

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

From *Specimen Days*

In 1865, Whitman was fired from a clerkship in the Department of the Interior because the Secretary had been shown a copy of his poems, *Leaves of Grass*, and decided it was an immoral book. In response, his friend William O'Connor wrote (with Whitman's direction) a short apologia, *The Good Gray Poet* (1866), which portrayed him as a stalwart democrat who had served quietly and heroically all through the Civil War comforting wounded soldiers.

With *The Good Gray Poet*, Whitman's public image began to change from the sensual, rowdy, egotistical "rough" of *Leaves of Grass* to the martyred democratic saint, an image which served him very well for the rest of his life. It comported better with his middle age and with the fact that in 1873 he suffered a paralytic stroke. For his convalescence, Whitman left Washington and moved near his brother George in Camden, New Jersey, where he was visited by a growing number of English and American admirers. In the late 1870s he recovered further from the stroke by spending many months at Timber Creek, outside Camden.

Specimen Days (1882) is the "good grey poets" memoir. It preserves the memories and images for which he wanted to be known and omitted (by its "skips and jumps") the supposedly immoral and more cosmic, tormented Whitman. It also preserved his voice, for there is a striking correlation between the book's material and method and the narrator's persona. Thus, its artifices of carelessness, kindness, and healthy and loving impulsiveness reveal as well as conceal. Whitman's service in the hospitals was indeed heroic—and a socially acceptable expression of his male amativeness, as he called his homosexual love. *Specimen Days* is the work of someone who had survived war, paralysis, public attack, and the risks in his own nature, and had grown into an older, mellower, and even more complex and accomplished man. Whitman sketches the contents of *Specimen Days*, which vary considerably, in footnote I, concluded here but adjusted (in brackets) to indicate contents by sections rather than pages.

The standard biography of Whitman is Gay Wilson Allen's *Solitary Singer* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1967). A scholarly edition of *Specimen Days* was prepared by Floyd Stovall for *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman* and published by New York University Press in 1963.

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