# Brainpickings.org: Walt Whitman on Democracy

“America, if eligible at all to downfall and ruin, is eligible within herself, not without… Always inform yourself; always do the best you can; always vote.”

**BY MARIA POPOVA**

In 1855, **Walt Whitman** (May 31, 1819–March 26, 1892) made his debut as a poet and self-published [*Leaves of Grass*](https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/08/21/walt-whitman-a-noiseless-patient-spider-animated-ted-ed/). Amid the disheartening initial reception of pervasive indifference pierced by a few shrieks of criticism, the young poet received an [extraordinary letter of praise and encouragement](https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/09/08/emerson-whitman-letter/) from his idol — [Ralph Waldo Emerson](https://www.brainpickings.org/tag/ralph-waldo-emerson/), the era’s most powerful literary tastemaker. This gesture of tremendous generosity was a creative life-straw for the dispirited artist, who soon became one of the nation’s most celebrated writers and went on to be remembered as America’s greatest poet.

In the late 1860, working as a federal clerk and approaching his fiftieth birthday, Whitman grew increasingly concerned that America’s then-young democracy had grown in danger of belying the existential essentials of the human spirit. He voiced his preoccupations in a masterful and lengthy essay titled ***Democratic Vistas***, later included in the indispensable Library of America volume [***Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose***](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/094045002X/braipick-20).

Both Whitman’s spirited critique of American democracy and his proposed solution — which calls for an original and ennobling national body of literature as the means to cultivating the people’s mentality, character, and ideals — ring remarkably true today, perhaps even truer amid our modern disenchantment and dearth of idealism, accentuated by the spectacle of an election season.

Literature, Whitman argues, constructs the scaffolding of society’s values and “has become the only general means of morally influencing the world” — its archetypal characters shape the moral character and political ideals of a culture. Long after the political structures of the ancient world have crumbled, he reminds us, what remains of Ancient Greece and Rome and the other great civilizations is their literature. He writes:   
  
*At all times, perhaps, the central point in any nation, and that whence it is itself really sway’d the most, and whence it sways others, is its national literature, especially its archetypal poems. Above all previous lands, a great original literature is surely to become the justification and reliance, (in some respects the sole reliance,) of American democracy. Few are aware how the great literature penetrates all, gives hue to all, shapes aggregates and individuals, and, after subtle ways, with irresistible power, constructs, sustains, demolishes at will. …In the civilization of to-day it is undeniable that, over all the arts, literature dominates, serves beyond all — shapes the character of church and school — or, at any rate, is capable of doing so. Including the literature of science, its scope is indeed unparallel’d.*

Lamenting the vacant materialism of consumer society, Whitman writes:  
  
*We had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believ’d in, (for all this hectic glow, and these melodramatic screamings,) nor is humanity itself believ’d in…. Our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their sloughs, in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly-deceptive superficial popular intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and esthetic results… In vain have we annex’d Texas, California, Alaska, and reach north for Canada and south for Cuba. It is as if we were somehow being endow’d with a vast and more and more thoroughly-appointed body, and then left with little or no soul… To take expression, to incarnate, to endow a literature with grand and archetypal models — to fill with pride and love the utmost capacity, and to achieve spiritual meanings, and suggest the future — these, and these only, satisfy the soul. We must not say one word against real materials; but the wise know that they do not become real till touched by emotions, the mind.*

The savior of the nation’s soul, Whitman insists, is not the politician but the artist:  
  
*Should some two or three really original American poets, (perhaps artists or lecturers,) arise, mounting the horizon like planets, stars of the first magnitude, that, from their eminence, fusing contributions, races, far localities, &c., together they would give more compaction and more moral identity, (the quality to-day most needed,) to these States, than all its Constitutions, legislative and judicial ties, and all its hitherto political, warlike, or materialistic experiences.*The sole antidote, Whitman reminds us, lies in our own hands and the ballots they hold — in not shirking our duty as voters. He shares his advice to the young:  
  
*America, it may be, is doing very well upon the whole, notwithstanding these antics of the parties and their leaders, these half-brain’d nominees, the many ignorant ballots, and many elected failures and blatherers. It is the dilettantes, and all who shirk their duty, who are not doing well… America, if eligible at all to downfall and ruin, is eligible within herself, not without. Enter more strongly yet into politics… Always inform yourself; always do the best you can; always vote.*The role of government and those in power, he argues, is not to rule by authority alone — the mark of dictatorship rather than democracy — but “to train communities … beginning with individuals and ending there again, to rule themselves.” Above all, the task of democratic leadership is to bind “all nations, all men, of however various and distant lands, into a brotherhood, a family.” Many decades before women won the right to vote and long before Nikola Tesla’s[feminist vision for humanity](https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/07/10/nikola-tesla-when-woman-is-boss/), Whitman argues that a robust democracy is one in which women are fully empowered and included in that “brotherhood” on equal terms:  
  
*I have sometimes thought … that the sole avenue and means of a reconstructed sociology depended, primarily, on a new birth, elevation, expansion, invigoration of woman… Great, great, indeed, far greater than they know, is the sphere of women.*Reflecting on the perils of inequality in any guise, for any group, he adds:  
  
*Of all dangers to a nation, as things exist in our day, there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn — they not privileged as others, but degraded, humiliated, made of no account.*The supreme tool of reconstructing a more equal society, Whitman asserts, is literature — a body of literature that gives voice to the underrepresented, that elevates and expands and invigorates their spirits by mirroring them back to themselves as indelibly worthy of belonging to society. Whitman writes:

*A new founded literature, not merely to copy and reflect existing surfaces, or pander to what is called taste … but a literature underlying life, religious, consistent with science, handling the elements and forces with competent power, teaching and training men — and, as perhaps the most precious of its results, achieving the entire redemption of woman … and thus insuring to the States a strong and sweet Female Race… — is what is needed.*But Whitman’s most pertinent point is that true dedication to democracy isn’t a mere fleeting fixture of election season. Rather, it permeates the very fabric of society and must be upheld in every aspect of our lives, at every moment — something best effected by literature:   
  
*Far, far, indeed, stretch, in distance, our Vistas! How much is still to be disentangled, freed! How long it takes to make this American world see that it is, in itself, the final authority and reliance! Did you, too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruits in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between men, and their beliefs — in religion, literature, colleges, and schools — democracy in all public and private life… The literature, songs, esthetics, &c., of a country are of importance principally because they furnish the materials and suggestions of personality for the women and men of that country, and enforce them in a thousand effective ways.*