



## SONG OF WALT WHITMAN, SONG OF HOPE?

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Walt Whitman was a Long-Island born poet who is most notably known for *Leaves of Grass* (1855), a work that was inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson's call for great poets to render the genuine American experience. In this collection, Whitman takes the voice of a democratic poet on and "prepares us for the perception of a single, universal truth and for our subsequent transformation into the kind of people we need to be" (Brink 2013, xv). Whitman was always close to US pop culture and its (anti)heroes. The nineteenth-century American poet is at the heart of America's culture, which is shown by, for example, John Keating and his rebellious schoolboys chanting Whitman's eponymous line of "O Captain! My Captain!" in Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and the many references to Whitman's work in *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) (Bolonik 2013). To the question "Who is the quintessential American?," Elisabeth Panttaja Brinke, writer, editor and educator who taught literature at Harvard University, Tufts University and Boston College, argues it is "Whitman" (2013, xxii), mainly because of the poet's representations of both democracy and nature.

Whitman's democratic ideas and philosophy of nature are best depicted in his epic "Song of Myself." The poem deals with Whitman's speaker or "I" and with their extraordinary relationship with both the natural and the human worlds. The line "I take part, I see and hear the whole," for example, attests to Whitman's (his speaker's) affiliation with the Emersonian transcendentalist "idea that, to come to truth, it takes the whole soul working in accordance with the whole of nature" (Michaud 1919, 81). Diane Kepner argues, however, that Whitman's "theory of nature" might be slightly more complex, especially in the theory's attempts to find a "common ground between materialism and idealism," body and soul, or "scientific truth and mystical truth" (Kepner 1979, 163). Materialism and idealism eventually coincide in Whitman's use of the atom metaphor. In the first section of "Song of Myself," the speaker states, "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you / [...] / My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, / this air" (Whitman 2013, 22-23). According to



Kepner, the “unseen atoms” symbolize the divine “energy” that blends with other “atoms” in order to produce what is “seen” in the universe, namely every object that the human eye is capable of perceiving (Kepner 1979, 191). Whitman’s speaker therefore uses the atom metaphor with the idealistic aim of “universalizing” or harmonizing things and beings by presenting them as “the converging objects of the universe” (2013, 40). The poet builds on the scientist’s approach but also emphasizes “unity” and harmony among objects and humans, offering a more inclusive and “comprehensive” worldview (Kepner 1979, 197). Such endeavors also align with Whitman’s political stances against slavery and in favor of equal rights for all individuals.

As ecocritic Lawrence Buell writes, Whitman’s poetry came at a time when “people [were] treat[ing] others as ‘non-persons’” and therefore “*Song of Myself*” could be interpreted as restoring a “sense of plenitude, of contact with others and with landscape” (Buell 2001, 99). As a fervent opponent to slavery, Whitman describes his speaker in the tenth section of his epic poem as helping a “runaway slave [who] came to [his] house”, and to whom he “gave [...] a room” and “had him sit next [to him] at [the] table” (2013, 30-31). In addition, the speaker stresses that he is “the poet of the woman the same as the man” and “say[s] [that] it is as great to be a woman as to be a man” (2013, 41). This posture echoes the Emersonian concept of the “(Universal) Man” or “Mind”, later reappropriated by Margaret Fuller to include women, and here so beautifully and progressively endorsed by Whitman.<sup>1</sup>

Just like some of Emerson’s essays, Whitman’s “*Song of Myself*” was critiqued because of its “egotheism,” (Gura 2008, 216) due to the abundant use of the pronouns “I” and “myself”, or toward its “aggressive optimism” (Crumbley 2002, 41). Such potential for empowerment may have indeed inspired readers to consider human capacities as boundless and to pursue their life in the frontier era, simultaneously endorsing destructive logic of growth and expansionism (Lombard 2019, 26). Nevertheless, like Emerson, Whitman initiated a positive shift in public attitude toward humans and nonhumans alike, or at least a possible step toward an ethics of care for (non-)human otherness (Lombard 2021). Shunning the idealistic view of nature as an isolated realm, for example, Whitman’s speaker states:

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<sup>1</sup> In Fuller’s influential essay *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1843), one can read: “By Man I mean both man and woman: these are two halves of one thought. I lay no especial stress on the welfare of either. I believe that the development of the one cannot be effected without that of the other. My highest wish is that truth should be distinctly and rationally apprehended, and the conditions of life and freedom recognized as the same for the daughters and the sons of time; twin exponents of a divine thought” (1998, 5).



This is the city and I am one of the citizens  
Whatever interests the rest interests me, politics, wars, markets,  
newspapers, schools,  
The mayor and councils, banks, tariffs, steamships, factories,  
stocks, stores, real estate and personal estate. (2013, 67)

Whitman was a democratic poet of change, of necessary change. The city cobblestones were as important to him as the leaves of grass. Beyond egotism, one can read hope in “Song of Myself” and, more largely, in Whitman’s work, hope for a more just society. His philosophy of nature conveys connections between materialism and idealism, pragmatism and hope, but does not promote any form of dominance or control over (non-)human others. Walt Whitman is one of the few poets whose voices have transcended centuries and contributed lasting footprints in the American self and culture.

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