Walt Whitman is primarily known as the author of Leaves of Grass. However, from 1841 to 1848, when he was in his twenties, he published approximately 24 short stories and 1 temperature novel in New York periodicals—newspapers and magazines.

Literary critics and biographers have long believed Whitman’s fiction was “pretty terrible” and, therefore, unpopular. But the stories were widely circulated and often reprinted in 19th-century periodicals.

Using periodical databases, I have discovered 324 reprints of Whitman’s fiction since 2010, including “The Tomb-Blossoms” from the United States Magazine and Democratic Review, January 1842. Historical print periodicals may be illegible and/or unavailable, and digital scans can also be illegible and/or of low quality.

Choosing the source text for encoding projects is a difficult editorial decision. In this case, I chose the original periodical printing over later, revised versions of the short fiction. TEI guidelines do not have a specific set of instructions for encoding short stories originally published in 19th-century periodicals. But there are guidelines for prose texts and for structural elements that appear in periodicals.

This project can serve as the foundation for The Walt Whitman Archive’s future work with the fiction and the reprints because the reprints share many of the same features as the original printings. However, they also introduce new challenges, including editorial changes. For example, “The Tomb-Blossoms” was reprinted under variant titles, because the reprints share many of the same features as the original printings. However, they also introduce new challenges, including editorial changes. For example, “The Tomb-Blossoms” was reprinted under variant titles, including “The Tomb-Flowers” in 1881 and “Her Offerings” in 1892.

I hope to create data visualizations based on the metadata I have recorded for each reprint in order to document trends in national and international circulation.

I would like to start my own digital humanities project in addition to writing a book on Whitman’s fiction.

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Figure 5: Walter Whitman, c. 1848-1854. Image from The Walt Whitman Archive.