

"Song of Myself"

Introduction

Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" is the most famous of the twelve poems originally published in *Leaves of Grass*, the collection for which the poet is most widely known. First published in 1855, Whitman made extensive revisions to the book, changing titles, motifs, and adding whole poems until 1881, and tinkering further until his death in 1892. The title "Song of Myself" did not come about until 1881, going through various permutations that include "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American," "Walt Whitman," and "Myself." Its changing title hints at the shifts found within the sprawling epic. From the obvious "Walt Whitman" to the abstract "Myself," Whitman reveals his desire to examine the individual, the communion between individuals, and the individual's place in the universe. The poem is at once a meditation on what it is to be human, a song to the America that Whitman felt so passionately about, and a sermon about the equality of man. Its free-verse construction, devoid of conventional meter and rhyme, mirrors the expansive, sensual, often sexual, language that marked the poem as something totally new. An early criticism of *Leaves of Grass* in the September 15, 1855, edition of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* explains,

Here we have a book which fairly staggers us. It sets all the ordinary rules of criticism at defiance. It is one of the strangest compounds of transcendentalism, bombast, philosophy, folly, wisdom, wit and dullness which it ever catered into the heart of man to conceive.... It is a poem; but it conforms to none of the rules by which poetry has ever been judged.

Whitman was raised by working-class, liberal parents during the most nationalistic period in American history. Pride in the newly formed country's success was widespread, yet no indigenous work of literature existed to reflect the native culture, the landscape, or the political idealism of America. In his 1837 "American Scholar" address, Ralph Waldo Emerson challenged his listeners: "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close.... We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." In the 1955 introduction to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Gay Wilson Allen tells that the challenge sparked the poet's imagination. In 1849, one of the characters from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Kavanagh* shouted, "We want a national literature altogether shaggy and unshorn, that shall shake the earth, like a herd of buffaloes thundering over the prairies!" Whitman responded to the call with the earth-shaking *Leaves of Grass*, the first truly American collection of poetry written by a great American poet.

Before publishing *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman worked as a newspaper apprentice, a teacher, a journalist, and a writer of short fiction. His working-class background gave him compassion for the disenfranchised. His passion for democracy and equality made him detest slavery. His frustration with the political climate leading up to the Civil War inspired him with poetic fervor. It is interesting, then, that these elements come together in an utterly indefinable work of poetic genius. Poets, critics, lecturers, and educators have failed to come up with a definitive interpretation of "Song of Myself," though not for lack of trying. Countless books and papers have been written in an attempt to unlock the mysteries of Whitman's mystical, lyrical, poetic journey of the soul. In the end, most agree that the independent reader is responsible for making his or her way through this innovative, challenging, and thoroughly American poem. The version explored here is the final, 1892, or "Deathbed" edition.

COMPLETE TEXT: "Song of Myself" (1892 version) by Walt Whitman

1
I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loaf and invite my soul,
I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,

I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,

Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

2
Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes,
I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color'd sea-rocks, and of hay in the

barn,

The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind,
A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,
The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-sides,
The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun.

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd the earth much?

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed
on the spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen 'o all sides and filter them from your self.

3

I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,
 Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
 And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
 Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

Urge and urge and urge,
 Always the procreant urge of the world.

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance and increase, always sex,
 Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed of life.

To elaborate is no avail, learn'd and unlearn'd feel that it is so.

Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights, well entretied, braced in the beams,
 Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,
 I and this mystery here we stand.

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.

Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,
 Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.

Showing the best and dividing it from the worst age vexes age,
 Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they discuss I am silent, and go bathe and
 admire myself.

Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean,
 Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.

I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing;
 As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night, and withdraws at the peep of
 the day with stealthy tread,

Leaving me baskets cover'd with white towels swelling the house with their plenty,
 Shall I postpone my acceptance and realization and scream at my eyes,
 That they turn from gazing after and down the road,
 And forthwith cipher and show me to a cent,
 Exactly the value of one and exactly the value of two, and which is ahead?

4

Trippers and askers surround me,
 People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city I live in, or the nation,
 The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old and new,
 My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,
 The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,
 The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss or lack of money, or depressions or
 exaltations,
 Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events;
 These come to me days and nights and go from me again,
 But they are not the Me myself.

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
 Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
 Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,
 Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,
 Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.

backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog with linguists and contenders,
I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait.

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder, mullein and poke-weed.

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic, → style of writing
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.

→ here grass symbolizes
both Death and Life

→ Grass symbolizes
green hope

→ Death symbolizes
new beginning
and new life

→ Theme of Death,
nature, and life
is prominent

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

(All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.)

7

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.

I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe, and am not contain'd between my hat
and boots,
And peruse manifold objects, no two alike and every one good,
The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good.

I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,
I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself,
(They do not know how immortal, but I know.)

Every kind for itself and its own, for me mine male and female,
For me those that have been boys and that love women,
For me the man that is proud and feels how it stings to be slighted,
For me the sweet-heart and the old maid, for me mothers and the mothers of mothers,
For me lips that have smiled, eyes that have shed tears,
For me children and the begetters of children.

Undrape! you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded,
I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no,
And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and carnot be shaken away.

Section-wise Explanation of "Song of Myself"

Section 1 The opening lines of the poem prepare the reader for what lies ahead: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." This introduces the universal "I," sets the celebratory tone, and foreshadows the themes of equality, nature, and goodness. He goes on, "I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass," equating the natural ease and comfort with which the "I" observes a blade of grass to communing with the soul. Though the universal "I" is invoked, Whitman appears as himself in the third stanza, "form'd from this soil, this air, / Born here of parents born here from parents the same ... / I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin." As Whitman the man is born of the earth and the air, Whitman the poet is emerging as himself, as the poem itself, in these very lines.

Section 2 In this section, the poet exalts the beauty of nature, writing, "The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless, / It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it." Whitman equates fresh air with all that is good. "I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked, / I am mad for it to be in contact with me." Nakedness is honesty. Whitman rejoices in simplicity and vitality as much as in honesty. The introduction of the senses begins with air on skin and progresses to "My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs, / The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore." The celebration of the self and of the soul continues. Whitman expresses the miracle of the body and its functions while the soul rejoices in its existence on earth. "The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind / ... / The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun." He then claims that the reader can "possess the origin of all poems," and will learn to "listen to all sides and filter them from your self."

Section 3 Whitman invokes the urgency of the present early in this section:

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

The mystery of the self as a present being in both body and soul is expressed in the lines, "I and this mystery here we stand / Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul." Whether in body or soul, the present is all that matters. With, "I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing; / As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the day with stealthy tread," he repeats the love of the present in sexual language. The emphasis falls on the fact that Whitman is satisfied in his body, seeing, dancing, laughing, singing, hugging, and loving. This joyful expression carries into the next section.

Section 4 The poet recalls good times and bad, including "Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events; / These come to me days and nights and go from me again, / But they are not the Me myself." Whitman will not let the evils of the earth strip him of his joy. The "myself" of which he speaks is his essence, his soul, as well as the soul of mankind. The soul is naturally good. It naturally seeks joy and equanimity and does not dwell on "fitful events." "Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next, / Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it." Whitman seems to believe it best to let life unfold on its natural progression.

Section 5 In this section, Whitman the individual becomes the abstract "myself" of the poem's title. The identities of "I," "you," and "myself" evolve into a universal self brought about by the birth of Whitman the poet. As introduction to his poetic birth, Whitman writes,

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,

**Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.**

The reader may ask, "Whose voice? And why not words, or music, or rhyme?" The following stanza, one of the most surreal verses in the whole poem, describes Whitman's poetic birth in highly sensual language:

How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.

In an essay in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, James E. Miller Jr. writes, "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.'" The newly born poet finds himself with "the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth." He continues:

And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women and my sisters and
lovers,

And that a kelson of the creation is love.

Sections 6-7 In section 6, Whitman introduces the first key image after his poetic awakening. The spear of grass image from the beginning of "Song of Myself" reappears here. "A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands, / How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is anymore than he." With these words, the journey into understanding begins. From here through the mid-section of the poem, the democratic symbolism of grass ("Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones, / Growing among black folks as among white") expands to celebrate daily scenes of American life with Whitman as guide.

The last lines of the section, "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier," act as a bridge between sections 6 and 7. In section 7, the song continues, "Has any one supposed it lucky to be born? / I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it." Here, Whitman refers to his poetic rebirth, the birth of the new self that depended on the death of his previous self.

Sections 8-10 "The little one sleeps in its cradle" marks the official beginning of Whitman's poetic journey through America as he catalogs the American experience. He explores the commonalities shared by the human race, the celebration of everyday life, and the indignities and difficulties suffered by humanity:

The runaway slave came to my house and stopt outside,
I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,
Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsy and weak,
And went where he sat on a log and led him in and assured him,
...

He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and pass'd north,
I had him sit next to me at table, my fire-lock lean'd in the corner.

This image follows one describing the marriage of a trapper to a "red girl ... her head was bare, her coarse straight locks descended upon her voluptuous limbs and reach'd to her feet." Boatmen, clam-diggers, Native Americans, runaway slaves: Whitman makes plain the fact that one man or woman works, lives, seeks love, and seeks freedom as well as the next.

Critical Appreciation of "Song of Myself"

This poem had no title in the first (1855) edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In 1856 it was called "A Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" and in 1860 it was simply termed "Walt Whitman." Whitman changed the title to "Song of Myself" in 1881. The changes in the title are significant in indicating the growth of the meaning of the poem.

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.

In Whitman's poem "Song of Myself," he talks about his existence, his relationship with his environments, and the vast universe around him. In this poem, Whitman celebrates his life, his health, and everything he has accomplished through his experiences by describing his interactions with other individuals, nature, and the understanding of life through his beliefs. Whitman worries about the dark side of humanity have to offer like riots, war, causing fear, murder, and other ill-fated mindsets that the human mind can think of. Whitman stated in section 46, "Not I, not anyone else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself." In this excerpt, he discusses the quest of life where one has to travel his or her own journey alone and do the passage for themselves and not anyone else.

Also mentioned in section 46, "You are asking me questions, and I hear you, / I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out for yourself." He talks about questions, which one has to answer for himself and himself, alone. Whitman explains that every person has to fight their own battles and must overcome their own fears in order to seek the answers that we have been searching for. Before a human departs this earth, one tries to prove their importance of his or her existence to society by proving their value that meets their requirements. Whitman further explains that if one doesn't value their own self, then how can others accept them, so that individual must first overcome their undesirable views of themselves and learn how to love and appreciate themselves in order to obtain the approval of others. One needs to come out as a shining armor through all the pros and cons of life to provide importance for his/her own sake to get complete satisfaction. This poem conveys to how the mindset of the early 19th century hasn't changed in modern times, how a person must still overcome their struggles, seek approval of others, and find the answers that they are searching for to make them feel that they accomplished something in their lives.

There are three important themes: the idea of the self; the identification of the self with other selves, and the poet's relationship with the elements of nature and the universe. Houses and rooms represent civilization; perfumes signify individual selves; and the atmosphere symbolizes the universal self. The self is conceived of as a spiritual entity which remains relatively permanent in and through the changing flux of ideas and experiences which constitute its conscious life. The self comprises ideas, experiences, psychological states, and spiritual insights. The concept of self is the most significant aspect of Whitman's mind and art.

To Whitman, the self is both individual and universal. Man has an individual self, whereas the world, or cosmos, has a universal or cosmic self. The poet wishes to maintain the identity of his individual self, and yet he desires to merge it with the universal self, which involves the identification of the poet's self with mankind and the mystical union of the poet with God, the

Absolute Self Sexual union is a figurative anticipation of spiritual union. Thus the poet's ecstasy is both physical and spiritual, and he develops a sense of loving brotherhood with God and with all mankind. Even the most commonplace objects, such as Leaves, ants, and stones, contain the infinite universe.

"Song of Myself" is a good example of the **stylistic features of *Leaves of Grass***. Whitman's style reflects his individualism. He once wrote to Horace Traubel, his biographer: "I sometimes think the *Leaves* is only a language experiment." Words, for Whitman, have both a "natural" and a "spiritual" **significance**. Colloquial words unite the natural with the spiritual, and therefore he uses many colloquial expressions. He is also fond of using **foreign words**. The **catalog** is another special **characteristic of Whitman's poetic technique**. He uses numerous images, usually drawn from nature, to suggest and heighten the impression of a poetic idea. These images appear to have no clear organization; yet, in effect, they have a basic underlying unity, usually involving a spiritual concept, which gives meaning and coherence to the apparently disconnected images or scenes.

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 theunsettler." 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.

Universal "I": Though the poem is about the poet's self, he **universalizes the concept of "I"** to **include all of ourselves in his experiences**. It's this simplistic beauty of inclusivity and at the same time its complexity that make this poem one of the most celebrated.

Symbols: Whitman uses symbols extensively to illustrate various states of "self." Perfume represents individuals, houses and rooms represent civilization, the atmosphere represents the universal. Grass is the central symbol to explain that the divinity is in the ordinary: "the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation" (section 6) and that nothing really dies: "The smallest sprout shows there is really no death" (section 6). He reused these symbols consistently throughout his work, even beyond Leaves of Grass, as in When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd.

Experiment of words: Whitman uses colloquialisms to merge spiritual and natural concepts and to discover the joy he experiences through his senses (e.g.: "The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind," (section 2) "Loaf with me on the grass," (section 5) and "not contain'd between my hat and boots") (section 6). Whitman says he was "form'd from this soil" and refers to "talkers," "trippers and askers" (section 4) as wasting their time intellectualizing, when they could be enjoying simple things like watching a blade of grass. The colloquial expressions (void of obscure high-art references) give Whitman's poem an accessibility and charm that is both obscure and wandering, yet we want it to be within our grasp so we can celebrate right along with him. Does he come off as a love-yourself-with-me populist-poet or an egotistical recluse who is disengenuous and rambles?

To sum up, one can say Walt Whitman was a poet who narrated reality as he saw in his poems. His poems reflect not only the 19th century but as well the present times in which we live now. In his poem "Song of Myself," Whitman talks about his expeditions from one place to another in the way he viewed them, which is similar to the present-day world. Proving one's reason for survival, seeking appreciation, and fighting for one's rights have not changed and will

never change for years to come. These are the things, which will always remain unchanged, and will continue to dominate in every society and generation, thus the poem, "Song of Myself," can also be called a modern-day epic as well.

Major Themes in "Song of Myself"

There are three important themes: the idea of the self, the identification of the self with other selves, and the poet's relationship with the elements of nature and the universe. Houses and rooms represent civilization; perfumes signify individual selves; and the atmosphere symbolizes the universal self. The self is conceived of as a spiritual entity which remains relatively permanent in and through the changing flux of ideas and experiences which constitute its conscious life. The self comprises ideas, experiences, psychological states, and spiritual insights. The concept of self is the most significant aspect of Whitman's mind and art.

To Whitman, the self is both individual and universal. Man has an individual self, whereas the world, or cosmos, has a universal or cosmic self. The poet wishes to maintain the identity of his individual self, and yet he desires to merge it with the universal self, which involves the identification of the poet's self with mankind and the mystical union of the poet with God, the Absolute Self. Sexual union is a figurative anticipation of spiritual union. Thus the poet's ecstasy is both physical and spiritual, and he develops a sense of loving brotherhood with God and with all mankind. Even the most commonplace objects, such as Leaves, ants, and stones, contain the infinite universe.

Equality

In "Song of Myself," "I" brings a sense of equality to the poem without directly addressing that theme. In its own mysterious way, though, the poem does deal directly with equality and democracy, primarily through Whitman's imagery and language. Whitman's belief in equality is so strong, he dedicates the first lines of "Song of Myself" to it:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

Here, "I" and "you" are used symbolically, not unlike the "myself" from the title that repeats itself in the first line. The grass is used symbolically to indicate equality later in the poem:

A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

Whitman seeks an answer. He speculates upon a number of possibilities before suggesting the following:

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

Here, the grass represents that which is equal among all people. By sprouting everywhere, in both broad and narrow zones, among black and white people, given and received equally, the grass is a symbol of democracy.

One of the most powerful and elusive segments of the poem addresses the theme of equality by virtue of its imagery alone. Whitman paints a vibrant picture of democracy by compiling a descriptive list of Americans in action:

The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel.

Without commentary or elaboration, Whitman illustrates the essence of equality in this catalog of humanity, which includes the farmer, the lunatic, the malform'd, the quadroon, the connoisseur, the bride, and the prostitute, among many others. The segment ends with the following:

And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.

The song of the poet and his subjects, then, becomes the song of America and its lofty ambitions of egalitarianism.

Finally, the poet declares himself "a kosmos" as a way of representing his and our universality:
Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,

...
Whoever degrades another degrades me,
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.

...
I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.

Sex and Sexuality

Sex and sexuality are prominent themes in "Song of Myself." Whitman's passionate belief in the goodness of nature fuels his eroticism as much as his belief in the intrinsic connection of body and soul. Whitman's belief in egalitarianism and the communion of individuals is further reflected in his sensuous language and imagery:

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,

...
And there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheel'd universe,
And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and composed before a million universes.

Sex and sexuality are bound to nature as well as to spirituality. Whitman proves this by pointing out that the senses, though natural, are also supernatural in the miraculous abilities they impart. Though not overtly sexual, the following example of his earthy rhetoric illustrates how Whitman connects flesh, desire, bodily function, and spirituality:

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.
Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from,
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.

Whitman also uses the body as a metaphor for the dramatic and varied American landscape. In the following passage, the use of "I" and "you" reflect the universal "myself" of the poem's title:

Mix'd tussled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be you!
Trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat, it shall be you!

...
Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you!
Broad muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving lounger in my winding paths, it shall be you!
Hands I have taken, face I have kiss'd, mortal I have ever touch'd, it shall be you.

Whitman's ambiguous sexuality—critics have referred to his language as being everything from autoerotic to omnisexual—point to the possibility of his homosexuality as well as his desire to convey "the largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen" (as he described his countrymen in his preface to the 1855 edition). In the same way that "Song of Myself" defies absolute interpretation, Whitman's sexuality, and the manner in which he uses it in the poem, is too sprawling, too unwieldy to categorize. Or as Whitman says, "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

Democracy As a Way of Life Whitman envisioned democracy not just as a political system but as a way of experiencing the world. In the early nineteenth century, people still harbored many doubts about whether the United States could survive as a country and about whether democracy could thrive as a political system. To allay those fears and to praise democracy, Whitman tried to be democratic in both life and poetry. He imagined democracy as a way of interpersonal interaction and as a way for individuals to integrate their beliefs into their everyday lives. "Song of Myself" notes that democracy must include all individuals equally, or else it will fail.

COMPLETE TEXT: "O Captain! my Captain"

O Captain! my Captain, our fearful trip is done,
 The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,
 The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
 While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;

But O heart! heart! heart!
 O the bleeding drops of red,
 Where on the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

PUACP

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
 Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
 For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
 For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;

Here Captain! dear father!
 The arm beneath your head!
 It is some dream that on the deck,
 You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
 My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
 The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
 From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;

Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
 But I with mournful tread,
 Walk the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.
