

Whitman and the American 'romantic' nature

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

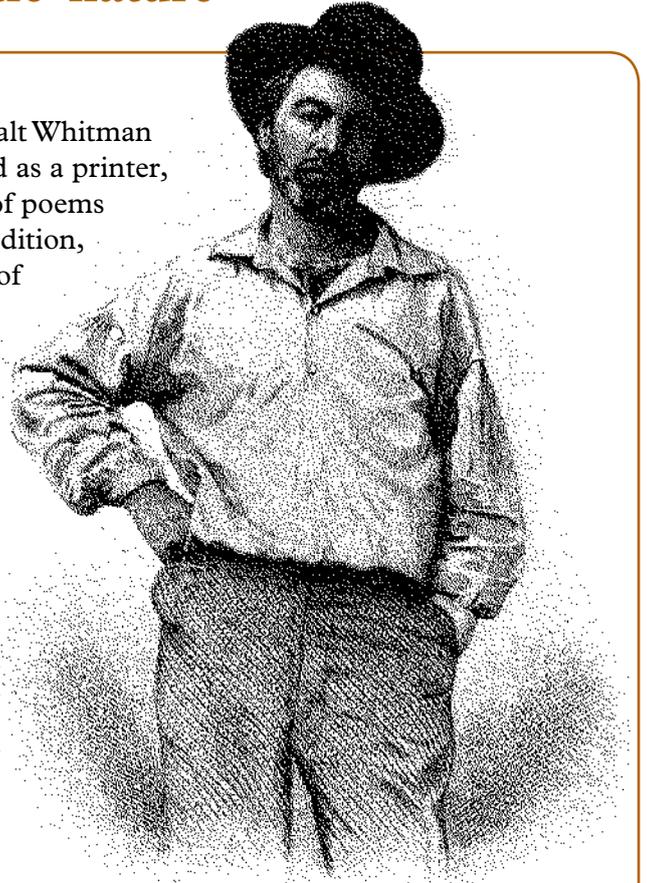
Born on Long Island, New York, to a working class family, Walt Whitman completed his education when he was 12 and he then worked as a printer, teacher and journalist. He started working on his collection of poems

Leaves of Grass in the early 1850s and published the first edition, at his own expense, in 1855. At that time, it was a collection of

12 poems and only a few critics appreciated the work. The general public was quite shocked by the form and some of the content, especially its sexuality. Whitman continued editing and revising the collection until his death and the last edition published in 1892 contained 400 poems.

Leaves of Grass is a celebration of America, its people, its landscape and the democracy on which the nation was built. It also deals with themes of physical and spiritual love, identity and the expression of self. Whitman managed to bring together romanticism, which had been prevalent up to that time, with the realism brought about by scientific and technological discoveries. He experimented with form and moved away from the influences of British literary tradition. He used free verse, without a regular rhyme scheme or meter, but which is extremely rhythmical in its sound, reflecting natural speech.

Walt Whitman is often considered the father of American poetry because of this innovative style and the influence he had on later American poets.



The poem ***Song of Myself*** is an epic poem which, as the title suggests, has the theme of identity at its core. The concept of self is divided into three components: the everyday 'I', the inner self and the universal soul. Whitman believed in all souls being connected in some way, so that it is possible to identify with other people, animals and nature. The poem also brings together the idea of America as a democracy, a place where everyone is the same and equally important, where diversity should be celebrated and where friendship is fundamental. This is the first section of the poem.

*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.*

1 Read the biography and decide if these sentences are true (T) or false (F). Correct the false ones.

- 1 Whitman had a long, formal education.
- 2 He did not have a publisher for the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
- 3 *Leaves of Grass* was immediately successful.
- 4 The collection of poems was never changed.
- 5 The concept of democracy was important to Whitman.
- 6 His poems have elements of romanticism and realism.
- 7 His poems reflect the sound of spoken language.
- 8 Whitman's style did not have an effect on American poetry.

	T	F
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2 Read the first section of the poem and answer these questions.

- 1 How old is Whitman?
- 2 What is he doing?
- 3 Who does he invite to join him?
- 4 What does he hope to do?

3 Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

- 1 How does Whitman say that we are connected? What about the connection with nature and the past?
- 2 The verb 'assume' has two meanings: 'believe' and 'become/take on'. How can you interpret line 2 with these two meanings?
- 3 What do you think the importance is of putting aside religion and learning for Whitman's journey?
- 4 Do you consider the soul to be separate or a part of one's identity?