

Writing like Whitman

In his poetry, Whitman seems to say, “I’m terrific, and you’re terrific too. Come along with me and we’ll see and do great things!” His tone is a combination of boasting and open-hearted generosity—“I know it all, and I’m going to share it with you!”

What are things you know that others don’t seem to know? What “secret knowledge” do you hold or can you imagine?

Try to write a Whitman-like poem that has this boasting, generous, and secret-telling type of tone in which you offer to share these secrets.

Student Example

“Come With Me”

Come with me and I’ll show you my heart. I know
where it is. I know all about it.

Come with me to a place I know. It’s a very
mysterious place. I get there through the back
roads of my mind.

Come with me, I’ll take you to a world, not a world
that you know. Not a world that I know. But a
world that nobody knows, not me or you. It’s a
world of our own to live the way we want.

To do the things we want.

To know the things we want.

There’s no way to get there.

It’s ourselves that takes us there.

Whitman also used many catalogs or lists in his poetry to illustrate, to celebrate, to create images, and to convey a particular theme.

Think about all the different things that are happening right now in America, in Jackson, all over the world, etc. Write a poem with one of these things that's happening in every line. Really try to think of a lot of things and of many different kinds of things . . . what your parents are doing, what your friends are doing, what people in different jobs are doing, what people in different cities or countries are doing, what babies are doing, what movie stars are doing, what people on airplanes are doing, what people in the jungle are doing, what people at birthday parties are doing, what people at funerals are doing You can include things that are happening in winter, in summer, in the daytime, and at night; but write about them as if they are happening right now—that way the poem will be most exciting—“Children are throwing snowballs at a tree / The airplane pilot fights the seduction of slumber . . .”

Example from Whitman

from *Song of Myself*
(section 15)

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft;
The carpenter dresses his plank—the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp;
The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner;
The pilot seizes the king-pin—he heaves down with a strong arm;
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat—lance and harpoon are ready;
The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches;
The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar;
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel;
The farmer stops by the bars, as he walks on a First-day loafe, and looks at the oats and rye;
The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum, a confirm'd case,
(He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's bed-room;)
The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,
He turns his quid of tobacco, while his eyes blurr with the manuscript;
The malform'd limbs are tied to the surgeon's table,
What is removed drops horribly in a pail;
The quadron girl is sold at the auction-stand—the drunkard nods by the bar-room stove;
The machinist rolls up his sleeves—the policeman travels his beat—the gate-keeper marks who pass;

The section of “Song of Myself” below is all about different sounds, some of them made by birds, some by fire, some by people, some by sticks, some by trains, some by instruments Think of all the different sounds you have heard, or of all the sounds you imagine are being made now in our school, city, country, or world. Write a poem about a lot of these sounds, putting one or more in every line. You can say what the sounds are like and also how they make you feel. If you wish you can start every line with words like “I hear” or “I listen to”—“I hear the sound of the train rushing into the station, / I listen to eggs fry in the pan and to the clatter of skates on the sidewalk / To the cry of the crow, to people crying their goodbyes”

Example from Whitman

from *Song of Myself*
(Section 26)

I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen,
And accrue what I hear into myself. . . . and let
 sounds contribute toward me.
I hear the bravuras of birds. . . . the bustle of growing
 wheat. . . . gossip of flames. . . . clack of sticks
 cooking my meals.
I hear the sound of the human voice. . . . a sound I love,
I hear all sounds as they are tuned to their uses. . . .
 sounds of the city and sounds out of the city. . . .
 sounds of the day and night;
Talkative young ones to those that like them. . . . the
 recitative of fish-pedlars and fruit-pedlars. . . . the
 loud laugh of workpeople at their meals,
The angry base of disjointed friendship. . . . the faint
 tones of the sick,
The judge with hands tight to the desk, his shaky lips
 pronouncing a death-sentence,
The heave'e'yo of stevedores unlading ships by the
 wharves. . . . the refrain of the anchor-lifters;
The ring of alarm-bells. . . . the cry of fire. . . . the
 whirr of swift-streaking engines and hose-carts
 with premonitory tinkles and colored lights,
The steam-whistle. . . . the solid roll of the train of
 approaching cars;
The slow-march played at night at the head of the
 association,
They go to guard some corpse. . . . the flag-tops are
 draped with black muslin.