

## Walt Whitman: A New York Poet Views Slavery

In the poem, “Song Of Myself,” New York poet, Walt Whitman, describes the Underground Railroad and explains his view of slavery. This version is from the third edition of “Leaves of Grass (1882).

10. The runaway slave came to my house and stopt outside,  
I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,  
Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsy and weak,  
And went where he sat on a log and led him in and assured him,  
And brought water and fill'd a tub for his sweated body and bruise'd feet,  
And gave him a room that enter'd from my own, and gave him some coarse clean clothes,  
And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,  
And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles;  
He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and pass'd north,  
I had him sit next to me at table, my fire-lock lean'd in the corner.

24. Whoever degrades another degrades me,  
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.  
Through me the afflatus [affinity] surging and surging, through me the current and index.  
I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,  
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.  
Through me many long dumb voices,  
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,  
Voices of the diseas'd and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,  
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,  
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs and of the fatherstuff,  
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,  
Of the deformed trivial, flat, foolish, despised,  
Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung.  
Through me forbidden voices,  
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,  
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured.

### Questions

1. What does Walt Whitman do when he hears a runaway slave by his house?
2. In your opinion, what does Whitman mean when he writes, “Whoever degrades another degrades me”?
3. Whitman is a White man who claims that “through me” long silenced voices can speak. Do you agree? Explain.