The History of American Literature

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**Walt Whitman**

1. Biography.
   1. Born May 31st, 1819, in West Hills, New York, the second of eight children. Whitman began working in newspaper offices at the age of 11 and wrote his first article at the age of 12.
   2. Lived in Brooklyn and later Manhattan and read many important writers of the day, including Emerson, Hawthorne, and Bryant. During this time he continued to write for newspapers and in 1842 published a novel about the evils of alcohol.
   3. Wrote political speeches and supported the anti-slavery campaigns of the day. Travelled to New Orleans in 1848 and saw the horrors of slavery with his own eyes. This experience affected him profoundly and changed his ideas about abolitionism.
   4. Emerson: Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote an essay titled “The Poet” that was a large part of Whitman’s awakening as a poet. He wrote: “I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil.” In this essay Emerson called for a poetry that would represent America: all people and all ideas, all of its landscape, and all of its qualities: good, bad, kind, evil, peaceful, and angry. Whitman heard this and started writing.
   5. Shortly after he returned from New Orleans he began to work hard on a new form of poetry. He published the first edition of his life’s work, *Leaves of Grass*, in 1855. The poetry was unique in both its style and themes.
   6. Whitman’s poetry amounted to a revolution in literature. His poetry celebrated the body and the sexual nature of his poetry led to some problems. His publishers were even threatened with charges of obscenity on several occasions.
   7. During the Civil War Whitman worked as a medical assistant helping injured and dying soldiers, first in New York and later in Washington D.C. At first excited by the work, he became weakened physically by the death he saw around him and was unhealthy thereafter.
   8. He saw himself as America’s “national bard (poet)” and worked hard to promote himself and his poetry. Although his poetry was not popular among the general public during his lifetime, many contemporary poets, writers, and critics recognized his importance.
   9. For the rest of his life Whitman worked on this book, publishing nine different editions. The last, so-called “Death-bed Edition,” was published just two months before Whitman’s death in 1892.
2. Themes.
   1. Controlling Ideas: Ideas that represent Whitman’s “way of thinking.”
      1. Unity. In Whitman’s poetry “all things are one.” This is the single most important idea for understanding his poems: **all of the metaphors are interconnected**. Sex is democracy, the human body is the poem, the poem is America. All of these ideas can be interpreted through each other in the poems.
      2. Existence. Whitman’s is always asking the questions:
         1. “Who **am** I?”
         2. “Who **are** we?”
         3. “What **is** the world?”
         4. “What **is** a relationship between humans?”
      3. Contact. The best way to understand something (for Whitman) is to **touch it** (or kiss it, or eat it, or lay on it, or swim in it). He tries to understand the world through his senses and the most important sense for him is touch.
      4. The character **“I”**. In Whitman’s poetry there is always an I but this “I” is not meant to mean only the author. It is you and it is me and it is the nation and it is the world and it is the universe. This is a BIG “I”.
   2. Metaphorical Ideas: The things that he writes about.
      1. The Human Body. The human body is the most important thing in Whitman’s poetry for three reasons:
         1. It provides us with a unity with the world and others. “We are all the same.”
         2. It is a means of questioning the nature of existence and the source of all questions: the “who am I?” begins with “What am I?”
         3. It is the ultimate “I”.
         4. It provides us with a way of touching (contact), and therefore understanding, the world, society, and, most importantly, people around us.
      2. Sex.
         1. For someone who values the sense of touch over all others, it is no surprise that the act of sex is extremely important. It is impossible to touch or be touched more than during sex.
         2. It is also an extremely important metaphor in Whitman’s poetry. It represents the human experience in nature, in society, and in all relationships.
         3. Whitman’s sexuality is a source of great curiosity for anyone who studies him. He appears to have lived the way that he wrote. He was probably intimate with several men and at least two women.
      3. The Nation. “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” His grand them is the Unites States. This is the background for most of his other metaphor.
      4. Democracy. The idea of democracy perfectly lines up with Whitman’s views about people: we are all important, equal, and we only achieve our full potential by closely interacting with others around us. Whitman’s democracy was radical for its time: all individuals are equal: rich and poor, white and black, man and woman.
      5. Nature. The natural world is also a central metaphor in Whitman’s work. When he talks about nature he is not only talking about his body in nature (which he talks about a LOT), but this experience represents all of the other “Contacts” as well: the contact of sex, or democracy, or individuals in society are all represented in the poems by descriptions of contact with the earth.
3. Style.
   1. Free Verse. Whitman’s poetry does not have end rhyme or a standard meter. It is still complex and uses many different poetic devices (such as alliteration, anaphor, and internal rhyme). This freedom with the poetic form is meant to create the feeling of energy and freedom in the meaning of the poem and Whitman does this very well.
   2. Language: Whitman creates new words, uses words in a new way, and plays with sentence structure to create meaning. He also used language that is extremely shocking to some people. He talks about the human body and its functions in ways that can make some people uncomfortable. He is trying to get us to look at our body without shame.
   3. Catalogues. He writes long lists, attempting to capture everything he can think of on a give topic.
   4. Narrative Voice. This is the “I” we spoke of. The voice in his poetry is Whitman, but it is also you and me and everyone else and everything else at the same time.
   5. Revision: Whitman changed and revised his poems and the last publication is very different from the first edition. He meant that his poems would be looked at as a living and growing thing. It is often important to look at the changes he made and see how the changes affect the meaning of the poems.

**Selections from “Song of Myself” by Walt Whitman**.

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.

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.

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 procreant urge of the world.

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance 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.

Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,

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 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,

Shall I postpone my acceptation and realization and scream at my eyes.

That they turn from gazing after and down the road,

And forthwith cipher and show me to a cent.

Exactly the value of one and exactly the value of two, and which is ahead ?

15.

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft.

The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp,

The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner.

The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm.

The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready.

The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches.

The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar.

The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel.

The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loafe and looks at the oats and rye.

The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case,

(He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's bed-room ;)

The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case.

He turns his quid of tobacco while his eyes blur with the manuscript;

The malform'd limbs are tied to the surgeon's table,

What is removed drops horribly in a pail ;

The quadroon girl is sold at the auction-stand, the drunkard nods by the bar-room stove,

The machinist rolls up his sleeves, the policeman travels his beat, the gate-keeper marks who pass.

The young fellow drives the express-wagon, (I love him, though I do not know him;)

The half-breed straps on his light boots to compete in the race.

The western turkey-shooting draws old and young, some lean on their rifles, some sit on logs.

Out from the crowd steps the marksman, takes his position, levels his piece ;

The groups of newly-come immigrants cover the wharf or levee,

As the woolly-pates hoe in the sugar-field, the overseer views them from his saddle.

The bugle calls in the ball-room, the gentlemen run for their partners, the dancers bow to each other,

The youth lies awake in the cedar-roof'd garret and harks to the musical rain.

The Wolverine sets traps on the creek that helps fill the Huron,

The squaw wrapt in her yellow-hemm'd cloth is offering moccasins and bead-bags for sale.

The connoisseur peers along the exhibition-gallery with half-shut eyes bent sideways.

As the deck-hands make fast the steamboat the plank is thrown for the shore-going passengers.

The young sister holds out the skein while the elder sister winds it off in a ball, and

stops now and then for the knots.

The one-year wife is recovering and happy having a week ago borne her first child.

The clean-hair'd Yankee girl works with her sewing-machine or in the factory or mill,

The paving-man leans on his two-handed rammer, the reporter's lead flies swiftly over the note-book,

the sign-painter is lettering with blue and gold,

The canal boy trots on the tow-path, the book-keeper counts at his desk, the shoemaker waxes his thread.

The conductor beats time for the band and all the performers follow him.

The child is baptized, the convert is making his first professions,

The regatta is spread on the bay, the race is begun, (how the white sails sparkle !)

The drover watching his drove sings out to them that would stray,

The pedler sweats with his pack on his back, (the purchaser higgling about the odd cent ;)

The bride unrumples her white dress, the minute-hand of the clock moves slowly,

The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just-open'd lips,

The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck.

The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each other,

(Miserable ! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you ;)

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

On the piazza walk three matrons stately and friendly with twined arms,

The crew of the fish-smack pack repeated layers of halibut in the hold.

The Missourian crosses the plains toting his wares and his cattle,

As the fare-collector goes through the train he gives notice by the jingling of loose change.

The floor-men are laying the floor, the tinners are tinning the roof, the masons are

calling for mortar,

In single file each shouldering his hod pass onward the laborers ;

Seasons pursuing each other the indescribable crowd is gather'd, it is the fourth of Seventh-month,

(what salutes of cannon and small arms !)

Seasons pursuing each other the plougher ploughs, the mower mows, and the

winter-grain falls in the ground ;

Off on the lakes the pike-fisher watches and waits by the hole in the frozen surface.

The stumps stand thick round the clearing, the squatter strikes deep with his axe,

Flatboatmen make fast towards dusk near the cotton-wood or pecan- trees.

Coon-seekers go through the regions of the Red river or through those drain'd by

the Tennessee, or through those of the Arkansas,

Torches shine in the dark that hangs on the Chattahooche or Altamahaw,

Patriarchs sit at supper with sons and grandsons and great-grand- sons around them.

In walls of adobie, in canvas tents, rest hunters and trappers after their day's sport,

The city sleeps and the country sleeps.

The living sleep for their time, the dead sleep for their time,

The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young husband sleeps by his wife ;

And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,

And such as it is to be of these more or less I am.

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

21.

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

The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me.

The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man.

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

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

I chant the chant of dilation or pride,

We have had ducking and deprecating about enough,

I show that size is only development.

Have you outstript the rest? are you the President?

It is a trifle, they will more than arrive there every one, and still pass on.

I am he that walks with the tender and growing night,

I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.

Press close bare-bosom'd night − press close magnetic nourishing night !

Night of south winds − night of the large few stars !

Still nodding night mad naked summer night.

Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!

Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees !

Earth of departed sunset − earth of the mountains misty-topt!

Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!

Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river !

Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake !

Far-swooping elbow'd earth − rich apple-blossom'd earth !

Smile, for your lover comes.

Prodigal, you have given me love − therefore I to you give love!

O unspeakable passionate love.

51.

The past and present wilt − I have fill'd them, emptied them.

And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Listener up there ! what have you to confide to me ?

Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,

(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)

Do I contradict myself ?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab.

Who has done his day's work ? who will soonest be through with his supper?

Who wishes to walk with me ?

Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?

52.

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my

loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,

I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me.

It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds,

It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

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

I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

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.

And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged.

Missing me one place search another,

I stop somewhere waiting for you.