The Writing of Walt Whitman

• from the Preface to the 1855 Edition of Leaves of Grass
• from Song of Myself

I Hear America Singing
On the Beach at Night Alone
America

Concept Vocabulary

You will encounter the following words as you read part of an essay and a number of poems by Walt Whitman. Before reading, note how familiar you are with each word. Then, rank the words in order from most familiar (1) to least familiar (6).

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<thead>
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<th>WORD</th>
<th>YOUR RANKING</th>
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<tr>
<td>ampler</td>
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<td>vast</td>
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<td>breadth</td>
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<td>prolific</td>
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<td>multitudes</td>
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After completing the first read, come back to the concept vocabulary and review your rankings. Mark changes to your original rankings as needed.

First Read NONFICTION and POETRY

Apply these strategies as you conduct your first read. You will have an opportunity to complete the close-read notes after your first read.

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STANDARDS

Reading Literature
By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

Reading Informational Text
By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
The Writing of Walt Whitman

During the nineteenth century, American writers found their own voices and began to produce literature that no longer looked to Europe. Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Dickinson—each contributed to a recognizably American style, but no one sounded as utterly American as Whitman. His style incorporates the plain and the elegant, the high and the low, the foreign and the native. It mixes grand opera, political oratory, journalistic punch, everyday conversation, and biblical cadences. Whitman’s sound is the American sound. From its first appearance as twelve unsigned and untitled poems, *Leaves of Grass* grew to include 383 poems in its final, “death-bed” edition (1892). In the preface to the 1855 edition, Whitman wrote: “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he absorbed it.” There is little doubt that, according to his own definition, Whitman proved himself a poet.

### About the Author

**Walt Whitman**

Walt Whitman (1819–1892) was born on Long Island and raised in Brooklyn, New York. His education was not formal, but he read widely, including the works of Sir Walter Scott, Shakespeare, Homer, and Dante. Trained to be a printer, Whitman spent his early years working at times as a printer and at other times as a journalist. When he was twenty-seven, he became the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, a respected newspaper, but the paper fired him in 1848 because of his opposition to slavery. After accepting a job at a newspaper in New Orleans, Whitman traveled across the country for the first time, observing the diversity of America’s landscapes and people.

**A New Vocation**

Whitman soon returned to New York City, however, and in 1850, he quit journalism to devote his energy to writing poetry. Impressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s prophetic description of a new kind of American poet, Whitman had been jotting down ideas and fragments of verse in a notebook for years. His work broke every poetic tradition of rhyme and meter as it celebrated America and the common person. When the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855, critics attacked Whitman’s subject matter and abandonment of traditional poetic devices and forms. Noted poet John Greenleaf Whittier hated Whitman’s poems so much that he hurled his copy of *Leaves of Grass* into the fireplace. Emerson, on the other hand, responded with great enthusiasm, remarking that the collection was “the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed.”

**His Life’s Work**

Though Whitman did publish other works in the course of his career, his life’s work proved to be *Leaves of Grass*, which he continually revised, reshaped, and expanded until his death in 1892. The poems in later editions became less confusing, repetitious, and raucous, and more symbolic, expressive, and universal. He viewed the volume as a single long poem that expressed his evolving vision of the world, and in its poems he captured the diversity of the American people and conveyed the energy and intensity of all forms of life. Today, *Leaves of Grass* is regarded as one of the most important and influential collections of poetry ever written.
from the Preface to the 1855 Edition of Leaves of Grass
Walt Whitman
America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions . . . accepts the lesson with calmness . . . is not so impatient as has been supposed that the slough still sticks to opinions and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms . . . perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house . . . perceives that it waits a little while in the door . . . that it was fittest for its days . . . that its action has descended to the stalwart and well-shaped heir who approaches . . . and that he shall be fittest for his days.

The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality that forever indicates heroes. . . . Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves. Here the performance disdaining the trivial unapproached in the tremendous audacity of its crowds and groupings and the push of its perspective spreads with crampless and flowing breadth and showers its prolific and splendid extravagance. One sees it must indeed own the riches of the summer and winter, and need never be bankrupt while corn grows from the ground or the orchards drop apples or the bays contain fish or men beget children upon women. . . .
from
Song of
Myself
Walt Whitman
I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loaf and invite my soul,
I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, formed from this soil, this air.
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and
their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,¹
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands,
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any
more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful
green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer² designedly dropped,
Bearing the owner’s name someway in the corners, that we may see
and remark, and say Whose?

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the
end to arrest it,
And ceas’d the moment life appear’d.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.

¹. abeyance (uh BAY uhns) n. temporary suspension.
². remembrancer n. reminder.
The big doors of the country barn stand open and ready,
The dried grass of the harvest-time loads the slow-drawn wagon.
The clear light plays on the brown gray and green intertinged,
The armfuls are pack’d to the sagging mow.

I am there, I help, I came stretch’d atop of the load,
I felt its soft jolts, one leg reclined on the other,
I jump from the crossbeams and seize the clover and timothy,
And roll head over heels and tangle my hair full of wisps.

The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,
Ya-honk he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation,
The pert may suppose it meaningless, but I listening close,
Find its purpose and place up there toward the wintry sky.

The sharp-hoof’d moose of the north, the cat on the house-sill,
the chickadee, the prairie dog,
The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats,
The brood of the turkey hen and she with her half-spread wings,
I see in them and myself the same old law.

The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections,
They scorn the best I can do to relate them.

I am enamor’d of growing outdoors,
Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods,
Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes and mauls, and the drivers of horses,
I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out.

What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me,
Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns,
Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me,
Not asking the sky to come down to my good will,
Scattering it freely forever.

These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands,
they are not original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing,
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,
If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,
This is the common air that bathes the globe.
51
The past and present wilt—I have fill’d them, emptied them, and proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Listener up there! what have you to confide to me? Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening, (Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)

Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab.

Who has done his day’s work? who will soonest be through with his supper? Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?

52
The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me, It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow’d wilds, It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun, I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, If you want me again look for me under your boot soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean, But I shall be good health to you nevertheless, And filter and fiber your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, Missing me one place search another, I stop somewhere waiting for you. ♦

3. snuff . . . evening put out the last light of day, which moves sideways across the sky.
4. nigh adj. near.
5. yawp n. hoarse cry or shout.
6. scud n. low, dark, wind-driven clouds.
7. effuse (ih EFOOZ) v. pour out.
8. bequeath (bih KWEETH) v. hand down or pass on.
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,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter\(^1\) singing as he stands,
The woodcutter’s song, the plowboy’s on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

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\(^{1}\) hatter *n.* person who makes, sells, or cleans hats.
On the beach at night alone,
As the old mother sways her to and fro singing her husky song,
As I watch the bright stars shining, I think a thought of the clef\(^1\) of the universes and of the future.

A vast similitude\(^2\) interlocks all,
5  All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns, moons, planets,
    All distances of place however wide,
    All distances of time, all inanimate forms,
    All souls, all living bodies though they be ever so different, or in different worlds,
    All gaseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes, the fishes, the brutes,
10  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’ed,
    And shall forever span them and compactly hold and enclose them.

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1. **clef** *n.* symbol that is placed at the beginning of a line of written music to indicate the pitch of the notes.
2. **similitude** *(suh MIHL uh tood)* *n.* similarity or likeness.
Center of equal daughters, equal sons,
All, all alike endear’d, grown, ungrown, young or old,
Strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich,
Perennial\(^1\) with the Earth, with Freedom, Law and Love,
A grand, sane, towering, seated Mother,
Chair’d in the adamant\(^2\) of Time.

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1. **perennial** *adj.* enduring; consistently recurring or returning.
2. **adamant** *n.* legendary rock of impenetrable hardness.
Comprehension Check

Complete the following items after you finish your first read.

1. In his Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, how does Whitman define America’s attitude toward the past?

2. In Section 1 of “Song of Myself,” what does the speaker celebrate and sing?

3. In Section 52 of “Song of Myself,” what does the speaker “bequeath” to the dirt?

4. Cite three types of songs the speaker hears in “I Hear America Singing.”

5. According to the speaker in “On the Beach at Night Alone,” what connects all things?

6. In the opening line of “America,” how does the speaker describe the nation?

RESEARCH

**Research to Clarify** Choose at least one unfamiliar detail from the text. Briefly research that detail. In what way does the information you learned shed light on an aspect of Walt Whitman’s work?

**Research to Explore** Conduct research to find out why Whitman was regarded as a revolutionary writer in his time.
Close Read the Text

1. This model, from paragraph 2 of the Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, shows two sample annotations, along with questions and conclusions. Close read the passage and find another detail to annotate. Then, write a question and your conclusion.

   **ANNOTATE:** The passage contains some repeated words.
   **QUESTION:** What idea does the repetition emphasize?
   **CONCLUDE:** Whitman emphasizes a “right now” picture of America.

   Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. . . . Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves.

   **ANNOTATE:** This list juxtaposes concrete and abstract nouns.
   **QUESTION:** Why does Whitman include these particular nouns?
   **CONCLUDE:** He is painting a diverse and exuberant picture of America.

2. For more practice, go back into the text and complete the close-read notes.
3. Revisit a section of the text you found important during your first read. Read this section closely and **annotate** what you notice. Ask yourself **questions** such as “Why did the author make this choice?” What can you **conclude**?

Analyze the Text

**STANDARDS**

Reading Literature
- Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.
- Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

**Notebook** Respond to these questions.

1. (a) **Interpret** In the Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, what does Whitman mean when he calls America a “nation of nations”? (b) **Connect** How does he develop that idea in “I Hear America Singing”?

2. (a) In Section 51 of “Song of Myself,” what attitude toward time does the speaker express? Cite time-related details to support your answer.
   (b) **Analyze** What does the speaker seem to want of the listener? Explain.

3. **Summarize** What main idea does the speaker express in lines 2–3 of Section 52 of “Song of Myself”?

4. **Interpret** In “On the Beach at Night Alone,” how does the second stanza state and develop the “thought” the speaker has in the third line of the poem? Explain.

5. **Historical Perspectives** The French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that Americans are “always considering themselves as standing alone, [imagining] that their whole destiny is in their own hands.” To what extent do you think Walt Whitman’s writing illustrates that idea?

6. **Essential Question:** What role does individualism play in American society? What have you learned about American individualism from reading Whitman’s writings?
Analyze Craft and Structure

Poetic Structures  Traditional epic poetry tells a long story about a hero whose adventures embody the values of a nation. Today, many readers consider *Leaves of Grass* an American epic because it expresses national ideals. Underlying the poem’s diverse subjects is the constant echo of an epic theme—that all people are inherently equal and connected by the shared experience of being alive. Whitman uses specific poetic structures to establish a sense of epic sweep suitable for this theme.

- **Free Verse:** Unlike formal verse, which has strict rules, free verse has irregular meter, no rhyme scheme, and varying line lengths. It simulates natural speech. Free verse allows Whitman to shape every line and stanza to suit his meaning, rather than fitting his message to a form:

  *Do I contradict myself?*  
  *Very well then I contradict myself, . . .*

- **Anaphora:** A type of rhetorical device, anaphora is the repetition of a word or group of words at the beginnings of successive sentences or sections of text. It creates a majestic tone and rhythm.

  *If they are not yours as much as mine . . .*  
  *If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle . . .*  
  *If they are not just as close as they are distant . . .*

- **Catalogue:** Whitman’s use of catalogues, or lists, of people, objects, or situations evokes the infinite range of elements that make up human experience. “I am enamor’d,” he writes,

  *Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes and mauls, and the drivers of horses . . .*

Practice

Notebook  Answer the questions, and complete the activity.

1. (a) How does line 1 of Section 17 of “Song of Myself” express Whitman’s epic theme? (b) How does “On the Beach at Night Alone” relate to this theme?

2. (a) Cite specific lines from Section 51 of “Song of Myself” that sound like natural speech. Explain your choices. (b) What does this speech-like quality suggest about the speaker’s attitudes toward the listener and the topic?

3. (a) Identify at least one example of each poetic structure as it appears in the Preface or poems. (b) For each example, explain how it contributes to the expansive, epic-like quality of the work.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>POETIC STRUCTURE</th>
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Concept Vocabulary

**ampler**  **vast**  **prolific**

**teeming**  **breadth**  **multitudes**

**Why These Words?** These concept words are used to describe abundance, even overabundance. Whitman believes that all people of all times are connected. As he writes in “On the Beach at Night Alone,” a “vast similitude interlocks all.” America is a “teeming nation of nations,” Whitman declares, that “showers its *prolific* and splendid extravagance.”

1. How does the concept vocabulary clarify the reader’s understanding of Whitman’s worldview?

2. What other words in these selections connect to this concept?

**Practice**

**Notebook** Answer these questions.

1. Which is the *ampler* unit of measure: a pint or a cup? Explain.
2. Why might life in a *teeming* urban area be challenging?
3. How would you feel if you were set adrift on a raft in a vast ocean? Why?
4. Why might a job candidate emphasize his or her *breadth* of experience?
5. What would a songwriter need to do to be considered *prolific*?
6. Why do *multitudes* of people sometimes gather in sports stadiums?

**Word Study**

**Latin Combining Form: multi-** A combining form is a word part that can be added to a word or to another word part—such as a root or an affix—to create a new word. The Latin combining form *multi-* means “many” or “much.” In the word *multitudes*, it combines with -*tude*, another word-forming element that means “state or quality of.” *Multitudes*, thus, means “the state or quality of being multiple or many.”

1. *Multi-* is part of some words that relate to math or science. Write a definition of *multiply* that demonstrates your understanding of the combining form *multi-*.. Check your answer in a college-level dictionary.

2. Identify and define two other words that include *multi-* and relate to math or science. Consult etymological references in a dictionary to verify your choices.
ESSENTIAL QUESTION: What role does individualism play in American society?

Conventions and Style

Author’s Choices: Diction  Whitman’s style is as individual and as revolutionary as his use of poetic structure. His diction, or word choice, features the following elements:

- **Variety of Types of Words:** Whitman’s poetry features an exuberant blend of different types of diction.

  | Simple: wherever the land is and the water is | Intellectual: Creeds and schools in abeyance |
  | Sensory: I shake my white locks at the runaway sun. | Abstract: Nature without check with original energy. |
  | Specific: I loaf and invite my soul | General: I am large, I contain multitudes |

- **Onomatopoeia:** Whitman sometimes uses sensory words that mimic the sounds they name.
  EXAMPLE: I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

- **Words in Pairs:** One of Whitman’s favorite tactics is to use words in pairs joined by and. These pairings create a biblical cadence, assert the sacred quality of everyday things, and suggest a higher unity behind the diversity of life Whitman describes.
  EXAMPLE: If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing

In the end, even Whitman’s simple and specific words, such as grass, come to represent larger ideas, while his more intellectual or abstract words, such as atom and multitudes, come to take on an almost sensory weight.

Read It

1. In these lines of Whitman’s, mark specific or sensory words. Then, mark abstract or general words. Finally, identify words paired by and.
   a. All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses.
   b. The old mother sways while she sings her husky song.
   c. I roll head over heels and tangle my hair full of wisps.

2. Reread Section 14 of “Song of Myself.” Identify two instances of onomatopoeia, two sensory words or phrases, and two abstract or general words.

3. **Notebook  Connect to Style** In a brief paragraph, explain how Whitman’s diction in “I Hear America Singing” makes his portrait of America seem comprehensive and fundamental, like a passage in scripture or an epic. Then, identify the shift in diction in the final line and explain its effect.

Write It

**Notebook** Write three sentences in which you imitate Whitman’s style of pairing words, using pairs of words from the list.

sneakers  ocean  malls  stream  expand  data
sky  laboratories  pixels  laces  farms  channel surf
Writing to Sources

In “I Hear America Singing,” Walt Whitman vividly describes the work that various Americans do. His descriptions are full of sensory language—words and phrases that appeal to one or more of the five senses. Sight and hearing are the chief senses engaged in “I Hear America Singing.” However, Whitman also appeals to touch, as when he refers to the carpenter who is measuring “his plank or beam.”

Assignment

Using Section 9 of “Song of Myself” as a model, write a brief narrative account about something that happened to you while you were working. You may narrate an event related to household chores, homework, or an after-school job. Use precise details and sensory language to make your account vivid and interesting for readers. Be sure to include your reactions to the event and also your reflections on what the event revealed to you about yourself.

Vocabulary Connection

Consider using several of the concept vocabulary words in your narrative account.

ampler vast prolific
teeming breadth multitudes

Reflect on Your Writing

After you have drafted your narrative account, answer the following questions.

1. Does your narrative account both tell a story and share a reflection?

2. What sensory language did you use?

3. How much did you vary your diction?

4. Why These Words? The words you choose make a difference in your writing. Which words helped you make your narrative vivid and engaging?
Speaking and Listening

Assignment
With a partner, prepare and deliver an oral interpretation of one of the poems by Whitman. As you prepare, discuss how to read the poem to preserve the flow of the lines and the excitement and expansiveness of the verse. Then, deliver your oral interpretation to the class as a whole.

1. Choose a Poem Together, review the poems by Walt Whitman in this section. Choose the one that appeals to you the most, whether for its themes or language.

2. Analyze the Poem Once you and your partner have chosen a poem, reread it carefully to analyze its structure and meaning. Decide whether you will present the text together in a choral reading or will divide it into parts for individual interpretation. Take a few minutes to discuss the level of formality and tone, or emotional attitude, you want to convey. In addition, consider how you will use your voices and gestures to emphasize meaning and demonstrate your interpretation of the poem. Together, mark up the text with notes that you can follow as you read for the class. Keep in mind that you should work together to build a single overall impression of the poem.

3. Rehearse Your Presentation Read the poem aloud, following the notes and presentation cues you have drawn up together. Pay special attention to the ways in which your reading can enhance Whitman’s meaning. Consider how body language, including gestures, can contribute to the impact of your reading. Likewise, vary your volume and pace to make your reading as expressive as possible.

4. Evaluate Partner Readings After you have presented your oral interpretation and listened to those of your classmates, use a presentation evaluation guide like the one shown to assess what you heard.

PRESENTATION EVALUATION GUIDE

Rate each statement on a scale of 1 (not demonstrated) to 5 (demonstrated). Be prepared to defend your ratings, using examples.

- [ ] The speakers held the audience’s attention.
- [ ] The speakers clearly conveyed the poem’s main idea.
- [ ] The speakers used effective pacing and employed suitable volume, emphasis, and tone.
- [ ] The speakers used appropriate gestures and body language to emphasize aspects of the poem.

EVIDENCE LOG
Before moving on to a new selection, go to your Evidence Log and record what you learned from the writing of Walt Whitman.