



Walt Whitman
1819–1892

LITERARY ANALYSIS: WHITMAN’S STYLE

Like other poets of his day, Walt Whitman was deeply committed to celebrating the beauty and richness of America. Yet, while many of his contemporaries relied on conventional poetic forms such as sonnets and ballads, Whitman did not. Instead, he invented a new form to capture the spirit of the nation. Called **free verse**, this poetic form lacks any regular patterns of rhyme and meter. As a result, the lines in free verse flow easily, resembling natural speech. Other aspects of style that distinguish Whitman’s work are as follows:

- **repetition**—or repeated words and phrases
- **parallelism**—or ideas phrased in similar ways
- **onomatopoeia**—or words that imitate sounds
- **catalogs**—or lists of things, people, or attributes

As you read each poem, notice how Whitman’s choice of form and stylistic devices help convey the speaker’s experience.

READING SKILL: ANALYZE SENSORY DETAILS

In his poetry, Whitman praised life in all of its diversity. He often relied on sensory details to communicate a wealth of experiences to readers. You probably remember that **sensory details** are words and phrases that appeal to the five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. As you read Whitman’s poetry, record various examples of sensory details and analyze their effectiveness. For each poem, use a chart like the one shown.

"When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer"		
Details	Sense(s)	Why Effective
"When I heard . . . When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me" (lines 1–2)	hearing and sight	They clearly place the speaker in a lecture hall.

Jack-of-All-Trades

Born in 1819, Walt Whitman grew up in a hurry. He left school at age 11, and within a few years he was living on his own in New York City. He drifted from job to job, working as a printer, journalist, and carpenter. He loved to stroll around the city, taking in sights and sounds that he would later use in his poetry.

Pioneer of Poetry

In 1855, Whitman published *Leaves of Grass*, a volume of poems that captured the variety and tumult of 19th-century American life. Upon receiving a copy, the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson declared, "It is the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed." However, other writers denounced the book for its unorthodox form and content. Over the years, Whitman added to, revised, and rearranged the poems in *Leaves of Grass*, producing nine editions in total. Today, it is often regarded as the most influential collection of poetry in American literature.

Whitman and the Civil War

When Whitman learned that his younger brother had been wounded in Fredericksburg, Virginia, he immediately traveled to the front. There he saw the aftermath of one of the war’s bloodiest battles. This experience convinced him to work in Washington, D.C., as a volunteer nurse. In caring for the wounded, Whitman witnessed the effects of war on men’s bodies and minds. During this time, he wrote numerous poems, including the poignant "The Artilleryman’s Vision." His years of nursing, he once wrote, were "the greatest privilege and satisfaction . . . and, of course, the most profound lesson of my life."



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