

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet¹—only Tulle²—

¹ Tippet A shoulder-covering, usually made of fur.
² Tulle Soft, silk netting used in veils and hats.

10 We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

20 Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—

WALT WHITMAN

Selections from "Song of Myself"

Walt Whitman (1819–1892), America's first world-class poet, was also America's most American poet. Unlike any poet before or after, he made his own country the subject of his lifelong project. The poem group entitled *Leaves of Grass* (first edition, 1855; ninth or deathbed edition, 1891–1892) is a hymn celebrating the whole life of the nation, with the poet identifying himself with male and female, young and old, white and black, slave and free, healthy and handicapped—and animals, too. Speaking in a mystical, biblical voice, he sang of the body and the soul, of night, earth, and sea, of vice and virtue. *Leaves of Grass* was a living work that evolved in structure over thirty-seven years, with almost constant revision, reordering, additions, and subtractions, starting with 12 and expanding to 383 poems in the deathbed edition. It was meant to represent the growth of his country, to give voice to "a composite, electric, democratic personality," to embody America's soul—the mystical reality of national consciousness.

Leaves of Grass, innovative in form, style, and subject, helped free American poetry from European tradition. At the same time, it opened up European writing to fresh voices in the ever-widening global culture. Whitman's work attracted admirers among England's writers, who charged that Americans did not fully appreciate him. Though Whitman was not neglected at home (Emerson, then dean of American letters, welcomed *Leaves of Grass* with these words: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career. . ."), it is true that Whitman had to deal with the criticism that *Leaves of Grass* was an immoral book because of sexual overtones in certain poems. Indeed, because of this work, he was fired from a government clerkship after serving less than six months.

Whitman's reputation has grown since the late 1950s, when he was rediscovered by America's Beat Generation—a group of writers who were repulsed by society's materialism and militarism. The leading Beat poet, Allen Ginsberg (see "A Supermarket in California"), found a brother spirit in Whitman; they shared not only a contempt for elegant writing, but also homosexual feelings, a beard, and an unkempt appearance. Both, too, shared a decided preference for society's rejects, called "beats" by Ginsberg but "roughs" by Whitman (a poem in *Leaves of Grass* introduced "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos"). The bohemian Whitman was only one phase of his life, the time prior to the Civil War. After working during the war as a nurse to Northern and Southern soldiers in Army hospitals in Washington, D.C., he settled down into a new persona that he kept to the end: the "good gray poet," living quietly and receiving visitors.

Reading the Selection

"Song of Myself," with its sensual, even erotic language, is the heart of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. In these lyrical verses, filled with Romantic images, Whitman sings of love of self, of man, of woman, of nature, of country, of the world, of the gift of life itself. The voice that speaks is exuberant, as if the words can scarcely be uttered, so complete is the zest for living. Scholars who have analyzed the poem, however, conclude that the poetical structure is artfully crafted so as to give the impression of spontaneity. Originally published as a single poem, without divisions, "Song of Myself" took up more than half the space of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In the deathbed edition the poem, now divided into fifty-two sections, occupied only a small portion of the whole. The poem's first twelve sections are included here. Section 12 may have inspired Allen Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California."

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.
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.

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,

8
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.
The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread,
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 dark-color'd sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,
The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd 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 hill-sides,
The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me
rising from bed and meeting the sun.

10
Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you
recon'd the earth much?
Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

30
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 spectres¹ 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 your self.

¹ spectres Ghosts.

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, ⁴⁰
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 procreant² urge of the world.

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always sub-
stance and increase, always sex,
Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a
breed of life.

To elaborate is no avail, learn'd and unlearn'd feel that it
is so.

Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights, well
entretied, braced in the beams,³
Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical, ⁵⁰
I and this mystery here we stand.

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that
is not my soul.

Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.

Showing the best and dividing it from the worst age
vexes age,
Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things,
while they discuss I am silent, and go bathe and
admire myself.

Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any
man hearty and clean,
Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none
shall be less familiar than the rest.

I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing;
As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side ⁶⁰
through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the
day with stealthy tread,
Leaving me baskets cover'd with white towels swelling
the house with their plenty,

² procreant Producing offspring.

³ plumb . . . entretied . . . braced in the beams Carpenter's terms,
each signifying "well made." Plumb means "exactly in the center";
entretied means "cross-braced, as between two joists or walls"; and
braced means "strengthened with iron or lumber."

Shall I postpone my acceptance and realization and
scream at my eyes,
That they turn from gazing after and down the road,
And forthwith cipher⁴ and show me to a cent,
Exactly the value of one and exactly the value of two, and
which is ahead?

4

Trippers⁵ and askers⁶ surround me,
People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the
ward and city I live in, or the nation,
The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors
old and new,
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,
The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I ⁷⁰
love,
The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing
or loss or lack of money, or depressions or
exaltations,
Battles, the horrors of fratricidal⁷ war, the fever of
doubtful news, the fitful events;
These come to me days and nights and go from me again,
But they are not the Me myself.

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle,
unitary,
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable
certain rest,
Looking with side-curved head curious what will come
next,
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering
at it.

Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through ⁸⁰
fog with linguists and contenders,
I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait.

5

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase
itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.
Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop⁸ from your
throat,

⁴ cipher Work out by means of arithmetic.

⁵ Trippers People going about their daily chores.

⁶ askers People asking questions.

⁷ fratricidal Having to do with the killing of one's own brothers and
sisters; a term often used to describe the American Civil War.

⁸ stop In an organ, a knob for regulating the volume and quality of
the sounds.

Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or
lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer
morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently
turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged
your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you
held my feet. 90

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and
knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my
own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and
the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson⁹ of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder,
mullein¹⁰ and poke-weed.¹¹

6

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. 100

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hope-
ful 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,¹² Tuckahoe,¹³ Congressman, Cuff,¹⁴ give them
the same, I receive them the same.

⁹ kelson From Old Norse. Variant of *keelson*, a nautical term. A timber or girder fastened above and parallel to the keel of a ship, to give additional strength.

¹⁰ mullein A plant with wooly leaves and yellow flowers; a member of the snapdragon family.

¹¹ poke-weed An American plant, with white flowers and purple berries, used in emetics and purgatives.

¹² Kanuck Also Canuck. Slang for French Canadian.

¹³ Tuckahoe Native American from tidewater Virginia who eats "tuckahoe," an edible rootstock of an underground fungus.

¹⁴ Cuff African American.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of
graves. 110

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring
taken soon out of their mothers' 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 120
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. 130

7

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and
I know it.

I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-
wash'd babe, and am not contain'd between my hat
and boots,
And peruse manifold objects, no two alike and every
one good,
The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all
good.

I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,
I am the mate and companion of people, all just as
immortal and fathomless as myself,
(They do not know how immortal, but I know.)

Every kind for itself and its own, for me mine male and
female,
For me those that have been boys and that love women, 140

For me the man that is proud and feels how it stings to be
slighted,
For me the sweet-heart and the old maid, for me mothers
and the mothers of mothers,
For me lips that have smiled, eyes that have shed tears,
For me children and the begetters of children.

Undrape! you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor
discarded,
I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no,
And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and
cannot be shaken away.

8

The little one sleeps in its cradle,
I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush
away flies with my hand.

The youngster and the red-faced girl turn aside up the
bushy hill, 150
I peeringly view them from the top.

The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom,
I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note where
the pistol has fallen.

The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles,¹⁵
talk of the promenaders,
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating
thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the granite
floor,
The snow-sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-
balls,
The hurrahs for popular favorites, the fury of rous'd mobs,
The flap of the curtain'd litter,¹⁶ a sick man inside borne
to the hospital,
The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows and
fall,
The excited crowd, the policeman with his star quickly
working his passage to the centre of the crowd, 160
The impassive stones that receive and return so many
echoes,
What groans of over-fed or half-starv'd who fall
sunstruck or in fits,
What exclamations of women taken suddenly who hurry
home and give birth to babes,
What living and buried speech is always vibrating here,
what howls restrain'd by decorum,
Arrests of criminals, slights, adulterous offers made,
acceptances, rejections with convex lips,
I mind them or the show or resonance of them—I come
and I depart.

¹⁵ blab . . . pave . . . tires . . . boot-soles Idle sounds made on the pavement by cart wheels and boot soles. *Sluff*, also spelled *slough* means "droppings."

¹⁶ litter A couch secluded by curtains and carried on men's shoulders or by beasts of burden.

9

The big doors of the country barn stand open and ready,
The dried grass of the harvest-time loads the slow-drawn
wagon,
The clear light plays on the brown gray and green
intertinged,
The armfuls are pack'd to the sagging mow. 170

I am there, I help, I came stretch'd atop of the load,
I felt its soft jolts, one leg reclined on the other,
I jump from the cross-beams and seize the clover and
timothy,¹⁷
And roll head over heels and tangle my hair full of wisps.

10

Alone far in the wilds and mountains I hunt,
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,¹⁸ 180
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 was a red girl,¹⁹
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 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.²⁰

The runaway slave came to my house and stopt outside,
I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile, 190

¹⁷ timothy A grass grown for hay.

¹⁸ sparkle and scud "Sparkle" alludes to the play of sunlight on water; "scud" is a sailing term meaning "to run before the wind."

¹⁹ red girl Young Native American woman.

²⁰ feet Whitman's description of the marriage in this verse is based on "The Trapper's Bride," a painting by the Baltimore artist Alfred Jacob Miller (1810-1874).

Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him
limpsy²¹ 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,
And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his
awkwardness,
And remember putting plasters on the galls²² 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-lock²³ lean'd in the
corner.

11

Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly;
Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome.

She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
She hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the
window.

Which of the young men does she like the best?
Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.

Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,
You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your
room.

²¹ limpsy Poetic, limp; without energy or will.

²² galls Sores caused by chafing.

²³ fire-lock A gun outfitted with a lock that requires a slow match to
ignite the powder charge.

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-
ninth bather,
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.

The beards of the young men glisten'd with wet, it ran
from their long hair,
Little streams pass'd all over their bodies.
An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,
It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.

The young men float on their backs, their white bellies
bulge to the sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to
them,
They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant
and bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray.

12

The butcher-boy puts off his killing-clothes, or sharpens
his knife at the stall in the market,
I loiter enjoying his repartee and his shuffle and break-
down.

Blacksmiths with grimed and hairy chests environ the
anvil,
Each has his main-sledge, they are all out, there is a great
heat in the fire.
From the cinder-strew'd threshold I follow their
movements,
The lithe sheer of their waists plays even with their
massive arms,
Overhand the hammers swing, overhand so slow,
overhand so sure,
They do not hasten, each man hits in his place.

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Selection from *Madame Bovary*

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) is considered the greatest novel in the French language. Its heroine, Emma Bovary, is the first of a line of unhappy middle-class wives, such as the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, who appear in modern fiction. Flaubert's story of Emma's revolt against marriage led officials to prosecute him (unsuccessfully) for "immorality." Such a charge is ludicrous today, partly because morals are more relaxed, and partly because studies