

Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1892) [excerpt: Sec. 51]

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51

The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied them,
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab.

Who has done his day's work? who will soonest be through with his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?

Step 1 - Paraphrase:

A first-person narrator begins the poem by contemplating his past, present, and the future which awaits him. A "listener" then appears in the passage, and the narrator asks the "listener" to quickly say what he wishes to tell him, as no one else is currently around to hear and he has little time to spend listening. As he sits waiting on a "door-slab," he turns his attention towards the next task which looms in the upcoming future.

Step 2 - Observe:

- 1.) The author being the only person in the passage, apart from the "listener" which won't speak back is potentially significant.
- 2.) Much of the language in the passage refers to time, which could potentially be significant.
- 3.) The questions asked in the last two stanzas may potentially be significant.
- 4.) The randomness in the length of stanzas and Whitman's lack of regard for grammar (which both can be typical of free-verse) is potentially significant.

Step 3 - Contextualize:

- 1.) The fact Whitman came from a background in which he had to work for what he earned, along with for the most part self-educating himself.
- 2.) This excerpt's placement near the end of the poem tells the reader that Whitman is referring to the end of his life.
- 3.) Although Whitman writes the poem about himself and in first-person, context of the transcendentalism philosophy of his time period tells us that he is likely attempting to convey a universal truth through his own experiences and observations.

Step 4 - Analyze:

- 1.) The fact the "listener up there," who won't respond is the only other character in the passage is

significant because it hints that the speaker is alone, praying to a higher power than himself.

2.) The author's placement of this excerpt near the end of the poem, along with his references to time running out, are significant because it helps the reader understand that he's referring to the latter part of his life in which he is near death.

3.) Background knowledge of Whitman's self-education and roots in a working-class family is significant because you know that he understands how far hard work can get you and the time required to achieve your goals.

4.) The last three stanzas are significant because they bring together the theme of the poem as a whole. While the narrator realizes those close to him can't always be around while in pursuit of their dreams to be there for him, he ponders whether this is the complete reason or just another way of expressing that they never truly cared enough to make an attempt.

Step 5 - Argue:

In the passage given from "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman conveys the theme that sometimes people don't realize how important someone or something is to them until it's gone forever. With the introduction of the "Listener up there," in the second stanza, it shows that the narrator is alone, praying to a higher power, in search of someone who legitimately cares for him and what he has to say. The placement of this excerpt in the next to last section of the poem, in combination with continual references to time (and how it's running out), it becomes apparent that the narrator is referring to the twilight of his life. Background knowledge of Whitman's self-education and roots in a working class family are additionally significant, showing the reader that hard work in pursuit of his goals was no foreign idea to Whitman, and that he was fully aware of the time required to achieve them. Through his experiences, the author found that living life in itself keeps an individual busy, but has in the process also realized that your priorities should still be centered around those closest to you. In the end, the narrator just hopes those around him come to the same realization he has before it's too late and they'll never have the chance to get to know him for who he truly is.

Step 6 - Reflect:

One of the things I found confusing about the passage was what Whitman was attempting to convey with the use of the sentences inside parentheses. My argument set aside the first and third stanzas to an extent, especially the third which I found more confusion in him discussing if he contradicts himself. The most debatable element of my arguments would, in my opinion, be whether the narrator actually wants those around him to realize what he has about not understanding how much people take something for granted until it's gone, or if he was trying to convey another slightly different theme.

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