



## Chapter 18

### Walt Whitman (1819–1892)

Whitman was one of the great innovators in American literature. In the cluster of poems he called *Leaves of Grass* he gave America its first genuine epic poem. The poetic style he devised is now called free verse—that is, poetry without a fixed beat or regular rhyme scheme. Whitman thought that the voice of democracy should not be halted by traditional forms of verse. His influence on the poetic technique of other writers was small during the time he was writing *Leaves of Grass*, but today elements of his style are apparent in the works of many poets. During the twentieth century, poets as different as Carl Sandburg and the “Beat” bard, Allen Ginsberg, have owed something to him.

Whitman grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and worked there as a schoolteacher, as an apprentice to a printer, and as the editor of various newspapers. He had very little schooling but read a great deal on his own. He was especially intrigued by the works of Shakespeare and Milton. Strangely enough, his only contact with the Eastern religions or with German Transcendentalists, whose ideas he frequently used in his poetry, was what he had read of them in the writings of Emerson.

In the 1840s Whitman supported Jackson’s Democratic Party; he also favored the exclusion of slavery from new states in his newspaper writings and because of this, in 1848, he was dismissed from his job. He then worked sporadically at carpentry and odd jobs, and had some of his writing—which was conventional and undistinguished—printed in newspapers.

In 1848 he visited New Orleans, Chicago, and the Western frontier; the latter impressed him greatly. There is speculation that some of his experiences on this trip marked a turning point in his career, though it is more likely

that he was gradually developing as an artist. At any rate, soon after this he became famous. He published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, setting the type for the book himself, and writing favorable reviews of it in the papers, anonymously. He continued to add new poems to the collection, and to rearrange and revise them, until his death in 1892. His best work is usually considered to have been done before 1871.

Most of the poems in *Leaves of Grass* are about man and nature. However, a small number of very good poems deal with New York, the city that fascinated Whitman, and with the Civil War, in which he served as a volunteer male nurse. In his poetry, Whitman combined the ideal of the democratic common man and that of the rugged individual. He envisioned the poet as a hero, a savior and a prophet, one who led the community by his expressions of the truth.

With the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman was praised by Ralph Waldo Emerson and a few other literati but was attacked by the majority of critics because of his unconventional style. He wanted his poetry to be for the common people but, ironically, it was ignored by the general public.

### **Song of Myself** (excerpt)

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

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd 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,  
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.

10

Alone far in the wilds and mountains I hunt, 15  
Wandering amazed at my own lightness and glee,  
In the late afternoon choosing a safe spot to pass the night,  
Kindling a fire and broiling the fresh-kill'd game,  
Falling asleep on the gather'd leaves with my dog and gun by my side.

The Yankee clipper is under her sky-sails, she cuts the sparkle and scud, 20  
My eyes settle the land, I bend at her prow or shout joyously from the deck.

The boatmen and clam-diggers arose early and stopt for me,  
I tuck'd my trowser-ends in my boots and went and had a good time;  
You should have been with us that day round the chowder-kettle.

I saw the marriage of the trapper in the open air in the far west, the bride 25  
was a red girl,

Her father and his friends sat near cross-legged and dumbly smoking,  
they had moccasins to their feet and large thick blankets hanging  
from their shoulders,

On a bank lounged the trapper, he was drest mostly in skins, his luxuriant 30  
beard and curls protected his neck, he held his bride by the hand,  
She had long eyelashes, her head was bare, her coarse straight locks  
descended upon her voluptuous limbs and reach'd to her feet.

The runaway slave came to my house and stopt outside,  
I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile, 35  
Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsy<sup>1</sup> and weak,  
And went where he sat on a log and led him in and assured him,  
And brought water and fill'd a tub for his sweated body and bruise'd feet,

And gave him a room that enter'd from my own, and gave him some  
 coarse clean clothes, 40  
 And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,  
 And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles;  
 He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and pass'd north,  
 I had him sit next me at table, my fire-lock lean'd in the corner.



**Note**

1. limpsy: limping or swaying

 **I Sit and Look Out**

I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all oppression  
 and shame;  
 I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men, at anguish with themselves,  
 remorseful after deeds done;  
 I see in low life the mother misused by her children, dying, neglected, gaunt, 5  
 desperate;  
 I see the wife misused by her husband—I see the treacherous seducer of  
 young women;  
 I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequited love attempted to be hid—  
 I see these sights on the earth; 10  
 I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tyranny—I see martyrs and prisoners;  
 I observe a famine at sea—I observe the sailors casting lots who shall be kill'd  
 to preserve the lives of the rest;  
 I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon laborers,  
 the poor, and upon negroes, and the like; 15  
 All these—all the meanness and agony without end, I sitting, look out upon,  
 See, hear, and am silent.



## **Beat! Beat! Drums!**

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!  
Through the windows—through doors—burst like a ruthless force,  
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,  
Into the school where the scholar is studying;  
Leave not the bridegroom quiet—no happiness must he have now with his 5  
    bride,  
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain,  
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums—so shrill you bugles blow.

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!  
Over the traffic of cities—over the rumble of wheels in the streets; 10  
Are beds prepared for sleepers at night in the houses? no sleepers must sleep  
    in those beds,  
No bargainers' bargains by day—no brokers or speculators—would they  
    continue?  
Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt to sing? 15  
Would the lawyer rise in the court to state his case before the judge?  
Then rattle quicker, heavier drums—you bugles wilder blow.

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!  
Make no parley—stop for no expostulation,  
Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer, 20  
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,  
Let not the child's voice be heard, nor the mother's entreaties,  
Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the  
    hearses,  
So strong you thump O terrible drums—so loud you bugles blow. 25