



## Poetry in America

Despite Edgar Allan Poe having been the first significant and influential Romantic American poet, early American poetry received minimum attention. It expressed itself in a traditional form, presenting everyday feelings of love, patriotism, and religion and depending upon a mechanical use of rhyme and meter. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, a

great poet, Walt Whitman, appeared to challenge and significantly alter the traditional practice of poetry. He was far ahead of his time in terms of poetic form and content and profoundly influenced the modern development of poetry in America as well as in Europe.

### Walt Whitman (1819 ~ 1892)

Born near Huntington, New York, Whitman was the second child of a family of nine children. His father was a carpenter. The poet had a particularly close relationship with his mother. At the age of four, his family moved to Brooklyn, New York, where he attended public school for six years before being apprenticed to a printer. Two years later he went to New York City to work in printing shops. He returned to Long Island in 1835 and taught in country schools. In 1838 and 1839 Whitman edited a newspaper. Bored with the job, he returned to New York City to work as a printer and journalist. There he enjoyed the theater, the opera, and the libraries. Whitman wrote poems and stories for popular magazines and made political speeches, for which he was rewarded with the editorship of various short-lived newspapers. After several years spent at various jobs, including building houses, Whitman began writing a new kind of poetry and thereafter neglected business.

Whitman's poems were influenced by Transcendentalism, and expressed enthusiasm for the richness of nature and for the vitality and variety of human activity. Merely walking in a city or crossing a



Walt Whitman  
Culver Pictures

river caused poetic ecstasies of delight over the richness of common man's ways.

Whitman was delighted by the unique American democracy. He portrayed America as being the land of grand opportunity of the common man and as a place for each individual to develop his full capacity. The richness of life had developed in America by allowing all men to prosper.

Therefore, the content of Whitman's poems was new - his themes were democracy, individualism, the common man, and any human activity, no matter how humble. Which he expressed in new forms. Breaking with the elaborate vocabulary of traditional poetry, he wrote using the daily speech of people in the streets. He ignored meter and concentrated upon rhyme. However, the last syllable of each line in most of his poems does not rhyme, the syllable sound repetition occurs in earlier parts of the line. His poetry was free verse, a revolutionary device for his time, and, as he had expected, accepted by a greater variety of people.

The stanza from the poem, "*For You, O Democracy*", shows this new form:

"Come, I will make the continent indissoluble  
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,  
I will make divine magnetic lands  
With the love of comrades,  
With the life-long love of comrades."

The lines have no meter, no regular length. The rhythmical unity of the stanza is obtained by means of the repetition of "*I will make*" at the beginning of each of the first three lines and repetition, again, in the phrases beginning "with" in the last two lines.

All of Whitman's poems were published in one volume, *Leaves of Grass*. But it was not well received or accepted at first. Emerson and Thoreau were very impressed by the poetry, others were however offended and outraged. When writing about human activity, Whitman described physical intimacy and sex in a way that was considered immoral for the time. His use of common speech, concentration on daily activities, and rejection of traditional poetic forms were deemed vulgar. He was fired from a government position he had because of the "immorality" in his books. His

friends helped support him, but he spent most of his life in poverty.

Whitman was famous mostly among small literary groups in England, France, and Germany. Due to the European attention, he gradually obtained more notoriety in America. It was only later in his life that he acquired popularity in his own country and was called "the bard of democracy."

The three poems below are extracts from *Leaves of Grass*. The first, "*There Was a Child Went Forth*," shows the rich but simple environment of the poet's childhood, contributing to his poetic formation. The next, "*A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim*," shows a scene from Whitman's experiences during the Civil War. The last poem, "*A Noiseless Patient Spider*," is a Transcendental reflection brought on by an observation of nature.

## *There was a child Went Forth*

“There was a child went forth every day,  
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,  
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day  
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.  
The early lilacs became part of this child,  
And grass and white and red morning-glories, and white and red clover, and the song of the phoebe-  
bird<sup>1</sup>,  
And the Third-month<sup>2</sup> lambs and the sow's pink-faint litter, and the mare's foal and the cow's calf,  
And the noisy brood of the barnyard or by the mire of the pond-side,  
And the fish suspending themselves so curiously below there, and the beautiful curious liquid,  
And the water-plants with their graceful flat heads, all became part of him.  
The field-sprouts of Fourth-month and Fifth-month became part of him,  
Winter-grain sprouts and those of the light-yellow corn, and the esculent<sup>3</sup> roots of the garden,  
And the apple-trees covered with blossoms and the fruit afterward, and  
wood-berries, and the commonest weeds by the road,  
And the old drunkard staggering home from the outhouse<sup>4</sup> of the tavern whence<sup>5</sup> he had lately risen,  
And the schoolmistress that pass'd on her way to the school,  
And the friendly boys that pass'd, and the quarrelsome boys,  
And the tidy and fresh-cheek'd girls, and the barefoot negro boy and girl  
And all the changes of city and country wherever he went.

His own parents, he that had father'd him and she that had conceiv'd him in her womb and birth'd him<sup>6</sup>,  
They gave the child more of themselves than that,  
They gave him afterward every day, they became part of him.

The mother at home quietly placing the dishes on the supper-table,  
The mother with mild words, clean her cap and gown, a wholesome odor falling off her person and  
clothes as she walks by,  
The father, strong, self-sufficient, manly, mean, anger'd, unjust,  
The blow, the quick loud word, the tight bargain, the crafty lure,  
The family usages, the language, the company, the furniture, the yearning and swelling heart,  
Affection that will not be gainsay'd<sup>7</sup>, the sense of what is real, the thought if after all it should prove un-  
real,  
The doubts of day-time and the doubts of night-time, the curious whether and how,  
Whether that which appears so is so, or is it all flashes and specks?  
Men and women crowding fast in the streets, if they are not flashes and specks what are they?  
The streets themselves and the facades of houses, and goods in the windows,  
Vehicles, teams, the heavy-plank'd wharves, the huge crossing at the ferries,  
The village on the highland seen from afar at sunset, the river between,  
Shadows, aureola and mist, the light falling on roofs and gables of white or brown two miles off,  
The schooner near by sleepily dropping down<sup>8</sup> the tide,  
The hurrying tumbling waves, quick-broken crests, slapping,  
The strata of color'd clouds, the long bar of maroon-tint away solitary by itself, the spread of purity it  
lies motionless in,  
The horizon's edge, the flying sea-crow, the fragrance of salt marsh and shore mud,  
These became part of that child who went forth every day, and who now goes, and will always go forth  
every day.”

## *A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim*

“A sight in camp in the daybreak gray and dim,  
As from my tent I emerge so early sleepless,  
As slow I walk in the cool fresh air the path near by the hospital tent,  
Three forms I see on stretchers lying, brought out there untended lying,  
Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish woolen blanket,  
Gray and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.  
Curious I halt and silent stand,  
Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest the first just lift the blanket:  
Who are you elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-gray'd hair, and flesh all sunken about the eyes?  
Who are you my dear comrade?  
Then to the second I step - and who are you my child and darling?  
Who are you sweet boy with cheeks yet blooming?  
Then to the third - a face nor child nor old, very calm, as of beautiful yellow-white ivory;  
Young man I think I know you - I think this face is the face of the Christ himself,  
Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.”

## *A Noiseless Patient Spider*

“A noiseless patient spider,  
I mark'd where on a little promontory<sup>9</sup> it stood isolated,  
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,  
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,  
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,  
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,  
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor<sup>10</sup> hold,  
Till the gossamer<sup>11</sup> thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.”

## DISCUSSION

1. List the innovations Whitman brought to American poetry and explain why he introduced them.
2. Cite examples of Whitman's innovative rhyme scheme taken from the poems above.
3. Is the poet trying to say something about the importance of his childhood environment in "*A Child Went Forth*"?
4. How does Whitman view death in "*Daybreak Gray and Dim*"?
5. What Transcendental aspects can be seen in "Noiseless Patient Spider"?

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<sup>1</sup> small songbird

<sup>2</sup> March

<sup>3</sup> edible

<sup>4</sup> outside toilet

<sup>5</sup> from where

<sup>6</sup> given birth to him

<sup>7</sup> denied

<sup>8</sup> floating down

<sup>9</sup> peninsula

<sup>10</sup> web's threads

<sup>11</sup> very delicate

### Did you know that ...

during the Civil War Whitman ministered to wounded soldiers in Union army hospitals?

today, Whitman's poetry has been translated into every major language?

Whitman's poetry is widely recognized as a formative influence on the work of many American writers?