



# Ode to Walt Whitman

PABLO NERUDA

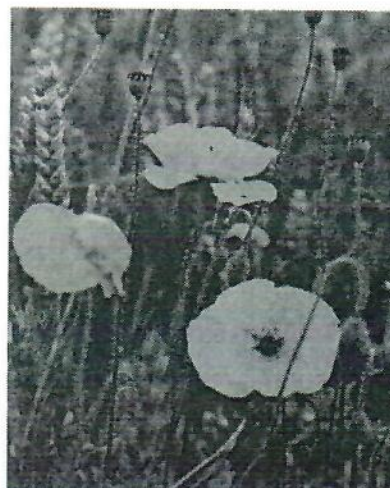
**BACKGROUND** Pablo Neruda (1904–1973), a Nobel Prize–winning poet from Chile, was greatly inspired by Walt Whitman’s poetry. In a speech delivered in 1972, he said, “I was barely 15 when I discovered Walt Whitman, my primary creditor. I stand among you today still owing this marvelous debt that has helped me live.” In the following poem, Neruda echoes Whitman’s joyful exuberance.

I do not remember  
at what age  
nor where:  
in the great damp South  
5 or on the fearsome  
coast, beneath the brief  
cry of the seagulls,  
I touched a hand and it was  
the hand of Walt Whitman.  
10 I trod the ground  
with bare feet,  
I walked on the grass,  
on the firm dew  
of Walt Whitman.

15 During  
my entire  
youth  
I had the company of that hand,  
that dew,  
20 its firmness of patriarchal pine, its  
prairie-like expanse,  
and its mission of circulatory peace.



Not  
disdaining  
the gifts  
25 of the earth,  
nor the copious  
curving of the column's capital,  
nor the purple  
initial  
30 of wisdom,  
you taught me  
to be an American,  
you raised  
my eyes  
35 to books,  
towards  
the treasure  
of the grains:  
broad,  
40 in the clarity  
of the plains,  
you made me see  
the high  
tutelary  
45 mountain. From subterranean  
echoes,  
you gathered  
for me  
everything;  
50 everything that came forth  
was harvested by you,  
galloping in the alfalfa,  
picking poppies for me,  
visiting  
55 the rivers,  
coming into the kitchens  
in the afternoon.



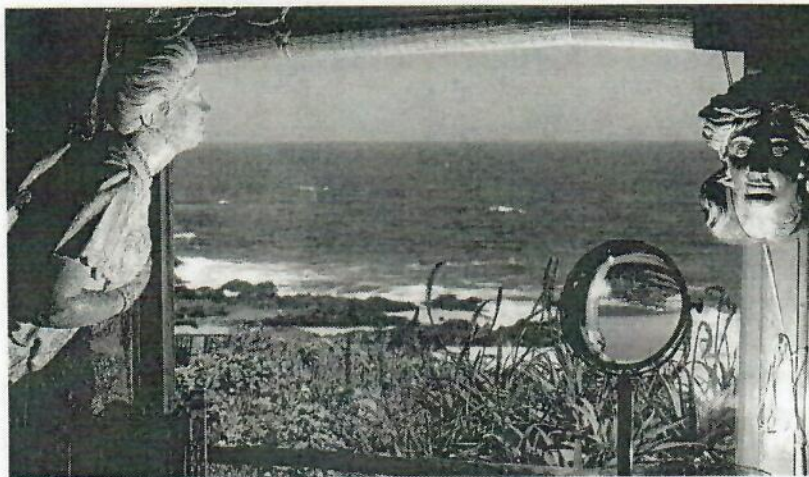
But not only  
soil  
60 was brought to light  
by your spade:  
you unearthed  
man,  
and the  
65 slave  
who was humiliated  
with you, balancing  
the black dignity of his stature,  
walked on, conquering  
70 happiness.

To the fireman  
below,  
in the stoke-hole,  
you sent  
75 a little basket  
of strawberries.  
To every corner of your town  
a verse  
of yours arrived for a visit,  
80 and it was like a piece  
of clean body,  
the verse that arrived,  
like  
your own fisherman beard  
85 or the solemn tread of your acacia  
legs.

Your silhouette  
passed among the soldiers:  
the poet, the wound-dresser,  
the night attendant  
90 who knows  
the sound  
of breathing in mortal agony  
and awaits with the dawn  
the silent  
95 return  
of life.

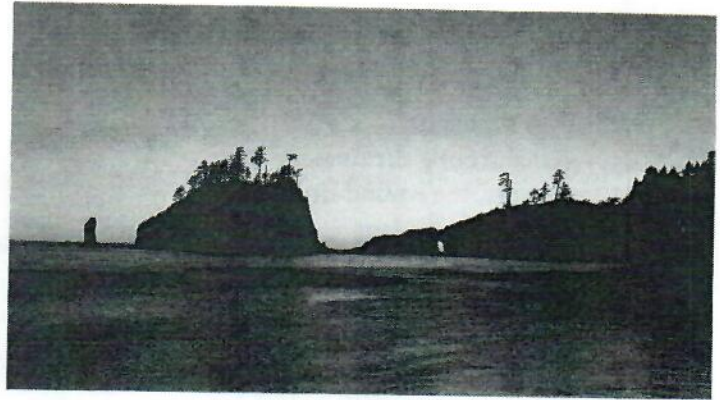
Good baker!  
Elder first cousin  
of my roots,  
100 araucaria's  
cupola,  
it is  
now  
a hundred  
105 years  
that over your grass  
and its germinations,  
the wind  
passes  
110 without wearing out your eyes

New  
and cruel years in your Fatherland:  
persecutions,  
tears,  
115 prisons,  
poisoned weapons  
and wrathful wars  
have not crushed  
the grass of your book;  
120 the vital fountainhead  
of its freshness.  
And, alas!  
those  
who murdered  
125 Lincoln  
now  
lie in his bed.  
They felled  
his seat of honor  
130 made of fragrant wood,  
and raised a throne  
spattered  
with misfortune and blood.



View from Neruda's house on Isla Negra, Chile, with antique sailboat figureheads hanging in the window

But  
 135 your voice  
       sings  
       in the suburban  
       stations,  
       in  
 140 the  
       vespertine  
       wharfs,  
       your word  
       splashes  
 145 like  
       dark water.  
       Your people,  
       white  
       and black,  
 150 poor  
       people,  
       simple people  
       like  
       all



155 people  
       do not forget  
       your bell:  
       They congregate singing  
       beneath  
 160 the magnitude  
       of your spacious life.  
       They walk among the peoples with your  
       love  
       caressing  
       the pure development  
 165 of brotherhood on earth.

## Literary Analysis

- Analyze Metaphor** Neruda uses various metaphors to characterize Whitman's poems. What does each of these metaphors suggest about Whitman's verse?
  - Whitman's hand (lines 8–9)
  - Whitman as harvester (lines 47–70)
  - a basket of strawberries (lines 71–76)
  - a bell (lines 147–157)
- Compare Texts** Neruda has acknowledged Whitman's influence on his own verse. What elements of "Ode to Walt Whitman" reveal this influence? Be specific, citing evidence from this poem as well as from the Whitman poems you read on pages 510–517.