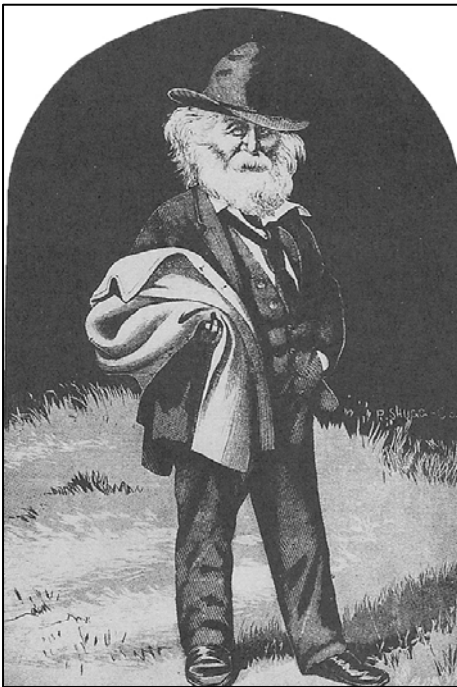
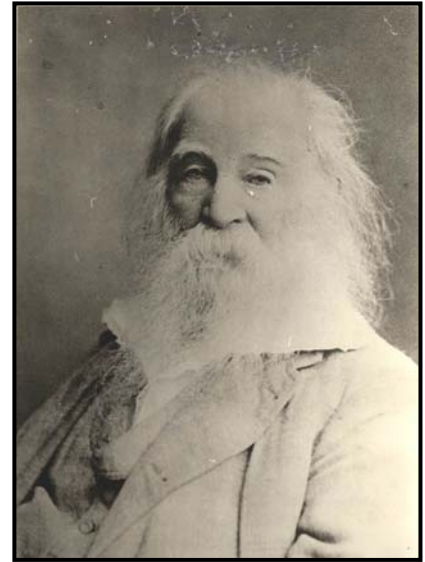


Walt Whitman in the Pulpy Flesh: The Poet as Illustrated in the Comics of Jeremy Eaton

Robert A. Emmons Jr.
Rutgers University, Camden

When we conjure up images of Walt Whitman, apart from the famous 1855 frontispiece engraving, we probably most often visualize the old man, tender, sitting in a chair, relaxed in his loosely fitted clothes with his unkempt hair and beard, the Good Grey Poet. Sometimes he is with friends, loved ones, or children, and at all times he seems at ease. The face of Walt Whitman is well represented in the photo-historical record. If there is a lack of images depicting the poet before middle age, it is well made up by the plethora in his later years. In this accessibility of the representation of the man, in a way, we always know where to find him.



Caricature Walt Whitman, 1872

One place we would scarcely think of looking for the venerable poet is in the pages of comic books. Walt Whitman, superhero! This is hardly an idea that rushes to our minds when we envision the man. Of course, his imprinted likeness can be found in various illustrations that have graced his books and in editorial cartoons, but it is a surprise to find him as a lead actor in a contemporary comic book.

Cartoonist Jeremy Eaton is one artist who has cast him there, and throughout his career he has taken a special

interest in depicting Walt Whitman in his comics.¹ Eaton's comic books are political, provocative, sexual, intelligent, and edgy. They explore issues of gender, identity, and power, and he joins the ranks of underground and independent comics creators that have pushed the boundaries of what a comic book can be by illustrating and writing captivating and cutting-edge mature comics. These comics exist outside of the mainstream market and resemble little of the superhero genre that has defined the medium for most of the general public. It is just this outsider status that allows indie comics creators to produce challenging material. Eaton's use of Walt Whitman in his strips captures both the esoteric and familiar aspects of the poet, as they build around obscurities in Whitman's life. He uses irony to detail the passion, tenderness, and beauty that mark Whitman's life and work.

Eaton has focused on Whitman in three separate strips. His first appearance, "Walt Whitman's Super-Hero Daydream," comes in the inaugural issue of Eaton's anthology *Whot Not!* in 1993. He doesn't appear again until the fourth and final issue of *Whot Not!* in 1994. For his second appearance, he is not the star, but a player in a cast of poets, and as the title indicates, a not so lucky bunch, for whom, "Poetry Does Not Pay!" The final appearance of Whitman centers on an interesting biographical interlude and is titled, "Young Walt Sees a Skull With Hair On It": the single page comic presents the young journalist during his time at the New York newspaper, the *Aurora*, and appears in the 1995 comic, *A World of Trouble #1*.

Eaton's handling of Whitman falls right in line with a theme evident throughout his comics--the historical contexts of comic books themselves. His strips are flirtatious postmodern narratives that are at once ironic, paradoxical, and self-reflexive. In his depictions of Whitman, he manages to construct a narrative that comments on the historical constructedness of comic books--and the construction of its language--even as he reveals something about Whitman as a culturally constructed persona and poet.

It's a dual-reflexive moment wherein we find revelations in the unlikely similarities between Whitman the poet and Eaton the cartoonist. Indeed, Whitman has much in common with the independent or underground comics creator. Both self-published in obscurity early on, both have a reputation for creating sincere, personal, provocative, and controversial material, and both have struggled to publish their work while seeking to maintain artistic integrity.

Eaton's strip "Walt Whitman's Super-Hero Daydream," a complex historiography of both Whitman and the comics of the 1940s and 50s, in just nine panels, stages these matters: it is a marvelously ambiguous comment on sexuality, paranoia, and censorship. The single page cartoon is comprised of nine equal panels and features an older, frail Whitman napping in what can be perceived as the familiar setting of his Mickle Street residence. He sits in his big chair, in front of a paned window, clutching his cane. In Whitman's daydream, he still has his long hair and beard, but is much healthier and more robust. He reveals his vitality by ripping his shirt open and revealing the "W" emblazoned on his chest, sparking images of the "Man of Steel's" transformation from the ordinary and helpless Clark Kent into Superman. He is joined by a younger man, who in turn, also removes his ordinary clothes to reveal the familiar superhero tights and cape, and he, too, is marked with a "W" on the chest. The younger man then turns to Whitman and punches him in the stomach: "POW!" Whitman, unharmed by this act of aggression, puts his arm around the man, and they embrace in a kiss that is glorified by the setting sun. But, before Whitman can indulge himself in this encounter any longer, the moment is concealed by "The Comics Code Authority" stamp. Whitman awakes from his dream, frustrated, uttering a single word, "Damn."



One certainly can read the series of images as an absurd dream-sequence detailing a homosexual fantasy, but to fully comprehend the cartoon, a bit of back-story is required of both Whitman and the comic book industry. Comics have always been an interesting mirror on U.S. history. If we look into that mirror, we can see what has occupied the public consciousness at various moments in that history, a view that at times manages to slip under the radar. During the turbulence of the 1940s and 50s, comics were held on trial, along with other items in the American landscape, in an effort to weed out the elements of filth that were seen as contributing to the corruption of America. This era brings up images of purported Communists paraded before various committees and subcommittees and Senator Joseph McCarthy's investigations into possible Communist infiltrations of all levels of society and government. Their goal: To

snuff out out the vile element that was compromising America's mission of faith, freedom, and prosperity.

In 1947, the film industry suffered at the hands of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. By the beginning of the 1950s, McCarthy's paranoia was at an all-time high. In *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, Bradford W. Wright reminds us of the assault against the comic book industry during the Cold War:

One day before the Army-McCarthy hearings commenced, the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency had opened its hearings to investigate the comic book industry. As the anxious public trusted 'expert' and government officials to root out the subversive elements "brainwashing" their children into delinquency, the paranoid style of Cold War politics intruded into the debate over the mass media and youth culture. (156)

The Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency arose from a longer battle between comics and a set of individuals who made it their personal goal to clean up the industry. If Senator McCarthy was the point-person to combat the Communist invasion, comics had their equivalent in Dr. Frederic Wertham, a psychiatrist and driving force in the pursuit of exposing the comics industry and restoring a moral foundation for the youth of America. He had linked much of the disturbing and delinquent behavior in youth to the reading of comic books, which he regarded as an unregulated, unsupervised influence on children. In 1948, Wertham presented a lecture titled "The Psychopathology of Comic Books" at a conference held by the Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy. In *Time's* coverage of the conference, they offer the gentle reader a grim diagnosis:

Said Dr. Wertham: "We are getting to the roots of one of the contributing causes of juvenile delinquency... You cannot understand present-day juvenile delinquency if you

do not take into account the pathogenic and pathoplastic influence of comic books.” In plainer language: comic books not only inspire evil but suggest a form for the evil to take. (29)

Wertham’s argument gained momentum quickly. Civic and religious groups throughout America pressured distributors and retailers to remove objectionable comics from their newsstands. Wertham’s *Saturday Review of Literature* article, “The Comics... Very Funny!” (May 29, 1948), vaulted the psychiatrist to the position of expert in the dangers of comic books. Following his lead, groups throughout America cried out for something to be done. Preventing the sales of objectionable comics at a legislative level would prove difficult in the face of the First Amendment, but continued pressure from the public and increasing retail bans throughout the country forced the comic book industry to appease their challengers to a degree.

The industry found a partial solution in the decision of Hollywood in the 1930s to enact a self-regulating body to oversee a code of standards that all films would adhere to. The Association of Comics Magazines Publishers established an initial attempt at self-regulation in 1948, but it failed at controlling the content of the majority of comics reaching the newsstands. It wasn’t until Wertham wrote his now infamous book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, which effectively heated the debate back up, that the comic book industry would be forced to clean up their act. On April 21, 1954, the Senate Committee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency began hearings to investigate the comic book industry’s role in the problem of juvenile delinquency. Of course, Dr. Frederic Wertham testified before the Committee to make his case against his long-time foe.

In a final attempt to assuage the Committee, the industry formed the Comics Magazine Association of America and devised a new code that would be subscribed to by most of the publishers involved in the controversy. This time, the efforts proved at least temporarily

successful and were reflected in the Subcommittee’s 1955 investigation report, which “stated flatly that ‘this country cannot afford the calculated risk involved in feeding its children, through comic books, a concentrated diet of crime, horror, and violence.’ While praising the CMAA’s program of self-regulation, the committee resolved to watch its progress closely and report on it at a later date. If this latest effort failed, the committee warned that ‘other ways and means must – and will – be found to prevent our nation’s young from being harmed by crime and horror comic books.’” (Wright 174-175).

This is the situation that “Walt Whitman Super-Hero Daydream” evokes. Even more specifically, the content of the panels addresses major items and themes covered in both the 1954 code and *Seduction of the Innocent*. We can see direct correlations in many elements from the Comics Code (1954):

COSTUME

2. Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable.

MARRIAGE AND SEX

2. Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at nor portrayed. Violent love scenes as well as sexual abnormalities are unacceptable.

4. The treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage.

5. Passion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way as to stimulate the lower and baser emotions.

7. Sex perversion or an inference to same is strictly forbidden.

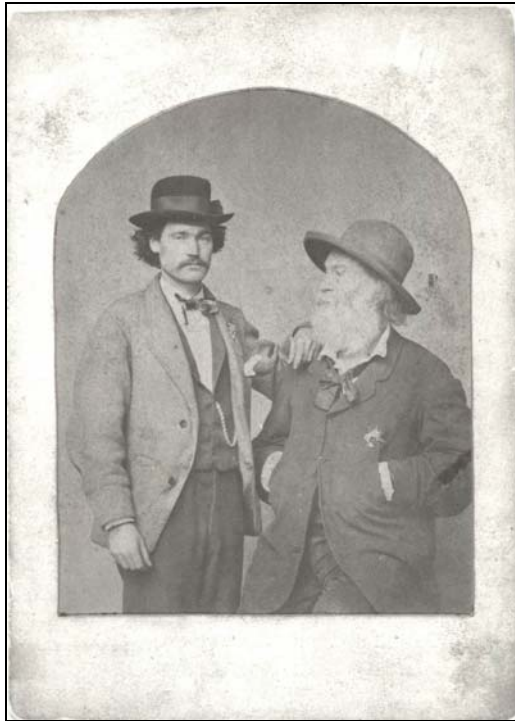


Panel 5



Panel 7

Clearly, panels 5 and 7 violate and satirize the Code's rules on sex scenes, the sanctity of marriage, the display of lower or base emotions, and the prohibition of "sexual perversion." The adversary that becomes lover in panel 7 raises questions. Who is this man? Someone fabricated by the cartoonist? Eaton's knowledge of Whitman's life suggests there may be something more here, for the man resembles, so closely, Whitman's longtime companion, Peter Doyle. The two men met on a rainy night and instantly connected; as Doyle recalled, "We were familiar at once – I put my hand on his knee – we understood" (*Calamus* 5). There is no masking the two men's intimate relationship. In a letter to Doyle, Whitman signs off, "Good night, Pete – Good night, my darling son – here is a kiss for you, dear boy – on the paper here – a good long one" (*The Correspondence Vol. 2* 103-104).



Doyle and Whitman, 1869



Panel 6

The oddly aggressive actions of panel 5 parody the sexual violence statute of the Code, but it also suggests the implications of the aggressiveness of comic book superheroes, the expectations related to gender roles, in particular the demands of masculinity. It would seem Eaton is well-versed on Wertham's psychoanalytic approach to sex and violence in comics. The findings of *Seduction of the Innocent* are complex. If we find some sections laughable and problematic due to biased or unsupported opinions, Wertham still was applying widely accepted psychoanalytical theory. In panels 5-7, Eaton is giving us the ultimate homoerotic fantasy that Wertham so often implied was inherent in many of the superhero relationships. Perhaps his most well-known and controversial analysis was the bond between superhero and sidekick, particularly that of Batman and Robin. In a chapter titled, "I Want to Be a Sex Maniac! Comic Books and the Psycho-Sexual Development of Children," Wertham wrote of the dynamic duo:

Several years ago a California psychiatrist pointed out that the Batman stories are psychologically homosexual. Our researches confirm this entirely. Only someone ignorant of the fundamentals of psychiatry and of the psychopathology of sex can fail to realize a subtle atmosphere of homoerotism [sic] which pervades the adventures of the mature “Batman” and his young friend “Robin”... Batman and Robin... go into action in their special uniforms. They constantly rescue each other from violent attacks by an unending number of enemies... At home they lead an idyllic life. They are Bruce Wayne and “Dick” Grayson... It is like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together. Sometimes they are shown on a couch, Bruce reclining and Dick sitting next to him, jacket off, collar open, and his hand on his friend’s arm. [Robin] often stands with his legs spread, the genital region discreetly evident. (190-191)

The relationship that Wertham describes is a proxy for the often lived homosexual experience, one that can be in constant public conflict and only find safety in the confidence and secrecy of the home.

Whitman contended against suggestions of his homosexuality and prevented, to the best of his ability, any appearance of that. Often he spoke of female conquests to quell suspicions. Doyle would even cover for him and would talk up Whitman’s prowess with the opposite sex to mislead the curious. But Whitman struggled with this conflict. In an 1870 diary entry, he wrestled with his “secret” life. In his book *Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality*, Jonathan Ned Katz decodes Whitman’s diary:

On June 17, 1780, Whitman finally decided to break emotionally with Doyle, vowing in his diary: ‘It is IMPERATIVE, that I obviate & remove myself (& my orbit) *at all hazards*, from this incessant *enormous & abnormal*

PERTURBATION.’ The “perturbation,” it is clear, was Doyle... That same July Whitman vowed again “To GIVE UP ABSOLUTLEY & for good, from the present hour, this Feverish, FLUCTUATING, *useless* UNDIGNIFIED PURSUIT of PD.’ Then feeling a need to disguise the cause of his perturbation, Whitman erased “PD” and wrote “16.4,” a simple code for *P* and *D*, the sixteenth and fourth letters of the alphabet. (171).

The conflict in panel 5 can be seen as just such an emotional battle, one over which Whitman wants to triumph. Panel 7 reveals his true emotions, however, as the two men embrace and kiss. This act, however, is not allowed: Whitman is pulled from his sleep by the Comics Code Authority stamp, symbolic of the public eye. He wakes with sad regret.

Homosexuality in the work of Whitman has been extensively studied in contemporary explications of his writings. But, at the time of his first publication of *Leaves of Grass*, if many noticed, only a few mentioned it in their criticism of the collection. One venomous review mirrors the problems of homoeroticism Wertham found in superhero comics. In a review in *The Criterion*, Rufus W. Griswold expresses his disdain for the book:

It is impossible to imagine how any man’s fancy could have conceived such a mass of stupid filth, unless he were possessed of the soul of a sentimental donkey that had died of disappointed love... No! these fellows have no secrets, no disguises; no indeed! But they do have, conceal it by whatever language they choose, a degrading, beastly sensuality, that is fast rotting the healthy core of all social virtues... Thus, then, we leave this gathering of muck to the laws which, certainly, if they fulfill their content, must have power to suppress such gross obscenity... The records of crime show that many monsters have gone on in

impunity, because the exposure of their vileness was attended with too great indelicacy. “Peccatum illud horribile, inter Christianos non nominandum.”

This final statement in Latin reveals the subtext of Griswold’s ire: Homosexuality, or “That horrible sin, among Christians not be named.” It is easy to see the parallels between the language in Griswold’s review and Wertham’s “disturbing” findings in the portrayal of inappropriate sexual relationships in comics.

Eaton captures these parallels in nine stark panels, giving us a complex meta-narrative that all at once illustrates a history of American paranoia that joins Whitman to comics, while offering subtler notions of the complexity that really builds the foundation of love and desire. It is an irony that says, “We are battling ourselves. It is a fight which cannot be won.”

Eaton does not return to Whitman again until the final issue of *Whot Not!* In this, the penultimate of his Whitman cartoons, Eaton continues to track the similarities that exist between the poet and the cartoonist, each involved in a profession of seemingly fruitless results. “Poetry Does Not Pay!” is much more artistically ambitious than the previous and later strips. It is a five-page comic that compositionally weaves itself through the lives of four poets. It is crowded with text and image and it demands that the reader pay close attention to narrative vectors.



Whitman is cast with Keats, Poe, and Rimbaud as they relate their personal woes and failures at the hands of their artistic callings. Eaton starts with Whitman and uses language that immediately calls to mind the indie comics creator: “Let us start with Wally ‘Small Press’ Whitman and see how the dirt-poor, self-published beggar-poet ended up living out his grey years...” The strip’s narrator, Vex V. Verse, tells us of Whitman, “The indelicate wiles of Wally’s muse led him to eventual ruin in his every endeavor, from newspaper editorships in Brooklyn and New Orleans to a position at the Attorney General’s Office in Washington D.C.

Scorned by many, loved by few, his reputation preceded him” (1). The strip is a whirlwind of Whitman biographical data including his life in Camden, his experience in the Civil War, and his late designing of his own tomb. Every moment a contributing factor in his cause of death: “Poetry.” Whitman, Keats, Rimbaud, Poe, and the struggling cartoonist, are they all not living and dying for their life’s work?

The comparison of poetry and comics continues in Eaton’s final strip on Whitman, “Walt Sees a Skull.” Once again, it is a single page strip, comprised of 9 panels of equal size. As with “Super-Hero Daydream”, this technique brings a sense of order to the vignette within the panels as opposed to “Poetry Does Not Pay” where chaos in the representation of the poet’s life and death prevails. In “Walt Sees a Skull”, Eaton creates an anti-superhero comics meant to relate to the reality of each of our lives. Eaton’s awareness of the life of Whitman yields more than just a “slice-of-life” moment. The story he chooses to illustrate is a dramatic moment in Whitman’s life.



If we look to his newspaper articles chronicling the event, we see the passion with which Whitman writes of the injustices of greed and the displacement of the underprivileged. The two editorials and one first-hand report about the Baptist cemetery at Delancy and Chrystie Streets in New York City are poetic calls for justice. The cemetery was purchased by the Hudson Fire Insurance Company and was set for new home development, which meant the removal of all the corpses. Eaton's strip details the scene, and in Whitman's writings we find what is behind the interpretation of Whitman's visage in the strip's final panel. Eaton illustrates Whitman as

shocked, appalled, and weary, and his inclusion of the “skull with hair on it” is no sensationalistic artistic flourish; Whitman noted all of this: “These creatures actually set people to work with spades and pickaxes to dig down and pitch out decayed relics of bodies buried there. Fleshless bones, and ghastly skeletons, and skulls with the hair still attached to them” (Rubin and Brown 41). He records a confrontation at the scene: “On stepping into the ground at the corner of Chrystie and Delancy streets, we found a woman armed with a pistol, guarding the grave of her husband and children” (Rubin and Brown 39). In the April 1, 1842, editorial Whitman continues:

We can sympathize with these people. We are thrilled at reading the anecdote given above. For there is in every man’s breast a sentiment which leads him to regard with horror any desecration of the dark and ghostly grave... Coarse indeed must be the character, and callous the soul, that would touch sorely upon these hallowed sympathies. (Rubin and Brown 39).

In his final editorial on the subject on April 5, 1842, Whitman demands justice:

It has been reserved for our city to put the damning climax to these deeds that disgrace humanity. A set of miserable wretches – through courtesy, we suppose, passing in the world as *gentlemen* have, within the past fortnight, rendered themselves infamous by desecrating the very *grave*, in order to add something to their ill won heaps of gold... Do they pretend to possess the souls of men?... Let the finger of scorn and indignation be pointed at these men. Let popular opinion show them what reward is meted out of the soulless brutes, who outrage every pure and gentle feeling of the soul – every sentiment of love, every remnant of the perfection that was Adam’s in Eden!”

This final exclamatory statement rings of the cry of the poet and artist, whose purpose is to appeal to love and the soul.

Jeremy Eaton's Walt Whitman comic strips are complex commentaries on American society and the role of art and the artist in it over two centuries. His fondness for and close familiarity with the poet shows, as he pays homage to Whitman by incorporating and extending his ethics of justice and freedom – sexual and otherwise – in his own work.

List of Illustrations

Walt Whitman, 1889, Philadelphia, Photographer: Frederick Gutekunst, Credit: Ohio Wesleyan University, Bayley Collection.

Peter Doyle and Walt Whitman, 1869, Washington, D.C., Photographer: M. P. Rice, Credit: William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Trent Collection.

1872 Caricature of Walt Whitman

Whot Not! #1

Whot Not #4

World of Trouble #1

Works Cited

- Eaton, Jeremy. "Walt Whitman's Super-Hero Daydream." *Whot Not!* #1 (Oct. 1993), Fantagraphics Books.
- . "Poetry Does Not Pay." *Whot Not!* #4 (Aug. 1994), Fantagraphics Books.
- . "Walt Whitman's Super-Hero Daydream." *World of Trouble* #1 (June 1995), Black Eye Productions.
- Griswold, Rufus W. "Review of Leaves of Grass." *The Criterion*. November 10, 1855.
- Katz, Jonathan Ned. *Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001.
- Rubin, Joseph Jay and Charles H. Brown, eds. *Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora: Editor at Twenty-Two*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972.
- Wertham, Frederic, *Seduction of the Innocent*. New York: Rinehart & Company, 1954.
- Whitman, Walt. *The Correspondence*. 6 vols. Edited by William White. New York: New York UP, 1961-1977.
- Whitman, Walt. *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*. Vol. 8. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1902.
- Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.

¹ Eaton's website showcases his works as an illustrator, cartoonist, and artist <<http://www.jeremyeatonart.com>>.