

Continuum of Greatness

*The Hall of Fame for Great Americans
at Bronx Community College, CUNY*



Walt Whitman

1819-1892

*“In this broad earth of ours amid the
measureless grossness and the slag enclosed and
safe within its central heart,
nestles the seed perfection.”
from “Birds of Passage” section, Leaves of Grass*

Hall of Fame Facts

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

- Elected into Hall of Fame: 1930
- There were 107 electors, and 64 votes were required for election.
- By this time, there was criticism for the failure to include Walt Whitman among the honored Americans.

- Whitman was elected to the Hall of Fame with a bare three-fifths total.
- Whitman received 64 votes.

For more information, go to
<http://www.trivia-library.com/b/hall-of-fame-for-great-americans.html>

Walt Whitman

May 31, 1819–March 26, 1892



Walt Whitman and Herman Melville were born in the same year, but never met. He also never met Nathaniel Hawthorne or James Fenimore Cooper. Once, he met Edgar Allan Poe and later dreamt of Poe and recorded the dream as such:

“In a dream I once had, I saw a vessel on the sea, at midnight in a storm... On the deck was a slender, slight, beautiful figure, a dim man enjoying all the terror, the murk, the dislocation of which he was the center and the victim. That figure of my lurid dream might stand for Edgar Poe, hid fortunes, and his poems...”



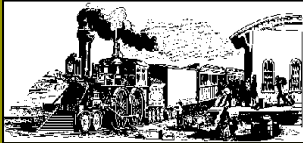
While the figure on the ship may be that of Poe, on a more psychological and speculative level, Poe here is to Whitman the modern man who is lost in the storms of life and surrounded by darkness. While some of Whitman’s later poems are dark in content and reveal, at times, nature’s ugliness (“This Compost,” 1856 edition) and Whitman’s own unresolved conflicts as in “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” Henry David Thoreau called Whitman the greatest “democrat.” Born on May 31, 1819 as Walter Whitman to Walter Whitman, a housebuilder, and Louisa Van Velsor at West Hills, Long Island, Whitman was the second child and son. One of seven children, Whitman often assumed a paternalistic role to some of his troubled and ill siblings. Jesse, born in 1818, was unstable and died in 1870 in an insane asylum; Hannah Louisa, born in 1823, may have been psychotic; Andrew, born in 1827 became an alcoholic; and, Edward, born in 1835, was feeble-minded.

Whitman’s career started off as a journalist. He worked on newspapers in New York, and also wrote some fiction, short stories. He wrote one novel entitled *Franklin Evans: The Inebriate*. It is a temperance novel about an alcoholic. Many critics and readers of Whitman’s fiction agree that his fiction was not his strong talent. Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* was so unlike other American writing at the time that many consider his work to be the first voice of America. Whitman called the *Leaves of Grass* a language experiment. Written in nine different editions, Whitman published and modified his opus over the course of his life beginning with the 1855 edition and ending with the 1892 deathbed edition. As a transcendentalist, Whitman embraced the organicism of nature and like other transcendentalists, believed that nature was a symbol of the spirit. Embracing and utilizing the idea of the organic form in his poetry (promoted by Emerson in his essay, “The Poet”), Whitman wrote without rhyme or meter and is considered by many to be the father of free verse (see also “Why the Leaf? Why the Grass?” on page 4). Since Whitman’s mother was a Quaker, *Leaves of Grass* has been compared to a Quaker meeting. In these meetings, people do not speak unless the spirit moves you to do so. The *Leaves of Grass* is in a sense a “mystic fit” in that Whitman speaks in the poem only when he feels moved to do so.

Whitman’s subject in *Leaves of Grass* is himself, and Emerson influenced Whitman greatly. Like Emerson, Whitman was also at enmity with the business culture in the United States: “...pallor of years of moneymaking with all their scorching days and icy nights and all their stifling deceits and underhanded dodgings...is the great fraud upon modern civilization...” (Preface, 1855 edition). Also, like Emerson, Whitman embraced the transcendental idea of the oversoul: “Whatever satisfies the soul is truth...” (Preface, 1855 edition). Unlike Emerson, Whitman did not reject the past: “America does not repel the past...” (Preface, 1855 edition).



Ralph Waldo Emerson
(1803-1882)
Elected into the Hall of
Fame 1900.

<p>May 31, 1819</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Walt Whitman born in West Hills, New York</p>	<p>1820</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Missouri Compromise prohibits slavery in new territories above latitude 36°30’.</p>	<p>1829</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Whitman hears a sermon delivered by Quaker leader Elias Hicks and is deeply moved.</p>	<p>1830</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Steam-powered railroad train exhibits in Baltimore, MD.</p>	<p>1830</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Indian Removal Act passed by Congress, forces Native Americans to move west of the Mississippi.</p>
	<p>1827</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Slavery abolished in New York State.</p>			<p>1831</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Nat Turner leads slave revolt, killing more than 57 whites.</p>

Emerson, in his essay “Nature” says that we must reject the past. Whitman, in fact, does not reject anything. The future, to Whitman, is the past. Also, on a literal level, Whitman projects and encourages calmness (and loafing), as opposed to Emerson’s sense of urgency that we must change our lives. Whitman also deals with two taboo subjects at this time in America: death and sex. In some of his poems, he combines sexual images with natural images (“Spontaneous Me”), and makes the point that since animals are not ashamed of sex then why should we be? Whitman was always breaking down barriers between people and the way to do that is to talk and write about things that people are afraid of. Also, unlike Emerson, Whitman acknowledges the “evil” part of himself. In the sixth section of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” he writes: “I am he who knew what it is to be evil...” This poem is important and significant because in it the reader will read what Whitman describes in the poem, and we will experience and see what he saw and it will evoke in us the same feelings. As one of Whitman’s most structured poems, he is suggesting that he is literally crossing from Manhattan to Brooklyn, but it is also a crossing of time from Whitman to the reader. What was possible for him in this experience is possible for us because we are reading his account of this crossing. By naming what he sees, we become Whitman and he becomes us.

Whitman’s “I” in his poem has been criticized by many to be narcissistic. Closer examination of his work, however, suggests that Whitman slips from one identity to another. In other words, he assumes many different archetypal selves. In order to understand all of the people in the United States, he must become them and assumes many different postures in “Song of Myself.” For Whitman, this is a sign of a democratic, mobile society. Whitman sheds one identity for another. In order to be the “representative poet” called forth by Emerson in his essay “The Poet,” he had to become everyone. For example, he assumes the persona of Adam and poses as Adam in the Garden of Eden. He goes around and names things: “This is the grass that grows...” (1855 edition). He also assumes the hero persona, the lover persona, and the Hindu-mystic persona...etc. In fact, in the 1855 Preface, Whitman exhorts that one needs both “pride” and “sympathy” as a poet—belief in oneself, but sympathy for others.

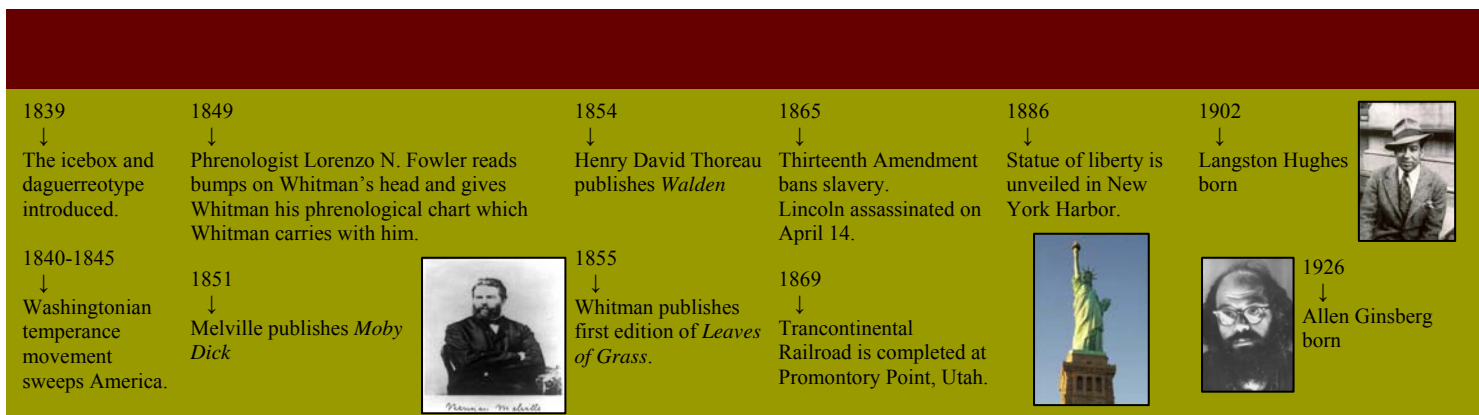
Whitman was also one of the rare poets of his era who did not reject science and technology. One his most beautiful poems, in fact, praises the invention and operation of the locomotive: “To a Locomotive in Winter.” He describes it as: “Type of modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent.” In “Passage to India,” he also praises “You engineers, you architects, machinists...”

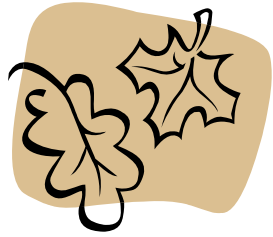
Some of Whitman’s most powerful poems were the poems he wrote about the Civil War (“Drum Taps” volume). Whitman’s brother, George, fought with the 51st regiment for most of the war. When he was wounded in the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862, Whitman went to search and care for his brother. Whitman was influenced by the death and suffering he saw and even describes many gruesome images of the dead and wounded in his poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed,” a poem of grief and mourning over the loss and assassination of President Lincoln. The expansiveness of Whitman’s poetry is limitless---as he would want it to be. His style of free verse influenced many other writers including Allen Ginsberg and other beatnik writers like Jack Kerouac. Langston Hughes was very influenced by Whitman. His poem (as well as others), “Let America be America Again,” has often been compared stylistically and thematically to Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing.”



George Whitman, Walt Whitman’s brother, in his Union army uniform, c. 1862.
Photo: Library of Congress

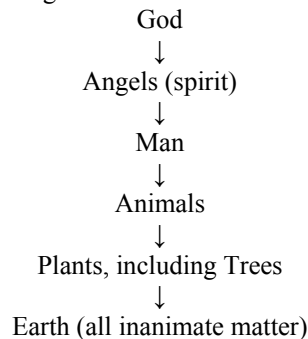
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Why the Leaf? Why the Grass?

Why did Walt Whitman call his life opus *Leaves of Grass*? The leaf was the controlling symbol/metaphor at the time and represented many things. In one respect, the leaf as a metaphor took the place of the Great Chain of Being. The Great Chain of Being or *Scala Naturae* was a classical and western medieval concept. The chain was composed of hierarchical links from the most basic elements (earth and matter) to the most divine (God). Roughly speaking, the chain would look something like this:



Notice that man is in the middle of this chain. He is both mortal flesh, as the animals below him, but is also close to the spirit. The ways of God, the spirit were of course encouraged in these times. It is the desires of the flesh (our animalistic natures) that drag us down. It is important to note that this chain was not considered a ladder; it was a hierarchical arrangement. Sin, in relation to this hierarchy, is defined as any attempt to change this order. Man had to respect his proper place and not try and move up the scale. In fact, Alexander Pope in his "An Essay on Man" said that "The proper study of Mankind is Man."



Engraving of Walt Whitman frontispiece to *Leaves of Grass*, 1855
Photo: Library of Congress

The transcendentalists, namely Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, believed that God was within, and since we are part and parcel of God then we, too, are divine. In fact, Walt Whitman says, "Divine I am inside and out." Whitman did not feel that the human body was a drag on the soul, but that it was a natural way to experience the spirit. He wrote about two taboo subjects: sex and death. Both of these experiences for Whitman were ways to reach another more transcendent level. In fact, he says in the 1855 edition: "And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own. /And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own..." He even says in this same edition: "As God comes a loving bedfellow and sleeps at my side all/night and close on the peep of the day..." You can clearly see here that Whitman was not willing to stay "in his place" prescribed by The Great Chain of Being. He, instead, views himself as God's equal and friend and vice versa. And, the body is not a weight on the soul: "I have said that the soul is not more than the body,/And I have said that the body is not more than the soul."

So, why the leaf? The leaf is an organic metaphor that was prevalent at this time. It is a regenerative, natural image. It is ever-changing and growing and it does not stay in its “place.” It is a significant symbol/metaphor because it suggests that things are not hierarchical (like the Chain of Being) and are not fixed, but change and grow. To the American Transcendentalists, the whole emphasis is on change. As Thoreau suggests in *Walden*, we do not have to stay stuck. Whitman said in “Song of Myself,” “limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields” (section 5).

The leaf is also a metaphor for the “Organic Form” proposed by Emerson in his essay “The Poet.” Instead of writing a poem, for example, to fit a specific meter and rhyme, Emerson proposed that the thought should define the form. In other words, a person would just sit down to write and the expression would create the form. A writer would not tailor his/her words or ideas to fit a structured meter or rhyme scheme. Emerson wrote, “For it is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem...” He also said, “the poet names the thing because he sees it...this expression or naming is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree.” Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* was written in the organic form. It has no rhyme and no meter. The subject/content of the poem creates the form. Whitman has been called the father of “free verse” which is poetry without rhyme or meter. Much of the poetry and song lyrics today are written in this form.

The grass is also a symbol of regeneration after death. Whitman calls the grass “the beautiful uncut hair of graves” (1855 edition). He says: “Tenderly will I use you curling grass,/It may be that you transpire from the breast of young men...” (1855 edition). Later on in that section, he proclaims that all the dead (now a part of the grass) are “alive and well somewhere.” In other words, they have died, but have not died. Just as nature regenerates, so do we even after death. Whitman said in “Song of Myself:” “I know I am deathless” (section 20). Also, in a country such as America that embraced the Puritan ideals of hard work, Whitman’s image of the grass symbolized a “loaferism” that was popular in his time. He wrote in a November 1840 essay: “I have sometimes amused myself with picturing out a nation of loafers.” Loafers were “mainly young working-class men and women who had been impelled by hard times to reject normal capitalist pursuits and find other means of gratification and amusement” (Reynolds 64). Loafing on the grass became a symbol for Whitman. It was an activity that allowed him both to relax but also to engage in the spiritual and transcendent activity of writing poetry: “I loafe and invite my soul,/I lean and loafe at my ease....observing a spear of summer grass,” he wrote in the 1855 edition.

A leaf is also a folio (or page). So, Whitman on a symbolic level was not only talking about the literal natural leaf, but the organic pages of his poem which was revised into 9 different editions. So, the *Leaves of Grass* as a poem itself was organic and changing and growing.

Other writers at the time referred to themselves as leaves. For example, Oliver Wendell Holmes said that he is a leaf on a bough because he is progressing and changing: “I am one of the very last leaves that still cling to the bough of life that budded in the 19th century.” Both the leaf and the grass are metaphors for the change in nature and man is part of this change. In fact, Whitman wrote:

“I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles” (1855 edition).

The images of buds, leaves, and grass are images of the universe as a growing, unfixed place.

Consulted Source:

Reynolds, David. *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography*.
New York, NY: Random House, 1995.

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The cover of Whitman’s 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass. Whitman never placed his name on the book. He placed his photo only on the inside (see p. 4). Notice the organic images of the gold lettering and intertwining images of leaves and grass.

