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## WALT WHITMAN AS A CLASSIC POET

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Walt Whitman was born in Long Island, New York City in 1819. His father, a carpenter who moved to Brooklyn later knew the old Thomas Paine. Whitman discontinued his education, and served as an office boy at 11, worked for a doctor, worked in a press, and newspapers. He also did teaching. He turned to journalism, and he contributed to *Mirror*, *Democrat*, and *Star*. He read Sir Walter Scott's novels and participated in debating societies, poetry-reading and theatres. He became a political worker for Democrats.

After maturity, Whitman edited *Brooklyn Eagle*. He reviewed books by Carlyle, Fuller, Melville, Sand, Goethe, and others. As a nationalist, he justified Mexican War and respected President Zachary Taylor. He hailed America's mission of "peopling the new world with a noble race." Once like Emerson he made a trip to the west.

Mr Whitman began experimenting in poetry in New York in 1848. He befriended Brooklyn artists. He realized what it was 'emotions, raptures, uplifts.' And the roughs and artists. "Always self-taught he undertook a more systematic plan of study. He studied Egyptology, Orientalism, Greek literature, European disciplines and democracy. He was keen about aesthetics. By 1855, he wrote the few poems of his monumental work *Leaves of Grass*.

Facing the title page of this remarkable book was an engraving of a lounging working man, broad-hatted, bearded, shirt open at the neck to reveal a colored undershirt, the right arm akimbo, left hand in pants pocket, weight on the right leg. Such a man would hardly be expected to read verse, much less write it. The title page said simply "*Leaves of Grass*" and gave the place and date of publication as "Brooklyn, New York: 1855." The back of the title page named "Walter Whit-man" as the man who had entered the work for copyright; that this was the author was confirmed by a line far down in the first poem (the one later retitled *Song of Myself*; here they were all titled *Leaves of Grass*. (Vincent 917-918)

The book began with an essay about America's new poetry which the Transcendentalists Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman himself and Dickinson experimented. Whitman referred to Emerson's lecture on poet.

Whitman wrote of America as a great nation. He wrote of man's progress in all fields including science and technology. There were masterstrokes of comedy. The poems spoke of Whitman's great achievements in versification. He deviated much even from Emerson and Thoreau, appropriating the scene.

Emerson greeted Whitman immediately at the beginning of a great career. Horace Greeley of *Tribune* encouraged him as did Emerson. He visited the Brahmin poet Longfellow. Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott visited Whitman at Brooklyn. The second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1856) included *San-Down Poem* ('Crossing Brooklyn Ferry). Whitman announced that he loved to fount equality between man and woman and the slaves a kind of universal humanism or brotherhood as we see it in his early poem "Song of Myself":

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (Vincent 936)

Whitman wrote a group of 12 poems called *Live Oak with Moss*, hinting at homosexuality, much new then.

Whitman's *Enfans d'Adam* and *Calamus Poems* came forth though Emerson resisted it. In fact, Emerson wanted to invite him to Concord, but the great men of the times opposed it. Then Whitman was the most controversial figure. Soon he found Thayer and Eldridge as publishers of *Leaves of Grass* the third edition 1860. Actress Adah Isaacks Menken defended Whitman greatly.

The American Civil War began in 1860s. Whitman volunteered as a nurse. His brother George got wounded in Washington DC. In fact, he got a job there. *Drum Taps* (1865) is his collection of war poems published in *Leaves of Grass*, and the next edition included his elegy on President Lincoln called 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed.' The elegy starts thus:

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd.

And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,

I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

O' Conner's biography of the poet *The Good Gray Poet* (1866) consolidated Whitman's international fame. Such sections like *December Vistas* and *Specimen Days* appeared in later prints. Whitman had a paralysis in 1873, and he stayed with George in Camden. The continental edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1876. English poet, Lord Teanyson included, appreciated Whitman from the Atlantic shores. It is said,

Of all the American writers of the nineteenth century, Whitman offers the most inspiring example of fidelity to his art. While Hawthorne let marriage become his true career, and while Melville ceased writing for a public that would not accept him. Whitman persisted. (James persisted also, but he was equipped with material, educational, and social advantages Whitman lacked.) Outraging his employers and his family by his odd hours and the semblance of mere loafing, outraging his well-wishers by refusing to compromise on minor points that might have gained him fuller acceptance, finagling reviews, reviewing himself, writing admiring accounts of his work for others to sign, shocking some of his followers by refusing to give autographs gratis, Whitman kept on, like what he called some high-and-dry "hard-cased dilapidated grim ancient shell-fish or time-bang'd conch," uncompromising to the end, never bowing to the materialism and puerilities of nineteenth-century America.) Appropriately, when he finally accumulated a few worldly belongings about him at Camden, he managed to give a nautical east to his room, for eccentric as he seemed, crotchety, stubborn. Whitman was a literary equivalent of Melville's Bulkington in *Moby-Dick*, willing to renounce the comforts of the shore, all normal earthly felicity, for a life of the intellect and the imagination. He died at Camden on March 26, 1892, secure in the knowledge that he had held unwaveringly true to his art and to his role as an artist who had made that art prevail. (Vincent 921-22)

Whitman thinks the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem like the 'leaves of grass.' In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of Whitman that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. See this in his great poem 'Passage to India.' Whitman's Indian poem 'Passage to India' inspired E.M. Forster to write his novel *A Passage to India*. A few stanzas are as follows,

Passage to India!

Cooling airs from Caucasus, far, soothing cradle of man,

The river Euphrates flowing, the past lit up again.

Lo soul, the retrospect brought forward,

The old, most populous, wealthiest of earth's lands.  
 The streams of the Indus and the Changes and their many  
     affluents,  
 (I my shores of America walking to-day behold, resuming all,  
 The tale of Alexander on his warlike marches suddenly dying,  
 On one side China and on the other Persia and Arabia,  
 To the south the great seas and the Bay of Bengal,  
 The flowing literatures, tremendous epics, religions, castes,  
 Old occult Brahma interminably far back, the tender and  
     junior Buddha,  
 Central and southern empires and all their belongings, possessors,  
 The wars of Tamerlane, the reign of Aurungzebe,  
 The traders, rulers, explorers, Moslems, Venetians, Byzantium,  
     the Arabs, Portuguese,  
 The first traveler famous yet, Marco Polo, Patouta, the Moor,  
 Doubts to be solv'd, the map incognita, blanks to be fill'd,  
 The foot of man unstay'd, the hands never at rest,  
 Thyself O soul that will not brook a challenge.  
 The mediaeval navigators rise before me,  
 The world of 1492, with its awaken'd enterprise,  
 Something swelling in humanity now like the sap of the earth  
     in spring,  
 The sunset splendor of chivalry declining.  
 And who art thou sad shade?  
 Gigantic, visionary, thyself a visionary,  
 With majestic limbs and pious beaming eyes,  
 Spreading around with every look of thine a golden world,  
 Enhuing it with gorgeous hues. (Whitman 321)

**References:**

1. Leitch, Vincent. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: WW Norton Co, 2001.
2. Wikipedia T.S. Eliot p 13 accessed on 22/12/2022.