Songs of Myself by Walt Whitman

Summary

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."

In the third and fourth sections, Whitman chides the "talkers," "trippers," and "askers" for wasting their time discussing "the beginning and the end," and "the latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies . . . More important is the eternal procreant urge of the world." He prepares

himself for the union of his body with his soul: “I witness and wait.” As his soul is “clear and sweet,” so are all the other parts of his body -and everyone’s bodies. “Not an inch . . . is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.”

Section 5 is the poet’s ecstatic revelation of union with his soul. He has a feeling of fraternity and oneness with God and his fellowmen (“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 a vision of love (“And . . . a kelson [an important structural part of a ship] of the creation is love”). This union brings him peace and joy.

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 chi’d" or maybe it is “the handkerchief of the Lord.” Here the grass is a symbol of the divinity latent in the ordinary, common life of man and it is also a symbol of the continuity inherent in the life-death cycle. No one really dies. Even “the smallest sprout shows there is really no death,” that “all goes onward and outward . . . /And to die is different from what any one supposed.”

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.