



Research Paper

# Reimagining America through Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*

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## Abstract

Whitman's name skyrocketed after he self-published *Leaves of Grass*, his collection of poetry in 1855. *Leaves of Grass* was a revolution in the literary world for its unconventional style of writing. By championing the spirit of America, often referred to as the "Bard of Democracy", Whitman celebrated the themes of democracy, individual freedom, the human body, nature and even love in the form of free-verse poems. He kept updating, expanding and revising *Leaves of Grass* till his last breath, as if giving us a metaphorical pathway to walk alongside him as his views of the American life evolves throughout his lifetime. *Leaves of Grass* broke away from the traditional form of poetry and helped reshape the voice of American literature as we know it today. It boasts of individuality and the interconnectedness of life which paved the way to add inclusivity in the American dream. *Leaves of Grass* arose as a rebellion against the rigid poetic form and stylistic conventions of the time.

**Key words:** Reimagining America, democracy, individuality.

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## I. Introduction

Walt Whitman (1819 - 1892) is a household name for literary enthusiasts, and his works, their therapy. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, Whitman was born as the second son in a large working-class family consisting of 8 siblings, in West Hills, Long Island, New York on the 31st of May 1819 (1). His career started out as a necessity rather than an exploration of his inner artist, as he left schooling at the ripe age of 11, owing to limited family resources. He vicariously lived the roles of a printer, office boy, carpenter and newspaper editor in his early life exploring the ups and downs of print media and journalism. Whitman worked as a volunteer nurse in Washington, D.C., caring for the wounded soldiers of the American Civil War, giving him a first-hand view of the war ground, that greatly influenced his literary writing especially his poignant war poems. His style of writing broke all traditional parameters and conventions of literature as the world knew till then. His use of free verse and malignant portrayal of the human emotions influenced the many generations of future poets. Post-stroke Whitman shifted to Camden, New Jersey where he died on the 26th of March 1892. Whitman's funeral was held as a public event, thus highlighting his legacy as a symbol of American innovation in poetry.

*Leaves of Grass* is a collection of poems, first self-published by Walt Whitman, in 1855. Written in free verse, it celebrates the themes of democracy, the human form, nature, sexuality and the American spirit. *Leaves of Grass* provided the world with a voice - a voice that spoke for all and merged the "I" with "we". Whitman thought of himself as the moral embodiment of the American people thus uniting the diverse demographic under an umbrella poetic form. In 'Song of Myself', Whitman sketches,

"I am of old and young, of foolish as much as the wise,  
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others." (27, verse 16.)

This portrayal of inclusiveness shattered all the misguided obnoxious assumptions prevalent in the 19th century literary world that granted voice only to the chosen few. Whitman's work gave off a sense of true dignity to the American society that resided and flourished in its plurality - to the marginalised, to the women, to the enslaved,

to the working class and to the privileged- leaving no man behind. His grasp at democracy was spiritual to its core - binding the society in a cosmic bond that reiterated of the interconnectedness it exuded. One in which every 'leaf of grass' mattered, is an equal and contributed to itself and to its kin. Each blade of grass becomes a symbol of regeneration and renewal.

While nature is often used as a setting for the happenings of literature, Whitman gave the realm a new identity. Not as a tool but as a partner and contributor to the human experience. He gave a true interrelatedness to each - the grass, the stars, the sea and the body. Thus, presenting nature as a biome that shares the same sacred essence - one that celebrates the interconnectedness between all. In poems such as 'Song of Myself', we can see Whitman portray nature as a manifestation of the cosmos and the reflection of the soul. The word 'grass' is a metaphor that functions simultaneously as a botanical image, social allegory, and spiritual emblem all at the same time. In 'Song of Myself,' grass is introduced as a multivalent symbol of American democracy's fundamental unity alongside its irreducible yet volatile diversity. The grass itself- countless individual blades emerging from common earth, each unique yet structurally identical, collectively forming unbroken fields-embodies Whitman's democratic ideal with exceptional precision. Each blade maintains its individual integrity whilst contributing to an organic, interconnected whole. This natural phenomenon provided Whitman with a powerful counter-narrative to hierarchical human social organisations. The grass notably grows "among black folks as among white," explicitly invoking this metaphor to address racial equality-a profoundly radical assertion in 1855 America. The grass metaphor challenges aristocratic, hierarchical traditions inherited from European culture, promoting instead a vision of America as a "resplendent field" of diverse yet fundamentally equal individuals. The work directly engaged with slavery's brutal contradiction of democratic principles. Additionally, the grass metaphor encapsulates the central paradox of democracy itself: how individual freedom and collective unity can coexist without either entirely overwhelming or negating the other. This tension-between the particular and universal, the singular and collective-remained central to Whitman's democratic vision.

Whitman's rejection of conventional Victorian poetic forms represented not merely aesthetic rebellion but a profoundly democratic artistic philosophy. He consciously abandoned rigid metrical patterns, strict rhyme schemes, and formally constrained structures that had characterised English-language poetry for centuries. Traditional Victorian verse, with its elaborate technical requirements, often functioned as an exclusive club accessible primarily to educated elites trained in classical languages and literary conventions. Whitman recognised these formal constraints as inherently aristocratic, reflecting and reinforcing social hierarchies that democracy was supposed to transcend. The direct, inclusive, conversational voice of *Leaves of Grass* deliberately breaks down the conventional barriers between poet and reader, establishing an egalitarian relationship that embodies democratic principles within the act of literary communication itself. The form thereby becomes inseparable from the content's democratic message.

Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman presents an extraordinary array of characters representing the full spectrum of American society: labourers toiling in factories and fields, farmers cultivating agricultural land, merchants conducting commerce, mothers nurturing children, enslaved people suffering beneath oppressive systems, immigrants beginning new lives, soldiers enduring warfare's brutality, and countless others. By elevating these individuals to the status of poetic subjects' worthy of serious artistic attention, Whitman fundamentally challenged prevailing assumptions about who and what deserved literary representation. Whitman's vision articulated in *Leaves of Grass*, American democracy required developing its own indigenous cultural forms -distinctive American art, poetry, educational systems, and theological frameworks-that would nurture and sustain what he termed a "religious and moral character" within society. This revolutionary insight positioned *Leaves of Grass* itself as a form of democratic scripture, a spiritual text designed to inspire readers toward embodying democratic values in daily life and cultivating democratic consciousness within themselves. Whitman's vision encompasses both physical and spiritual democracy, celebrating body and soul with equal reverence in works like 'Song of Myself.' This radical integration of bodily experience with spiritual transcendence represented a profound rejection of puritanical traditions that had elevated spirit above flesh. For Whitman, authentic democracy required honouring the complete human being-body, mind, spirit, and sexuality-recognising all dimensions of human experience as worthy of celebration, respect, and poetic attention. This holistic democratic vision challenged restrictive moral conventions whilst simultaneously asserting democracy's spiritual foundations.

The *Leaves of Grass* necessarily confronted the profound contradictions between democratic rhetoric and brutal reality characterising 1855 America. Slavery's continued existence represented the most glaring contradiction to Whitman's egalitarian democratic vision. Despite his assertions of racial equality and universal human dignity, the nation remained fundamentally divided by racial slavery, systematic discrimination against African Americans, legal subordination of women, and persistent class hierarchies. Whitman's inclusive rhetoric, whilst genuinely visionary and progressively intentioned, sometimes glossed over these persistent, deeply embedded structural inequalities. This limitation reflected the constraints of nineteenth-century democratic imagination, even amongst its most progressive voices. Furthermore, whilst Whitman celebrated

working people and marginalised populations, the first edition comprised merely twelve poems-a modest foundation for the expansive, evolving project that *Leaves of Grass* would become through subsequent editions and revisions spanning decades. Nonetheless, Whitman's work proved genuinely revolutionary in attempting to redefine American identity beyond inherited race, class, and gender hierarchies. His commitment to democratic inclusivity-however incomplete and historically limited by contemporary standards-represented genuine progress and represented a challenge to his era's dominant assumptions. The contradictions between Whitman's democratic vision and historical reality underscore both literature's potential and limitations as an instrument for social transformation.

## II. Conclusion

Through innovative poetic forms, the grass metaphor's symbolic richness, and deliberate celebration of ordinary people's dignity and worth, Whitman crafted a literary work that functioned simultaneously as artistic masterpiece, political manifesto, and spiritual testament. His poetic innovations and democratic ideals challenged readers to fundamentally rethink conventional assumptions about individuality, equality, and community, offering radically new perspectives on democracy's meaning and possibilities. *Leaves of Grass* ultimately transcends its historical moment whilst remaining deeply rooted within it. The work represents not merely a literary milestone but rather a persistent call to cultivate genuine democratic consciousness within society and within individual selves. Whitman's grass metaphor-countless individual blades growing together in fundamental equality-remains a profoundly enduring symbol of American democracy's promise and complexity. The grass simultaneously represents both unified wholeness and irreducible diversity, both individual freedom and collective interdependence. . As contemporary readers engage with Whitman's 1855 vision, we confront both the genuine democratic advances since his era and the continuing struggles to realise the inclusive, egalitarian democracy that Whitman imagined and advocated. His work continues challenging us toward greater justice, deeper recognition of human dignity, and more authentic democratic practice.

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