Risk

Walter "Walt" Whitman. (May 31, 1819 - March 26, 1892) An American poet who volunteered during the Civil War to help those injured. Whitman took this experience that showed him gruesome, gritty views of what the Civil War created and incorporated it into his poems. These perspectives were not commonly written about and were looked down upon when read by the average reader. Despite this criticism, along with one of his books getting banned, he took the risk of continuing to write this way. This shaped his American dream because Whitman took a risk going against the views of others and through this accomplished fame.

Walter Whitman is known as the American poet. Whitman was a journalist unlike others during this time period. In order to become a famous Journalist, journalist knew that they needed to not only be highly educated but also needed to write pieces that included the opinion that the average reader would agree with. During this time period the Civil War was occurring, so smart journalist wrote pieces about patriotism and heroism. Whitman however, took the realistic images and gory horrors from the war he had learned about from soldiers and wrote about them. These types of writings can be seen in his piece Drum Taps. These poems were not well liked because they didn’t fit into the norm of what others were writing about during this time period. However, Whitman took the risk to write them despite this unpopular opinion. Even having a couple of his books banned, this never stopped Whitman who went against all odds and became a famous and well-known poet of American society, whose poems are still being read and discussed today.

Being born during the 1800s, Whitman was forty-two years old when the Civil War began. Whitman was an eyewitness to the experience of the Civil War, but did not participate physically. One of Whitman’s brothers, George, enlisted early to fight in the Civil War, and ended up getting injured. Whitman went to visit his brother and was horrified with what he saw. He saw soldiers who were badly injured, and others who were presumed dead. Seeing this he decided to take action and volunteer. By having this first-hand experience of being a volunteer it inspired Whitman. Whitman is known as “the first poet to take us by hand and show us the shattered bodies of soldiers dying in makeshift hospitals.” Whitman decided to write about what he saw. These poems started off by applauding the wars energy and how it excited cities to take patriotic actions. Later, Whitman gave readers different types of poems such as, The Wound Dresser and Come up from the Fields Father. These poems differentiate from the other poems by showing gruesome images of soldiers like the ones Whitman saw in the hospital beds while he was volunteering. Whitman wrote about these repulsive injuries in disturbing ways. In Wound Dresser, Whitman says that he is dressing “the neck of the cavalryman with the bullet through and through” and he also describes a soldier by saying, “his eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody stump”. This type of gritty writing is not typical in that time period. Whitman writes his poems trying to find an alternate belief to the idea of the inevitability of death that comes from war. These poems were put into a later edition of Leaves of Grass. Leaves of Grass created controversy due to its writings on sexual themes, democracy, slavery and many more topics that were not highly written about
during that time period. By adding these war time poems, it only added to the distastefulness of these poems. *Leaves of Grass* was soon to be criticized and ridiculed by many and become banned in Boston.

In 1882, Whitman's book was banned by the Society of Suppression. This banning came shortly after the Watch and Ward Society in Boston and the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice tried making booksellers stop the sale of *Leaves of Grass*.¹¹ A British reviewer said that people should "throw it immediately behind the fire". Rufus Wilmot Griswold called the piece “A mass of stupid filth".¹² Some people would have taken these words to heart and fixed their pieces in order to gain more positive reviews. This was not the case for Whitman. Hatred and unkind words never stopped Whitman. Receiving all this hate, just made Whitman strive to keep expressing his views allowing these rude words to better his writing.

Whitman decided to take a risk and try something unheard of during this time period. Whitman wrote about what he saw and his experiences volunteering with the soldiers of the Civil War. While receiving great hate for these writings and even having one of his books banned, Whitman took this negative energy and continued doing what he loved. No matter how much hate he received, this hate never stopped him from writing what he wanted. Whitman accomplished the American dream of becoming a famous poet by writing what he wanted to write about despite the risk of having everyone against him.


¹⁴ Hutchinson


¹⁶ Sychterz, 13

¹⁷ Sychterz, 14

x Sychterz, 14


xii Hutchinson