

Name: _____ Class: _____

Excerpts from 'Song of Myself': 1, 2, 6, 52

By Walt Whitman
1855

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was an American poet, essayist, and journalist. Whitman is considered one of the most influential poets of his time and also recognized as the father of free verse. His epic, "Song of Myself" contains 52 verses and is regarded as one of the greatest depictions of the American experience. The poem was written in a time of unrest within America right before the Civil War, and also has strong influence from the transcendental movement. As you read, keep this in mind and pay attention to the themes and ideas that emerge.

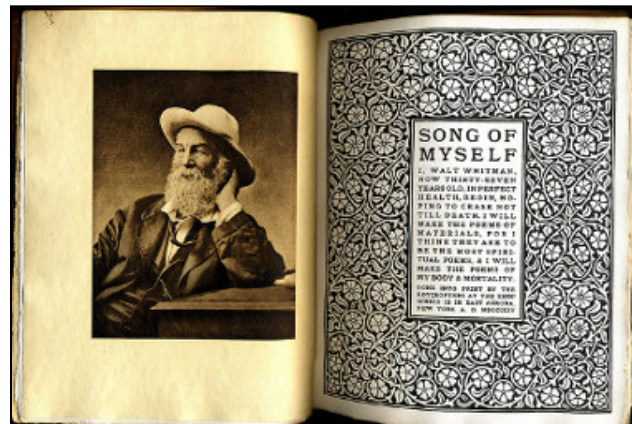
1

[1] I Celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume¹ you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs
to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of
summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from
this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the
same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools² in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor³ for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.



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2

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 distillation⁴ would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

1. **Assume (verb):** to believe; to take on (character, quality, mode of life, beliefs)
2. Creeds and schools refer to the formal institutions in society, such as religion, law, politics etc.
3. **Harbor (verb):** to contain
4. purification; extraction of essential or important aspects of something

The atmosphere is not a perfume.... it has no taste of the distillation.... it is odorless,
It is for my mouth forever.... I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
I am mad⁵ for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, and buzzed whispers.... loveroot, silkthread, crotch and vine,⁶
My respiration and inspiration.... the beating of my heart.... the passing of blood and air through my
lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-colored sea-rocks, and of hay in the
barn,
The sound of the belched words of my voice.... words loosed to the eddies⁷ of the wind,

A few light kisses.... a few embraces.... reaching around of arms,
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs⁸ wag,
The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-sides,
The feeling of health.... the full-noon trill⁹.... the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun.

Have you reckoned¹⁰ a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned the earth much?
Have you practiced so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun.... there are millions of suns left,
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand.... nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor
feed on the spectres¹¹ in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

6

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.

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 remembrancer¹² designedly¹³ dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

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5. overcome by desire; excessively fond
 6. The speaker is conveying his overwhelming need to physically connect with nature.
 7. circular movements; swirls
 8. tree branches
 9. vibrating sound, such as laughter or birdsong
 10. **Reckon (verb):** to think of or consider
 11. ghosts or spirits
 12. one who is tasked with reminding or chronicling

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 then the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire¹⁴ from the breasts of young men,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them, soon out of their mother's laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.
What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

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 arrest¹⁵ it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

52

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab¹⁶ and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp¹⁷ over the roofs of the world.

13. deliberate for a specific purpose or effect

14. **Transpire (verb):** to occur

15. **Arrest (verb):** to stop

16. chatter

17. harsh cry

The last scud¹⁸ of day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse¹⁹ my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath²⁰ myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre²¹ your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

Excerpts from 'Song of Myself': 1, 2, 6, 52 by Walt Whitman is in the public domain.

18. flash; swift movement

19. **Effuse** (*verb*): to pour or flow

20. **Bequeath** (*verb*): to hand down

21. As a noun, fibre is matter or material; it also means an essential character or quality.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best identifies one of the themes of the poem?
 - A. One must abandon all material objects to truly enjoy life.
 - B. All things and people are interconnected.
 - C. Real knowledge is gained from books and formal education.
 - D. Formal institutions such as religion and law have no purpose in society.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." (Stanza 1)
 - B. "Creeds and schools in abeyance, / Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten" (Stanza 4)
 - C. "Nature without check with original energy." (Stanza 4)
 - D. "I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked" (Stanza 6)

3. PART A: What does the word "loafe" mean as it is used in stanza 2?
 - A. to begin
 - B. to sing
 - C. to relax
 - D. to examine

4. PART B: Which phrase best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "I Celebrate myself, and sing myself" (Stanza 1)
 - B. "invite my soul" (Stanza 2)
 - C. "at my ease" (Stanza 2)
 - D. "observing a spear of summer grass" (Stanza 2)

5. PART A: How does the symbol of grass develop the theme of section 6?
 - A. It reveals that God is in everything, whether that thing is aware of God's existence.
 - B. It reveals that life and death are cyclical and connect everything.
 - C. It reveals that nature is resilient and indifferent to mankind.
 - D. It reveals that unlearned children understand the universe better than learned adults.

6. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "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." (Stanza 11)
 - B. "Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord, / A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt" (Stanza 13)
 - C. "What do you think has become of the young and old men? / And what do you think has become of the women and children?" (Stanza 20)
 - D. "They are alive and well somewhere, / The smallest sprout shows there is really no death, / And if ever there was it led forward life" (Stanza 21)
7. What is the author's likely purpose in having the speaker address "you" throughout the poem?
- A. to urge the reader to learn with and identify with the speaker
 - B. to depart from the more traditional approach of speaking about one's own life
 - C. to reveal that the speaker and the reader are born with shared knowledge
 - D. to allow the speaker to brag about their knowledge to the reader
8. How does the author use imagery from section 52 to develop the poem's themes? Cite evidence from multiple sections of the poem in your response.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Some people have considered this poem to be "egotistical." Do you agree with this view? Why or why not?
2. Think about the state of America at the time Whitman wrote "Song of Myself." How do the themes of the poem relate to the times in which it was written? Are these themes still relevant today? Why or why not?
3. Identity is said to be one of the major themes within the poem. What identities does the speaker reveal? What about identity is significant about the time in which the poem was written?