

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

(1) BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Walter Whitman (May 31, 1819 – March 26, 1892) was an American poet, essayist, journalist, and humanist. He was a part of the transition between Transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his works. Whitman is among the most influential poets in the American canon, often called the father of free verse (or *vers libre*). His work was very controversial in its time, particularly his poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*, which was described as obscene for its overt sexuality.

Born on Long Island, Whitman worked as a journalist, a teacher, a government clerk, and a volunteer nurse during the American Civil War in addition to publishing his poetry. Early in his career, he also produced a temperance novel, *Franklin Evans* (1842). Whitman's major work, *Leaves of Grass*, was first published in 1855 with his own money. The work was an attempt at reaching out to the common person with an American epic. He continued expanding and revising it until his death in 1892. After a stroke towards the end of his life, he moved to Camden, New Jersey where his health further declined. He died at age 72 and his funeral became a public spectacle.

Whitman's sexuality is often discussed alongside his poetry. Though he is usually labeled as either homosexual or bisexual, it is unclear if Whitman ever had a sexual relationship with another man and biographers continue to debate his sexuality. Whitman was concerned with politics throughout his life. He supported the Wilmot Proviso and opposed the extension of slavery generally, but did not believe in the abolitionist movement. (Wikipedia)

(2) TEXT OF WORK

Read the poem with annotations at: <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/2288.html>

Summary of class-covered sections

Sections 1, 2

This poem celebrates the poet's self, but, while the "I" is the poet himself, it is, at the same time, universalized. The poet will "sing myself," but "what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." The poet loafs on the grass and invites his soul to appear. He relates that he was "form'd from this soil," for he was born here, as were his parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. He is thirtyseven years old and "in perfect health." He hopes to continue his celebration of self until his death. He will let nature speak without check with original energy.

In section 2, the self, asserting its identity, declares its separateness from civilization and its closeness to nature. "Houses and rooms are full of perfume," Whitman says. "Perfumes" are symbols of other individual selves; but outdoors, the earth's atmosphere denotes the universal self. The poet is tempted to let himself be submerged by other individual selves, but he is determined to maintain his individuality.

The poet expresses the joy he feels through his senses. He is enthralled by the ecstasy of his physical sensations. He can enjoy each of the five senses—tasting, hearing, smelling, touching, and seeing—and even more—the process of breathing, the beating of his heart, and "the feeling of health." He invites the reader to "stop this day and night" with him in order to discover "the origin of all poems."

Sections 6, 7, 10, 17

Section 6 presents the first significant transition in the poem and introduces the central symbol in "Song of Myself." A child appears with both hands full of *Leaves* from the fields and asks the poet, "What is the grass?" The poet at first feels incapable of answering this question but continues thinking about it. He muses that perhaps "the grass is itself a child" or maybe it is "the handkerchief."

In Section 7 the poet signifies his universal nature, which finds it "just as lucky to die" as to be born. The universal

self finds both “the earth good and the stars good.” The poet is part of everyone around him. He sees all and condemns nothing.

Sections 8-16 consist of a catalog of all that the poet sees—people of both sexes, all ages, and all conditions, in many different walks of life, in the city and in the country, by the mountain and by the sea. Even animals are included.

Section 17 again refers to the universality of the poet—his thoughts are “the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands.” Sections 18 and 19 salute all members of humanity.

Grass, a central symbol of this epic poem, suggests the divinity of common things. The nature and significance of grass unfold the themes of death and immortality, for grass is symbolic of the ongoing cycle of life present in nature, which assures each man of his immortality. Nature is an emblem of God, for God’s eternal presence in it is evident everywhere. Grass is the key to the secrets of man’s relationship with the Divine. It indicates that, God is everything and everything is God.

These sections deal with the themes of God, life, death, and nature. Their primary aim is to reveal the nature of the poet’s journey through life and the spiritual knowledge which he strives for along the way. They reveal an essential element in a mystical experience—the awakening of the poet’s self. “Song of Myself” is a poetical expression of that mystical experience. It arises out of a belief that it is possible to achieve communion with God through contemplation and love, without the medium of human reason. It is a way of attaining knowledge of spiritual truths through intuition. Sections I to 5 concern the poet’s entry into a mystical state, while sections 6-16 describe the awakening of the poet’s self to his own universality.

Section 24

Section 24 presents some of Whitman’s basic tenets. He calls himself a “kosmos.” The word “kosmos,” meaning a universe, is significant and amounts to a renewed definition of the poet’s self as one who loves all people. Through him, “many long dumb voices” of prisoners, slaves, thieves, and dwarfs—all of those whom “the others are down upon”—are articulated and transfigured. He also speaks of lust and the flesh, for each part of the body is a miracle: “The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer.” In section 25 Whitman dwells on the comprehensive range of the poet’s power. He declares that “with the twirl of my tongue I encompass world and volumes of world. Speech is the twin of my vision.” He must speak, for he cannot contain all that he has to say; and yet “writing and talk do not prove me.” What he is can be seen in his face.

The poet’s self-appraisal is the keynote of sections 20-25. He describes himself as gross and mystical. He feels he is part of all that he has met and seen. He is essentially a poet of balance, since he accepts both good and evil in his cosmos. His awareness of the universe, or cosmic consciousness, is expressed when he calls himself “a kosmos,” invoking a picture of the harmony of the universe. He accepts all life, naked and bare, noble and ignoble, refined and crude, beautiful and ugly, pleasant and painful. The physical and the spiritual both are aspects of his vision, which has an organic unity like the unity of the body and the soul. Whitman realizes that the physical as well as the spiritual are aspects of the Divine. The culmination of the poet’s experience of self is the ecstasy of love.

Contemplating the meaning of grass in terms of mystical experience, he understands that all physical phenomena are as deathless as the grass.

These chants express various stages of the poet’s mystical experience of his self. The first stage may be termed the “Awakening of Self”; the second, the “Purification of Self.” Purification involves an acceptance of the body and all its functions. This acceptance reflects the poet’s goal to achieve mystical experience through physical reality. This is in opposition to the puritanical view of purification through mortification of the flesh. In Whitman’s philosophy, the self is purified not through purgation but through acceptance of the physical. Man should free himself from his traditional sense of sin. The mystical experience paves the way for the merging of physical reality with a universal reality.

Whitman is representative of all humanity because, he says, the voices of diverse people speak through him—voices of men, animals, and even insects. To him, all life is a miracle of beauty. Sections 20-25 close on a note of exaltation of the poet’s power of expression, although they indicate that his deeper self is beyond expression.

Sections 46, 49, 52

In section 46, the poet launches himself on the “perpetual journey,” urging all to join him and uttering the warning, “Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, You must travel it for yourself.” The poet (section 47) says that

he is a teacher, but he hopes that those he teaches will learn to assert their own individuality: “He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.” Section 48 repeats the idea that “the soul is not more than the body,” just as “the body is not more than the soul.” Not even God is more important than one’s self. The poet asks man not to be “curious about God” because God is everywhere and in everything: “In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass.”

The poet is not afraid of death. In section 49, he addresses it: “And as to you Death, you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me.” For there is no real death. Men die and are reborn in different forms. He himself has died “ten thousand times before.” The poet feels (section 50) there is something that outweighs death, although it is hard for him to put a name to it: “It is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness.”

The last two sections are expressions of farewell. “The past and present wilt—I have fill’d them, emptied them,/And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.” He knows that his writings have been obscure but sees the paradoxes in his works as natural components in the mysteries of the cosmos: “Do I contradict myself?/Very well then I contradict myself,/(I am large, I contain multitudes.)” The poet can wait for those who will understand him. He tells them, “If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles,” for he will have become part of the eternal life cycle. Although it may be difficult to find or interpret him, he will be waiting. “Missing me one place search another,/I stop somewhere waiting for you.”

The poet’s journey and quest for selfhood have now come full circle. He began by desiring to loaf on the grass and ends by bequeathing himself “to the dirt to grow from the grass I love.”

These chants contain many of the important ideas and doctrines of Whitman. The poet brings a new message of faith for the strong and the weak, a belief in the harmony and orderliness of the universe. The poet, noting what has been said about the universe, shows how his own theories, which have a more universal scope, transcend them. Assuming the identity of the Savage-Christ, he delivers a sermon which imagines transcendence of the finite through a union of the individual soul with the Divine Soul. The poet offers to lead men and women “into the unknown—that is, into transcendent reality. Whitman talks about the self as part of the eternal life process. There is no death, for man is reincarnated time and time again. The poet speaks about man’s relation with the moment and with eternity. Eternity is time endless, as is the self.

The poet does not prescribe any fixed pathway to a knowledge of the self; it is for each person to find his own way to make the journey. The poet is not afraid of death because death, too, is a creation of God and through it one may reach God. The culmination of the poet’s mystical experience is revealed in his vision of eternal life. Life is neither chaotic nor finite; it is harmonious, reflecting the union of the poet’s individual soul with the Divine Soul.

Grass is the central symbol of “Song of Myself,” and it represents the divinity contained in all living things.

Although no traditional form is apparent, the logical manner in which the poet returns to his image of grass shows that “Song of Myself” was planned to have an order and unity of idea and image.

(CliffsNotes)

(3) ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

The analysis and commentary pertains to the poem as a whole.

The poem was first published without sections and appeared as the first of twelve untitled poems in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Today it is one of the best-known poems in the book. The first edition was published by Whitman at his own expense. In the edition of 1856, Whitman used the title “Poem of Walt Whitman, an American”, which was shortened to “Song of Myself” in the 1860 edition. The poem was divided into fifty-two numbered sections in the 1867 edition.

“Song of Myself” is a sprawling combination of biography, sermon, and poetic meditation. **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.

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 unsettler." 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.

(Wikipedia, SparkNotes)

(4) SOURCES CITED

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(5) RECOMMENDED READING

Ed. Ann Woodlief. "Song of Myself." American Transcendentalism Web. 1999. Studies in American Transcendentalism, Virginia Commonwealth University.
<<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/roots/legacy/whitman/songofmyselfweb.html>>.

(Includes the text of whole poem with analysis and commentary on specific parts. To access commentary, click on bold-faced words and expressions in poem. Also refer to main page on Whitman for more information about the author, his poetry, and the historical and cultural context in which he lived.)

Radeljković, Zvonimir. "The Comprehensive Walt Whitman." American Topics: Essays in American Literature. Sarajevo: Buybook, 2005.

(The essay includes a comprehensive analysis of Walt Whitman's work with special emphasis on "Song of Myself" and ties in Whitman's work well with his Transcendentalist/Emersonian influences. Also refer to page 360 for a more intimate account of Walt Whitman's biography.)

End of Stan.tk Study Guide

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