

Who Watches This, Watches a Man: Walt Whitman in Educational Films

Kevin McMullen

The past half-century has seen the emergence of film as a popular teaching tool. While Walt Whitman has been perhaps the most analyzed American poet amongst literary scholars, the majority of the American population will encounter the Good Gray Poet only in junior high, high school, or college classrooms, often in an anthology or educational film; for most, he will be associated with a big beard, a big hat, and even bigger poems, usually too long to be read in their entirety. Some scholarly attention has been given to Whitman's place in anthologies, textbooks, and fictional films, but virtually nothing has been written on the topic of Whitman's portrayal in educational and documentary films, films that for many audiences will be one of the contributing factors in permanently shaping their views of one of America's most well-known poets.

The sixteen films treated in this analysis represent a substantial and near-complete collection of the documentary or educational films made solely about Whitman and his poetry.¹ In surveying these films, I note what sort of information each film chooses to include or exclude and pay particular attention to the choices made regarding discussions of some of the more controversial aspects of Whitman's work and biography. The final portion of the analysis

attempts to bring the films together as a whole, to elucidate commonalities and trends, and ultimately to discern how these films function in shaping Whitman for specific audiences.

Discussion of the films has been organized into three sections, based on three fairly distinct “types” of educational films made about Whitman. The first section focuses on films which draw their source material almost exclusively from Whitman’s own work, offering what effectively amounts to recorded readings and illustrations of selections from his poetry and prose. The second section focuses on a new wave of educational films, mainly from the 1980’s and 90’s. Most likely in response to the rise of New Historicist criticism, these films focus almost solely on Whitman’s biography and the cultural contexts from which his work emerges. The third and final group of films consists of those which offer the fullest presentation of multiple aspects of Whitman’s life and work, combining biographical background, selections and interpretations of his poetry or prose, and a discussion of the critical and cultural significance of a complicated (and often controversial) American personality. All four of the films discussed in this third section were produced by or in association with large (and relatively well-funded) organizations. In organizing my analysis in this way, I hope to highlight the importance of a film’s intended audience and institutional backing to its content. More generally, I speculate about the degree to which these two factors are responsible for the difference between Whitman’s portrayal in educational films, where he seems to be largely invoked as a poet of patriotism, and his portrayal and invocation in fictional films, where he seems to have the most resonance as a poet of sexual freedom. This heretofore unexplored topic of Whitman in educational and documentary films is also in line with the recent emergence of an academic interest in educational films as a whole. The past two years have seen the publication of two books dedicated solely to an examination of educational and academic film, and as the editors of

a 2012 collection of educational film-related essays note in their introduction, “[s]cholarly interest in educational film is on the rise.”²

And while much of the material contained in the films which I will describe (particularly the early films) may strike modern readers as predictable and unexciting, I believe that it is nevertheless important to know exactly what sorts of information these early Whitman films contained, and as most of the films described here are no longer widely available for viewing, there is a certain amount of descriptive bibliographic work that first needs to be done before we can begin to analyze the patterns, trends, and changes in Whitman’s portrayal in educational film. What’s more, I would argue that even material which some modern scholars deem mundane and uninspiring can provide valuable insight, for it is only by examining such material that we can begin to ask just *why* so many of the early Whitman films contained such predictable and unexciting content, particularly when they are describing a poet who is *anything but* predictable and unexciting. This analysis then can be viewed as both a “recovery and preservation” effort on behalf of these largely unknown and neglected Whitman materials, as well as an attempt to place this material into the wider-known spectrum of Whitman’s portrayal in other media. Like the study of Whitman in anthologies and textbooks, the examination of educational and documentary films is an excellent, and I would argue invaluable, way to gauge and evaluate Whitman’s evolving portrayal to the general public, inside the classroom and out.

Watching Whitman’s Words

Several of the early educational films about Whitman use only the poet’s own words to tell his story, or perhaps more accurately, the portion of his story deemed fit to tell. Two films released in 1965 by Line Films Productions use this technique, and seem to be two of the earliest

educational films about Whitman on record.³ Both films were supervised by Whitman biographer Gay Allen Wilson and feature film, “gathered over a 25 year period,” of places familiar to Whitman, such as the area around his boyhood home on Long Island, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and areas of the American west. The longer of the two films, *Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass*, runs 21 minutes, and opens by saying that “this is the story of Walt Whitman, the poet, and *Leaves of Grass*, his creation.” The film claims to be “told entirely in Whitman’s own words, gleaned from his notebooks, jottings, prose writings, and poems,” although at several points throughout the film, the narrator’s voiceovers are clearly offering material not in the poet’s words, merely meant to move the “plot” forward quickly. However, most of the film is indeed taken from Whitman’s own writings, woven together artfully, with journal entries bleeding directly into poetry and then back into journal entries again. For much of the film, Whitman’s words are read over footage depicting then-modern people going about their daily tasks — fishermen, sailors, a stereotypical suburban family eating dinner, children playing baseball, young girls picking apples in an orchard. The film is concerned only with Whitman’s early years, leading up to the first publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, and the response to the book, which the film acknowledges “received scant acceptance or critical acclaim” during Whitman’s lifetime. Above all, the film seeks to demonstrate the range of experiences that contributed to the development of Whitman’s creation, discussing his love for music, theatre, opera, ferry boats, and in general, the people of New York. As the narrator notes, “books, lectures, opera, people, fields, shores, all nourished a poetic growth that would graft itself into and alter the nature of poetry in America and the world.” While the film succeeds in giving a brief biographical background of Whitman’s formative years, it offers no discussion of the more controversial aspects of that time. Although Marvin Miller (playing the voice of Whitman) notes that “I went

down to New Orleans,” he describes nothing of what he saw there, before quickly relating that “after a time, I plodded back northward,” thus leaving out the crucial discussion of Whitman’s encounters with slaves on the auction block and the emotions that such encounters stirred within him. The decision to exclude such details likely stems from the film’s release at the height of the Civil Rights movement, when a discussion of slavery would have been seen as a politicizing of the film, something the filmmakers were apparently keen to avoid. The irony of such a decision in a film striving to show the myriad cultural forces that fed into Whitman’s radical new book is that, in excluding mention of Whitman’s awakening to the realities of slavery, the film leaves out one of the most important turning points in Whitman’s personal and poetic life. Additionally, the film does not broach the topic of sexuality at all.

Somewhat strangely, despite the complete exclusion of certain important details of Whitman’s life in *Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass*, another Line Films production was made which focuses solely on a small, often neglected experience in the poet’s life, a film entitled *Walt Whitman’s Western Journey*. The fifteen minute filmstrip, also advised by Allen, seeks to tell the story of Whitman’s journey into the American west, through West Virginia, Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, and into Colorado. Again, the film begins with the disclaimer that it is told “entirely in Whitman’s own words,” words mostly describing the scenery that the poet encountered on his train trip, of the passing landscape of each state, of the rivers, prairies, and wildlife, even extended descriptions of the train itself, with most of the passages coming from *Specimen Days*. These descriptions are accompanied with moving images of similar landscapes to those described, with plenty of pastoral farm scenes and cows grazing in fields. Whitman expresses his desire for new words to describe the vastness and scale of this new land, before turning to descriptions of the towns of Kansas and Colorado, calling Denver the “queen city of

the plains and peaks.” The final portion of the film is devoted to nature imagery, mostly woodland animals and majestic mountains in the distance. The film offers little substantial information about Whitman as a person or poet, and serves more as a travelogue of the nineteenth-century American plains and frontier, with Whitman serving more as narrator than subject.

Line Films’ decision to make an entire film about such a minor portion of Whitman’s life likely results from a common problem facing early educational filmmakers—the difficulty of representing educational, often text-based material with striking, yet relevant, visual images. *Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass*, in seeking to illustrate the influences on Whitman’s poetry from 1855, had to resort to anachronistic shots of 1960’s America. The limited budget of Line Films did not allow for historically accurate re-creations of Broadway, for example, so the filmmakers had to settle for either static illustrations, or a moving image of modern Broadway. However, such problems could be alleviated by choosing a subject which appears relatively unchanged more than a century later, a subject such as prairies, mountains, and wild animals. Thus, the nature and cost of film itself often dictated, at least in part, the content being presented.

In 1966 McGraw-Hill, Inc. produced a film that also draws exclusively from Whitman’s own words and which further demonstrates the limitations of early educational films. Part of a series entitled *Living Poetry*, the film is entitled *Poems of Walt Whitman*, and features only that – poems of Whitman. Unlike the two previous Line films, this 10-minute filmstrip offers no biographical information or discussion of any kind. Instead, the narrator recites four Whitman poems: “I Hear America Singing,” “Miracles,” “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” and “O Captain! My Captain!” And also unlike the Line films, McGraw-Hill chose not to represent the poems with modern moving images, but with static illustrations of the scenes being described.

The first illustration shows a chorus of townspeople, mouths open as though in song, while a chorus sings triumphantly on the soundtrack. The narrator then begins an emphatic reading of “I Hear America Singing,” and as he lists the various occupations of the singers, each is shown in turn — the mechanic, the carpenter, the boatman, the deckhand. The next two poems, “Miracles” and “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” follow a similar predictable pattern of illustration and recitation. The depiction of “O Captain! My Captain!” is a bit more interesting, if only for its oddities. The opening illustration shows a ship at sea, with American flags flying. Next, a cannon is shown firing from the shore, presumably towards the ship, the shots that felled the Captain. However, clearly visible behind the firing cannons are several American flags. Why the Americans appear to be firing on their own ship, and why they injure and kill their own captain, is unclear (while one could make the argument that the dueling American flags is meant to represent America’s internal conflict during the Civil War, given the quality of the rest of the film, it seems unlikely that such thought was put into the symbolism). However, at the poem’s conclusion, an image of the fallen sea captain fades to an image of Abraham Lincoln, offering at least some historical context to the poem. Overall, the film offers a safe, predictable reading of safe, predictable Whitman poems, avoiding unsettling, boundary-breaking, and revolutionary aspects of the poet’s work. Also, the film is one among many documentaries to include “O Captain!” as a seemingly obligatory reading of Whitman’s work.

In fact, one early Whitman film was dedicated solely to this poem. Produced in 1971 by Oxford Films, *Reading Poetry: O Captain! My Captain!*, again does just what the title claims — reads poetry. Or more accurately, reads a poem. The 10-minute film features three separate readings of the same poem, recited by actor Efram Zimbalist, Jr. (the film’s credits actually misspell Zimbalist’s name). The first reading is accompanied by images of a choppy sea and a

sailing ship. The camera cuts back and forth between the sea and portions of the ship — a sail, a length of rope, or a broader view of the deck. Sailors, seemingly modern-day naval shipmen, are seen in the background of many shots, although not involved in any narrative of the poem. The exceedingly dramatic reading ends and the camera fades out. The second “reading” has no narration, but instead features the printed words of the poem on the screen, set in front of Civil War images and photographs, including many images of Lincoln, with organ music playing solemnly in the background. None of the images portray any violence or death but instead show soldiers congregated in mass or standing by a cannon. The third and final reading of the poem features both narrative and printed text, this time set over images of first Martin Luther King, Jr., then John F. Kennedy, and then Robert Kennedy, with a verse of the poem devoted to each. The final image of the film, and perhaps the most graphic and moving, is Boris Yaro’s famous photograph of Robert Kennedy immediately after having been shot, lying on the ground with a young busboy leaning over him. The film is clearly intended to show the relevancy of Whitman’s words, even for modern-day audiences, though three full renditions of the same poem belabor the point.

The extraordinarily heavy reliance on Whitman’s words—at times to the almost total exclusion of other filmic possibilities—probably resulted from several factors. Since the 1920’s, filmmakers and producers had been fighting to establish the legitimacy of educational films, striving to show that they could compete with, or even be superior to, traditional text-based learning. Although educational films had become more established by the 1950’s and early 60’s, debates about their value still continued (and continue to the present). It seems likely that makers of these early Whitman films sought to show that their medium could do just what texts could do—present Whitman’s writing; instead of *reading* Whitman’s words, students could *hear* and *see*

Whitman's words. Such an approach would help explain the focus on Whitman's work, rather than his reception or biography. Another factor not to be underestimated is the nature of the market for these films. In the early 1960's, there were approximately 3,000 public and private schools in the market for purchasing educational films,⁴ and this limited market was further constricted by the tendency of schools to hang on to a film "until it wore out or until time proved its contents irrelevant or inaccurate."⁵ Films about canonical authors were thus unlikely to be replaced with any frequency. With such a limited consumer-base, producers of educational films needed to keep costs down whenever possible; having a single narrator read an already existing text with accompanying images (especially if those images were simply static illustrations, as in the McGraw-Hill and Oxford films) was one way to do so, saving the expense of hiring actors and foregoing the time and costs necessary to write a more comprehensive critical or biographical script. Thus, these early Whitman educational films offer little by way of interpretation and scant biographical information, instead offering safe readings of some of Whitman's less innovative poems.

Low-budget biographies: Looking at Whitman the man

Numerous educational films about Whitman were produced in the 1980's and 90's, and whereas the early filmstrips tend to focus mainly on Whitman's uncontroversial verse, the videos of the 80's and 90's concentrate mainly on the uncontroversial aspects of Whitman's biography. Such a shift is likely due to the emergence of New Historicist criticism during the same time period, with the focus moving from the work to the context and culture surrounding its creation.

Although well before the emergence of New Historicism, an Oxford Films production of 1972 seems to bridge the gap between those works based solely on Whitman's words, and those offering a moderated discussion of his biography. Entitled *Poetry by Americans: Walt Whitman*, this 10 minute filmstrip offers a brief but fairly accurate biography of the poet, mentioning the poet's birth and early years on Long Island, career as a journalist, time in New Orleans, creation of *Leaves of Grass*, the rise of Lincoln, the outbreak of the Civil War, and Whitman's clerical jobs in Washington and his visits to area hospitals. After Lincoln's assassination, the narrator notes that "the whole nation grieves, but none more than Whitman. The nation's mourning is resonant in Whitman's lines. One poem becomes a classic." The poem, of course, is "O Captain," a poem which the narrator says "conjures up the feelings the common man felt about the Civil War and a nation's fallen president," before concluding, inaccurately, that "despite the critical success of his other poetry, many scholars consider this Walt Whitman's great literary monument." The film then ends with Efram Zimbalist's dramatic reading of the poem, taken directly from the earlier Oxford film, again accompanied with images of Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy, although this time, all are incorporated into a single recitation. Thus, *Poetry by Americans* continues the trend of glorifying one of Whitman's less critically-acclaimed poems⁶ but offers the biographical and historical context of both the author and the work that they chose to highlight.

The Thomas S. Klise Company produced a short, twenty-minute documentary on Whitman in 1985, entitled *Whitman: The American Singer*, a film that is consistent with the New Historicist trend of emphasizing context and biography. Although one of the shorter films, it covers most of the major aspects of Whitman's life. After opening with a quote from Ezra Pound describing Whitman as a "nauseating pill," the narrator notes that *Leaves of Grass* was a "turning

point of all American imaginative expression.” Moving chronologically through Whitman’s early life, the film mentions the Whitman family dynamic, Whitman’s school-teaching, journalistic background, and trip to New Orleans. The narrator oversimplifies when he says that, even before going to New Orleans, Whitman was an “ardent anti-slavery man,” and there is no mention made of the poet’s encounters with slaves on the auction block in his southern sojourn. Instead, the narrator states that, upon returning from New Orleans, Whitman was “living in the eye of an interior hurricane,” a description that conveys the dramatic change that took place in Whitman leading up to the publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. The film dances around the issue of Whitman’s homosexuality. For example, the narrator manages to both raise and side-step the issue when he notes that *Leaves* “frankly discussed human sexuality, sexual union...and many variations, some would say deviations, of human sexuality, this at a time of Victorian prudery.” During a discussion of Whitman’s Civil War work, Whitman is described as forming “strong, affectionate attachments” with many of the young men. Whitman, the narrator notes, “never apparently loved a woman romantically. He would greet a woman with an embrace; but he would embrace a man too.” This description is clearly meant to note Whitman’s interest in men, but it is the closest the film comes to outing the poet. Unlike many of the other low-budget documentaries, Klise’s film does not exclude all criticism of its subject. At one point, after discussing the release of the first edition of *Leaves*, the narrator notes that Whitman was “almost too democratic for the nineteenth century — he was everybody’s comrade.” Later, Whitman is described as “vain, testy, egotistical.” And during a discussion of Whitman’s post-Civil War poems, the narrator calls “O Captain! My Captain!” a “much quoted poem, but much inferior to ‘Lilacs.’” Klise’s film covers basic biographical information about Whitman but (unlike earlier Whitman films), it offers few poetic examples, with only “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard

Bloom'd" being briefly quoted. The Klise video is fairly representative of the other educational offerings in the late 80's and 90's, nearly all of which are low-budget productions, often utilizing a single narrative voice and illustrated only with images and photos of Whitman and nineteenth-century America.

Another such film was produced by Guidance Associates in 1990. Called *Walt Whitman: An American Original*, it contains the standard biographical information and a few, short readings of poems ("I Sing the Body Electric," "Lilacs," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and portions of "Song of Myself"). The film brushes up against questions of sexuality, showing images of semi-nude people of indeterminate gender laying together during a reading of "I Sing the Body Electric," but does not pursue the issue further. Despite its title, the film does little to convey the aspects of Whitman's work that made him "an American original." A 1992 film entitled *Walt Whitman: Poet of Humanity* is even less adventurous in its discussion. The film's opening states that it is "for all grade levels," and then proceeds to offer over-generalized comments about the poet and his beliefs. The film follows a peculiar pattern, with the narrator stating a claim, followed by briefs excerpts of poetry as evidence, accompanied by images (which more often than not, seem to have no correspondence to the passage being read). After the narrator states that Whitman had a love for animals, several passages from "Song of Myself" that relate to animals are read, accompanied by still photos of all manner of creatures, although not necessarily those being described (at one point, an image of a hippopotamus is followed by an image of a giraffe, with no mention being made of either in the excerpt). Several of the film's other statements are rather puzzling, such as "Whitman treated women with respect" and "Whitman equates the idea of God and religion with his own personal existence and his interpersonal relations with others." Neither claim seems particularly relevant as a major theme of Whitman's

work, especially when more obvious themes are left out. Again, the film introduces the issue of sexuality but fails to delve into it, stating that Whitman “openly celebrated the sexuality of men and women, and thoroughly shocked his contemporaries.” However, the readings that follow are not overtly sexual or shocking, and nothing more is made of the matter. The film offers no biographical information whatsoever and, again, gives only small hints as to the revolutionary nature of Whitman’s work in regards to either content or style. *Poet of Humanity* seems to be intended for the youngest audience of any of the Whitman offerings, as the “for all grade levels” preface would indicate. The formulaic, question-and-response format and the inclusion of clip-art-like illustrations set against brightly colored backgrounds would indeed make it suitable for even children in the mid-elementary years. And while such a young audience might explain the selection of some facts that the film chose to highlight, such as Whitman’s love for animals, it does not explain the inclusion of statements such as “Whitman equates the idea of God and religion with his own personal existence and his interpersonal relations with others,” a phrase which even a well-educated adult might have to re-read before fully comprehending.

Another film, made in 1994 by SKAN Productions, labels itself as *Walt Whitman: A Concise Biography* and does indeed present much of Whitman’s life in its thirty minutes. However, the unprofessional quality of the film quickly becomes distracting and frustrating. While images of a wooded landscape are shown, a series of words and phrases fly across the screen, like something from a badly-animated PowerPoint presentation: “Paumanok Picture,” “From Montauk Point,” “Calamus,” “Song of Myself,” “These I Singing In Spring,” and “Leaves of Grass.” The phrases are not explained and the film moves on. Later, an image of an old, clapboard-sided home is shown, as the narrator explains that “[t]his is one of the few old buildings left in Huntington. [Whitman] had his press in Huntington.” As the narrator speaks,

several modern cars drive in front of the shot; one even stops and idles in the center of the screen for several seconds, the driver clearly visible in the window. A similar disregard for detail is seen in the film's inconsistent handling of Whitman's homosexuality. In discussing Whitman's time in Washington, D.C., the narrator states that, "Another good friend was Peter Doyle, a tram conductor. He was young enough to be Whitman's son, but he remained a steadfast friend." Such a statement serves to sideline a discussion of the poet's potential homosexuality, a move certainly in keeping with other contemporary films. However, several minutes later, after Whitman has moved to Camden, the narrator relates the visit of Edward Carpenter, "who was an open homosexual," before stating that "Carpenter probably felt, as many do, and did, that Whitman too was homosexual." Why the filmmakers chose to bring up this issue with Carpenter, but not with Doyle, is uncertain. The decision may stem from the fact that Carpenter wrote openly about his sexual orientation, whereas Doyle did not, with the filmmakers preferring to stay on firmer factual ground.

A unique educational film made in the early 90's is *Walt Whitman: Sweet Bird of Freedom*. Another thirty minute production, the film deviates from the voiceover narration style of the most of its contemporaries, featuring an actor (Dallas McKennon) as Whitman in his cluttered Camden home, relating anecdotes about his life, punctuated by bits of his own poetry. McKennon's Whitman is kindly and gregarious, and tells the viewer that he is "supposed to get all gussied up and read my poetry in Philadelphia tonight" to "commemorate the death twenty years ago of Abraham Lincoln." The conversational Whitman is able to cover a great deal of biographical ground, and the film offers a number of informative points, and for the most part, does not seek to over-glorify or over-simplify Whitman's accomplishments. At one point, Whitman bemoans that he has made ten times more money in Britain than in the United States,

complaining that “the very people I have written for show me a cold and distant shoulder.” He expresses anger about Emerson and other reviewers having turned on him, calling Emerson a “doddering, senile old fool” for having left Whitman’s poems out of his poetry anthology (although these words do not appear to have actually come from Whitman). Interestingly, and unlike most of the other films, *Sweet Bird of Freedom* addresses Whitman’s growing disdain for “O Captain! My Captain!”

“Whenever I write for the occasion [commemorating Lincoln’s death]” Whitman says, “all the crowd will ever clamor for is another rendering of ‘O Captain! My Captain!’” He then sarcastically sings a few lines of the poem, comically dancing around his desk before slamming his hat angrily to the ground. “I have written other poems you know...30 years of other poems!” However, near the film’s conclusion, Whitman describes hearing of Lincoln’s assassination, and then says that he “sat down later and wrote a solemn memorial to him, and perhaps to all notions of the American potential.” And while, given the actor’s earlier statements, one may expect him to be referring to “Lilacs,” he instead begins reciting, solemnly and dramatically, accompanied by organ music, “O Captain! My Captain!” It seems that the filmmakers, despite their earlier insistence upon the poet’s dislike of the poem, could not resist another rendition of the infamous elegy. Despite this inconsistency, *Sweet Bird of Freedom* offers a distinctive and fairly informative interpretation of Whitman’s life and work. However, while *Sweet Bird of Freedom* and most of these biographically-based documentaries attempt to cover all of Whitman’s life, two films chose to confine their discussion to Whitman’s life during the Civil War.

Walt Whitman’s Civil War, a filmstrip made in 1972, runs fifteen minutes and features Will Geer as Walt Whitman, and like several of the earlier educational films, opens by noting that “the words in this film are Walt Whitman’s.” While not reciting much of Whitman’s Civil

War poetry (the only poems included are “Ashes of Soldiers” and “Old War-Dreams”), *Walt Whitman’s Civil War* successfully conveys the poet’s deep emotional attachment to the people and events of the war, utilizing descriptions from *Memoranda During the War*, *Specimen Days*, and *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. Geer reads descriptions of battles and injuries, accompanied by photographs, some of them showing soldiers with amputated limbs and other injuries, a surprisingly-graphic touch not included in the later Whitman/Civil War film. The most effective and moving portion of the film finds Geer reciting a long list of individual soldiers, noting their injuries and desires as they lay in hospital beds, each accompanied by a photo of a soldier. The list goes on for several minutes, and brings the vast descriptions of battles and destruction down to a personal level. The film rather poignantly concludes with a weary-looking Whitman, trudging through the woods, reciting a passage from the “Preface Notes to 2d Annex” from the 1892 edition of *Leaves*, asking, “Will the America of the future — will this vast rich Union ever realize what itself cost, back there after all?”

While the Greer film does an effective job of relating Whitman’s personal connection to the war, a video made in 1999 by Video Knowledge Inc. and entitled *Walt Whitman and the Civil War* does a better job of introducing viewers to a broader selection of Whitman’s Civil War poetry and prose. Although short (running 28 minutes), the video features portions of “First O Songs for a Prelude,” “This Dust Was Once the Man,” “Beat! Beat! Drums!,” “The Wound Dresser,” “Hush’d Be the Camps Today,” “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” and, of course, the obligatory “O Captain!” as well as portions of earlier Whitman poems “I Sing the Body Electric” and “There Was a Child Went Forth” (most likely chosen because of their treatment of race). In addition, the film concludes with a reading of several entries from Whitman’s journals, in which he describes the “long, sad processions” of dead soldiers and

“strings of ambulances” returning to Washington. Although another fairly low-budget production, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War* nonetheless contains more than the usual platitudes about Whitman’s hospital work and a rousing reading of “O Captain! My Captain!” The narrator notes that both Whitman and Lincoln were “morally opposed to slavery, but neither believed that the destruction of the Union was an appropriate price to pay to meet that goal,” and later quotes Whitman as saying that “the South was technically right, but morally wrong.” The film also makes several references to Whitman’s aversion to the term “Civil War,” which he instead referred to as “the War of Attempted Secession” or “the Secession War.”

Progressive portrayals

While the films discussed up to this point have offered largely safe, “school appropriate” portrayals of Whitman as person and poet, the final four documentaries discussed in this section provide what would generally be considered more progressive, nuanced examinations of both Whitman’s biography and a broader selection of his work. The Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation produced the earliest of these “progressive portrayals” in 1971, and what is perhaps one of the most interesting, and bizarre, of the educational Whitman films. Entitled *Walt Whitman: Poet for a New Age*, the film runs 29 minutes and features a young Jack Nicholson as the narrator. The film opens with an image of an actor dressed as a young Whitman, dark-bearded and wearing clothes clearly meant to be those of the 1855 frontispiece, lounging under a tree by a pond. Strangely, the first spoken words interweave lines from “Song of Myself” and “I Sing the Body Electric,” as a voice-over proclaims, “I celebrate myself, I sing

the body electric, and what I assume, you shall assume.” After Nicholson states that “from the start, Whitman had big ideas,” the next several vignettes offer dramatizations of various scenes from both Whitman’s life and his poetry. The first depicts the “I am the hounded slave” scene from “Song of Myself,” showing a shirtless male slave, staggering through woods and fields, pursued by men on horseback, waving guns and firing at the runaway. Perhaps the oddest of these dramatizations shows a high-society party, with Whitman in attendance, dressed to the nines in a black tux. The scene quickly takes on a nightmarish quality, as the tuxedoed host greets his guests by stabbing them with a knife; the host slits the throat of one guest, and as blood spurts from his neck, the guest graciously thanks his attacker. The scene is accompanied by various lines from the thirteenth section of “Song of the Open Road,” where “inside the dresses and ornaments, inside of those wash’d and trimm’d faces” there lurks a “secret silent loathing and despair.” The scene culminates with a man dressed in women’s clothing and woman dressed in men’s clothing, both laughing hysterically at an appalled-looking Whitman. As the camera cuts back and forth between the laughing couple and the poet, Whitman is seen wearing less and less clothing, until he’s finally standing naked in a darkened room, the laughter fading to echoes (the nudity, however, is not graphic, with a wide camera shot and dark lighting). The whole scene seems to draw its inspiration from the section of “Song of the Open Road” mentioned above, where Whitman expresses the concealed, hateful intentions often lurking beneath a decorous face, and vows to “know all, and expose it,” ultimately exposing (in his nakedness) himself as well.

Another somewhat surreal scene follows, with Whitman lying in bed (as though the previous scene were only a nightmare). A full-grown Whitman is shaken awake by his mother, who then leans forward and gives her son an ambiguous kiss on the lips, lasting a bit too long for

comfort, after which Whitman strokes her hair fondly. Mrs. Whitman, leaving the room, says, “Walt, I keep thinking any day now you’ll have a girl of your own,” to which Walt replies, “You’ll always be my girl Ma, you know that.” Nicholson’s voiceover then states that Whitman “never paid court to a girl, never, as far as we know, was able to respond to a woman,” as a woman suddenly appears in Walt’s bed, smiling at Whitman, who appears terrified. The scene seems to suggest that Whitman’s apparent aversion to female companionship was a result of his fondness for his mother, perhaps hinting at the theory that an excessive attachment to his mother led to homosexuality. Thus, while not completely ignoring the issue of Whitman’s homosexuality, the Encyclopedia Britannica film references the topic only in passing, and even then, with some skepticism. After a reading of “To a Stranger” the narrator asks, “Did Walt take to poetry out of his loneliness? Were his poems just a way of creating an acceptable self-image? Did Walt love himself? Other men? Or, a very strange love affair indeed, the whole kosmos?” The film’s apparent suggestion in the previous scene, that Whitman harbored sexual feelings for his mother, is perhaps a far stranger love affair. The film also presents as fact the contested claim that Abraham Lincoln read *Leaves of Grass* at his law office in Illinois, based on a description in a book by Henry Rankin, a law student in Lincoln’s office at the time.

After brief discussions of the initial failure of *Leaves of Grass* (including a rather comical scene in which “John Greenleaf Whittier” introduces himself, then tosses Whitman’s book into the fireplace), Whitman’s experience during the Civil War, and a reading of portions of “Lilacs,” the film concludes in an odd manner. A post-Civil War Whitman (still sporting a dark beard) looks directly into the camera and quotes the final section of “Song of Myself,” only to be interrupted by an apparition of himself, partly transparent and adorned with sparkling stars. The sparkling Whitman, floating in the sky above a tree, proclaims, “But I, I will sleep no more!”

before shouting “If you want me again, look for me over the roofs of the world!” and drifting slowly away. Apparently suggestive of the enduring presence of Whitman and his cosmic aspirations, and playing on the film’s title (*Poet of a New Age*), the ending leaves the viewer confused. Ultimately, the film is more concerned with edgy, artistic interpretations than accurate presentations of Whitman’s life and poetics. And despite its edgier elements, the film disappointingly shies away from a serious discussion of Whitman’s sexuality, or even an exploration of his bold and sexualized poetry. Like the other three documentaries in this section, the edgier content (evidence of a more mature intended audience) of *Poet of a New Age* may be a result of the backing of a large, firmly-established organization. Encyclopedia Britannica Films was one of the largest and most respected maker of educational films throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and as Geoff Alexander notes in his history of academic films, “[i]n terms of intelligent content, exacting production standards, and overall affective value, EB’s overall output in the 1960-1985 era was never equaled on such a mass scale.”⁷ Lower-budget, private film companies, lacking both the resources and organizational backing, could not afford to be too controversial, choosing instead to stay simple and safe.

Another film which benefited from the backing of a large corporation was CBS’s 1975 *Song of Myself*, part of the *American Parade* series. Featuring actor Rip Torn as Whitman, the half hour film recreates numerous portions of the poet’s life, as reminisced by an aged Whitman as he sits in Thomas Eakins photography studio. Torn is convincing in his role as the Good Grey Poet, aptly portraying Whitman as a still-vital, though increasingly weary man, battered by the toll of a life lived on his own terms.⁸ *Song of Myself* shows Whitman at several stages of his life, the first as a 30-year-old man, still working as a journalist, and beginning to form the ideas that will become *Leaves of Grass*. He is shown sitting at the dinner table with his family, as his father

lambasts his son's lack of commitment to a profession, citing Walt's short trip to work in New Orleans as an example. Young Walt counters that he does not "consider New Orleans a failure. After all, I got to see America; I've got a whole different outlook." This line hints at the transformative effects that his trip to the south had on Whitman, although the issue of slavery and Whitman's views on it are not discussed further. Later scenes show Whitman searching through a Civil War hospital tent for his brother George, watching the burial of dead soldiers, tending to the sick and wounded in hospital tents, and writing letters for the dying. Throughout, Torn performs readings of aptly chosen poems, expertly adapting his reading style to the tone of the scene. In a particularly entertaining scene, Whitman is fired from his job in the Department of the Interior, after his "disgusting" book is discovered by his employer, James Harlan, Secretary of the Interior. Torn begins reading, defiantly and boisterously, "From Pent-Up Aching Rivers," nearly shouting that he is "singing the phallus, / Singing the song of procreation,"⁹ marching up and down the office. As his fellow employees laugh and his supervisor implores him to stop, Torn only reads louder, shouting the words by the scene's conclusion. Unlike many of the other films, *Song of Myself* gives considerable treatment to the poet's declining health, showing Whitman collapse after a stroke, and from then on, limping weakly about, often propped on another's arm.

The film's treatment of Whitman's sexuality is extensive, though cleverly veiled. Peter Doyle plays a large role, but his true relationship to Whitman is never explicitly stated, although strong hints are dropped throughout. As the aging Whitman sits in Eakins' studio, complaining that he has given all of himself that there is to give, lamenting that "the more I emptied myself out, the more I fill up," he reminisces that, "I can't tell you how many boys I..." As his voice ambiguously trails off, the scene changes to show a younger Whitman, riding in a horse-drawn

cab. The viewer is then introduced to the cab's driver, who we learn is named Peter Doyle. The following several scenes show Whitman and Doyle together — eating in an outdoor café, walking through the woods. As they stroll through the woods, Torn's voiceover recites "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances":

When he whom I love travels with me or sits long while holding me by the
hand,
When the subtle air, the impalpable, the sense that words and reason hold not, surround
us and pervade us,
...
But I walk or sit indifferent, I am satisfied,
He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me.¹⁰

Although the pair walks close together during this reading, it is unclear whether they are holding hands. Later, as Doyle helps a hobbled Whitman down the stairs and out the door on his way to Camden, Whitman calls Doyle "the best friend I ever had" and notes that "I've always loved men like you, comrades." Thus, *Song of Myself* perhaps comes closer than any other film to outing Whitman without actually doing so. However, when compared to the other fairly bland filmstrips made in the same period, *Song of Myself* remains one of the more progressive educational Whitman films for its time.

Another of the bigger-budget documentary endeavors, and the first of two which first aired on PBS, was produced by the New York Center for Visual History in 1988, as part of PBS's *Voices and Visions* series. *Voices and Visions: Walt Whitman* is an hour-long, in-depth look at the life and writing of Whitman and draws on the commentary of numerous well-known poets and Whitman experts, including poets Allen Ginsberg, Donald Hall, and Galway Kinnell, biographer Justin Kaplan, and critic Harold Bloom; the film is narrated by actor Peter MacNicol (who several years earlier appeared in a fictional film which invokes Whitman, *Sophie's*

Choice). *Voices and Visions* presents a far more progressive and candid discussion of the poet than the previous films, and for the first time, does not shy away from the more controversial aspects, and actually puts forth a few controversial suggestions of its own. For example, Bloom asserts his belief that Whitman never actually had sexual contact with a human being.

Much of the early documentary focuses on Kaplan's assertion that Whitman was "very much our first urban poet," followed by examples of Whitman's urban inspiration. Readings of select portions of "Song of Myself," read by each of the poets, accompany a collage of video and images that shifts back and forth between 19th and late-20th century New York City, showing the enduring relevance of the experiences that Whitman describes. The same technique is used in a reading of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," in which images of 19th century New York harbor and modern Staten Island Ferries are intermixed (a similar technique would be used nearly 20 years later in PBS's *American Experience* film on Whitman, which I will discuss shortly). Unlike many of the other, lower-budget documentaries, *Voices and Visions* does not fall into the trap of equating Whitman's poetic persona with his actual life. Fairly early in the program, Bloom states that Whitman's description of himself (which Bloom quotes incorrectly) as "'eating, drinking, brawling' could not be more at variant with the actual fact." Later on, Kaplan notes that Whitman was "not the blustering sexual athlete of his poems," but that such a persona was "a created dramatic identity."

One of the most commendable aspects of the film is its direct treatment of Whitman's sexuality. Kaplan notes that Whitman sought to create a "frank recognition of the glory and beauty of nakedness," following which, a reading of "I Sing the Body Electric" is accompanied by a series of nineteenth-century photographs set to motion of men and women, completely nude, engaged in manual labor, swinging a hammer or an axe. While the age of the images (and

their copyright status) is likely what allowed PBS to be able to air them, the mere decision to include both male and female full-frontal nudity represents a progressive move on the part of director Jack Smithie. Additional images of naked men and women are shown later in the film, during a reading of the “28 bathers” section of “Song of Myself.” Other frank discussions of Whitman’s intimacy with the body abound. Kinnell says that “[i]f Whitman had one overriding ambition” it was “to get sex — the body — into poetry.” And unlike other films, which find all manner of ways to side-step Whitman’s relationship with Peter Doyle (often just referring to Doyle as “a good friend of the poet”), the narrator of *Voices and Visions* frankly states, “Whitman was romantically involved in the 1860’s with Peter Doyle,” and then offers a reading of sections of the “Calamus” poems. Bloom suggests that Whitman’s numerous images of the ocean, particularly in “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” and the comparison of the ocean to a mother-figure, was sexual and was Whitman’s way of describing a desire to enter into the mother. And Ginsberg, while sitting on a New York or New Jersey dock, relates his oft-quoted anecdote of the chain of homosexual relations that supposedly link him and Whitman. Ginsberg matter-of-factly states that he had sex with Neil Cassady, who had had sex with astrologist Gavin Arthur, who as a young man had slept with aging poet Edward Carpenter, who had described to Arthur his having slept with Whitman. True or not, the frank and casual discussion of homosexual relationships is unheard of in earlier Whitman films.

One of the only under-developed aspects of the film is its discussion of the Civil War. The war receives no mention in the documentary until nearly 45 minutes have passed, at which point the narrator notes that “the Civil War pulled Whitman out of himself.” Galway Kinnell also says that Whitman “never recovered emotionally from the effects of the Civil War.” Such claims hint at the gravity of the war’s effect on the poet, and yet, very little discussion or narration is

provided to back them up. Ginsberg says that Whitman's role in the war "was not killing but healing," after which, several passages from Whitman's *Memoranda During the War* and "The Wound Dresser" are read. The discussion then quickly turns to Lincoln and "Lilacs," before concluding with Whitman's later, declining years.

The most recent and perhaps most ambitious Whitman documentary was released in 2008, as a part of PBS's *American Experience* series. The Emmy-nominated *American Experience: Walt Whitman* was directed by Mark Zwonitzer, narrated by actor J. K. Simmons, and like *Voices and Visions*, features interviews with prominent poets, authors, historians, and scholars. The approach taken by both of the PBS documentaries, in interviewing several renowned Whitman scholars, sets these films apart from most of the others, which in essence offer only one person's take on Whitman. The expansive running time of 120 minutes allows the film to cover a wide sweep of Whitman's life, poetics, and the historical events surrounding him, offering in-depth discussions of relevant biographical material, extended and effective readings of his poetry, and well-chosen visual accompaniment. The filmmakers were able to put close-up photography of Whitman's words to good use, cleverly highlighting certain words of poetry in quick succession, presenting an overview of the poems' most pertinent points. Another prevalent technique is the intermingling of scenes from different time periods, shifting back and forth between 19th and 21st century New York streets or people on ferry boats (as in the *Voices and Visions* film), demonstrating the continuing relevance of Whitman's words.

Also like the earlier PBS film, *American Experience* does not back down from frank discussions of the more controversial elements of Whitman's story, devoting a good deal of time to the sexuality in the poet's work and the issues surrounding the Civil War and slavery. At one point in the film, Karen Karbiener comments that nakedness is celebrated from the first page of

Leaves, and “not just heterosexual sex but sex on the edges, masturbation, voyeurism, oral sex, it’s in there.” Unlike the *American Parade* special, which chose to focus on Whitman’s relationship with Peter Doyle, *American Experience* devotes a good deal of time to Whitman’s relationship with Fred Vaughn, and the subsequent heartbreak that the poet felt upon the relationship’s failure. In a particularly progressive scene, a young man and woman are shown, laying in the grass, their bodies and tongues entwined. As they continue to kiss, the woman suddenly becomes a man, and from there the scenes switches back and forth several times between scenes of homosexual and heterosexual love-making, the participants in obvious ecstasy, as Whitman (voiced by actor Chris Cooper), reads the fifth section of “Song of Myself,” describing the intercourse of the body and the soul. *American Experience* exceeds *Voices and Visions* in its Civil War discussion, talking at great length about Whitman’s feelings toward and role in the war. As Ed Folsom notes in the film, Whitman truly believed that “a book was going to prevent a civil war.” The visual accompaniments of the Civil War sections are particularly moving, with graphic images of severed legs, feet, and arms, soldiers with amputated limbs and shocking disfigurements, coupled with readings of Whitman’s words from poems and journals. And when it comes time to discuss Lincoln’s assassination, “O Captain! My Captain!” is nowhere to be found.

With the exception of *Sweet Bird of Freedom* and *Song of Myself*, *American Experience* is the only documentary to offer much commentary on Whitman’s years following the Civil War, particularly in Camden. Although this era of Whitman’s life is summarized only briefly, the film conveys the poet’s declining health and declining radicalism, noting that during this time he “pulled some of the more revealing ‘Calamus’ poems.” Cooper also offers an excellent reading of “To the Sun-set Breeze,” a late Whitman poem, recited with an aged and feeble-sounding

voice. The film ends with on-screen text stating that “Walt Whitman printed 795 copies of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. About two dozen sold. In 2008, millions of copies of *Leaves of Grass* are in circulation around the world,” concluding with the film’s powerful assertion of Whitman’s continuing influence.¹¹

The poet of patriotism: Whitman’s role in educational films

These films then, from ten minute filmstrips reciting one poem to two hour publicly televised meditations, have offered thousands of viewers across nearly half a century varying portraits of one of America’s best-known literary figures. And though all of the portraits depict the same man, they differ widely in both their style and in the materials used to compose them. As previously discussed, early educational filmstrips were forced to justify their legitimacy as a means of education, and thus, the earliest films about Whitman attempt to show that film can do the same thing that books do — present Whitman’s words to an audience.

However, the decision of which words to include, and how to frame their presentation, was influenced in part by the audience for which these filmstrips were intended. As most such filmstrips would have been shown in public school classrooms, most likely middle school or high school, the content had to be “school appropriate,” not depicting material which would be too controversial or shocking, inciting a flurry of parental letter-writing or phone calls to teachers and school officials. This then provides an explanation for the relatively “safe” content of the films described in the first two sections of this analysis, as these were all films produced largely for school and classroom use, short ten to thirty minute presentations that could comfortably be

shown in a single class period and provide an introduction to a major author or his work. However, the decisions to include only “safe” content has an impoverishing effect: our literary heritage is presented as simplistic and uninspiring, and a heteronormative pattern is imposed on a life and collection of writings that can fit that pattern by omission or distortion of major aspects of his life and works. Whitman is not a figure who easily fits with a desire to reinscribe the status quo. Moreover, the same poems that appeared in many early classroom anthologies are often the poems quoted in these films. Ed Folsom, in a study of Whitman’s inclusion in nineteenth-century American textbooks and literature anthologies, notes that the Whitman poems most often included in those early collections were poems that were a bit radical in style or form (by the standards of the time), but quite conventional in content.¹² This same pairing of radical style and safe, conventional content is somewhat analogous to the situation in many of the educational films, in which Whitman’s radical style is mentioned or implied, but not shown directly. While many of the films preached that Whitman was a revolutionary figure, “a turning point of all American imaginative expression,” “an American original,” often, Whitman’s radical ideas about life, death, love, and the future were not reflected in the poems chosen to be representative of his style. Like nineteenth-century anthologies intended largely for classroom use, many early educational films about Whitman fell prey to restrictions placed upon them by their intended audience.

However, such a rationale fails to account for *Poet of a New Age*, the fairly progressive 1971 production by Encyclopedia Britannica Films, a company that dealt almost exclusively in classroom material. In this case, the explanation seems to lie in the production company. As previously noted, Encyclopedia Britannica was the largest producer of educational films in the era from 1960-1985. What’s more, the company “made many of the era’s most important films”

and “its filmmakers were, taken as a whole, exceptional.”¹³ Geoff Alexander even goes so far as to say that “[a] book could be written solely on the subject of memorable EB films.”¹⁴ With the financial and legal backing of such a large and well-regarded corporation, Encyclopedia Britannica’s filmmakers likely felt the freedom to push the limits of generally-accepted content and style. Thus, in the same year that Oxford Films produced a ten-minute filmstrip consisting of three separate readings of “O Captain!” Encyclopedia Britannica produced an elaborate half hour film with numerous actors, relatively complex special effects, and included suggestions of Whitman’s homosexuality, potential incest, and partial nudity. They were far ahead of their time: even twenty years later, most of the educational films produced by small, independent companies and organizations seemed unable to push the envelope of accepted classroom material. Therefore, even though intended for school use, *Poet of a New Age* stands apart. The three other films examined in the third section also benefitted from the financial and legal backing of larger organizations (PBS and CBS and the well-established reputation of such programs as *American Experience* and *American Parade*). But the more progressive content of the *American Experience*, *American Parade*, and *Voices and Visions* films is also the result of a larger intended audience. As all three first aired on television, their audience consisted, at least in part, of the American adult viewing public, not necessarily school-aged youth, which helps to explain the explorations of more overt sexuality, slavery, racism, and in general, a more nuanced discussion of a complicated literary figure living in a tumultuous social and political age.

Intended audience and institutional backing also help to explain the ways in which the non-fictional portrayals of Whitman on film, taken as a whole, differ from fictional films portrayals of the same time period. As Kenneth Price notes in *To Walt Whitman, America*, during the 1980’s, filmmakers “appropriated Whitman as a relatively unthreatening entryway into

consideration of same-sex love,” likely, as Price suggests, because Whitman carried with him a “sanctified status...and stature as a revered poet,” making him “a figure granted latitude.”¹⁵

However, in documentaries, discussion of Whitman’s homosexuality did not occur until later, and even then, only in select instances. *Voices and Visions* (1988) was the first non-fictional film to offer any extended discussion of Whitman as a gay poet, and it was not until *American Experience* in 2008 that any such extended discussion was seen again, despite the fact that numerous educational films about Whitman were made in the early 1990’s. If Whitman in fictional films “has the most cultural resonance...as a poet of love,” as Price posits,¹⁶ it would seem that Whitman, for the majority of the early educational films, perhaps in all of them until *Voices and Visions*, has the most cultural resonance as a poet of patriotism. The titles of many of the early films reflect this: *The American Singer*, *An American Original*, *Poetry by Americans*, *Poet of Humanity* (namely, an American humanity), and *Sweet Bird of Freedom* (American freedom, that is), or as evidenced in his inclusion on programs with names like *American Parade* and *American Experience*. Even in films with other titles, the emphasis is on Whitman as a poetic embodiment of America and the democracy that America stands for. Portraying Whitman as a poet of patriotism is a safe choice in films intended for students, far less likely to ruffle feathers. Fictional films, most produced by large studios, can afford to show an edgier Whitman. And apart from simply being able to *afford* to be more controversial and shocking, it is also likely that Hollywood films are freer to take risks because they can easily be dismissed as mere fiction or fantasy.

Thus, perhaps Whitman's portrayal in educational films is most akin to his portrayal in a form other than film. In an article examining Whitman's use in selected twentieth-century anthologies, Price notes that "Whitman has become a touchstone for addressing questions regarding the nature of the future and of democracy."¹⁷ The same could be said for many of the educational films, which seek to, first, show that Whitman was a true "American original," and second, show that his American-ness continues to endure and remain relevant. Whether in *Voices and Visions* and *American Experience*, where scenes of Whitman's New York are shown side-by-side with scenes of modern Manhattan, or in the overdone readings of "O Captain!" that shift from Lincoln to John F. Kennedy, or in the pamphlets that accompany several of the films, asking classroom discussion questions about what Whitman would think of the Vietnam War, educational filmmakers go to lengths to ensure that their films resonate not just in the bygone days that they describe, but in the present and into the future. And while this desire to remain culturally relevant is certainly not a phenomenon unique to educational films about Whitman, there is something about Whitman's own desire to project himself into the future (and even his love of having his image preserved in photographs) that lends itself to such discussions. Whitman too had a desire to remain relevant, not just for his own time, but for all time. Perhaps if Whitman had been born a century or two later he might have said, "Camerado, this is no film. Who watches this, watches a man." An American man that is.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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Notes

I would like to thank Kenneth M. Price and Amanda Gailey for their comments, guidance, and support.

¹ This survey does not, however, include any documentaries in which Whitman may be mentioned indirectly or as a small part of a larger topic, such as documentaries about the Civil War, general American poetry, famous authors, or the like.

² Orgeron, Devin, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible. *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States*. New York: Oxford, UP, 2012, 7. Print

³ I found reference to one earlier Whitman filmstrip, *Walt Whitman: Background for his Works*, made by Coronet Instructional Films in 1956. However, the rarity of this filmstrip did not make it possible for me to obtain a copy. I also found mention of another filmstrip which I was unable to obtain, also made by Coronet and entitled *Walt Whitman's World* (1966). Walter Blair, chair of the English Department at the University of Chicago, served as the "educational consultant" on the 1956 film, a film with a stated purpose of providing "a visual basis for understanding Whitman's poetry in relation to his life and the period in which he lived." A summary of the film, as provided in the printed "Teacher's Guide" which accompanied it, indicates that the film featured readings of poems such as "Song of the Exposition," "There Was a Child Went Forth," "Manahatta," "Pioneers! O Pioneers!," "Song of Myself," and "Beat! Beat! Drums!" and was intended for high school students. I would like to thank Eric Conrad for providing me with images of the "Teacher's Guide."

⁴ Alexander, Geoff. *Academic Films for the Classroom*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc. Publishers, 2010, 47. Print.

⁵ Orgeron, 48.

⁶ An odd aspect of many of these early Whitman films is that they seem to be made with little regard for the trends in critical Whitman scholarship of the day. While it is true that "O Captain!" was once considered one of Whitman's greatest works, the poem had long fallen out of critical favor by the time these films were made, likely as a result of a shift toward a modernist sensibility.

⁷ Alexander, 97.

⁸ Torn would later reprise his role as Whitman in *Beautiful Dreamers* in 1991, a semi-historical feature-length film based on Whitman's trip to a mental institution in Canada. The film received fairly extended discussion in Kenneth Price's *To Walt Whitman, America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2004) in a chapter on Whitman in fictional films, and Price notes it is "both inaccurate as history and weak as a story." As a result, I will not discuss it further here.

⁹ Whitman, Walt. *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Justin Kaplan. New York: Library of America, 1996, 248. Print.

¹⁰ Whitman, 274.

¹¹ It is worth noting however that this final reference to Whitman's book being sold "around the world" is the film's first and only mention of Whitman as an international literary figure.

¹² Folsom, Ed. "'Affording the Rising Generation an Adequate Notion:' Whitman in Nineteenth-Century Textbooks, Handbooks, and Anthologies." *Studies in the American Renaissance*. Ed. Joel Myerson. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, 1991, 345-74. Print.

¹³ Alexander, 90.

¹⁴ Alexander, 97.

¹⁵ Price, Kenneth M. *To Walt Whitman, America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2004, 125. Print.

¹⁶ Price, 124.

¹⁷ Price, Kenneth M. "Whitman in Selected Anthologies." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 48 (Spring 2005), 147-162. Print.