Resources for the Study of Walt Whitman

http://www.whitmanarchive.org/

The Walt Whitman Archive is located at the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Edited by Whitman scholars Ed Folsom & Kenneth M. Price, the archive is working to provide access to facsimile and e-text versions of all the editions of Leaves of Grass (1855, 1856, 1860, 1867, 1871-72, 1881-82, 1891-92.) Also available is an extended biography of Whitman by Folsom and Price, the complete volume of contemporary reviews of Whitman's work; selected critical essays; all known photographs of Whitman, with annotations; introductions to each edition of Leaves, reprinted from *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* and, with the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, a comprehensive bibliography of books, essays, notes, and reviews about Whitman. The searchable bibliography contains articles, books, chapters of books, and poems about Whitman, published from 1975 to the present. There are thousands of entries in the database, most of which are annotated. The archive also includes editions of Whitman’s works printed outside the US: including the first two British editions of Whitman's poetry and the first full-length Spanish-language translation as well as two Russian translations of Whitman. Finally, the archive makes available sample manuscripts, including Whitman's drafts of “Live Oak, with Moss,” the “Calamus” sequence, as well as links to Whitman's recently recovered notebooks from the 1850s and 1860s at the Library of Congress.

Selected Reference Sources in the Mason Library


Blake, David Haven. *Walt Whitman and the culture of American celebrity*. 2006. PS3231 .BS8


The Nineteenth Century: Origins and Reception

Whitman’s Anonymous Self-Reviews” (1856), 34–48

“Thoreau on Whitman” (1856) 67–68

“It is the healthiest book, morally” (1859), 97–98

“Henry James on Walt Whitman” (1865), 110–14

“Anne Gilchrist on Whitman” (1870), 137–41

“A Belated Appreciation” (1873), 152–54

“Peter Bayne on Whitman” (1875), 156–78

“William James on Whitman” (1895), 240–45

William Dean Howells on Whitman” (1895), 246–47

“John Burroughs on Whitman” (1896), 248–51

The Twentieth Century: Reception and Legacy
“Santayana on Whitman” (1900)


Allen Ginsberg, “Supermarket in California” and “America”

3 / Resources for the Study of Walt Whitman


Gary Snyder, “Walt Whitman’s Old ‘New World,’” *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, Watersheds*


William H. Rueckert, “Kenneth Burke’s Encounters with Walt Whitman,” *Encounters with Kenneth Burke*


George Kateb, “Whitman and the Culture of Democracy,” *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture*


“Gerard Manley Hopkins on Whitman” (1882), 195–98
“John Addington Symonds on Whitman” (1893), 224–29
“Basil de Selincourt on Whitman” (1914), 271–84
E. M. Forster, “The Beauty of Life” (1911)
D. H. Lawrence, “Letter to Henry Savage, December 22, 1913” (1913), 52–53
Denis Donoghue, “Walt Whitman” (1975), 65
Tom Paulin, “Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State” (1991), 69–70

Whitman and the Spanish-Speaking World
Fernando Alegría, “Whitman in Spain and Latin America,”” !” 71–95
José Martí, “The Poet Walt Whitman” (1887), 96–106
Rubén Darío, “Walt Whitman” 1890), 106–07
Cebriá Montoliú, “Walt Whitman’s Philosophy” (1909), 107–12
Miguel de Unamuno, “Adamic Song” (1930); 113–15
Jorge Luis Borges, Camden, 1892” (1966), 126
Jorge Guillén, “My Relationship with Walt Whitman” (1971), 127
Maria Clara Bonetti Paro, “Whitman in Brazil,”” 128–36
Gilberto Freire, “Camerado Whitman” (1948), 137–46
Roger Asselineau, “Whitman in Portugal,”” 147–48
Susan M. Brown, “The Case of Fernando Pessoa,”” 148–5
Fernando Pessoa, “Salutation to Walt Whitman” (1915), 154–59
Federico García Lorca, “Oda a Walt Whitman/Ode to Walt Whitman”
Mario Vargas Llosa, “Why Literature? The Premature Obituary of the Book,”” The New Republic

Whitman in Europe, India, China, and Japan
Walter Grünzweig, “Whitman in the German Speaking Countries,”” 160–72
Ferdinand Freiligrath, “Walt Whitman” (1868), 172–76
Johannes Schlaf, “Walt Whitman” (1892), 176–86
Hermann Hesse, “Walt Whitman’s Leaves Of Grass” (1904), 186–87
Gustav Landauer, “Walt Whitman” (1907) 189–93
Herman Bahr, “Walt Whitman” (1919), 193–201
Thomas Mann, “Letter to Hans Reisiger” (1922), 201
Hans Reisiger, “The Heartbeat of True Democracy” (1922), 202–09
Walter Grünzweig, “‘Teach Me Your Rhythm’: The Poetics of German Lyrical Responses to Whitman,”
Malcom Cowley, “Song of Myself and Indian Philosophy,” A Century of Whitman Criticism, Edwin Haviland Miller, ed., 231–45
Takashi Kodaira and Alfred H. Marks, “Whitman in Japan,” 429–35
Questions and Themes in the Study of Walt Whitman: Texts, Contexts, Reception

“The word I primarily put for them [my poems] is suggestiveness. . . . I round and finish little, if anything; and could not consistently with my scheme.”

— “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” 1888

Whitman addresses a number of inescapable human questions. He does not “answer” these questions but rather explores them and, in turn, offers an opportunity for the reader to think with him about these fundamental questions.

1. The question of art: What is art? (Samuel Johnson pointed out that it is easier, after all, to say what poetry is not than what it is.) What is poetry? How does art or poetry evolve? What is the relationship between tradition and innovation? One definition: art is art when someone has used one’s medium well. Is this thing well conceived? What does it do?

- How does one represent something like democracy? How does one represent a vision? How does one represent a feeling? How does one judge art? In what context and using whose criteria?

- Whitman demonstrates well that the form or structure or shape of a poem is the realization of a potential.

- His theory of art calls for innovation. It is predicated on what he understands as the theory of democracy. He believes that we need spaces in which to determine what we desire and what we need to live to the fullness of your powers and not to their limits. That is to say, we need literature and art in a very practical way, so as to better think, and reflect, and feel. As Whitman suggests when judging any piece of art, “Has it helped any soul?”

2. The question of the individual: We are all in the same dilemma as citizens of a democracy, observes the philosopher Hilary Putnam: we have the capacity to think for ourselves, to ask the question, “how shall I live?”

- This idea of an individual is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back to the seventeenth century when humans are first fully considered as discrete subjects with powers that can determine their fate and the fate of history. The ideas of creativity, genius, and originality, further developed in the eighteenth century, are radical proposals and are at the heart of Whitman’s art. Whitman’s essential belief is that a person can respond to and engage with an environment and be changed by it. He acknowledges but seeks opportunity for the democratic subject outside the narrower and traditional hierarchal determinants of class and identity (good breeding, money, and so on). Whitman complicates the idea of the unified self and seems to anticipate a definition of the self as “conjectural,” to borrow a term from the anthropologist
James Clifford. He rejects the idea of the self as something simply put together by a person, expressed, and confirmed by others as an identity.

3. The question of the community: In what ways does one address the problem of being together? How does one live with others? What is the relationship between the individual and the community?

- What happens when one dissents from a religious or social community of the “elect”? How do people reach agreement when one does not presuppose an authority (person(s), canon of precepts or laws) based on consensus? Whitman discerned that agreement does not incite continued inquiry: difference is essential to incite inquiry.

- The democratic demand for consent is therefore a problem for the individual. A community is in part defined by the relationship established by a proposition (“All men are created equal,” for instance). But the relationship among persons is not maintained there, and so the members of a community must respond, indeed have a “response-ability,” to address the potential meaning of the proposition. (The columnist Ellen Goodman once pointed out that tradition cannot be handed down it must be taken up.)

4. The question of democracy: Whitman emerges as a writer in the permanently transitional space between an already articulated and as yet unrealized democracy.

- How does one invest in the redemptive possibilities of social experience and balance those opportunities with the ever-present awareness of limitations and complexity?

- If the experiment of democracy is articulated in a set of documents (Declaration of Independence, The US Constitution)—and managed through its institutions (The Executive, Judicial and Legislative branches) and public servants—what is the role of the individual who must attempt to renew a hope in a system that is continually disappointing?

- For instance, Whitman, writing at mid-century, was consumed by a staggeringly primitive question: which human beings are persons? Despite the theory of democracy that had guided the incipient nation the ideal of political unity had left unanswered the crisis of how one determines a person. Therefore there emerges an interesting convergence of art and policy that confronted a culture that lacked an effective or sustainable structure. The aesthetic ideal one sees in Whitman that seeks to rewrite a set of dichotomies—body/soul, individual/collective, nation/state, body/mind, writer/reader, masterslave—is therefore fundamentally a political ideal as well. Poetry and public policy in this sense are instruments of urgent, common work.
5. The question of learning:

- How do we learn from our experience? How do we learn to think more deliberately? How do we change, adapt, grow? One of Whitman’s proposals is that we learn by doing, whether moving the body or the mind.

Themes in Whitman’s Poetry and Prose

There are literally hundreds of themes to consider when reading and thinking and writing about Walt Whitman’s poetry and prose. Here are a few with which to begin.

- Whitman’s Prose and Poetry: Reincarnations of the 1855 Preface: consider the relationship between the prose and the poetry in the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass; or, consider the 1855 preface in relation to Whitman’s later prose works, such as “Democratic Vistas” or Specimen Days.

- The evolution of Leaves of Grass: Consider the design, layout, and aesthetic development in Leaves of Grass (1855–1860). Whitman made important changes to Leaves of Grass between 1855-1860. Track down a copy of the first three editions (you can borrow my variorum edition) and consider specific changes and their significance for subsequent “epic” projects by poets and writers.

- Form and structure in “Song of Myself”: Formulate and discuss an approach to the organizational principle(s) of Whitman’s poem(s).

- Catalogues and meaning in Leaves of Grass: Sections 15, 16 and 33: what are the differences among these sections? Is there a deliberate or identifiable structure? If so, what is it and how does Whitman establish, maintain and loosen this structure in each catalogue.

- Whitman’s theory of the modern: The 1881 essay “Carlyle from American Points of View” (1881) provides a starting point for considering this topic. “My utmost pretension is probably but to offset that old claim of the exclusively curative power of first-class individual men, as leaders and rulers, by the claims and general movement and result of ideas. Something of the latter kind seems to me to be the distinctive theory of America, of democracy, and of the modern—or rather, I should say, it is democracy, and is the modern.”

- Whitman’s philosophy: In the “Preface” to the 1855 Edition Whitman writes: “This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one who asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body. . . .”
• Whitman the radical: Consider the political propositions of Whitman

• Whitman’s treatment of sexuality and homoeroticism: Read the “Calamus” and Children of Adam” sequences, “I Sing the Body Electric”; consider the essays in Erkkila and Grossman’s anthology of essays, Breaking Bounds

• Whitman’s use of the American West: Consider the use of the American West by a lifelong resident of the Atlantic seaboard. Whitman’s preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass in which he says that the poet of America “incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes”

• Whitman and Transcendentalism: Most apparent in Whitman’s relationship with Ralph Waldo Emerson, but it is also evident in his mother’s Quakerism and what is best called Whitman’s religious mysticism


• Whitman as American Adam: Early American theology was dominated by the concept of original sin, which stated that man was born into a fallen state. R.W.B. Lewis argues, in his book The American Adam, that Whitman provided one antidote to this philosophy.

• Whitman, individualism and the community: Consider Whitman’s treatment of the relations between the “I” and the “en-masse,” the celebration of the individual and the problem of community.

• Whitman and the American Multicultural Identity: Consider the following passage from an 1883 letter (Whitman: Poetry and Prose 1170): “We Americans have yet to really learn our own antecedents, and sort them out, to unify them. They will be found ampler than supposed, and in widely different sources. Thus far, impress’d by New England writers and schoolmasters, we tacitly abandon ourselves to the notion that our United States have been fashion’d from the British Islands only, and essentially form a second England only—which is a very great mistake.”

• Whitman and Censorship: Reading the contemporary reviews of Whitman’s publications one comes to see that his poetry and prose has pushed the limits of public taste and decorum. Consider the most extreme responses to Whitman that deem his book of poems inappropriate for the public he sought to reach through his writing.

• Phrenology and the Body Beautiful: Consider the relationship between the pseudo-science of phrenology and Whitman’s treatment of the body.

• Whitman as Nature Poet or Environmental Writer: consider Whitman’s vision of the relation between human and nonhuman world.
• America’s Poet/America’s Gay Poet: Conflicts in Memorializing Whitman: One way of mapping Whitman’s legacy is through the cycle of embrace and the rejection in the generations of his readers.

• Representations of the Poet (I): Examine the 1855 Leaves of Grass frontispiece image. Consider how it might be said to merge with the text as part of an overall message. Consider how the 1876 Leaves of Grass frontispiece image interacts with—or even is an integral part of—the poem “Out from Behind This Mask.”

• Representations of the Poet (II): Consider how the later image and poem respond to, or modify, the 1855 image and text. Perhaps consider, more broadly, the frontispiece photographs and engravings of American poets, 1820-1890.

• Democratic Literature: Working with Whitman’s definition(s) of the literary, build an argument for the exclusive value and cultural importance of literature. Consider Whitman’s radical approach to the act of reading.


• Why Whitman?: “It is not ‘can any of us imagine better?’ but ‘can we all do better?’ The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is now, we must think anew and act anew. We must disen thrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.” —Abraham Lincoln, “Second Annual Message” (in which he articulates the proposed policy of Emancipation)

• Whitman and Modern Poetry: “It is a terrific problem that faces the poet today—a world that is so in transition from a decayed culture toward a reorganization of human evaluations that there are few common terms, general denominators of speech that are solid enough or that ring with any vibration of spiritual conviction. The great mythologies of the past (including the Church) are deprived of enough façade to even launch good raillery against. Yet much of their traditions are operative still—in millions of chance combinations of related and unrelated detail, psychological references, figures of speech, precepts, etc. these are all a part of our common experience and the terms, at least partially, of that very experience when it defines or extends itself. (Hart Crane, “General Aims and Theories,” included as an appendix in Phillip Horton’s Hart Crane, New York, 1937.)