

### **I Sit And Look Out // a poem lyrics by Walt Whitman**

I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all  
oppression and shame;  
I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men, at anguish with  
themselves, remorseful after deeds done;  
I see, in low life, the mother misused by her children, dying,  
neglected, gaunt, desperate;  
I see the wife misused by her husband – I see the treacherous seducer  
of young women;  
I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequited love, attempted to be  
hid – I see these sights of the earth;  
I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tyranny – I see martyrs and  
prisoners;  
I observe a famine at sea – I observe the sailors casting lots who  
shall be kill`d, to preserve the lives of the rest;  
I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon  
laborers, the poor, and upon negroes, and the like;  
All these – All the meanness and agony without end, I sitting, look  
out upon,  
See, hear, and am silent.

Walt Whitman published his most famous pieces in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was very different from the previous ones and represented one of the most important influences framing Whitman`s writing. Why? Growing capitalistic company in captation of profit and in exploring ethic and all the other borders of behaviour and the new style of living in combination with lack of experience of living in this new situation (the 19<sup>th</sup> century means rapid town, transit, economy, business and system development) put itself in a hole and it was a challenge for some people, including Whitman, to handle new problems and to bring back among people at least some basic assurances to make the life more pleasant to be lived.

I think we can affirm with guarantee this poem is pessimistic. When I read it line after line, I feel the author`s disillusionment of the things in the world (first two lines); then I see not only the frustration of the present situation, but also the comparison of recent and future events; and Whitman`s not comfortable with it – he`s afraid, but not in order to save himself, he`s anxious about the hole future of man – because he sees the day to day manifestations (exhibits) of what`s going to

cause the collective collapse of human company, its attitudes and to turn common human existence into something unprecedented. He criticizes person to person behaviour (eg. disrespect, ingratitude), changes in personal ethic qualities and, something I see as very important and very general for whole poem, universal desperation. (next three double lines). In the second part of the poem I recognise prevision of the incoming epoque of bad times and big warning against this.

Let`s look at some literary technique Whitman has used. Firstly, it is so-called free verse in modern poetry. In free verse you do not find any standardized elements (eg. number of syllables per line, rhyme at the end of line, cadenced scheme). It is said that free verse enables authors to express their feelings more easily and respects the natural rate of speech. Secondly, this poem belongs to those that surprise you with their new points (sense, ideas) each time you read it. This effect is called symbolism. Eg. – and this is really clear - *I observe a famine at sea – I observe the sailors casting lots who shall be kill`d, to preserve the lives of the rest;* - the sea can be consider as a civilization, a country, a family and making the decicion of who`s going to be killed in order to let the remaining survive can be understood as a Biblical event, as a symbol of something. It is not easy to discover all of the poem`s meanings.

It is a good chance I`ve already read a collection of Whitman`s poems in Czech and so I can repeat my previous conclusion. I am a little disappointed when I think about Whitman`s (and also Beaudelaire`s, Verlaine`s etc.) poems in general (and this poem respects exactly what I mean by the general sense of Whitman` work, I think), because I see just problems, frustrations, warnings, constatations and hopeless ideas. Sometimes I say to myself: „These guys probably had no time to work and live as the rest of people.“ They were *just* writing, dreaming, drinking alcohol and describing what bad happened to them. Yes, this is an unilateral view of their work, I know (I just mentioned that). On the other hand they help people to identify different tendencies in their lifes and offer another view of one thing. It is sometimes useful.

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