**I Sing the Body Electric”**

**Summary and Form**

This is another of the poems from the original 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass.* Whitman here explores the physical body at length. In other poems he has established the interconnectedness of the body and the soul; here he celebrates the primacy of the body and its importance in forging connections between people. This is yet another poem of lists, which again imply a democratizing force at work. Whitman’s egalitarianism is a particularly important aspect of this poem, for it allows him to argue against the kind of valorization of the body implicit in slavery.

The lists alternate with anecdotal and propositional sections, which allow Whitman to work out some of the issues surrounding the body. This makes “Body Electric” one of his more highly structured poems. Just as various organs and features come together in the greater structure of the human body, so too do the various bits and pieces of Whitman’s poetry come together in a greater whole.

**Commentary**

Whitman prizes the body most for its generative qualities. This is most evident in the fifth and sixth sections of the poem, where he examines first the female and then the male body, praising both for their “sacred” status. The woman is much more strongly associated with reproduction: she is “the gates of the body, and... the gates of the soul.” The man is more a figure of “action and power,” although he too is associated with propagation. The small anecdote of the “common farmer” is an interesting case. The farmer is seen through the eyes of his children, who “love him.” While the love of the children is not presented erotically, it shades into the erotic gaze of the poet, who longs to “sit by him... that [I] and he might touch each other.” The ability of this simple man to build a sort of family dynasty seems to be what attracts the poet.

Women are of course generative in the same literal sense in this poem. The eighth stanza opens with the image of “[a] woman’s body at auction”: obviously a slave auction. Strangely the poet, in the previous stanza, has spoken of helping an auctioneer sell a male slave. The auctioneer “does not half know his business” and the poet helps him by cataloguing the wonders of the man’s body. Both the male and the female slave are touted as the parents of multitudes. This makes them attractive as property: they can become essentially breeding stock for their masters. This kind of extreme valuation of the body would seem to be the extreme case of the kind of body-centrism Whitman advocates. In fact, though, it is the opposite. For Whitman, the body has primacy in its ability to generate experience, which can be compared metaphorically to the generation of children. The body can connect both erotically and spiritually with the bodies of others. In all this, the role of the body as the conduit between the soul and the world remains crucial. The slave auctions show a kind of debased, misguided worship of the physical.

The final stanza of the poem gives a catalogue of body parts, both the poet’s and others’. The parts listed have functions, of course, but they also provide the raw materials for poetry: “these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul.” The body becomes sacred through its linkage with the soul; while it is only the soul’s helper or accomplice, it nevertheless does not deserve second-rate status, for it enables not only spirituality but also poetry.

# Walt Whitman: Poems Summary and Analysis of "I Sing the Body Electric"

## Summary:

In "[I](http://www.gradesaver.com/walt-whitman-poems/study-guide/character-list#i) Sing the Body Electric," Whitman explores the physicality of the human [body](http://www.gradesaver.com/walt-whitman-poems/study-guide/character-list#body). In the first section, the speaker likens the body to the [soul](http://www.gradesaver.com/walt-whitman-poems/study-guide/character-list#soul) and argues that the body does just as much as the soul and in a way, the body is the soul—it does not corrupt the soul, as was a common Christian belief.

In the second section, Whitman dives into one of his famous lists, discussing the various ways in which the body is perfect. He starts by clarifying that he is writing about both the male body and the female body. He lists the characteristics that define a "well-made man," including the way his limbs and joints move, the way he holds his his neck, his waist, his knees, and his back. Whitman then proceeds to celebrate several different types of bodies such as those belonging to babies, girls, mothers, swimmers, rowers, horsemen, and laborers. He loves all of these various kinds of bodies, and releases his own bodily constraints in order to experience life alongside each one of these archetypes.

In the third section, Whitman narrows his focus. He writes admiringly about a specific farmer with five sons. Whitman recalls visiting the man, who at eighty years of age, was still "full of vigor, calmness, beauty of person." Whitman describes the farmer's sons and daughters, who loved their father beyond a child's obligation to his or her parent. Whitman expresses his wish to "sit by him" in his boat and perhaps even share physical contact. In the short fourth section, Whitman remarks that there is nothing more wonderful than to be surrounded by beautiful human bodies; it "pleases the soul." In the fifth and sixth sections, he describes the female body and the male body, respectively. He celebrates the female form by describing a woman's sensuality and her ability to inspire erotic stimulation as well as create new life. His starts his description of the male body by equating it to the female body. He acknowledges that all male and female bodies are sacred no matter what.

Sections seven and eight take place at a slave auction. Whitman occupies the position of the auctioneer. However, he uses his description of these slaves as a way to condemn the practice of slavery, underlining his belief that all bodies are equally sacred; they all have "the same red-running blood" running through their veins. He points out that no one can know what these bodies will eventually be capable of creating (especially since children of slaves automatically became slaves as well). In the final section, Whitman lists all of the characteristics of the human body that he admires. At the end, he concludes that these features are not only markers of the human body, but that the body's "parts and poems" also represent the soul.

## Analysis:

Whitman tendency towards overt descriptions of human sexuality, like in "I Sing the Body Electric," caused a great deal of controversy when [*Leaves of Grass*](http://www.gradesaver.com/leaves-of-grass) was first published. Though he frequently alludes to the human body in other poems from this collection, "...Body Electric" is Whitman's longest and most specific poem devoted entirely to his appreciation of both the male and female form. Whitman's signature list structure features prominently in this piece and serves as a tool to draw the [reader](http://www.gradesaver.com/walt-whitman-poems/study-guide/character-list#reader)'s attention to the unique qualities of the human body while also celebrating the body parts' cumulative significance.

Whitman wrote "...Body Electric" in free verse, separating his words into nine distinct sections of varying lengths. Though this poem could have been just as effective without the numbered, separate verses, the division highlights the specific intent of each verse despite their all being part of the same poem - just like the unique parts of the body comprise a unified whole. Ultimately, Whitman makes the point that the body and the soul are inextricably intertwined and therefore, devaluing or mistreating the body is also a crime against the soul.

Whitman takes great care to assert (repeatedly) that he considers male and female bodies to be equal. This was a somewhat radical point of view during Whitman's time, when women were generally accepted to be socially inferior to men. That being said, Whitman's tone becomes more intimate and his prose more admiring when he describes the male physique. "The full-spread pride of a man is calming and excellent to the soul," he writes. Readers could take this subtle difference as an indication of Whitman's sexual preference - many historians have hypothesized that the poet was attracted to other men.

Whitman also manages to weave a political message into his celebration of the human body. [In America](http://www.gradesaver.com/in-america), the the mid-to-late 1800s were marked by the Civil War and subsequent battle over slavery. Even after the North's victory, former slaves and African Americans in general faced a great deal of discrimination. Whitman takes advantage of this outlet and reminds his readers that all human bodies have the same blood running through their veins, regardless of race. He also suggests that the offspring of these former slaves could be powerful, influential people one day and that suppressing a swath of Americans based solely on race stifles all of that potential. Certainly, many Americans did not share Whitman's controversial views, but he was never one to filter his opinions.