

Song of Myself

Walt Whitman

BY

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SECTION 1 TEXT

- I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
- And what I assume you shall assume,
- For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
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- I loafe and invite my soul,
- I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.
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- 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.
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- Creeds and schools in abeyance,
- Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
- I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
- Nature without check with original energy.

SECTION 1 SUMMARY

Get out the microscope, because we're going through this poem line-by-line.

- Whitman states what he's going to do in the poem: celebrate himself. This practice might seem a little arrogant, but we'll just go with it. (It turns out, that he's celebrating not only himself, but all of humanity.)
- He lays out some of his ground rules: we're going to believe ("assume") whatever he believes. At another level, we're going to "take on" whatever roles or personalities the speaker takes on. (This is another definition of the word "assume.")
- Whitman must have learned to share as a tyke in the sandbox: he offers up the atoms of his body as our own.
- He introduces another character: his "soul." In this poem, the speaker and his soul are two slightly different things.
- (Just a note: we normally don't call the speaker of the poem by the poet's name, but in this poem, it just makes things simpler, especially since the speaker tells us that his name *is* Walt Whitman.)
- So, Whitman hangs out with his soul, and they look at a blade of summer grass. (The title of the poetry collection to which this poem belongs is *Leaves of Grass*.)
- Whitman describes the air as perfume and says he could get drunk on it, but he won't let himself.
- He wants to get naked and go to the riverbank. He is in love with the air.
- If you think *these* images sound kind of erotic, just you wait. There's a reason why Whitman was considered scandalous in his day.

Section 5 Text

- I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,
- And you must not be abased to the other.
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- Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
- Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best,
- Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.
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- I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
- How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
- And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
- And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.
-
- Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,
- 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 that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers,
- And that a kelson of the creation is love,
- And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
- And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
- And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder, mullein and poke-weed.

Section 5 SUMMARY

- We weren't joking about there being different versions of Whitman in this poem. You've got to watch out for them.
- He tells his soul he believes in it, and that his "other" nature (the one concerned with day-to-day worries) must be kept in its place.
- Again he invites the soul to hang out in the grass. He wants the soul to hum a pleasant tune...
- ...And that's when things get steamy. Whitman talks about having an erotic encounter with his own soul.
- They were lying in the grass together in June, when suddenly Whitman's soul gave him the most soulful kiss you can imagine. The kiss reaches all the way to the speaker's heart.
- Being intimate with your own soul can only lead to "peace and joy and knowledge."
- At the end of the section, we get a flavor of Whitman's religious beliefs. He thinks that God is a part of his own nature and not a separate being. This would have been considered blasphemy by most Christians of his time.
- He has an epiphany about the world being limitless and everyone being his brother or sister.
- Love is a "kelson of the creation." A kelson is a beam that helps to keep a ship steady. In other words, Whitman is saying that love helps to keep the world steady.
- "I too..." make comparisons of speaker and hawk.
- L. 112-13 – Life is an endless cycle.
 - No belief in death, only rebirth or afterlife
 - No concern with status or respectability
 - Belief in connection of all living things

Section 6 Text

- 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.
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- 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?*
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- 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. Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
- It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
- It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
- It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps,
- And here you are the mothers' laps.
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Section 6 Text

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- 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.
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- 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 arrest 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.

Section 6

- This whole section is about grass.
- A child asked him what the grass was, and he couldn't answer, except to guess that grass must be the symbol or "flag" of our hopeful nature. Green is the color of hope.
- Or, it could be like God's handkerchief, just a little something to remember him by.
- Or, it could be the child of all the other plants.
- Or, it could be a "hieroglyphic," a kind of writing that symbolizes the equality of all people and things. After all, the grass grows the same everywhere, and for everyone. (Or so he thought. Shmoop's lawn in California doesn't do so well...)
- Or, it could be like "hair" of graves. This line seems pretty unexpected. The idea is that things are being born and dying so often that all grass must be covering some kind of grave. More generally, the soil itself is a "grave" that everyone returns to eventually.
- Whitman thinks about what kinds of people might have been buried in the soil beneath him, whether they were young men, mothers, or small children who died too soon.
- The grass comes from the mouths of dead people, like so many "uttering tongues." He wishes he could translate what they were saying.
- Finally, he decides that people don't ever fully disappear, perhaps because we all belong to the same web of life, and that death itself is not such a bad thing.

Section 10 Text

- Alone far in the wilds and mountains I hunt,
- Wandering amazed at my own lightness and glee,
- In the late afternoon choosing a safe spot to pass the night,
- Kindling a fire and broiling the fresh-kill'd game,
- Falling asleep on the gather'd leaves with my dog and gun by my side.
- The Yankee clipper is under her sky-sails, she cuts the sparkle and scud,
- My eyes settle the land, I bend at her prow or shout joyously from the deck.
- The boatmen and clam-diggers arose early and stopt for me,
- I tuck'd my trowser-ends in my boots and went and had a good time;
- You should have been with us that day round the chowder-kettle.
- I saw the marriage of the trapper in the open air in the far west, the bride was a red girl,

Section 10 Text

- Her father and his friends sat near cross-legged and dumbly smoking, they had moccasins to their feet and large thick blankets hanging from their shoulders,
- On a bank lounged the trapper, he was drest mostly in skins, his luxuriant beard and curls protected his neck, he held his bride by the hand,
- She had long eyelashes, her head was bare, her coarse straight locks descended upon her voluptuous limbs and reach'd to her feet.
- The runaway slave came to my house and stopt outside,
- I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,
- Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsy and weak,
- And went where he sat on a log and led him in and assured him,
- And brought water and fill'd a tub for his sweated body and bruis'd feet,
- And gave him a room that enter'd from my own, and gave him some coarse clean clothes,
- And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,
- And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles;
- He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and pass'd north,
- I had him sit next me at table, my fire-lock lean'd in the corner.

Section 10

- Whitman is taking on different personalities. He's a shape-shifter who can assume the identities of other people at will.
- He takes on the identity of a hunter in the mountains.
- He wanders through the forest and stops for the night to sleep and eat the game he has killed.
- He becomes the captain of a ship called a "Yankee clipper" and eats chowder with other sailor-types.
- Poof! Now's he's in the West to see the marriage of a beaver trapper and a Native American ("red") girl. He describes the richly dressed trapper and the healthy young girl.
- Now he plays the role of a man who shelters a runaway slave. Whitman, who wrote this poem a few years before the Civil War broke out, was firmly against slavery.
- He treats the wounds of the former slave and gives him food and shelter. He invites the slave to dine at his table and, tellingly, has no fear that the slave will ever try to take his rifle ("firelock").
- Whitman has a seemingly limitless trust in other people.

Section 11 Text

- 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.
- She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
- She hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window.
- Which of the young men does she like the best?
- Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.
- Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,
- You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room.
- Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather,
- The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.
- The beards of the young men glisten'd with wet, it ran from their long hair,
- Little streams pass'd all over their bodies.
- An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,
- It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.
- The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to the sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
- They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch,
- They do not think whom they souse with spray.
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Section 11

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- This section is one of the most famous and important in the poem. It's also one of the most erotic.
- A 28-year-old woman watches 28 men bathing naked in the river. She watches them from behind her window blinds.
- She imagines that she is bathing with them in the river, as the "twenty-ninth bather."
- Her gaze is erotically charged, like a hand passing over their bodies.
- The young men don't realize that they are swimming around this "twenty-ninth bather." If they did, they would probably be embarrassed because she's a woman.
- This section is intensely homoerotic. Many scholars believe that Whitman expressed his own feelings and desires through the gaze of the hidden woman. There are no comparable descriptions of naked women in the poem.

SONG OF MYSELF ANALYSIS

GRASS

- Symbol Analysis
- "Song of Myself" did not originally have a title, but people probably thought it was titled *Leaves of Grass*, which is the name of the book in which it was published. It was the first poem in that book, and grass is one of its central images. You could think of the speaker narrating the entire poem while sitting in the grass with his soul. 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.
- Title: The title of the book in which "Song of Myself" appears, *Leaves of Grass*, is a pun on the meaning of "leaves" as the green things on plants, and also as the pages of a book.
- Section 1: The speaker states his intention to look at a "spear" of summer grass. The word "spear" is suggestive of a weapon. Is the entire poem about a single blade of grass?
- Section 6: This is the most important section concerning grass in the poem. He describes grass as a symbol of his "hopeful" disposition. The grass is also metaphorically a child of other plants and the "handkerchief" of God, left as a token of God's presence. Most importantly, the speaker uses a metaphor comparing the grass to "the beautiful uncut hair of graves." The earth is a grave because the soil is made up partly of decomposed bodies. The idea of dead life supporting new life is crucial.

SONG OF MYSELF ANALYSIS

- ME, MYSELF, AND I (AND MY SOUL, TOO)
- Symbol Analysis
- It's not easy to keep track of exactly who is talking in the poem. We have the guy named "Walt Whitman," but Walt also has a deeper self he calls "Me Myself" or just "Myself." Oh, and then there's his soul, which may or may not be the same thing as "Myself." Confused yet? It's OK. Just remember, there's not a strict separation between all of these personas, but it is important to recognize *when* the speaker is talking to one or another of these personas, and how they contribute to his idea of an all-encompassing personality.
- Section 1: Whitman personifies a part of his person into someone that he could invite on a nice summer outing. He invites his soul to come look at the grass with him.
- Section 5: He addresses his own soul through apostrophe, which is when a speaker talks to something outside the poem. He reminds his soul of an erotic encounter in the grass.

- HEY, "YOU"

- Symbol Analysis

- Didn't you know that you were one of the main characters of this poem? It's not like you had a choice. It seems like Whitman mentions "you" in every other line. His goal is to force you, whether you like or not, to identify with him. He wants you to learn from him, but also to travel your own path. However, "you" is not a stable idea in the poem any more than "I" is. "You" could be anything from natural phenomena to the literal reader.
- Section 1: Whitman exaggerates (hyperbole) in claiming that "every atom" of himself belongs to you, the reader.

- A JOURNEY
- Symbol Analysis
- The journey is the main extended metaphor in the poem, which begins in the daytime and ends at night. The poem itself is a journey, and this is one of the reasons why "Song of Myself" is considered an epic, similar to other famous journey-poems like Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It's not a "real" journey in the sense that no person could ever possibly go all the places that he claims to go. Instead, it's an imaginative journey in his mind, or more accurately, his soul.
- Section 1: The journey begins with an invitation from Whitman to his soul. Except they don't go anywhere. They just hang out and "loafe" in the grass. Our parents always used to get on us for "loafing."
- Section 10: Whitman frequently uses short narratives or scenes called "vignettes" that take him from place to place. In this section, he becomes a hunter and witnesses the marriage of a trapper, among other things.

- LISTS (CATALOGUES)!

- Symbol Analysis

- Lists that go on and on are one of Whitman's specialties. They define his poetic style. In this poem, he tries to contain the entire world within "Myself," the all mighty "I." This requires naming a whole lot of stuff that to which he belongs and with which he identifies. The technical term for these lists in poetry-speak is "catalogue." These lists often include many lines in a row that begin with the same word or phrase, which is called "anaphora."
 - Section 2: The first list in the poem is a list of things his loves and wants to be in contact with.

- THE TWENTY-NINTH BATHER

- Symbol Analysis

- The "Twenty-Ninth Bather" section of "Song of Myself" is so famous that we felt it deserved its own heading here. Basically, it's a short narrative or vignette, along the lines of the naval battle in sections 35 and 36. The imagery is extremely erotic, and many critics think that Whitman was expressing his own desires through the eyes of the voyeuristic young woman. The language is extraordinarily vivid.
- Section 11: The young woman sees 28 young men bathing naked in the river, and she imagines herself as the "twenty-ninth bather." Whitman addresses her through apostrophe, saying, "Where are you off to, lady?" Like Whitman, she takes a journey in her mind. Her eyes are compared metaphorically to an "unseen hand" that touches their bodies. Why 28 bathers? Some critics think that the number relates the usual number of days of a woman's menstrual cycle. Just throwin' it out there. Feel free to tell us what you think.

■ ANALYSIS: FORM AND METER

■ Free Verse?

- Whitman's particular style of writing has come to be known as "free verse," but not everyone agrees with this term. The term "free verse" was popularized by 20th century poets like William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg whom Whitman inspired. The term means "a poem with no regular form or meter." If that's the definition, then "Song of Myself" is free verse.
- Other critics prefer not to use the term "free verse," arguing that Whitman borrows forms and styles from all over the place. According to this train of thought, labeling Whitman's poetry "free verse," would cover up this vast diversity styles he draws from.
- Either way, we don't think it's a huge deal. Technical terms in poetry can be overrated.
- Besides, a verse of Whitman's poetry is recognizable from a mile away. He uses tons of repetition, including the repetition of words at the beginning of lines, called "anaphora." His stanzas are frequently long lists, called "catalogues." And his lines are generally longer than those in most other classic poems.
- As we mentioned, Whitman does not use a regular meter, but his ear for rhythm is probably his greatest poetic strength. At some points he seems to slip into a traditional use of stresses and beats, as in this phrase from Section 1:
 - *Hous-es* and *rooms* are *full* of *per-fumes*
 - The *blab* of the *pave* the *tires* and *carts* and *sluff* of *boot-soles* and *talk* of the *prom-en-ad-ers*
- Gallons of ink have been spilled on Whitman's peculiar sense for rhythm, and your best bet is to explore the poem on your own.

■ ANALYSIS: SPEAKER

- This "Walt Whitman" character is, as he says, a "kosmos," or an entire universe. He's like a giant magnet drawing everyone and everything into itself. He knows exactly how you and everyone else feels, and his powers of empathy are unparalleled. He's been all over America and all over the globe, and even outer space. Also, his two best friends happen to be the two persons that also live inside his body – how convenient. These guys are the "Me Myself" and the "Soul." There's no clean division between these different personas; they are more like masks that Whitman puts on and takes off. He speaks for his soul but stands apart from it.
- He's a good friend of you, the reader. He is constantly addressing the reader as "you." He seems to think that you and he are on a journey together, and that he's your guide. He challenges your sense of pride and tries to goad you into thinking for yourself. It's clear that he has really soaked up the ideas of the American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose notion of "self-reliance" is essentially, "learn by experience and don't trust everything you read from books or hear from other people." It's equally clear from the elevated language and interesting words he uses that the speaker has read the Bible and *a lot of Shakespeare*.

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- However, the one thing that gets him more excited than anything else is sex. Or at least the body. He loves bodies, particularly the strong, muscular bodies of strapping young men. Ladies are cool, too, but he's just not quite as excited about the womenfolk. Read into this what you will – plenty of other people have. Also, he feels no shame about sexuality and doesn't think that sex is "shameful" or "immoral."
- As for his political beliefs, the speaker is clearly against slavery in the years running up to the Civil War. He shelters a runaway slave. But he doesn't hate Southerners for slavery. He just wishes everyone would realize that they are brothers and sisters and get along. He's a passionate democrat (with a small "d") and believes in the idea and promise of America.
- There's much, much more to say about the speaker, but the poem itself is dedicated to saying it. That's why it's called, "Song of Myself."

■ ANALYSIS: SETTING

- Where It All Goes Down
- "Song of Myself" is set in too many locations to name. At the same time, you could argue that the speaker goes to all of these places without moving anywhere at all. He just wants to "loafe" and look at a blade of grass, but the contemplation of this single "spear of grass" leads to thoughts about America, the world, and even the universe.
- One reason for these frequent shifts is that Whitman likes telling vignettes, which are small vivid stories that put us in a particular scene but do not have a conventional narrative. The story of the woman admiring the 28 bathers is one such vignette, and so is the story about attending the wedding of a fur trapper and a Native American girl.
- Some of the settings seem more realistic than others. The setting in which the speaker wheels through the universe past the planet Uranus is obviously not realistic, but the story of the massacre in the Mexican-American War feels like it could have been written by a journalist who was there. Above all, Whitman hopes to give a sense of the size and span of America and her great democracy. The diversity of the setting reflects the diversity of its people.

- **ANALYSIS: SOUND CHECK;**- If the speaker wasn't ambivalent about priests, preachers, and clergymen, we'd think he was a preacher himself. The poem sounds like a really long, deeply passionate sermon, and the audience is America as a whole.
- Another tactic used by preachers is repetition. Think of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech "I Have a Dream." King, of course, was a preacher, and in that speech he repeats the phrase "I Have a Dream" over and over again in a spellbinding way. Much of the speech is a list, or "catalogue," of King's dreams for society. Whitman is *the* poet who uses repetition of phrases in successive lines (called anaphora) and long lists (called catalogues). Take, for example, this list of things that the speaker "knows" for certain:
- *Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth;
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 that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers; (section 5)*

- Two other tricks of the trade used by our speaker are rhetorical questions and apostrophe. In a sermon, a preacher uses rhetorical questions to anticipate an argument or to introduce a subject by pretending to respond to a question about it. Whitman does exactly the same thing with questions like, "Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?" (section 5). In that case, the argument he's responding to is, "I feel proud because I understand poems."
- As for apostrophe, the term just means talking to someone who can't respond. Preachers might talk to the "poor and oppressed" or to "sinners" or some other group. Politicians often address "My fellow Americans." The sound of "Song of Myself" is greatly influenced by the speaker's repeated attempts to start side-conversations, as if he were pointing to someone in a great crowd and saying, "You there! I've got something to say to you." Who, me?
- Whitman generally avoids the fancy language and sentence structures of the traditional poetry of his day, but his tone is more like a formal speech than a plain conversation. He still knows how to turn a phrase. Think, for example, of the memorable passage when he praises his soul, says he wants to hear its "valved voice," and remembers when his soul "plunged [its] tongue to my bare-stript heart." From start to finish, "Song of Myself" is full of such astonishingly beautiful and highly eloquent passages. If Whitman was a preacher, we wouldn't miss his sermons for the world.

- ANALYSIS: WHAT'S UP WITH THE TITLE?
- If Whitman were in a relationship with "titles" for "Song of Myself" on Facebook, the status would read, "It's complicated." In the first, historic edition of *Leaves of Grass* from 1855, the poem has no title. The collection has a lengthy and famous preface in prose (which you should read – check it out [here](#)), in which Whitman explains his ideas of poetry and democracy. Then he just launches right into the poem. People who read that first edition probably assumed the title of the poem was "Leaves of Grass."
- And yes, "Leaves of Grass" would be an appropriate title, because one of the poem's central images is grass. Specifically, Whitman thinks that grass is a symbol of hope but also of the dead people who are buried beneath it and try to communicate to the living.
- *Leaves of Grass* is also a famous pun. A "leaf" can be both the green thing that hangs from trees and also a page in a book. So Whitman wants you to think that, literally, the book you hold in your hands is like a clump of grass. Also, we don't normally think of grass as having leaves. Grass has blades; trees have leaves. The speaker, however, compares this small plant (i.e., grass) to larger trees. In Whitman's world, small things can be huge.
- be different "characters" in the poem. This final title is also more democratic, and focuses our attention of the "Me Myself" persona. Anyone could write a poem called "Song of Myself." This one just happens to be written by Whitman.
- A "song," by the way, is both a piece of music and an old-fashioned word for "poem." Songs are meant to be performed, and this poem is a grand performance to be sure.

■ ANALYSIS: CALLING CARD

■ Catalogues!

- Wait, what's a catalogue? In poetry, catalogue is just a list of stuff. It could even be a grocery list, provided you've got especially poetic groceries. "Song of Myself" is the ultimate poem for catalogues. There are just so many of them, and they go on forever. For example, Section 33 is a huge catalogue of places that his soul travels to. If you're trying to figure out just what makes Whitman so distinctive, this technique is a great place to start

■ ANALYSIS: TOUGH-O-METER

■ (5) Tree Line

- Walt Whitman is an accessible poet. Everyone can, and should, read Whitman. There's something about his poetic tone that is so reassuring that it's hard to be intimidated by him. Plus, he never judges people, and he thinks book learning is overrated. What could possibly scare off the reader? OK, so "Song of Myself" is *long*, and might be intimidating from that standpoint. Otherwise, it's tempting to think that Whitman is a "simple" poet because he's so darned direct. But there's plenty of complexity to sink your teeth into here. For starters, who is this "I" who narrates the poem, and how does he relate to those other dudes, "Me" and "My Soul"?

Literary and Philosophical References

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (section 2)
- Crucifixion of Jesus Christ (section 38)
- World Religions: Greek myth, Hinduism, Islam, Brahmism, Mayan (section 41), Christianity, Native American religions, animism, gymnosophism, Hinduism (again), Islam (again), Puritanism, atheism, etc. (section 42)
- The Koran (section 43)
- Historical References
- Slavery: "quardroon girl" (section 15), "I am the hounded slave" (section 34)
- Native Americans (section 15)
- The Antebellum North and the South (section 16)
- The President (section 21)
- Walt Whitman! (section 24)
- The Alamo (section 34)
- The Mexican-American War (section 34)
- War with Britain (possibly the War of 1812) (sections 35-36)
- Mount Vernon (section 37)
- The Battle of Saratoga (section 37)

- Song of Myself Themes
- Identity
- The word "identity" occurs only a couple of times in "Song of Myself," but it is easily the central theme of this vast epic. Whitman sees his identity split into at least three components: his ever...
- Visions of America
- America was not just a place to Whitman, it was also an idea and a goal to shoot for. His America is a place where all people are equal, all jobs are equally important, and people feel for one another...
- Friendship
- Whitman is the poet of democracy, and friendship is the one truly essential ingredient for a democracy. He wasn't the only one to realize this. His contemporary and literary inspiration Ralph Waldo...
- Spirituality
- Whitman's ambivalence about religion and spirituality is a major topic of "Song of Myself." He thinks that society has surpassed organized religion with its hierarchies and rules, but his language...
- Sex
- Well, not sex, exactly...or maybe in certain passages. "Song of Myself" became scandalous in some circles because of its frank discussion of sexuality, body parts, and bodily fluids. But Whitman is...
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■ SONG OF MYSELF THEME OF IDENTITY

- The word "identity" occurs only a couple of times in "Song of Myself," but it is easily the central theme of this vast epic. Whitman sees his identity split into at least three components: his everyday personality, the more inner "self" or "Me Myself," and the universal "Soul." He was attracted to the American Transcendentalist idea of the "Oversoul," or the soul that is somehow part of or connected to all other souls in the world. For him, there is no such thing as "private experience." He experiences the pains and pleasure of all other people in the world, and even animals and inanimate natural phenomena, because he "identifies" with them. That is, his innermost identity is connected to all things in the world.
- Questions About Identity
- Do you find Whitman's attempts to identify with *everyone* believable? Do you think there are people he doesn't like, even if he doesn't say so?
- Does Whitman have different identities at different points in the poem, or does he maintain the same basic identity throughout?
- How does the project of "Song of Myself" relate to the political situation in 1850s America?
- Why does Whitman call himself a "kosmos"? What is the origin of this word?

■ SONG OF MYSELF THEME OF VISIONS OF AMERICA

- America was not just a place to Whitman, it was also an idea and a goal to shoot for. His America is a place where all people are equal, all jobs are equally important, and people feel for one another with a passionate, neighborly love. He views his identity as being so wrapped up in this American idea that the poem's title could easily have been "Song of America" instead of "Song of Myself." The poem celebrates the diversity of the nation. Beneath the surface, the poem is also a desperate attempt to remind his fellow Americans of their common bonds. Whitman was aware of the potential for violent bloodshed looming on the horizon. Tragically, the Civil War, which began a few years after he published the poem, proved that his worries were well founded.
- Questions About Visions of America
- What are the central elements of Whitman's ideal of America?
- If he were alive today, what elements of American culture would Whitman be happy about, and in what elements would make him put on the old frowny-face?
- Does Whitman ever criticize America, either directly or implicitly?
- Why do you think this poem has often been considered the most representative American poem?

■ SONG OF MYSELF QUESTIONS

- Bring on the tough stuff - there's not just one right answer.
- Who is the speaker of the poem? How many speakers are there? Do the "Me Myself" or the "Soul" ever get a chance to speak?
- What is the relationship between the "Walt Whitman" who narrates the poem and the Walt Whitman who wrote the poem? Can we assume that the two are the same person?
- "Song of Myself" is sometimes described as an "American epic," in the same way that Homer's *Odyssey* or Virgil's *Aeneid* are epics. What makes this poem "epic," or do you disagree with this judgment?
- What would Whitman think about people memorizing his poem and studying it in classes and writing papers about it? Would his ego be flattered, or would he think this wasn't true to the spirit of the poem? Or do you think that he would have a different reaction entirely?
- Do you find yourself wanting to identify with Whitman, or do you want to resist his attempts to make you a part of himself?
- What kinds of stories or memories would you include in a "Song of *Yourself*"? Remember, as Whitman shows, your song can include lots of things that didn't actually happen directly to you.
- Do you agree with people who say that "Song of Myself" is the most representative American poem? What would make it representative? What makes it "democratic"?