

### **A Bird, came down the Walk (359) by Emily Dickinson**

A Bird, came down the Walk -  
He did not know I saw -  
He bit an Angle Worm in halves  
And ate the fellow, raw,

And then, he drank a Dew  
From a convenient Grass -  
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall  
To let a Beetle pass -

He glanced with rapid eyes,  
That hurried all abroad -  
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,  
He stirred his Velvet Head. -

Like one in danger, Cautious,  
I offered him a Crumb,  
And he unrolled his feathers,  
And rowed him softer Home -

Than Oars divide the Ocean,  
Too silver for a seam,  
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon,  
Leap, plashless as they swim.

‘A Bird, came down the Walk’ by Emily Dickinson is a beautiful nature poem. It focuses on the actions of a bird going about its everyday life. ‘A Bird, came down the Walk’ by Emily Dickinson describes the simple, yet beautiful, actions of a bird searching for food and then taking flight.

The poem begins with the speaker describing a bird she sees. She is close by, making it so that she can look at the bird, but it does not immediately notice her. From where she is situated, she sees the bird pick up an “Angle Worm” and bite it in half. It moves quickly from place to place, showing the anxiety inherent to most of its species. It knows the dangers presented by the much larger and stronger world. In the last sections the speaker attempts to offer the bird a crumb. It does not want anything to do with a human being and flies away. Its movements are swift yet purposeful, as if it is swimming.

In the first stanza of ‘*A Bird, came down the Walk*’ the speaker begins by describing the simple, yet beautiful movements of a bird. This particular bird is coming “down the Walk.” This is likely a sidewalk or path of some kind near the speaker’s home, or where she is situated. The speaker is able to observe the bird’s actions without it immediately becoming frightened. This says something

about humans and their interactions with nature. Birds are rightfully wary of the presence of humans. They will not behave in the same way if they are knowingly being watched. The speaker does not have any ill intentions though. She is simply reporting on what she's seeing, and finding importance in the instinctual actions of the bird. It finds a worm, noted here as an "Angle Worm," and eats it raw, biting it in half.

The next thing the speaker sees is the bird drinking the "Dew" from the grass. It doesn't have to go anywhere else to find water, making the "Dew" and "Grass" "convenient." So far, its life has been presented as a simple movement from need to need. In the next two lines another small life is introduced, the "Beetle." While the two creatures might be simple to human eyes, the bird makes a conscious effort to "hop" to the side and "let" the beetle crawl past. The bird is very aware of its world, as will be seen in the final stanzas.

In stanza three of '*A Bird, came down the Walk*', the bird's reactions to its world are carefully studied by the speaker. It is clear she is truly watching this creature and taking sound mental notes on what it is doing. She notices its inherent anxiety. No matter what it's doing it looks around "with rapid eyes." They move quickly, "all abroad," trying to see everything at once. It is very on edge and aware of the variety of dangers it might face. The speaker takes some liberties with the description and states how the bird's eyes appear like "frightened Beads." They are shiny, probably black, and moving or rolling around easily. The bird becomes scared of the speaker and "stir[s]" its "Velvet Head." This description of his feathers is interesting. Dickinson uses the word "Velvet" implying a kind of luxury about the animal. It is clear she, or at least the speaker she is channeling, sees the bird as a lovely thing.

The fourth stanza of '*A Bird, came down the Walk*' describes the one interaction the speaker attempts with the bird. She reaches out to him and offers "him a crumb" of food. The bird does not react positively to this intrusion on its space and as its instincts require, flies away.

In Dickinson's words, the action is much more complicated and elegant. The bird is said to "unroll...his feathers." It is a process the speaker sees slowly and is able to study. Each feather passes her by in all its "Velvet" beauty. When he takes to the sky he is said to "row" to his "Home," wherever that may be. The use of the word "row" here, as if applying to sailing, starts a metaphor that continues into the fifth stanza. Dickinson closely relates water and flight and the movements which make them up.

The last stanza is more metaphorical than those which came before it. The speaker is interested in how the bird's wings move through the air. She describes this process as being similar to "Oars divid[ing] the Ocean."

The bird has a clear beauty that is compared to a butterfly that takes off from the “Banks of Noon” in the heat of the day. It jumps and moves “splashless” through the air. It cuts through the air as an oar would through the water.

‘*A Bird, came down the Walk*’ is a five stanza poem that is separated into sets of five lines. As was common within Dickinson’s works, she uses quatrains, or sets of four lines to structure the piece. One will also immediately take note of her characteristic capitalizations and dashes, over which literary scholars are divided. In this particular poem, the dashes only appear at the ends of the lines. This might have been done to elongate a pause before a reader moves to the next line.

In terms to meter, the poem conforms to iambic trimeter. This means that each line contains three sets of two beats. The first of these is unstressed and the second stressed. The rhyme scheme is a bit looser. There is almost a pattern of ABCB, if not for a few half or slant rhymes, such as that which appears in stanza three.

Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, the great American epic poem, has often been read as the poem that best captures the tensions and conflicting qualities that define what we might call the “American democratic self.” Whitman originally published the poem in 1855 and then revised it five times over the next - twenty-- five years, changing its title from *Leaves of Grass* to *Poem of Walt Whitman, An American* and then just *Walt Whitman* before settling on *Song of Myself* in 1881. Over the years, he added and deleted lines, changed punctuation, altered words, and sectioned the poem in different ways. In its original form, the poem had unnumbered stanzas that varied from a single line to over 80 lines; by 1860, Whitman had numbered these stanzas from 1 through 372; and by 1867 he had further divided the poem into 52 numbered sections, while still keeping the stanza numbers. Only in 1881 did he drop the stanza numbers and retain just the 52 sections. In addition to the internal changes in the poem, Whitman altered its positioning in *Leaves of Grass*, placing it first among the twelve poems in the 1855 edition but dropping it into second position in 1860 and moving it further back in each succeeding edition. The poem thus plays a different role in each edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Three versions of the poem (1855, 1856, and 1860) appeared before the Civil War and three more (1867, 1871, and 1881) after the war. After the Emancipation Proclamation and Reconstruction, the historical currency of *Song of Myself* changed dramatically, and the poem, when read in the context of Whitman’s later work, recedes into a kind of nostalgia for a - dreamed-- of democracy that was never realized, that was shattered by the war, by the persistent racial strife in the culture after emancipation , and by growing class disparities. By the twentieth century, most readers had stopped reading *Song* as a poem growing out of the specific turbulent social history of 1850s America, and many began reading it as primarily a spiritual or mystical text. But *Song of Myself* in recent decades has been examined anew as a key text in - nineteenth-- century American cultural studies, a poem that responds acutely to the tensions of class, race, and - sexuality— as well as to emerging linguistic, religious , and scientific - issues— that defined the United States in the years leading up to the Civil War and continued to haunt the nation in the decades after the war. 2 The final version of the poem, which we reprint here, is the version that Whitman wanted future readers to encounter, even if many readers over the years have preferred the earliest (1855) version, with its

idiosyncratic ellipses and a flow unbroken by section numbers. For all the changes Whitman made to the - poem— and he made hundreds of - them— the thrust and power of Song of Myself remains consistent from the first version to the last. There is no mistaking the fact that we are encountering the same poem in the 1881 version that we encountered in the original 1855 version, and Whitman's inclusion of this poem (the longest by far that he would ever write) in a prominent place in every edition of Leaves of Grass keeps it the cornerstone of his book even as the poem and the book itself evolve in response to massive cultural, political, and personal changes over a quarter of a century. Whitman wrote at a time that geological, evolutionary, and astronomical science were exploding - long-- held notions about time and - space— the history of the earth suddenly was being told in terms of billions rather than thousands of years, and the earth itself seemed to be drifting from the center of the universe to a tiny and insignificant outpost on the fringes of a vast galaxy that was itself a speck in the - ever-- increasing vastness that scientific inquiry was opening up. While many writers shrank from this unsettling diminishment of human significance, Whitman embraced it and turned the lesson around: humans, he said, could - now— for the first - time— see themselves as part of something far more gigantic, cosmic, and sublime than could ever before have been imagined. He welcomed all the new knowledge science was bringing, and he made poetry out of it. The new vastness aided Whitman in his goal of creating a truly democratic voice.

# Song of Myself (1892 version)

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.

2

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes,  
I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,  
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,  
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,  
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,  
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,  
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,  
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through  
my lungs,  
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color'd sea-rocks, and of  
hay in the barn,  
The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind,  
A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,  
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,  
The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-sides,

The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun.

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd the earth much?

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead,  
nor feed on the spectres in books,

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.

## Section 1

Whitman opens his poem with a conventional iambic pentameter line, as if to suggest the formal openings of the classic epics, before abandoning metrics for a free-flowing line with rhythms that shift and respond to the moment. Instead of invoking the muse to allow him to sing the epic song of war, rage, and distant journeys, Whitman becomes his own muse, singing himself and announcing that the subject of his epic will be himself. He “celebrates” that self, and the etymology of the word “celebrate” indicates “to return to” or “to frequent.” The whole poem will be Whitman’s record of the self expanding out into the world, absorbing more and more experience, then contracting back into the self, discovering that he can contain and hold the wild diversity of experience that he keeps encountering on his journeys through the world. He sets out to expand the boundaries of the self to include, first, all fellow Americans, then the entire world, and ultimately the cosmos. When we come to see just how vast the self can be, what can we do but celebrate it by returning to it again and again?

Throughout the poem, Whitman probes the question of how large the new democratic self can become before it dissipates into contradiction and fragmentation, and each time he seems to reach the limit, he dilates even more. In the first three lines, he abandons the two main things that separate people, that create animosity, jealousy, and war—beliefs and possessions: “what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to you as good belongs to me.” At every level of our being, we are incessantly transferring and exchanging materials, ideas, emotions, affections. The atoms that yesterday composed a living cow or a growing plant today are part of us, as the eternal atoms of the universe continue their nonstop interaction and rearrangement.

It is in this way that Whitman introduces us to his two main characters, “I” and “you.” This section begins with “I” and ends with “you,” just as the entire “Song of Myself” does the same: we experience the transfer of energy from Whitman’s “I” to the “you” that we as readers learn to inhabit in this poem. It is possible to hear the “you” in “Song” as addressed to the entire nation or

the entire world, and it is also possible to hear it as intimately addressed only to the individual reader in this particular moment of encounter. It is one of the most difficult words in the poem to translate, because the second-person pronoun in English is quite promiscuous: “you” is the word we use to address our most intimate lover as well as a total stranger, a single person alone with us in a room or a vast crowd. Whitman teases out all the implications of this promiscuous English pronoun that signals at once only you, a “simple separate person,” and also you, the “en masse,” the world of potentially intimate strangers who always hover around us. Translators must decide in each case whether the “you” is informal or formal, singular or plural.

The speaker of the poem “loafes” and observes “a spear of summer grass,” and the entire poem is generated in that act. Thinking of the land he grew up in and of his ancestors, he realizes that every leaf of grass is a sign of transference, like the grass that grows from graves, as the atoms of the dead arise again out of the earth and now give voice to him, forming the very tongue that will sing of his past (his organ of vocalization is literally made up of the atoms of the land he sings on and sings about). So “Song of Myself” starts us out on what the poet will call “a perpetual journey,” one that turns into an escape narrative for all readers of the poem, who need to liberate themselves from all the enslaving beliefs and possessions that prevent individual growth, who need to put “Creeds and schools in abeyance” and risk a journey that will take us beyond preconceived notions of “good” and “bad,” a journey that will allow us to confront the “original energy” of nature unchecked, nature freed of the restraints that we have all been taught to put on it.

It is said that a poem is an act of attention—to someone, something, some experience or portion of existence, grasped, imagined, or remembered—and in the first section of “Song of Myself” Whitman offers an image of the poet attending to the world, loafing (marvelous word!), leaning, opening his soul up to the world. What he observes could not be simpler, a spear of grass, and that is the point: a poem seeking nothing less than to tell the story of the universe, within and without, will begin at the atomic level, in the blood, the soil, the air, and circulate everywhere—the testament of a man determined to enlarge our imaginative capacities.

The influence of “Song of Myself” on American poetry is incalculable. The poet insists that “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you”—words that have inspired countless poets to map new worlds. Indeed it is hard to imagine William Carlos Williams discovering “the pure products of America,” Theodore Roethke undertaking “the long journey out of the self,” or Allen Ginsburg writing “Howl” absent Whitman, not to mention the work of contemporary poets like C. K. Williams and Pattiann Rogers. We all live under the gaze of that pioneer who counsels us, in the final lines of “Song of Myself,” to look for him under our boot-soles.

A word about Whitman’s prosody: the movement from iambic pentameter in the first line to cadenced free verse in the manner of the Psalms signals his departure from traditional English versification, propelling him from the known into the unknown. He is ever traveling toward the future, from a spear of grass to the farthest star and back again, and for this journey he will need a more versatile music than he could muster in blank verse. The line that he discovered, which could

accommodate an extraordinary range of subject, diction, tone, imagery, and ideas: “Nature without check with original energy.” This energy fuels his song.

### Question

"I celebrate myself"—this was the first line of the first published version of "Song of Myself," to which Whitman later added the clause, "and sing myself." How does this addition change your understanding of the poem? Why do you think Whitman made such a change?

## Section 2

In this section, Whitman breaks out of enclosures, whether they be physical enclosures or mental ones. In one of his early notebooks, Whitman had drafted the line “Literature is full of perfumes,” a recognition that books and philosophies and religions all offer filtered versions of how to view the world. They are all “intoxicating”—alluring, to be sure, but also toxic. We are always tempted to live our lives according to the views of those who came before us, but Whitman urges us to escape such enclosures, open up the senses fully, and breathe the undistilled atmosphere itself. It is in this literal act of breathing that we gain our “inspiration,” the actual *breathing in* of the world. In this section, Whitman records the physicality of singing, of speaking a poem: a poem, he reminds us, does not derive from the mind or the soul but from the *body*. Our inspiration comes from our respiration, and the poem is “the smoke of my own breath,” the breathing of the atoms of the air back out into the world again as song. Poems are written, Whitman indicates here, with the lungs and the heart and the hands and the genitals—with the air oxygenating our blood in the lungs and pumping it to our brain and every part of our body. We write (just as we read) with our bodies as much as our minds.

The poet in this section allows the world to be in naked contact with him, until he can feel at one with what before had been separate—the roots and vines now seem part of the same erotic flow that he feels in his own naked body (“love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine”), and he is aware of contact and exchange, as he breathes the world in only to breathe it back again as an undistilled poem. All the senses are evoked here—smell (“sniff of green leaves”), hearing (“The sound of the belch’d words of my voice”), touch (“A few light kisses”), sight (“The play of shine and shade”), taste (“The smoke of my own breath,” that “smoke” the sign of a newly found fire within).

Now Whitman gently mocks those who feel they have mastered the arts of reading and interpretation. As we read this poem, Whitman wonders if we have “felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems,” and he invites us now to spend a “day and night” with him as we read “Song of Myself,” a poem that does not hide its meanings and require occult hermeneutics to understand it. Rather, he offers up his poem as one that emerges from the undistilled and unfiltered sources of nature, the words “belch’d” (uttered, cried out, violently ejected, bellowed) instead of manicured and shaped. This is a poem, Whitman suggests, that does not want to become a guide or a “creed,”



but one that wants to make *you* experience the world with your own eyes. We take in this poet's words, and then "filter them" *from* our selves, just like we do with the atmosphere and all the floating, mingling atoms of the world.

What poet can resist the temptation to "possess the origin of all poems," to drink continuously from the source of inspiration? This is what Whitman offers in the second section of "Song of Myself," and much more—"the good of the earth and sun" and all the stars, not to mention learning how to take experience at first-hand: to see for oneself what is truly there, to establish, as Emerson wrote, "an original relationship with the universe." To forge such a relationship the poet leaves behind the intoxicating perfume of human society and sets out on his own to breathe the odorless, inspiriting atmosphere of nature: a state of freedom, of readiness, in which the poet opens himself—and in flows the world. He invokes all of his senses—taste, touch, sound, smell, sight—in the long sentence fragment with which the second stanza concludes, for he is alert now to what is there: "The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color'd sea rocks, and of hay in the barn..." He takes it all in, he makes song out of his meeting with the sun, he extends his hand to anyone willing to stop with him for a day and a night. He promises to teach us to see and sing for ourselves, free of every influence, including that of the teacher. Here are the keys to a kingdom stretching to the very limits of the imagination. And here is how to take the measure of the universe—the grid within which the poems of the future will be written.

### Question

How is it possible not to "take things at second or third hand" or not to "look through the eyes of the dead" or not to "feed on the spectres in books"? Don't we all learn about the world and develop our beliefs by listening to and learning from others, both living and dead?