

Whitman, who translated some of his poems into French, did have an affinity with the French symbolist movement. In the mid-1880s, the Symbolist movement began in France. Like the French symbolists, Whitman tried to interpret the universe through sensory perceptions, and both broke away from traditional forms and methods.

IMPORTANCE OF THE TITLE OF SONG OF MYSELF

The title of "*Song of Myself*" is significant in several ways. Firstly, it emphasizes the personal and subjective nature of the poem. It is a song that celebrates the self and Whitman's own experiences and observations. The use of the word "*song*" also suggests a musical and lyrical quality to the poem, highlighting the importance of rhythm and sound.

Furthermore, the title suggests a sense of universality, as if Whitman's experiences and observations are representative of the human experience as a whole. The use of "*myself*" rather than "*I*" also emphasizes the idea that the self is not just an individual entity, but is connected to and part of a larger whole.

The title of "*Song of Myself*" sets the tone and themes for the poem, emphasizing both the personal and universal aspects of Whitman's writing.

Individualism and Self-Exploration: The title "*Song of Myself*" immediately signals the focus on the self and individual experience. The poem delves into the depths of the speaker's own thoughts, emotions, and perceptions, inviting readers to join in this exploration of self. It celebrates the uniqueness and complexity of the individual, emphasizing personal identity and self-expression.

Universal Human Experience: While the poem centers around the self, it also connects the individual experience to the broader human experience. Whitman uses the personal as a lens through which he explores universal themes, making the poem relatable to readers from diverse backgrounds. By celebrating his own self, Whitman suggests that every person's self has inherent value and should be acknowledged and celebrated.

Rejecting Conformity and Celebrating Freedom: The title "*Song of Myself*" signifies a rejection of societal norms and expectations. Whitman aims to break free from conventional constraints and express himself authentically, challenging the conformity and conformity prevalent in his time. The title implies a sense of liberation and the assertion of one's own voice and beliefs.

Empowerment and Self-Affirmation: The use of the word "*song*" in the title conveys a sense of joy, music, and celebration. It suggests that the poem is not just a reflection of the self but an affirmation and expression of inner strength, creativity, and vitality. It encourages readers to embrace their own unique voices and celebrate their existence.

In summary, the title "*Song of Myself*" encapsulates the themes of individualism, universal human experience, freedom, empowerment, and self-affirmation present throughout Walt Whitman's poem. It highlights the significance of self-exploration, personal identity, and the celebration of one's own voice and existence.

SIGNIFICANCE OF GRASS IN THE SONG OF MYSELF

In Walt Whitman's "*Song of Myself*," grass serves as a recurring symbol that represents the unity and interconnectedness of all living things. The speaker describes the grass as a "*hierarchical, egalitarian, and democratic*" symbol that grows equally for everyone, regardless of their social status or wealth.

The grass also represents the cycles of life and death, as it is described as growing and decaying in equal measure. This cycle of growth and decay is seen as a natural and necessary part of life, emphasizing the speaker's belief in the interconnectedness of all things and the cyclical nature of existence.

Furthermore, the grass represents the sensual and physical aspects of life, with the speaker describing the grass as "*the beautiful uncut hair of graves*" and "*the flag of my disposition*." The speaker celebrates the sensual pleasures of life, including sexuality and physical contact with others, and sees them as a natural and essential part of the human experience.

The recurring imagery of grass throughout the poem holds several symbolic meanings.

Grass represents the democratic spirit and the inherent equality of all individuals. Whitman uses the grass as a metaphor for the common people, emphasizing their collective strength and vitality. Just as grass grows everywhere and is accessible to all, Whitman celebrates the democratic ideals of inclusiveness and equality.

Grass serves as a symbol of interconnectedness and unity, highlighting the idea that all living beings are interconnected and part of a larger whole. The imagery of the grass spreading and intertwining its roots signifies the interconnectedness of humanity, nature, and the universe.

Grass symbolizes the life force and vitality that permeates the natural world. Whitman celebrates the resilience and regenerative power of nature, using the grass as a symbol of life's energy and constant renewal.

Grass also represents the cyclical nature of life, growth, and decay. Just as the grass grows, withers, and reseeds, it signifies the continuous cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Whitman finds solace in this eternal cycle, emphasizing the idea of continuity and the interconnectedness of past, present, and future.

The significance of grass in "*Song of Myself*" lies in its representation of democratic ideals, interconnectedness, vitality, and the cyclical nature of life. Through the imagery of grass, Whitman captures the essence of his celebration of the self and the interconnectedness of all beings.

In nutshell, the grass serves as a powerful symbol of the speaker's central themes of unity, interconnectedness, and the celebration of life in all its forms.

WALT WHITMAN'S LEAVES OF GRASS

1. This most famous of Whitman's works was one of the original twelve pieces.
2. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in the 1855.
3. Like most of the other poems, it too was revised extensively, reaching its final permutation in 1881.
4. "*Song of Myself*" is a sprawling combination of biography, sermon, and poetic meditation.
5. 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.
6. "*Song of Myself*" is composed more of vignettes than lists:
7. Whitman uses small, precisely drawn scenes to do his work here.
8. This poem did not take on the title "*Song of Myself*" until the 1881 edition.
9. Previous to that it had been titled "*Poem of Walt Whitman, an American*"
10. What was the name of this poem in 1860, 1867, and 1871 editions, simply "*Walt Whitman*."?
11. *Myself*, the poem explores the possibilities for communion between individuals.
12. 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
13. Whitman begins this poem by naming its subject – himself.
14. He says that he celebrates himself and that all parts of him are also parts of the reader.

15. He is thirty-seven years old and "in perfect health" and begins his journey "Hoping to cease not till death."
16. He puts all "Creeds and schools in abeyance" hoping to set out on his own, though he admits he will not forget these things.
17. Whitman then describes a house in which "the shelves are / crowded with perfumes"
18. He breathes in the fragrance though he refuses to let himself become intoxicated with it. Instead,
19. He seeks to "go to the bank by the wood" and become naked and undisguised where he can hear all of nature around him.
20. Whitman says that he has heard "what the talkers were talking, the talk of the / beginning and the end," but he refuses to talk of either.
21. Instead, he rejects talk of the past or future for an experience in the now. This is the "urge" of the world which calls to him
22. . Whitman sees all the things around him – "The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old / and new," but he knows that "they are not the Me myself."
23. He remembers in his own past that he once "sweated through fog" with fashionable arguments.
24. Whitman then describes an encounter between his body and soul.
25. He invites his soul to "loafe with me on the grass" and to lull him with its "valved voice."
26. He tells his soul to settle upon him, "your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd / own upon me...."
27. He invites his soul to undress him and reach inside him until the soul feels his feet.
28. This will bring him perfect peace "that pass all the argument of the earth...."
29. This peace is the promise of God and is what allows all people to become his brothers and sisters.
30. Whitman recalls a scene in which a child came to him with a handful of grass and asked him what it was.
31. The grass is "the flag of my disposition" and it is the "handkerchief of the Lord...."
32. It is also the child or a symbol for all of humanity.
33. Whitman sees the grass sprouting from the chests of young men, the heads of old women and the beards of old men.
34. He remembers all those that have died and recalls that each sprout of grass is a memorial to those that have come before.
35. Whitman reflects that "...to die is different from what any one supposed, and / luckier."
36. Twenty-eight young men bathe on a sea shore while a young woman, "richly drest" hides behind the blinds of her house on the water's bank.
37. She observes the men and finds that she loves the homeliest of them.
38. She then goes down to the beach to bathe with them, though the men do not see her.
39. "An unseen hand" also passes over the bodies of the young men but the young men do not think of who holds onto them or "whom they souse with spray."
40. Whitman describes groups of people that he stops to observe.
41. The first is a "butcher-boy" sharpening his knife and dancing.
42. He sees the blacksmiths taking on their "grimy" work with precision.
43. Whitman then observes a "negro" as he works a team of horses at a construction site.
44. Whitman admires his chiseled body and "his polish'd and perfect limbs."
45. He sees and loves this "picturesque giant...."
46. Whitman describes the work of all people of the land – the carpenter, the duck-shooter, the deacons of the church, the farmers, the machinist, and many more.
47. They often have hard, ordinary lives, yet Whitman proclaims that these people "draw inward to me, and I tend outward to them" and they all "weave the song of myself." Whitman describes himself as "old and young" and "foolish as much as...wise."
48. He is "Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man...."
49. He is of all the land of North America from the South even into Canada.
50. . "His thoughts are for all people, even those that society has considered outcasts."

Whitman wonders why he should adhere to the old ways -- prayer or ceremony. He claims that he has "pried through the strata, analyzed to a hair" and found that nothing is as true and sweet as "my own bones." Whitman understands himself. He is "august" and vindicated by his own nature. "I exist as I am, that is, enough." He does not have to explain his inconsistencies. Those are only to be accepted. "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" All pleasure and all pain are found within his own self. Whitman describes himself in the basest terms: "Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding," he does not feign interest in manners. He hears the "primeval" voices of democracy and mankind and gives himself over to these forbidden lusts. Above all, Whitman says, "I believe in the flesh and the appetites...."

GRASS OF LEAVES

In one of the sections from the poem, "*Song of Myself*" Walt Whitman starts out with a child asking a question, "*What is the grass?*" Grass is a symbol of life. God, who created both the heavens and the earth, also gave birth to life. When Whitman refers to grass as a "handkerchief of the Lord" (7), as a gift. When people look at the grass, they do not think of it as a creation but rather just a plant. Whitman refers to the grass as "*a child, the produced babe of vegetation*" (11, 12). Here, the grass is a metaphor for the birth of a child. In often cases, the birth of anything is celebrated because it symbolizes a new life, a new beginning.

Whitman in a way compares grass as a human society. He mentions that grass is "*a uniform hieroglyphic*" (13) and they "*alike*" (14). In scientific terms, all humans are similar to each other and the only aspect that makes each person different is their personality and race. But even if people are racially different from each other physically, every person is the same internally as Whitman puts it: "*Growing among black folks as among white, 'Knuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the / same, I receive then the same*" (15-17). The "same" can also be interpreted in a different way such as referring to the fact that every person regardless of their race, job, or status will go through life (give) and die in the future (receive).

Another example of Whitman's comparison of grass to humans is when he says, "*It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men, / It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken,*" (20, 21). Grasses all start out as a seed and will not grow unless its owner takes care of it. This can refer to humans as well since babies cannot take care of themselves and must rely on adults to grow and develop. This cycle of life is repeated for generations to come as seen in lines 23 and 24 where Whitman compares the growth of grass to that of a human child, "*soon out of their mother's laps, / And here you are the mothers' laps*". As children once grew up with parents, in the near future, they themselves will become parents as well.

In the middle of the poem, Whitman stops celebrating the joy of procreation and focuses more about the philosophy of death. Death is part of everyday life and feared by many people. Whitman tells the child to not fear death because he says, "*there really is no death*" (38). He considers the grass that grows among the graves in the cemetery to be the "*beautiful uncut hair of graves*" (18). Even among death, Whitman considers life beautiful. He tells the child that even after a person "*ceased*" (41) to live, they still continue to live after death. What became of the old women and men is something a child should not think about. Each person has their own thought but Whitman says that we should all focus on one thing:

*"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,"* (37-40).

Since grasses can regrow in the same area, Whitman may refer to this new growth (the sprout) as a second beginning which will continue to grow for future generations. Even though people may die, it is only because it is life. This cycle of life as Whitman puts it, "*goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,*" (42). Even at the end of a person's human life, their life after death still continues.

At the end of the poem, Whitman describes dying a different death as being lucky: *"And to die is different from what any one supposed, and / luckier"* (43,44). From this, it seems as if Whitman is saying that death from anything else other than old age is better. Dying from old age may mean that the person has lived their life throughout like a straight path unlike those who pass away from other reasons such as accidents and illnesses. It is a never ending cycle of life and death for all.

DEMOCRATIC THEMES IN LEAVES OF GRASS

Whitman expresses his celebration of working class democracy through the *"varied carols"* of men and women who take pride in their occupations in the poem *"I Hear America Singing"*. For example, he writes:

**I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the
steamboat deck... (lines 1-5)**

Whitman writes about the diversity of work here and the people who take pride in what they do. His use of imagery creates a vivid picture of hard working people. Whitman modified standard *"King's English"* diction and abandoned traditional rhyme schemes and formal meters. Free verse is apparent throughout Whitman's works, which he patterned after ancient poetic forms, incantations, and praises from The Bible (Psalms) and Homer. He attempts to mirror the patterns of spoken language.

Whitman's values are reflected in his subject matter and style. In *"Song of Myself #1,"* for example, Whitman writes:

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

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (l.1-3) Whitman celebrates unity of all life and people. His belief in equality for all people is also depicted in these lines. The following line reflects Whitman's love of nature:

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air...(l.6)

For Whitman to say he was formed from nature shows just how much he believed he was one with nature. The *"I"* has become identified with every element in the universe. Whitman was a bundle of contradictions because the form was loose enough to allow for long lists and catalogs abundant in detail, but also flexible to include delicate moments of lyricism and oratory.

Whitman extended cadence of poetic lines through parallelism, alliteration and assonance. For example, in *"When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer,"* he writes:

**When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in
columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add,
divide, and measure them,
When I heard the astronomer where he lectured with
much applause in the lecture-room...(l.1-4)**

Whitman uses parallelism in this poem when he repeatedly states *"When"* at the beginning of each line. Whitman suggests that the working class is valued highly in his opinion because the astronomer in this poem seems to be a hard worker who earns his applause in the lecture-room. The poem has no periods or ending punctuation except at the end. It is all one long sentence.

Whitman is the father of Modern Poetry; his work suggests the revolutionary power of democracy and literary art. When Whitman stated "*The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem*," I believe he meant that the diversity of geography, culture, beliefs and work all combine to create a wonderful country. Whitman's subject matter and style tie together to reflect his values of a working class democracy, humbleness and the enjoyment of life. Whitman's impact has solidified American dreams (of independence, freedom, and fulfillment) and transcends, transforms them for a larger spiritual meaning.

WHITMAN: A VOICE OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Walt Whitman is a great poet of democracy. Indeed, he may be the greatest. As Thoreau said, Whitman "is apparently the greatest democrat the world has ever seen." Specifically speaking, he is perhaps the greatest poet of the culture of democracy. He writes the best phrases and sentences about democracy. To describe democratic culture we may take into account the following ideas:

First, democratic culture is the soil for the creation of new works of highly artistic poems and moral writings, in particular.

Second, democratic culture is a distinctive stylization of life—that is, a particular set of appearances, habits, rituals, dress, ceremonies, folk traditions, and historical memories.

Third, democratic culture is the soil for the emergence of great souls whose greatness consists in themselves being like works of art in the spirit of a new aristocracy.

All these ideas are interconnected and appear in Whitman's writings throughout his life. But, in our judgment, Whitman's democratic individuality is a greatly more powerful and original idea than any of the other ideas of democratic culture that we have just mentioned. Democracy for Whitman means the assertion of one's individuality as well as equality with others. In his view all men are equal and all professions are equally honourable. Whitman had a deep faith in democracy because this political form of government respects the individual. He thought that the genius of the United States is best expressed in the common people, not in its executive branch or legislature, or in its churches or law courts. He believed that it is the common folk who have a deathless attachment to freedom. His attitudes can be traced to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century because he thought that the source of evil lay in oppressive social institutions rather than in human nature.

The function of literature is to break away from the feudal past of man and artistically to urge the democratic present. Princes and nobles hold no charm for Whitman; he sings of the average, common man. He follows Emerson in applauding the doctrine of the "divine average" and of the greatness of the commonplace. A leaf of grass, to Whitman, is as important as the heavenly motion of the stars. Whitman loves America, its panoramic scenery and its processional view of diverse & democratically inclined people. He loved, and reveled in, the United States as a physical entity, but he also visualized it as a New World of the spirit. Whitman is a singer of the self as well as a trumpeter of democracy because he believes that only in a free society can individuals attain self-hood.

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.

This is Whitman's expression of the idea of democracy taken from "Song of Myself." In this all-encompassing interpretation Whitman says that the freedom offered by democracy is for all not a chosen few. It included all people, not renouncing those of other races, creeds, or social standings.

Whitman celebrates no individual person, nor does he celebrate himself. Though he often says "I celebrate myself", the self celebration throughout is celebration of himself as a man and an American. The "I" in Whitman's poetry is not only the individual, but collective ego of humanity (universal). This "I" is an imaginative and sympathetic identification of himself with every other individual (average American). This "I" strongly asserts Whitman's faith in democracy.