

FRANKLIN EVANS, EL BORRACHO.

Walt Whitman. Ed. Carme Manuel, trans. Sergio Saiz.

Colección Letras Universales: Cátedra, 2012

ISBN: 978-84376-2962-9. 362 pp.

ESTHER DE LA PEÑA

Universidad de Sevilla

estherdlp@hotmail.com

This volume, edited by Carme Manuel and accurately translated by Sergio Saiz, is the first Spanish edition of Whitman's only novel, *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate*, first published in 1842, as an extra installment in Benjamin's *New World*. In this edition, Carme Manuel's commendable undertaking not only explores Whitman's life and work thoroughly within his milieu, but also reveals glimpses of Whitman's point of departure for his approach to literature, particularly his evolution and development as a poet, which will culminate in the colossal *Leaves of Grass*.

Readers who are primarily interested in the socio-cultural movement of that period of American History will find in this volume a more than complete introduction of 138 pages, a rigorously annotated text, and a very extensive bibliography. Carmen Manuel's capacious knowledge of American intellectual history is clearly manifested in this edition, in her scrupulous attention to historical details, and relevant political and socio-cultural commentaries through an impeccable prose that will certainly appeal to the reader, beyond the quality of the novel.

Indeed, not many people know that Walt Whitman began his career as a novelist with the writing of the first temperance novel of his time, *Franklin Evans*, which became his most popular work in the 19th century, selling around two thousand copies. Despite being a best-seller at the time, as a novel, *Franklin Evans* has mostly been neglected for its plot discordance and formulaic cliché narrative. As a matter of fact, Carme Manuel starts her complete introduction with the acknowledgement of Whitman's own disavowing review, which is followed by a comprehensive analysis of

Whitman's biography and early literary career where *Franklin Evans* appears as a representative work of the temperance novel genre.

Franklin Evans tells the story of a countryman, a farmer's apprentice, who seeks fortune in the city, and initiates a journey that will involve him in constant follies and misadventures, with the central motif of alcohol. The novel reveals certain plot inconsistencies and contradictions throughout the story (like his impulsive trip South and marriage to Margaret, a slave woman; the interludes about a Native American drama; and the strokes of luck from which Franklin Evans benefits). In all, the novel focuses on the moralizing conception of the drunkard as a destructive social outcast, like most subsequent narratives written during the temperance movement in the mid-to-late 19th and early 20th centuries. Steeped in the Washingtonian ideologies, the didactic role of Whitman's novel was to prevent future drunkards, and to propagate the beliefs that had to be foisted on the people, and thus, on the nation. In his utopian alcohol-free American society, Franklin Evans emerges as the last intemperate man who finally signs the pledge to mark the end of American intemperance. In the words of Jackson, homiletic literature, such as temperance narratives, "built networks of reform translating individuals into communities of action that read religious fictions as experiential templates for their own lives" (644). In this light, the reader of *Franklin Evans* is sought to get involved in the reform project of internal and external moral behavior. The message culminates in the last chapter, when the Washingtonian pledge is proclaimed and celebrated to praise temperance as the key to the regeneration of the people.

Carne Manuel also adds an important contribution to this edition when she points out other significant lines of interest, made evident through a close analysis of *Franklin Evans*' narrative in context. The editor explores how the political and socio-cultural ideologies of the Temperance movement emerged and evolved, shaping the mores and conventions of Walt Whitman in Antebellum America. The editor devotes a great deal of attention to explaining and contextualizing how the major figures of the time influenced Whitman's ideology and writing. Thus, the relationship between Whitman and the environment, notably urban surroundings, is clearly manifested as anti-urban in *Franklin Evans*, in open contradiction to Whitman's early feelings about the country. In this light, and very appropriately too, Carne Manuel informs the reader widely about the historical relevance of New York City at the time and its crucial role during the rise of the Temperance

movement. Likewise, *Franklin Evans* shows Whitman as a proslavery apologist (Klammer, 1995). The connection between racial issues and alcohol appears clearly when Franklin Evans marries the Creole woman under the effects of alcohol, after succumbing to her “dark” charms. At this point, Manuel endeavors to gather inclusive bibliographic references to provide the reader with a wide scope of studies and opinions about the vocabulary used by Whitman, as well as its multiple interpretations in relation to this topic. Thus, according to Castiglia and Hendler, the temperance narrative reaches its highest moralizing teaching when “the drunkard, at his lowest point, is often described as a man who has figuratively and often literally lost his whiteness, whose skin has taken on an ‘unnatural redness’ or still darker tones” (lvi).

In this manner, Carme Manuel makes a remarkable contribution with her first edition of *Franklin Evans*, a broadly instructive volume in which she traces the evolution of Walt Whitman, from conservative prejudiced views as a journalist to his later visionary ideas as a poet. Therefore, from the representative cliché of *Franklin Evans*, readers can now acknowledge Whitman’s evolution, passion and force in his discourse, when years later he would return to this theme in his masterpiece *Leaves of Grass*: “A drunkard's breath, unwholesome eater's face, ve- nerealee's flesh,/ Lungs rotting away piecemeal, stomach sour and can- kerous,/ Joints rheumatic, bowels clogged with abomination” (415).

In conclusion, we can only be grateful for Carme Manuel’s success in helping the reader understand and appreciate Whitman’s literary birth, transformation and embodiment of the *summa americanensis*, representative man of the 19th century milieu, through a comprehensive edition of his only novel *Franklin Evans*.

WORKS CITED

- CASTIGLIA, Christopher and Glenn Hendler. “Introduction.” Walt Whitman. *Franklin Evans, or the Inebriate: A Tale of the Times*. Eds. Christopher Castiglia and Glenn Handler. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

JACKSON, Gregory S. *The Word and Its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

KLAMMER, Martin. *Whitman, Slavery and the Emergence of "Leaves of Grass."* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.

WHITMAN, Walt. *Leaves of Grass, 1860: The 150th Anniversary Facsimile Edition*. Jason STACY, ed. University of Iowa Press, 1970.