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Walt Whitman: Intentions And Interpretations

Lance Watson

Syracuse University, lbwatson@syr.edu

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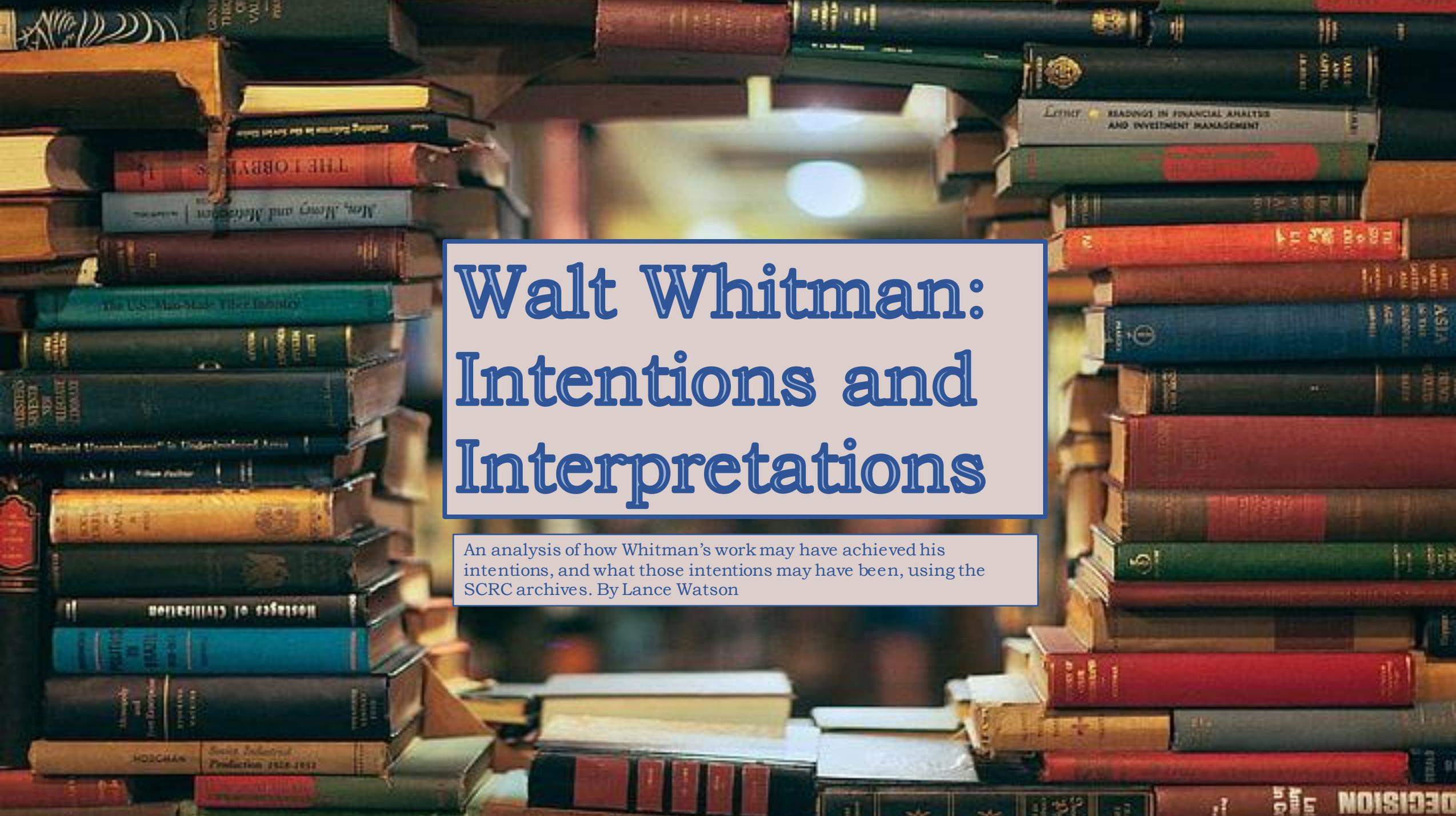


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Walt Whitman: Intentions and Interpretations

An analysis of how Whitman's work may have achieved his intentions, and what those intentions may have been, using the SCRC archives. By Lance Watson

Who was Walt Whitman?

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was a poet, best known for his work(s) *Leaves of Grass*, a book of poetry which he revised and re-published 8 separate times. Whitman was considered by some to be the great American author of his time, although many critiqued and dismissed his poems for their subject matter. Today, Whitman is considered one of the most influential poets from the 19th century.

“Walt Whitman.” Text/html. Poetry Foundation. Poetry Foundation, March 1, 2024.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walt-whitman>.

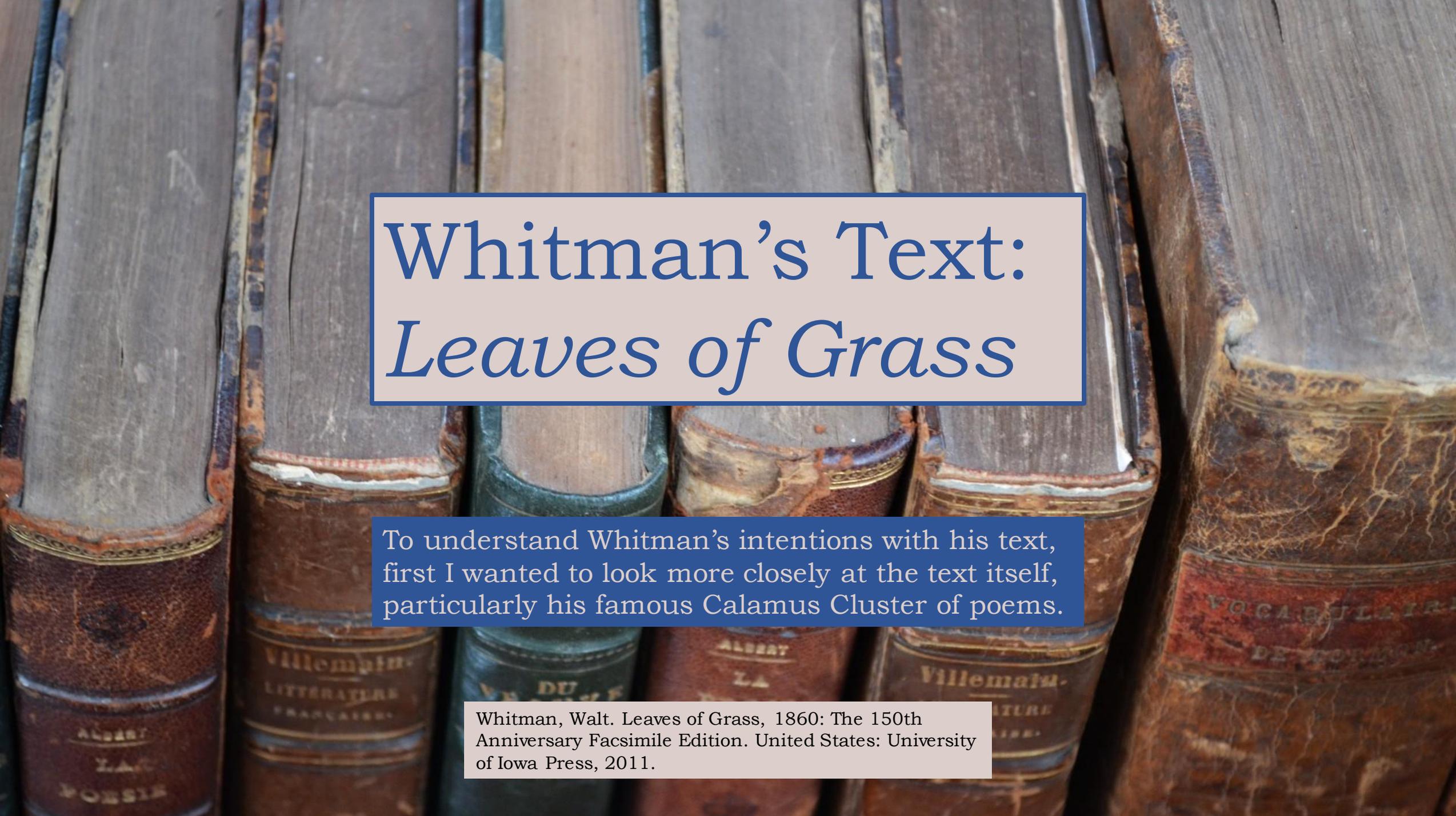
A Brief Look at Other Scholars

“Whitman seeks to discover and express truth in all its forms...he preaches a new way forward: poetry will offer the grand transcendent synthesis of the two (religion and science), encompassing all truth and continuing to evolve as a living entity within humanity”

- Luidens, Karen E., "Religion, Science, and Truth in the Human Experience: Poetry as Living Synthesis in Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass" (2017). Masters Theses. 849.
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/theses/849>
- “Transcendent synthesis”, or a transformation of our understanding
- “Entity within humanity” – the ability of poetry to be personal and powerfully transformative within individuals.

“Whitman develops a new American spirit with the intention of encouraging the American people to seek individual solitude; although, in this innovative individualism there is a paradox revealed: one must connect with each other and find social belonging at the same time as being self-reliant to have true liberating individualism.”

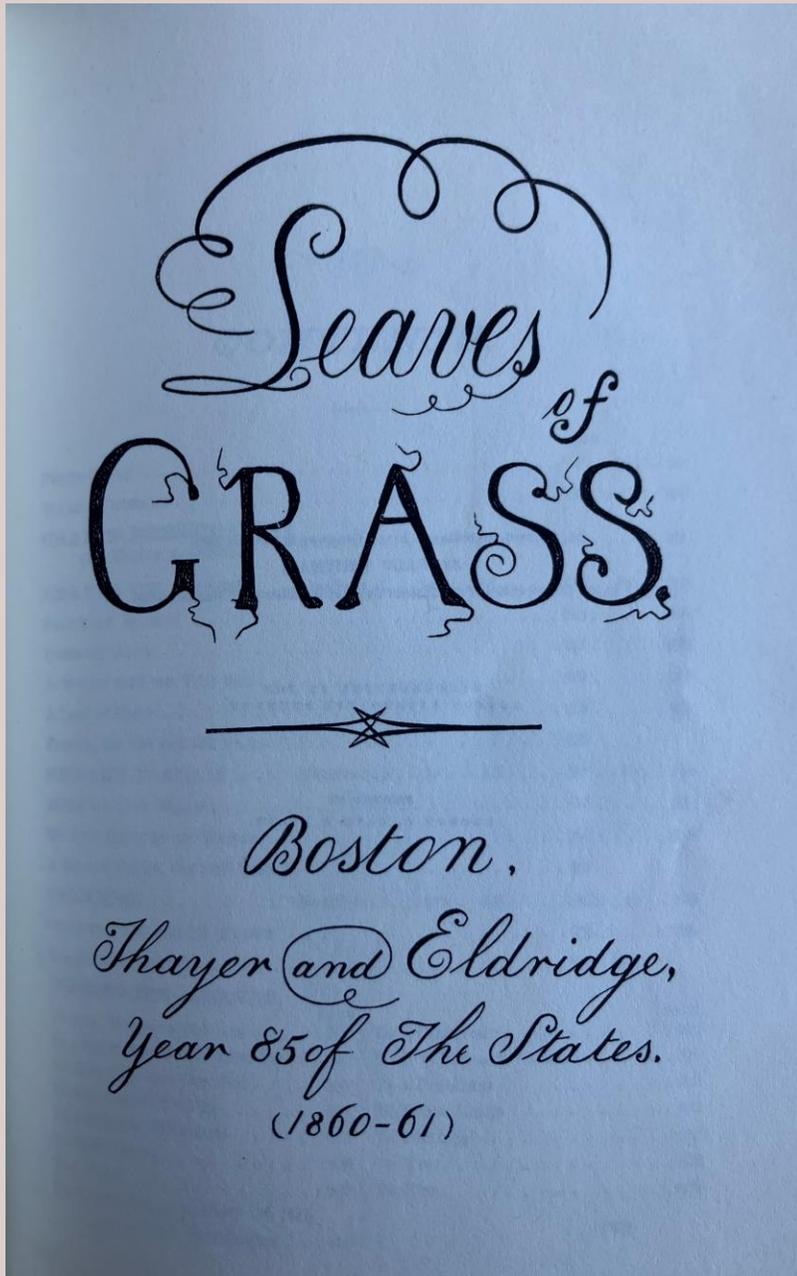
- Edlund, Tina. (2017). Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass : A Poetic Paradox in Search of American Individualism (Dissertation). Retrieved from <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:hv:diva-11746>
- The development of “a new American spirit” implies a new way of thinking/living.
- Emphasis on connection between people.



Whitman's Text: *Leaves of Grass*

To understand Whitman's intentions with his text, first I wanted to look more closely at the text itself, particularly his famous Calamus Cluster of poems.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*, 1860: The 150th Anniversary Facsimile Edition. United States: University of Iowa Press, 2011.



The title page of *Leaves of Grass* is beautifully done, with the title written very intentionally. The word “grass” is drawn with squiggly lines coming off of it, which I interpret to represent roots. Roots represent a foundation – perhaps placing this text as a foundation for change, or a foundation of American identity. This idea of foundation also calls to mind the Bible, and the way I serves as the foundation of Christian religion. In some instances in the text, Whitman calls to Christianity to make himself a god-like figure, so it seems likely that this connection was intentional.

The Title Page

Where do we see Whitman's intentions in the text?

From Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, 1860 Edition.
Calamus Cluster poem 3,
pages 344-345.

Whitman seems to desire a physical closeness to the reader. Something about this connection is meant to be personally, which is implied in the metaphor of Whitman himself as the book.

"Whoever you are holding me now in hand,
Without one thing all will be useless,
I give you fair warning before you attempt me
further,
I am not what you supposed, but far different.

Who is he that would become my follower?
Who would sign himself a candidate for my
affections? Are you he?

The way is suspicious – the results slow, uncertain,
may-be destructive;
You would have to give up all else – I alone would
expect to be your God, sole and exclusive,
Your novitiate would even then be long and
exhausting,
The whole past theory of you life, and all
conformity to the lives around you, would have to
be abandoned;
Therefore release me now, before troubling yourself
any further – Let go your hand from my shoulders,
Put me down and depart on your way."

Again, Whitman seems to be implying a personal connection between himself and his audience. Here, this starts to take a transformative tone, placing the reader as a "follower", implying that Whitman will be teaching them something, or changing their mind somehow. Additionally, the closeness of "affections" further exemplifies the personal feelings the work is meant to evoke.

Whitman evokes religion and the image of God, once again calling on feelings of transformation. The "sole and exclusive" nature the connection between Whitman and the reader takes on here further cements the idea of the reader as a disciple to Whitman's teachings. He seems to intend for something to be learned, something he considers almost holy.

In Christianity, disciples are expected to give up all their worldly possessions to follow God. The idea of giving up "conformity" resonates with Christian discipleship in this way. The distance from and abandonment of society Whitman refers to further speaks to the transformative effect he desires from his works, as he believes it will separate the reader from social norms entirely.

Again, Whitman draws on physical sensations of touch. Here, he seems to imply that leaving this book is the equivalent of physically leaving him. In addition to this, Whitman's warning shows further proof of his belief that his book was transformative. He felt the need to warn people off, because he was so sure his book could separate them from society and its norms.

“Resolved to sing no songs to-day
but those of manly attachment”
- Calamus Cluster poem 1, page
341

“From that of myself, without which
I were nothing,
From what I am determined to
make illustrious, even if I stand
sole among men,”
- Enfans D’Adam (Children of
Adam) Poem 2, page 288

“Hark, close and still, what I now
whisper to you,
I love you – O you entirely possess
me,
O I wish that you and I escape free
from the rest, and go utterly off – O
free and lawless,”
- Enfans D’Adam, Poem 2, page
289

It is important to discuss the queer content of Whitman’s work when looking at its transformative nature.

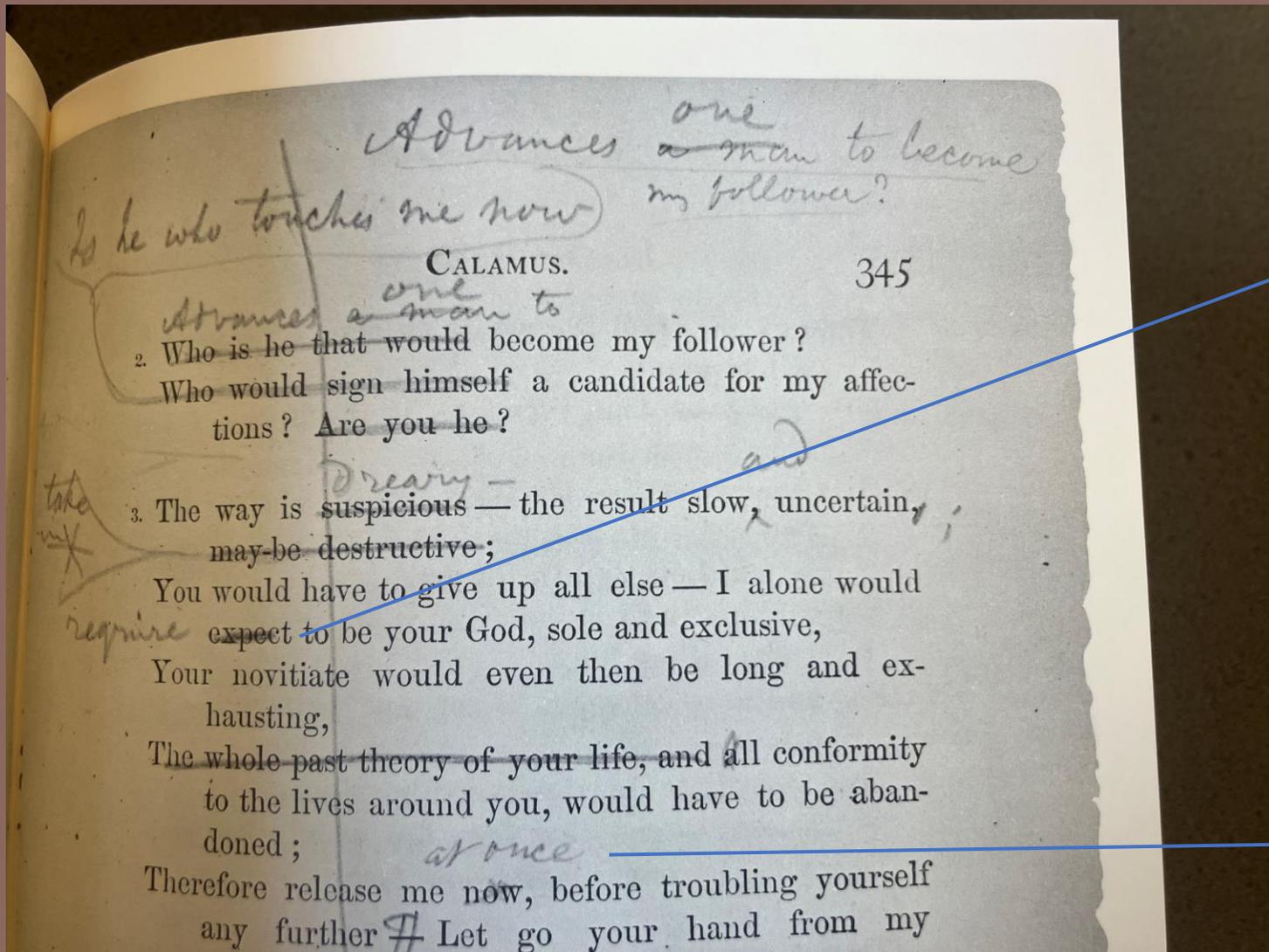
This shows a depiction of creation which casts Whitman as a unique actor: this furthers the narrative of Whitman as a leader of men, as he is “illustrious” yet “alone”, implying he stands ahead to show the way.

Here Whitman expresses a desire to escape society with the reader, who he professes to love. This reads as a metaphor for throwing off societal norms in order to live a better, free life. This reflects the idea of a transformed life which Whitman is trying to bring his readers.

Whitman's Edits

After an initial analysis of the text of *Leaves of Grass*, I wanted to further analyze Whitman's exact intentions with his language by looking directly at the edits he made between editions. To do this, I looked at *Walt Whitman's Blue Book*, a photocopied edition of Whitman's 1860-61 edition of *Leaves of Grass* showing the edits he made while planning his next edition.

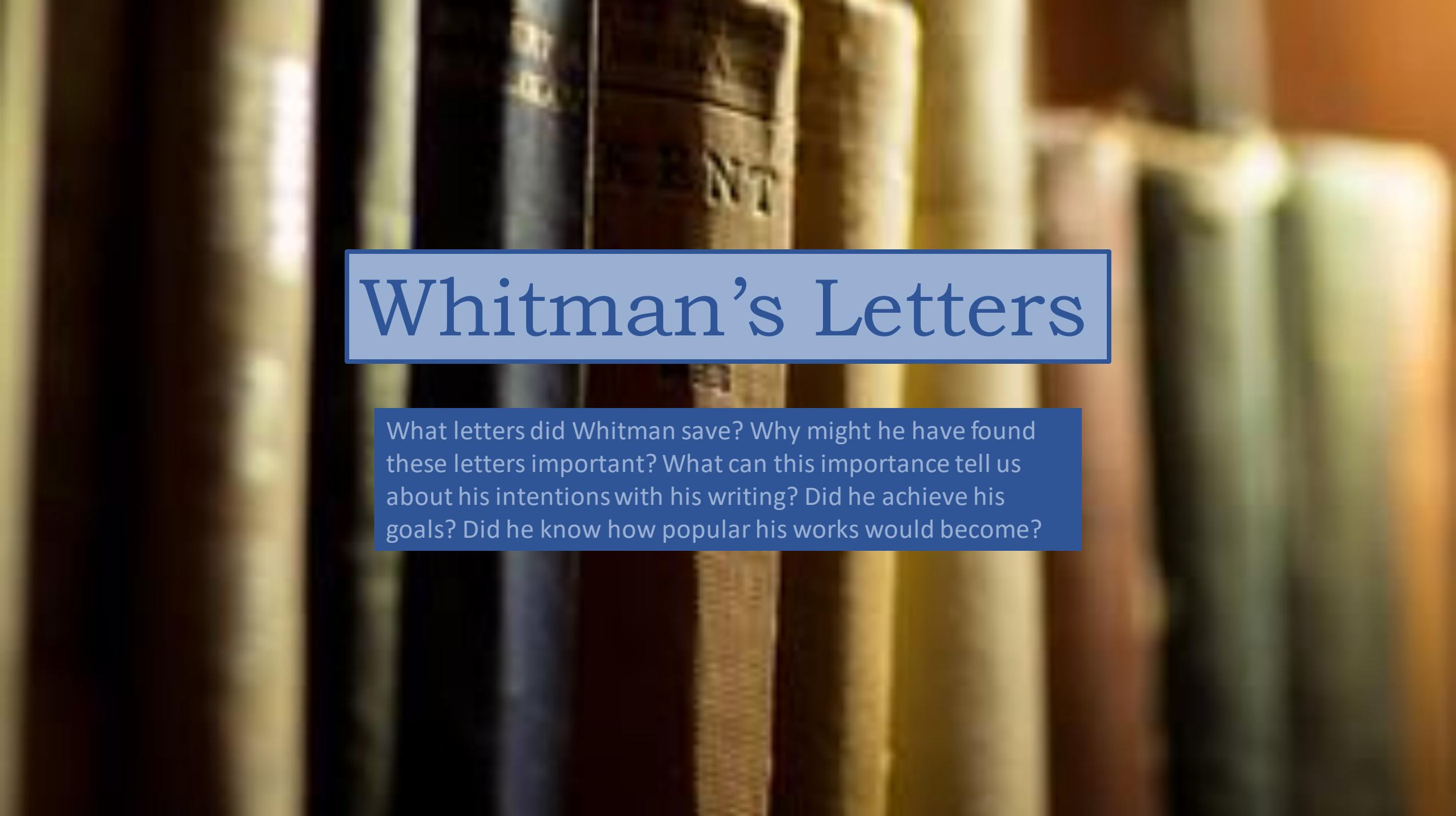
Whitman, Walt. *Walt Whitman's blue book: the 1860-1861 Leaves of Grass containing his manuscript additions and revisions*. New York: New York Public Library, 1968. Accessed through Special Collections Research Center University Archives, Syracuse University.



Changing the wording from “expect” to “require” makes this line much more forceful, and places emphasis on the idea of the book, or even Whitman himself, as a holy figure. Again, this brings us back to transformation and discipleship.

Again, Whitman is making his wording stronger here, as he changes “now” to “at once”. Instead of a simple command, this adds urgency to the need to “release” the book. This urgency more strongly reflects the way Whitman’s ideas were working against societal norms, showing his desire to change his readers perceptions.

Walt Whitman’s blue book: the 1860-61 Leaves of grass containing his manuscript additions and revisions. Page 345, poem 3 of the Calamus Cluster. Book accessed from the SCRC archives.



Whitman's Letters

What letters did Whitman save? Why might he have found these letters important? What can this importance tell us about his intentions with his writing? Did he achieve his goals? Did he know how popular his works would become?

I am glad to see by the Pall Mall Budget
of yesterday, that you are in fairly good health. Were
I near you, I should like to have the honour of paying
my personal respects to you. I am your debtor: When
a young man, I read your "Leaves of Grass" - 1855 ed.
It revealed a new world to me - the world within myself
your "Specimen Days"; I regard as the most humane
book of the present Century. While breathing the
spirit of freedom, it bears no feeling of ill will
against those who wished to keep chains on
men because their skins were "black." I might
have said to you that I have

Angus, WC. Letter to Walt Whitman. 1880. Walt Whitman Collection, Box 1,
Special Collections Research Center University Archives, Syracuse U. Manuscript.

"William C. Angus to Walt Whitman, 26 October 1888 (Correspondence) - The Walt
Whitman Archive." Accessed March 1, 2024.

<https://whitmanarchive.org/biography/correspondence/tei/med.00830.html>.

"I am your debtor: when a young man, I
read your 'Leaves of Grass' - 1855 ed - it
revealed a new world to me - the world
within myself."

- Letter to Walt Whitman from WC
Angus, 1888

Who was WC Angus?

- As far as I can tell, he was just a fan.
According to Walt Whitman Archive,
"William Craibe Angus (1830-1899) was
a Scottish art dealer from Glasgow". So,
it's unlikely he was anyone important to
Whitman!

Then why save his letter?

- Most likely, Whitman saved this letter
due to the commentary on his writing.
The idea that *Leaves of Grass* "revealed
a new world" to Angus seems to match
with my earlier analysis of Whitman's
intentions - it shows his work as
transformative in Angus' life!

the binding, pronouncing it "most satisfactory" -
A very pleasing thing happened to me the other week - a working man - a joiner - to whom I had lent your books, called upon me and thanked me, as I never have been thanked before, for the loan "I never read such wonderful live words, I am regularly possessed with them, while I'm working in my shop the very wood seems written all over with them - How he knows the life of us working men! and what a love for us" These were as nearly as I remember his words; and on my promising to tell you of them, he was

Bathgate, Herbert J. Letter to Walt Whitman. 1880. Walt Whitman Collection, Box 1, Special Collections Research Center University Archives, Syracuse U. Manuscript.

"Herbert J. Bathgate to Walt Whitman, 31 January 1880 (Correspondence) - The Walt Whitman Archive." Accessed March 1, 2024.
<https://whitmanarchive.org/biography/correspondence/tei/loc.01084.html>

"A very pleasing thing happened to me the other week - a working man - a joiner - to whom I had lent your books, called upon me and thanked me, as I never have been thanked before, for the loan. 'I never read such wonderful live words, I am regularly impressed with them, while I'm working in my shed the very wood seems written all over with them - How he knows the life of us working men! and what a love for us'"

- Letter to Walt Whitman from Herbert J Bathgate, 1880

Who was Herbert J Bathgate?

➤ Bathgate was a British author. He speaks to Whitman personally, suggesting that they may have been friends. At the very least, Whitman respected his work, saying "Bathgate writes genuinely, considerately: he has no affectations", according to the Walt Whitman archive.

Why keep the letter?

➤ Again, the letter discusses Whitman's writing. Specifically, it discusses the impact of his writing on a "working man" - part of his intended audience! There is also a very clear theme of transformation and almost holiness which was felt from Whitman's work, as the reader describes feeling like Whitman's words are written into the very wood he works with.

Conclusions

By looking at Whitman's writings, his edits, and his kept letters, we can begin to draw conclusions about his overall intentions when writing *Leaves of Grass*. Together, these sources point towards a desire for transformation in the lives of Whitman's readers.

Additionally, we see many instances in the texts and in Whitman's edits where he emphasizes a physical feeling of closeness between himself and his readers. The letters Whitman has kept seem to exemplify this connection, as they show that the effect he had on readers was important to Whitman. Overall, it does seem like Whitman had some idea of his works effects while he was still alive, despite his notoriety. I think he'd be thrilled that his work is still being talked about hundreds of years later, as it shows the long-term transformative power his works have held over society.