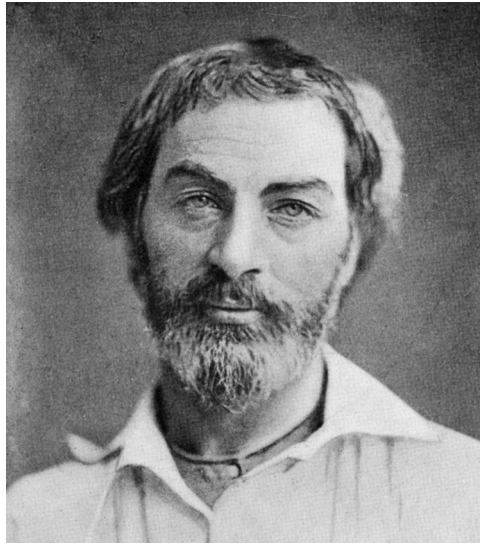


## 181 QUOTATIONS



### Walt Whitman

(1819-1892)

Walt Whitman is the bard of America who shocked the Victorians. “I was told he is disgraceful,” wrote Emily Dickinson. More than any other literary figure Whitman embodies and celebrates the traditional ideals of democracy, freedom and equality. He was the seminal American poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as Emerson was the seminal philosopher. Dickinson was not discovered until the 1920s. Whitman’s democratic vision, themes and loose rhythmic style using common language influenced many later writers including Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane and most of the free verse poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ezra Pound and the other Modernists had to come to terms with Whitman in their revolt against Romanticism. In particular, the opening of T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” resembles the opening of Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” while expressing a situation opposite to it in every way. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922), the most influential poem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, proclaims the failure of Whitman’s optimistic dream of spiritual progress. Hart Crane’s epic *The Bridge* (1930) is an attempt to extend Whitman’s vision. In “Song of Myself” the “myself” should be understood first as representing all humanity at the present stage of evolution—as a “cosmos”—then secondarily as the individual Walt Whitman. The mystical vision and structure of the poem have been analyzed best by Malcolm Cowley in his Introduction to the original edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), which Whitman revised and added to throughout his life. Appreciation of Whitman peaked during the countercultural revolution of the 1960s, then Postmodern cynicism in the universities and scorn for America—Manifest Destiny and all that—stigmatized him as naïve and imperialistic. His spirituality and even his discretion as an evident homosexual were out of date among the politically correct elite.

ORDER OF TOPICS: “Myself” as humanity, ego, self-reliance, freedom, individualism, identity, equality, Nature, body and soul, sex, animals, pastoralism, grass, Puritanism, individuation, transcendent consciousness, miracles, time, America, Democracy, government, politics, westward movement, Manifest Destiny, the open road, progress, Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, justice, friends, morality, parenthood, simplicity, literature, *Leaves*, censorship, Postmodernism, organized religion, God, optimism, immortality, death, epitaph:

“ MYSELF”

In all people I see myself.

When I give, I give myself.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself.

Immense have been the preparations for me.

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

Of these one and all I weave the song of myself.

It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue of you.

I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I an encloser of things to be.

Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.

All forces have been steadily employ'd to complete and delight me, / Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.

#### EGO

If you done it, it ain't bragging.

All faults may be forgiven of him who has perfect candor.

I may be as bad as the worst, but, thank God, I am as good as the best.

I know perfectly well my own egotism, / Know my omnivorous lines and must not write any less.

The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.

#### SELF-RELIANCE

Henceforth I ask not good fortune. I myself am good fortune.

Re-examine all that you have been told...dismiss that which insults your soul.

Wisdom is not finally tested in schools.

#### FREEDOM

Freedom—to walk free and own no superior.

I wear my hat as I please indoors or out.

The runaway slave came to my house and stopt outside... He staid with me a week before he was recaptured and pass'd north, / I had him sit next to me at table.

#### INDIVIDUALISM

The whole theory of the universe is directed unerringly to one single individual.

The beauty of independence, departure, actions that rely on themselves.

Oh while I live, to be the ruler of life, not a slave, to meet life as a powerful conqueror, and nothing exterior to me will ever take command of me.

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.

A heroic person walks at his ease through and out of that custom or precedent or authority that suits him not.

#### IDENTITY

Walt Whitman, a cosmos, of Manhattan the son, / Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking, and breeding, / No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them.

#### EQUALITY

I am the hounded slave.

All the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers.

Whoever degrades another degrades me, / And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.

Only what proves itself to every man and woman is so, / Only what nobody denies is so.

The prostitute draggles her shawl...I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you.

The President holding a cabinet council is surrounded by the great Secretaries.

Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man.

[He affirms] the perfect equality of the female with the male.

And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man.

The Female equally with the Male I sing.

#### NATURE

I exist as I am, that is enough.

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking...

I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.

If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred.

Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.

If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it.

As Adam early in the morning, / Walking forth from the bower refresh'd with sleep, / Behold me where I pass, hear my voice, approach / Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass, / Be not afraid of my body.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from / The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer, / This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.

Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water.

After you have exhausted what there is in business, politics, conviviality, and so on—have found that none of these finally satisfy, or permanently wear—what remains? Nature remains.

Why are there trees I never walk under but large and melodious thoughts descend upon me?

#### BODY AND SOUL

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul.

And your very flesh shall be a great poem.

#### SEX

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.

I am a free companion, I bivouac by invading watchfires, / I turn the bridegroom out of the bed and stay with the bride myself, / I tighten her all night to my thighs and lips.

Where the bull advances to do his masculine work, where the stud to the mare, where the cock is treading the hen.

#### ANIMALS

I think I could turn and live with animals, they're so placid and self-contain'd.

The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

[Animals] 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.

#### PASTORALISM

I am for those who believe in loose delights, I share the midnight orgies of young men, I dance with the dancers and drink with the drinkers.

Be cautious, not judgmental.

And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral drest in his shroud.

To the real artist in humanity, what are called bad manners are often the most picturesque and significant of all.

Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me, why should you not speak to me? And why should I not speak to you?

There is an indescribable freshness and unconsciousness about an illiterate person that humbles and mocks the power of the noblest expressive genius.

I have learned that to be with those I like is enough.

Nothing endures but personal qualities.

In the confusion we stay with each other, happy to be together, speaking without uttering a single word.

Now I see the secret of making the best person: it is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth.

Give me odorous at sunrise a garden of beautiful flowers where I can walk undisturbed.

A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books.

#### GRASS

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

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.

It is time to explain myself—let us stand up.

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

#### PURITANISM

The shallow consider liberty a release from all law, from every constraint. The wise man sees in it, on the contrary, the potent Law of Laws.

There shall be love between the poet and the man of demonstrable science. In the beauty of poems are the tuft and final applause of science.

Hurrah for positive science! long live exact demonstration!

Have you learned the lessons only of those who admired you, and were tender with you, and stood aside for you? Have you not learned great lessons from those who braced themselves against you, and disputed passage with you?

#### INDIVIDUATION

I tramp a perpetual journey.

Passage indeed O soul to primal thought.

Greater than stars or suns, / Bounding O soul thou journeyest forth.

The voyage of his mind's return, / To reason's early paradise, / Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions, / Again with fair creation.

The poets of the kosmos advance through all interpositions and coverings and turmoils and stratagems to first principles.

Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you / You must travel it for yourself. [echoes popular Christian hymn]

Wisdom cannot be pass'd from one having it to another not having it.

Passage to more than India!

#### TRANSCENDENT CONSCIOUSNESS

The expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new.

I cannot be awake for nothing looks to me as it did before, / Or else I am awake for the first time, and all before has been a mean sleep.

Bathe me O God in thee, mounting to thee, / I and my soul to range in range of thee.

There is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheeled universe.

Whatever satisfies the soul is truth.

I am afoot with my vision.

#### MIRACLES

Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.

To me, every hour of the day and night is an unspeakably perfect miracle.

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars.

And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

Every moment of light and dark is a miracle.

#### TIME

What is past is past.

The future is no more uncertain than the present.

Here or henceforward it is all the same to me, I accept Time absolutely.

#### AMERICA

Other lands have their vitality in a few, a class, but we have it in the bulk of our people.

The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races.

The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature.

The genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges, or churches, or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors, but always most in the common people.

And there is no trade or employment but the young man following it may become a hero.

There is no week nor day nor hour when tyranny may not enter upon this country, if the people lose their roughness and spirit of defiance.

I see great things in baseball. It's our game—the American game.

The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.

Produce great men, the rest follows.

#### DEMOCRACY

I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy, / By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.

Assuming democracy to be at present in its embryo condition, and that the only large and satisfactory justification of it resides in the future, mainly, through the copious production of perfect characters among the people, and through the advent of a sane and pervading religiousness.

I say that democracy can never prove itself beyond cavil, until it finds and luxuriantly grows its own forms of art, poems, schools, theology, displacing all that exists, or that has been produced anywhere in the past, under opposite influences.

#### GOVERNMENT

The official services of America, national, state, and municipal, in all their branches and departments, except the judiciary, are saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, mal-administration; and the judiciary is tainted. The great cities reek with respectable as much as non-respectable robbery and scoundrelism.

#### POLITICS

Disengage yourself from parties.

Always inform yourself; always do the best you can; always vote.

#### WESTWARD MOVEMENT

All the past we leave behind.

Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual.

I know not where they go, / But I know that they go toward the best—toward something great.

All the pulses of the world, / Falling in they beat for us, with the Western movement beat, / Holding single or together, steady moving to the front, all for us, / Pioneers! O pioneers!

We primeval forests felling.

#### MANIFEST DESTINY

Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?

I see over my own continent the Pacific railroad surmounting every barrier... Tying the Eastern to the Western sea, / The road between Europe and Asia.

For purpose vast, man's long probation fill'd, / Thou rondure of the world at last accomplish'd.

Year of the purpose accomplish'd! / Year of the marriage of continents, climates and oceans!

#### THE OPEN ROAD

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road.

To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls.

Will you give me yourself? Will you come travel with me?

#### PROGRESS

Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent. [The railroad]

And will never be any more perfection than there is now.

## CIVIL WAR

The real war will never get in the books.

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them, / And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them, / I saw the debris...of all the slain soldiers of the war.

I go round from one case to another. I do not see that I do much good to these wounded and dying; but I cannot leave them. Once in awhile some youngster holds on to me convulsively, and I do what I can for him.

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge, / Straight and swift to my wounded I go... / To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return, / To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss, / An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail, / Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill'd again....

Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested.

## ABRAHAM LINCOLN

I see the President almost every day, as I happen to live where he passes to and from his lodgings out of town.... We have got so that we exchange bows, and very cordial ones.

Of all the days of the war, there are two especially I can never forget. Those were the day following the news, in New York and Brooklyn, of that first Bull Run defeat, and the day of Abraham Lincoln's death. I was home in Brooklyn on both occasions. The day of the murder we heard the news very early in the morning. Mother prepared breakfast—and other meals afterward—as usual; but not a mouthful was eaten all day by either of us.

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.

## JUSTICE

Judging from the main portions of the history of the world, so far, justice is always in jeopardy.

## FRIENDS

I no doubt deserved my enemies, but I don't believe I deserved my friends.

## MORALITY

Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people...

## PARENTHOOD

Nothing for instance is greater than to conceive children and bring them up well.

And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.

## SIMPLICITY

Nothing is better than simplicity.

Simplicity is the glory of expression.



The art of art, the glory of expression and the sunshine of the light of letters, is simplicity.

#### LITERATURE

To have great poets, there must be great audiences.

The attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots.

I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes. We convince by our presence.

Viewed freely, the English language is the accretion and growth of every dialect, race, and range of time, and is both the free and compacted composition of all.

The expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic.

*Leaves of Grass* (1855)

The words of my book nothing, the drift of it everything.

He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.

Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself, it provokes me forever, it says sarcastically, Walt you contain enough, why don't you let it out then? [The structure of "Song of Myself" imitates inhaling and exhaling.]

#### CENSORSHIP

The dirtiest book of all is the expurgated book.

#### POSTMODERNISM

I heard what was said of the universe, / Heard it and heard it of several thousand years; / It is middling well as far as it goes—but is that all?

When the memories of the old martyrs are faded utterly away...when the large names of patriots are laughed at in the public halls from the lips of the orators...when the boys are no more christened after the same but christened after tyrants and traitors instead...when the laws of the free are grudgingly permitted...when it is better to be a bound booby and rogue in office at a high salary than the poorest free mechanic or farmer...

Great genius and the people of these states must never be demeaned to romances.

#### ORGANIZED RELIGION

I do not despise you priests, all time, the world over.

There soon will be no more priests. Their work is done.

Every man shall be his own priest.

#### GOD

The great Camerado.

I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least.

In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass.

No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about death.

I accept reality and dare not question it.

O Thou transcendent, / Nameless, the fibre and the breath, / Light of the light, shedding forth universes,  
thou centre of them, / Thou mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving, / Thou moral, spiritual  
fountain—affection's source—thou reservoir...

#### OPTIMISM

Faith is the antiseptic of the soul.

As he sees the farthest he has the most faith.

Keep your face always toward the sunshine—and shadows will fall behind you.

Let your soul stand cool and composed before a million universes.

I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown.

#### IMMORTALITY

My rendezvous is appointed, it is certain, / The Lord will be there and wait till I come on perfect terms, /  
The great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine will be there.

The eternal tendencies of all toward happiness make the only point of sane philosophy.

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

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

No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.

Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?

#### DEATH

Nothing can happen more beautiful than death.

The smallest sprout shows there really is no death.

To die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

#### EPITAPH

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love.

