

# *St Aiden's Homeschool*



*Footsteps on the Road to Learning*



*Biography  
Walt Whitman*



www.staidenshomeschool.com  
Donnette E Davis

**Walter Whitman** (May 31, 1819 – March 26, 1892) was an American poet, essayist, journalist, and humanist. He was a part of the transition between Transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his works. Whitman's among the most influential poets in the American canon, often called the father of free verse.

Whitman's sexuality's often discussed alongside his poetry. Though biographers continue to debate his sexuality, he's usually labeled as either homosexual or bisexual. It isn't clear if Whitman had sexual relationships with men. Whitman was concerned with politics throughout his life. He supported the Wilmot Proviso and opposed the extension of slavery generally, but didn't believe in the abolitionist movement.

## Life and work

### Early life

Walter Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, in West Hills, Town of Huntington, Long Island, to parents with interest in Quaker thought, Walter and Louisa Van Velsor Whitman. He was the second of nine children and was immediately nicknamed "Walt" to distinguish him from his father. Walter Whitman Sr. named three of his seven sons after American leaders: Andrew Jackson, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson. The oldest was named Jesse and another boy died unnamed at the age of six months. The couple's sixth son, the youngest, was named Edward. Whitman looked back on his childhood as generally restless and unhappy due to his family's difficult economic status. One happy moment that he later recalled was when he was lifted in the air and kissed on the cheek by the Marquis de Lafayette during a celebration in Brooklyn on July 4, 1825.

At age eleven Whitman concluded formal schooling. He then sought employment, due to his family's financial situation, originally as an office boy for two lawyers and later as an apprentice and printer's devil for the weekly Long Island newspaper the *Patriot*, edited by Samuel E. Clements. There, Whitman learned about the printing press and typesetting. He may have written "sentimental bits" of filler material for occasional issues. Clements aroused controversy when he and two friends attempted to dig up the corpse of Elias Hicks to create a plaster mold of his head. Clements left the *Patriot* shortly after, possibly as a result of the controversy.

### Early career

The following summer Whitman worked for another printer, Erastus Worthington, in Brooklyn. His family moved back to West Hills in the spring, but Whitman remained and took a job at the shop of Alden Spooner, editor of the leading Whig weekly newspaper the *Long-Island Star*. and anonymously published some of his earliest poetry in the *New York Mirror*. At age 16 in May 1835, Whitman left the *Star* and Brooklyn. He moved to New York City to work as a compositor though, in later years, Whitman couldn't remember where. He attempted to find further work but had difficulty in part due to a severe fire in the printing and publishing district In May 1836, he rejoined his family, now living in Hempstead, Long Island. Whitman taught intermittently at various schools until the spring of 1838, though he wasn't satisfied as a teacher.

After his teaching attempts, Whitman went back to Huntington, New York to found his

own newspaper, the *Long Islander*. Whitman served as publisher, editor, pressman, and distributor and even provided home delivery. After ten months, he sold the publication to E. O. Crowell, whose first issue appeared on July 12, 1839. No copies of the *Long Islander* published under Whitman survive. By the summer of 1839, he found a job as a typesetter in Jamaica, Queens with the *Long Island Democrat*, edited by James J. Brenton. During this time, he published a series of ten editorials called "Sun-Down Papers—From the Desk of a Schoolmaster" in three newspapers between the winter of 1840 and July 1841. In these essays, he adopted a constructed persona, a trend he'd utilize throughout his career. Whitman moved to New York City in May, initially working a low-level job at the *New World*, working under Park Benjamin, Sr. and Rufus Wilmot Griswold. He continued working for short periods of time for various newspapers; in 1842 he was editor of the *Aurora* and from 1846 to 1848 he was editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*. He also contributed freelance fiction and poetry throughout the 1840s. Whitman lost his position at the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1848 after siding with the "Barnburner" wing of the Democratic party against the newspaper's owner, Isaac Van Anden, who belonged to the conservative, or "Hunker", wing of the party.

### **Leaves of Grass**

Whitman claimed that after years of competing for "the usual rewards", he determined to become a poet. He first experimented with a variety of popular literary genres which appealed to the cultural tastes of the period. As early as 1850, he began writing what'd become *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poetry which he'd continue editing and revising until his death. Whitman intended to write a distinctly American epic and used free verse with a cadence based on the Bible. At the end of June 1855, Whitman surprised his brothers with the already-printed first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. George "didn't think it worth reading".

Whitman paid for the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* himself. A total of 795 copies were printed. No name's given as author; instead, facing the title page was an engraved portrait done by Samuel Hollyer, but in the body of the text calls himself "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos, disorderly, fleshly, and sensual, no sentimentalist, no stander above men or women or apart from them, no more modest than immodest". The book received its strongest praise from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote a flattering five page letter to Whitman and spoke highly of the book to friends. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was widely distributed and stirred up significant interest, in part due to Emerson's approval, but was occasionally criticized for the seemingly "obscene" nature of the poetry. Geologist John Peter Lesley wrote to Emerson, calling the book "trashy, profane & obscene" and the author "a pretentious ass". On July 11, 1855, a few days after *Leaves of Grass* was published, Whitman's father died at the age of 65.

In the months following the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, critical responses began focusing more on the potentially offensive sexual themes. Though the second edition was already printed and bound, the publisher almost didn't release it. In the end, the edition went to retail, with 20 additional poems, in August 1856. *Leaves of Grass* was revised and re-released in 1860 again in 1867, and several more times throughout the remainder of Whitman's life. Several well-known writers admired the work enough to visit Whitman, including Bronson Alcott and Henry David Thoreau.

Amidst the first publications of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman had financial difficulty and was forced to work as a journalist again, specifically with Brooklyn's *Daily Times* starting in May 1857. As an editor, he oversaw the paper's contents, contributed book reviews, and wrote editorials. He left the job in 1859, though it's unclear if he was fired or chose to leave. Whitman, who typically kept detailed notebooks and journals, left very little information about himself in the late 1850s.

### Civil War years

As the American Civil War was beginning, Whitman published his poem "" as a patriotic rally call for the North. Whitman's brother George had joined the Union army and began sending Whitman several vividly detailed letters of the battle front. On December 16, 1862, a listing of fallen and wounded soldiers in the *New York Tribune* included "First Lieutenant G. W. Whitmore", which Whitman worried was a reference to his brother George. He made his way south immediately to find him, though his wallet was stolen on the way. "Walking all day and night, unable to ride, trying to get information, trying to get access to big people", Whitman later wrote, he eventually found George alive, with only a superficial wound on his cheek. He'd write of this experience in "The Great Army of the Sick", published in a New York newspaper in 1863 and, 12 years later, in a book called *Memoranda During the War*. He then contacted Emerson, this time to ask for help in obtaining a government post.

The Whitman family had a difficult end to 1864. On September 30, 1864, Whitman's brother George was captured by Confederates in Virginia, another brother, Andrew Jackson, died of tuberculosis compounded by alcoholism on December 3. That month, Whitman committed his brother Jesse to the Kings County Lunatic Asylum. Whitman's spirits were raised, however, when he finally got a better-paying government post – a low grade clerk in the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the Department of the Interior – thanks to his friend William Douglas O'Connor. O'Connor, a poet, daguerreotypist and an editor at the *Saturday Evening Post*, had written to William Tod Otto, Assistant Secretary of the Interior, on Whitman's behalf. Whitman began the new appointment on January 24, 1865, with a yearly salary of \$1,200. A month later, on February 24, 1865, George was released from capture and granted a furlough because of his poor health.

Effective June 30, 1865, however, Whitman was fired from his job. O'Connor protested until J. Hubley Ashton had Whitman transferred to the Attorney General's office on July 1. O'Connor, though, was still upset and vindicated Whitman by publishing a biased and exaggerated biographical study, *The Good Gray Poet*, in January 1866. The fifty-cent pamphlet defended Whitman as a wholesome patriot, established the poet's nickname and increased his popularity. Also aiding in his popularity was the publication of "O Captain! My Captain!", a relatively conventional poem to Abraham Lincoln, the only poem to be anthologized during Whitman's lifetime.

Part of Whitman's role in the Attorney General's office was interviewing former Confederate soldiers for Presidential pardons. "There're real characters among them", he later wrote, "and you know I've a fancy for anything out of the ordinary." In August 1866, he took a month off in order to prepare a new edition of *Leaves of Grass* which wouldn't be published until 1867 after difficulty in finding a publisher. He hoped it'd be its last edition. In February 1868 *Poems of Walt Whitman* was published in England thanks

to the influence of William Michael Rossetti, with minor changes which Whitman reluctantly approved. The edition became popular in England, especially with endorsements from the highly respected Anne Gilchrist. Another edition of *Leaves of Grass* was issued in 1871, the same year it was mistakenly reported that its author died in a railroad accident. As Whitman's international fame increased, he remained working in the attorney general's office until January 1872. He spent much of 1872 caring for his mother who was now nearly eighty and struggling with arthritis. He also traveled and was invited to Dartmouth College to give the commencement address on June 26, 1872.

### **Health decline and death**

Early in 1873, Whitman suffered a paralytic stroke; his mother died in May the same year. Both events were difficult for Whitman and left him depressed. He moved to Camden, New Jersey to live with his brother George, paying room and board until he bought his own house on Mickle St. in 1884. Around this time, he began socializing with Mary Oakes Davis, the widow of a sea captain, who lived nearby. She moved in with Whitman on February 24, 1885 to serve as his housekeeper in exchange for free rent. She brought with her a cat, a dog, two turtledoves, a canary, and other assorted animals. During this time, Whitman produced further editions of *Leaves of Grass* in 1876, 1881, and 1889.

As the end of 1891 approached, he prepared a final edition of *Leaves of Grass*, an edition which has been nicknamed the "Deathbed Edition". He wrote, "L. of G. *at last complete*—after 33 y'rs of hackling at it, all times & moods of my life, fair weather & foul, all parts of the land, and peace & war, young & old". Preparing for death, Whitman commissioned a granite mausoleum shaped like a house for \$4,000 and visited it often during construction. In the last week of his life, he was too weak to lift a knife or fork and wrote: "I suffer all the time: I've no relief, no escape: it's monotony — monotony — monotony — in pain."

Whitman died on March 26, 1892. An autopsy revealed his lungs had diminished to one-eighth their normal breathing capacity, a result of bronchial pneumonia. A public viewing of his body was held at his Camden home; over one thousand people visited in three hours and Whitman's oak coffin was barely visible because of all the flowers and wreaths left for him.

### **Writing**

Whitman's work breaks the boundaries of poetic form and is generally prose-like. He also used unusual images and symbols in his poetry, including rotting leaves, tufts of straw, and debris. He also openly wrote about death and sexuality, including prostitution. This connection was emphasized especially in "Song of Myself" by using an all-powerful first-person narration. As an American epic, it deviated from the historic use of an elevated hero and instead assumed the identity of the common people. *Leaves of Grass* also responded to the impact that recent urbanization in the United States had on the masses.

### **Lifestyle and beliefs**

## Alcohol

Whitman was a vocal proponent of temperance and rarely drank alcohol. He once claimed he didn't taste "strong liquor" until he was thirty and occasionally argued for prohibition. One of his earliest long fiction works, the novel *Franklin Evans; or, The Inebriate*, first published November 23, 1842, is a temperance novel. Whitman wrote the novel at the height of popularity of the Washingtonian movement though the movement itself was plagued with contradictions, as was *Franklin Evans*. Years later Whitman claimed he was embarrassed by the book and called it a "damned rot". He dismissed it by saying he wrote the novel in three days solely for money while he was under the influence of alcohol himself. Even so, he wrote other pieces recommending temperance, including *The Madman* and a short story "Reuben's Last Wish".

## Religion

Whitman was deeply influenced by deism. He denied any one faith was more important than another, and embraced all religions equally. In "Song of Myself", he gave an inventory of major religions and indicated he respected and accepted all of them – a sentiment he further emphasized in his poem "With Antecedents", affirming: "I adopt each theory, myth, god, and demi-god, / I see that the old accounts, bibles, genealogies, are true, without exception". Whitman was a religious skeptic: though he accepted all churches, he believed in none. As Whitman biographer Jerome Loving wrote, "the discussion of Whitman's sexual orientation will probably continue in spite of whatever evidence emerges." Whitman had intense friendships with many men throughout his life. Some biographers have claimed that he may not have actually engaged in sexual relationships with men,

Peter Doyle may be the most likely candidate for the love of Whitman's life, according to biographer David S. Reynolds. Doyle was a bus conductor whom Whitman met around 1866 and the two were inseparable for several years. Interviewed in 1895, Doyle said: "We were familiar at once — I put my hand on his knee — we understood. He didn't get out at the end of the trip — in fact went all the way back with me." In his notebooks, Whitman disguised Doyle's initials using the code "16.4". A more direct second-hand account comes from Oscar Wilde. Wilde met Whitman in America in 1882, and wrote to the homosexual rights activist George Cecil Ives that there was "no doubt" about the great American poet's sexual orientation — "I've the kiss of Walt Whitman still on my lips," he boasted. The only explicit description of Whitman's sexual activities's second hand. In 1924 Edward Carpenter, then an old man, described an erotic encounter he'd had in his youth with Whitman to Gavin Arthur, who recorded it in detail in his journal. Late in his life, when Whitman was asked outright if his series of "Calamus" poems were homosexual, he chose not to respond.

There's also some evidence that Whitman may have had sexual relationships with women. He'd a romantic friendship with a New York actress named Ellen Grey in the spring of 1862, but it isn't known whether or not it was also sexual. He still had a photo of her decades later when he moved to Camden and referred to her as "an old sweetheart of mine". In a letter dated August 21, 1890 he claimed, "I've had six children - two are dead". This claim has never been corroborated. Toward the end of his life, he often told stories of previous girlfriends and sweethearts and denied an allegation from the *New York Herald* that he'd "never had a love affair".

## Shakespeare authorship

Whitman was a proponent of the Shakespeare authorship question, refusing to believe in the historic attribution of the works to William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon. Whitman comments in his *November Boughs* (1888) regarding Shakespeare's historical plays:

## Slavery

Whitman opposed the extension of slavery in the United States and supported the Wilmot Proviso. However, he wasn't an abolitionist and believed the movement did more harm than good. He once wrote that the abolitionists had, in fact, slowed the advancement of their cause by their "ultraism and officiousness". His main concern was that their methods disrupted the democratic process, as did the refusal of the Southern states to put the interests of the nation as a whole above their own. and was concerned at the increasing number of African-Americans in the legislature.

## Legacy and influence

- Walt Whitman has been claimed as America's first "poet of democracy", a title meant to reflect his ability to write in a singularly American character. A British friend of Walt Whitman, Mary Smith Whitall Costelloe, wrote: "You can't really understand America without Walt Whitman, without *Leaves of Grass*... He's expressed that civilization, 'up to date,' as he'd say, and no student of the philosophy of history can do without him." Modernist poet Ezra Pound called Whitman "America's poet... He is America." Andrew Carnegie called him "the great poet of America so far". Whitman considered himself a messiah-like figure in poetry. Others agreed: one of his admirers, William Sloane Kennedy, speculated that "people will be celebrating the birth of Walt Whitman as they're now the birth of Christ".
- The literary critic, Harold Bloom wrote, as the introduction for the 150th anniversary of *Leaves of Grass*:
- Whitman's lifestyle was adopted by the Beat movement and its leaders such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac in the 1950s and 1960s as well as anti-war poets like Adrienne Rich and Gary Snyder. Whitman also influenced Bram Stoker, author of *Dracula*, and was the model for the character of Dracula. Stoker said in his notes that Dracula represented the quintessential male which, to Stoker, was Whitman, with whom he corresponded until Whitman's death. Whitman's a 2009 inductee of the New Jersey Hall of Fame.

*Acknowledgements, Thanks & Terms of Use*

We would love to hear your comments on this workbook. If you have a moment please email your comments and suggestions to [feedback@staidenshomeschool.com](mailto:feedback@staidenshomeschool.com)

Other Volumes In Our Series Of Workbooks

AFRICA  
ALPHABET, VOWELS & CONSONANTS  
ANIMALS  
COLOURS, SHAPES, PUZZLES  
DOLCH WORDS , WORD FAMILIES & PHONICS  
NUMBERS AND COUNTING

© All rights reserved. Digital duplication, electronic transmission or posting of the contents contained, printing, photocopying, and/or distribution of copies of content is prohibited with the exception of the purchaser reproducing as many copies as necessary for use by their own family or single classroom. Altering, amending, or reproducing portions of this document or the contents contained herein, in any other than the original format is prohibited. Every caution has been taken to ensure that the information contained herein is accurate. However by the use of this product the user absolves Donnette E Davis and/or St Aiden's Homeschool and/or her/its duly authorised representative/s from any liability or obligation arising out of the use hereof whatsoever. Any changes to these terms and conditions must be made in writing and agreed to by all parties involved.

While much of the contents of this package are in the public domain we have spent many man hours compiling this unit and therefore hold the Compilation Copyright to this Collection. Additionally while you can copy the content of Public Domain material which is freely available, the format, layout, design and images and graphic content, including web pages, i.e. the unit, remains the sole property of Donnette E Davis and/or St Aiden's Homeschool and/or her/its duly appointed agents.

Wikipedia, Public Domain images and my own personal collection of PD images purchased & licensed through Green Label Clipart Collection have been used in this eBook.

Special thanks to:  
Totally Explained  
Wikipedia  
US Department of Education

Donnette E Davis © 2009  
St Aiden's Homeschool, South Africa  
P O Box 13720  
Cascades  
3202  
KwaZulu-Natal  
Republic of South Africa  
[www.staidenshomeschool.com](http://www.staidenshomeschool.com)