An Analysis of the Effects of
the Influence of Experience as a Journalist
on the Poetry of Walt Whitman

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

Walt Whitman’s work as a journalist is often overlooked. Few realize that this period of his life plays a key role in influencing his work as a poet. This thesis begins with a brief history of Whitman’s life through his journalism career and an overview of the history of the penny press for which he wrote. It then examines several of Whitman’s key journalistic practices that are reflected in *Leaves of Grass*. These include a focus on the working man, the practice of observation, the revision of the five Ws, and interests in community journalism and politics.

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When reading history books about the penny press in America, one rarely runs across the name Walt Whitman. He is a poet to most; he is *Leaves of Grass*. *Leaves*, however, is firmly rooted in a journalistic ground that the foundation of Whitman's life rests on. Much of what Whitman learned as a journalist appears in the poems of *Leaves*.

As a journalist, Whitman focused his writing on the working man. He observed the world around him, especially the people in it. He learned the five Ws and adapted them to fit his own thoughts. He wrote to motivate and inform the public. He also immersed himself in the party politics that governed the newspaper world. All of these actions are reflected in *Leaves of Grass*.

To understand how Walt Whitman's experiences as a journalist influenced his poetry, one must have an understanding of his life leading up to his career as a journalist.

Whitman was born on a Long Island farm on May 31, 1819. Walt was one of nine children born to Walter and Louisa Whitman (Allen, *Walt Whitman*, 12). He attributed his physical strength, perfect health, taste for cleanliness, moral seriousness, and stubbornness to his Dutch ancestors on his mother's side (Asselineau, 17). "He belonged to a class of simple, rural people of plain manners (Asselineau, 18)."

Whitman's early childhood was spent in the country, but he was soon transplanted to the city when his father sold the family's farm on May 27, 1823, and they moved to Brooklyn (Allen, *Reader's Guide*, xi). There, Walt's father unsuccessfully tried his hand at carpentry. In Brooklyn, young Walt received his only formal schooling, which ended at the age of 11. He also grew to love the sea, taking long walks on the beach alone. In 1830, his parents, unable to feed him and his siblings, sent young Walt out as an errand boy with first a doctor then a lawyer (Asselineau, 18-20).

It was in 1830, as an apprentice-typesetter for the Brooklyn *Long Island Patriot*, a
newspaper with around 500 subscribers, that Whitman began his career as a journalist (Allen, Reader's Guide, xi). This job was most influential in his development, because it was at the Patriot that Whitman learned not only how to set type, but how to write. “At that time, when American journalism in the small towns was still a craft and not yet an industry, the workmen were not specialized and could be at the same time typographers and journalists (Asselineu, 20).”

Whitman’s short education was bolstered in this position by his love of reading and the opportunity to observe others in the printing office. He gained a working knowledge of politics and of the history of his city and country by speaking with the men he worked with (Asselineu, 20-21). Whitman poured over his books. He was inspired by the writing of Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, Shakespeare, Dante, Milton, Homer, George Sand, and Ralph Waldo Emerson among others. The materials he read are reflected in much of Leaves of Grass and in some of his newspaper writing (Allen, Reader's Guide, 24).

Between the ages of 12 and 16, Whitman worked as a printer in several offices in Brooklyn and New York City until a fire on August 12, 1835, destroyed much of New York City's downtown, costing him his job. Unable to find work, he returned to Long Island as a schoolmaster and taught at seven different schools between 1836 and 1838 (Allen, Reader's Guide, xi).

Whitman created his first venture as a full-time journalist. He began his own newspaper, the Long Islander, in Huntington, Long Island, in 1838. Whitman published, printed, and delivered the paper all on his own. His restlessness, however, drove him to put an end to the venture and sell his printing equipment after only a year (Allen, Walt Whitman, 21). Whitman then busied himself with teaching school and campaigning for presidential candidate, Martin Van Buren, and vice-presidential candidate, Charles Francis Adams, in 1848. Both were
champions of the Free Soil Party, which proposed that slavery should not be allowed in the newly annexed Western territories (Allen, Reader's Guide, 19-20).

Whitman returned to the printing profession in May 1841, at the New World office in New York City. He also spent short stints at several Democratic papers like the Democratic Review, the Aurora, the Sun, the Tattler, and the Statesman. “These continual shifts do not necessarily indicate [Whitman's] instability, [however]. They were due as much to the journalistic conditions of the time as to his own temperament...the speed with which Whitman found a new job whenever he lost one shows that he was well thought of (Asselineau, 25-26).”

Some of Whitman's most vivid journalistic work, much of which reappears in Leaves of Grass, was written in the two months in the spring of 1842 that he was editor of the New York Aurora (Allen, Walt Whitman, 25). Whitman's series of “City Walks” articles detailed his observations of the bustling city (Rubin, 2). Whitman spent hours wandering through the city watching what was going on around him and putting what he saw on paper. “His editorials give us vivid impressions of the life of the city, and his private enjoyment of his strolls down Broadway to the Battery (Allen, Walt Whitman, 25).”

After his short stint at the Aurora, Whitman returned to Brooklyn and wrote for the Brooklyn Evening Star, a daily, and the Long Island Star, a weekly, until March 1846 when he began his longest stay at a single paper, the Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Allen, Reader's Guide, xi). Whitman was happy with this Democratic paper and pushed on in the campaign for “free soil” until the Democratic Party split on the issue. The Eagle’s owner, Issac Van Anden, did not agree with the side Whitman took, and Whitman's employment with the Eagle was terminated in January 1848 (Allen, Walt Whitman, 31-32).

Soon after, Whitman was given a taste of the countryside beyond New York when he
agreed to take the position of editor at the New Orleans *Crescent*. The two-week trip by train, stagecoach, and steamboat gave him the opportunity to observe the countryside. He later urged American artists to capture the scenes on canvas to celebrate the beauty of their country (Asselineau, 31). Whitman was also enchanted by New Orleans. "The climate, the vegetation, the people, the customs were all new to him and filled him with wonder. He never tired of walking through the town during the ample free time which his work on the *Crescent* allowed him (Asselineau, 32)." Whitman resigned from the *Crescent* after only three months, however. Hayes and McClure, the paper's proprietors, began to show a cold attitude toward him and became reluctant to share the paper's politics with him. Whitman offered his resignation and it was promptly accepted. "In all probability, he was forced to leave not because of his work, but because of his political opinions (Asselineau, 34-35)." Whitman decided to take an extended trip in returning to New York. He passed through Chicago, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Buffalo, and Niagara Falls.

After returning to Brooklyn, Whitman became editor of the *Freeman*, a "free soil" newspaper. He supported the venture until interest waned in the political movement, and he finally put the paper to rest on September 11, 1849 (Allen, *Walt Whitman*, 34-35). It is at this point in his life that Whitman began to turn away from journalism and toward the poetry that would become *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman was a journalist in one of the most transitional periods in American journalism, the advent of the penny paper. He also worked in an important city, because although penny papers sprouted and expanded in Philadelphia and Baltimore, New York City was the initial hotbed of the evolving press. From the 1830s through the 1860s, the American newspaper grew from a penny paper offering sensationalism and gossip into a form that would begin to resemble
today's newspaper. "Many institutions were drastically altered after 1830, but none more than the press (Emery, 107)."

A product for the masses, the newspaper for a penny sprouted out of the industrial revolution's improvements in printing technology that allowed faster production and cheaper newsprint. "The industrial revolution, which resulted in less expensive goods, also made it possible to produce less expensive paper. A newspaper publisher could print more pages and provide more space for advertising those goods and other services in better style than had developed (Emery, 92)." In 1822, Peter Smith, connected with R. Hoe & Company, printing-press makers, began to revolutionize the printing press. He invented a hand press with a much faster lever action than had ever been available. In 1827, Samuel Rust of New York created the Washington hand press. This press included many more automated features like a platen that was raised and lowered by springs, a toggle device for quick impressions, a faster-moving bed, and automatic ink rollers. The speed offered by these hand presses was nothing compared to the speed that could be had from steam-driven presses, however. In 1830, David Napier of England perfected a steam-driven press created earlier by Friedrich Koenig of Saxony that tripled the speed of printing. In the United States, R. Hoe & Company built on Napier's model and created a steam-driven press that could produce 4,000 double impressions in an hour (Emery, 92-93).

The penny paper drew a new segment of the public to the newspaper reading audience, the working public, who could not afford more than a penny a day for its paper (Mott, 215). Until this time, newspapers could only be had by a subscription of $6 to $10 a year, paid in advance. Most skilled workers could not afford this lump sum payment and simply did not purchase newspapers (Emery, 96-97). The style of journalism driving these papers also began to change to better suit the largest segment of the reading public. "The newly recognized public was
more interested in news than in views. The penny papers concentrated on supplying this type of intelligence in readable form (Emery, 98).” Editors began to study the new public that was reading their fare and realized that what interested the penny public was different from what interested the subscribing public. The penny public was interested in human-interest news like police records, divorce records, and daily observations about ordinary people (Payne 240).

The first successful penny daily, the New York Sun, emerged on September 3, 1833, from the printing office of Benjamin Day. The purpose of the paper, as printed at the top of the first page, was “to lay before the public, at a price within the means of everyone, all the news of the day, and at the same time offer an advantageous medium for advertisements (Payne, 244).” The four-page paper specialized in human-interest articles that focused on local happenings like the courts and the police reports, as well as news of violence. Within six months, the Sun had a circulation of around 8,000 (Emery, 97-98). In three years, the Sun had a daily circulation of 27,000 copies (Payne, 245). One of the most popular features that boosted the Sun’s circulation was its police reporting. Day hired George Wisner, a young, out-of-work printer, for $4 a week to regularly attend the early-morning police courts and write humorous articles about them. Day mirrored the technique used in the London Morning Herald’s reports on the Bow Street Court. “Such amusing, though crude, exploitation of the tragicomedy of drunkenness, theft, assaults, and street-walking had hoisted the circulation of the Morning Herald to a point which made it rival that of the (London) Times (Mott, 222).” Many of the Sun’s police reports resembled the following:

William Luvoy got drunk because yesterday was so devilish warm. Drank 9 glasses of brandy and water and said he would be cursed if he wouldn’t drink 9 more as quick as he could raise the money to buy it with. He would like to know
what right the magistrate had to interfere with his private affairs. Fined $1 –

forgot his pocketbook, and was sent over to Bridewell (Mott, 223).

The Sun printed little on politics and plenty of advertising. The entire back page was advertising and most of the third page was set aside for classified notices and want ads (Emery, 98). "The Sun broke sharply with the traditional American news concept, and began to print whatever was interesting and readable regardless of its wide significance or recognized importance (Mott, 224)."

After seeing the Sun's success, many other printers decided to try their hands at the penny press. The 1833 national average of 1,200 papers more than doubled by 1860 to 3,000. These numbers do not even include the thousands of newspapers that were born quickly and died quickly (Mott, 216). "The Sun and its galaxy of imitators proved that news was a valuable commodity, if delivered in a sprightly manner (Emery, 98)."

One of the most successful penny dailies was James Gordon Bennett's New York Herald. Bennett, unlike most newspaper creators to this time, was strictly an editor and publisher. He did not start out in the printer's trade, but was a newspaperman from the beginning. In 1837, Bennett wrote, "Shakespeare is the great genius of the drama, Scott of the novel, Milton and Byron of the poem – and I mean to be the genius of the newspaper press (Mott, 229)." First published on May 6, 1835, the Herald imitated the Sun, but added a few tricks to the trade. Bennett's aggressive style of journalism created a crime reporting section that was surpassed by no other. On June 4, 1836, the entire front page was devoted to the Robinson-Jewett case, the murder of a prostitute in a brothel by a notorious town figure. Bennett's reporting of the case generated so much interest that the court could not continue hearing testimony when the defendant was up for trial. The Herald also included a financial section to appeal to those in the
business class. Bennett took a special interest in "the money page," reporting for it personally until his administrative duties would no longer allow him to. The Herald also introduced a "letters to the editor" section that was well liked, and Bennett helped develop the critical review column and society news. Before long, the Herald was also reporting sports news. By 1836, the Herald had a circulation of 20,000 readers and was, by 1860, with 77,000 readers, the largest daily (Emery 100-102).

Horace Greeley's New York Tribune, first published in 1841, and Henry J. Raymond's New York Times, first published in 1851, also started as penny papers. Both papers became rival political powerhouses, but did not remain penny dailies for long. Expenses forced them to raise their prices to two cents within the first year of publication. These papers, however, more closely resembled the modern press. (Mott, 267-281).

In the day of the Penny Press, writing about ordinary people doing ordinary things became key to gaining newspaper readership. Readers demanded something they could relate to - news about daily life. Only the newspapers that began to focus on what was happening on the street could survive, (Payne 241).

Details, such as could be obtained from the police courts, about the life of ordinary people, and the romance of the divorce courts were used to make the penny papers more appealing, thus bringing about a broader interest on the part of the journalists in the human side of the daily life of the city (Payne, 240).

Whitman was in tune with the daily life of the working man who was purchasing the paper at a penny a day. In his childhood years, Whitman was very much part of a working-man's family. Before he was sent off to be an apprentice, Walt watched his father toil as a carpenter trying to feed and clothe his large family. "His father worked faithfully at his carpenter's trade,
but found it difficult to support his growing family on a carpenter's wages (Allen, *Walt Whitman*, 16)." After becoming an apprentice in the printing trade, Walt, too, learned the value in working for a living. This experience gave him the ability to relate to the common man in his newspaper writing giving him plenty of practice for when he would later incorporate this interest in *Leaves*.

In his newspaper articles, Whitman wrote on the police reports and court reports, which titillated readers, but went a step further to including descriptions of the daily life of the on-the-street individual, whom he observed during long walks through town. Whitman did more than just list the facts; he gave readers a description of the person involved. He let readers know how he felt, how he looked, how he smelled. Whitman made the readers feel as if they could see, smell, touch, and hear the people they were reading about.

On June 6, 1846, Whitman wrote an article for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reporting another fatality in a series of drownings on the wharf. The article detailed the actions of the father and the mother on learning that their son has died. Whitman's detail does more than tell readers that the parents were distraught, it shows them.

Presently his father, a stalwart young Irishman, came along. It was pitiable to see his tears and wailing when he took the little cap! That was fatal proof enough. Great drops gathered on his forehead—and he wept and wrung his hands, and acted like an insane man (Brasher, 60).

In another, lighter feature in the *Aurora* on March 23, 1842, headlined "Yesterday," Whitman gives the reader a glimpse of a sunny summer afternoon with people bustling by.

It is a pleasant thing to see crowds of well-dressed men and women, with smiling faces, promenading our streets or our public grounds. And the little children! The fat, fresh, clean, healthy, merry little children—it is better than splendor to look at.
them and their gambols. What heart so gross, what brain so deficient in
loveableness, as not to be pleased with the spectacle of little children at play
(Rubin, 31)?

"[Whitman] made poetry celebrate things that aren't normally considered poetic. Take
time to notice the world around you. See that the ordinary is extraordinary (Swerdlow, 134)." In
Leaves, Whitman focuses on the ordinary people he wrote about in the newspapers. "What we
feel most in Leaves of Grass... is the sense of life and the photographic impression of reality in
scenes of the street, shop, and countryside (Brasher, 37)." Whitman was greatly influenced by
Ralph Waldo Emerson's vision of the poet. Emerson wrote, "the poet is representative. He
stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the
common wealth (Emerson, 893)."

In "I Hear America Singing," we see those same ordinary people whom Whitman wrote
to and about in the daily newspapers.

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the
steamboat deck (Whitman, 9).

In "Song of the Exposition," Whitman glorifies the ordinary man's work. He says that the
everyday person should understand the beauty of his trade and congratulate himself on a job well
done. Like a modern-day Candide, Whitman suggests that everyone should have some manual
labor in his life to make it better.
To you ye reverent sane sisters,

I raise a voice for far superber themes for poets and for art,

To exalt the present and the real,

To teach the average man the glory of his daily walk and trade,

To sing in songs how exercise and chemical life are never to be baffled,

To manual work for each and all, to plough, hoe, dig,

To plant and tend the tree, the berry, vegetables, flowers,

For every man to see to it that he really do something, for every woman too;

To use the hammer and the saw, (rip, or cross-cut,)

To cultivate a turn for carpentering, plastering, painting,

To work as a tailor, tailoress, nurse, hostler, porter,

To invent a little, something ingenious, to aid the washing, cooking, cleaning,

And hold it no disgrace to take a hand at them themselves (Whitman, 163).

Whitman saw himself as being very close to the workingman. He used this relationship to draw the average reader into his writing and make him interested so he could better relate to the message that was being conveyed.

Whitman learned a lot about the daily life of the working man from closely observing what went on around him as he walked through the city. He believed that one must have a clear picture of the world to understand it and to write about it. He did a great deal of observing as a reporter and was often called lazy because of his habit of endless strolling through the city, wandering, and watching. Much of this observation finds its way into Whitman’s “City Walks”
editorials in the *Aurora*. Many of these scenes then reappear in *Leaves*, notably in "Song of Myself." "It was in these pieces that Whitman first stumbled upon subjects, styles, stances, and strategies to which he would later return in *Leaves of Grass* (Fishkin, 15)."

In a March 23, 1842, editorial in the *Aurora*, titled "An Hour in a Balcony," Whitman describes Broadway's omnibuses and their drivers.

The noisiest things, which attract attention in that part of Broadway, are the omnibuses. Rumbling and bouncing along, they come, now and then stopping as some person on the sidewalk holds up his finger—a signal that he wants to take passage. The omnibus drivers are a unique race. Winter and summer, rain or shine, there they are, perched up on the tops of their vehicles, and driving ahead just the same (Rubin, 26).

This observation later appears in "Song of Myself." In section eight, we see "the heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor (Whitman, 28)."

Whitman reported a fire in a March 30, 1842, *Aurora* article, headlined "Scenes of Last Night."

Every now and then would come a suffocating whirlwind of smoke and burning sparks. Yet we stood our ground—we and the mass—silent, and gazing with the awful admiration upon the wreck and the brightness before us. The red flames rolled up the sides of the houses, newly caught, like the forked tongues of serpents licking their prey. It was terribly grand! And then all the noise would cease and for many minutes nothing would break in upon silence except the hoarse voices of the engines and their subordinates, and the hissing of the fire. A few moments
more, and the clatter and clang sounded out again with redoubled loudness (Rubin, 37).

In “Song of Myself,” Whitman remembers the sounds and the sight of the 1842 fire. “The ring of alarm-bells, the cry of the fire, the shirr of swift-streaking engines and hose-carts with premonitory tinkles and color’d lights (Whitman, 45).” In “I Sing the Body Electric,” Whitman describes the firemen’s return from the fire.

The march of firemen in their own costumes, the play of masculine muscle through clean-setting trousers and waiststraps,

The slow return from the fire, the pause when the bell strikes suddenly again, and the listening on the alert (Whitman, 77).

In “Song of Joys,” Whitman describes his own reaction to the fire. Perhaps it is how he reacted to the news of the fire when he was a journalist.

O the firemen’s joys!

I hear the alarm at dead of night,

I hear bells, shouts! I pass the crowd, I run!

The sight of the flames maddens me with pleasure (Whitman, 142).

Whitman’s love of the sea comes out in both his newspaper writing and his poetry. As a journalist, Whitman spent time watching the sea and internalizing the feelings it inspired in him. Whitman writes about the ocean in both the Aurora and the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. In the Aurora, on April 21, 1842, Whitman describes the ocean after a storm in an editorial titled, “The Ocean.”

We love to listen to the deep and ceaseless tones of its music, when the repose of midnight has fallen upon it. There is a sublimity in its angry tossing, when wrought to madness by the assaults and goadings of the storm king. We love to
think of the riches, and the lost, that lie beneath its wave, and to carry the thoughts forward to that eventful hour when it must give up its treasures and its dead — when the sands which now form its bound will melt away with "the fervent heat,” and its waves be lost in the ocean of eternity (Rubin, 131).

In a June 18, 1846, *Eagle* article headlined “A Drive Out of Brooklyn,” Whitman describes the ocean as ships sail past. In this article he also comments on the ocean’s eternity.

How grand... the rolling scope of the ocean, whose waves dash into the sand-hills there! We drove some distance on that hard, clean, level sand, snuffing up the air with such delight as a man feels, who rarely gets away from the purlieus of the crowded city — The phantom shapes of vessels, with full-bellied sails, saw we in the distance, moving along like children of the mist. There, too, were the white plumes of many a mighty ripple — ere it threw its long hollow scoot high up the shore. Nor was the scene wanting in solemnity. How can human eyes gaze on the truest emblem of Eternity, without an awe and a thrill (Brasher, 74)?

In “On the Beach at Night Alone,” in *Leaves*, Whitman explains that the sea has been around to see many civilizations, languages, lives and deaths across the globe.

All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, languages,

All identities that have existed or may exist on this globe, or any globe,

All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future,

This vast similitude spans them, and always has spann’d,

And shall forever span them and compactly hold and enclose them (Whitman, 211).

A whole section of *Leaves*, “Sea-drift,” is devoted to describing the sea. Whitman writes
about the sea at night, the sea after a storm, walking along the beach, the ships on the sea, and what is in the sea. In “Patrooling Barnegat,” Whitman describes the ocean during a storm at night as he does in “The Ocean” in the *Aurora*.

Wild, wild the storm, and the sea high running,
Steady the roar of the gale, with incessant undertone muttering,
Shouts of demoniac laughter fitfully piercing and pealing,
Waves, air midnight, their savagest trinity lashing (Whitman, 212).

Whitman also describes a night storm at sea in “Tears.”

O storm, embodied, rising, careering with swift steps along the beach!
O wild and dismal night storm, with wind – O belching and desperate!
O shade so sedate and decorous by day, with calm countenance and regulated pace (Whitman, 208).

One can also see an early use of Whitman’s noted cataloging techniques derived from his observations in some of his *Aurora* articles (Fishkin, 17). One of these catalogues can be found in the March 18, 1842, article headlined “New York Boarding Houses,” in which he describes the types of people who frequent the New York boarding houses. He writes, “Married men and single men; old women and pretty girls; milliners and masons; cobblers, colonels, and counter jumpers; tailors and teachers; lieutenants, loafers, ladies, lackbrains, and lawyers; printers and parsons – ‘black spirits and white, blue spirits and gray’ – all ‘go out to board (Rubin, 23).’”

Many of Whitman’s catalogues in *Leaves* read like section 15 of “Song of Myself.”

The pure contrallo sings in the organ loft,
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp,
The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,
The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready,
The dick-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,
The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loaf
and looks at the oats and rye,
The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case,
(He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's bed-room;)
(Whitman, 32-33)

Through observation, Whitman makes both his newspaper articles and his poems come alive as he relates what he sees. It is this observation that led Whitman to becoming "everyman" and it was during his time as a newspaper editor that he could simply wander the streets, soaking up information to include in his articles and later in his poems. "Walt's principal inspiration was what made him happiest, the people he said he 'absorbed (Swerdlow, 119).'

Since the beginnings of American journalism, the profession has stated that its main objective in reporting an event is to learn the five Ws of a situation and offer them to the public. The reporter examines the "who," "what," "when," "where," and "why" of a situation and sometimes delves into the "how." Whitman learned this traditional method by experiencing the ways of conventional journalism, and then expanded it.

For Whitman the "who" means staring hard at faces and movements and trying to fathom from these images a sense of the pain, the pathos, the dread, the frustration
and the bewilderment that lay behind them. For Whitman "what" means the visual and aural images of flames and firemen, of cracked glass and crushed dreams. For Whitman "where" is simply "Broome and Delancy Streets" and "when" is simply the hour, between seven and eight o'clock, that Whitman visited the scene of the fire (Fishkin 22).

Whitman did his fair share of conventional reporting, however. "The 19 or so highly distinctive pieces he wrote for the *Aurora* were outnumbered three to one by some 65 conventional ones (Fishkin 23)." Whitman's conventional articles often began like "The Park Meeting" which appeared April 2, 1842, in the *Aurora*.

At the appointed hour, 5 o'clock yesterday afternoon, a collection of people began to congregate in the Park, for the purpose of taking measures to prevent the desecration of the graves in the church yard of Chrystie and Delancy streets.

Alderman Purdy was appointed to preside over the meeting (Rubin, 40).

But elsewhere, it is clear that Whitman's version of the five Ws was ahead of its time. Now many reporters take a look at more than just the facts. They study trends, try to motivate readers to take part in their communities, and attempt to challenge conventional wisdom.

Whitman did all of these in his own journalism and later his poetry. "Whitman managed to extricate himself from the conventions of the journalism of his day and explore new modes of reporting (Fishkin 22)."

Whitman looked at several problematic trends while editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and tried to motivate the public to do something about them. On June 18, 1847, he noted that people who were committing misdemeanors like vandalism and vagrancy were being given a life of leisure in prison.
The county has quite long enough been to the expense of supporting in idleness and comparative comfort those who disturb the peace of the city; and it is settled that many worthless and dissolute persons have been tempted to infringe the laws for the sole purpose of securing an asylum. A workhouse would put an end to this abuse, and be a great stroke of economy (Brasher 146-147).

On July 10, Whitman again commented on the issue, which had yet to be addressed. He noted that a vagrant who had been sentenced to jail at “hard labor” for fifteen days was hardly doing any labor.

Curiosity is alive to know what is done in prison, which is entered upon the police records as being so “hard.” We never happened to see the convicts doing anything harder than masticating wholesome victuals, lolling on comfortable straw mattresses and staring stone walls out of countenance (Brasher 147).

Whitman also urged readers to explore alternatives to conventional wisdom, to consider that the perceived reality is not always the reality.

Whitman urged his reader to learn to step as far as he could beyond convention... He doesn’t want his reader to see a triangle as a square just because everyone calls it one, or to fail to question an unjust law just because it is on the statute books. He urges his reader to question the authority of these conventions, and to be wary of the ways in which they could blind him to a more clear-sighted view of his world (Fishkin 23-24).

In the *Eagle*, Whitman challenged the conventional view of the Irish immigrant as an uncivilized, rowdy, uneducated peasant. Whitman viewed the Irishman as warm-hearted and tolerant (Brasher 127). On April 3, 1846, Whitman framed a reply to the comment that the Irish
"are a low ignorant set, and have no business here, at all." His reply stated:

They are men like us, and have wants and appetites, affection for their offspring, and anger for all kinds of tyranny, and if they don't get work or food, they will starve to death... Shall we suppose, because we came here a few years before them, that they have therefore no claim on the limitless... capacities of American for human happiness, not to say subsistence (Brasher, 127)?

Whitman also campaigned for better health and especially health concerns for women. He encouraged women to take charge of their health and learn about ailments that might afflict them. He condemned the idea of women's delicacy as a reason for their ignorance on this subject and others (Brasher 185-186). In a March 4, 1847, review of Dr. Edward H. Dixon's *Woman, and her Diseases, from the Cradle to the Grave*, in the *Eagle*, Whitman wrote:

Let any one bethink him a moment how rare is the sight of a well-developed, healthy, naturally beautiful woman: let him reflect how widely the customs of our artificial life, joined with ignorance of physiological facts are increasing the rarity... and he will hardly dispute the necessity of such publications as this (Brasher, 186).

Whitman also addressed the moral argument against the tight lacing of corsets by women of the time. Not only was tight lacing so constrictive to the woman's body that it endangered her health, but the way it made her body look was hardly modest. On April 13, 1846, Whitman commented on the immodesty in tight lacing.

There is a certain class of be-chained, be-ringed, and bespangled things, called dandies, which infest our streets, to the annoyance of well disposed persons, and who may perhaps affect to be pleased with those exquisite specimens of tight
lacing with which our eyes are often pained. But why does such an unnatural spectacle as that of a tight laced lady impart please to a dandy? – Is it because it renders her more beautiful or graceful? Not at all. The reasons are such as we do not feel disposed at present to specify. Suffice to say, they are such as no modest female should approve (Brasher, 186-187).

Whitman’s poetry has these same characteristics of going past the five Ws to look into a person and an event, as well as give the reader something more to think about than just a superficial idea. Whitman’s poems challenge conventional wisdom and urge readers to take a stand regarding community issues. “Students see in Whitman a metaphor into which they can read what they need. Equality for women. Sexual freedom. Freedom of expression (Swerdlow, 141).”

In “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors,” one of Whitman’s civil war poems, he describes a slave woman saluting the American flag carried by a regiment of Northern soldiers as they march past her. Whitman goes beyond simply depicting her, however; he digs deeper, describing the scene and relaying what she might be thinking as she is doing the act.

Who are you dusky woman, so ancient hardly human,
With your woolly-white and turban’d head, and bare bony feet?
Why rising by the roadside here, do you the colors greet?
(‘Tis while our army lines Carolina’s sands and pines,
Forth from thy hovel door thou Ethiopia com’st to me,
As under doughty Sherman I march to toward the sea.)

Me master years a hundred since from my parents sunder’d,
A little child, they caught me as the savage beast is caught,
Then hither me across the sea the cruel slaver brought.

No further does she say, but lingering all the day,

Her high-borne turban'd head she wags, and rolls her darkling eye,

And courtesies to the regiments, the guidons moving by (Whitman, 256-257).

This description urges readers think about what the woman is really doing. Whitman opens a window to her thoughts that gives a cue to readers that they should think about why she is saluting the flag and what her action means.

In “Transpositions,” Whitman tells the reader to transpose the normal for its opposite and see how things go. Whitman urges readers to challenge conventional wisdom and become active in their own thoughts and decisions. He wants them to consider how things might be if looked at in a different light.

Let the reformers descend from the stands where they are forever bawling – let an idiot or insane person appear on each of the stands;

Let judges and criminals be transposed – let the prison keepers be put in prison –

let those that were prisoners take the keys;

Let them that distrust birth and death lead the rest (Whitman, 346).

In the section of Leaves titled “By the Roadside,” Whitman titled three poems, “Thought.” Each of these poems is a short suggestion of something to think about. He wants readers to be motivated to act on their conclusions. These “Thoughts” are strong suggestions that Whitman hopes will spur readers to action in the same way that his editorials would have. The first of Whitman’s “Thought” poems suggests that readers question whether or not they follow and obey a particular belief blindly.
Of obedience, faith, adhesiveness;
As I stand aloof and look there is to me something profoundly affecting in large masses of men following the lead of those who do not believe in men
(Whitman, 222).

Whitman’s second “Thought” addresses the nature of justice.

Of Justice – as if Justice could be any thing but the same ample law, expounded by natural judges and saviors,
As if it might be this thing or that thing, according to decisions (Whitman, 222).

Whitman’s third “Thought” asks what the harm is in having equality for all.

Of Equality – as if it harm’d me, giving others the same changes and rights as myself – as if it were not indispensable to my own rights that others possess the same (Whitman 223).

It is in this same “food for thought” style of persuasion that Whitman addresses his political beliefs, of which he had many. Whether he wished it or not, Whitman became immersed in politics when he became a newspaperman (Stovall, 31). Newspapers of the day were tied up in both local politics, as well as national politics. The 1850 census listed only 5 percent of newspapers as either politically neutral or independent (Mott, 216). Whitman learned politics very early on in his journalistic career as an apprentice printer. “The editorial room of a small-town newspaper was an ideal post of observation; there he could observe life and obtain a working knowledge of politics. There was in fact little news in these small papers. Most of the articles were devoted to political questions and campaign propaganda (Asselineau, 20-21).”

Whitman was most vocal about his politics while editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. The newspaper was owned by Issac Van Anden, a local Democratic “boss” (Allen, Walt Whitman,
31) and the paper's main purpose was to serve as a voice for the Democratic Party. It is likely that Whitman held his job for nearly two years because he consistently agreed with and fervently fought for the party's issues in his editorials (Brasher, 18). Whitman fought for the party's causes with "ardent patriotism, seasoned with the highest idealism" until the Democratic Party spilt over the issue of "free soil" (Allen, Walt Whitman, 31).

Whitman was against slavery, but was not an abolitionist. The abolitionists did not support the expansion of the United States into the Western territories because they didn't want slavery to expand as well. Whitman feared that the abolitionist arguments would lead to the separation of the states (Allen, Handbook, 164). Whitman and other "free soilers" believed that expansion and exploration were vital to the United States. Proponents of "free soil" felt that expansion into the Western territories could happen without taking slavery with it by simply outlawing slavery in the newly annexed areas. "Whitman, son of a carpenter and friend of the working men, saw the extension of slavery into the new territories as an ominous threat to free labor, especially in the industrial North (Allen, Handbook, 164-165)." Van Anden, however, did not agree with Whitman's Free Soil Party, which he often campaigned for in the Eagle, and soon dismissed him from his editorship (Allen, Reader's Guide, 19).

Free soilers were strong supporters of the Mexican-American war. The war would give the United States more territory to move into, and it would move the strong European conquerors off the continent. Whitman wrote in the Eagle, "Let our arms now be carried with a spirit which shall teach the world that, while we are not forward for a quarrel, America knows how to crush, as well as how to expand (Brasher, 88)" When readers cried for peace, Whitman responded with an even louder cry for war. On May 21, 1846, in the Eagle, Whitman wrote:

A correspondent inquires how we reconcile our peace principles, as formerly
expressed through this journal, with our present position on the Mexican War. We are not for peace, under all circumstances – and have never been so. We think no man with true life in his soul can whine the “peace doctrine” now; and though we would not “imitate the action of the tiger,” we yet think that, being attacked, this nation should prosecute a vigorous and stern war with the enemy – carrying our arms, if need be, into the very capital of Mexico (Brasher, 88-89).

Whitman carries his spirit of exploration into *Leaves of Grass*. In “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” he writes that the youth should take up their weapons and blaze trails into the west. He says that European nations have grown weary of taking these territories and it is now the time for the United States to do so.

Come my tan-faced children,

Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,

Have you your pistols? Have you your sharp-edged axes?

Pioneers! O Pioneers!

For we cannot tarry here,

We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,

We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,

Pioneers! O Pioneers!

O you youths, Western youths,

So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship,

Plain I see you Western youths, see you tramping with the foremost,

Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Have the elder races halted?
Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?

We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,

Pioneers! O Pioneers! (Whitman, 185)

The need for expansion was not the only political view that Whitman carried into *Leaves*. In *Leaves*, he often campaigns for democracy and freedom and against the separation of the states. He also writes about the Civil War and includes honoring memories of President Lincoln after the assassination.

In “I Hear it was Charged Against Me,” Whitman defends himself against the comment that he seeks to destroy institutions, saying that he only wants to establish a love that spans everything and holds everyone together.

I hear it was charged against me that I sought to destroy institutions,

But really I am neither for nor against institutions,

(What indeed have I in common with them? Or what with the destruction of them?)

Only I will establish in the Mannahatta and in every city of these States inland and seaboard,

And in the fields and woods, and above every keel little or large that dents the water.

Without edifices or rules or trustees or any argument,

The institution of the dear love of comrades (Whitman, 104).

Whitman sends several requests to “The States” in *Leaves*. In his inscription “To the States,” Whitman asks they “resist much, obey little.”

To the States or any one of them, or any city of the States, *Resist much, obey*
Once unquestioning obedience, once fully enslaved,

Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city of this earth, ever afterward resumes its liberty (Whitman, 7).

In “To the States, To Identify the 16th, 17th, or 18th Presidentiad,” Whitman comments on the Civil War government. This poem immediately precedes “Drum-Taps,” a collection of Whitman’s Civil War poems and the section “Memories of President Lincoln” honoring the assassinated president.

Why reclining, interrogating? why myself and all drowsing?

What deepening twilight – scum floating atop of the waters,

Who are they as bats and night-dogs askant in the capitol?

What a filthy Presidentiad! (O South, your torrid suns! O North, your arctic freezings!)

Are those really Congressmen? Are those the great Judges? is that the President?

Then I will sleep awhile yet, for I see that these States sleep, for reasons;

(With gathering murk, with muttering thunder and lambent shoots we all duly awake,

South, North, East, West, inland and seaboard, we will surely awake (Whitman, 224).)

“Drum-Taps” is a poetic look at the Civil War from an inside observer’s point of view. Whitman traveled into the battleground of the South on December 13, 1862, to find his wounded brother George and care for him. Six days later, he found him already recovered in Falmouth, Virginia with the 51st New York regiment. Whitman did not leave immediately, but stayed with
the troops on the front lines, not fighting, but observing. “It was an unforgettable adventure. He shared the hard life of the soldiers, subsisting like them on salt pork and sea biscuits and sleeping in the mud and snow, rolled up in a blanket...for the first time, he saw the war close up, in all its horror (Asselineau, 143).” Whitman visited the camp’s makeshift hospital and helped give first aid to the wounded soldiers. At the end of December, he traveled to Washington D.C. with a convoy of wounded soldiers and stayed there to help at the hospital (Asselineau, 143-145). He used his observation on the front lines and stories told by wounded soldiers to write the poems that make up “Drum-Taps” from such a close point of view. Whitman gives a glimpse of what he saw in the makeshift hospital in “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown.”

A march in the ranks hard-prest, and the road unknown,

A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the darkness,

Our army foil’d with loss severe, and the sullen remnant retreating,

Till after midnight glimmer upon us the lights of a dim-lighted building,

We come to an open space in the woods, and halt by the dim-lighted building,

‘Tis a large old church at the crossing roads, now an impromptu hospital,

Entering but for a minute I see a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made,

Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles and lamps,

And by one great pitchy torch stationary with wild red flame and clouds of smoke,

By these, crowds, groups of forms vaguely I see on the floor, some in the pews laid down,

At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death,
Whitman greatly admired President Lincoln, whom he praised for reuniting the states and saving the democracy of the United States. In “This Dust Was Once the Man,” Whitman writes:

This dust was once the man,
Gentle, plain, just and resolute, under whose cautious hand,
Against the foulest crime in history known in any land or age,
Was saved the Union of these States (Whitman, 272-273).

“Memories of President Lincoln” is a section of Leaves devoted to honoring President Lincoln after his death. It is this section that contains one of the few poems to become popular in Whitman’s lifetime, “O Captain! My Captain!” One of only two poems included in Leaves that rhyme, Whitman thought it too conventional and later said “I’m almost sorry I ever wrote the poem (Swerdlow, 139).” Other poems, like “Hush’d Be the Camps To-day,” offer a solemn memory of the assassinated president. “Hush’d” shows the soldiers’ reactions on the day of President Lincoln’s burial.

Hush’d be the camps to-day,
And soldiers let us drape our war-worn weapons,
And each with musing soul retire to celebrate,
Our dear commander’s death...
As they invault the coffin there,
Sing – as they close the doors of earth upon him – one verse,
For the heavy hearts of soldiers (Whitman, 272).

Whitman revels in the restored Democracy after the war. Democracy was his one cherished political love. In “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” he rejoices in it and sings of its power.
By blue Ontario's shores,

As I mused of these warlike days and of peace return'd, and the dead that return
no more,

A Phantom gigantic superb, with stern visage accosted me,

_Chant me the poem_, it said, _that comes from the soul of America, chant me the
_carol of victory_,

_And strike up the marches of Libertad, marches more powerful yet_,

_And sing me before you go the song of the throes of Democracy_ (Whitman, 273).

"Whitman's political bent to democracy was basic. His early training in the newspaper
business made him a politician, if that was not yet earlier in his blood. And he remained
politically minded. He thought it the duty of every young man to participate in politics (Briggs,
198)."

It would be politics that would eventually turn Whitman against journalism. "There are
signs that by 1844 he was beginning to lose interest in party politics and that he continued
newspaper work only because he could not make a living by creative writing alone (Stovall,
39)." He turned to poetry, believing that his feelings were too strong to adequately be expressed
in prose, submitting his poems to the New York _Tribune_ and the New York _Post_. Whitman had
searched for a long time to find a medium that would best convey his message. Newspapers were
no longer this medium. "Profoundly discouraged by the opportunism of the politicians,
undoubtedly disappointed by the voters' indifference to the ideas which were dear to him, he
gave up active politics for good... Not only did he renounce active politics, but he almost
completely abandoned journalism (Asselineau, 40-41)."

It seems very unlikely that a man with Whitman's journalistic experience and
wide acquaintance with editors could not obtain another newspaper position... One must conclude that Walt Whitman did not want another newspaper position. He did not want to risk further betrayal by political compromisers. He was sick of the profession of journalism precisely because he believed so strongly in freedom and justice for all humanity. He would earn a living somehow, but it would be honestly obtained (Allen, *Walt Whitman*, 38).

Although Whitman turned away from journalism, its influence on him is evident in *Leaves of Grass*. “The journalist would always continue to coexist with the poet and the poet would never be indifferent to the fate of his city (Asselineau, 42).”


Works Cited


