



Leaves of Grass

Walt Whitman (1819 - 1892)

Read by:	Multiple readers	Format:	MP3 CD in DVD case
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We forget how big America must have seemed to both Americans and Europeans in the nineteenth century, especially when one compared its sheer size to the square mileage of Europe. America was the beneficiary of Europe’s advances in the arts, music and literature; however, America was also the young buck who sought to mark its own territory, to etch its own profile, to speak with its own voice. Early American poetry had relied too much on the classical forms and well-mannered, albeit witty, content of seventeenth century English poems. However, with the English Romantics, Concord’s Emerson and Transcendentalism, America was ready to birth a distinctly American voice that would capture its sweep, its unbounded potential and vast promise. In 1855 an unknown, a self-proclaimed rough, age 37, a man in his prime, Walt Whitman (1819-1892) of New York, published the first edition of twelve poems titled *Leaves of Grass*. American poetry, all poetry, has never been

the same since. This is the great American work, twelve poems that became more than 400 poems written over forty years of Whitman’s life. They celebrate the human being, the physical body, the heart, mind and transcendent soul. These poems revel in the unapologetic glory of the purely physical, sensual necessities, as well as the abstract mysteries of life. As with any genius, Whitman’s model was Life with a capital “L”, and he spent his adult years writing to represent Life as it is, without the artifice of masks, manners or social niceties. Like Life, and like America, Whitman’s poems are beautiful, wild, cruel, unpredictable, yearning, sensual, direct, desirous, self-evident, arbitrary, contradictory, and, sometimes, confusing. Whitman’s poetry is like the storm that destroys a town while it cleans the air and seeds the soil. His poetry is as large as America, as generous as America, and as grand as nature. It is the voice that says America is alive and well, generative, creative, filled with infinite promise. *(Summary by Michael Hogan)*

The poetryfoundation.org bio of **Walt Whitman** (May 31, 1819 – March 26, 1892) begins with this: “Walt Whitman is America’s world poet—a latter-day successor to Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare. In *Leaves of Grass* (1855), he celebrated democracy, nature, love and friendship. This monumental work chanted praises to the body as well as to the soul, and found beauty and reassurance even in death.” Such is the scope and impact of his work in helping forge an American sensibility and bringing free verse to the poetic toolbox.

Whitman was born the second of nine children in Huntington, Long Island, to parents with a Quaker cast of mind and economic difficulties. The family moved to Brooklyn when Walt was four. After his formal schooling ended at age 11, he worked as an office boy, printer’s apprentice, compositor, teacher journalist, and editor. He started *Leaves of Grass* in 1850 and published it at his own expense in 1855. The first edition stirred significant interest, in part due to an endorsement by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who declared it “the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed.” The book also aroused controversy for its unabashed openness on sexual matters and for its stylistic innovations, which abandoned the strict meter and rhyme of the time with “the long cadences and rhetorical strategies of Biblical poetry.” He was fired from his job at the Department of the Interior upon the book’s publication.

Whitman worked as a clerk in Washington during the Civil War and nursed injured soldiers in his spare time, which led to the poems in *Drum-Taps* (1865) He suffered a paralyzing stroke in 1873, after which he moved to his brother’s home. He continued to add to and revise *Leaves of Grass* throughout his life, producing numerous editions. Although he failed to gain much popularity in America during his, over 1,000 people attended his funeral in 1892.