

Walt Whitman Person and Poetry

Lecture By
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Walt Whitman (1819–1892)

- ❑ Poet and journalist
- ❑ He was also called the "Bard (poet) of Democracy"
- ❑ Walt Whitman was born on May 31, 1819 in West Hills, New York.
- ❑ Considered one of America's most influential poets
- ❑ In 1855 he self-published the collection *Leaves of Grass*; the book is now a landmark in American literature (highly controversial).
- ❑ Whitman later worked as a volunteer nurse during the Civil War, writing the collection *Drum Taps* (1865) in connection to the experiences of war-torn soldiers.
- ❑ Whitman died on March 26, 1892 in Camden, New Jersey.

Family

Parents: Louisa Van Velsor and Walter Whitman

While earlier Whitmans had owned a large parcel of farmland, sold off by the time Walt was born. As a result, his father struggled through a series of attempts to support the family.

The names his brothers included George Washington Whitman, Thomas Jefferson Whitman and Andrew Jackson Whitman indicates his parents love for America transferred in Walt.

At 11, Walt Whitman was taken out of school by his father to help out with household income. He started to work as an office boy for a Brooklyn-based attorney team and eventually found employment in the printing business.

His father's increasing dependence on alcohol and conspiracy-driven politics contrasted sharply with his son's preference for a more optimistic course more in line with his mother's disposition.

Journalism as Career:

At 17, Whitman turned to teaching, for 5 years in various parts of Long Island.

Due to difficult circumstances he was forced to teach and by 1841 he again returned to journalism.

In 1838 he had started a weekly called **the Long Islander** that quickly folded and later returned to New York City, worked on fiction and continued his newspaper career.

In 1846 he became editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle , a prominent newspaper, for almost two years.

Whitman proved to be a volatile journalist, with a sharp pen and a set of opinions that didn't always align with his bosses or his readers.

He backed what some considered radical positions on women's property rights, immigration and labor issues.

Not surprisingly, his job tenure was often short and had a tarnished reputation with several different newspapers.

In 1848 Whitman left New York for New Orleans, where he became editor of the Crescent.

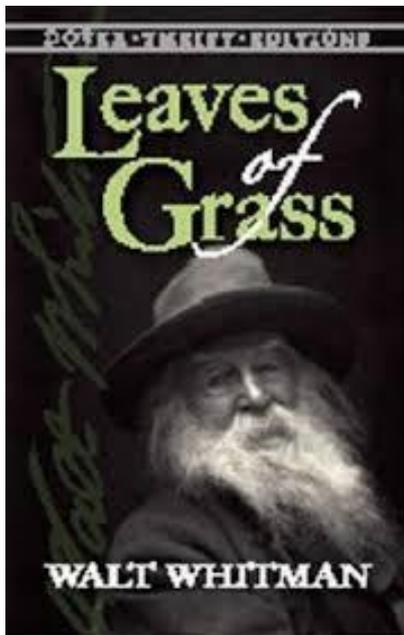
It was a three months stay only—but it was where he saw for the first time the wickedness of slavery.

Whitman returned to Brooklyn in the autumn of 1848 and started a new "free soil" newspaper called the Brooklyn Freeman

Over the ensuing years, as the nation's temperature over the slavery question continued to rise, Whitman's own anger over the issue elevated as well.

He often worried about the impact of slavery on the future of the country and its democracy.

It was during this time that he turned to a simple 3.5 by 5.5 inch notebook, writing down his observations and shaping what would eventually be viewed as trailblazing poetic works.



'Leaves of Grass'

In 1855, Whitman, self-published a slim collection of 12 unnamed poems with a preface titled Leaves of Grass.

He could only afford to print 795 copies of the book. Leaves of Grass marked a radical departure from established poetic norms.

Tradition was discarded in favor of a voice that came at the reader directly, in the first person, in lines that didn't rely on rigid meter and instead exhibited an openness to playing with form while approaching prose.

On the book's cover was an iconic image of the bearded poet himself.

Leaves of Grass received little attention at first, though it did catch the eye of fellow poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote Whitman to praise the collection as "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom" to come from an American pen.

Whitman published a revised edition of *Leaves of Grass* next year that featured 32 poems, including a new piece, "Sun-Down Poem" (later renamed "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"), as well as Emerson's letter to Whitman and the poet's long response to him.

With the new poetry Henry David Thoreau and Bronson Alcott visited Whitman.

By this point, Whitman's family was marked by dysfunction, inspiring a fervent need to escape home life. His heavy-drinking older brother Jesse would eventually be committed to Kings County Lunatic Asylum in 1864 while his brother Andrew was also an alcoholic. His sister Hannah was emotionally unwell and Whitman himself had to share his bed with his mentally handicapped brother.

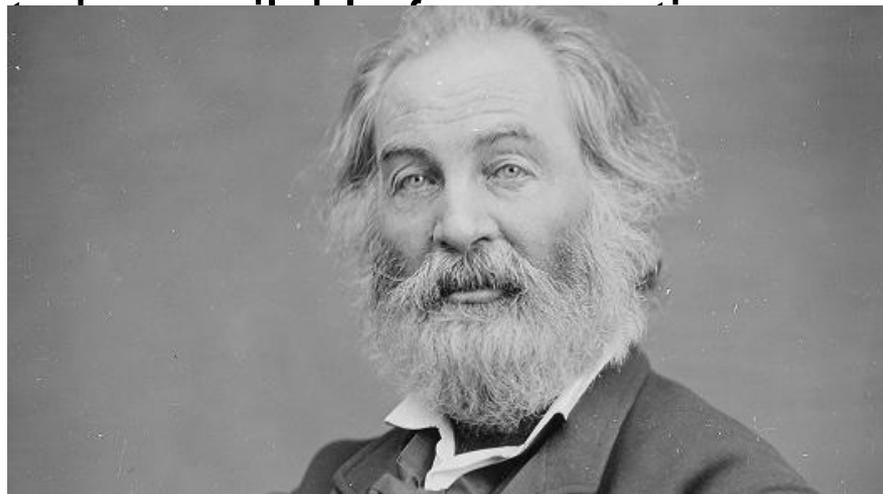
Alcott described Whitman' as "Bacchus-browed, bearded like a satyr, and rank" while his voice was heard as "deep, sharp, tender sometimes and almost melting."

Like its earlier edition, this second version of *Leaves of Grass* failed to gain much commercial traction.

In 1860, a Boston publisher issued a third edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

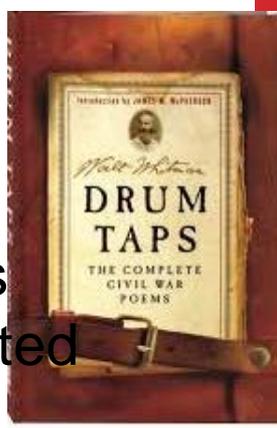
The revised book held some promise, and also was noted for a sensual grouping of poems—the "Children of Adam" series, which explored female-male eroticism, and the "Calamus" series, which explored intimacy between men.

But the start of the Civil War drove the publishing company out of business, furthering Whitman's financial struggles as a pirated copy of *Leaves* came



In the Civil War:

In 1862, Whitman traveled to Fredericksburg to search for his brother George, who fought for the Union and was being treated there for a wound he suffered.



Whitman moved to Washington, D.C. the next year and found part-time work in the paymaster's office, spending rest of his time visiting wounded soldiers.

This volunteer work proved to be both life-changing and exhausting. The work took a toll physically, but also propelled him to return to poetry.

In 1865 he published a new collection called **Drum-Taps**, based on his experiences in Civil War included poems like "Beat! Beat! Drums!" and "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night."

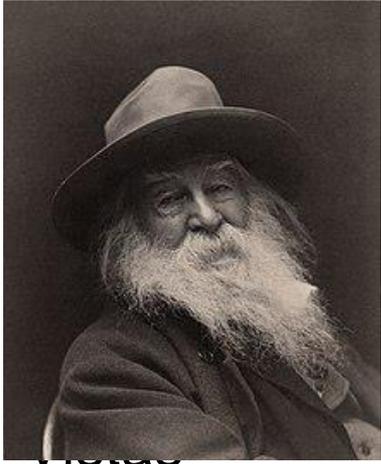
A follow up edition, *Sequel*, was published the same year and featured 18 new poems, including his elegy on President Abraham Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

Soon after the war he met Peter Doyle, amidst a time of great taboo around homosexuality, he developed an instant and intense romantic bond with Doyle.

As Whitman's health began to unravel in the 1860s, Doyle helped nurse him back to health. Their relationship undergone changes in the later years

Later Whitman believed to have suffered greatly from feeling rejected by Doyle, though the two would later remain friends.





In the mid-1860s, found steady work in Washington as clerk.

In 1870 he published two new collections, *Democratic* and *Passage to India*.

But in January of 1873 he suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed. In May he traveled to Camden, where he died just three days after his arrival.

Frail himself, Whitman found it impossible to continue with his job in Washington and relocated to Camden to live with his brother George and sister-in-law Lou.

An 1882 edition of the *Leaves of Grass* earned the poet some fresh newspaper coverage, resulted in robust sales, enough so that Whitman was able to buy a modest house of his own in Camden.

These final years proved to be both fruitful and frustrating for Whitman. His life's work received much needed validation in terms of recognition, especially overseas.

Yet even as Whitman felt new appreciation, the America he saw emerge from the Civil War disappointed him. His health, too, continued to deteriorate.

Final Days:

On March 26, 1892, Walt Whitman passed away in Camden.

Right up until the end, he'd continued to work with *Leaves of Grass*, which during his lifetime had gone through many editions and expanded to some 300 poems.

Whitman's final book, *Good-Bye, My Fancy*, was published the year before his death.

He was buried in a large mausoleum he had built in Camden's Harleigh Cemetery.



Leaves of Grass

Emerson says: “the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed”.

He was praised by Thoreau, Bryant, Swinburne, Edward Dowden, J.A. Symonds and others.

Whitman became the leader of the sort of cult.

But he received high praise on one hand, he was target of much criticism on the other, so that a true estimate of him is yet difficult to arrive at.

The irregular unrhymed lines in which most of *Leaves of Grass* is written, in accordance with the author’s belief that the American spirit could not be bound by the shackles of traditional verse forms, are often uncouth, but have a noble music and cadence of their own.

Whitman tried to express his democratic ideals as naturally as the grass grows , came to be accepted as stimulating message to humanity.

He sacrificed rhyme and metre and used a remarkable freedom in expression but retained a regard for rhythm.

The first edition contained twelve poems of which the first, “Song of Myself” was obviously an attempt to describe a symbolic man of the 19th century named with Walt Whitman.

Whitman’s occasional verbosity and frequent repetitions in leaves of grass are confusing to the reader. The books has too much faults.

The ideas expressed in these poems might have been familiar but they have got first emotional impact from Whitman.

Whitman used an idiom which being unfamiliar was not liked by many. Furthermore, many poems run counter to the moral conventions of the period.

The edition of 1860 included “Calamus” and “children of Adam” which appeared to be incentive to sexuality and perhaps perversion. The critics neglected to discuss the beauty and emotional appeal of the poems in “ Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”. The critics discussed only his sexuality, his egoism, and his exuberant optimism.

For Whitman: Leaves of grass is or seeks to be, simple a faithful and doubtless self willed record. In the midst of all, it gives one man’s the author’s- identity, ardous, observations, faiths, and thoughts, coloured hardly at all with any decided colouring from other faiths or identities.

He defines the Leaves of Grass: an attempt of a naïve, masculine, affectionate, contemplative, sensual, imperious person to cast into literature not only his grit and arrogance, but his own flesh and form, untrapped, regardless of models, regardless of modesty or law and ignorant, as at first it appears of all outside of the fiercely loved land of his birth.

He further comments: *Leaves of Grass* has mainly been outpouring of my own emotional and other personal nature- an attempt to put a person, a human being myself in the later half of the 19th century, in America-freely, fully and truly on record. I could not find any similar personal record in current literature that satisfied me.

Critics agree: *Leaves of Grass* begins by celebrating the individual and then proceeds to indicate various ways of union between individual and nature and between the one and the many in the society.

Children of Adam concentrate on the physical love, uniting men and women in families with children.

Calamus describes the moral spiritual love of comrades.

Then group of poems like *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* emphasizing general qualities of social, economic, and cultural unity.

Sea Drift and *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, there is a return to the individual whose development is completed by realization, the result of some great sorrow and suffering of the meaning of death.

Drums Tap generalizes this knowledge in the suffering of nation at war, and expresses it in the elegy for Lincoln, “When the Lilacs last in the Door Yard Bloomed”.

Though at the outset he had announced himself as the poet of the soul no less than the poet of the body, he devoted the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* largely to the celebration of body and its material environment content in the main to state the theory of the soul and its spiritual relations.

To Whitman a sexless individuality was inconceivable. “I am the poet of Body and I am the poet of soul, ... of physiology from top to toe.”

He conceived of Literature: “ a means of whereby men may be revealed to each other as brothers.”

Leaves of Grass as a whole is the bible of democracy.

The problem of democracy is to develop supreme individuals on the one hand and on the other to bind these separate selves into a social union.

Leaves of Grass has for its chief aim the stimulation of personality.

The purpose of first poems is to arouse, dilate, expand and greaten the reader. Consequently they radiate personal energy-they are proud, strenuous, joyful, optimistic.

The function of second group of poems is to provide for union. They show the identification of each with all with nature, and with God. The first stage of union is in sex-union in the natural. A higher more spiritual identity, is found in comradeship or union in the spiritual domain.

The war was a war for union: *the Drum Taps* inculcate, therefore, identity in nationality.

The song of death and parting declare the fusion of soul and body in a cosmic order.

As pride was the key word of the first group, love becomes the sign of the second series.

Whitman was pledged to democracy first of all because he believed it would safeguard the freedom of the individual, on whom the greatness of the state depends.

The individual can not eventually asserts his freedom until he has overthrown the past with its lumber of traditions and its web of restraint. Whitman, therefore, the advocate of revolt; he is the arch rebel.

Song of Myself

Self revealing poems in literature and helps understand Whitman.

The poems begins with an assertion which challenge to contemporary literature, which Whitman regarded as “class poetry” representing a world where literature had spoken for the exceptional man, not for the simple, separate person or the “en-masse’.

I Celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

He wants to be the voice of democracy and he wants to speak at all hazards what he finds there representative of the “divine average”

Through love and its instruments, the senses comes the knowledge that all men with god also are brothers

Old maids, drivers, farmers, hunters, yankee clippers, the clam digger, trapper, slaves, young men and women, negro drymen-all these keen to the grass, that grows wherever the land is and enjoys the common air.

He voices the prisoners, slaves, the diseased, and despairing, the voices of sex and lust and are clarified.

Therefore, it is expansionist poem.

It is also prophetic poem, because he urges vigorous country to spiritualistic energy,

“song of myself” is a collection of closely related short poems and contains really gist of all Whitman ever had to say.

He pours into this long work the multiform experiences of America.

The poems sweeping over the country of America, describing its cities, sounds, scenes, various geographical regions, and professions walks of life.

The purpose of this catalogue is an endeavour to cultivate an awareness of other people which takes you outside of yourself and brings about a new kind of relationship between you and the external world.

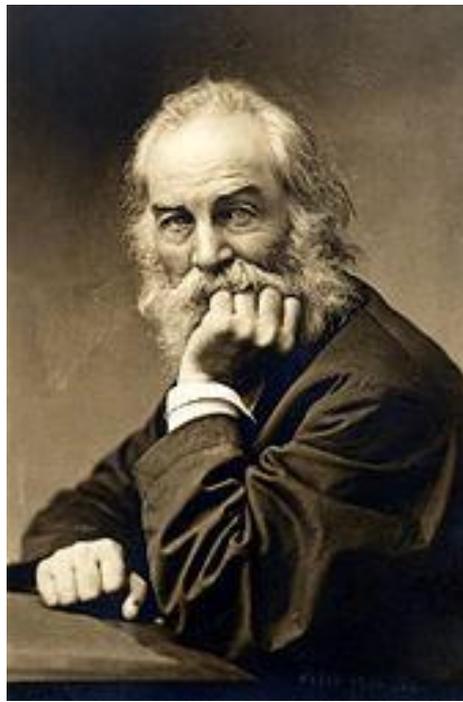
Whitman celebrate himself as a symbol of the “divine average”

The common man, lusty, full blooded, was as important as the saint, the intellectual or the aristocrat.

The song of myself surveys Whitman;’s whole world, his milieu and ambience – but not according to any necessary order or chronology. Its on the basis of his wishes and wills.

The Hero’s hope in song of myself, his “altogether moral and political” object is to know that the world is there, and in the knowing, to know that he is there.

Song of myself is a poem in which the speaker wills himself to be at the mercy of his world; for he knows that in this world lies his only source of the range of experiences which will let him complete the cycle of self-recognition, identification with others and self-definition.



Walt Whitman : Song of Myself

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Section 16:

- Whitman found: He's the union of opposites: old and young, foolish and wise, mother and father, the average people and the elites, South and North.
- The poet is painfully aware of all the fault lines of the great cultural battle that threatens to engulf the United States. The danger of civil war is real, and Whitman's poetic persona attempts to stand astride the rift and hold the nation together for dear life.
- Whitman always tries to broaden his reach. You'll never hear him say, "I'm like this group, but not like this group."
- He loves the diversity of his identity and wouldn't trade it for the world.
- At the end of the section, he returns to the idea that nature is fine the way it is, and, foreshadowing a Radiohead song, that "Everything is in its right place."

Section 17:

- Whitman doesn't want us to think that his thoughts are especially original. If he were truly saying something that no one had thought of before, it would undermine his entire point about the connections between people.
- If we don't take his words as our own, we won't be able to get anything out of them.
- Not only his thoughts, but also the grass he walks on and the air he breathes are ours.

Section 18:

- This section is different in later editions of "Song of Myself." In the later editions the section is devoted entirely to images of war, which were likely influenced by Whitman's experiences in the Civil War.
- Whitman continues to expand on the idea that everyone shares in the truly essential things in life: songs, water, laws, and so on.
- On the subject of war, he says that his song is for the defeated as much as the victorious. Those who failed in battle are no less deserving of praise than those who succeeded. He doesn't divide the world into "winners" and "losers."

Section 20:

- In this section, Whitman begins by naming some of the mysteries of life. He has a suspicious tone ("Who goes there!"),
- His point in this section is to address the skeptics and cynics who say that "life is a suck and a sell."
- He could be thinking of Macbeth's famous speech that life is just "sound and fury signifying nothing."
- He talks about his non-conformity. He does things just the way he likes.
- He also addresses the worry that existence might end with death. He doesn't think there is any such thing as "dissolution," because the world is so well built. He's not concerned about what happens after death

Section 21:

- Whitman says that he is the poet of both the body and the soul.
- He challenges the religious concepts of heaven and hell, saying that he has made heaven part of his present life, and that the idea of hell needs to be "retranslated."
- He's tired of people being modest and insecure. His song is a song of "pride" and celebration. He recognizes that his attitude is new and unusual, but he thinks people need to get over their individual anxieties.
- Switching gears, he describes the night, the earth, and the sea in glowing and beautiful terms. The earth has shown him love, so he's going to love the earth right back
- In the 1855 edition, the section ends with the lines: "Thruster holding me tight and that I hold tight! We hurt each other as the bridegroom and the bride hurt each other!" These lines were majorly controversial in Whitman's day, and he eventually removed them

Section 22:

- Here Whitman describes the sea.
- The sea invites him to take a "turn," and the ambiguity of this phrase is striking.
- The line, "Dash me with amorous wet . . . I can repay you" is especially sexually suggestive.
- (Whitman is using sexuality as a metaphor for his mystical union with nature.)
- He goes on to say that he is the poet who is sympathetic to everything. He sings about evil as well as good. He thinks that evil should be corrected, but he still isn't going to judge.
- He doesn't know why anyone would be evil. He finds meanness and faithlessness incomprehensible.

Section 24:

- Here he declares his manifesto.
- He describes himself first and foremost as an American, then as a "rough," someone who isn't refined or polished.
- Finally, he uses the Greek word "kosmos," which we now use to describe outer space ("cosmos") but which more appropriately means the entire world, known and unknown.
- He takes pride in his sensuality and loves to eat, drink, and "breed."
- One of the poem's most famous and humorous couplets is, "Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" These lines express Whitman's radicalism, and they are used as an epigram at the beginning of Allen Ginsberg's collection *Howl*.

Section 24 contd...

- He reaffirms his faith in the principles of true democracy and says that he is a vessel for all different kinds of voices, even "forbidden voices."
- Whitman gives voice to people whose voices are not usually heard in society.
- In this section he shows his "rough" nature with frank talk about sexuality and the body. He loves the body and even the smell of armpits.
- Then he treats nature like a body and worships it, too. Here, Whitman's description of nature is intensely erotic.
- Again he says that one can learn more from nature than books. Nature makes him humble and aware that he is not a "master" of the world

Section 30:

- Whitman returns to the idea that nature contains all truth. Now he talks about truth being "born" from things, having impregnated the world in the previous sections.
- Truth must be shown, he says, not proven. Deep truths should be self-evident.
- The "soggy clods" of damp earth will become "lovers and lamps," that is, people whose love shines within them.
- He seems to be comparing people with plants that grow from the soil and spread their branches and leaves outward.

Section 32:

- This section is dedicated to animals, and how animals have a healthy attitude toward life. They aren't distressed and don't feel religious guilt.
- Whitman begins to show his teeth regarding organized religion, particularly religions that focus on the ideas of guilt, shame, and hatred of the body. He is made "sick" by people "discussing their duty to God."
- He also attacks an obsession with owning things and property.
- The animals seem to bring him pieces of himself, little reminders of his own heritage and history.
- He shares a moment of connection with a majestic stallion, and then he lets the stallion go gallop about. In his imagination, he is galloping faster than the stallion.

Themes: Equality

- Whitman's belief in equality is so strong, he dedicates the first lines of "Song of Myself" to it. Here, "I" and "you" are used symbolically, not unlike the "myself" from the title that repeats itself in the first line.
- The grass is used symbolically to indicate. By sprouting everywhere, in both broad and narrow zones, among black and white people, given and received equally, the grass is a symbol of democracy.
- Whitman paints a vibrant picture of democracy by compiling a descriptive list of Americans in action, which includes the farmer, the lunatic, the malform'd, the quadroon, the connoisseur, the bride, and the prostitute, among many others.
- The song of the poet and his subjects, then, becomes the song of America and its lofty ambitions of egalitarianism.
- Finally, the poet declares himself "a kosmos" as a way of representing his and our universality

Sex and Sexuality:

- Whitman's passionate belief in the goodness of nature fuels his eroticism as much as his belief in the intrinsic connection of body and soul.
- Whitman's belief in egalitarianism and the communion of individuals is further reflected in his sensuous language and imagery.
- Sex and sexuality are bound to nature as well as to spirituality. Whitman proves this by pointing out that the senses, though natural, are also supernatural in the miraculous abilities they impart.
- Whitman also uses the body as a metaphor for the dramatic and varied American landscape.
- Whitman's ambiguous sexuality—critics have referred to his language as being everything from autoerotic to omnisexual—point to the possibility of his homosexuality as well as his desire to convey "the largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen"

Nationalism:

- Walt Whitman was born during a time of unrivaled American nationalism. His generation was the first to witness growing stability and expansion of the territories. Patriotism was rampant.
- Walt's father had reverence for the heroes of the American Revolution.
- The new nation was being invented with every passing day, and American citizens were filled with political idealism
- By the time Whitman had reached middle age, Emerson and H. W. Longfellow had clarified the need for an original American literature.
- Emerson wrote in his essay "The Poet" (1844), "Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics,... the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung."
- The call for a wholly new American literature—one that would define and describe the as-yet undefined American culture, landscape, and psychology—had been sounded. It was the vibrant, heady climate of these times that inspired Whitman to write *Leaves of Grass*.

Slavery

- The optimism and enthusiasm for American expansion was tempered by the institution of slavery.
- Africans and their descendants had been enslaved on American soil since the early seventeenth century. By the time the U.S. Constitution was adopted, slavery had become a dying institution.
- The northern states began to abolish the practice and the founding fathers declared that the importation of slaves into the United States would end by the year 1808, but slavery was reinvigorated in the southern states after the invention of the cotton gin in the early 1800s.
- Cotton, a crop that requires a massive labor force to raise, suddenly became profitable. Slavery was once again on the rise.
- During Whitman's lifetime, the problem of slavery begged a solution. The contradiction of enslaved peoples living in a supposedly free country was just too great.

- As a journalist, Whitman wrote primarily about class issues and the interests of white workingmen. He made his anti-slavery stance known, but he never focused his attention on the issue.
- The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855, just six years prior to the attack on Fort Sumter—the start of the American Civil War—and the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln as the sixteenth U.S. president.
- Slavery was the most divisive issue facing American citizens at the time.
- Whitman was prompted to write a political tract called "The Eighteenth Presidency!" in 1856 denouncing the fact that slave owners persisted in dominating both the national judiciary and the legislature.
- He was not the only American to prophesy the coming civil war and condemn hypocritical leaders. The powder keg that was slavery was ready to blow, and every American citizen, whether free or enslaved, was affected