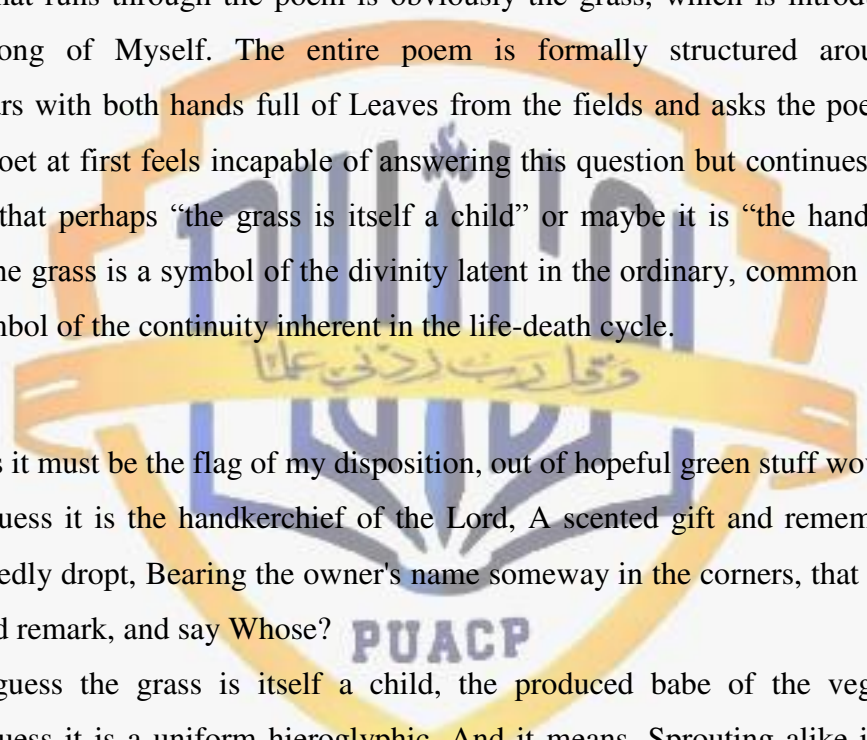


Symbols in Song of Myself

The question 'What is the grass?', introduced in the 6th section of Song of Myself by Whitman, establishes the central symbol of the poem. As a poem, Song of Myself has 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. All these three themes are beautifully expressed through the symbols of grass, Self, Houses and rooms, perfume, and atmosphere.

The symbol that runs through the poem is obviously the grass, which is introduced in the 6th section of Song of Myself. The entire poem is formally structured around the grass. 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 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.



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, 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.

Whitman is "able to see the grass as the recapitulation of the whole cycle of life, death and rebirth; it the symbol of the individual ("the flag of my disposition"), of Deity ("the handkerchief of the Lord"), of reproduction ("the produced babe of the vegetation"), of the new social order of

American democracy ("a uniform hieroglyphic"), of death ("the beautiful uncut hair of graves"), and finally of the new form into which death transmogrifies life"

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.

Grass, a central theme 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 symbol of this epic poem, suggests the divinity of common things. The nature and significance of grass unfold to the secrets of man's relationship with the Divine. It indicates that, God is everything and everything is God.

The poet's senses convince him that there is significance in everything, no matter how small. Sections 31-33 contain a catalog of the infinite wonders in small things. He believes, for example, that "a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars" and "the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery," for all things are part of the eternal wonder of life and therefore even "the soggy clods shall become lovers and lamps."

The grass symbol also appears at the closing section of the poem.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

Though the poem Song of Myself lacks the traditional form, but this grass symbol gives the poem an order and the unity of theme. From the very beginning of the poem the poet emphasizes on his oneness with the general people. Thus the poem ends with the same symbol of grass giving the poem a coherent unifying theme.

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."

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.

Symbol of 'I'

In "Song of Myself," Whitman uses "I" to refer not only to himself, but to a larger "I" that includes the reader and humanity in general. Invoking the universal "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 second section of the poem also opens with some symbols. 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. 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.

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.

Grass as the symbol of the equality

In this poem the grass is also used as a symbol of democracy. Grass grows in clusters or clumps. Thus it becomes a symbol of democracy. 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.