Introduction to Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*

First published in 1855, Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* would grow and change over the rest of his life through its later editions published in 1856, 1860, 1867, 1871, and 1881. In these later editions, Whitman would expand and reframe the twelve poems he initially included in the collection, adding numerous poems so that by the so-called deathbed edition of 1891-1892 the collection would include 293 poems. *Leaves of Grass*, in a very real way, became Whitman’s lifework. It transformed as he aged and as he reflected on the new conditions of American life growing out of the Civil War and the age of increasing industrialization and urbanization that followed. While scholars debate the significance of the differences among the various editions and have varying opinions of the strengths and weaknesses of the versions of poems appearing in different editions, *Leaves of Grass*, through its multiple manifestations, maintains a coherent essence, an essence at the center of Whitman’s experimental, determinedly American poetics.

Some of the key features of Whitman’s poetry and his project within *Leaves of Grass* can be seen by focusing on one of his most famous (and longest) poems “Song of Myself,” especially by considering it in the context of the first edition. The 1855 edition broke with traditional poetry in numerous ways. Most jarringly, for many readers, was its eschewal of traditional meter and rhythm in favor of free verse. The romantic poetic theories of William Wordsworth and Ralph Waldo Emerson had established the foundation for this abandonment of traditional form, but Whitman took this break with the past to a new extreme. Where Wordsworth had touted his determination “to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them . . . in a selection of language really used by men,” Whitman would throw the doors of poetry open to all of society, inviting those excluded from polite discussion (“The kept-woman, the sponger, thief”) to be part of his poetic retinue and would describe them in their own vernacular. Where Emerson would contend “that it is not meter, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem,” Whitman would abjure standard meter altogether, allowing his subject matter and his thought to determine line-length, stanzaic organization, and cadence.

The 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* establishes this break from the past from the very outset. Rather than providing the author’s name, the opening pages give the title and a steel engraving from a daguerreotype of the author (see image among resources for this subunit) with no name. It is not until about halfway through the first poem of the collection (later titled “Song of Myself”) that the poet announces himself: “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos.” The portrait included in the frontispiece prefigures this idea of Whitman as a “rough.” He loafs (a key verb for his poem) at his ease, his collar open, his hat atilt, gazing steadfastly at the reader. The image does not convey the majesty or the cultural privilege or authority often associated with the poet; rather, it suggests the pride and self-assuredness of the American common man whom Whitman’s poetry attempts to represent and celebrate. The engraving indicates that the book of poetry that follows will not adhere to traditional notions...
of poetic decorum in terms of structure, language, or subject matter, but that it will speak of life as it is lived and observed by a man of the people.

What first appears after the introductory matter, however, is not a poem, but a prefatory manifesto written in a prose that moves towards the poetry that will follow. The first line captures Whitman’s focus on America and his experimentation with basic linguistic structure (the sentence here) through the use of parallel structures linked by ellipses:

America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions. . . . accepts the lesson with calmness . . . is not so impatient as has been supposed that the slough still sticks to opinions and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms . . . perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house . . . perceives that it waits a little while in the door . . . that it was fittest for its days . . . that is action has descended to the stalwart and wellshaped heir who approaches . . . and that he shall be fittest for his days.

This paragraph-long sentence sets up both the formal experimentation and the central themes of the book as a whole. To represent America fully, Whitman finds it necessary to stretch language and grammatical (and poetic) forms to a breaking point, pushing sentences and lines to capture, here, the nation’s ability simultaneously to enclose past, present, and future and, elsewhere in the book, its ability to incorporate the vast diversity of people and geography that make up the country.

This sentence’s refusal to break its multiple clauses into distinct sentences prefigures the organization of the twelve untitled poems that follow. At the beginning of each poem, Whitman repeats the title of the book, “Leaves of Grass,” and with some poems beginning on the same page that others end, the lack of titles or numbered sections (elements Whitman would include in later editions) makes it somewhat difficult to determine where one poem commences and another culminates. This blurring of boundaries echoes one of Whitman’s key ideas, what he calls, at times, “the merge,” an idea he opens the first poem with: “I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” Two central concerns are introduced here, the fundamental importance of the self and the inescapable interconnectedness of all of humankind on both a spiritual and a material level (“the merge”). We can see the tension at work in the line quoted earlier where Whitman proclaims himself: “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos.” The poet is first and foremost himself, a distinct, irreducible individual, yet in his individuality, an individuality tied both to his nation and his class, he represents and embodies the truths at the core of the universe, truths manifest through the body itself and connecting all of humankind and existence.

Whitman’s ideas here about the individual’s divinity and his or her incorporation within a universal whole echo key tenets of romantic thought, most notably and directly Emerson’s transcendentalism. Whitman, in fact, supposedly
stated "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil." He sent a copy of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* to Emerson, and when Emerson responded with a celebratory letter, he included the letter in the second edition. Yet Whitman’s understanding of how the individual is a “part or particle of God” because the “currents of the Universal Being circulate” through him or her (Emerson’s *Nature*) is quite distinct from Emerson’s due to its focus on the material—bodily—nature of that connection with the divine, with the world, and with other humans.

That material focus begins with his title and his explication of his title in “Song of Myself.” In response to a child asking “What is the grass?” Whitman answers that “I do not know what it is any more than he.” The greatest questions of the universe, Whitman suggests, are as opaque or as translucent to the poet as they are to anyone. Continuing, Whitman begins to delineate various ways of understanding the central figure “it must be the flag of my disposition” or “it is the handkerchief of the Lord,” dropped for us to find or it “is itself a child” or “it is a uniform hieroglyphic,” “And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones, / Growing among black folks as among white.” There is no one answer to what the grass is, but Whitman indicates that it is possibly all of these at the same time, an emblem of the individual’s mood or psychology, a symbol of the divine presence in everyday life, a figure of innocence and rebirth, reproduction and recreation, and above all the sign of a radical egalitarianism of humankind. The figure of the grass itself conveys how this vision of divine equality relates to Whitman’s emphasis on the individual’s relationship to a whole. “Grass” usually refers to a mass—a plot of grass—that is at once a distinct, undifferentiated whole (we usually don’t say a field of grasses) and yet, as Whitman’s “leaves” iterate, grass is made up of innumerable individual plants.

Two of Whitman’s most distinctive structures and themes underline this idea. Throughout his poetry, but most notably in “Song of Myself,” Whitman’s lines begin to transform into catalogues of the individual elements making up some particular category. So at line 257 in the 1855 version of “Song of Myself,” Whitman begins a series of sixty-six lines in which he describes various kinds of workers and occupations (“The jour printer” “The machinist”), social positions and identities, from the highest to the lowest (“The opium eater” “The prostitute” “The President”) before concluding “And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them, / And such as it is to be of these more or less I am.” Through his catalogue Whitman attempts to incorporate the vast variety of the nation, leaving out no one and refusing to judge them, for his job as a poet is to celebrate them all, to let their lives impinge on him and shape his voice as his voice will then go forth to give the nation a sense of itself.

For Whitman, the central figure for this movement “inward to me” and “outward to them,” the merge, comes to be sex. Thus, when Whitman proclaims that “Through me forbidden voices, / Voices of sexes and lusts . . . . voices veiled, and I remove the veil, / Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured,” he does so not just to indicate his willingness to treat of all matters related to human existence but also to emphasize the centrality of sex for his poetry. While later editions of *Leaves of Grass* would be more scandalous to Victorian U.S.
readers, both with their explicit depiction of procreative sex and their suggestion of same sex intimacy, the first edition—and “Song of Myself” in particular—repeatedly turns to sex to indicate the bodily and spiritual interconnectedness of all. In a section beginning at line 73 in the 1855 version of “Song of Myself,” Whitman describes an encounter between his soul and his body, where the two become equally materialized and entwined in the grass: “I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning; / You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me, / And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my barestript heart, / And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet.” Through its suggestion of sexual intimacy, the section epitomizes Whitman’s use of sex to envision the interconnectedness of humankind with one another and with the entire universe on both a physical and spiritual level, two elements of existence that, in fact, cannot be separated. Whitman’s own sexuality has often provoked interest—most biographers and critics have concluded that his most intense erotic attractions and relationships were with men—but sex is far more than personal for him. In fact, the political, social, and aesthetic implications of Whitman’s emphasis on sex have been central to much of the academic criticism concerning his body of work in recent years, with scholars accessing how he developed, criticized, and innovated upon existing and emerging discussions about the human body and about sexuality and identity. To read Whitman, then, is to read a poet who immersed himself in American society of his age even as he presented a radical challenge to Victorian American conceptions of poetry, sex, and human existence—a challenge that would resonate with many American poets of the twentieth century.

Suggested Recent Criticism


