

WALT WHITMAN

FRANKLIN EVANS



A TALE OF THE TIMES

Walt Whitman

Franklin Evans (A Tale of the Times)

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Declan Murphy

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Introduction

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A single indulgence swells into a tide that sweeps a young life through the eddies of ambition, temptation, and reform, testing where personal will ends and the currents of a changing nation begin.

Franklin Evans (A Tale of the Times) is Walt Whitman's early novel of temperance, first published in 1842 when he was a young journalist in New York. Known also as The Inebriate, it follows a provincial youth whose entry into urban life coincides with encounters that normalize and intensify alcohol use. Without revealing outcomes, the narrative establishes how sociability, work, and entertainment press upon a susceptible conscience, and how reformist ideals promise an alternative course. The book's premise is simple and forceful: the hazards of drink are not merely private lapses but public dramas, shaped by institutions, fashion, and the fast rhythms of a bustling republic.

The publication history situates the novel within the period's mass print culture. Appearing in the New York weekly the New World, it reached readers who consumed fiction alongside news, political commentary, and reform appeals. Such venues made moral narratives timely and portable, circulating them through a national network of cheap papers and pamphlets. Whitman, trained as a printer and active as a newspaperman, wrote into this environment, adopting forms and energies that suited a broad audience.

The subtitle's claim—a tale "of the times"—announces both topical urgency and a bid to capture the texture of everyday life as it was lived in streets, shops, ferries, and parlors.

As a temperance novel, Franklin Evans participates in a recognizable genre: the cautionary life-story that maps stages of exposure, enticement, rationalization, and crisis. Its scenes move between convivial spaces and domestic interiors, where habits acquire moral meaning and social consequences. The narrative strategy is direct, its moral horizon explicit, yet it is attentive to the circumstances that blur responsibility and complicate judgment. Rather than offering abstract debate, it dramatizes how custom, imitation, and opportunity shape behavior. In doing so, it treats alcohol not as an isolated vice but as a social technology—an instrument of belonging, escape, and bargaining in a competitive marketplace.

The book holds a kind of classic status, not as Whitman's crowning achievement, but as a key artifact of American reform literature and the poet's only full-length novel. It shows how popular fiction could mobilize sentiment, suspense, and instruction to address a recognizable public problem. The work's afterlife in classrooms and scholarship owes to its position at the crossroads of journalism, activism, and storytelling, and to the durability of its central theme. Long before addiction studies had modern vocabulary, Franklin Evans pressed readers to consider habit, compulsion, and responsibility in terms that remain intelligible today.

Placed within the larger temperance tradition, the novel precedes and stands alongside later bestsellers that made

the saloon and the parlor battlegrounds of character and community. Its strategies—vivid set-pieces, emblematic figures, and the steady accumulation of consequence—became hallmarks of mid-nineteenth-century social-problem fiction. While it cannot be credited with founding those conventions, it demonstrates their early consolidation in the 1840s and shows how a lively press could amplify them. The book's wide circulation confirms that moral narrative was not fringe literature but a central genre through which Americans argued about reform and pleasure, liberty and restraint.

Reading *Franklin Evans* also invites reflection on Whitman's development. The novel's preoccupation with social bonds, crowd life, and the frictions of a heterogeneous city anticipates concerns that would occupy the poet in later work, even as the styles differ. Here, the method is didactic and plot-driven; later, Whitman would seek capacious, inclusive forms. Yet the sympathy with ordinary experience—the worker's day, the commuter's drift, the pressures of status and belonging—already animates this story. For students of literary history, the book provides an early register of Whitman's fascination with the American multitude and the moral weather of its streets.

The central figure is rendered as both individual and type: a young American negotiating the passage from rural familiarity to urban complexity. The novel tracks how companionship, employment, and entertainment routines create a scaffold for drinking, and how respectable surfaces can hide fragile foundations. Without disclosing particulars, it charts a sequence of tests in which small decisions

compound, mentors and associates exert force, and environments educate as powerfully as any sermon. The city, in this telling, is an instructor—dazzling, permissive, and exacting—while the countryside offers memory, contrast, and occasionally a mirage of safety.

Whitman's approach recognizes that alcohol's appeal is not solely chemical; it is social, aesthetic, and economic. Scenes in households, workplaces, and public venues ask who profits from indulgence, who pays its costs, and how communities allocate sympathy and blame. The book explores the interplay of agency and circumstance: how personal vows contend with peer ritual, how marketplace rhythms overtake private intention, and how reform organizations seek to convert individual crises into collective witness. It is attentive to gendered expectations as well, observing how domestic ideals and public reputations become entangled in the policing of behavior.

Stylistically, the novel mixes brisk narrative with moments of sentiment and moral emphasis. Its prose favors clarity and movement over ornament, reflecting the newspaper training of its author and the impatience of a general readership. Episodes are staged for immediacy—recognizable settings, swift turns, and a rhetoric that presses the lesson without eclipsing the human texture. The effect is neither purely documentary nor purely melodramatic; rather, it is a hybrid suited to reform aims, where persuasion depends on felt experience as much as on principle. The pacing keeps the social argument in view while honoring the momentum of story.

Reception history deepens its interest. Contemporary readers ensured the book a broad audience, confirming that temperance fiction could command attention beyond meeting halls. In later years, Whitman publicly minimized the novel's artistic value, and critics long read it primarily as a curiosity beside his poetry. Yet modern scholarship has revisited Franklin Evans as a revealing window onto the print economy of the 1840s, the culture of reform, and the early career of a major American writer. Its preservation in editions and archives reflects not nostalgia alone, but the enduring utility of the text for understanding its moment.

For contemporary readers, the novel's questions remain vital. How do communities balance pleasure and public health? What structures enable or hinder recovery from destructive habits? Where do market incentives collide with moral responsibility? Franklin Evans addresses these matters in the idiom of its time, but the dynamics it depicts recur wherever advertising, peer culture, and stress meet limited resources for care. The book endures because its story of susceptibility and resolve is also a study of citizenship—how a nation educates desire, disciplines harm, and imagines compassion. Its relevance lives in ongoing debates about agency, support, and the common good.

Synopsis

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Franklin Evans (A Tale of the Times), published in 1842, is Walt Whitman's temperance novel, narrated in the first person by its title character. Framed as a moral and social case history rather than a romantic adventure, it traces the making and unmaking of a young man within the ferment of antebellum America. Issued in New York in a mass-circulation format, the book participates in reform literature, using a confessional voice to connect private habit with public consequence. Without allegory, it moves through workplaces, boardinghouses, parlors, and streets, asking how ordinary temptations and rationalizations accumulate into patterns that shape one life.

At the outset, Franklin is a country-bred youth seeking opportunity beyond the farm. He arrives in New York City with modest expectations and a belief in steady work as a path to advancement. Urban novelty exerts a pull: new acquaintances, convivial routines, and the sense that small indulgences are part of belonging. The narrative dwells on early sips and social customs, showing alcohol as a lubricant of commerce and friendship. What begins as courtesy becomes habit. Franklin's perspective, candid yet uncritical, records how thresholds slide: from taking a glass to avoid offense, to lingering in company, to measuring the day by occasions to drink.

The city furnishes settings where appetite and respectability mingle. Boardinghouses promise supervision

but also provide ready companions; theaters, saloons, and oyster cellars offer spectacle alongside liquor. Franklin gravitates toward figures who seem worldly and generous, and he adopts their rhythms. Whitman's scenes emphasize the ordinariness of temptation, the absence of a single villain, and the power of example. Minor lapses—tardiness, neglect of letters home, careless spending—introduce a pattern. The narrator's self-assurance contrasts with hints of concern from employers or guardians. In this middle ground, where amusement masks drift, the novel locates the beginnings of dependency as a social, not purely private, phenomenon.

As consequences gather, Franklin seeks fresh starts through relocation and new employment. The story moves between city and countryside and includes a sojourn in the South, where he works under patrons who value order and decorum. There he observes plantation life and the institution of slavery, which the novel presents within the conventions of its time while acknowledging its human costs. These chapters widen the frame from individual habit to regional custom, showing how drinking practices, hospitality, and hierarchy reinforce one another. Change of scene brings temporary stability, yet the same vulnerabilities—loneliness, vanity, and a desire to please—remain close at hand.

Relationships enter as both refuge and test. Franklin forms attachments that promise domesticity and moral steadiness, and marriage is depicted as a potential barrier against waywardness. Yet the demands of household economy, expectations of trust, and the omnipresence of

convivial culture strain these bonds. Whitman tracks the subtle misalignments that drinking produces: secrecy, broken promises, social embarrassment, and financial shortfalls. The novel's women, variously caretaking, admonitory, or endangered, register the social impact of a habit often minimized as private. Without dwelling on sensational detail, the narrative shows how affection and duty can be eroded by patterns of avoidance and self-excuse.

Into this conflict steps organized reform. Franklin attends temperance meetings, hears persuasive oratory, and takes pledges championed by societies that rely on voluntary commitment. The attractions are real: a clean break, public support, and the dignity of self-command. Equally real are the frictions—the ubiquity of drink in business, the skepticism of peers, and the strain of making abstinence a daily practice in a culture of toasts. Episodes of improvement and backsliding are narrated without technical analysis, instead emphasizing motive, mood, and circumstance. The temperance movement appears as both moral amplifier and fragile shield, powerful in resolve yet vulnerable to ordinary pressure.

The novel's middle sections show the institutional textures around addiction. Employment proves precarious as reliability falters; debt becomes an instrument of dependence; and legal entanglements loom when disorder spills into public view. Whitman portrays benevolent acquaintances, stern authorities, and opportunists, leaving causality distributed rather than fixed. Franklin's self-justifications alternate with moments of alarm, and the

narrative records illnesses and shocks that punctuate his trajectory. City life—its anonymity, credit systems, and entertainment economy—appears as an ecosystem in which a single weakness multiplies consequences. Still, the voice remains personal and reflective, concerned with what a different choice might have prevented or repaired.

Stylistically, the book blends reportage with sentimental convention. Episodes are brisk, moralized, and vividly situated, yielding an episodic progress that mirrors vacillation. Sober counsel often arrives through emblematic characters; peril emerges through commonplace scenes rather than extremes. Regional shifts—from urban bustle to rural quiet to southern estates—underscore that the problem is national in scale, knitted into hospitality, labor, and leisure. Whitman also includes social types familiar to the era’s readers, using them to outline class expectations and vulnerabilities. The didactic aim is plain, yet the narrative keeps attention on lived detail, so the argument proceeds through accumulated experience rather than abstract claims.

Without anticipating specific turns, the closing movement consolidates the book’s warning and appeal. Franklin’s story advances the temperance argument by showing how ordinary sociability can harden into ruinous habit, and how reform requires more than intention. Beyond its immediate purpose, the novel stands as an early Whitman effort and a document of antebellum reform culture, shaped by urban growth, regional contrast, and debates over personal responsibility. Its endurance lies in the questions it poses rather than any single resolution: What helps a person

change? What do communities normalize or resist? The tale's broader message stresses vigilance, mutual aid, and the costs of fashionable indulgence.

Historical Context

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Franklin Evans (A Tale of the Times) is framed by the early 1840s United States, with New York City and its environs as a principal setting. This was a decade of rapid urban growth, bustling docks, and crowded boardinghouses, where churches, reform societies, newspapers, courts, and taverns all contended for influence over daily life. The city's teeming streets dramatized the era's defining institutions: a commercial marketplace fueled by finance and trade; evangelical congregations eager to reform morals; and an expanding print culture that popularized debates about vice and virtue. Into this environment, Whitman places a cautionary narrative about alcohol, mobility, and ambition amid the social currents of the metropolis.

The novel appeared in 1842, first in the *New World*, a New York weekly known for its large circulation and taste for popular and reform literature, and then as a separate pamphlet. Whitman, in his early twenties, had recently moved from Long Island and Brooklyn into Manhattan's journalistic world, working as a printer and editor. The *New World*'s inexpensive formats and national reach exemplified the democratization of reading in the period. Franklin Evans aligned with a dominant genre—temperance fiction—whose sensational plots and moral lessons promised both entertainment and reform-minded instruction to a mass audience.

The temperance movement had been building since the 1820s, drawing energy from the evangelical Second Great Awakening. The American Temperance Society, formed in 1826, encouraged pledge-taking and “moral suasion,” urging individuals to forswear spirits to improve family life and social order. By the 1830s and early 1840s, temperance addresses, tracts, and periodicals proliferated. Franklin Evans echoes these currents by staging the dangers of drink as a public problem and a private tragedy. Its narrative voice and didactic episodes mirror the rhetoric of reform—depicting alcohol as a catalyst for disorder and poverty, while narrating repentance and self-mastery as attainable social and personal remedies.

A distinctive strand of temperance activism in Whitman’s years was the Washingtonian movement, launched by workingmen in Baltimore in 1840. Its hallmark was the testimonial of the “reformed drunkard,” whose confession created powerful emotional identification in lecture halls and print. The movement spread quickly through northeastern cities, including New York, where mass meetings filled large venues in 1841-1843. Franklin Evans borrows from this convention: the protagonist’s descent and hoped-for recovery resemble testimonial arcs designed to persuade by example. The novel’s emphasis on first-person moral awakening reflects the Washingtonians’ shift from abstract sermonizing toward vivid, personal narrative as a reform tool.

New York’s explosive growth in the decades after the Erie Canal opened in 1825 provided the urban backdrop that Whitman knew intimately. The canal made the city the

nation's premier port, drawing clerks, sailors, artisans, and migrants into densely built neighborhoods. Boardinghouses and printshops abutted theaters, dance halls, and grog-shops. The novel's urban temptations—easy access to liquor, speculative work, casual sociability—were part of a city where leisure and vice were strongly commercialized. Places like the Bowery and Five Points became symbols of both democratic energy and moral alarm, while reform societies sought to impose order through meetings, tracts, and charity.

The Panic of 1837 and its prolonged aftermath formed another key context. The collapse of credit and the lingering depression into the early 1840s threw many out of work and sharpened debates about personal responsibility and structural causes of poverty. Reformers frequently connected economic distress to intemperance, arguing that sobriety would stabilize households and labor discipline. Franklin Evans voices anxieties familiar to readers who had seen businesses fail and families displaced. Its story draws on a milieu where economic precarity heightened scrutiny of male habits, and where a single misstep—excess drink, gambling, or absenteeism—could derail employment and respectability.

Alcohol pervaded everyday life in early nineteenth-century America. Per capita consumption of distilled spirits peaked around 1830, and workplace drinking—at noon, during “treats,” and at celebrations—remained common well into the 1840s. Reformers attacked the convivial customs that normalized intoxication and the credit-based “treating system” that pressured men to drink in groups.

Franklin Evans repeatedly underscores how ordinary and socially sanctioned drinking occasions could slide into ruin. The novel's warnings align with contemporary temperance tracts that targeted tavern culture, dram shops, and the convivial bonds of male sociability that reformers saw as breeding grounds for dependency and vice.

Legal and policing debates also shaped the climate in which Whitman wrote. States experimented with licensing and regulation of retail liquor in the 1830s and 1840s, and some localities tried partial prohibitions or Sunday closing rules. In New York, enforcement was uneven and politicized, with municipal officers struggling to manage densely clustered drinking places. Calls for more systematic urban governance culminated in a reorganization of the city's police in 1845. Franklin Evans participates in this regulatory conversation less by proposing specific statutes than by insisting that intemperance produced social costs that courts, almshouses, and charities were already paying.

Gender ideology was central to temperance rhetoric. Middle-class reformers promoted the domestic ideal of a sober, industrious male breadwinner and a morally vigilant wife and mother. Women organized their own temperance groups, including Martha Washington societies, and used petitions, pledges, and parlor meetings to press for change. Franklin Evans draws on this discourse by foregrounding the harms that male drinking inflicts on households, highlighting endangered domestic stability and female suffering without necessarily granting women formal power. The novel thereby participates in a broader antebellum moral

economy that located civic virtue, and the stakes of reform, within the home.

Immigration and class tensions complicated temperance politics. In the 1840s, arrivals from Ireland and the German states increased, and nativist commentators often linked immigrant neighborhoods with drinking culture. Reform messaging sometimes carried ethnic and class overtones, presenting temperance as a hallmark of native-born Protestant respectability. New York's partisan struggles also turned saloons and taverns into organizing hubs. Franklin Evans reflects these realities by depicting drinking as interwoven with urban class performance and peer pressure, while largely speaking from a mainstream, reformist perspective that assumes the norms and voice of the city's English-speaking Protestant middle strata.

Race and antislavery agitation formed another current in Whitman's New York. Although slavery ended in New York State in 1827, the city's economy was deeply tied to Southern cotton, and abolitionist organizing in the 1830s provoked fierce backlash, including anti-abolition riots in 1834. Black New Yorkers created churches, mutual aid associations, and temperance societies that positioned sobriety as a means of survival and citizenship in a hostile environment. While Franklin Evans focuses on alcohol rather than race politics, it emerges from a city where reform, labor, and racial hierarchies collided, and where the rhetoric of self-discipline bore different stakes across racial lines.

Mobility—geographic and social—was a hallmark of the age. Ferries connected Brooklyn and Manhattan; steamboats moved passengers along the coast and rivers;

early railroads stitched together towns and markets. Young men left farms for clerking jobs; itinerant printers and teachers followed opportunities. Such movement animates temperance fiction, where relocation often signals both aspiration and vulnerability to temptation. Franklin Evans relies on precisely this world of constant movement, in which the speed of travel and the anonymity of the city could loosen the constraints of family oversight while multiplying occasions for both advancement and moral peril.

The print ecosystem that carried the novel to readers was itself a technological and economic story. Steam-powered presses, stereotyping, and machine-made paper reduced costs and enabled long runs. Mammoth weeklies and cheap pamphlets reprinted British novels, American speeches, and reform tracts for a national market. The New World specialized in such dissemination, pairing entertainment with instruction. Franklin Evans benefited from this infrastructure, reaching readers far beyond Manhattan. Its publication method illustrates how midcentury reform culture piggybacked on commercial innovations, making moral persuasion a mass commodity in the same channels that sold sensational fiction.

Popular entertainment in the 1840s ranged from theaters and minstrel shows to lecture halls and lyceums. Temperance became a stage genre as well, with dramas and monologues that moved audiences to tears and pledges; by 1844, plays like *The Drunkard* were drawing crowds in Boston and beyond. New York hosted huge temperance meetings in venues such as the Broadway Tabernacle,

where orators fused storytelling with reform appeals. Franklin Evans stands at the intersection of these modes—its episodic structure and melodramatic scenes resemble the performance culture of its day, while its explicit moral framing dovetails with lecture-hall appeals to conscience.

Whitman's own path helps explain the book's tone. Born in 1819 and raised on Long Island, he worked as a journeyman printer, a country schoolteacher, and by 1842 a Manhattan editor for Democratic-leaning papers. He wrote short fiction and reform sketches to suit periodical markets. Franklin Evans fits this apprenticeship: it is topical, urgent, and tailored to popular reform tastes. In later years, Whitman disparaged the novel and minimized its literary value, but it documents his immersion in urban journalism and his keen eye for crowds, streets, and the social performances that would remain central to his later writing, however transformed in idiom.

The novel's initial reach owed much to its serial format and to the appetite for temperance narratives in the early 1840s. While precise sales figures are uncertain, its circulation through the New World and as an inexpensive pamphlet ensured broad exposure among readers who might never purchase a bound novel. Over time, Franklin Evans receded behind Whitman's later poetry, especially *Leaves of Grass* (first published in 1855), yet scholars have returned to it as a representative artifact of antebellum reform fiction and urban sensationalism, attentive to its documentary value and to the networks that produced and consumed it.

Taken together, these contexts reveal Franklin Evans as a mirror and critique of its era. It channels the evangelical and Washingtonian appeal to self-reform, reflects the market-driven city's anxieties about disorder, and dramatizes the domestic costs reformers sought to prevent. It engages with legal and institutional debates about regulation, with the technologies that enabled mass persuasion, and with class and ethnic tensions that shaped the reception of temperance rhetoric. Though Whitman later distanced himself from it, the novel captures, with period-typical melodrama, the crosscurrents of commerce, reform, and urban modernity that defined the early 1840s.

Author Biography

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Walt Whitman (1819–1892) was an American poet, essayist, and journalist whose work transformed poetry's form and scope in the nineteenth century. Writing amid the rapid expansion, conflict, and reconstruction of the United States, he forged a vernacular, capacious style that sought to encompass the nation's diversity. His lifelong project, *Leaves of Grass*, used free verse, catalogs, and a boldly personal voice to propose a democratic poetics. Whitman also wrote prose reflections on culture and politics and composed elegies that helped readers reckon with the Civil War's losses. Revered and contested in his own time, he later became a foundational figure for modern and contemporary poetry.

Whitman's formal schooling ended early, and he educated himself through wide reading, apprenticeship in printing offices, and practical work in classrooms and newsrooms. He absorbed influences from Shakespeare and the King James Bible to opera and popular oratory, and he engaged with currents associated with American Transcendentalism. Ralph Waldo Emerson's call for a national poet encouraged Whitman's ambitions, and their subsequent correspondence affirmed his direction. Exposure to the press, politics, and public entertainments shaped his ear for colloquial speech and public address. These experiences, more than institutional study, informed his experiments with free verse, the mingling of high and

everyday diction, and subject matter drawn from ordinary life.

Before establishing his reputation as a poet, Whitman worked as a printer, schoolteacher, and journalist, rising to editorial posts at several newspapers, including a Brooklyn daily. In the late 1840s he traveled to New Orleans to work for a paper there, encountering the slave economy and the widening geography of the United States. He also tried his hand at fiction, publishing the temperance novel *Franklin Evans* in the 1840s. By mid-century he turned decisively to poetry, self-publishing the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in the 1850s. He oversaw its design and presentation, signaling a break with convention in both typographic exuberance and poetic method.

Leaves of Grass became an evolving life's work. Whitman repeatedly expanded and rearranged it across multiple editions, adding new poems and retitling or revising earlier ones. The book's frank celebration of the body and desire, its catalogs of labor and landscape, and its assertion of a representative "I" drew both admiration and censure. Emerson praised the early volume, while others condemned it as indecent. A later edition faced suppression in Boston in the early 1880s, after which Whitman republished it elsewhere to strong sales. Through these cycles of controversy and growth, his free-verse line, rhythmic cadences, and inclusive ambitions reshaped expectations for American poetry.

The Civil War profoundly marked Whitman's life and work. After a family member was wounded, he went south to visit and then remained in Washington, D.C., where he

spent years volunteering in military hospitals and took clerical posts in federal offices. The experience informed *Drum-Taps* and its sequel, which included major elegies for Abraham Lincoln such as *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* and *O Captain! My Captain!* He also recorded scenes and reflections in prose that later appeared in *Specimen Days*. These writings blend intimate attention to suffering with a broader meditation on national trauma, endurance, and the meanings of union.

Alongside war writings, Whitman developed a critique and defense of democratic culture in essays later gathered as *Democratic Vistas*. He gave public lectures, including an address on Lincoln that he delivered repeatedly, and continued issuing new poems and prose in late-life collections. Health problems, including a stroke in the 1870s, reduced his mobility, and he settled in Camden, New Jersey, while supervising further editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Volumes such as *November Boughs* and *Good-Bye My Fancy* reflect a reflective, sometimes austere late style. Throughout, he maintained his advocacy for a distinctly American language of poetry and for expansive sympathy across social divisions.

Whitman died in 1892, shortly after issuing a final, consolidated deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*. His legacy has grown across continents and generations. Poets in many languages have drawn on his long, flexible line, his catalogs, and his embrace of ordinary people. Modernists and later movements, including the Beat generation, found in him a precedent for candor and amplitude; writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Pablo Neruda acknowledged debts. In