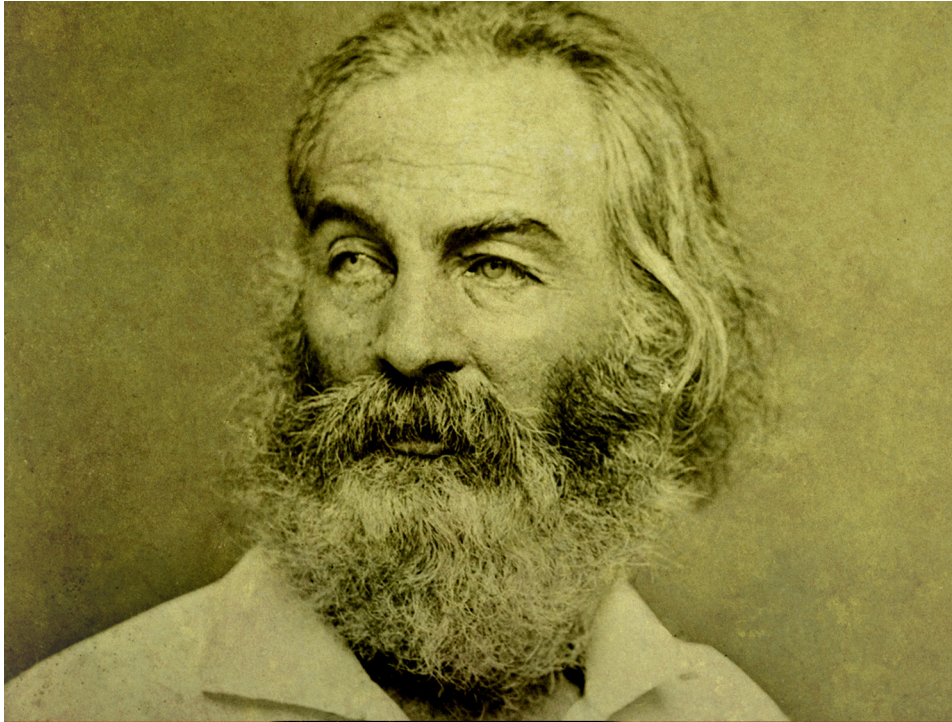
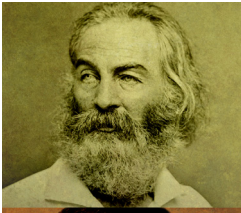


We the People Book Club

SELECTED POEMS OF **WALT WHITMAN** AND **MAYA ANGELOU**
Reading Guide





This We the People Book Club reading guide focuses on poetry, specifically two of the most ebullient American poets, Walt Whitman and Maya Angelou. Separated by a century, Whitman and Angelou share a determination and enthusiasm that you may experience as a balm and a tonic for trying times. We have decided to feature just five poems so that you can consider each deeply.

WHITMAN has, of course, been widely anthologized and much studied since his death; he is recognized as an innovator in American poetic form and as “America’s poet.” Though he achieved little acclaim in his lifetime, there is now an award named after him; each year an acclaimed poet gives the Walt Whitman Award to a first publication by an emerging American or international poet.

ANGELOU has an awards résumé that is too long to list fully. It includes a Presidential Medal of Freedom, several Grammy Awards, NAACP Image Awards, the Quill Award for Poetry, and the Springarn Medal.

About This Book Club Reading Guide

Researched and written by Julia Davis (a 2018-2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project), this guide includes background on Walt Whitman and Maya Angelou, an overview of the selected poems, and observations on their literary style. For your personal exploration and/or discussion with others in your book club, we include commentary on three themes. Questions within each will facilitate three approaches to the work: (1) your interpretation of the texts, (2) your personal reflections inspired by your reading, and (3) practices for you to try that animate the poems’ democratic values. The guide also includes ideas for further exploration; you might decide to engage these resources before or after your discussion.

Background

Walt Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, and died on March 26, 1892. Poet, journalist, and humanitarian, Whitman seemed both in his language and his actions to be a particularly *alive* human being.

Deeply grieved by the divisions of the Civil War, Whitman dedicated over a decade to caring for injured soldiers in Washington DC, acting as a kind of nurse and chaplain and often using what little money he received from royalties to buy supplies for his patients. Whitman turned from journalism to poetry during the war, because, as Kenneth Price put it, he felt the need “to address something that will serve to create a genuine sense of community in a nation that’s clearly fracturing before his eyes.”

Though he was eventually embraced as the “national poet” that philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson had called for, Whitman’s poetry was unconventional and sexually expressive in ways that challenged nineteenth-century taste and decorum. He self-published his opus *Leaves of Grass*, which grew in size up to the point of his death.

Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri in 1928. Over the course of her life, she was an actor, dancer, singer, playwright, producer, civil rights activist, autobiographer, and poet. Angelou reached a large audience in 1969 with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the first bestselling nonfiction book by an African-American woman; it remained on the *New York Times* Bestseller list for two years (a record at the time). In the years that followed, she published six more autobiographical volumes.

Angelou focused on poetry in the 1990s (though her prose had always sung). In 1992 Angelou herself became a kind of national poet: Bill Clinton asked her to write and perform a poem for his inauguration because “she had the voice of God.” The poem, “On the Pulse of Morning,” became a bestseller, and demand for her books immediately increased 12,000 percent!

Remembered equally as a poet and social justice giant, Angelou died of heart trouble in 2014 in her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Overview

Whitman

“Long, Too Long America” is part of *Drum-Taps*, which was published as a section of *Leaves of Grass* in the final, 1891 Edition. The context for the poem is the American Civil War, which Whitman sees as a test of the previously peaceful nation’s character. It is enspirited by the question of whether democracy is indeed strong enough to survive the bloody fracturing that daily brings wounded into the hospitals and camps Whitman visited.

You can read “Long, Too Long America” at:
poetryfoundation.org/poems/91386/long-too-long-america

“Salut Au Monde” returns us to the Whitman we expect: exuberant and celebratory. Whitman’s imagery travels the world as a kind of American ambassador, praising and inviting into friendship the globe’s great diversity of people, geography, innovations, and belief systems.

You can read “Salut Au Monde” at:
whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1860/poems/51

In “Song of the Open Road,” which appears right after “Salut Au Monde” in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman imagines a more local and literal kind of travel, though his subject is not only the joys of the body moving through space but also the progress of the soul “moving” through a lifetime.

You can read “Song of the Open Road” at:
poetryfoundation.org/poems/48859/song-of-the-open-road

Angelou

“Still I Rise” and “Phenomenal Woman” were originally published in separate collections but, appropriately, both appear in *Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women*. “Phenomenal Woman” does two things at once: it denies that a woman’s beauty must conform to a standard, and it celebrates a woman’s body for its power, expressiveness, and ability to communicate her spirit.

You can read “Phenomenal Woman” at:

[poetryfoundation.org/poems/48985/phenomenal-woman](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48985/phenomenal-woman)

“Still I Rise” boasts of the “richness,” tenacity, and strength of the black female speaker (and all black women), who rises above all attempts to lay her low, who cannot be contained by a history of slavery, lies, and discrimination.

You can read “Still I Rise” at:

[poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise)

Genre, Language, and Structure

Whitman

These three Whitman poems are partially representative in that they show some of his major concerns but do not represent the full breadth of his poetic voice. Stylistically, they do share elements with most of his other poetry, which is distinctive in several ways. He is said to be the father of free verse, which is to say versification without any set meter or rhyme scheme. As a Romantic who sought to write poetry that represented the common life, this lack of conventional form brings his lines closer to speech. Of course, everyday speech hardly sounds like a Whitman poem, but he closed the gap between convention and conversation.

These poems are marked by the use of parallelism, which allows him to reflect in his style the democracy he is singing. Parallelism links equal grammatical units through coordination rather than connecting unequal grammatical units through subordination. Parallelism is a way to avoid hierarchies and power relationships at the level of the sentence, echoing Whitman’s hopes for democracy. Lists are the most common form of parallelism, and you will notice lots of lists in these poems! The excessiveness of the lists also express Whitman’s most characteristic note: enthusiasm.

Angelou

Angelou’s poetic voice of course also cannot be represented but only hinted at in these two poems, both of which share elements characteristic of Angelou’s voice while not encompassing the breadth of her talent.

Both of these poems are accessible. “Still I Rise” especially exudes a directness of address capable of arresting its readers and holding them in place until the speaker is finished. Angelou’s tone in both of these poems expresses their speakers’ confidence; the woman in both knows her worth and speaks it freely in a bold tone that she knows the reader will interpret as audacity.

Angelou makes very different decisions regarding figurative language in each of these poems. In “Still I Rise,” she uses figures of nature to illuminate the woman’s power, setting up comparisons that are both charmingly eccentric (“I dance like I’ve got diamonds/At the meeting of my thighs”) and historically evocative (as when she figures the woman as a “black ocean”).

“Phenomenal Woman,” strikes a contrast to this. Angelou seems to be saying in this poem that women are beyond comparison, that the beauty and power of a woman is essential to her and would be reduced by comparison to any element or presence outside of her body. Thus, in this poem, there is imagery but no figurative language: all references are to the body of the actual woman as it is.

Themes

Equality and Freedom

Whitman

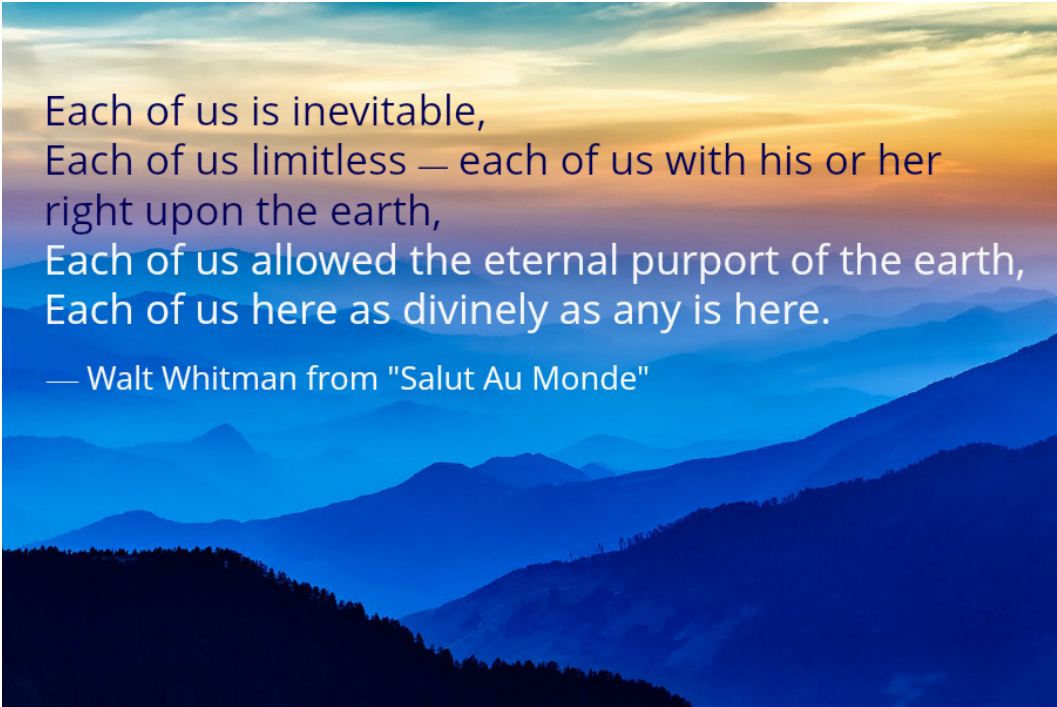
Whitman's project of representing democracy in his poems is imperfect (as anyone's would be), but one cannot read his poems without seeing and feeling how hard he is trying to rid his verse of any kind of preference, to find a language that proclaims the essential freedom of the spirit that gives rise to the concept of equality.

"Salut Au Monde" is a love song to the entire world, a total embrace of all corners of the globe offered "in America's name" by its poetic ambassador, which is Whitman himself. As Whitman imaginatively travels around the world introducing the newly constituted United States of America, the message of this diplomat is that we are all equal. The long lists of what Whitman hears and sees "import" democracy not by imagining power and dominion but by including (or attempting to include) all people in the ultimate promise of democracy: equality.

Towards the end of the poem, you can feel how Whitman is becoming frustrated by the limits of even his exhaustive lists. He attempts to offer the friendly greeting of direct address to every kind of person by name, but imagination, or perhaps space, prevent him, and he concedes to pronouns instead: "And you each and everywhere whom I specify not, but include just the same!" No power is lost as he shifts to a more general address; having established the genuineness of his belief in equality in the exhaustive parallelism, Whitman's pronouns carry just as much power, establishing universal equality much better than the Declaration of Independence's "All men." Whitman sings, "Each of us inevitable,/ Each of us limitless—each of us with his or her right upon the earth,/ Each of us allowed the eternal purport of the earth,/ Each of us here as divinely as any is here."

Angelou

The insistence on equality and freedom in Angelou's poems, of course, comes out of a different context; the proclamations seem more targeted, more personal, though the animating belief in universal equality might be taken for granted. Speaking from under a yoke of oppression far more burdensome than the one the "queer" Whitman experienced, Angelou's poems seem much more political in their resistance against constraint. The counterforce that must be overcome is more present than in Whitman's poems; it is an entire history of institutions and laws that argued against African-American equality in order to keep them unfree. Therefore, where Whitman in "Open Road" can imagine movement through wide spaces as the expression of freedom, the site of freedom in these Angelou poems is the body. This is particularly pronounced in "Phenomenal Woman" with its tight focus on various body parts and the indomitable spirit expressed through them. In Angelou's works, the body of the black woman breaks free of hate, discrimination, jealousy, and the words of history books and literature itself.



Each of us is inevitable,
Each of us limitless — each of us with his or her
right upon the earth,
Each of us allowed the eternal purport of the earth,
Each of us here as divinely as any is here.

— Walt Whitman from "Salut Au Monde"

THINK

1. Whitman's experiments in democratic language included reciprocal statements that eschew unilateral influence, pleasure, or power. There are several in "Open Road," one of which is, "Whoever accepts me he or she shall be blessed and shall bless me." They tend to be charming in spirit and awkward in execution. Are these the limitations of language, of ideology, or just of Whitman's time? Do we yet have inclusive or neutral language that is graceful?

REFLECT

2. Reflect on a phenomenal woman in your own life. What qualities made her phenomenal? What impact did she have on you?

PRACTICE

3. It can be somewhat comforting that in a country riven with divisions and fear (then or now), a Walt Whitman was produced, someone who seems relatively untouched by (or is at least trying exceedingly hard to rid himself of) the prejudices of his national community. Name and describe someone you know of who graciously combines love of all humanity with love of country.

PRACTICE

4. Whitman's poetry embraced the freedom of nonconformity. To become "national poet," Whitman himself had to violate conventions borrowed from other national traditions. In the last section of "Open Road," he writes:

Let the paper remain on the desk unwritten, and the book on the shelf unopen'd!

Let the tools remain in the workshop! let the money remain unearn'd!

Let the school stand! mind not the cry of the teacher!

Let the preacher preach in his pulpit! let the lawyer plead in the court, and the judge expound the law.

The voice here calls on us to set aside rules and roles, the lure of being "good," the chains of authority and position. There may be no better way to honor Whitman than to free yourself from a convention that works against your sense of freedom. Name an expectation you would like to free yourself from and set an intention to "mind not the cry of the teacher!"

The Power of the Individual

Whitman

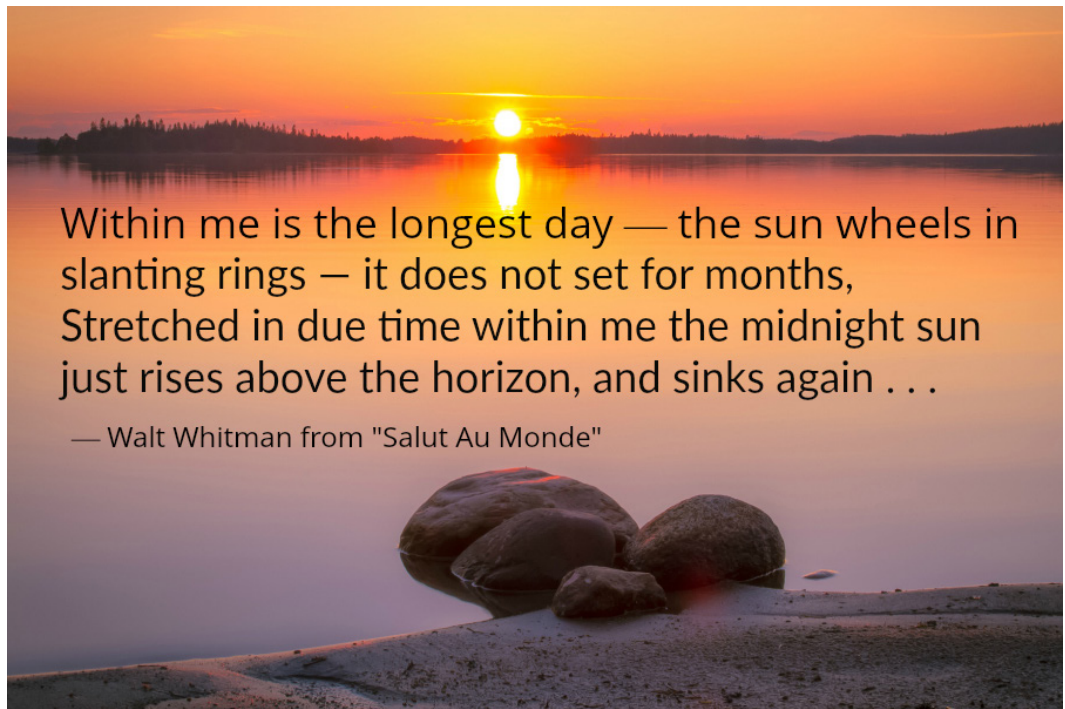
Whitman and Angelou both celebrate the power of the individual self without devolving into individualism, a sleight of hand we might take a moment to marvel at! Rather, for each of them, the individual is a site of power precisely because that individual has the capacity to raise others up.

For Whitman, the individual self "contains multitudes." The self in "Salut" and "Open Road," which is to say the selfhood of the speaker, is not a monolith; there is a distinctive energy that comes forth from the self (we might call this the soul), but this energy is in constant exchange with everything around it, interpenetrating, connecting, impacting and being impacted. The individual is where particularity and universality meet. It is *e pluribus unum* — out of the many, one.

The self is not full until it acknowledges and is changed by its connection with people, with nature, even with unpoetic objects like "you planks and posts of wharves"! The "secret to making ... the best persons ... is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth." For this reason, the speaker in "Open Road" exhorts the audience to keep moving in body (travel) and mind (curiosity), not to settle in houses in "loathing and despair," "smartly attired" and "keeping fair with the customs," but "speaking not a syllable" of one's own.

Angelou

Angelou's speakers also contain multitudes. They are more than themselves, powerful in their representation of historical experiences and marginalized identities. The speaker in "Still I Rise" is the historical tide of the oceans that brought her slave ancestors to the shores of America, as much as she is herself a tide that, daily, overcomes the residual pain of "history's shame." Similarly, the speaker of "Phenomenal Woman" is not speaking just of herself; her body is extraordinary but not unparalleled. Insofar as she identifies repeatedly as a woman, she is boasting the phenomenon of women — creating community as she voices her own confidence.



Within me is the longest day — the sun wheels in
slanting rings — it does not set for months,
Stretched in due time within me the midnight sun
just rises above the horizon, and sinks again . . .

— Walt Whitman from "Salut Au Monde"

THINK

1. At the beginning of "Salut Au Monde" Whitman's language suggests that the climates, peoples, and lands he outlines in the poem are all "within him." What do you think this means? How are "Asia, Africa, Europe" inside him?

REFLECT

2. The speaker in "Still I Rise" has a sense of herself as "the dream and the hope of the slave." She is an individual who is also the projection of her ancestors. In what ways do you feel like your individuality is a result of all that has come before you?

PRACTICE

3. Review Section 3 in "Open Road." Whitman's ability to find poetry everywhere is a life skill that yields joy and guards against the myth of separateness. Spend some time in an area of town you do not feel is particularly beautiful, perhaps an industrial area. Stare at it until you find words of praise for it as Whitman does for wharves, pavement, and intersections.

Audacity and Resilience

For Whitman and Angelou, audacity and resilience are a matter of both style and content. One of the chief pleasures of reading their poetry is the fearlessness and boldness in the voices of the speakers. These tones invite us to find our own power and daring in order to fully join the experience of the poems — and perhaps beyond that, to continue to perform this audacity and resilience as we encounter the challenges of our daily lives.

"Still I Rise" is a veritable anthem to resilience, with the "and still" theme signaling the continual perseverance of the speaker and of the black women she represents.

This strong black woman is a force of nature, as ineluctable as the tide washing in, as quietly forceful as warm air rising in a room. She has overcome slavery and poverty and not only holds her head up in dignity but walks like she is the richest woman in the world. And she is: she has hoarded history's fears of her and transformed them into the riches of fearlessness.



“Long, Too Long America” is not so much a proclamation of the country’s resilience as it is a hope that democracy itself can find wells of resources like those in Angelou’s living room and backyard. This poem is Whitman’s hard look at a nation untried, a nation currently divided. Will it recover? Will all of Whitman’s own celebrations of America and Americans prove to be predicated on the easy life, “cloister virtue”? He appears confident of what “your children really are,” but not confident that, amid crisis, Americans will uphold their character in a national effort at healing and, as the world watches, “show to the world” the greatness that lies within them. The equivocal confidence belies not just the newness of the nation but also the depth of his fears. He is waiting to see

THINK

1. Lines 7-8 in “Still I Rise” contain what must be one of the most audacious similes ever written to express a stride. The incongruence of “oil wells” and “living room” contributes to the striking image, but why does Angelou combine the inside and outside here, the wildness of drilling with the domestication of a living room? How are oil wells a symbol of resilience?

REFLECT

2. Reflect back on a time in your personal life or in the life of your nation when joy and peace turned to trial and chaos. Did you or your people preserve your sense of dignity, generosity, and compassion amidst the turmoil? Did you “rise”? What was the most difficult challenge you faced in trying to both survive and maintain your moral character?

PRACTICE

3. Even though what Whitman is lamenting in “Long, Too Long America” is a country literally divided (severed into North and South) — even though he found slavery abhorrent and was a Northerner through and through, he still does not use divisive language in the poem. He references only the whole country: “America” and “your children.” In whatever form you choose, draft a lament for a current national crisis and use language as unifying as Whitman’s.

Other Reading Guides for the We the People Book Club:

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

A Good Man Is Hard to Find by Flannery O'Connor

Selected Poems of Walt Whitman and Maya Angelou

Tenth of December by George Saunders

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson

Puddnhead Wilson by Mark Twain

The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin and

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen

The Partly-Cloudy Patriot by Sarah Vowell

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

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The **We the People Book Club** is a year-long program contemplating America's past and possibilities as presented by classic and contemporary literary voices. It is a part of The Practicing Democracy Project, a collaboration between **The Center for Spirituality & Practice** and the **Fetzer Institute**.

The Practicing Democracy Project offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

For more information on the Project, visit [PracticingDemocracy.net](https://www.PracticingDemocracy.net).

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