

Beginning my studies

WALT WHITMAN

Beginning my studies, the first step pleas'd me so much,
The mere fact, consciousness — these forms — the power of motion,
The least insect or animal — the senses — eyesight — love;
The first step, I say, aw'd me and pleas'd me so much,
I have hardly gone, and hardly wish'd to go, any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time, to sing it in ecstatic songs.

Welcome to Enchanted English, a podcast for English learners and language lovers, where we're looking for the magic in life, language, and literature. I'm Lory, and I'm a passionate reader, a writer, a book blogger, and an English language teacher. On this podcast I share classic poetry, fiction and nonfiction written in English, delve into the lives of the authors, talk about the language they use, and discuss what makes their work so remarkable. You can find more information and a free transcript of this episode on my blog, at enterenchanted.com/english.

The poem you just heard was “Beginning my studies” by Walt Whitman.

Walt Whitman (1819–1892) has been called “America’s world poet.” He was born on Long Island and grew up in Brooklyn, in New York State. He had little formal education, but was inspired by his travels through the growing nation to write and self-publish his first book, *Leaves of Grass*, in 1855. He continued to add to and revise this book throughout his life.

Whitman helped with nursing in a hospital during the American Civil War and was deeply marked by the suffering he saw. He revered

President Abraham Lincoln; one of his most beloved poems is the elegy he wrote after Lincoln's death, "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd."

Although some people admired Whitman's work during his lifetime, many found it strange, rough, and too open about topics like sex for the nineteenth century. His reputation has grown since his death, and his work influenced many modern poets. He has also been a strong voice for the American ideal of free individualism linked with tolerance, compassion for the other, and embracing diversity, and continues to inspire many thinkers and activists today.

Whitman loosened up the rigid forms that poetry was expected to follow, using language in creative, surprising ways. At the same time, he echoed the Bible and other ancient forms of verse in powerfully rhythmical, song-like lines. His open-minded attitude and generous, democratic spirit now seem to be calling us from the future, rather than the past.

"Beginning my studies" first appeared in 1867 in *Drum-Taps*, Whitman's book of poems about the Civil War, and was later included in *Leaves of Grass*. It is typical of Whitman that even in midlife, and following a gruesome war, he still writes of the joy of new beginnings. His poetry is full of the wonder to be found even in the most mundane, common daily experiences, and of the hope that can spring up in a dark-seeming world.

We'll listen to the poem again, and then I'll talk more about the language Whitman uses.

[POEM AGAIN]

Whitman starts the first sentence of his poem in an unusual way. A full sentence would say, "When I was beginning my studies," or "As I was

beginning my studies, the first step pleased me so much.” But Whitman chooses to leave out the introductory words and start with the verb, “beginning,” plunging us into action right away.

Then he gives a long list of things that please him. Whitman loved lists! He wrote countless poems that listed an incredible number of things, people, actions, and qualities. He keeps these lists from becoming boring by carefully crafting their rhythm and sounds, so that they dance or march or sing.

Whitman was a poet who wanted to speak to ordinary people and lift up ordinary language. He uses many common words, and a few that are not so common. Loiter is a wonderful English word that has been used since the fourteenth century. It is mainly seen today on warning signs that tell people not to stop on sidewalks and in front of shops: NO LOITERING. For Whitman, loitering — pausing to enjoy the small wonders of life — is a beautiful thing, not a crime.

If you have any questions about this poem or about Walt Whitman, please write them in the comments and I’ll be happy to answer them. Remember, you can find a transcript of this episode at [enterenchanted.com / english](http://enterenchanted.com/english). And now, let’s listen one more time to the poem. Beginning my Studies, by Walt Whitman.

[POEM AGAIN]