



## HERRMANN, B.: Whitman

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### Whitman

*Text: Walt Whitman (1819–1892), based on Leaves of Grass and scripted by Norman Corwin (1910–2011)*

#### Whitman:

[1] I, Walt Whitman, heard that you asked for something to prove this puzzle the New World. And to define America, her athletic Democracy. Therefore I send you my poems that you behold in them what you wanted.

[2] You whoever you are!...

You daughter or son of England!  
You of the mighty Slavic tribes!  
You dim-descended black, divine-soul'd African,  
You Norwegian, Swede, Dane, Icelander,  
You Roman! Neapolitan! You Greek!  
You Chinaman of China!  
You foot-worn pilgrim welcoming the far-away sparkle of the minarets of Mecca!  
All you continentals of Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia, indifferent of place!  
All you on the numberless islands of the archipelagoes of the sea!  
And you of centuries hence when you listen to me!  
And you each and everywhere whom I specify not, but include just the same!  
Health to you! Good will to you all, from me and America sent!

[3] I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!)

My signs are a rain-proof coat, good shoes, and a staff cut from the woods,  
No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,  
I have no chair,  
I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, exchange,  
But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,  
My left hand hooking you round the waist.  
My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road.

These States are the amplest poem.

Here is not merely a nation but a teeming Nation of nations,  
Here the doings of men correspond with the broadcast doings of the day and night.  
I announce the Union more and more compact; indissoluble,  
I announce splendors and majesties to make all previous politics of the earth insignificant.  
This America is only you and me,  
Its power, weapons, testimony, are you and me,  
The officers, capitols, armies, ships, are you and me,  
The war is you and me.  
Past, present, future, are you and me.

I swear I begin to see the meaning of things,  
I swear nothing is good to me now that ignores individuals,  
The American compact is altogether *with* individuals!  
The whole theory of the universe is directed unerringly to one single individual – namely, to *You*.  
The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are!  
The President is there in the White House for you, it is not you who are here for him;  
The Congress convenes every twelfth-month for you;  
Laws, courts, the going and coming of commerce and mails, are all for you;  
Sculpture and monuments and anything inscribed anywhere are tallied in you;  
All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it.  
All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments.

[4] Listen:

When the psalm sings instead of the singer,  
When the script preaches instead of the preacher,  
When I can touch the body of books by night or by day, and whey they touch my body back again,  
When a university course convinces like a slumbering woman and child convince,  
When the minted gold in the vault smiles like the night-watchman's daughter,  
When warrantee deeds load in chairs opposite and are my friendly companions,  
Then I intend to reach them by hand, and make as much of them as I do of men and women like you.

#### Stranger:

Uh – May I speak to you for a moment?

**Whitman:**

Stranger, if you, passing, meet me and desire to speak to me, why should you not speak to me?  
And why should I not speak to you?

**Stranger:**

Seems to me you're pretty sure of yourself.

**Whitman:**

I know perfectly well my own egotism  
Know my omnivorous lines and must not write any less,  
And would fetch you whoever you are flush with myself.  
I am Walt Whitman.  
I exist as I am, that is enough.

**Stranger:**

You like the sound of your own name, don't you?

**Whitman:**

[5] Walt Whitman! A cosmos, of Manhattan, the son!  
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,  
No sentimentalist, no stander above men or women or apart from them,  
No more modest than immodest.  
No dainty *dolce affetuoso* I.  
Bearded, sun-burnt, gray-necked, forbidding, I have arrived  
To be wrestled with as I pass for the solid prizes of the universe! I wear my hat as I please indoors or out.  
I give the sign of Democracy!  
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of, on the same terms.

**Stranger:**

And what good do you suppose sharing everything is going to do you?

**Whitman:**

As if it harmed me giving others the same rights and chance as myself –  
As if it were not indispensable to my own rights that others possess the same!

**Stranger:**

Hold on a second – what are you trying to say?

**Whitman:**

[6] One's self I sing, a simple separate person,  
Yet –  
Utter the word Democratic, the word "en-masse."  
Of Life immense in passion, pulse and power,  
The Modern Man I sing!  
Behold, I do not give lectures or a little charity,  
When I give I give myself.  
I do not ask who you are, that is not important to me,  
You can do nothing and be nothing but what I will enfold you.  
To cotton-field drudge or cleaner of privies I lean,  
On his right cheek I put the family kiss,  
And in my soul I swear I never will deny him.  
O despairer, here is my neck.  
By God, you shall not go down! Hang your whole weight upon me!  
I dilate you with tremendous breath, I buoy you up,  
Every room of the house do I fill with an arm'd force!

**Stranger:**

Look: I don't follow you – you're over my head.  
Anyway, why don't you calm down, there's nothing to get excited about. Take it easy.

**Whitman:**

Did you ask dulcet rhymes from me?  
Did you seek the civilians' peaceful and languishing rhymes?  
Did you find what I sang so hard to follow?  
Why I was not singing for you to follow, to understand – nor am I now;  
What to such as you anyhow such a poet as I? Therefore leave my works,  
And go lull yourself with what you can understand, and with piano-tunes,  
For I lull nobody, and you will never understand me!

[7] 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,  
 I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of grass.  
 Once a child said, fetching the grass to me with full hands.

**Child:**  
 What is the grass?

**Whitman:**  
 How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than she.  
 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,  
 A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,  
 Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say whose?  
 Or I guess the grass is the beautiful uncut hair of graves.  
 Tenderly will I use you curling grass,  
 It may be you are from old people,  
 This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,  
 Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.  
 I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women.

And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.  
 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,  
 The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,  
 And if ever there was, it led forward life.  
 All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,  
 And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.

**Child:**  
 Tell me more about the grass.

**Whitman:**  
 [8] I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,  
 And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,  
 And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,  
 And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,  
 And the cow crunching with deppress'd head surpasses any statue.  
 And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

**Child:**  
 Are there a lot of miracles?

**Whitman:**  
 Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,  
 Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the water,  
 Or stand under trees in the woods,  
 Or talk by day with anyone I love, or sleep in the bed at night with anyone I love,  
 Or sit at table at dinner with the rest,  
 Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,  
 Or watch honey-bees busy around the hive of a summer forenoon,  
 Or animals feeding in the fields,  
 Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,  
 Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining so quiet and bright.  
 What stranger miracles are there?

[9] Of Life immense in passion, pulse and power,  
 I sing. But I too sing War —  
 I too am come, chanting the chant of battle!  
 This year!  
 Sending itself ahead countless years to come!  
 Arm'd year — year of the struggle,  
 No dainty rhymes or sentimental love verses for you, terrible year  
 Not you as  
 Some pale poetling seated at a desk lisping cadenzas piano,  
 But as a strong man erect, advancing, carrying a rifle on your shoulder!  
 I know that the past was great and the future will be great and I know that both curiously conjoint in the present time  
 For the sake of him I typify, for the common average man's sake, if you are he.

[10] I will acknowledge contemporary lands,  
 I will trail the whole geography of the globe and salute courteously every city large and small,  
 I will put in my poems heroism upon land and sea, and I will report all heroism from an American point of view.

**Communique:**

Distinguished Service stars today were conferred upon the following men...

**Whitman:**

Brave, brave were the soldiers (high named today) who lived throughout the fight;  
But the bravest press'd to the front and fell, unnamed, unknown.

**Communique:**

Allied losses on land, sea and air to date number more than fifteen million killed...

**Whitman:**

I beat and pound for the dead,  
I blow my loudest for them.  
Vivas to those whose war-vessels sank in the sea!  
And to all generals that lost engagements, and all overcome heroes!  
And the numberless unknown heroes equal to the greatest heroes known!

**Communique:**

Washington confirms the execution by Japanese authorities of American prisoners.  
Berlin admits Nazi mobs have lynched at least five American flyers.

**Whitman:**

The corpses lie in new-made graves, bloody corpses of young men,  
The rope of the gibbet hangs heavily, the bullets of princes fly, the creatures of power laugh aloud.  
Those corpses of young men,  
Those martyrs that hang from the gibbets, those hearts  
pierc'd by the gray lead, cold and motionless . . .  
They live in *other* young men, O' kings!  
They live in brothers again ready to defy you,  
They were purified by death, they were exalted.  
Not a grave of the murder'd for freedom but grows seed for freedom,  
in its turn to bear seed,  
Which winds carry afar and re-sow, and the rains and the snows nourish.  
Not a disembodied spirit can the weapons of the tyrants let loose,  
But it stalks invisibly over the earth,  
whispering, counseling, cautioning!

**Communique:**

A major counter-attack impends in the area south of Cherbourg.

**Whitman:**

The soldier camp'd or upon the march is mine,  
On the night before the pending battle many seek me and I do not fail them.  
On this solemn night (it may be their last) those that know me seek me.

**Communique:**

Resistance of the French underground in support of the Allied invaders in increasing hourly...

**Whitman:**

O star of France,  
The brightness of your hope and strength and fame,  
Like some proud ship that led the fleet so long,  
Seems today a wreck driven by the gale, a mastless hulk,  
And 'mid its teeming madden'd half-drown'd crowds,  
Nor helm nor helmsman.  
Dim smitten star.  
Star crucified – by traitors sold,  
Star panting o'er a land of death, heroic land,  
Miserable! Yet for your errors, vanities, sins, I will not now rebuke you,  
Your unexampled woes and pangs have quell'd them all,  
And left you sacred.  
O ship of France, beat back and baffled long!  
Bear up! Continue on!  
Sure as the ship of all, the Earth itself,  
Onward beneath the sun following its course,  
So you O ship France!  
Finished the days, the clouds dispel'd,  
The travail o'er, the long-sought extrication,  
Reborn, high O'er the European world,  
Again your star O France, fair lustrous star,  
In heavenly peace, clearer, more bright than ever  
She beam immortal.

**Communiqué:**

Combined Allied Naval Forces are planning extensive campaigns in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters...

**Whitman:**

Of ships sailing the seas,  
Of unnamed heroes in the ships – of waves spreading and spreading far as the eye can reach,  
Of dashing spray, and the winds piping and blowing,  
And out of these; A chant for the sailors of all nations!

**[11] Flaunt out O sea**

your separate flags of nations!  
Flaunt out the various ship-signals!  
But: Reserve especially for yourself and for the  
Soul of Man one flag above all the rest:  
A spiritual woven signal for all nations,  
emblem of man elate above death,  
Token of all brave captains and all intrepid sailors and mates,  
And all that went down doing their duty;  
Reminiscent of them:  
A pennant universal, subtly waving all the time, o'er all brave sailors,  
All seas, all ships!

I am for those who walk abreast with the whole earth.  
I see the male and female everywhere.  
I see the serene brotherhood of philosophs.  
I see the results of perseverance and industry.  
I see ranks, colors, civilizations, I go among them, I mix indiscriminately.  
And I salute all the inhabitants of the earth.  
Each of us inevitable,  
Each of us limitless – each of us with his or her right upon the earth.  
Each of us here as divinely as any is here.  
This is what I have learnt from America

**[12] Listener out there! I stay only a minute longer,**  
The past and present wilt –  
I have filled them, emptied them,  
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Poets to come! Orators, singers, musicians to come!  
Not today is to justify me and answer what I am for,  
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known,  
Arouse! For you *must* justify me.

I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,  
I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness.  
I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face,  
Leaving it to you to prove and define it,  
Expecting the main things from you.

**[13] I see not America only,**  
not only Liberty's nation but other nations preparing,  
I see tremendous entrances and exits, new combinations, the solidarity of races,  
I see that force advancing with irresistible power on the world's stage,  
I see Freedom, completely arm'd and victorious and very haughty,  
with Law on one side and Peace on the other,  
A stupendous trio all issuing forth against the idea of caste.  
What historic denouements are these we so rapidly approach?  
I see men marching and countermarching by swift millions,  
I see the frontiers and boundaries of the old aristocracies broken,  
I see the landmarks of European kings removed;  
Never were such sharp questions ask'd as this day.  
Never was average man, his soul, more energetic, more like a God,

His daring foot is on land and sea everywhere, he colonizes the Pacific, the archipelagoes,  
With the steamship, the electric telegraph, the newspaper, the wholesale engines of war,  
With these and the world-spreading factories he interlinks all geography, all lands:  
What whispers are these O lands, running ahead of you, passing under the seas?  
Are all nations communing?  
Is there going to be but one heart to the globe?  
Is humanity forming en-masse?  
For lo, tyrants tremble, crowns grow dim,  
The earth, restive, confronts a new era.

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