

PROVIDENCE ATHENAEUM – Wheaton College student essay, Whitman, 2016.

Cephas Giovanni Thompson. *Sarah Helen Whitman* (1838). Oil on canvas, H.31.25 in (70 cm) x W.27.25 in (49.5 cm) in frame. Gift of William F. Channing, 1884.

Writer, spiritualist, and transcendentalist, Sarah Helen Power Whitman [1803-1878] was a devout patron of the Athenaeum and an intellectual standout in the city at a time of remarkable cultural ferment. For this reason, a portrait of Whitman by painter Cephas Giovanni Thompson deserves its place of honor in the Athenaeum, where she was a dedicated user and a familiar face. Rendered with a pink sash that falls daringly from her widow's cap, and a sidelong gaze breaking the parameters of the picture's frame, Whitman embodies the very profile that today serves as the Athenaeum's logo: like the ancient Greek goddess Athena, she too was a steward of intellectual life and culture.

Whitman was a well read classicist, a Virgil enthusiast, and often dressed in the robes and helmet of Athena at intellectual gatherings.¹ She found joy in reading and translating supernatural ballads, the writings of Goethe and Victor Hugo, and she corresponded regularly with other writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Margaret Fuller.² In 1829, her first published poem "Retrospection," simply signed "Helen," appeared in Sarah J. Hale's *Ladies Magazine*, and as she gained recognition thereafter, in 1853 her first collection of poems, *The Hours of Life and Other Poems*, was published under the aegis of George H. Whitney, a Providence bookseller and publisher.³

A steward of intellectual life in nineteenth-century Providence, Whitman was a respected and primary hostess of many salons, selecting the works of favored authors and procuring special guest speakers. These gatherings were typically held in her home at 76 Benefit Street, although the house number changed to 88 sometime after 1859.⁴ Her home served as an intellectual center, having seen many prominent Providence residents such as James Freeman Clark and Editor Horace Greeley, who routinely published her poems in his *New York Tribune*.⁵

While America grew obsessed with industrialization, the New England avant-garde, led by transcendentalists such as Whitman, opened new avenues to the spiritual.⁶ Indeed, Whitman's thriving intellectual life underscores the fascinating bipolarity of American intellectual life, seemingly flash-frozen within the walls of the Athenaeum: the industrial working streets of Providence required skill, vocation, and capital, yet a growing New England also required dreamers like Whitman.

Unfortunately, Whitman has never received her full literary due. Editors of acclaimed journals such as Harpers would coax poems from her with the promise of publication, only to include her

¹ Brett Rutherford, Introduction to Sarah Helen Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe, *Last Flowers: The Romance Poems of Edgar Allan Poe and Sarah Helen Whitman* (Providence Rhode Island: the Poets Press, 2011), xvii.

² Rutherford, xvii.

³ Rutherford, *Last Flowers*, xvii, and, *The Raven Circles* (Providence Athenaeum, 1959), 17.

⁴ "The New England Poetess," Sarah Helen Whitman-Poeana (Providence, Rhode Island: 1803-1878), 1.

For more information on Whitman's moves, see John Hutchins Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development of Providence, 1636-1950*

Information found in *The Raven Circles* by...Doris, July 12 1959

⁵ *Raven Circles*, 17

⁶ Rutherford, *Last Flowers*, xvii.

work anonymously.⁷ In her own time, she emerged as Providence's "civic" poet, often called upon to write and recite a poem for the dedication of a monument: for example, she read "The Drama" (from *Hours of Life*) at the opening of Shakespeare Hall, a theatre in Providence now serving as a commercial building, and "Memorial Hymn" (from *Poems*, 1879) for the dedication of the Rhode Island Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument located in Kennedy Plaza.⁸

Her reputation has often been eclipsed, as well, by her habitual attachment to Edgar Allan Poe [1809-1849]; given her brief engagement to the writer in 1948, she is often reduced to a two-dimensional image as his passionate, but failed, love interest. Poe first noticed Whitman in 1845 after speaking at the Franklin Lyceum: often told with wistful romanticism, the tale goes that Poe first observed Whitman in her garden on Benefit Street. Soon after, their relationship blossomed within the sunlit nooks of the Athenaeum when Poe signed his name in the library's copy of George Hooker Colton's *American Whig Review*, claiming his authorship of an anonymously published poem "Ulalume", a heart wrenching piece written shortly after the death of his wife, Virginia Eliza Clemm Poe, in 1847.⁹

Whitman, praising "Ulalume" as "perhaps the most original and weirdly suggestive of all his poems," grew captivated of the poet, later agreeing to his marriage proposal in 1848.¹⁰ Unfortunately, their short-lived romance came to an end in the Athenaeum on December 23rd, 1848, when someone (whose name is now unknown) handed Whitman a note that revealed Poe's lingering drinking habits, compelling her to end the engagement.¹¹

At the Athenaeum's fifteenth Annual Meeting in November 1884, Whitman's literary executor, Dr. William F. Channing presented the Athenaeum with Whitman's portrait.¹² In a letter written to the Athenaeum on October 27th, 1884, Channing explained the painting was given to him by Mrs. Whitman during the last year of her life, and in accepting it, he assured her "that it should be placed, at some future time, where it could be seen by all her friends."¹³ (Adding further interest to the work, Channing fitted the painting with a frame originally from famed portraitist Gilbert Stuart, [1755-1828].)¹⁴ It is a measure of Whitman's early self-confidence that, as a recent widow of thirty-five and quite new to Providence, she had commissioned this portrait of herself in the first place. Later in her life this choice had paid off, for Whitman's modest reputation as a poet and Poe's former fiancée attracted admirers who solicited copies of the painting. In response, she requested copies of Thompson's 1838 portrait while eventually gifting the original to the Athenaeum.¹⁵

The creator of this striking image, Cephas Giovanni Thompson [1809-1888], son of the better known portrait painter Cephas Thompson, was a Providence resident and a member of the

⁷ Rutherford, *Last Flowers*, xvi.

⁸ Whitman, Sarah Helen (1803-1878), Portrait Collection, Brown University Office of the Curator, <http://library.brown.edu/cds/portraits/display.php?idno=114>, 19 February 2016.

⁹ Eugene L. Didier, *The Life and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Haskell House Publishers LTD.), 101.

¹⁰ Didier, *Life and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 103.

¹¹ Jane Landcaster, *Inquire Within* (Providence Athenaeum, 2004), 79.

¹² Reference Binder, Providence Athenaeum.

¹³ A letter by William F. Channing, Providence Athenaeum, October 27, 1884.

¹⁴ A letter by William F. Channing, Providence Athenaeum, October 27, 1884.

¹⁵ Whitman, Sarah Helen (1803-1878), Portrait Collection, Brown University Office of the Curator, <http://library.brown.edu/cds/portraits/display.php?idno=114>, 19 February 2016.

prestigious National Academy of Design in New York. His painting studio was located on the third floor in the Arcade, Providence's oldest indoor shopping center and the original home of the Providence Athenaeum (before it merged with the Providence Library Company in 1836, to form the current Providence Athenaeum).¹⁶ It was here where he painted many portraits of prominent people, including Whig Party member and State Senator Henry Bowen Anthony and Whitman herself. In 1839, a year after he painted Whitman, Thompson left Providence for Italy, settling in Rome where he remained for many years.¹⁷

Thompson's painting, which is said to be unfinished, is unique in that it does not simply depict a polite and demure woman.¹⁸ Although Whitman appears haloed with full, glossy ringlets, there is an underlying tone of rebellion in her expression and pose: a sign of tension may be detected in her angular jaw, and rather than passively sitting, the forward twist of her shoulders and far gaze indicate action. In 1828 Whitman had begun her married life in Boston with John Winslow Whitman, a young lawyer and author, who died unexpectedly in 1838, leaving her a childless widow. Unable to support herself through her writing, she moved that year to Providence—the same year the Athenaeum first opened its doors on Benefit Street—where she lived with her mother and sister. It was in that first year of her widowhood that she posed for Thompson—choosing, rather stridently, to avoid the conventional widow's black that women of the era would have worn for at least the first year of mourning.¹⁹

In a 1921 article for the *Boston Sunday Herald*, Margaret Emerson Bailey expressed a mixture of astonishment and admiration at the way the poet chose to represent herself: "It is neither irrelevant nor flippant matter, then, that the portrait of Mrs. Sarah Helen Whitman, which hangs in the Athenaeum in Providence, should first draw attention by its bright notes of color; by the warm blue shawl, by the indecorous pink streamers of the widow's cap."²⁰ Apart from the pastel shades of her bonnet and the airiness of her signature muslin dress, Whitman's determined sidelong and stern jaw project action into the future, her intellectual endeavors exceeding the limits of the frame.

A multi-faceted poetess immersed in the politics and dreams of her native Rhode Island, Whitman's "indecorous" pink streamers emblazon the interior of the Athenaeum today, where she has indeed been seen by many friends.

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¹⁶ Cephas Giovanni Thompson 1809-1888, Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁷ Cephas Giovanni Thompson (Manuscript), Rhode Island Historical Society

¹⁹ Lancaster, 75.

²⁰ Margaret Emerson Bailey, "When Poe First Met His Helen, A Woman Free in Mind and Spirit," *Boston Sunday Herald*, 6 February 1921.