

Walt Whitman, 1819-1892: He Created a New Kind of Poetry

We celebrate National Poetry Month with poems by one of America's greatest poets.

Transcript of radio broadcast:

11 April 2009

VOICE ONE:

I'm Faith Lapidus.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Phoebe Zimmermann with People in America in VOA Special English. Today we tell about Walt Whitman, one of America's greatest poets.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:



A drawing of Walt Whitman

In the Nineteenth Century, one of America's greatest writers, Walt Whitman, helped people learn to value poetry. Whitman created a new kind of poetry.

Walt Whitman was born in eighteen nineteen in New York City. During his long life, he watched America grow from a young nation to the strongest industrial power in the world. Whitman was influenced by events around him. But his poetry speaks of the inner self. He celebrated great people like President Abraham Lincoln. He also celebrated common people.

VOICE TWO:

As a young man, Whitman worked as a school teacher, a printer and a newspaper reporter. He was thirty-six years old when he published his first book of poetry in eighteen fifty-five. He called it "Leaves of Grass." It had only twelve poems. The poems are written in free verse. The lines do not follow any set form. Some lines are short. Some are long. The words at the end of each line do not have a similar sound. They do not rhyme.

Here are some lines from the famous poem "Song of Myself" from "Leaves of Grass." Whitman writes about grass as a sign of everlasting life.

VOICE THREE:

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 dropped,

Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

...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 soon out of their mother's laps.

VOICE ONE:

One of America's greatest thinkers and writers immediately recognized the importance of "Leaves of Grass." Ralph Waldo Emerson praised Whitman's work. But most other poets and writers said nothing or denounced it.

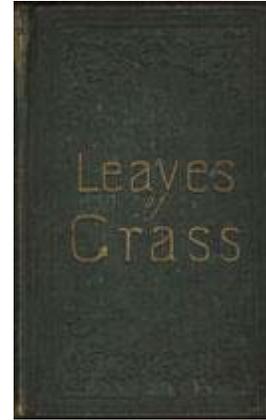
Most readers also rejected Whitman's poems. The new form of his poetry surprised many people. His praise of the human body and sexual love shocked many people. Whitman was homosexual. He loved men. Some people disliked Whitman's opinions of society. He rejected the desire for money and power.

Even his own brother told Whitman that he should stop writing poetry. But Whitman had many things to say. And he continued to say them. Readers began to understand that America had a great new poetic voice.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

The American Civil War began in eighteen sixty-one. The southern states had withdrawn from the United States. They wanted to protect their rights



against the central government. They especially wanted to continue owning black slaves.

The northern states fought the South to save the Union and free the slaves. Walt Whitman hated slavery because he believed all people are equal. He supported the northern cause.

During the war, Whitman worked for the government in Washington, D.C. He also worked without pay at army hospitals. He helped care for wounded and dying soldiers. He sat beside these men for hours. He brought them food. He wrote letters for them.

Whitman sometimes saw President Abraham Lincoln riding his horse in Washington. President Lincoln was murdered soon after the Civil War ended. Whitman honored him with a poem called "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed." The poem describes Lincoln as a great spirit and a fallen star. This is how the poem begins:

VOICE THREE:

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed,

And the great star early drooped in the western sky in the night,

I mourned, 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.

O powerful western fallen star!

VOICE ONE:

After the Civil War, Whitman worked for government agencies. He watched the United States try to heal itself and increase democracy. To Walt Whitman, democracy was more than a political system or idea. It was the natural form of government for free people. Whitman believed democracy is meant to honor the rights of every person and the equality of all people.

Whitman denounced people who believed they were better than others in the eyes of God. He expressed these ideas in his poem "Song of Myself."

VOICE THREE:

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contained,

I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

Walt Whitman's poems praise the United States and its democracy. The poet expressed his love for America and its people in many ways.

This poem is called "I Hear America Singing." It celebrates the many different kinds of workers doing their jobs to help their country.

VOICE THREE:

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear;
Those of mechanics—each one singing his, as it should be, blithe and strong;
The carpenter singing his, as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his, as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work;
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat—the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck;
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench—the hatter singing as he stands;
The wood-cutter's song—the ploughboy's, on his way in the morning, or at the noon intermission, or at sundown;
The delicious singing of the mother—or of the young wife at work—or of the girl sewing or washing—
Each singing what belongs to him or her, and to none else;

The day what belongs to the day—at night, the party of young fellows, robust,
friendly,

Singing, with open mouths, their strong melodious songs.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:



Walt Whitman

Experts today praise "Leaves of Grass" as a major literary work. In his time, Whitman thought of it as a work in progress. He re-published the book every few years for the rest of his life. Each time he added new poems. And he changed many of the old lines. The last version of the book contained more than four hundred poems. By then, Whitman's fame had spread to many nations.

In eighteen seventy-three, Walt Whitman suffered a stroke. He spent the last years of his life in Camden, New Jersey. He wrote more poems. He also wrote about political and democratic policies.

Whitman was poor and weak during the last years of his life. He died in eighteen ninety-two. But if we can believe his poetry, death held no terrors for him. Listen to these lines from "Song of Myself":

VOICE THREE:

And as to you Death, and you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me...

And as to you Corpse I think you are good manure, but that does not offend me...

And as to you Life I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths.

(No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before)...

Do you see O my brothers and sisters?

It is not chaos or death -- it is form, union, plan -- it is eternal life -- it is Happiness...

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun...

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...

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,

Missing me one place search another,

I stop somewhere waiting for you.

VOICE TWO:

Some critics say Walt Whitman was a spokesman for democracy. Others say he was not a spokesman for anything.

Instead, they simply call him a great poet. We leave you now with more words from "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman.

VOICE THREE:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul, I am the poet of the woman the same as the man.

I celebrate myself.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Jerilyn Watson wrote this program. Lawan Davis produced it. Our studio engineer was Bill Barber. Steve Ember read the poetry. I'm Faith Lapidus.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Phoebe Zimmermann. Join us again next week for another People in America program in VOA Special English.