

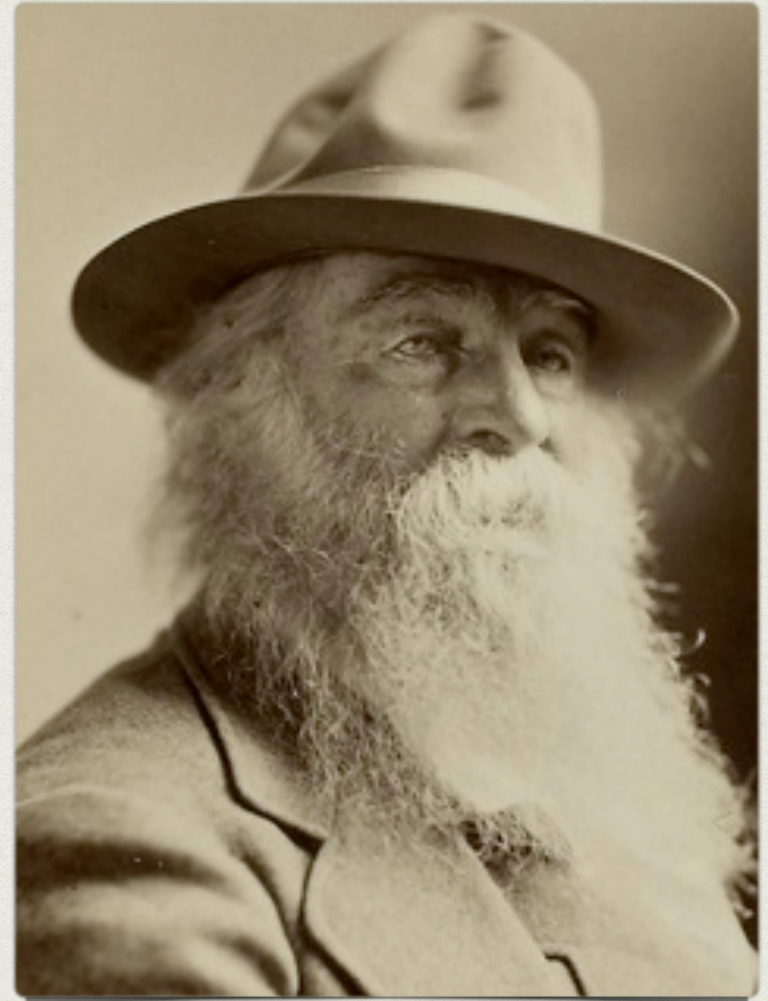


Walt Whitman

1819-1892

Walt Whitman: Life

1. Son of a Quaker carpenter and near-illiterate Dutch farmers
2. Teacher, journalist; printer; government clerk
3. Often ignored, sometimes banned; first recognized in England; ends up America's national poet
4. Re-worked *Leaves of Grass* throughout his life
5. "First" to use free verse, first literary groupies



Groupies

Loving [a Whitman biographer and critic] notes that while Whitman was more attracted to men than to women, some women were highly attracted to him. One of them was a Hartford, Connecticut woman named Susan Garnet Smith, whom Loving calls “the first groupie in American letters.” In 1860, Smith wrote Whitman a love letter, saying she had read *Leaves of Grass* during a country walk, while the birds and the bees were making love.

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“My womb is clean and pure,” Smith wrote. “It is ready for thy child my love. Angels guard the vestibule until thou comest to deposit our and the world's precious treasure . . . Our boy my love! Do you not already love him? He must be begotten on a mountain top, in the open air.”

Groupies

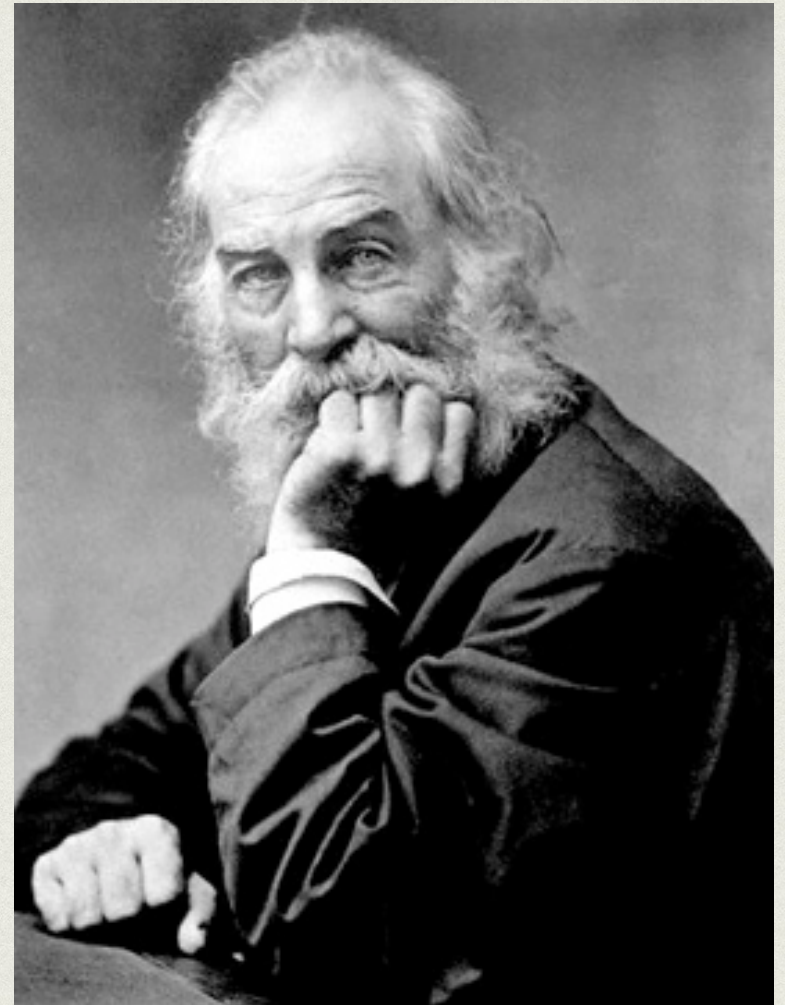
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The 41-year-old poet never responded. Many years later, a friend found the letter among a disarray of Whitman’s papers strewn about his Camden home. On the envelope Whitman had written: “Insane?”

Walt Whitman: Views

1. Intensely democratic, abolitionist, liberal
2. Erotic, bisexual, focused on body
3. Narcissistic, messianic, poet as national prophet
4. In love with work, working class



American Romanticism

1. Inherits the gothic tradition
2. Inherits Romantic cult of nature (Hudson River School)
3. But almost always more focused on realism
4. The two American qualities: optimism and pragmatism
5. American Romantic nationalism: frontier, Manifest Destiny, Jacksonian democracy













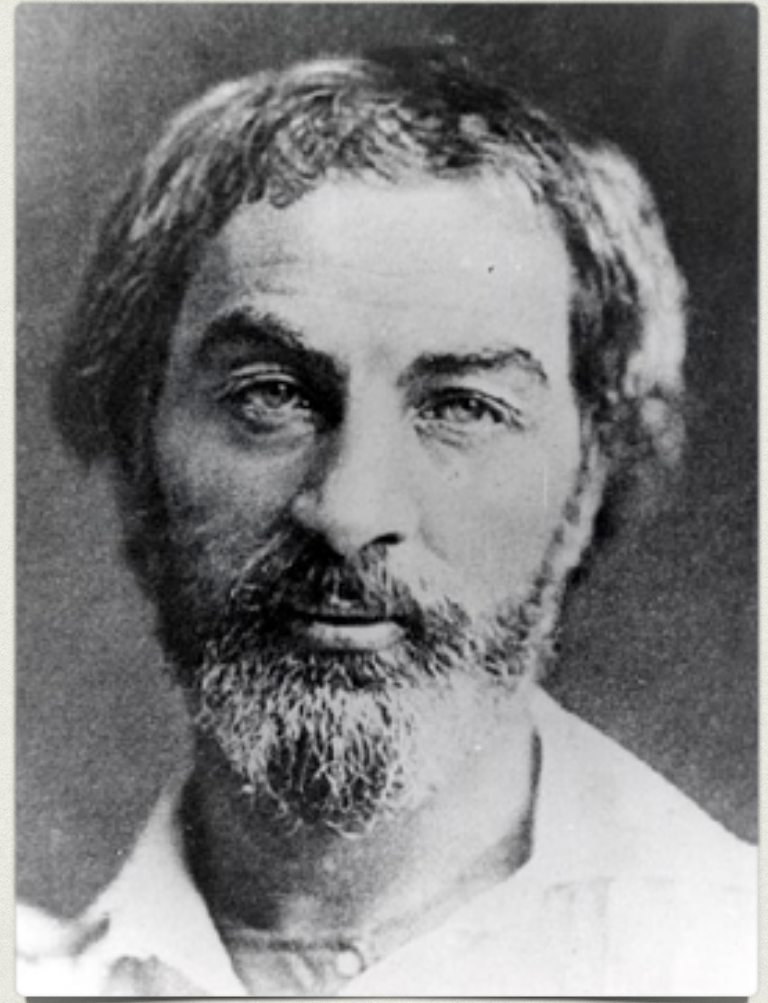
“American Progress,” John Gast, 1872





Poetry: Poetic Techniques

1. Free verse (“ordinary” speech)
2. List, enumeration, catalog (gestures at totality)
3. Repetition (anaphora and epistrophe), creates “chant”
4. The “Whitman envelope”



Free Verse

To Foreign Lands

I heard that you ask'd for something to prove this puzzle the New World,
And to define America, her athletic Democracy,
Therefore I send you my poems that you behold in them what you wanted.

Chaotic List

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood
and air through my lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color'd
sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,

The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind,
A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,
The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-sides,
The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and
meeting the sun.

The Chant

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse,
I say the Form complete is worthier far,
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

*epistrophe —
end line repetition*

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd
the earth much?

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

*Anaphora — initial
repetition*

The Whitman Envelope

Be it so, then I answer'd,
I too haughty Shade also sing war, and a longer and greater one than any,
Waged in my book with varying fortune, with flight, advance and retreat, victory deferr'd and wavering,
(Yet methinks certain, or as good as certain, at the last,) the field the world,
For life and death, for the Body and for the eternal Soul,
Lo, I too am come, chanting the chant of battles,
I above all promote brave soldiers.

Whitman envelope — crescendo,
decrescendo

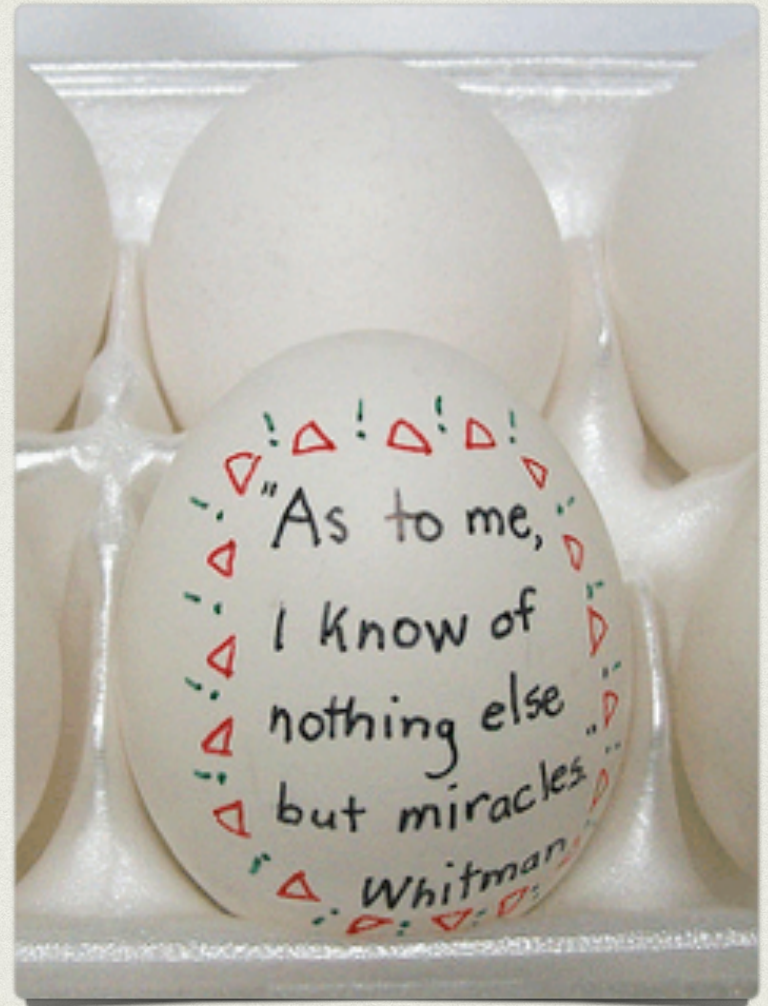
Poetry: Poetic Themes

1. Himself
2. America (“the greatest poem”)
3. Ordinary life: nature, work, intimacy
4. Demand for reader’s participation
5. Tensions
 - a. narcissism & national communion
 - b. micro- and macroscopic
 - c. nature & artifice (work & craft)
6. The body
7. Optimism, energy, passion
8. Music



The Poems

1. "One's-Self I Sing"
2. "I Hear America Singing"
3. "Song of Myself"



One's-Self I Sing

Anna viromque cano!

One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,

individual + } all

Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse,

collective }

the whole — embodied

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,

body + mind = all

Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse,

I say the Form complete is worthier far,

← iambic pentameter!

The Female equally with the Male I sing.

bisexuality, all

American optimism

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,

Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,

= American democracy

The Modern Man I sing.

I Hear America Singing

America = work

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be
blithe and strong,

The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank
or beam,

The mason singing his as he makes ready for work,
or leaves off work,

The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat,
the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,

The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench,
the hatter singing as he stands,

*Catalog:
individual
examples
give
totality*

*Love of work / labor
gives us identity*

I Hear America Singing

The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way
in the morning, or at noon intermission or at
sundown,

The delicious singing of the mother,
or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or
washing,

Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,

The day what belongs to the day—
at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,

Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

totality
(night is coming)

labor is what belongs to you

merged into a collective at night

Song Of Myself

I.

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.

*Narcissistic individual
merges with the other
loaf is a collective
body politic*

labor + leisure = all

Song Of Myself

2.

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded
with perfumes,
I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

} the artificial
scent

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the
distillation, it is odorless,

the
natural

It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and
naked,

I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

frantic
embrace
of the world
prophetic
figure

Song Of Myself

2.

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd the earth much?

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

Communal / sexual

*totality
no received
authority*

*participatory
democracy*

Song Of Myself

12.

The butcher-boy puts off his killing-clothes, or sharpens his knife
at the stall in the market,
I loiter enjoying his repartee and his shuffle and break-down.

Blacksmiths with grimed and hairy chests environ the anvil,
Each has his main-sledge, they are all out, there is a great heat in
the fire.

From the cinder-strew'd threshold I follow their
movements,
The lithe sheer of their waists plays even with their massive arms,
Overhand the hammers swing, overhand so slow, overhand so sure,
They do not hasten, each man hits in his place.