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2026: THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US

JUNE HIGHLIGHT

LEAVES OF GRASS BY WALT WHITMAN

Walt Whitman's defining collection of poetry, revised multiple times during his life, that reflected his philosophy of life and humanity. His poetry reflects a focus on the material - nature, the human body, and physical sensation - in a form that broke from all prevailing rules for meter, length, and rhyme.

Whitman attempted to articulate the voice of America, in particular the working class people that made it work, to remind the people of their uniquely American identity.

CONTEXT & IMPACT

Walt Whitman was born in 1819 in New York to a working class family. He was of the first generation of the United States that grew up assuming the stable existence of the country, which influenced his writing and patriotism. Whitman was very close to his mother and siblings, but never married or had any children. (He claimed six illegitimate offspring but never named them or their mothers, leading most to presume that the claim was a fiction attempting to mask his presumed homosexual preferences.)

He worked for newspapers most of his life, first as a typesetter, then later as an editor and journalist. Whitman's journalism ranged over a variety of social critiques; he criticized corporal punishment in schools, the way police rounded up prostitutes, and the use of public funds for parochial (religious) schools. He was deeply concerned with working class interests and was consistently opposed to slavery (though he also held other racist views). He also found moderate success with his only novel, *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate*, a didactic story intending to promote temperance which was published in 1842.

Over time, the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* began to form. In part, it was written as a response to an 1844 Ralph Waldo Emerson essay entitled *The Poet*, which called for the US to develop its own new, unique poet who embodied the young country's virtues and vices. Whitman oversaw all aspects of publication. The title is an inside joke: Publishers called cheap work of little value "grass", and "leaves" was the term for pages of a book. Jokes aside, Whitman did intentionally work to design the book to fit in a pocket and be cheap enough for an ordinary American to own and to carry everywhere.

Leaves of Grass did not sell well and received critical reviews, which disliked that the poetry was written in first person, as free verse, and that it covered what were at the time verboten subjects. Whitman was not too discouraged, though, and was already at work revising *Leaves of Grass*. He also took into his own hands the publicity for his work - he circulated positive anonymous reviews (many of which he wrote himself) as well as emblazoning one of the first "cover blurbs" in America by printing (without permission) the opening works of a supportive letter written to him by Ralph Waldo Emerson. It wasn't until the 1860 edition that *Leaves of Grass* began to sell well.

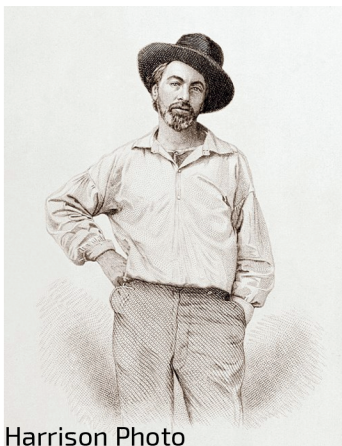
The Civil War marked a significant turning point for Whitman. Though he was considered too old to fight, his younger brother George was wounded in battle and later became a prisoner of war. During a visit to George, Walt found his eyes opened to the realities of war for the soldiers and families actually fighting it, and he began to work to support wounded soldiers. He spent a great deal of time over the years visiting soldiers in hospitals in New York and D.C., often writing letters to the families of those who he witnessed die. He wrote articles about the soldiers and worked to raise funds to help provide needed materials for them. The soldiers came to the hospitals from all over the country, providing Walt with insight into the breadth and diversity of America. His time at the hospitals also gave him insight into the human body, a fascination evident in his poetry.

continued

The Civil War also was a danger to Whitman's project, *Leaves of Grass*. In *Leaves*, Whitman was attempting to be the Voice of America, going so far as to ensure his work reached the hands of the everyday working man he was trying to represent. The war called into question whether or not America even had a unified, unique identity and culture. The country was rocked even more by the assassination of President Lincoln after the war ended. (Walt was particularly affected by Lincoln's death and wrote four memorial poems which helped the country process its grief. He also developed a series of Lincoln lectures, speaking all over the country on his life and influence.) In the end, America found that they did have a shared identity; the country began to heal because of voices like Whitman's that reminded Americans of what they shared.

After the war, Whitman took a job as a government clerk until his 1874 resignation due to ill health, after some conflicts with Secretary of the Interior James Harlan, who made him transfer departments due to his authorship of obscene poetry (*Leaves of Grass*). His troubles with Harlan inspired William D. O'Conner to publish a pamphlet entitled *The Good Gray Poet* to defend his poetry as important American literature that captured real human experiences. Other authors began to be public about their appreciation of his work and he gained a substantial following in England. After he retired from government work he traveled around America giving lectures and speaking publicly until his death in 1892.

Walt found in poetry the music of words; he discovered a way to form that music to match his own rambling spirit - the same spirit he saw as intrinsic to being American. Whitman pioneered a new style of poetry in the United States. He is known as the Father of American free verse; it was being independently developed in France at approximately the same time. He deliberately broke away from traditional European rhyming schemes and rigid metrics. Free verse is the modern "norm"; the majority of poetry published in the 21st century would be considered free verse. Whitman also cleverly used "I" to represent both himself and the country to which he was striving to give a voice. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* left a legacy not just of a revolutionary form of poetry, but also a portrait of a man and a country that are full of paradoxes; a constantly revising manuscript that exemplifies how America is building and reshaping itself. In his own words: "I am large (I contain multitudes)". Generations after him have been inspired by his work to create their own visions: poets, to be sure, but also scriptwriters, singers, authors, and naturalists - all of whom have helped shape America into what it is today.



Harrison Photo

"DO I CONTRADICT MYSELF?
VERY WELL THEN I CONTRADICT MYSELF,
(I AM LARGE, I CONTAIN MULTITUDES.)"
— WALT WHITMAN

"I AM NOT THE POET OF GOODNESS
ONLY, I DO NOT DECLINE TO BE THE
POET OF WICKEDNESS ALSO."
— WALT WHITMAN

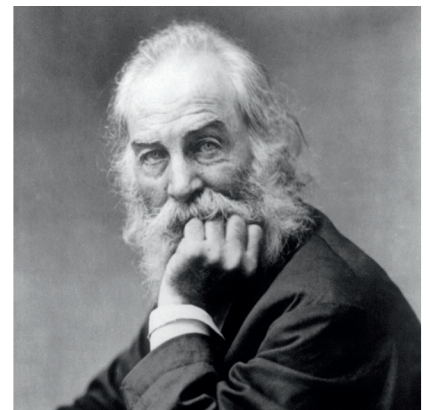


Photo used in *The Good Gray Poet*

FUN FACTS

- The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* didn't have a named author; Whitman just used the Harrison photo. Though he changed the photo in a couple of later editions, he always returned to the original choice. (photo on previous page)
- Whitman helped change the usage of the word "electric". Though the term "electric" existed prior to 1855 (it dates back to Ancient Greece, where it referred to static charge that occurred when amber was rubbed against wool or fur), Whitman popularized the meaning of the term to be "thrilling, alive", as we now think of it colloquially. (Think of music: *Electric Slide*, Metallica's *It's Electric*, Katy Perry's *Electric*, *Electric Avenue* by Eddy Grant and *Electric Energy* by Ariana DeBose, Boy George, & Nile Rodgers to name a few.)
- One of the last poems to be included in *Leaves of Grass* was *A Voice from Death*, (The Johnstown, Penn., cataclysm, May 31, 1889.)
- Walt Whitman loved opera, especially in the way the human voice is used as an instrument. He carried that love into his poetry and his speaking career.
- *Leaves of Grass* was made into a 2009 dark comedy starring Edward Norton in dual roles as a buttoned-up professor and his hedonistic pot growing twin; Whitman's poetry is featured throughout. Other films/series that heavily reference *Leaves of Grass* are: *Dead Poets Society* (1989), *Breaking Bad*, *The Twilight Zone* (episode: *I Sing the Body Electric*), *The Simpsons* (episodes: *Mother Simpson*, *The Squirt and the Whale*), and *Paper Towns*.
- Whitman liked to be naked around friends and there is a historical debate over whether or not he is the model posing for a series of naked photos by Thomas Eakins entitled simply "Old Man",
- Whitman designed his own \$4,000 tomb in Camden, New Jersey.

SOURCES & MORE

Articles

- Walt Whitman Archive: <https://whitmanarchive.org/>

Books

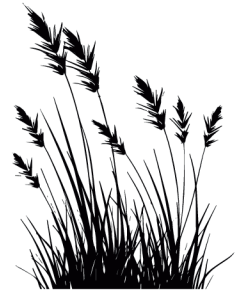
- Anerson, Kirsten. *Who Was Walt Whitman?* Penguin Workshop, 2021.
- Callow, Philip. *From Noon to Starry Night*. R. Dee, 1992.
- Kerley, Barbara. *Walt Whitman: Words for America*. ill. by Brian Selznick. Scholastic, 2004.
- Kaplan, Justin. *Walt Whitman, A Life*. Perennial Classics, 2003.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. Canterbury Classics, 2018.

Films

- *In Search of Walt Whitman*. PBS, 2020. (available on Kanopy)
- *Walt Whitman: An American Original*. Guidance Associates. 1988. (available on Kanopy)

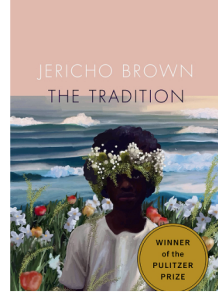


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



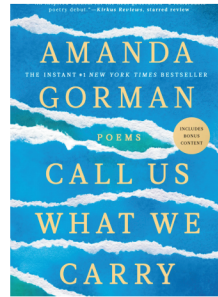
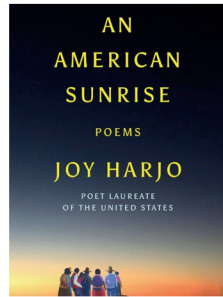
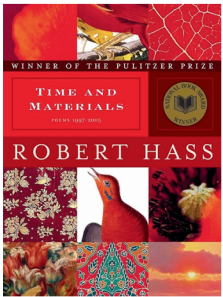
- What is poetry to you? What makes Whitman's work, or other works of free verse, poetry? What type of descriptors do you find yourself gravitating towards when trying to define poetry?
- Do you agree that Whitman was the Voice of America during his time? Do you feel that his poetry still speaks for America? What contemporary poet speaks for today's America like Whitman spoke for his time?
- Whitman writes "*A great poem is no finish to a man or a woman but rather a beginning.*" When you think of poetry that has moved you, do you think that Whitman's definition of greatness is good? Does it resonate in you like that poem you love?
- Excerpt from *By Blue Ontario's Shore*: 11: *For the great Idea, / That, O my brethren, that is the mission of poets.* When he wrote this, who do you think Whitman was thinking of when he wrote of 'poets'? Do you think he thought of poets in a restrictive or expansive way?
- In the preface, Whitman writes "*Whatever satisfies the soul is truth.*" Is this an accurate definition of truth? What do you think Whitman is trying to say here?
- Whitman writes: *But now I think there is no unreturn'd love, / the pay is certain one way or another* What is he writing about here? What does this reveal about how Whitman sees/feels love?
- Excerpt from *Assurances*: *I do not doubt but the majesty and beauty of the world are latent in any iota of the world / I do not doubt I am limitless, and that the universes are limitless, in vain I try to think how limitless,* What assurances is Whitman trying to express here? What idea(s) do you think he is pushing back against?
- In *Drum-Taps*, originally published separately from *Leaves of Grass*, we can see how Whitman's thoughts evolve as the Civil War moves onward. What stands out about how his thoughts changed? Why do you think he chose to keep earlier versions of his ideas in later editions of his works?
- Whose grief was represented in each of the four poems in *Memories of Abraham Lincoln*? Did Whitman choose different styles, lengths, and imagery for specific reasons, or were they all him processing his own personal grief? In particular, what do you think prompted him to compose *O Captain! My Captain!* in traditional rhyme and meter?
- Excerpt from *To a Pupil*: *Is reform needed? is it through you? / The greater the reform needed, the greater the Personality you need to accomplish it.* What do you think Whitman meant by 'reform'? Do you think that Whitman viewed reform as essential to American culture?

READ-ALIKES - LEAVES OF GRASS



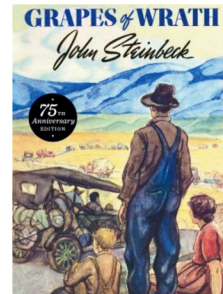
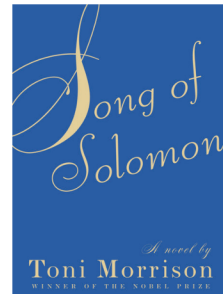
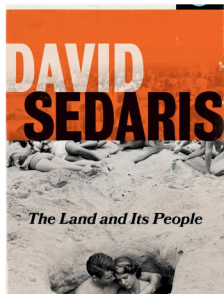
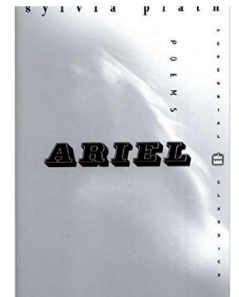
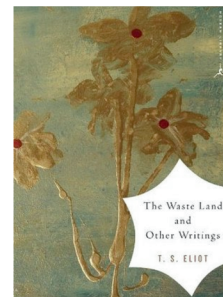
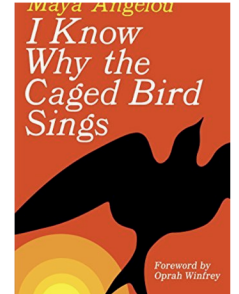
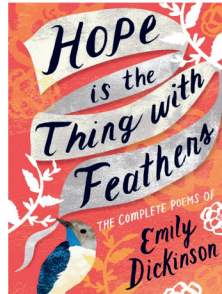
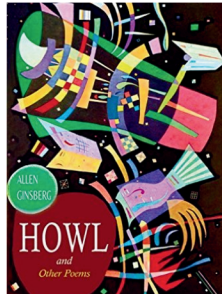
Contemporary Poets:

- *The Tradition* by Jericho Brown
- *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* by Ross Gay
- *Call Us What We Carry* by Amanda Gorman
- *Time and Materials* by Robert Hass
- *An American Sunrise* by Joy Harjo
- *Olio* by Tyehimba Jess
- *The Shadow of Sirius* by W.S. Merwin
- *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine



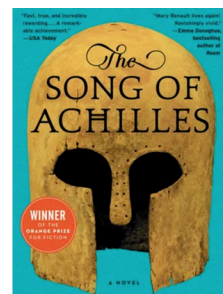
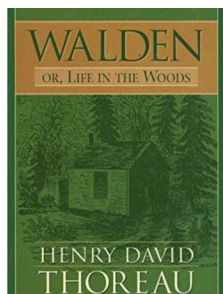
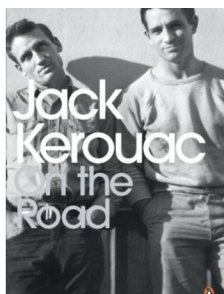
Poets who were Cultural Icons:

- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou
- *Complete Poems 1904-1962* by e.e. cummings
- *Hope is the Thing with Feathers* by Emily Dickinson
- *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot
- *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost
- *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg
- *The Weary Blues* by Langston Hughes
- *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath



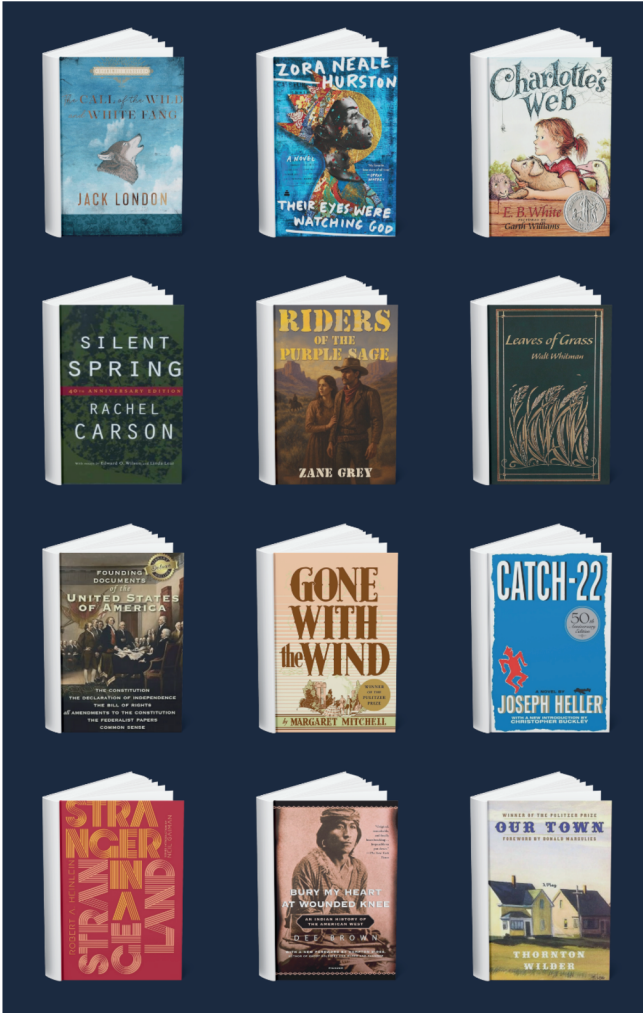
Prose that reads like Whitman:

- *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac
- *Suttree* by Cormac McCarthy
- *Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller
- *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison
- *The Land and Its People* by David Sedaris
- *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck
- *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau
- *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong



UPCOMING SELECTIONS

THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US



- **January:** *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London
- **February:** *Their Eyes were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
- **March:** *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White
- **April:** *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson
- **May:** *Riders of the Purple Sage* by Zane Grey
- **June:** *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman
- **July:** *The Federalist Papers* by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, & James Madison
- **August:** *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell
- **September:** *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller
- **October:** *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein
- **November:** *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown
- **December:** *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder



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