

About the Author

Walt Whitman



Walt Whitman (1819–1892) was born on Long Island and raised in Brooklyn, New York. His education was not formal, but he read widely, including the works of Sir Walter Scott, Shakespeare, Homer, and Dante. Trained to be a printer,

Whitman spent his early years working at times as a printer and at other times as a journalist. When he was twenty-seven, he became the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, a respected newspaper, but the paper fired him in 1848 because of his opposition to slavery. After accepting a job at a newspaper in New Orleans, Whitman traveled across the country for the first time, observing the diversity of America's landscapes and people.

A New Vocation Whitman soon returned to New York City, however, and in 1850, he quit journalism to devote his energy to writing poetry. Impressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson's prophetic description of a new kind of American poet, Whitman had been jotting down ideas and fragments of verse in a notebook for years. His work broke every poetic tradition of rhyme and meter as it celebrated America and the common person. When the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855, critics attacked Whitman's subject matter and abandonment of traditional poetic devices and forms. Noted poet John Greenleaf Whittier hated Whitman's poems so much that he hurled his copy of *Leaves of Grass* into the fireplace. Emerson, on the other hand, responded with great enthusiasm, remarking that the collection was "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed."

His Life's Work Though Whitman did publish other works in the course of his career, his life's work proved to be *Leaves of Grass*, which he continually revised, reshaped, and expanded until his death in 1892. The poems in later editions became less confusing, repetitious, and raucous, and more symbolic, expressive, and universal. He viewed the volume as a single long poem that expressed his evolving vision of the world, and in its poems he captured the diversity of the American people and conveyed the energy and intensity of all forms of life. Today, *Leaves of Grass* is regarded as one of the most important and influential collections of poetry ever written.

Background

The Writing of Walt Whitman

During the nineteenth century, American writers found their own voices and began to produce literature that no longer looked to Europe. Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Dickinson—each contributed to a recognizably American style, but no one sounded as utterly American as Whitman. His style incorporates the plain and the elegant, the high and the low, the foreign and the native. It mixes grand opera, political oratory, journalistic punch, everyday conversation, and biblical cadences. Whitman's sound is the American sound. From its first appearance as twelve unsigned and untitled poems, *Leaves of Grass* grew to include 383 poems in its final, "death-bed" edition (1892). In the preface to the 1855 edition, Whitman wrote: "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he absorbed it." There is little doubt that, according to his own definition, Whitman proved himself a poet.



from
**Song of
Myself**

Walt Whitman

1

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loaf and invite my soul,
5 I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, formed from this soil, this air.
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and
their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

10 Creeds and schools in abeyance,¹
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

6

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands,
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any
more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful
green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
5 A scented gift and remembrancer² designedly dropped,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see
and remark, and say *Whose?*

...

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
10 The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the
end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.

1. **abeyance** (uh BAY uhns) *n.* temporary suspension.
2. **remembrancer** *n.* reminder.

NOTES

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In Section 6, mark the questions.

QUESTION: Why does Whitman choose to present these ideas as questions?

CONCLUDE: What is the effect of these questions?

9

The big doors of the country barn stand open and ready,
 The dried grass of the harvest-time loads the slow-drawn wagon.
 The clear light plays on the brown gray and green intertinged,
 The armfuls are pack'd to the sagging mow.

- 5 I am there, I help, I came stretch'd atop of the load,
 I felt its soft jolts, one leg reclined on the other,
 I jump from the crossbeams and seize the clover and timothy,
 And roll head over heels and tangle my hair full of wisps.

14

The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,
Ya-honk he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation,
 The pert may suppose it meaningless, but I listening close,
 Find its purpose and place up there toward the wintry sky.

- 5 The sharp-hoof'd moose of the north, the cat on the house-sill,
 the chickadee, the prairie dog,
 The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats,
 The brood of the turkey hen and she with her half-spread wings,
 I see in them and myself the same old law.

- The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections,
 10 They scorn the best I can do to relate them.

I am enamor'd of growing outdoors,
 Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods,
 Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes and
 mauls, and the drivers of horses,
 I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out.

- 15 What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me,
 Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns,
 Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me,
 Not asking the sky to come down to my good will,
 Scattering it freely forever.

17

These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands,
 they are not original with me,
 If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next
 to nothing,
 If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,
 If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.

- 5 This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,
 This is the common air that bathes the globe.

51

The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied them,
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,³
5 (Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain **multitudes**.)

I concentrate toward them that are nigh,⁴ I wait on the door-slab.

10 Who has done his day's work? who will soonest be through with
his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?

52

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of
my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp⁵ over the roofs of the world.

The last scud⁶ of day holds back for me,
5 It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse⁷ my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath⁸ myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
10 If you want me again look for me under your boot soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fiber your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
15 Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you. 🐾

3. **snuff** . . . **evening** put out the last light of day, which moves sideways across the sky.
4. **nigh** *adj.* near.
5. **yawp** *n.* hoarse cry or shout.
6. **scud** *n.* low, dark, wind-driven clouds.
7. **effuse** (ih FYOOZ) *v.* pour out.
8. **bequeath** (bih KWEETH) *v.* hand down or pass on.

NOTES

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In Section 51, mark details that suggest the speaker is talking to a specific person or group of people.

QUESTION: Why does the speaker include these references? Whom is the speaker addressing?

CONCLUDE: What is the effect of this approach?

multitudes (MUHL tuh toodz)
n. large number of people or things; masses

I Hear America Singing

Walt Whitman

NOTES

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: Mark the various kinds of workers mentioned in lines 2–8.

QUESTION: Why does the speaker name so many kinds of workers?

CONCLUDE: What is the effect of these references?

- I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
 Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe
 and strong,
 The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
 The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves
 off work.
- 5 The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the
 deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
 The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter¹
 singing as he stands,
 The woodcutter's song, the plowboy's on his way in the
 morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
 The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work,
 or of the girl sewing or washing,
 Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
- 10 The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young
 fellows, robust, friendly,
 Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

1. **hatter** *n.* person who makes, sells, or cleans hats.