

## critical analysis of walt whitman song of myself

### Use of Language

**Idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation.**

**Words used for their sounds as much as their sense; foreign languages**

**Use of language from several disciplines**

**The sciences: anatomy, astronomy, botany (especially the flora and fauna of America)**

**Businesses and professions, such as carpentry**

**Military and war terms; nautical terms**

### Summary and Form

This most famous of Whitman's works was one of the original twelve pieces in the 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Like most of the other poems, it too was revised extensively, reaching its final permutation in 1881. "Song of Myself" is a sprawling combination of biography, sermon, and poetic meditation. It is not nearly as heavy-handed in its pronouncements as "Starting at Paumanok"; rather, Whitman uses symbols and sly commentary to get at important issues. "Song of Myself" is composed more of vignettes than lists: Whitman uses small, precisely drawn scenes to do his work here.



This poem did not take on the title "Song of Myself" until the 1881 edition. Previous to that it had been titled "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" and, in the 1860, 1867, and 1871 editions, simply "Walt Whitman." The poem's shifting title suggests something of what Whitman was about in this piece. As Walt Whitman, the specific individual, melts away into the abstract "Myself," the poem explores the possibilities for communion between individuals. Starting from the premise that "what I assume you shall assume" Whitman tries to prove that he both encompasses and is indistinguishable from the universe.

### Commentary

Whitman's grand poem is, in its way, an American epic. Beginning *in medias res*—in the middle of the poet's life—it loosely follows a quest pattern. "Missing me one place search another," he tells his reader, "I stop somewhere waiting for you." In its catalogues of American life and its constant search for the boundaries of the self "Song of Myself" has much in common with classical epic. This epic sense of purpose, though, is coupled with an almost Keatsian valorization of repose and passive perception. Since for Whitman the birthplace of poetry is in the self, the best way to learn about poetry is to relax and watch the workings of one's own mind.

While "Song of Myself" is crammed with significant detail, there are three key episodes that must be examined. The first of these is found in the sixth section of the poem. A child asks the narrator "*What is the grass?*" and the narrator is forced to explore his own use of symbolism and his inability to break things down to essential principles. The bunches of grass in the child's hands become a symbol of the regeneration in nature. But they also signify a common material that links disparate people all over the United States together: grass, the ultimate symbol of democracy, grows everywhere. In the wake of the Civil War the grass reminds Whitman of graves: grass feeds on the bodies of the dead. Everyone must die eventually, and so the natural roots of democracy are therefore in mortality, whether due to natural causes or to the bloodshed of internecine warfare. While Whitman normally revels in this kind of symbolic indeterminacy, here it troubles him a bit. "I wish I could translate the hints," he says, suggesting that the boundary between encompassing everything and saying nothing is easily crossed.

The second episode is more optimistic. The famous “twenty-ninth bather” can be found in the eleventh section of the poem. In this section a woman watches twenty-eight young men bathing in the ocean. She fantasizes about joining them unseen, and describes their semi-nude bodies in some detail. The invisible twenty-ninth bather offers a model of being much like that of Emerson’s “transparent eyeball”: to truly experience the world one must be fully in it and of it, yet distinct enough from it to have some perspective, and invisible so as not to interfere with it unduly. This paradoxical set of conditions describes perfectly the poetic stance Whitman tries to assume. The lavish eroticism of this section reinforces this idea: sexual contact allows two people to become one yet not one—it offers a moment of transcendence. As the female spectator introduced in the beginning of the section fades away, and Whitman’s voice takes over, the eroticism becomes homoeroticism. Again this is not so much the expression of a sexual preference as it is the longing for communion with every living being and a connection that makes use of both the body and the soul (although Whitman is certainly using the homoerotic sincerely, and in other ways too, particularly for shock value).

Having worked through some of the conditions of perception and creation, Whitman arrives, in the third key episode, at a moment where speech becomes necessary. In the twenty-fifth section he notes that “Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself, / It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically, / *Walt you contain enough, why don’t you let it out then?*” Having already established that he can have a sympathetic experience when he encounters others (“I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person”), he must find a way to re-transmit that experience without falsifying or diminishing it. Resisting easy answers, he later vows he “will never translate [him]self at all.” Instead he takes a philosophically more rigorous stance: “What is known I strip away.” Again Whitman’s position is similar to that of Emerson, who says of himself, “I am the unsettlér.” Whitman, however, is a poet, and he must reassemble after unsettling: he must “let it out then.” Having catalogued a continent and encompassed its multitudes, he finally decides: “I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.” “Song of Myself” thus ends with a sound—a yawp—that could be described as either pre- or post-linguistic. Lacking any of the normal communicative properties of language, Whitman’s yawp is the release of the “kosmos” within him, a sound at the borderline between saying everything and saying nothing. More than anything, the yawp is an invitation to the next Walt Whitman, to read into the yawp, to have a sympathetic experience, to absorb it as part of a new multitude.

## Criticism

### ***The Walt Whitman Encyclopedia***

Title: 'Song of Myself' [1855]

Author: Miller, James E., Jr.

Print source: J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), reproduced by permission.

In the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, "Song of Myself" came first in the series of twelve untitled poems, dominating the volume not only by its sheer bulk, but also by its brilliant display of Whitman's innovative techniques and original themes. Whitman left the poem in the lead position in the 1856 edition and gave it its first title, "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American," shortened to "Walt Whitman" in the third edition of 1860. By the time Whitman had shaped *Leaves of Grass* into its final structure in 1881, he left the poem (its lines now grouped into 52 sections) in a lead position, preceded only by the epigraph-like cluster "Inscriptions" and the programmatic "Starting from Paumanok."

"Song of Myself" portrays (and mythologizes) Whitman's poetic birth and the journey into knowing launched by that "awakening." But the "I" who speaks is not alone. His camerado, the "you" addressed in the poem's second line, is the reader, placed on shared ground with the poet, a presence throughout much of the journey. As the poem opens, the reader encounters the poet "observing a spear of summer grass" and extending an invitation to his soul. He vows to "permit to speak at every hazard, / Nature without check with original energy" (section 1). Leaving "[c]reeds and schools" behind, he goes "to the

bank by the wood to become undisguised and naked" (sections 1 and 2), clearly preparing himself for the soul's visit of section 5, which dramatizes the transfiguring event that launches the poet on his lifelong quest.

This event may best be described as the organic union of the poet's body and soul, the latter appearing first in the disembodied "hum" of a "valvèd voice." In highly charged erotic imagery, the soul settles his head "athwart" the poet's hips, "gently" turns over upon him, parting his shirt from his "bosom-bone" and plunging his "tongue" to the poet's "bare-stript heart"—while reaching simultaneously to *feel* his "beard" and to *hold* his "feet." In short, the soul with his phallic tongue (instrument of his "valvèd voice") penetrates directly to the poet's heart, bestowing there, without aid of mind or "reason," the teeming sperm of life-affirming intuitive knowledge, in effect the foundation for transcendent self-assurance that will sustain the poet on his search. Held in the trance-like grip of the soul from beard to feet, the poet suddenly awakens to the "peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth," a fragmentary but certain knowledge: "that the spirit of God is the brother of my own," "that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers," "that a kelson of the creation is love." These sweeping affirmations trail off into what seems a heap of incoherent images—"limitless" "leaves," "brown ants," "elder, mullein and poke-weed." In effect, the incomprehensible multiplicity of nature, in its smallest manifestations, is also embraced in the all-inclusive affirmations of God and brotherhood.

As the awakening portrayed in section 5 has prepared the poet for a new kind of knowledge, section 6 launches him on his journey into knowing, beginning with exploration of a child's question, " *What is the grass?* " This phase of the journey extends through section 32, providing ample occasion for the poet to establish many of the subjects and themes that are addressed elsewhere in *Leaves of Grass*. From the focus on the grass imagery in section 6, the poet moves on to the theme of "en-masse," in sections 7-16. He becomes Walt Whitman, American, roaming the continent, celebrating everyday scenes of ordinary life. He presents himself (in section 13) as the "caresser of life wherever moving . . . Absorbing all to myself and for this song." This movement rises in a crescendo to the extended catalogue of section 15, with its rapid-fire snapshots of American types and scenes.

Moving away from American diversity in section 17, the poet turns to human commonality—to "the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is." In sections 18-24, the poet proceeds to collapse traditional discriminations, celebrating "conquer'd and slain persons" (section 18) along with victors, the "righteous" along with the "wicked"—extending his embrace to include outcasts and outlaws. But increasingly his focus fixes on the equality of body and soul and ways of rescuing the body from its inferior status. He turns to himself and his own body, presenting in section 24 a nude portrait of "Walt Whitman, a kosmos," providing a catalogue, meticulously metaphoric, for every item of his anatomy ("Firm masculine colter," "duplicate eggs").

Throughout sections 18-32 of "Song of Myself," the poet celebrates the erotic dimension of all the senses, but he turns to the miraculous touch in section 28: "Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity?" In some of the most surrealistic lines in all of *Leaves*, the poet proceeds to portray himself in a scene of self-induced sexual arousal to the climactic point of orgasm. Section 29 presents the poet's tender farewell to complicit touch, while sections 30-32 explore the knowledge bestowed by the experience: "What is less or more than a touch?" Having experienced and affirmed the most intense of physical ecstasies, the poet contemplates becoming one with the animals: he mounts and races a "gigantic beauty of a stallion." But he ends by "resign[ing]" the stallion, realizing that deeper knowledge lies in wait.

Adjusted to his new identity bestowed by touch, he is now ready for the second major phase of his journey. Section 33 begins with new and higher affirmations: "Space and Time! now I see it is true, what I guess'd at, / What I guess'd when I loaf'd on the grass." In this longest section of "Song of Myself," the poet feels the exhilaration of being no longer bound by the ties of space and time: he is "afoot with" his "vision." He feels able, indeed, to range back and forth over all time, and to soar like a meteor out into space. But in one of the strangest reversals in "Song of Myself," this peak of exaltation



in section 33 glides into its opposite as the poet begins to identify more and more closely with the outcasts and rejected: "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there." He becomes the "old-faced infants and the lifted sick," the mother "condemned for a witch," "the hounded slave." A note of despair sounds louder and louder through sections 34-37, until at the end the poet becomes a homeless beggar. Such despair, unfelt during similar identifications with outcasts in sections 17-20, suggests that the poet has moved obscurely beyond the knowledge of his previous phase.

Section 38, opening with strong rejection of the role of beggar he has assumed ("Enough! enough! enough!") suddenly resets the direction for the poet on his journey: "I discover myself on the verge of a usual mistake." Although he is never quite explicit about the basis for what he knows, he says that he "remember[s] now" and resumes "the overstaid fraction." He suggests metaphorically that the nature of this "overstaid fraction" is contained in the resurrection that followed (or follows) crucifixion, in lines implying humankind's identification with the universalized experience of Christ: "The grave of rock multiplies what has been confided to it, or to any graves, / Corpses rise, gashes heal, fastenings roll from me." Thus out of his despair, the poet emerges "replenish'd with supreme power," a power that reaches beyond identification with the downtrodden and rejected, a power indeed to bring "help for the sick as they pant on their backs" as well as "yet more needed help" for "strong upright men" (section 41).

This stage, in which the poet is confident in his transcendent power, extends through the closing sections, 38-49. In section 43 the poet affirms all religious faiths ("worship ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern"), and in section 44 he celebrates his place in evolutionary theory: both religion and science contain the seeds that provide the source for his supreme power.

The reader learns in section 46 that the poet's is a "perpetual journey," that he has "no chair, no church, no philosophy," that he cannot travel the road for "you," but "you must travel it for yourself." In sections 48-49, he again affirms the body equal with the soul, as he affirms the identity of selfhood and Godhead. And similarly, he proclaims death and life so inseparably bonded as to render one unimaginable without the other. Near the end of section 49, the poet appears to give up further effort to convey in words what he knows and turns to the natural world for help: "O suns—O grass of graves—O perpetual transfers and promotions, / If you do not say any thing how can I say any thing?"

In section 50 the poet seems to be emerging from a trance-like state similar to that he entered in section 5: "Wrench'd and sweaty—calm and cool then my body becomes, / I sleep—I sleep long." Coming out of his deep sleep, the poet stammers almost incoherently: "I do not know *it . . . it* is a word unsaid, / *It* is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol" (emphasis added). Readers may guess that "it" refers to the ineffable transcendent meaning of the poet's experience on his dream-like journey. That meaning can be conveyed only by oblique analogy: "Something *it* swings on more than the earth I swing on, / To *it* the creation is the friend whose embracing awakes me" (emphasis added). In the end the poet addresses those "brothers and sisters" first evoked in section 5, trying to hit upon a word that might convey some notion, however inadequately, of the transcendent meaning discovered on his journey: "It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness."

As the poet's camerado from the beginning, "you" the reader come to the fore in the two concluding sections (51-52) of the poem. The poet does not deny but dismisses his "contradictions," asserting, "I am large, I contain multitudes." On beginning his journey (section 1) he promised he would "permit to speak at every hazard, / Nature without check with original energy"; similarly, at the end, he describes himself as "not a bit tamed," as "untranslatable," as one who sounds his "barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." His journey over and done, he prepares for departure, bequeathing himself "to the dirt to grow from the grass" he loves, and tells the reader: "If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles." To the end, the poet insists that his transcendental knowledge gained on his spiritual journey cannot be embodied in words, but that nevertheless it can be conveyed indirectly. Readers will come to "know," not because he has conveyed his meaning abstractly, but rather because he has come to "filter and fibre" their blood. At the end, the poet admonishes his readers to "keep encouraged" and continue their search for him, promising: "I stop somewhere waiting for you."

Like most poetic works of genius, "Song of Myself" has defied attempts to provide a definitive interpretation. In a very real sense, no reading of the poem has clarified the sum of its many mysteries. Critics have provided useful readings, concentrating on one or another dimension of the poem: Carl F. Strauch on the solidity of a fundamental structure, Randall Jarrell on the brilliance of individual lines, James E. Miller, Jr., on the portrayal of an "inverted mystical experience," Richard Chase on the often-overlooked comic aspects, Malcolm Cowley on the affinities with the inspired prophecies of antiquity, Robert K. Martin on the resemblance to a "dream vision based on sexual [essentially homosexual] experience." In addition, Edwin Haviland Miller has provided a guide through the various readings in *Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": A Mosaic of Interpretations* (1989). In the final analysis, readers must find their own way through "Song of Myself." They will know that they are on the right path when they begin to feel something of the "great power" that Ralph Waldo Emerson felt in 1855 (Whitman 1326).

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### ["The Poet" and "Song of Myself"](#)

This paper studies Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "The Poet" which details the life and role of a poet in society and compares it to **Walt Whitman's** poem, "Song of Myself."

1,785 words (approx. 7.1 pages), 2 sources, MLA, 2001, \$ 57.95

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#### **Abstract**

This paper studies the life and works and accomplishments of Ralph Waldo Emerson. It studies his essay "The Poet" and describes his idealistic vision of the life of a poet. It also describes the 19th-century artistic and philosophical movement called transcendentalism that he founded. Throughout this paper, the author compares Emerson's ideals to **Walt Whitman's** "Song of Myself." It also examines Ralph Waldo Emerson's strong influence and effect on American society.

#### **From the Paper**

"Ralph Waldo Emerson's idealized and mesmerizing description of the role and life of the poet in his essay "The Poet" describes not only the particular calling and obligation of those who choose to follow the poetic muses but "also because of Emerson's own influence on the writings of Americans who followed him" proved to be a strongly proscriptive piece of advice for other poets and writers in the decades after Emerson helped to found the 19th-century artistic and philosophical movement called Transcendentalism. The Transcendentalists defined themselves by their belief in a highly idealistic and fundamentally coherent system of belief in the essential unity of all things on earth "the connection of each thing to its neighbor" as well as a belief in the absolute importance of personal experience and insight (as opposed to knowledge and beliefs gained through formal logic and formal education) and the essential goodness of humanity."

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## ***Song of Myself (Identities and Issues in Literature)***

### ***The Work***

"Song of Myself" was first published as the untitled opening poem of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. The author's name does not appear on the first edition's title page, but it is mentioned in the poem: "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos." This characterization sums up the subject of identity in "Song of Myself." Whitman presents himself as an American working man and as a mystical figure at one with the universe.

Although the poem identifies "myself" simply as Walt Whitman, the identity of the speaker is also mythic. Instead of trying to say how unique his feelings and thoughts are, Whitman emphasizes his

ordinariness. His ordinariness is in fact so comprehensive that he absorbs each American, past, present, and future. This comprehensive awareness makes the speaker of the poem greater than himself, but it is a greatness and uniqueness that is, he emphasizes, accessible to all.

The idea behind “Song of Myself” is that individual identity is temporary but transcendent. The dominant tone of “Song of Myself” is joyous and mystical. The cycle of life renews itself constantly, and so conquers death. If each person absorbs this knowledge, each may feel kinship with all life, and so gain a sense of victory over mortality.

“Song of Myself” includes many modulations of tone as it moves toward its climax. To work out the theme of endless renewal, the fifty-two sections of the poem move back and forth between general and specific, between description and emotion, between the body and the soul. “Song of Myself” is a powerful—sometimes shocking—poem of physical identity. Sexuality is part of common humanity, and Whitman ignores pretenses in order to reach to the universal truths of human identity, including the truths of the body.

Like the rest of *Leaves of Grass*, “Song of Myself” is in free verse, or poetry without regular rhyme or meter. Free verse was a perfect form for Whitman to use to explore the themes of identity, nationality, and **transcendence** in a free country. The national motto—*e pluribus unum*, out of many one—might equally well serve as the motto for “Song of Myself.” Out of the many ethnic, racial, and gender identities Whitman saw in America, and out of the complexities of his own identity, he forged an epic of transcendent identity.

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**Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself'** is, on the most basic descriptive level, a really long poem. Whitman is clearly a poet with a lot to say, or at least with a lot of different ways to say it. He meanders from the micro to the macro, from atoms to the whole earth. There are obviously myriad ways to explain what the poem is about, and myriad 'keys' to its true meaning. In what became Section 6 of the final edition (lines 90–121 of the 1855 edition ) Whitman himself addresses this sort of 'meta-question' of interpretation. By doing so in one of the quieter, more straightforward sections of the poem, Whitman invites us to use the section as one such 'key.' In Section 6, Whitman lays out a (possible) microcosm of 'Song of Myself' and gives a very kind prompt that here is a place where befuddled readers can ease their way into the poem.

Whitman signals from the beginning of this passage that it is more accessible than most of his others. The first line tells us simply of a question asked by a child: ?A child said, What is the grass? fet..

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## **An Analysis of Walt Whitman's Song of Myself**

Whitman was always asking questions. He believed that life's goal or cause was a mystery. He was surrounded by people who were drawing distinct lines between right and wrong, rejecting the things in the universe that were not a direct ticket to holiness. Whitman, unlike his contemporaries, embraced the beauty of everything. His mystical perception of the world ushered in the idea that God was to be found in every thing, and that He could never be fully understood. I think that section six of "Song of Myself" captures Whitman's quest for knowing, and his idea that our perceptions of what is, only scratch the surface.

How appropriate that he starts this section with a question posed by a child, "What is the grass?" Whitman wants to answer, but realizes that he can't. Nature provides so many opportunities for interpretation. It is, on one hand, the abstract "flag of [his] disposition", but in the next stanza, the more tangible "handkerchief of the Lord." Notice that he "guesses" each time what the grass might

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## Divinity, Sexuality and the Self in Whitman's Song of Myself

Through his poetry, Whitman's "Song of Myself" makes the soul sensual and makes divine the flesh. In Whitman's time, the dichotomy between the soul and the body had been clearly defined by centuries of Western philosophy and theology. Today, the goodness of the soul and the badness of the flesh still remain a significant notion in contemporary thought. Even Whitman's literary predecessor, Emerson, chose to distinctly differentiate the soul from all nature. Whitman, however, chooses to reevaluate that relationship. His exploration of human sensuality, particularly human sexuality, is the tool with which he integrates the spirit with the flesh. Key to this integration is Whitman's notion of the ability of the sexual self to define itself. This self-definition is derived from the strongly independent autonomy with which his sexuality speaks in the poem. Much of the "Song of Myself" consists of a cacophony of Whitman's diffe...

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### Nature and Death in Walt Whitman's Song of Myself

There are many "popular" topics used frequently by authors. Love, religion, and war are some favorites. Two other such topics we typically read about are nature and death. The two can be discussed separately or they can be related to each other. Walt Whitman, a lover of nature, tackled these subjects in "Song of Myself" from Leaves of Grass. Another author who does the same is William Cullen Bryant. Though two very different writers with different styles, they share some of the same ideas.

"Song of Myself" is a celebration of life and God. Whitman loved everything imaginable about nature. He loved people, animals, and himself. Throughout this extensive poem, Whitman mentions "red" people (Indians), "negros," butchers, women, the poor and the rich. He believed that all are good in some way or another and all people are equal. He loved them all for their own special reason. He also loved animals. Stanza thirteen praises the beauty and worthiness of oxen, tortoises, and mockingbirds. He believed all living...

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### The Song Summed Up

2004-02-05

Added by: jared

"Song of Myself" is all about the human experience. When I say the human experience, I mean what men of the past, present, and future have seen, touched, smelt, and heard. In this poem Whitman is explaining how all of humanity is like one living organism, and no one part is more important than the other. In section 44 of "Song of Myself" Whitman says, "We have thus far exhausted trillions of winters and summers, There are trillions ahead, and trillions ahead of them. Births have brought us richness and variety, And other births will bring us richness and variety. I do not call one greater and one smaller, That which fills its period and place is equal to any." It is clear that Whitman had a perspective of the human race and its history that escaped most writers. More specifically, Whitman speaks of equal contribution to the human experience in section 42: "Here and there with dimes on the eyes walking, To feed the greed of the belly the brains liberally spooning, Tickets buying, taking, selling, but in to the feast never once going, Many sweating, ploughing, thrashing, and then the chaff for payment receiving, A few idly owning, and they the wheat continually claiming. This is the city and I am one of the citizens, Whatever interests the rest interests me, politics, wars, markets, newspapers, schools, The mayor and councils, banks, tariffs, steamships, factories, stocks, stores, real estate and personal estate. Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" could have easily been titled "Song of Humanity."

2004-03-04

**Added by: Janelle**

I just wanted to share what my favorite part is. I've read the entire thing numerous times and I even got a copy of the newest edition of *Leaves Of Grass* from my high school library when they were clearing space for new books (quite a steal I might add).

Even after reading all of it, I have many favorite segments and many quotes I take from it, but I still love 52 the best. This may be a rather morbid and macabre thing to post, but I'm absolutely determined to have "Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, Missing me one place search another, I stop somewhere waiting for you," put on my tombstone.

I'm just intoxicated w/ Whitman's style of writing; I feel freedom, exuberance, jubilee, and rapture when I read this work. It is so happy, it is so encompassing, it so wonderful that I can't help but feel better when I read it.

I wish that everyone could experience and enjoy life 1/2 as much as Whitman did - if we all did the world would certainly be different to say the least :)

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## **Walt Whitman (1819-1892)**

### **Contributing Editor: Betsy Eikkila**

#### **Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, and Personal Issues**

I use the 1855 versions of "Song of Myself" and "The Sleepers" because I think these poems represent Whitman at his unrevised best. I begin with a biographical introduction, stressing Whitman's active engagement as radical Democrat and party journalist in the major political conflicts of pre-Civil War America. The inscription poem "One's-Self I Sing" and his vision of the poet balanced between pride and sympathy in the 1855 Preface serve as a good introduction to "Song of Myself." I usually begin by asking the students to talk about Whitman's free verse technique. What ordering devices does he use in the opening lines to achieve his poetic design: these include repetition, biblical parallelism, rhythmic recurrence, assonance, and consonance.

Section 15 is a good illustration of the ways Whitman's catalog technique serves as a democratizing device, inscribing the pattern of many and one. By basing his verse in the single, end-stopped line at the same time that he fuses this line--through various linking devices--with the larger structure of the whole, Whitman weaves an overall pattern of unity in diversity. This pattern of many and one--the *e pluribus unum* that was the revolutionary seal of the American republic--is the overarching figure of *Leaves of Grass*.

I present "Song of Myself" as a drama of democratic identity in which the poet seeks to balance and reconcile major conflicts in the body politic of America: the conflict between "separate person" and "en masse," individualism and equality, liberty and union, the South and the North, the farm and the city, labor and capital, black and white, female and male, religion and science. One can discuss any of the individual sections of the poem in relation to this conflict. Moments of particular conflict and crisis occur in sections 28 and 38. I ask the students to discuss the specific nature of the crisis in each of these sections. Both involve a loss of balance.

In section 28, the protagonist loses bodily balance as he is swept away by an erotic, masturbatory urge. Ask the students to think about why a masturbation fantasy occurs in a poem about democracy. Ask them to think about why the masturbatory fit is represented in the language of political insurrection. These questions lead to interesting observations about the relation between political power and power over the body. Masturbation is, in effect, the political ground on which Whitman tests the theory of democracy. Within the democratic economy of his poem, the turbulence of the body, like the turbulence of the masses, is part of a natural regenerative order.

If section 28 involves a loss of bodily balance, section 38 involves a loss of self in empathetic identification with others. In discussing the crisis in section 38, ask the students what Whitman means



by the lines: "I find myself on the verge of a usual mistake." This will usually lead back to the end of section 3, where the poet begins identifying with scenes of suffering, carnage, and death. Some of these scenes are linked with the nation's history: the hounded slave, the Texas war, the American Revolution. The poet appears to be on the verge of losing faith in the divine potency of the individual and the regenerative pattern of the whole. He resolves the crisis by remembering the divinity of Christ as a living power existing within rather than outside of every individual.

The resolution of this crisis leads to the emergence of the divinely empowered poet who presides over the final passages of the poem, declaring his ultimate faith in the "form, union, plan" of the universe. Here you might want to discuss the relation between this poetic affirmation of democratic faith and union and the fact of an American Union that was in the throes of dissolution.

Since Whitman's poetic development corresponds with stages in his own and the nation's history, a chronological presentation works well in the classroom. After discussing "Song of Myself," you might want to discuss other 1855 poems such as "The Sleepers" and "There Was a Child Went Forth." "The Sleepers," which was toned down in later versions, represents in both its form and its content the half-formed, erotically charged, and anxiety-ridden fantasies of the dream state. The poem anticipates Freud's "unconscious" and the literary experiments of the surrealists. But the poem is revolutionary not only in its psychosexual dimension. The poet also descends into a kind of political unconscious of the nation, dredging up images of regeneration through violence associated with Washington and the battle for American independence, the slave as black Lucifer, and the Indian squaw.

If you have time to do later work by Whitman, the 1860 poems might be grouped together since they correspond with a period of both personal and national crisis. This crisis is most effectively represented in "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life"; within the context of *Leaves of Grass*, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" appears to respond to this crisis. Ask the students to comment on the differences between the "amative" poems of *Children of Adam* and the "adhesive" poems of *Calamus*. This will lead to a discussion of Whitman's sexual politics.

Women students have particularly strong and mixed reactions to "A Woman Waits for Me": they are attracted by Whitman's celebration of an erotically charged female body, yet are repelled by the fact that she seems rhetorically prone. The students will usually note that Whitman's poems to men seem more immediate and personal than the poems of *Children of Adam*. "In Paths Untrodden" reflects Whitman's split at this time between the public culture of democracy and his desire to tell secrets, to "come out" poetically by naming his hitherto unspeakable passion for men. You might want to remind the students that the term "homosexual" did not yet exist, and thus Whitman was breaking the path toward a language of male love. His invention is particularly evident in "When I Heard at the Close of the Day," where the power and tenderness of his feelings for his lover are linked with the rhythms of a completely natural order. The "confessional" note in the poems anticipates the later work of [Allen Ginsberg](#), [Robert Lowell](#), and [Sylvia Plath](#). Ask the students to reflect on why it was the poems of *Children of Adam* and not *Calamus* that most shocked the literary establishment. It was really not until Allen Ginsberg wrote his comic tribute to Whitman, "In a Supermarket in California," that Whitman, the homosexual poet, came fully out of the closet--at least in America.

I usually begin discussion of the war poems by asking how the experience of fratricidal war might affect Whitman as the poet of national union. This will lead to reflections on the tragedy of the Civil War. The poems of *Drum-Taps*--which proceed from militant exultation, to the actual experience of war, to demobilization and reconciliation--might be read as an attempt to place the butchery of the war within a poetic and ultimately regenerative design. Ask the students to compare Whitman's war poems with his earlier poems. They are at once more formally controlled and more realistic--stylistic changes that are linked with the war context. "A March in the Ranks Hard-Press'd, and the Road Unknown" and "The Artilleryman's Vision" are proto-modern poems in which the individual appears as an actor in a drama of history he no longer understands nor controls. Whitman's ambivalence about black emancipation is evident in "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors." "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" and "As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado" are particularly effective in suggesting

the ways the wartime context of male bonding and comradeship gave Whitman a legitimate language and social frame within which to express his love for men.

In discussing Whitman's famous elegy on the death of President Lincoln, it is interesting to begin by asking what remains unsaid in the poem. For one thing, Lincoln is never named as the subject within the context of the poem; his death becomes representative of all the war dead. By placing Lincoln's death within a timeless regenerative order of nature, Whitman's "Lilacs" also "covers over" the fact of Lincoln's unnatural and violent assassination. Although the vision of battle in section 15 is often passed over in critical considerations of the poem, this bloody sight of "battle-corpses" and the "debris" of war is, I believe, the unspeakable honor and real subject of the poem.

*Democratic Vistas* (1871) might be read either as an introduction to or a conclusion to the study of Whitman. In the essay, he struggles with the central tensions and paradoxes of American, New World experience. These conflicts intensify and are more urgently addressed in the post-Civil War period as the unleashed force of market capitalism and the dynamic of modern civilization appear to spin out of control. "Who bridles Leviathan?" Whitman asks in *Democratic Vistas*. It is a fitting question with which to conclude the study of Whitman and to begin the study of the modern world.

