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Walt Whitman

Selected Poems



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Selected Poems

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INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman was born in 1819 in West Hills, Huntington, Long Island, New York, and raised in Brooklyn. He seemed destined to live an uneventful and anonymous life. His father was an uneducated farmer and carpenter and Whitman himself left school at the age of thirteen to take a job as a newspaper office boy. Although he eventually worked his way up to become a reporter, book reviewer, and an editor, his newspaper writing, while competent, was neither original nor inspiring.

Then, in 1855, the virtually unknown Whitman, at the age of thirty-six, had a small volume of verse privately published. The book, *Leaves of Grass*, one of the most original and unconventional works in literature, marked the debut of the greatest poet America has yet produced. For sheer audacity the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* is unequalled in nineteenth-century literature. Whitman's poetry was a celebration of the common man, of American democracy, and of sexuality, conveyed through a revolutionary and rhapsodic free verse. Not even the English Romantics had broken so consciously and radically from poetic tradition.

Despite its originality, or perhaps because of it, *Leaves of Grass* would have sunk into obscurity had it not been for Ralph Waldo Emerson, the then dean of American letters and a major influence on Whitman. Upon receiving a copy he wrote to Whitman:

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of *Leaves of Grass*. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it. I find incomparable things, said incomparably well, as they must be. . . . I greet you at the beginning of a great career. . . .

With this letter, which Whitman reprinted without Emerson's permission, he was able to promote his book.

America in the mid-nineteenth century was still a young and developing nation and one of Whitman's aims in his poetry was to break free of the cultural and political traditions of Europe and exalt the United States, its people, and democracy, in a new and uniquely American poetry. He believed this country had a special place in the history of the world as its first true, working democracy. His best poetry radiates an almost boundless faith and promise in the capability of the United States and its citizens.

During the Civil War, Whitman's faith in America was put to a severe test. His brother George, a Union soldier, was wounded in battle and in 1862 Whitman went to visit him at the camp near Washington, D.C. where he was recovering. He remained in Washington for the duration of the war comforting and helping to nurse the wounded in hospitals there. It was a traumatic experience for him as he faced first-hand the suffering and deaths of thousands of American men. It inspired him to write the poems which would later become the *Drum-Taps* and the *Sequel to Drum-Taps* sections of *Leaves of Grass*, which includes the justly famous "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," his moving elegy for the assassinated president, Abraham Lincoln. Many critics believe that Whitman's Civil War experiences destroyed him as a poet, because in the post-war years he rarely wrote with his earlier inspiration and produced few great poems.

After the war, Whitman's reputation continued to grow, especially in England. Most people, however, considered his poetry scandalous and it even cost him his job as a clerk in the Department of Interior because James Harlan, then Secretary, disapproved of it.

In 1873, after suffering a paralytic stroke, Whitman retired to Camden, New Jersey. There he became a true American sage, "the good gray poet"—in the words of the title of one of many biographies written during his lifetime—surrounded by disciples and supporters. When he died in 1892, he was a revered and internationally famous poet.

The years since Whitman's death have seen the estimation of his poetry grow and his stature as America's greatest poet secured, for no other poet in our history has ever created as grand and inspiring a vision of America and its seemingly infinite promise.

Walt Whitman wrote only one book of poetry—*Leaves of Grass*. From

its first publication until his death, it went through numerous editions in which he added poems, revised many, and rearranged their order. This collection presents chronologically Walt Whitman's most famous and greatest work. All the selections here include his final revisions except for the first seven poems which are presented as they appeared in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, since the original versions are considered more spontaneous and innovative than Whitman's later changes. He himself said, "I do not suppose that I shall ever again have the *afflatus* [inspiration] I had in writing the first *Leaves of Grass*." Also included are excerpts from Whitman's original preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* in which he explains his theory for a new American poetry.

CHRISTOPHER MOORE

New York
1992

EXCERPTS FROM
PREFACE TO LEAVES OF GRASS
1855

The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto, the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes. . . . Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves. Here the performance disdaining the trivial unapproached in the tremendous audacity of its crowds and groupings and the push of its perspective spreads with crampless and flowing breadth and showers its prolific and splendid extravagance. One sees it must indeed own the riches of the summer and winter, and need never be bankrupt while corn grows from the ground, or the orchards drop apples, or the bays contain fish, or men beget children upon women.

* * *

The land and sea, the animals, fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forests, mountains and rivers, are not small themes . . . but folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects . . . they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls. Men and women perceive the beauty well enough . . . probably as well as he. The passionate tenacity of hunters, woodmen, early risers, cultivators of gardens and orchards and fields, the love of healthy women for the manly form, seafaring persons, drivers of horses, the passion for light and the open air, all is an old varied sign of the unfailing perception of beauty, and of a residence of the poetic in outdoor people. They can never be assisted by poets to

perceive . . . some may but they never can. The poetic quality is not marshalled in rhyme or uniformity, or abstract addresses to things, nor in melancholy complaints or good precepts, but is the life of these and much else, and is in the soul. The profit of rhyme is that it drops seeds of a sweeter and more luxuriant rhyme, and of uniformity that it conveys itself into its own roots in the ground out of sight. The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form. The fluency and ornaments of the finest poems or music or orations or recitations, are not independent but dependent. All beauty comes from beautiful blood and a beautiful brain. If the greatnesses are in conjunction in a man or woman, it is enough . . . the fact will prevail through the universe . . . but the gaggery and gilt of a million years will not prevail. Who troubles himself about his ornaments or fluency is lost. This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown, or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons, and with the young, and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency, not only in its words, but in the silent lines of its lips and face, and between the lashes of your eyes, and in every motion and joint of your body. The poet shall not spend his time in unneeded work. He shall know that the ground is always already ploughed and manured . . . others may not know it but he shall. He shall go directly to the creation. His trust shall master the trust of everything he touches . . . and shall master all attachment.

* * *

The American bards shall be marked for generosity and affection, and for encouraging competitors . . . They shall be kosmos . . . without monopoly or secrecy . . . glad to pass any thing to any one . . . hungry for

equals night and day. They shall not be careful of riches and privilege . . . they shall be riches and privilege . . . they shall perceive who the most affluent man is. The most affluent man is he that confronts all the shows he sees by equivalents out of the stronger wealth of himself. The American bard shall delineate no class of persons nor one or two out of the strata of interests nor love most nor truth most, nor the soul most, nor the body most . . . and not be for the eastern states more than the western, or the northern states more than the southern.

* * *

There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done. They may wait awhile . . . perhaps a generation or two . . . dropping off by degrees. A superior breed shall take their place . . . the gangs of kosmos and prophets en masse shall take their place. A new order shall arise, and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. The churches built under their umbrage shall be the churches of men and women. Through the divinity of themselves shall the kosmos and the new breed of poets be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things. They shall find their inspiration in real objects today, symptoms of the past and future. . . . They shall not deign to defend immortality or God, or the perfection of things, or liberty, or the exquisite beauty and reality of the soul. They shall arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth.

The English language befriends the grand American expression . . . it is brawny enough, and limber and full enough. On the tough stock of a race who through all change of circumstances was never without the idea of political liberty, which is the animus of all liberty, it has attracted the terms of daintier and gayer and subtler and more elegant tongues. It is the powerful language of resistance . . . it is the dialect of common sense. It is the speech of the proud and melancholy races, and of all who aspire. It is the chosen tongue to express growth, faith, self-esteem, freedom, justice, equality, friendliness, amplitude, prudence, decision, and courage. It is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible.

[EUROPE: THE 72D AND 73D YEARS
OF THESE STATES]

Suddenly out of its stale and drowsy lair, the lair of slaves,
Like lightning Europe le'pt forth . . . half startled at itself,
Its feet upon the ashes and the rags . . . Its hands tight
to the throats of kings.

O hope and faith! O aching close of lives! O many
a sickened heart!
Turn back unto this day, and make yourselves afresh.

And you, paid to defile the People . . . you liars mark:
Not for numberless agonies, murders, lusts,
For court thieving in its manifold mean forms,
Worming from his simplicity the poor man's wages;
For many a promise sworn by royal lips, and broken, and
laughed at in the breaking,
Then in their power not for all these did the blows strike of
personal revenge . . or the heads of the nobles fall;
The People scorned the ferocity of kings.

But the sweetness of mercy brewed bitter destruction,
and the frightened rulers come back:
Each comes in state with his train . . . hangman, priest and
tax-gatherer . . . soldier, lawyer, jailer and sycophant.

Yet behind all, lo, a Shape,
Vague as the night, draped interminably, head front
and form in scarlet folds,
Whose face and eyes none may see,
Out of its robes only this . . . the red robes, lifted
by the arm,
One finger pointed high over the top, like the head of
a snake appears.

Meanwhile corpses lie in new-made graves . . . bloody
corpses of young men:
The rope of the gibbet hangs heavily . . . the bullets of
princes are flying . . . the creatures of power laugh aloud,
And all these things bear fruits . . . and they are good.

Those corpses of young men,
Those martyrs that hang from the gibbets . . . those hearts
pierced by the gray lead,
Cold and motionless as they seem . . live elsewhere with
unslaughter'd vitality.

They live in other young men, O kings,
They live in brothers, again ready to defy you:
They were purified by death . . . they were taught and exalted.

Not a grave of the murdered for freedom but grows
seed for freedom . . . in its turn to bear seed,
Which the winds carry afar and re-sow, and the rains and
the snows nourish.

Not a disembodied spirit can the weapons of tyrants let loose,
But it stalks invisibly over the earth . . whispering
counseling cautioning.

Liberty let others despair of you . . . I never despair of you.

Is the house shut? Is the master away?
Nevertheless be ready . . . be not weary of watching.
He will soon return . . . his messengers come anon.

[1850]

[SONG OF MYSELF]

[1]

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

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

[2]

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes . . . the shelves are
crowded with perfumes,
I breathe the fragrance myself, and know it and like it,
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall
not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume . . . it has no taste of the
distillation . . . it is odorless,
It is for my mouth forever . . . I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised
and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, and buzzed whispers . . . loveroot,
silkthread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration . . . the beating of my heart
. . . the passing of blood and air through my lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore
and darkcolored sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,
The sound of the belched words of my voice . . . words
loosed to the eddies of the wind,

A few light kisses . . . a few embraces . . . a reaching
around of arms,
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple
boughs wag.
The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the
fields and hillsides,
The feeling of health . . . the full-noon trill . . . the song
of me rising from bed and meeting the sun.

Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you
reckoned the earth much?
Have you practiced so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the
origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun . . .
there are millions of suns left,
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand . . .
nor look through the eyes of the dead . . . nor feed
on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things
from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

[3]

I have heard what the talkers were talking . . . the
talk of the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

Urge and urge and urge,
Always the procreant urge of the world.