

## ***Song of Myself* by Walt Whitman**

Question no. 01: In Whitman's poem *Song of Myself*, in what ways does *I celebrate myself...* serve as an appropriate introduction to the themes and poetic vision described in the poem? Areeba

Walt Whitman is a famous American poet of the nineteenth century. He is considered the People's poet because of his humanism. He believed that the value of human beings, individually and together, held primacy over established practices, faiths and doctrines. His famous poetic collection is ***Leaves of Grass*** celebrates his philosophy of life and humanity. He was a great contributor to the genre of **Transcendentalism**, a philosophical belief that the divine spirit resides within all of us, and in the inherent goodness of man and Nature.

Whitman's famous poem *Song of Myself* offers an insight into his quest for **self-discovery** which is a recurrent theme of his poetry. The poem is about a journey from **intrapersonal** to **interpersonal** and finally leading to **transpersonal**. In the first stage of this journey, man becomes conscious of himself; in the second stage, he gains the knowledge about the souls of all men; in the third stage, he embraces God and in the fourth stage, the entire universe. Thus, *I* in his poem represents the souls of all men and the difference between *I* and *you* is blurred as he invites every human being to join him in this journey towards self-discovery.

Whitman appeared on the stage of American poetry around the American Civil War, a period of time when the Americans were trying to solidify their national identity. Whitman was an avid lover of the world in general, and America in particular. Therefore, his discovery of himself is actually a discovery of America. The very beginning of the poem reveals that the poem is not about self-idolizing rather it is playing a symphony that encompasses every human being.

***I celebrate myself, and sing myself,***

***And what I assume you shall assume,***

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

The above verses serve as an invitation for every human being to join the poet in the voyage of self-discovery. The poet establishes an atomic connection among all men. One can identify three main themes in the poem; 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.

In *Song of Myself*, the poet envisions the *I* which is enraptured by senses, embracing the whole humanity. The poet expresses his self in the universal terms. His goal is to blur every geographical, racial, and temporal boundary in order to bring forth the true essence of humanity which serves as a major theme of the poem. The poet is optimistic about the mystical and divine potential of every man. In his view, everyone is capable of self-realization. He invites all of his readers to explore the unknown by using their own perception.

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

***You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.***

James Miller states in *Walt Whitman* in this regard: ***"His self-celebration is to serve as signal for each man to discover his own selfhood"***. Thus, the poem modernizes the vision of a powerful American poet on human universal self and individual identity.

Question no. 02: What is the attitude of the speaker towards Nature in the poem? Areeba



Walt Whitman was a **Transcendentalist** writer. He believed in the idea that God, Nature and humans are all connected. His poem *Song of Myself* centers on the very belief. Whitman reveres and adores Nature in his poetry because he thinks that Nature is an essence of knowledge for every man. He places his speaker in indulgent pastoral settings while he revels in the natural beauty around himself. The speaker regards his communion with Nature as a religious experience. The poem invokes vivid imagery taken from Nature. The speaker celebrates himself and Nature around himself. To the speaker, **Nature is divine and an emblem of God**. The universe is not dead matter, but full of life and meaning. He loves the earth, the flora and fauna of the earth, the moon and stars, the sea, and all other elements of Nature. He believes that man is Nature's child and that man and Nature must never be disjoined.

*Song of Myself* focuses on celebration of beauty of Nature and man's place within it in the **Romantic-Enlightenment tradition**. The speaker regards Nature as a pure force and a sublime manifestation of God and everything good in this world. The poem is an **ode to liberty and Nature**. It is based upon the doctrine of Rousseau that Nature is the only guide that the mankind needs. The speaker is of the view that Nature needs no "**check**" or restraint and it should not be held down by "**creeds and schools**".

*I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,  
Nature without check with original energy.*

"**Creeds and schools in abeyance**" represent the doctrinal beliefs which the speaker rejects. He frees himself of all the externals because they are not the voice of Nature and oppress him. **Grass** is a frequent symbol, most conspicuously in section 6 of *Song of Myself*. Grass represents an image of God, a language that reveals secret. It is the secret of man's relationship with the Divine.

*Song of Myself* expresses the need for individual to feel one with Nature. One of the main ideas that Whitman discusses in his poem is how human beings are out of touch with nature when it is the one constant they have in their lives. This is why the speaker is celebrating the idea of being a part of nature and continuing his journey with nature after death. He does not fear the idea of death or even death itself because he questions nature and the dead while connecting them to the physical world.

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

Whitman has employed a lot of imagery from Nature in order to present a range of emotional experiences and the cycle of life and death. This poetic work represents the speaker's attempt to engage deeply and completely with Nature and to celebrate his connection to the entire world of Nature. Whitman provides powerful description of the natural world in the forms of plants, animals, landscapes, the elements, the seasons, harvest, decay, birth, and fertility. These natural elements sustain the themes of the poem. The speaker places himself in many different situations in Nature in order to understand the significance of Nature in their lives. He also praises the people who work closely with nature:

*I am enamour'd of growing out-doors,  
Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods,  
Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes  
and mauls, and the drivers of horses,  
I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out.*



Thus, the speaker of *Song of Myself* believes in Emerson's idea of unity with Nature. And the focuses on how self relates to the elements in Nature and the entire universe.

**Q 3: What are the three key episodes in the poem "Song of Myself"? What is symbolic significance of grass and what other symbols have been used in "Song of Myself"? Fajar**

"Song of Myself," the longest poem in *Leaves of Grass*, is a joyous celebration of the human self in its most expanded, spontaneous, self-sufficient, and the all-embracing state as it observes and interacts with everything in creation and ranges freely over time and space. The bard of the poem, speaking in the **oracular tones** of the prophet, affirms the divinity and sacredness of the entire universe, including the human body, and he asserts that no part of the universe is separate from himself—he flows into all things and in all things. 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.

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

*"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."*

and the narrator is forced to explore his *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 **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.

*"Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,  
Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly;  
Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome."*



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 at 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 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 cataloged 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.

Whitman uses symbols extensively to illustrate various states of "**self.**" **Perfume** represents individuals, **houses** and **rooms** represent civilization, the **atmosphere** represents the universal. **The 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" and that nothing dies: "The smallest sprout shows there is no death"*

Here the symbol of '**grass**' brings out the **optimistic** and **hopeful nature** of the poet. He is so optimistic that he believes that **death** is merely a transformation and not an end of life as is generally supposed.



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. *The grass* is also used as a center of 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. Also, the *grass* is an image of **hope, growth, and death**. According to the speaker, the bodies of countless dead people lie under the grass we walk on, but they also live on and speak through this grass.

