Establishing Rhetorical Context - Becker

“I think it's fair to say that few texts are written in isolation. Sure, an author may be a hermit or a prisoner, writing with charcoal on tree bark or paper towels, but even in physical isolation, an author joins some sort of intellectual conversation, even if he or she is conversing solely with written texts or remembered ideas. When, as a reader, you try to reconstruct the rhetorical context within which an author wrote an argument, you can often get a bigger picture that allows you to more effectively determine what the author intended to do and how well he or she accomplished his or her purpose” (writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching).

During class today, we will be analyzing Walt Whitman’s “Preface to *Leaves of Grass*” In preparation for this analysis, please establish as detailed a rhetorical context as you can for this essay.

1. When did Whitman write his “Preface” to *Leaves of Grass*?
2. What do you think prompted or inspired Whitman? Think about the cultural honor and value of poets who came before Whitman, and how they have become symbolic and iconic for their influence on cultures outside their native countries and loom large in history.
3. Before self-publishing *Leaves of Grass*, how would you characterize Whitman’s influence and prowess in American Literature?
4. Who was Whitman’s audience? How did you come to this conclusion?
5. What was Whitman’s purpose? What is he trying to achieve?

Prompt: Walt Whitman’s presence in the canon of American Literature is undeniable. His poetic style was revolutionary and incendiary for his time. In a concise and well-conceived (3-4) paragraph essay, explain the rhetorical context in which Whitman write’s his “Preface” and if he is successful in his appeal?