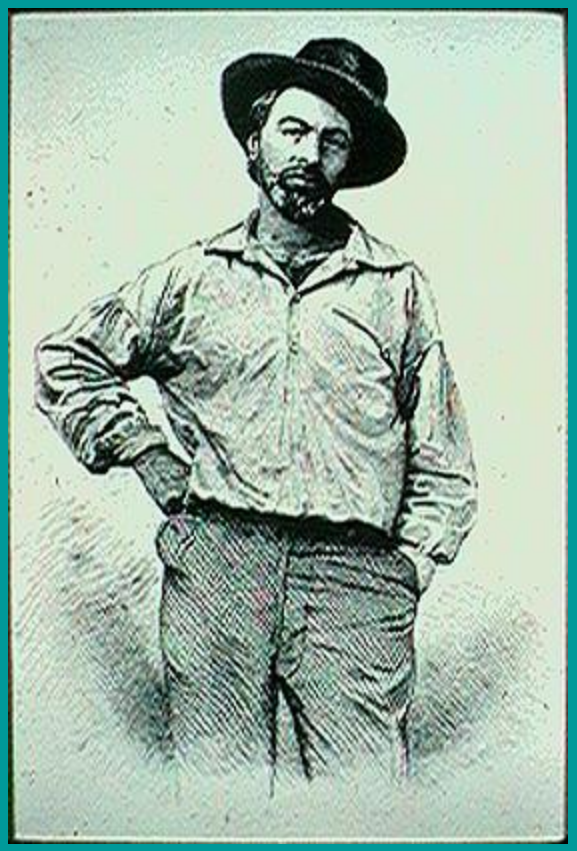
Walt Whitman

America's Poet



Birth and Early Career

- Born 31 May 1819 near Huntington, Long Island, New York
- Second child (of 8) born to Walter and Louisa Van Velsor Whitman.
- Works as printer's apprentice (to 1835) and as a schoolteacher.



The Journalist, 1844

- Worked for several different newspapers
- Wrote short fiction from 1841-1848
- Themes and techniques borrowed from Poe and Hawthorne



The Brooklyn *Eagle*

- 1846-1848. Becomes chief editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle,* a post he holds from from March 5, 1846 to January 18, 1848.
- In May 1848, Whitman is fired because his politics conflict with those of the publisher. A “free soil” or “locofoco”Democrat, Whitman opposes the expansion of slavery into new territories.

“Pulp Fiction”

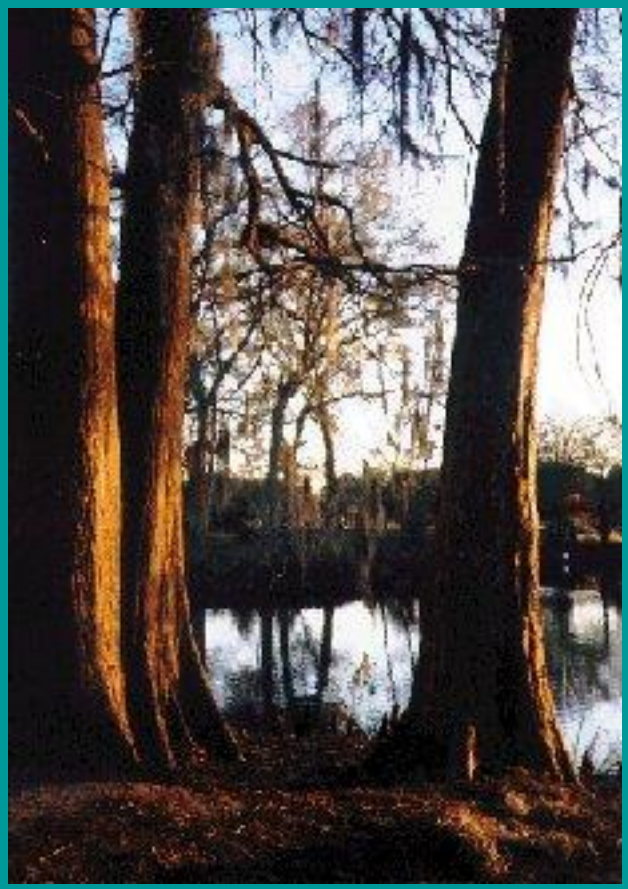
- *Franklin Evans,* 1842
- Temperance novel
- Sold 20,000 copies,

more than any other work Whitman published in his lifetime



New Orleans

- Lives in New Orleans for 4 months as editor of the *Daily Crescent*.
- Sees slavery and slave-markets at first hand
- Experiences with nature ("live oaks, with moss") and with French language later appear in his poetry.



Influences: Literature and Music

- Italian opera: "Were it not for the opera, I could never have written *Leaves of Grass.*"
- Shakespeare, especially *Richard III.* Whitman saw Junius Brutus Booth (father of John Wilkes Booth) perform.
- The Bible
- Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*

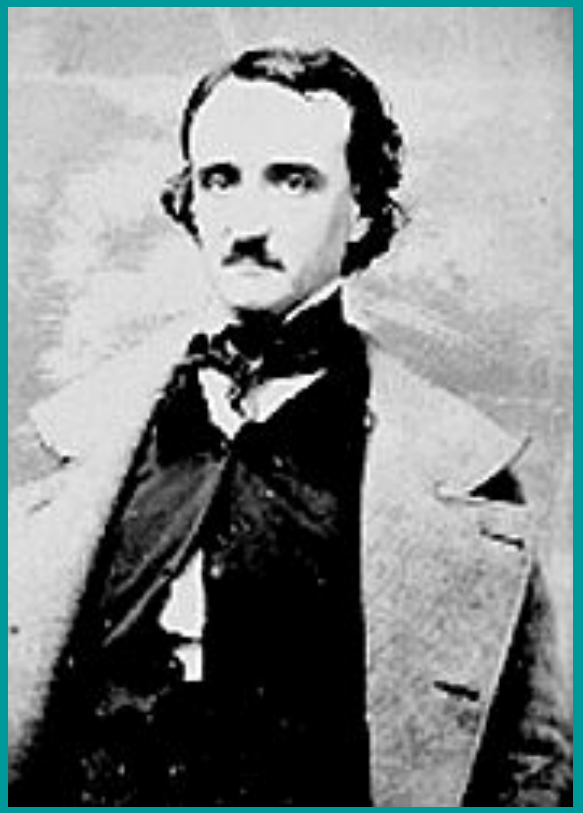
Emerson

- Emerson helped Whitman to "find himself": "I was simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil."



Literary Acquaintances

- Edgar Allan Poe
- William Cullen Bryant
- Amos Bronson Alcott
- Henry David Thoreau
- Friends at Pfaff's Restaurant ("Bohemians")(1859-1862)
  - Elihu Vedder, E.C. Stedman, Ada Clare, Henry Clapp



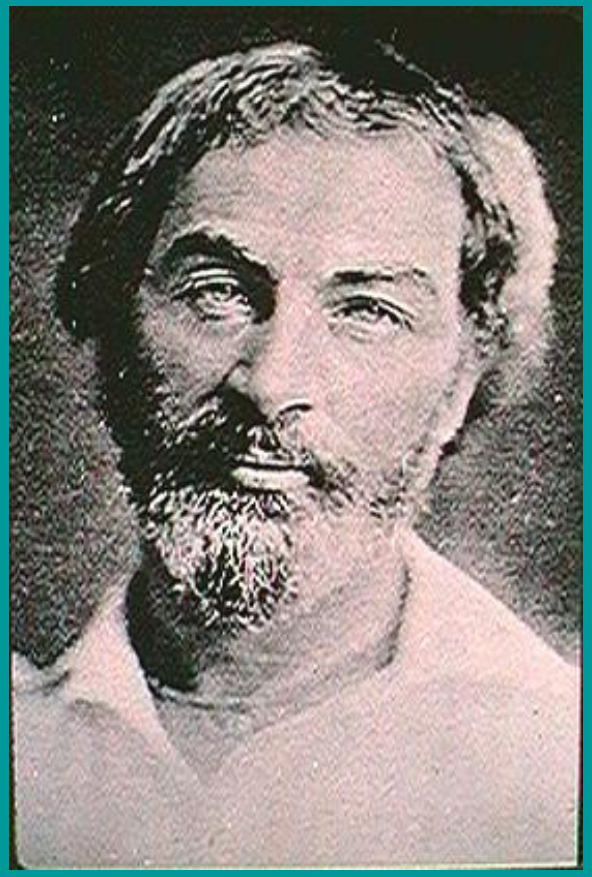
Whitman and Phrenology

- July 16, 1849: A phrenological examination confirms Whitman's sense of his own character, revealing bumps of "Sympathy, Sublimity, and Self-Esteem" along with the "dangerous fault of Indolence"



Whitman in 1854

- His friend Dr. Maurice Bucke called this "the Christ likeness" in which the poet as seer begins to emerge.
- In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman would write, "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there."



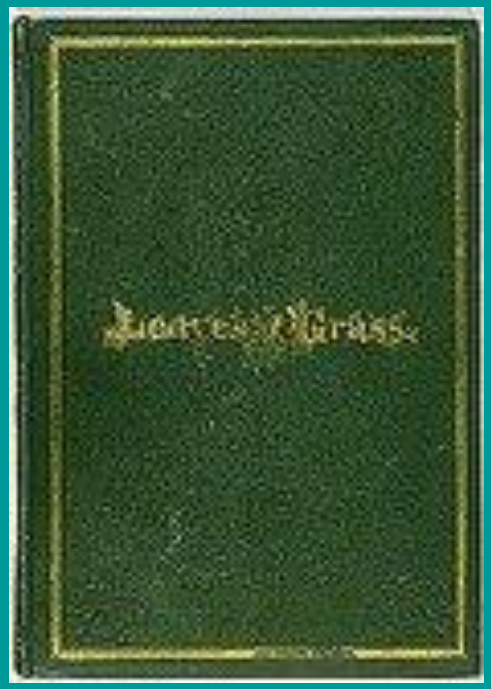
Leaves of Grass, 1855

Twelve poems, including

- "Song of Myself"
- "I Sing the Body Electric"
- "The Sleepers"

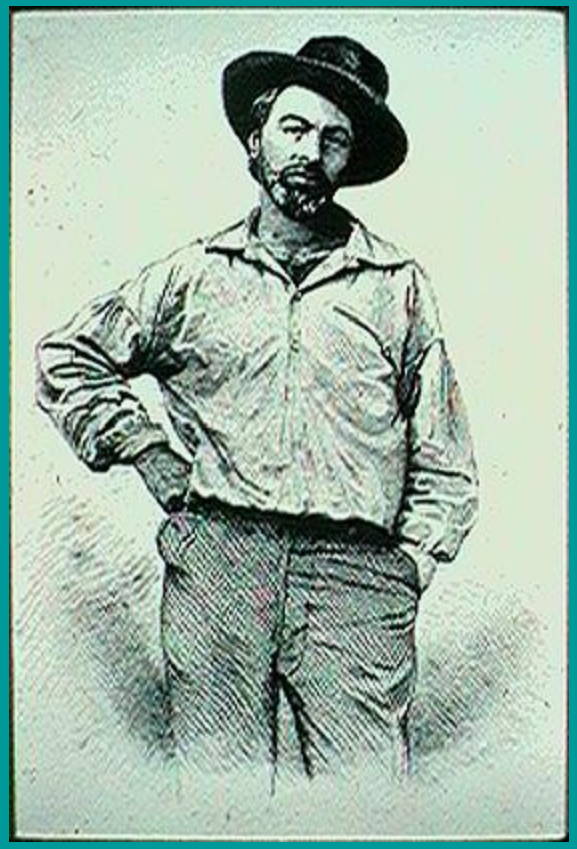
Only 795 copies printed

Family tradition says that Whitman set some of the type for this edition.



Leaves of Grass, 1855

Walt Whitman, an American, one
of the roughs, a kosmos,
Disorderly fleshy and sensual . . . .
eating drinking and breeding,
No sentimentalist . . . . no stander
above men and women or apart
from them . . . . no more
modest than immodest.
Whoever degrades another
degrades me . . . . and whatever
is done or said returns at last to
me,
And whatever I do or say I also
return.



Whitman's Themes

- Transcendent power of love, brotherhood, and comradeship
- Imaginative projection into others' lives
- Optimistic faith in democracy and equality
- Belief in regenerative and illustrative powers of nature and its value as a teacher
- Equivalence of body and soul and the unabashed exaltation of the body and sexuality

Whitman's Poetic Techniques

- Free verse: lack of metrical regularity and conventional rhyme
- Use of repeated images, symbols, phrases, and grammatical units
- Use of enumerations and catalogs
- Use of anaphora (initial repetition) in lines and "Epanaphora" (each line hangs by a loop from the line before it)
- The Whitman "envelope"
- Contrast and parallelism in paired lines

From “Song of Myself”

- Where the heifers browse, and the geese nip their food with short jerks;
- Where the sundown shadows lengthen over the limitless and lonesome prairie,
- Where the herds of buffalo make a crawling spread of the square miles far and near;
- Where the hummingbird shimmers . . . . where the neck of the longlived swan is curving and winding
- Where the laughing-gull scoots by the slappy shore and laughs her near-human laugh . . .

Whitman's Use of Language

- Idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation.
- Words used for their sounds as much as their sense; foreign languages
- Use of language from several disciplines
- The sciences: anatomy, astronomy, botany (especially the flora and fauna of America)
- Businesses and professions, such as carpentry
- Military and war terms; nautical terms

Reviews: Praise

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, letter to Whitman, 21 July 1855:
- "I find [*Leaves of Grass*] the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed. . . . I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start."

Reviews: Praise

- I am not unaware that the charge of coarseness and sensuality has been affixed to them. My moral constitution may be hopelessly tainted or - too sound to be tainted, as the critic wills, but I confess that I extract no poison from these Leaves - to me they have brought only healing. --Fanny Fern, critic and popular essayist

Reviews and Protests

- “Foul work" filled with"libidinousness" (*The Christian Examiner*)
- There are too many persons, who imagine they demonstrate their superiority to their fellows, by disregarding all the politenesses and decencies of life, and, therefore,justify themselves in indulging the vilest imaginings and shamefullest license. (Rufus Griswold, *The Criterion*)

Early Editions of *Leaves of Grass*

1855 Self-published the first edition

1856 Added new poems and revised old ones.

1860 Began grouping poems thematically; includes "A Child's Reminiscence," which will become "Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking"

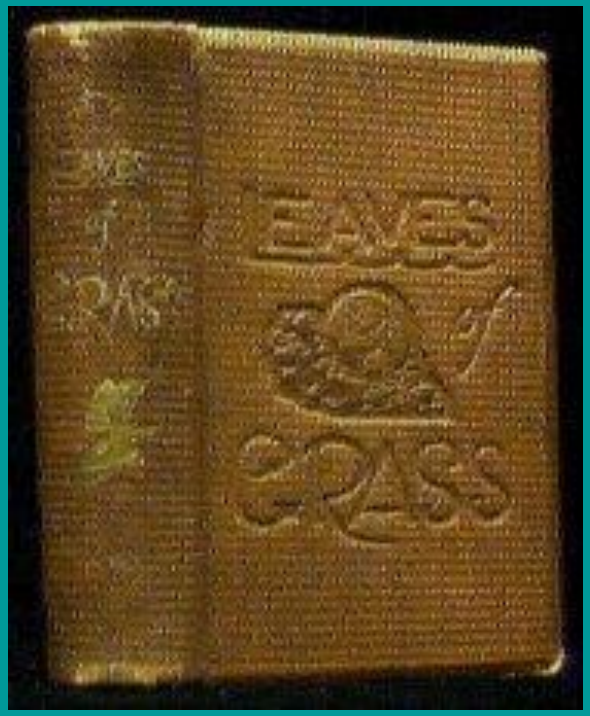
1867 Incorporates *Drum-Taps* (1865), including "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and "O Captain, My Captain"

Leaves of Grass, 1856

- Whitman has Emerson's praise printed on the spine in gold letters: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career."
- "I do not believe that all the sermons, so-called, that have been preached in this land put together are equal to it for preaching." Henry David Thoreau

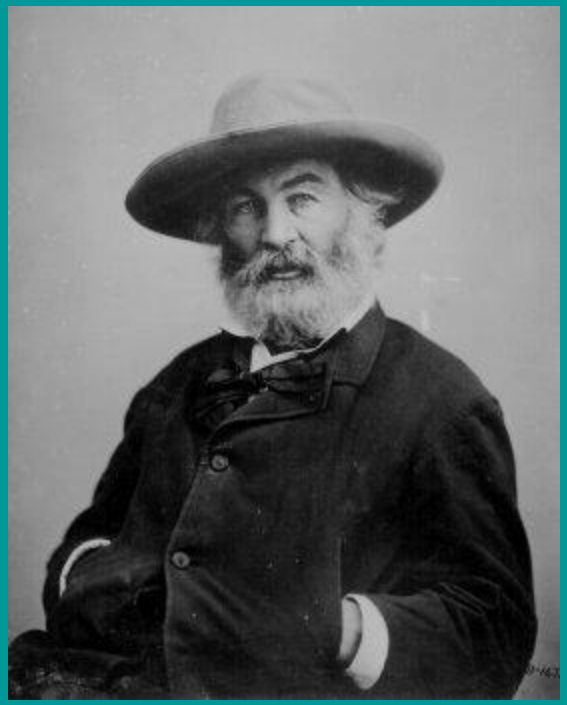
Leaves of Grass, 1860

- 146 new poems added to the 32 poems of the second edition, including "I hear America singing"
- *Enfans d'Adam* section, 15 poems on "amativeness" or love for women, and *Calamus*, 32 poems on "adhesiveness" or love between men



Civil War

- After his brother is wounded at Fredericksburg (1862), Whitman goes to Washington to care for him and stays for nearly 3 years, visiting the wounded, writing letters, and keeping up their spirits.

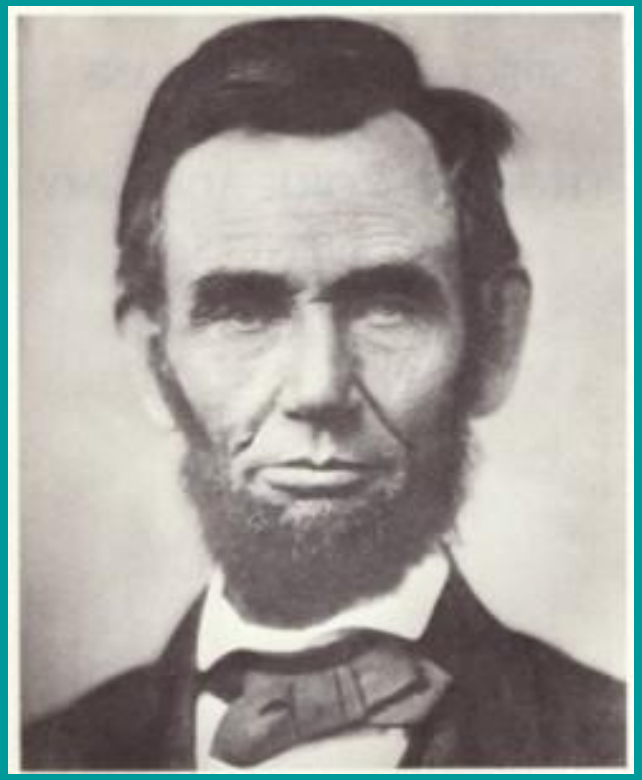


One Wounded Soldier's View

- "Every Sunday there were half a dozen old roosters who would come into my ward and preach and pray and sing to us, while we were swearing to ourselves all the time, and wishing the blamed old fools would go away. Walt Whitman's funny stories, and his pipes and tobaccos, were worth more than all the preachers and tracts in Christendom."

Whitman and Lincoln

- Whitman saw Lincoln often, but the two never met face to face.
- “When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom’d”
- “O Captain, My Captain”

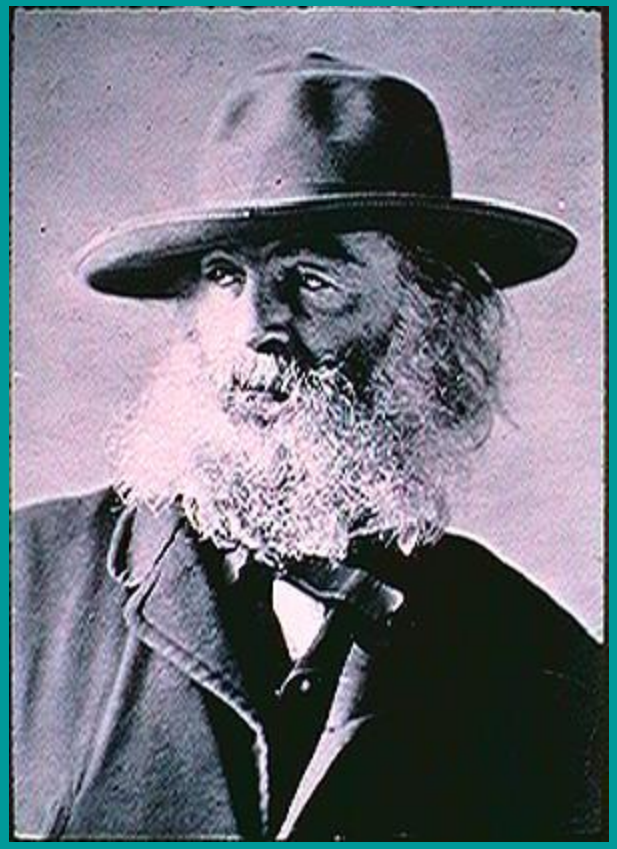


Walt Whitman, Civil Servant

- 1862, Clerk at the Paymaster's Office
- 1865. 1 January. Becomes a clerk at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, a post he enjoys.
- Fired in May because Secretary of the Interior James Harlan sees *Leaves of Grass* in Whitman's desk drawer and denounces it as immoral.

The Good Gray Poet

- May 1865. Whitman's friend William Douglas O'Connor secures him a job at the Attorney General's office, a post he holds until he leaves after he suffers a stroke in 1873.
- O'Connor publishes *The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication* (1866), the beginning of a shift in Whitman's public persona and popularity.



Later Editions of *Leaves of Grass*

1872 Includes 120-page "annex," *A Passage to India*

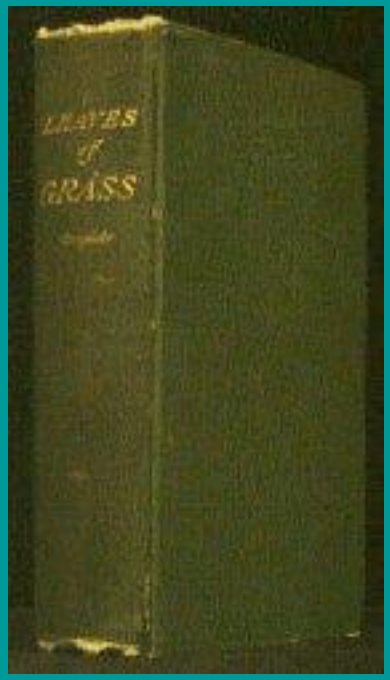
1881-1882 The firm of James R. Osgood discontinues publishing *Leaves of Grass* after it is banned in Boston; Whitman takes the copies and binds and sells them himself.

1888-1889 *Leaves of Grass* (Birthday Edition) is the first pocket-sized version.

1891-92 "Deathbed Edition"

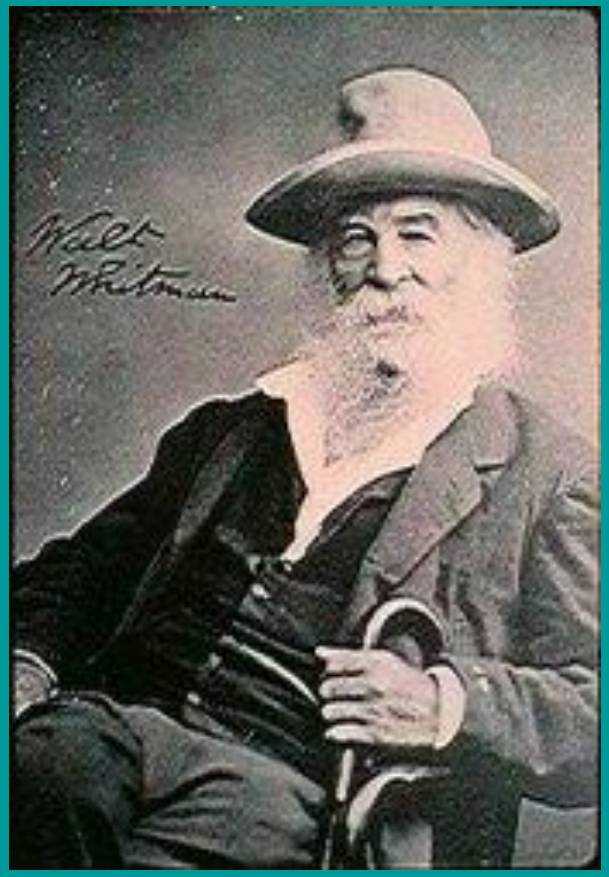
Leaves of Grass, 1872

- Includes *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel to Drum-Taps*
- Includes an "annex," *A Passage to India*



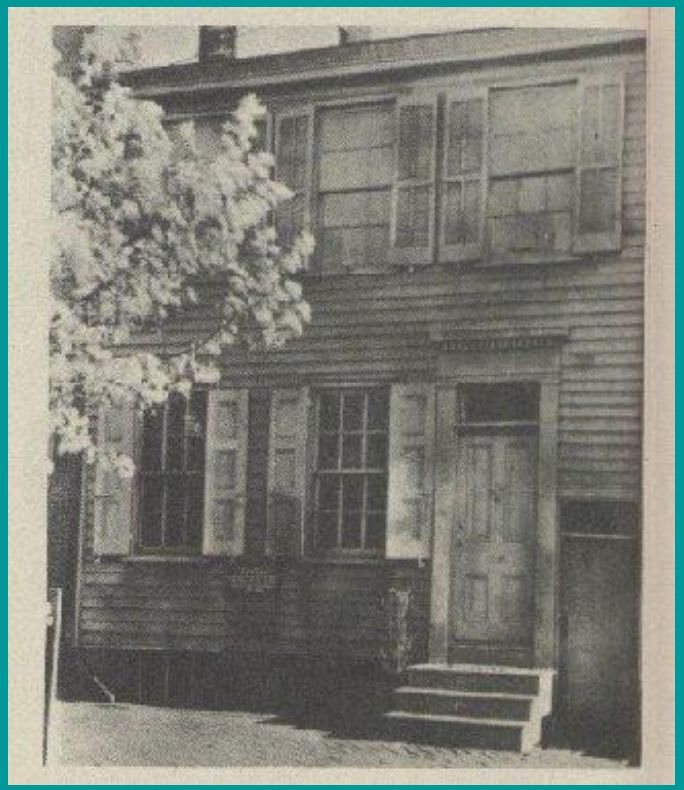
Specimen Days and Collect, 1882

- Autobiographical work with focus on the Civil War and Whitman's trip west to Kansas and Colorado
- Counterpart to the 1881-1882 edition of *Leaves of Grass*
- Begun much earlier as *Memoranda During the War* and partly inspired by Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches*



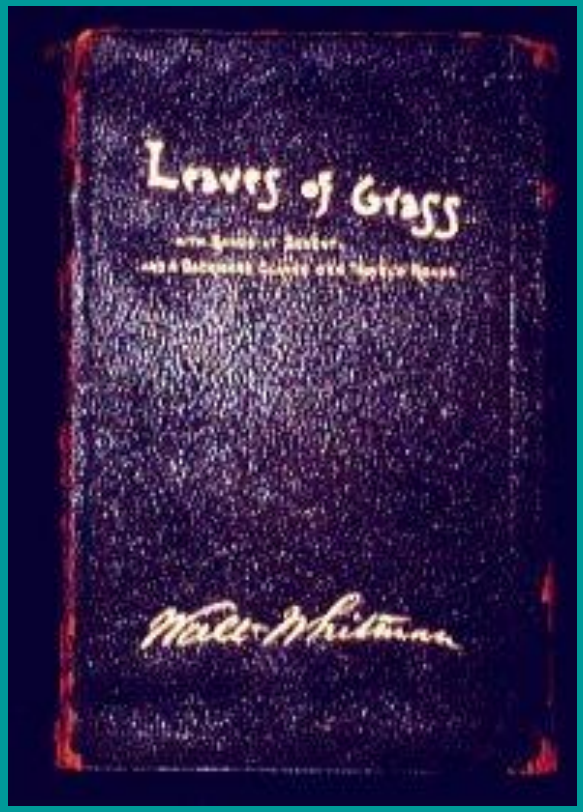
328 Mickle Street, Camden

- In 1884, Whitman purchases a house at 328 Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey, for $1750.
- It is the first house he has ever owned.



Leaves of Grass, 1889 and 1891

- 1891 edition includes *Good-Bye, My Fancy*
- These editions mix autobiographical prose reminiscences with poetry.



The Poet at Home

- Whitman would allow no one to pick up his papers, saying that whatever he wanted surfaced sooner or later.
- Whitman died on 26 March 1892 at about 6:30 p.m. and is buried in the tomb that he had designed.



Credits

- Sources are given in the notes section of the slides except as noted in the notes below.
- Pictures are courtesy of the Walt Whitman Hypertext Archive at the University of Virginia: http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/whitman/