

### Biographical Info on Walt Whitman

[From the Poetry Foundation]. Walt Whitman (1819 – 1892) is America’s world poet—a latter-day successor to Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare. In *Leaves of Grass* (1855, 1892), he celebrated democracy, nature, love, and friendship. This monumental work chanted praises to the body as well as to the soul, and found beauty and reassurance even in death.

Along with Emily Dickinson, Whitman is regarded as one of America’s most significant 19th-century poets. Born on Long Island, Whitman grew up in Brooklyn and received limited formal education. His occupations during his lifetime included printer, schoolteacher, reporter, and editor. Whitman’s self-published *Leaves of Grass* was inspired in part by his travels through the American frontier and by his admiration for Ralph Waldo Emerson. This important publication underwent eight subsequent editions during his lifetime as Whitman expanded and revised the poetry and added more to the original collection of twelve poems. Emerson himself declared the first edition was “the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed.”

Whitman published his own enthusiastic review of *Leaves of Grass*. Critics and readers alike, however, found both Whitman’s style and subject matter unnerving. According to *The Longman Anthology of Poetry*, “Whitman received little public acclaim for his poems during his lifetime for several reasons: this openness regarding sex, his self-presentation as a rough working man, and his stylistic innovations.” A poet who “abandoned the regular meter and rhyme patterns” of his contemporaries, Whitman was “influenced by the long cadences and rhetorical strategies of Biblical poetry.” Upon publishing *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman was subsequently fired from his job with the Department of the Interior. Despite his mixed critical reception in the U.S., he was favorably received in England, with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne among the British writers who celebrated his work.

During the Civil War, Whitman worked as a clerk in Washington, DC. For three years, he visited soldiers during his spare time, dressing wounds and giving solace to the injured. These experiences led to the poems in his 1865 publication, *Drum-*

*Taps*, which includes, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Whitman’s elegy for President Lincoln.

[From Wikipedia] American poet, essayist, and journalist. A [humanist](#), he was a part of the transition between [transcendentalism](#) and [realism](#), incorporating both views in his works. Whitman is among the most influential poets in the American canon, often called the father of [free verse](#).<sup>[1]</sup> His work was very controversial in its time, particularly his poetry collection *[Leaves of Grass](#)*, which was described as obscene for its overt sexuality.

Born in [Huntington](#) on [Long Island](#), Whitman worked as a journalist, a teacher, a government clerk, and—in addition to publishing his poetry—was a volunteer nurse during the [American Civil War](#). Early in his career, he also produced a [temperance novel](#), *[Franklin Evans](#)* (1842). Whitman's major work, *Leaves of Grass*, was first published in 1855 with his own money. The work was an attempt at reaching out to the common person with an American [epic](#). He continued expanding and revising it until his death in 1892. After a stroke towards the end of his life, he moved to [Camden, New Jersey](#), where his health further declined. When he died at age 72, his funeral became a public spectacle.<sup>[2][3]</sup>

Song of Myself, I, II, VI & LII

Walt Whitman, 1819 - 1892

I

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.

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.

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.

II

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.... 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 hill-sides,  
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.

VI

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,  
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 itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,  
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,  
Growing among black folks as among white,  
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive then the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,  
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,  
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken,  
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them, soon out of their mother's  
laps,  
And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,

Darker than the colorless beards of old men,  
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,  
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

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, 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 any one supposed, and luckier.

LII

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 yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me,  
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 effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
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 fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,

## **How Solemn As One by One**

**(Washington City, 1865.)**

**HOW solemn as one by one,  
As the ranks returning worn and sweaty, as the men file by  
where  
stand,  
As the faces the masks appear, as I glance at the faces studying  
the  
masks,  
(As I glance upward out of this page studying you, dear friend,  
whoever you are,)  
How solemn the thought of my whispering soul to each in the  
ranks,  
and to you,  
I see behind each mask that wonder a kindred soul,  
O the bullet could never kill what you really are, dear friend,  
Nor the bayonet stab what you really are;  
The soul! yourself I see, great as any, good as the best,  
Waiting secure and content, which the bullet could never kill,  
Nor the bayonet stab, O friend.**



### Vigil Strange

**VIGIL** strange I kept on the field one night;

When you my son and my comrade dropt at my  
side that day,

One look I but gave which your dear eyes return'd  
with a look I

shall never forget,

One touch of your hand to mine O boy, reach'd up  
as you lay on the  
ground,

Then onward I sped in the battle, the even-  
contested battle,

Till late in the night reliev'd to the place at last  
again I made my

way,

Found you in death so cold dear comrade, found  
your body son of

responding kisses, (never again on earth  
responding,)

Bared your face in the starlight, curious the scene,  
cool blew the

moderate night-wind,

Long there and then in vigil I stood, dimly around  
me the

battlefield spreading,

Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet there in the  
fragrant silent night,

But not a tear fell, not even a long-drawn sigh,  
long, long I gazed,

Then on the earth partially reclining sat by your  
side leaning my

chin in my hands,

Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours  
with you dearest

comrade- not a tear, not a word,

Vigil of silence, love and death, vigil for you my  
son and my  
soldier,  
As onward silently stars aloft, eastward new ones  
upward stole,  
Vigil final for you brave boy, (I could not save you,  
swift was your  
death,  
I faithfully loved you and cared for you living, I  
think we shall  
surely meet again,)  
Till at latest lingering of the night, indeed just as  
the dawn  
appear'd,  
My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop'd well  
his form,  
Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over  
head and  
carefully under feet,  
And there and then and bathed by the rising sun,  
my son in his  
grave, in his rude-dug grave I deposited,  
Ending my vigil strange with that, vigil of night  
and battle-field  
dim,  
Vigil for boy of responding kisses, (never again on  
earth  
responding,)  
Vigil for comrade swiftly slain, vigil I never forget,  
how as day  
brighten'd,  
I rose from the chill ground and folded my soldier  
well in his  
blanket,  
And buried him where he fell.

## When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd

BY WALT WHITMAN

[1965, PASTORAL ELEGY AFTER LINCOLN'S ASSASSINATION]

**1**

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,  
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,  
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,  
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,  
And thought of him I love.

**2**

O powerful western fallen star!  
O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!  
O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!  
O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!  
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

**3**

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash'd palings,  
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,  
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,  
With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard,  
With delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,  
A sprig with its flower I break.

**4**

In the swamp in secluded recesses,  
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary the thrush,  
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,  
Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat,  
Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know,

If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die.)

5

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,  
 Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from the ground,  
     spotting the gray debris,  
 Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass,  
 Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown  
     fields uprisen,  
 Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,  
 Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,  
 Night and day journeys a coffin.

6

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,  
 Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the land,  
 With the pomp of the inloop'd flags with the cities draped in black,  
 With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd women standing,  
 With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the night,  
 With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the unbared heads,  
 With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,  
 With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn,  
 With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin,  
 The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—where amid these you journey,  
 With the tolling tolling bells' perpetual clang,  
 Here, coffin that slowly passes,  
 I give you my sprig of lilac.

7

(Nor for you, for one alone,  
 Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,  
 For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you O sane and sacred death.

All over bouquets of roses,  
 O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,  
 But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,  
 Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,  
 With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,  
 For you and the coffins all of you O death.)

**8**

O western orb sailing the heaven,  
 Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk'd,  
 As I walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night,  
 As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night,  
 As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other stars all  
 look'd on,)  
 As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept me  
 from sleep,)  
 As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe,  
 As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night,  
 As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward black of the night,  
 As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb,  
 Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone.

**9**

Sing on there in the swamp,  
 O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call,  
 I hear, I come presently, I understand you,  
 But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me,  
 The star my departing comrade holds and detains me.

**10**

O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?  
 And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?  
 And what shall my perfume be for the grave of him I love?

Sea-winds blown from east and west,  
 Blown from the Eastern sea and blown from the Western sea, till there on the prairies  
 meeting,  
 These and with these and the breath of my chant,  
 I'll perfume the grave of him I love.

**11**

O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?  
 And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,  
 To adorn the burial-house of him I love?

Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes,  
 With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid and bright,

With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun, burning,  
 expanding the air,  
 With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of the trees  
 prolific,  
 In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-dapple here and  
 there,  
 With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the sky, and shadows,  
 And the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of chimneys,  
 And all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen homeward returning.

**12**

Lo, body and soul—this land,  
 My own Manhattan with spires, and the sparkling and hurrying tides, and the ships,  
 The varied and ample land, the South and the North in the light, Ohio's shores and  
 flashing Missouri,  
 And ever the far-spreading prairies cover'd with grass and corn.

Lo, the most excellent sun so calm and haughty,  
 The violet and purple morn with just-felt breezes,  
 The gentle soft-born measureless light,  
 The miracle spreading bathing all, the fulfill'd noon,  
 The coming eve delicious, the welcome night and the stars,  
 Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land.

**13**

Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird,  
 Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the bushes,  
 Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines.

Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song,  
 Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe.

O liquid and free and tender!  
 O wild and loose to my soul—O wondrous singer!  
 You only I hear—yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart,)  
 Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me.

**14**

Now while I sat in the day and look'd forth,

In the close of the day with its light and the fields of spring, and the farmers  
 preparing their crops,  
 In the large unconscious scenery of my land with its lakes and forests,  
 In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb'd winds and the storms,)
 Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the voices of children  
 and women,  
 The many-moving sea-tides, and I saw the ships how they sail'd,  
 And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all busy with labor,  
 And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on, each with its meals and  
 minutia of daily usages,  
 And the streets how their throbbings throb'd, and the cities pent—lo, then and  
 there,  
 Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest,  
 Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,  
 And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death.

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,  
 And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,  
 And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions,  
 I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,  
 Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness,  
 To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.

And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me,  
 The gray-brown bird I know receiv'd us comrades three,  
 And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love.

From deep secluded recesses,  
 From the fragrant cedars and the ghostly pines so still,  
 Came the carol of the bird.

And the charm of the carol rapt me,  
 As I held as if by their hands my comrades in the night,  
 And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird.

*Come lovely and soothing death,*  
*Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,*  
*In the day, in the night, to all, to each,*  
*Sooner or later delicate death.*

*Prais'd be the fathomless universe,  
 For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,  
 And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!  
 For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.*

*Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,  
 Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?  
 Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,  
 I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly.*

*Approach strong deliveress,  
 When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead,  
 Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,  
 Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.*

*From me to thee glad serenades,  
 Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings for thee,  
 And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are fitting,  
 And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.*

*The night in silence under many a star,  
 The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,  
 And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil'd death,  
 And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.*

*Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,  
 Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the prairies wide,  
 Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves and ways,  
 I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.*

## 15

To the tally of my soul,  
 Loud and strong kept up the gray-brown bird,  
 With pure deliberate notes spreading filling the night.

Loud in the pines and cedars dim,  
 Clear in the freshness moist and the swamp-perfume,  
 And I with my comrades there in the night.

While my sight that was bound in my eyes unclosed,



As to long panoramas of visions.

And I saw askant the armies,  
 I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,  
 Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with missiles I saw them,  
 And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and bloody,  
 And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in silence,)  
 And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,  
 And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,  
 I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,  
 But I saw they were not as was thought,  
 They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,  
 The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,  
 And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,  
 And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.

## 16

Passing the visions, passing the night,  
 Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades' hands,  
 Passing the song of the hermit bird and the tallying song of my soul,  
 Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying ever-altering song,  
 As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding the night,  
 Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again bursting with joy,  
 Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven,  
 As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses,  
 Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves,  
 I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring.

I cease from my song for thee,  
 From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing with thee,  
 O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night.

Yet each to keep and all, retrievements out of the night,  
 The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird,  
 And the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul,  
 With the lustrous and drooping star with the countenance full of woe,  
 With the holders holding my hand nearing the call of the bird,

Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever to keep, for the dead I  
loved so well,  
For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands—and this for his dear sake,  
Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,  
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.