

Leaves of Grass

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Feature Essay

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Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. Brooklyn, New York, 1855. Public domain. ISBN: 1986235556; ISBN-13: 978-1986235556. 98pp.

Leaves of Grass: A Review 168 Years Late

Walt Whitman hoped his small, green, unassuming chapbook *Leaves of Grass* would set the poetic and literary world on fire, but there was, initially, nothing but a spark and then a fizzle. Reviews suggested that Whitman be sent to an insane asylum and that the book itself was “intensely vulgar, nay, absolutely beastly.”¹ Even in 2023, there are divergent opinions concerning the literary worth of Whitman’s masterpiece. But how was it received in 1855?

A particularly long review by an unknown author published in London in 1855 is scathing. One prominent idea from the first sentence is that the reviewer considers the main issue with the book to be that Whitman is an American. “We had ceased, we imagined, to be surprised at anything that America could produce.” The reviewer offers examples from Whitman’s work to prove that much about *Leaves of Grass* is presented as grandiose but is, in truth, nothing but the “barbaric yawp” Whitman claims. “The man who wrote page 79 ... deserves nothing so richly as the public executioner’s whip.” The poem is now called “I Sing the Body Electric.” The poem celebrates themes of sexuality, the body, and the self and calls upon Whitman’s personal observation experiences. However, reviewers like the one quoted above only have nineteenth-century sensibilities upon which to draw to critique such work. The critic, him/herself, admits “If this work is really a work of genius—if the principles of these poems, their free language, their amazing and audacious egotism, their animal vigor, be real poetry and the divinest evidence of the true poet—then our studies have been in vain.”²

¹ Ferro, Shaunacy. “When Walt Whitman Reviewed His Own Book,” March 14, 2016. <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/77096/when-walt-whitman-reviewed-his-own-book>

² The Walt Whitman Archive. “Walt Whitman and His Poems.” <https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/lg1855/anc.00024.html>

American reviews, although few, were much more *American*. They celebrated Whitman as one of their own. The *United States Review* of September 1855 began, “An American bard at last!” The reviewer consistently uses the idea of Whitman the man to represent America the nation, and in this case, both Whitman and America come off well:

For all our intellectual people, followed by their books, poems, novels, essays, editorials, lectures, tuitions, and criticism, dress by London and Paris modes, receive what is received there, obey the authorities, settle disputes by the old tests, keep out of rain and sun, retreat to the shelter of houses and schools, trim their hair, shave, touch not the earth barefoot, and enter not the sea except in a complete bathing-dress. . . . but where in American literature is the first show of America? Where are the gristle and beards, and broad breasts, and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the souls of the people love? Where is the tremendous outdoors of these States? . . . where is the vehement growth of our cities? Where is the spirit of the strong, rich life of the American mechanic, farmer, sailor, hunter, and miner? Where is the huge composite of all other nations, cast in a fresher and brawnier matrix, passing adolescence, and needed this day, live and arrogant, to lead the marches of the world?³

Walt could not have said it better! And here is the joke—the above quote is a review from the pen of Whitman himself. Whitman was painfully known for reviewing or “puffing” his own books. He fully expected readers to take him seriously and hoped his anonymous reviews would create more sales of *Leaves of Grass*, but it was not to be. Sales languished, and accusations of pornography dogged his steps. He expanded and revised *Leaves* until the end of his life. The work remained bewildering to most readers, and his sexual frankness was offensive to many. During Whitman’s employment in Washington, D.C., he visited the great Union Army hospitals and wrote the incomparable *Drum Taps*. After the war ended, he continued to work in the capital until Salmon Chase, then serving as Secretary of the Treasury, refused to continue to employ a man who wrote such disreputable books.

The one man who saw Whitman’s worth from the beginning was poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said, “I greet you at the beginning of a great career.” He wrote this to Whitman in 1855 after seeing the first volume of *Leaves of Grass*. “I give you joy of your free and brave thought.”⁴ Although Whitman printed Emerson’s words on the frontispiece of his second edition

³ The Walt Whitman Archive. <https://whitmanarchive.org/archive1/works/leaves/1855/reviews/usreview.html>

⁴ Popova, Maria. “Incomparable Things Said Incomparably Well: Emerson’s Extraordinary Letter of Appreciation to Young Walt Whitman.” *The Marginalia*. <https://www.themarginalian.org/2014/09/08/emerson-whitman-letter/>

of *Leaves*—without asking Emerson first—it seems Emerson was correct. And so was Walt: an American bard at last!

One must ask today if *Leaves* would be one of the banned books encountered so often. It may come to be, although Whitman's volume was published in 1855. It checks all the boxes, and it is universally acknowledged that Walt was a gay man. *Leaves* has been banned before and may be again. After all, something described as “yawp” could not possibly have worth—unless one of the most influential American works written is really trash. This reviewer suggests readers get a copy of *Leaves of Grass* before they are all gone!

Meg Groeling received her master's degree in military history, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Savas Beatie also publishes. In addition, she is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War. She and her husband live with three cats in a 1927 California bungalow covered with roses on the outside and books on the inside.