

WALT WHITMAN

5/31/1819 – 3/26/1892

Walt Whitman is considered one of America's greatest poets. He liberated poetry from the constrictions of European models and created a genuinely American style of verse.

Walt Whitman is best known for *Leaves of Grass*, a groundbreaking volume of 12 untitled poems first published in 1855, which heralded a new, uniquely American style of poetry. Whitman continued to revise and expand *Leaves of Grass* for the rest of his life. The first few editions were poorly received. The book was censored by some prominent American intellectuals because of its innovative, unstructured verse and its celebration of sexuality, which they found obscene.

Whitman was born into a Quaker family on Long Island, New York. Largely self-educated, he supported himself as a printer, teacher and journalist while he pursued his vision of a new form of literature that would express America's destiny as liberator of the human spirit. *Leaves of Grass* reflects Whitman's belief that poetry should be simple, with the natural rhythm of spoken language and without orthodox meter or rhyme.

During the Civil War, the poet served as an unofficial nurse in an army hospital, caring for his brother and other wounded Union soldiers at his own expense. When the war ended, Whitman, who was already internationally famous, remained in Washington, D.C., working as a clerk in the Department of the Interior. However, when James Harlan, Secretary of the Interior, discovered that Whitman was the author of *Leaves of Grass*, Harlan fired the poet.

Whitman is widely considered the father of modern American literature, but during his lifetime he remained more highly regarded in Europe than in the United States. In 1882, Oscar Wilde, who was on a lecture tour of America, visited Whitman at the poet's home in Camden, New Jersey. Afterward he said of Whitman, "He is the grandest man I have ever seen, the simplest, most natural, and strongest character I have ever met in my life."

I CELEBRATE 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.

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 atmosphere is not a perfume—it has no taste of the distillation—it is odorless;
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.

