FROM PREFACE TO
THE 1855 EDITION OF
LEAVES
OF
GRASS
WALT WHITMAN

BACKGROUND The 1855 edition of was the first edition of Whitman's opus. In the preface to his work, Whitman's prose sings much as his poetry does, full of poetic language, enthusiasm, and energy.

America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions. . . . accepts the lesson with calmness . . . is not so impatient as has been supposed that the slough still sticks to opinions and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms . . . perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house . . . perceives that it waits a little while in the door . . . that it was fittest for its days . . . that its action has descended to the stalwart and well-shaped heir who approaches . . . and that he shall be fittest for his days.
The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes. . . . Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves. Here the performance disdaining the trivial unapproached in the tremendous audacity of its crowds and groupings and the push of its perspective spreads with crampless and flowing breadth and showers its prolific and splendid extravagance. One sees it must indeed own the riches of the summer and winter, and need never be bankrupt while corn grows from the ground or the orchards drop apples or the bays contain fish or men beget children upon women. . . .

Vocabulary
stirring (stur’ in) adj. busy;
full of energy

Literary Analysis
Epic Theme What portrait of America does Whitman paint in his references to “roughs and beards and space and ruggedness”?

Critical Reading

1. **Key Ideas and Details (a)** What subject does Whitman address in the first paragraph? **(b) Interpret:** What does Whitman mean when he says “the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house”?

2. **Key Ideas and Details (a)** According to Whitman, what makes America different from all other nations? **(b) Interpret:** What is the meaning of Whitman’s notion that the United States is “a teeming nation of nations”?

3. **Key Ideas and Details (a)** According to Whitman, what is the greatest of all poems? **(b) Analyze:** Based on this statement, how is Whitman redefining the idea of a poem?