

WALT WHITMAN

Gay U.S. Poet (1819-1892)



Unlike many other poets, Whitman came from the working class and celebrated its unique contributions to American ideals. His groundbreaking *Leaves of Grass* was released in six editions spanning 1855 to 1892, plus a final reprint of the sixth which included appendices and is often referred to as the “deathbed” edition. Speaking both to – and in the voice of – the common man, it represents the greatest achievement of Whitman’s life and a benchmark in the evolution of American literature. Throughout its various reprints, it alternated as a commercial flop, a critical favorite, a commercial success, and a scandal (the 1882 edition was banned in Boston). A book of profound influence, it is regarded by most literary historians as a towering work, revolutionary, and uniquely American. It is also almost universally interpreted as a paean to sexual expression and, in particular, a thinly veiled celebration of homoeroticism – so much so that in 1855 outraged critic Rufus W. Griswold denounced it as “*Peccatum illud horribile, inter Christianos non nominandum*” – Latin for “that crime not to be mentioned among Christians.” Some Whitman scholars have taken issue with the suppositions generally made about his sexuality and the ensuing characterizations of *Leaves of Grass*; Whitman himself admitted to participating in efforts to obfuscate the truth. But the evidence – in the form of letters, personal notes and interviews – supports the long-held conclusions that Whitman was gay and writing about sexual themes. Oscar Wilde, who met Whitman while touring the U.S. in 1882, wrote that there was “no doubt” about the great American poet’s sexual orientation, saying “I have the kiss of Walt Whitman still on my lips.” However one chooses to interpret Whitman’s personal life or its reflection in his work, the sheer power of his verse prompted one British reviewer to declare “You cannot really understand America without Walt Whitman, without *Leaves of Grass*.” His critical acclaim and reputation remain unrivaled in modern times.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: Have you ever read the classic, *Leaves of Grass*, by Walt Whitman? Why is this considered to be classic about the common man and the contribution to American literature?
2. Read the biographical information found at this link:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman
3. Describe how Whitman used his literary skills to celebrate the body and the material world. Listen to segments of *Leaves of Grass* in this link:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leaves_of_Grass#Overview

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Whitman’s role during the Civil War was documented in more than 600 letters. How did his contribution provided a picture of complexities of this time? Review the following link:
<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/correspondence/cw/index.html>
2. How did Whitman break out as a poet who crossed into many boundaries that were not explored? Read the following:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/whitman/program/intro.html>
3. Website Investigation: Choose another contributor to literature in The Legacy Walk and describe their connections as writers or poets to Whitman. Use the following link:
<http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/Literature.html>

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Examine the many stages of Whitman’s life as an American poet, essayist and journalist. How did he develop his aesthetic, democratic and sexual views for the public eye?
Read this biography at
<http://www.biography.com/people/walt-whitman-9530126?page=2>
2. What specific events do you think were influential in Whitman’s life? Examine this entry from Poets.org at
<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/126>
3. Capture your impression and connect the many challenges within the stages of Whitman’s life through these photographs. View the link compiled by Ed Folsom at
<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/multimedia/gallery/introduction.html>

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Whitman was a spokesperson for the impact of war on soldiers and families in America. How do you think his writing would provide a forum for this public outrage against war today?
2. How did Whitman portray his “quest” for self discovery in *Song of Myself* as revealed in
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125789927>
3. Describe figures today who demonstrate that passion for justice in understanding “who they are” in today’s world.