***The Father of free verse  
  
introduction***Walt Whitman is often celebrated as America’s finest poet. But it was a different story when he was alive.

Whitman (1819-92) was ridiculed and ostracized during his lifetime. His seminal work -- "Leaves of Grass," a collection of free-verse poems -- was called by many obscene for its overt sexuality.

Even Whitman’s family was unimpressed with his work. When he brought the first copy home, his brother George dismissed it: “I saw the book -- didn’t read it at all -- didn’t think it worth reading -- fingered it a little."

But Walt didn’t care. He was writing for those who believed, as he did, that “whatever satisfies the soul is truth.”

Whitman had abandoned several occupations -- printer, teacher, editor, shopkeeper and house builder -- because he felt called to writing, in particular to writing poetry that explored nature and the self.

Whitman published the first edition of "Leaves of Grass" with his own money in 1855, then printed, distributed and promoted it himself. He knew the poetry was shocking, but he also knew that its bluntness was the source of its power. As he once said, “All faults may be forgiven of him who has perfect candor.”  
***Biography*** *Walt Whitman The Father of Free Verse The Poet of Democracy The Good, Gray Poet*

***Early Years*** *Born in 1819, “Era of Good Feeling” o End of Federalism, Democratic-Republic party gains power “Restless youth”, and of 9 children Office boy in NYC – love for literature Left school at 11*

*The Young Professional Journalist, fiction writer, poet, and printer Pre-civil war: Free Soil movement Leadership = ineffectual Union values best represented in hard working, patriotic citizens*

*Leaves of Grass Carried around a notebook everywhere Wrote 12 unnamed “vignettes” and published them in book titled Leaves of Grass First edition received praise and was widely distribute Criticisms: “profane and obscene” Revised until his death – 7 editions, almost 300 poems Work is known for…*

*Impact of Civil War 1862: Brother, George, wounded during Civil War battle 1863-64: moves to D.C. and cares for wounded soldiers Puts brother in asylum, another brother dies of alcoholism/tuberculosis, and a third is captured by the Confederacy Drumtaps Interviewed Confederate soldiers for pardons while working in D.C. Death of Lincoln inspired poem “O Captain, My Captain!”****Final Years*** *Suffered from paralysis and spent his last years immobile and with a housekeeper companion and her pets “The war saved me “ – visiting the wounded and acknowledging “…the strength of the republic lay in the spirit, conduct, and quiet heroism of its citizens”*

*Poet of Democracy Distinctly American voice: used regional dialect, slang, colloquialisms Wrote from the persona of America itself Invented poet form: free verse Themes: universal brotherhood = goal of America Addressed topics no other authors would talk about:*

*Humanism and Transcendentalism Humanism: philosophical/ethical belief that values humans for all of the positive qualities and potential they have within them o Appeals to rationalism > religion Transcendentalism: society and institutions can corrupt individuals by providing too much support, molding identity and belief systems Humanism …… Whitman ….. Transcendentalism*

*Assignment Answer questions for “O Me! O Life!” Class discussion “The Wound Dresser” Assignment o Based on the imagery and figurative language used in the poem, write a newspaper article about the conditions of hospitals during the Civil War. o Article should have at least two quotations from civilians/soldiers/doctors/etc…****Free Verse  
  
Definition of Free Verse*** *Free verse is a literary device that can be defined as poetry that is free from limitations of regular meter or rhythm, and does not rhyme with fixed forms. Such poems are without rhythm and rhyme schemes, do not follow regular rhyme scheme rules, yet still provide artistic expression. In this way, the poet can give his own shape to a poem however he or she desires. However, it still allows poets to use alliteration, rhyme, cadences, and rhythms to get the effects that they consider are suitable for the piece.*

***Function of Free Verse***

*Free verse is commonly used in contemporary poetry. Some poets have taken this technique as a freedom from rhythm and rhyme, because it changes people’s minds whimsically. Therefore, free verse is also called vers libre.  
The best thing about free verse is that poets can imagine the forms of any sound through intonations instead of meters. Free verse gives a greater freedom for choosing words, and conveying their meanings to the audience. Since it depends upon patterned elements like sounds, phrases, sentences, and words, it is free of artificiality of a typical poetic expression.****Features of Free Verse***

*Free verse poems have no regular meter or rhythm.*

*They do not follow a proper rhyme scheme; these poems do not have any set rules.*

*This type of poem is based on normal pauses and natural rhythmical phrases, as compared to the artificial constraints of normal poetry.*

*It is also called vers libre, which is a French word meaning “free verse.”*

***Examples of Free Verse in Literature***

*Example: A Noiseless Patient Spider (By* ***Walt Whitman****)  
Example: Soonest Mended (By* ***John Ashbury****)  
Example: Come Slowly, Eden (By* ***Emily Dickinson****)  
Example: The Garden (By* ***Ezra Pound****)* ***Walt Whitman as the father of free verse****In the early 19th century, poetry rhymed. Period. End of story. Free verse didn't exist yet, and anything that didn't descend from a long line of European traditions dictating style, content, and form was quickly dismissed as commoner's gobbly-gook. It might be called sentimental, perhaps moving, but not poetic.  
Walt Whitman changed all that. The ideal American poet, according to Whitman, did not elevate himself above the common man. He didn't hold fast to tradition for tradition's sake. And, above all, he did not identify with Europe, it's land, people or society. He was American through and through.  
Whitman wasn't preaching to the choir; his high-minded ideals directly contradicted everything about modern American poetry and American poets. He was preaching equality and free verse to sonnet-clinging elites. Moreover, while the Good Gray Poet is now known world-over as the father of free verse, when he published the first edition of Leaves of Grass in 1855 he was a nobody.  
But Whitman's audacity knew no bounds; he wasn't content with coming out of the woodwork to call out the literati, and he wasn't content to take risks with his style. At the age of eleven, Walt left school to begin a career that included stints in teaching, printing, publishing, and journalism. He learned how to set type, and he acquired a feel for popular culture and, in a sense, marketing. In turn, this would lead to his ultimate show of panache -- the promotion of his own work.  
Upon the debut of Leaves of Grass, Walt sent complimentary copies to a number of prominent literary figures (now a common promotion tactic, then a rare move of boldness). And when Ralph Waldo Emerson responded favorably to the copy he received, Whitman took the liberty to publish the response in the New York Daily Times without asking for Emerson's permission. He even went so far as to anonymously publish reviews of his own work in several newspapers. There would be no shortage of praise for Walt Whitman.  
But Whitman and his poetry were not well-received by all. His poetry was regarded by many as obscene, and he was frequently perceived to be arrogant beyond belief. When it came to light that Whitman had published a number of self-written reviews, needless to say, people were not pleased. And in 1882 the sixth edition of Leaves of Grass, by now his life's work, was prohibited from being published in the city of Boston on grounds of obscenity. However, despite, or perhaps because of, all the controversy surrounding him, Walt Whitman accomplished a feat that most poets and authors do not: he lived to see his work rise to prominence.  
Regardless whether you enjoy his poetry or agree with his methods, Whitman's audacity serves as an inspiration to us all. He's a reminder that sometimes you need more than talent; you need a bit of chutzpah, too.  
  
A well known Whitman Poem that is a perfect example of his free verse style is* ***" Song of Myself "*** *The poem has plenty of reference of democracy and freedom of being ones "self"  
  
Song to Myself  
by   
Walt Whitman  
  
  
I celebrate myself, and sing myself,   
And what I assume you shall assume,   
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.  
  
I loaf and and invite my soul,   
I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.  
  
  
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,   
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,   
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,   
Hoping to seize not till death.  
  
Creeds and schools in abeyance,   
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,   
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,   
Nature without check with original energy.*