BERDACHE: A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

SUE-ELLEN JACOBS

INTRODUCTION

Berdache may be defined as a term referring to one who behaves and dresses like a member of the opposite sex. According to Angelino and Shedd, the English word berdache comes from the French word *bardach*: furthermore, the French derived their term from the Italian *berdasia*, which was taken from Arabic *bardi*: and the latter was borrowed from the Persian word *barah*: in all cases meaning a "kept boy" or a "male prostitute" (1955:121). The term was first used by the French explorers and travelers in the New World to refer to the Indian males who were passive homosexuals or those who played a passive part in sodomy. Angelino and Shedd use a quotation from Bossu's 1768 work, *Nouveaux Voyages aux Indes Occidentales*, to support this statement (1955:121-22). Bossu describes the Choctaws as being addicted to sodomy and gives a description of their dress.

John Lawson, in 1709, was traveling through the North Carolina area and wrote that sodomy was not practiced by the Indians of that area (Catawba, Cherokee, Monacan, Pamlico) (McNickle 1962:Map 1) and that they did not even have a word for "that beastly and loathsome sin" (Lawson 1709:48).

Denig used the term berdache interchangeably with "hermaphrodite" (1850:58) and so did Maximillian (1906:354). Angelino and Shedd point out that Kroeber (1925, 1953) and Hill (1935) use the term "transvestite" and berdache as synonyms and, furthermore, these synonymous uses are found throughout the early literature on American Indians, all of which leads to confusion (1955:123).

Some of the Indians did have expressions or words which showed the distinction between transvestite, hermaphrodite and homosexual (see Table 1). For example, the Navaho, who call berdaches *nadle*, distinguish between "those who pretend to be nadle" and the "real nadle" (Dorsey 1891:467, 516; Hill 1935:273). Lurie (1953:712) agrees with Angelino and Shedd that "berdache" should not be used interchangeably with transvestite or hermaphrodite, and that "berdache" should designate a person of a defined physical sex who assumes the role and status of the opposite sex and is viewed in this manner alone. Angelino and Shedd state that "while a berdache is a transvestite, a transvestite is not necessarily a berdache" (1955:125). Stewart (1960a:13) agrees that berdache should be used in reference to homosexuals only and that transvestites and hermaphrodites should be called as
such. But, in order to be able to gather data from the early writings that mention berdache among the American Indians, it is necessary to remember that the term has been used as a synonym for several types of deviation, "even though more is implied in role and status than occasional or even permanent cross-dressing" (Angelino and Shedd 1955:125).

Another term used in the past is found in Hay, who, in reviewing Hammond's report of 1887 on sexual impotence in the male and female, says that it is possible that the early Spaniards referred to berdache as mujer-hado, which means "man-witch-woman" (1963:20). Hammond gave the word mujerado as the term used by an Acoma berdache, which Hay defines as meaning "womanly."

Some Specific Incidences Noted

Kroeber said that berdache probably existed within all North American Indian tribes (1953:497; 1925:46). Driver was a little more conservative and said that it was probably present in all of Northern California (1939:405). In his study of this area several of the tribes investigated denied the presence of these people (see Table IV). The close proximity and status of cultural exchange in which these tribes lived suggests that they all probably did share this trait, but some simply refused to admit its existence. Lurie actually encountered this situation when she studied the Winnebago. She found in 1945-1947 that the Wisconsin Winnebago informants did not wish to speak of berdache and became embarrassed when asked about it. Later, she learned that it was one of those things to be kept from whites (1953:708). The Nebraska Winnebago, however, were quite willing to speak about the subject. Possible reasons why this matter of denial has been found to occur when there is good reason for believing that the trait actually exists will be considered under the section dealing with tribal attitudes towards berdache.

There have been other studies besides Driver's of culture element distributions in California tribes, which showed berdache. Contrasting denial and admission in neighboring tribes was also found in these studies (Drucker 1941; Stewart 1941; Essene 1942; Harrington 1942; Voegelin 1942; Aginsky 1943; Gifford 1940). Lurie's work with the Winnebago showed parallels between Plains and Woodland Siouan practice. The only difference she found was in the terms which the Omaha and Ponca (Plains Sioux) and Winnebago used for berdache (see Table I).

Several authors agree that berdache was common among Plains Indians, but I found berdache reported only for several Sioux bands, Apache, Cheyenne and Shoshoni (Linton 1936:480; Honigmann 1954:278; Driver 1961:535). I was not able to find general-
ized statements on the incidence in other than these two areas (California and Plains). Other tribes are not spoken of by areal affiliation on this matter and should not be considered as representing traits common to their locale until further work can be done. (see Tables II and IV for these tribes; for tribes in which berdache was denied or not found, see Tables IIIa and IIIb)

POSTULATED REASONS FOR OCCURRENCE AND MANIFESTATIONS OF BERDA CH

The literature gives many reasons and origins for berdache. The expressed "cause" is probably determined by the society into which the berdache was born. Many tribes feel that a child is born with the condition. Lowie cites an incident in which a Crow berdache refused to follow the urgings of an Indian agent to dress like a man because it was "against his nature" (1935: 48). The man had been anatomically normal at birth, but grew up associating only with girls (49). Lowie later (1952) suggests that a berdache results from "the notion that a man as a result of a psychic experience must change his sex and thereafter fulfill all the duties of a woman" (181). He further asserts that this may or may not have religious associations in North America, and that the distribution of the trait was not definitely known in 1952. However, he does consider that the berdache "was a genuine male, mastered feminine accomplishments, often excelling in these, and indulged in homosexual intercourse. The Crow at one time had relatively many of these psychiatric cases...to them belong the task of chopping down the sacred tree of the Sun Dance" (244).

Among the Omaha, Lowie found the belief that berdaches resulted from the adolescent male's first vision quest. One case was reported in which a man tried to resist the vision and became so bound in the conflict that he committed suicide. "The Plains Indian berdache does not have a vision because he is an invert, for all the men in a generation who have visions only a handful are inverts" (1952:244). "The berdache phenomena are not the root of Plains religion, they presuppose its existence" (246).

Mead cites a case involving a boy, who she says was probably a "congenital invert" (1935:240), who grew up showing strong feminine characteristics and who performed women's tasks. He wore women's underclothing, but male outer dress (240).

An early preference for girls' company and women's work is mentioned as being present in quite a few groups. Many report that, in spite of parental efforts, a boy would begin in his early childhood to
play and work with girls and refuse to have anything to do with boys. Examples are found among the Crow (Denig 1961:187), Pomo (Gifford 1926:333), Zuni (Stevenson 1904:37) and the Omaha (Dorsey 1884:266). Among the Aleut and Tabutuabal, a boy might be deliberately raised as a girl and taught the work of women if particularly handsome (von Langsdorf 1817:345; Voegelin 1938:47). Among the California tribes, the Diegueno, Pima, Walapai and the Shiwits Paiute feel that some are "born thus" while others are transferred through a dream episode (Drucker 1941:154).

Dream inspiration has a wide distribution. Will (1906:128) says that the Mandan berdache "follows this life by order from the spirits given to them in a dream." Bowers agrees with Will (Bowers 1950:298) and points out that the dream determines a man’s conversion. California Indians who give the cause as acting on a dream are the Achomawi (Voegelin 1942), Mohave, Cocopa, Maricopa, and Papago (Drucker 1941). Omaha, Pawnee, Chippewa, Navaho, and Winnebago berdaches are most often supported in their role by a dream conscription (Fletcher 1911:132; Dorsey 1940:108; Kinietz 1947:155-6; Hill 1935:273; Lurie 1953:708). Driver (1961:535) indicates that the Plains berdaches were influenced by dreams.

Often, there are myths structured around the berdache giving support to their presence and function in the tribes. The Southern Okanagon of Washington blame the occurrence of berdache on the Coyote, who announced that such would occur when he left the Cougar’s house disguised as a woman (Cline 1938:119). Tlingit mythology says they exist because a "half-man, half-woman" was reincarnated in a certain child because the woman of this child married the sun and had such a person as her 8th child (de Laguna 1954:178). There are many myths among the Navaho regarding berdaches. These stories often cite hermaphrodite cattle and sheep, as well as men, as possessing magical powers (Reichard 1950:140).

A white American explanation has been given by Benedict who feels that these people, as well as other social deviants, find personal value in this escape from the struggle with their culture (1932:4). Radin suggests that introversion of the Pueblo Indians, as a result of the pressures around them, caused the incidence of berdache to increase (1927:239). Linton observed that the Plains Indians provided a desirable alternate status to failure in the berdache (1936:480), while Lowie (1952:244), like Benedict, refers to these berdaches in psychoanalytic terms: i.e., "these psychiatric cases."

A frequent occurrence in California is the procedure of testing for berdache. There are several means of doing this, but they all generally involve something similar to the following: A young
boy is seated on the ground. On one side of him are placed the tools or weapons representing manhood, on the other side some implements of woman’s work. The grass is set afire around the boy. As he flees from the burning grass, he will grab something from one side or the other. His selection will be the factor determining his future (Stewart 1960b:13).

Berdaches may fill a variety of roles, acting according to the demands of their culture. In some tribes, the berdache is considered in rather high esteem and is considered a vital member of religious rituals. In others, he is a shaman and a medicine-man. Yet, in still others, he is regarded as a good-for-nothing. Between these opposite poles there are berdaches who are required for special functions in funeral ceremonies and other special rites, such as in the Sun Dance of the Crow (Hays 1963:449). Table V lists only a sampling of the tribes under consideration, but gives an idea of the diversity of function.

The function of the berdache seems to correspond with the attitude their fellow tribe members have towards him. Perhaps it is that the function is due to the attitude. In any event, there is a correlation of extremes between these two.

ATTITUDES AND FEELINGS TOWARDS BERDACHE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF WHITE INFLUENCE

Even among the Southern Okanagon of Washington, who regarded the berdache as good-for-nothing, they still never ridiculed these men who dressed and behaved as women (Cline 1938:119). In many of the tribes mentioned herein, it is generally found that the berdache was never ridiculed. Stevenson (1904:37) reports that when a Zuni boy, at puberty, first assumed the dress and full-time work of women, the females teased him, but they looked on him with favor because they knew he would stay with them, helping them with their work. This same boy will, however, be discouraged and ridiculed by the men of the family until he has shown that in this chosen life he functions well in the community. Kroeber (1940:209-10) said that generally a berdache was not judged by his erotic life, but by his social status. "Born a male, he became accepted as a woman socially" (210). Driver (1961:535) agrees that they were accepted by their society, especially among the Plains Indians. In the Northeastern California tribes, Voegelin (1947:134) says that berdaches were regarded indifferently by the community.

Kinetz reports that the Chippewa berdaches were seldom despised or ridiculed and Hoffman says "they looked upon them as Manitous, or at least
for great and incomparable geniuses" (1891:153). Lurie notes that "at one time the
berdache was a highly honored and respected person, but
that the Winnebago had become ashamed of the custom because
the white people thought it was amusing or evil" (1953:
708). By the time Dorsey had visited these Indians in 1889,
there was already a certain amount of shame attached to
the role.

Stewart (1960a:13) cites the case of a Minnesota Chip-
pewa berdache who was "scorned, insulted, and greatly belittled
by the American travelers who met him..." Lawson's report,
referring to sodomy as a "beastly and loathsome sin" (1709:
48), indicates the idea that was often generated in treat-
ment of these Indians by whites.

In earlier times, most
berdaches dressed as women, un-
less of course, they were fe-
male homosexuals and these
dressed as men. Denig again
reflects the white attitude
when he, as a result of obser-
vations of the Crow, says:
"strange country this, where
males assume the dress and
perform the duties of females,
while women turn men and mate
with their own sex" (1961:199).

The former legal status
of berdaches among the Navaho
was the same as for women.
"The blood payment for the
murder of a nadle is the same
as that for a woman, which is
higher than that required when
a man is killed" (Hill 1935:
275).

Navaho berdaches seldom
dress as women now because they
fear the ridicule of white peo-
ple (Leighton 1947:78). Those
who are so inclined have found,
upon encountering white society,
they are generally considered
queer and referred to jokingly
(Hill 1943:12). It is hard for
the Navaho to understand this
treatment, and an interesting
observation by an old Navaho
man at a ceremonial attended by
a large number of tourists
demonstrates a reason for their
confusion: "There must be a
great many more transvestites
among the whites than among the
Navaho because so many white
women wear trousers" (Hill 1943:
12).

A Mohave berdache living
in 1965 is regarded by the white
people in the town where he
lives as "something of a vil-
lage idiot" (Waltrap 1965:6). He
does not dress in women's
attire, even though he likes
the idea of being able to do so,
because of the above fact. He
makes jewelry and dolls, woman's
work, and is considered an ex-
pert craftsman (9).

In the past, the berdache
in the tribes listed have earned
for themselves the re
bout of excellent craftsmen and house-
keepers, and it was once considered
the highest compliment if a woman
was told that her work was as good
as a berdache's (Linton 1936:480).
Often a male berdache also hunted
with the men. If a man married
so accomplished a berdache, he was
ridiculed and accused of seeking
a partner who would keep house and
hunt for him. The berdache suf-
forced no humiliation from this kind of union (491).

SUMMARY

The incidence of berdache among North American Indian tribes has been noted to have been quite widespread. The only areas lacking reference to berdache in the United States were the north-eastern, north-central, and east-central states' tribes. It is possible that the overt manifestations of berdache have diminished because of the imposition of white values on the Indian's way of life. Surely the fact that agents tried to force berdaches to change their ways with threat of punishment if they did not, and the fact that the berdaches were so ridiculed by white people, has influenced this diminution. In some cases however, the berdache existed amid ridicule and scorn, as with the Pima and Papago. These tribes considered a berdache a member of the backward group and he was required, in this instance, to use backward speech and action (Drucker 1914:218).

Formerly, a berdache assumed the dress of the opposite sex, as well as performing the latter's tasks. The evidence is that the dress is no longer changed, but the work of the opposite sex is very often still undertaken.

As with so many other institutions of Amerindian culture that served as means of social coordination by providing a place for even "deviant" members of the society, this position of berdache seems to have succumbed to the pressures of the white man. This pressure, in all cases, has forced the berdache into a position of a stigmatized member of society.

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Table I

Some Tribal Names for Berdache

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tribe</th>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
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<td>murfidai (hermaphrodite), das</td>
<td>Ponca</td>
<td>miⁿ-gu-ga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohave</td>
<td>alyha</td>
<td>Zuni</td>
<td>ko'thalmá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navajo</td>
<td>real nadle (hermaphrodite), nadle</td>
<td>Yuroks</td>
<td>wergern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnebago</td>
<td>šjángge</td>
<td>Pomo</td>
<td>das</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oglala</td>
<td>wiⁿkté</td>
<td>Acoma</td>
<td>wujeroda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omaha</td>
<td>miⁿ-gu-ga</td>
<td>Chippewa</td>
<td>a-go-kwa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II

Some Tribes in which Berdache is Reported

- California
  - Round Valley Indians (Essene 1942)
    - Northern Pomo
    - Kalekau
    - Kato
    - Lassik
    - Yuki
  - Central California Coast (Harrington 1942)
    - Northern Castano
    - Southern Castano
    - Salinan
    - Chumash (Excluding Emigdiano band)
    - Shoshonean (Excluding Fernandeño band)
  - Yuman–Piman Area (Drucker 1941)
    - Digüeño
    - Mohave
    - Cocopa
    - Maricopa
    - Pima
    - Papago
    - Walapai
    - Paiute
  - Northwestern California Area (Voegelin 1942)
    - Klamath
    - Shasta
    - Atsugewi
    - Achomawi
  - Wintu
  - Northwest California Area (Driver 1939)
    - Tolowa
    - Yurok
    - Hupa
    - Chilula
    - Mattole
    - Sinkyone
    - Yuki
  - Central Sierra (Aginsky 1943)
    - Yokuts
  - Others
    - Pit River
    - Tubatulabal
- Oregon
  - Klamath
  - Modoc
  - Shasta
  - Northern Paiute
- Washington
  - Okanagón (Cline 1938)
  - Quinault
- Idaho
  - Coeur D'Alene
  - Shoshoni
- Nevada
  - Paiute
- Colorado
  - Ute
Table II (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arizona</th>
<th>Sac (Westermark 1906)</th>
<th>Fox (Westermark 1906)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walapai</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>Osage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mohave</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>Illinois (Westermark 1906)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yuma</td>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>Choctaw</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maricopa</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Creek</td>
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<td>Pima</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>Seminole (Stewart 1960b)</td>
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<td>Papago</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Naskapi (Westermark 1906)</td>
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<td>Navajo</td>
<td>Cree (Stewart 1960b)</td>
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<td>Acoma</td>
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<td>Tewa (Hay 1963b)*</td>
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<td>Texas</td>
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<td>Apache (Stewart 1960b)</td>
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<td>Cheyenne (Hay 1963b)</td>
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<td>Crow (Hays 1963)</td>
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<td>Flathead (Stewart 1960b)</td>
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<td>Mandan</td>
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<td>South Dakota</td>
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<td>Minnesota</td>
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<td>Chippewa - Ojibwa</td>
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<td>Menomini</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winnebago</td>
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* Whitman (1940:424) reports there is no homosexuality among the Tewa; Hay (1963b) mentions personal knowledge of berdache.
### Table IIIa

**Some Tribes in which Berdache Is Denied**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tribe</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mono (Gashowu band)</td>
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<td>Chumash (Emigdieno band)</td>
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<td>Akwa'ala</td>
<td>Chimarike (Driver 1939)</td>
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<td>Shoshoni (Fernandino band)</td>
<td>Korok</td>
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<td>Yaqui</td>
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### Table IIIb

**Tribes Listed in the Human Relations Area File in which No Material Is to Be Found**

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<td>Tiwi</td>
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<td>Montagnais</td>
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<td>Gros Ventre</td>
<td>Micmac</td>
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### Table IV

**Some Tribes in which Female Berdache Is Reported**

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<td>Achomawi</td>
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<td>Wintu</td>
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<td>Hupa</td>
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<td>Tubatulabal</td>
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<td>Yokuts</td>
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<td>Other Areas</td>
<td>Other Areas</td>
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<td>Papago</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Crow (Denig 1850)</td>
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<td>Navajo (Hill 1935)</td>
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<td>Ojibwa (Landes 1937)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mohave (Winick 1956)</td>
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Table V

Role of the Berdache in 21 Tribes

| Counted on for high spiritual ceremonies | Crow, Cheyenne, Dakota, Illinois |
| Shamans or medicine-men                  | Mattole, Tolowa, Yurok, Oglala, Coeur d'Alene, Sac, Fox, Creek, Navajo, Klamath, Flathead, Chippewa, Winnebago |
| Oracle                                   | Navajo, Creek, Yekut |
| Special function at funerals             | Southern Okanagon |
| Good-for-nothing                         | |

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Gifford, Edward Winslow


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Linton, Ralph  

Lowie, Robert H.  

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Radin, Paul  

Reichard, Gladys A.  

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Stewart, Omer C.

Swanton, John R.

Tanner, John

Teit, James A.

Tixier, Victor

Underhill, Ruth

Voegelin, Erminie W.

vonLangsdorf, G.H.


Waltrep, Bob


Westermark, Edward


Whitman, William


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