew up his will in 1888, made arrangements for a tomb in Camden’s Harleigh Cemetery in 1890, and struggled with pneumonia in the winter of 1891–2, Whitman continued to write and to prepare a final, “Deathbed” edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The final version of his democratic epic consisted of the 1881–2 edition along with two “annexes” of poems, “Sands at Seventy” and “Good-Bye My Fancy,” plus the “Backward Glance” preface as a prose finale. Despite his poor health and declaration that *Leaves of Grass* was complete, he worked on further poems, including “A Thought of Columbus,” his final poem, authored in December 1891.

Ten days after giving this last poem to Traubel, Whitman died, taking his last breath at 6.34 p.m. on March 26, 1892, and Traubel held his hand as he passed away. On the day of the poet’s funeral, thousands turned out. The poet’s brother George attended the funeral, as did Peter Doyle, who came and left by himself. Harned, Bucke, and Ingersoll spoke at the funeral, but Traubel did not. At the tomb itself, no words were shared, though, according to Traubel, “Birds sang” (Traubel, Bucke, and Harned 1893: 438).

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