Song of Myself Study Guide

Song of Myself by Walt Whitman

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Introduction

Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" is the most famous of the twelve poems originally published in *Leaves of Grass*, the collection for which the poet is most widely known. First published in 1855, Whitman made extensive revisions to the book, changing titles, motifs, and adding whole poems until 1881, and tinkering further until his death in 1892. The title "Song of Myself" did not come about until 1881, going through various permutations that include "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American," "Walt Whitman," and "Myself." Its changing title hints at the shifts found within the sprawling epic. From the obvious "Walt Whitman" to the abstract "Myself," Whitman reveals his desire to examine the individual, the communion between individuals, and the individual's place in the universe. 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. Its free-verse construction, devoid of conventional meter and rhyme, mirrors the expansive, sensual, often sexual, language that marked the poem as something totally new. An early criticism of *Leaves of Grass* in the September 15, 1855, edition of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* explains,

Here we have a book which fairly staggers us. It sets all the ordinary rules of criticism at defiance. It is one of the strangest compounds of transcendentalism, bombast, philosophy, folly, wisdom, wit and dullness which it ever catered into the heart of man to conceive…. It is a poem; but it conforms to none of the rules by which poetry has ever been judged.

Born in West Hills, New York, just thirty years after George Washington was inaugurated, Whitman was raised by working-class, liberal parents during the most nationalistic period in American history. Pride in the newly formed country's success was widespread, yet no indigenous work of literature existed to reflect the native culture, the landscape, or the political idealism of America. In his 1837 "American Scholar" address, Ralph Waldo Emerson challenged his listeners: "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close…. We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." In the 1955 introduction to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Gay Wilson Allen tells that the challenge sparked the poet's imagination. In 1849, one of the characters from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Kavanagh* shouted, "We want a national literature altogether shaggy and unshorn, that shall shake the earth, like a herd of buffaloes thundering over the prairies!" Whitman responded to the call with the earth-shaking *Leaves of Grass*, the first truly American collection of poetry written by a great American poet.

Before publishing *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman worked as a newspaper apprentice, a teacher, a journalist, and a writer of short fiction. His working-class background gave him compassion for the disenfranchised. His passion for democracy and equality made him detest slavery. His frustration with the political climate leading up to the Civil War inspired him with poetic fervor. It is interesting, then, that these elements come together in an utterly indefinable work of poetic genius. Poets, critics, lecturers, and educators have failed to come up with a definitive interpretation of "Song of Myself," though not for

lack of trying. Countless books and papers have been written in an attempt to unlock the mysteries of Whitman's mystical, lyrical, poetic journey of the soul. In the end, most agree that the independent reader is responsible for making his or her way through this innovative, challenging, and thoroughly American poem. The version explored here is the final, 1892, or "Deathbed" edition.

Author Biography

Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman was born in West Hills, New York, on May 31, 1819, and settled with his family in Brooklyn soon after. Frequent visits to the city's museums, libraries, and lecture halls supplemented the future poet's lackluster public school education. He worked as a newspaper apprentice, schoolteacher, journalist, fiction writer, and editor of a New Orleans paper. It was in New Orleans that Whitman witnessed a slave auction firsthand. He vowed to never forget the dehumanization that was a regular occurrence in the United States.

He began writing uninspired, conventional poetry in the 1840s, then, toward the early 1850s, mysteriously abandoned convention and started creating utterly original poems. These were published anonymously in 1855 in a collection titled *Leaves of Grass*. The poems, especially "Song of Myself," changed the face of American poetry forever. Whitman revised, rearranged, and added poems to the book throughout the rest of his life, issuing a total of nine distinct editions between 1855 and 1892.

The Civil War and its attendant brutality shocked the poet, whose deeply held beliefs about humanity were now being challenged on the battlefields of America. He spent time comforting sick and injured soldiers on frequent hospital visits and writing poems about the war. He suffered a paralyzing stroke in 1873, but published four additional editions of *Leaves of Grass* before he died on March 26, 1892, in Camden, New Jersey.

Plot Summary

Section 1

The opening lines of the poem prepare the reader for what lies ahead: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." This introduces the universal "I," sets the celebratory tone, and foreshadows the themes of equality, nature, and goodness. He goes on, "I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass," equating the natural ease and comfort with which the "I" observes a blade of grass to communing with the soul. Though the universal "I" is invoked, Whitman appears as himself in the third stanza, "form'd from this soil, this air, / Born here of parents born here from parents the same … / I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin." As Whitman the man is born of the earth and the air, Whitman the poet is emerging as himself, as the poem itself, in these very lines.

Section 2

In this section, the poet exalts the beauty of nature, writing, "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." Whitman equates fresh air with all that is good. "I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked, / I am mad for it to be in contact with me." Nakedness is honesty. Whitman rejoices in simplicity and vitality as much as in honesty. The introduction of the senses begins with air on skin and progresses to "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." The celebration of the self and of the soul continues. Whitman expresses the miracle of the body and its functions while the soul rejoices in its existence on earth. "The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind / … / The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun." He then claims that the reader can "possess the origin of all poems," and will learn to "listen to all sides and filter them from your self."

Section 3

Whitman invokes the urgency of the present early in this section:

> There was never any more inception than there is now,
> Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
> And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
> Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

The mystery of the self as a present being in both body and soul is expressed in the lines, "I and this mystery here we stand / Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul." Whether in body or soul, the present is all that matters. With, "I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing; / As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the day with stealthy tread," he repeats the love of the present in sexual language. The emphasis falls on the fact that Whitman is satisfied in his body, seeing, dancing, laughing, singing, hugging, and loving. This joyful expression carries into the next section.

Section 4

The poet recalls good times and bad, including "Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events; / These come to me days and nights and go from me again, / But they are not the Me myself." Whitman will not let the evils of the earth strip him of his joy. The "myself" of which he speaks is his essence, his soul, as well as the soul of mankind. The soul is naturally good. It naturally seeks joy and equanimity and does not dwell on "fitful events." "Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next, / Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it." Whitman seems to believe it best to let life unfold on its natural progression.

Section 5

In this section, Whitman the individual becomes the abstract "myself" of the poem's title. The identities of "I," "you," and "myself" evolve into a universal self brought about by the birth of Whitman the poet. As introduction to his poetic birth, Whitman writes,

> 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.

The reader may ask, "Whose voice? And why not words, or music, or rhyme?" The following stanza, one of the most surreal verses in the whole poem, describes Whitman's poetic birth in highly sensual language:

> 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.

In an essay in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, James E. Miller Jr. writes, "This event may best be described as the organic union of the poet's body and soul, the latter appearing first in the disembodied 'hum' of a 'valvèd voice.'" The newly born poet finds himself with "the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth." He continues:

> 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 and my sisters and lovers,
> And that a kelson of the creation is love.

Sections 6-7

In section 6, Whitman introduces the first key image after his poetic awakening. The spear of grass image from the beginning of "Song of Myself" reappears here. "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 anymore than he." With these words, the journey into understanding begins. From here through the mid-section of the poem, the democratic symbolism of grass ("Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones, / Growing among black folks as among white") expands to celebrate daily scenes of American life with Whitman as guide.

The last lines of the section, "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier," act as a bridge between sections 6 and 7. In section 7, the song continues, "Has any one supposed it lucky to be born? / I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it." Here, Whitman refers to his poetic rebirth, the birth of the new self that depended on the death of his previous self.

Sections 8-10

"The little one sleeps in its cradle" marks the official beginning of Whitman's poetic journey through America as he catalogs the American experience. He explores the commonalities shared by the human race, the celebration of everyday life, and the indignities and difficulties suffered by humanity:

> 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,
> ...

He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and pass'd north,
I had him sit next to me at table, my fire-lock lean'd in the corner.

This image follows one describing the marriage of a trapper to a "red girl … her head was bare, her coarse straight locks descended upon her voluptuous limbs and reach'd to her feet." Boatmen, clam-diggers, Native Americans, runaway slaves: Whitman makes plain the fact that one man or woman works, lives, seeks love, and seeks freedom as well as the next.

Section 11

Section 11 opens with the image of the twenty-ninth bather, a female spectator longing to leave her proper place and join twenty-eight young male bathers by the shore. He implies that to fully experience the world, one must be of it, yet apart from it enough to maintain some perspective and without interfering. The voice, at first, belongs to the twenty-eight-year-old woman, hiding behind the blinds inside her fine house. Then, Whitman takes over, describing what it would be like if she were to join them as she has in her imagination. His reverence for the communion of bodies and souls is richly detailed here, and, due to the highly sensual language being employed, one might be led to consider the melding of bodies and souls in the act of lovemaking. The description of the men bathing invites the comparison of two people becoming one in a purely physical though transcendent moment, the hidden twenty-ninth bather the metaphor for the self that exists when the moment has passed.

Sections 12-19

In these sections, Whitman describes the people he meets as he travels, as well as his philosophy of accepting them all. Section 12 describes workers in a marketplace. In section13, Whitman describes himself as the "caresser of life wherever moving, backward as well as forward sluing…. Absorbing all to myself and for this song." From this point on through section 17, Whitman "absorbs" a litany of snapshots of American lives and people and spreads them before the reader as proof that all these actions, and places, and people, and moments truly exist:

The half-breed straps on his light boots to compete in the race,
…
The groups of newly-come immigrants cover the wharf or levee,
…
The child is baptized, the convert is making his first professions,
…
The bride unrumples her white dress, the minute-hand of the clock moves slowly,
…

The stumps stand thick round the clearing, the squatter strikes deep with his axe.

Whitman's list ends in section 17 with these words: "This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is, This the common air that bathes the globe." In sections 18 and 19, Whitman illustrates his egalitarian approach, writing "I play not marches for accepted victors only, I play marches for conquer'd and slain persons," and "I will not have a single person slighted or left away."

Sections 20-24

Whitman's song becomes metaphysical in section 20: "Who goes there? Hankering, gross, mystical, nude; How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat? What is a man anyhow? what am I? what are you?" He goes on to attempt answers and comes up with, "In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barley-corn less, And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them." This continues through to section 21, "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul, the pleasures of heaven are with me and pains of hell are with me." The next sections seem egotistical as he asserts his importance in the world, but he soon reveals that he believes the same is true for all: "I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy / By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms."

Sections 25-29

Whitman introduces the ideas of seeing and speaking in section 25. These acts may reveal an attempt at expression, even as they conceal "what I really am":

My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,
With the twirl of my tongue I encompass world and volumes of worlds.

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?

Deciding he has spoken too much, Whitman decides to listen. Section 26 begins, "Now I will do nothing but listen, To accrue what I hear into this song, to let sounds contribute toward it." This leads to a lengthy pattern of sounds, from "The ring of alarm-bells" to "The steam-whistle" to "The orbic flex of [the tenor's] mouth is pouring and filling me full."

Touch, though hinted at throughout, is given its own section in section 28. These surreal lines suggest sexual arousal in the context of the search for self-identity:

Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity,
...
You villain touch! what are you doing? my breath is tight in its throat,
Unclench your floodgates, you are too much for me.

Sections 30-32

Section 30 returns to the idea that truth can be found in natural things. This exploration leads the reader to section 31 ("I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars") where the frenetic journey reaches a resting point. Here, Whitman breaks out the lofty language of the sage: "In vain the plutonic rocks send their old heat against my approach, / In vain the mastodon retreats beneath its own powder'd bones." The section ends, "I follow quickly, I ascend to the nest in the fissure of the cliff."

He turns to animals next, praising their peacefulness, and denounces the earthly frustrations of man in this section. "I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd, I stand and look at them long and long." He goes on:

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

As much as Whitman loves men and women, he also fully embraces their faults. This section reveals the failings of man the poet finds particularly unsavory. The self in its rising must then rise above the faults he addresses here.

Sections 33-39

In section 33, the poet presents the vastness of his poetic world, writing, "My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps, / I skirt sierras, my palms over continents, / I am afoot with my vision." He puts himself in the place of many different people who have suffered, from doomed sailor to burned martyr to "hounded slave." He describes events from the Texas War of Independence and the American Civil War, and finally declares, "I am possess'd! / Embody all presences outlaw'd or suffering." He seems to wake from a dream in section 38, and in section 39 refers to himself in the

third person: "Wherever he goes men and women accept and desire him, / They desire he should like them, touch them, speak to them, stay with them."

Sections 40-43

Whitman examines his own role as poet and truth-seeker in these sections: "Flaunt of sunshine I need not your bask—lie over! / You light surfaces only, I force surfaces and depths also." He asks, "And what is reason? and what is love? And what is life?" He goes on to assure the world's priests that he does not despise them, and says, "My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths."

Section 44

In section 44, Whitman writes,

> It is time to explain myself—let us stand up.
> What is known I strip away,
> I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown.
> The clock indicates the moment—but what does eternity indicate?

The sprawling epic that preceded this moment made this moment possible. Without the journey, the destination would just be another place. Instead, Whitman has brought his readers to this place after carrying them to richerplaces. Now is the time to decipher the images, sift through the sand to reveal the treasures. He explains:

> Immense have been the preparations for me,
> Faithful and friendly the arms that have help'd me.
> ...
>
> All forces have been steadily employ'd to complete and delight me,
> Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.

Sections 45-47

The poet counsels the reader, "See ever so far, there is limitless space outside of that, / Count ever so much, there is limitless time around that," and, "Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself." "Song of Myself" has thus become a roadmap as much as a journey. Having brought the reader this far, Whitman has become more than a guide. He has become a father and a mother, a nurturing self wanting nothing more than for his child to find his or her way in the world alone:

Sit a while dear son,
Here are biscuits to eat and here is milk to drink,
But as soon as you sleep and renew yourself in sweet clothes, I kiss you with a good-by kiss and open the gate for your egress hence.

Sections 48-52

Whitman ponders God, which he sees in everyone and everything around him, and Death, which he does not fear, and finally falls into a deep sleep, exhausted from his vision. "To it the creation is the friend whose embracing awakes me …—it is Happiness." He is eager to continue with new people and new experiences.

The journey concluded, the reader is taken back to the beginning, to where Whitman loafes and leans, wondering over a spear of grass. "The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering. / I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." He leaves the reader with these lines:

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

Themes

Equality

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 grass is used symbolically to indicate equality later in the poem:

> 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.

Whitman seeks an answer. He speculates upon a number of possibilities before suggesting the following:

> 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.

Here, the grass represents that which is equal among all people. By sprouting everywhere, in both broad and narrow zones, among black and white people, given and received equally, the grass is a symbol of democracy.

One of the most powerful and elusive segments of the poem addresses the theme of equality by virtue of its imagery alone. Whitman paints a vibrant picture of democracy by compiling a descriptive list of Americans in action:

> The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
> The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,
> The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel.

Without commentary or elaboration, Whitman illustrates the essence of equality in this catalog of humanity, which includes the farmer, the lunatic, the malform'd, the quadroon, the connoisseur, the bride, and the prostitute, among many others. The segment ends with the following:

> And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
> And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
> And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.

The song of the poet and his subjects, then, becomes the song of America and its lofty ambitions of egalitarianism.

Finally, the poet declares himself "a kosmos" as a way of representing his and our universality:

> Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
> ...
> Whoever degrades another degrades me,
> And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.
> ...
> I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
> By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.

Sex and Sexuality

Sex and sexuality are prominent themes in "Song of Myself." Whitman's passionate belief in the goodness of nature fuels his eroticism as much as his belief in the intrinsic connection of body and soul. Whitman's belief in egalitarianism and the communion of individuals is further reflected in his sensuous language and imagery:

> I have said that the soul is not more than the body,

And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
...
And there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheel'd universe,
And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and composed before a million universes.

Sex and sexuality are bound to nature as well as to spirituality. Whitman proves this by pointing out that the senses, though natural, are also supernatural in the miraculous abilities they impart. Though not overtly sexual, the following example of his earthy rhetoric illustrates how Whitman connects flesh, desire, bodily function, and spirituality:

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.
Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from,
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.

Whitman also uses the body as a metaphor for the dramatic and varied American landscape. In the following passage, the use of "I" and "you" reflect the universal "myself" of the poem's title:

Mix'd tussled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be you!
Trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat, it shall be you!
...
Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you!
Broad muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving lounger in my winding paths, it shall be you!
Hands I have taken, face I have kiss'd, mortal I have ever touch'd, it shall be you.

Whitman's ambiguous sexuality—critics have referred to his language as being everything from autoerotic to omnisexual—point to the possibility of his homosexuality as well as his desire to convey "the largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen" (as he described his countrymen in his preface to the 1855 edition). In the same way that "Song of Myself" defies absolute interpretation, Whitman's sexuality, and the manner in which he uses it in the poem, is too sprawling, too unwieldy to categorize. Or as Whitman says, "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

Historical Context

Nationalism

Walt Whitman was born during a time of unrivaled American nationalism. His generation was the first to witness growing stability and expansion of the territories. Patriotism was rampant. Walt's father, Walter Whitman Sr. an admirer and acquaintance of Thomas Paine, had such reverence for the heroes of the American Revolution that he named three of his nine children Andrew Jackson, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson. The new nation was being invented with every passing day, and American citizens were filled with political idealism.

According to Gay Wilson Allen in the introduction of Signet Classic's 1955 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's success was aided

by the sanguine nationalism of the American people in the mid-nineteenth century. From the Puritans the young nation had inherited the belief that God had ordained a special, fortunate destiny for it. The Puritans had intended the Theocratic State of Massachusetts to be God's Own Government on earth. And the successes of the American people in their two wars with England had increased their confidence in a Providential destiny.

By the time Whitman had reached middle age, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had clarified the need for an original American literature. Emerson wrote in his essay "The Poet" (1844), "Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics,… the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung." The call for a wholly new American literature—one that would define and describe the as-yet undefined American culture, landscape, and psychology—had been sounded. It was the vibrant, heady climate of these times that inspired Whitman to write *Leaves of Grass*.

Slavery

The optimism and enthusiasm for American expansion was tempered by the institution of slavery. Africans and their descendants had been enslaved on American soil since the early seventeenth century. By the time the U.S. Constitution was adopted, slavery had become a dying institution. The northern states began to abolish the practice and the founding fathers declared that the importation of slaves into the United States would end by the year 1808, but slavery was reinvigorated in the southern states after the invention of the cotton gin in the early 1800s. Cotton, a crop that requires a massive labor force to raise, suddenly became profitable. Slavery was once again on the rise.

During Whitman's lifetime, the problem of slavery begged a solution. The contradiction of enslaved peoples living in a supposedly free country was just too great. As a journalist, Whitman wrote primarily about class issues and the interests of white

workingmen. He made his anti-slavery stance known, but he never focused his attention on the issue. Critics speculate about what may have caused him to address the issue as a poet. Some say witnessing a slave auction in New Orleans while working as an editor for the *Crescent* was a turning point. Others point to the fact that Whitman was beginning to attract a circle of radical thinkers and writers as friends. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, in their biography of Whitman for the *Whitman Archive*, write, "Whatever the cause, in Whitman's future-oriented poetry blacks become central to his new literary project and central to his understanding of democracy."

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855, just six years prior to the attack on Fort Sumter—the start of the American Civil War—and the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln as the sixteenth U.S. president. Slavery was the most divisive issue facing American citizens at the time. Whitman was prompted to write a political tract called "The Eighteenth Presidency!" in 1856 denouncing the fact that slave owners persisted in dominating both the national judiciary and the legislature. He wrote, "At present, the personnel of the government of these thirty millions, in executives and elsewhere, is drawn from limber-tongued lawyers, very fluent but empty feeble old men, professional politicians," not "the solid body of the people." He was not the only American to prophesy the coming civil war and condemn hypocritical leaders. The powder keg that was slavery was ready to blow, and every American citizen, whether free or enslaved, was affected.

Critical Overview

The first edition of Walt Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* was an anonymous, slim volume boasting a curious frontispiece. It featured an engraving of Whitman in full beard and working clothes, one hand in his pocket, the other on his hip. The jaunty, earthy image he presented was meant to emphasize the informal, personal nature of the poems.

The strange book was sold in a handful of bookstores around New York. Of the eight hundred copies printed, only two hundred were bound. In the introduction of Signet Classic's 1955 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Gay Wilson Allen wrote, "Today Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is almost universally recognized as one of the masterpieces of world literature, but it did not have an impressive beginning." Its free verse was lost on many of Whitman's critics. In 1856, the reviewer in *Crayon 3* writes,

With a wonderful vigor of thought and intensity of perception, a power, indeed, not often found, *Leaves of Grass* has no ideality, no concentration, no purpose—it is barbarous, undisciplined, like the poetry of a half-civilized people, and, as a whole, useless, save to those miners of thought who prefer the metal in its unworked state.

Others, such as Charles Dana of the *New York Daily Tribune*, found Whitman's sensual language offensive:

His words might have passed between Adam and Eve in Paradise, before the want of fig-leaves brought no shame; but they are quite out of place amid the decorum of modern society, and will justly prevent his volume from free circulation in scrupulous circles.

Anonymous reviews trumpeting the glowing collection appeared in various New York papers ("An American bard at last!" read one; another hailed it as "transcendent and new"), but they were obviously penned by Whitman himself. He sent copies to several well-known writers, but only Ralph Waldo Emerson responded. In a personal letter addressed to Whitman, Emerson expresses his enthusiasm for *Leaves of Grass* (quoted in "Whitman as Transcendentalist"):

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty.

Emerson's praise gave Whitman the confidence to forge ahead with a second edition of *Leaves of Grass*. He continued to rework and revise "his experiment" throughout the rest of his life. *Leaves of Grass* swelled from twelve poems in 1855 to 389 in 1881. According to Ivan Marki in his paper, "*Leaves of Grass*, 1855 Edition,"

When Malcolm Cowley reprinted [the 1855 edition] in paperback in 1959, he had to introduce it as "the buried masterpiece of American writing." Until then, the text was not

easily available and, except in Jean Catel's French study in 1930, received little scholarly or critical attention. That the situation has radically changed is due, to a large extent, to Gay Wilson Allen, who, even before Cowley, gave the first edition its due both in his handbook in 1946 and in his exemplary biography of Whitman, *The Solitary Singer* in 1955. No serious study of Whitman has appeared since in which the 1855 text is not extensively discussed and its significance in Whitman's achievement not recognized…. [T]he fascination with the 1855 edition continues, and the book is unlikely to become a buried masterpiece again.

"Song of Myself," untitled at the time, is the heart of every edition of *Leaves of Grass* from 1855 onward. The poem is not only Whitman's best, it is Whitman. Marki writes, "the poetic self named Walt Whitman is born…. *Leaves of Grass* is dominated by this presence emerging from 'Song of Myself.'"

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

In the following excerpt, Birmingham presents "Song of Myself" as the idealization of the potential American being: egalitarian, relational, and loving.

My suggestion is this: religious Americans might profit spiritually from a committed reading of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." By a committed reading I mean one in which, having suspended disbelief, readers allow themselves to experience the text as meaningful aesthetic event, bringing to bear only later their critical faith practice.

Whitman, I should warn, was a great poet of experience and the possibilities it contains, but a terrible philosopher. A stanza from the last poem in the first edition (1855) of *Leaves of Grass* only slightly exaggerates how badly he often wrote when a philosophical mood came upon him:

> Great is justice;
> Justice is not settled by legislators and laws ... it is in the soul,
> It cannot be varied by statutes any more than love or pride or the attraction of gravity can,
> It is immutable ... it does not depend on majorities ... majorities or what not come at last before the same passionless and exact tribunal.

The ungainly and demotic "what not" instances, however, one of Whitman's great gifts to later poets—license to replace conventionally poetic English with the language and rhythms of common American speech. Examples from two minor African-American poets may clarify the effect of this democratization of language. (Other groups and other poets could as easily be used.) Three or four decades before Whitman's birth in 1819, Phyllis Wheatley, doing her best to work in a language foreign both to her African and to her American heritage, writes that her love of freedom springs from having been "snatch'd from *Afric's* happy seat" and concludes, "Such, such my case. And can I then but pray / Others may never feel tyrannic sway?" However valid Wheatley's generous sentiment, the language rings untrue. (Its falseness brings to the poem an aura of cultural imperialism that may, paradoxically, enhance its effectiveness.) Three decades after Whitman's death in 1892, the congregation in James Weldon Johnson's "Listen, Lord—A Prayer" prays that the minister "Who breaks the bread of life this morning" be kept "out of the gunshot of the devil":

> Wash him with hyssop inside and out,
> Hang him up and drain him dry of sin.
> Pin his ear to the wisdom post,
> And make his words sledge hammers of truth—
> Beating on the iron heart of sin.

The 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* was made available on audiocassette from Blackstone Audiobooks in January 1996. It is read by Noah Waterman.

Johnson is not writing dialect poetry, yet his language rises from within the congregation's experience, capturing the black Baptist sacramentalization of the sermon. He can do so because the tradition Whitman began opened up poetry to the varieties of American language. Literary language no longer reigns. Or, better, every language feeds the poetic imagination.

I cite the African-American tradition because it has been marginalized by our culture as a whole, and Whitman's aesthetic vision—not only of language but of the possible American self—comprehends those relegated to society's edge. In her preface to *Passion* June Jordan, alluding obliquely to Whitman's homosexuality, speaks of him as "the one white father who shares the systematic disadvantages of his heterogeneous offspring trapped inside a closet that is, in reality, as huge as the continental spread of North and South America" and ultimately asserts that "[a]gainst self-hatred," which is what those at the margins are so often taught, "there is Whitman." At its best, Whitman's poetic vision affirms, against self-hatred, a possible American self that is inclusive rather than exclusive, trusting rather than suspicious, egalitarian rather than hierarchical, relational rather than individualistic.

Whitman's inclusive vision of the possible self will surely appeal to those at home with contextual theology, though it is in other ways disquieting to the religious mind. It discovers the transcendent, if at all, in the immanent—in the spirit (but not the Spirit) with whose grandeur the world is charged. In "Song of Myself," the self experiences the divine not as Other but as merged with the cosmos, with which the self merges as well. Further—and this limitation is secular as well as religious—that cosmos seems closed to evil and to tragedy. There is more here than facile optimism, however; "Song of Myself" offers not an ideal self, realized or to come, but a delineation of what the empirical American self and its world may become if it follows the trajectory of the best in its democratic experience. If taken as optimism from below, this bears a close resemblance to hope.

Whitman's was, to borrow the aesthetic theologian John Dixon's term, a horizontal imagination, polar to the vertical, hierarchical imagination dominant in Western culture. (Dixon notes that the Reformation belief in the priesthood of all believers was the product of the horizontal imagination, but as decades passed, the pulpit rose higher and higher, creating in Protestant church architecture a visual hierarchy that implicitly denied the belief.) The horizontal imagination is democratic; it prizes each reality for what it is, not for the height of the step it occupies on the stairway to the heavens. When Walt proclaims "Every kind for itself and its own […]" he is not insisting on the superiority of human to beast but stating his primary affinity with the human.

Leaves of Grass, more than any of the other seminal works published during the half-decade of 1850–1855, addresses America as a geographical and cultural totality in the process of self-creation. The Union was threatened; Whitman envisions unity present. Greed was manifest; he supposes heroes "pocketless of a dime" and originates delight

in the common grass and air. American individualism was raw; he raises egocentricity to impossible heights on the one hand and affirms the inherently relational nature of the self on the other. Democracy was, given the depredations of slavery and the deprivations of women, unrealized; he imagines equality of dignity and respect. He loves and finds hope in both city and countryside.

The angel, however, is in the details, what Zweig calls "the unvarnished, shaggy particulars of the everyday world." Whitman perceives, Zweig says, "a sexual prodding from within life to produce more and better life." In "Song of Myself," Walt witnesses the particulars and waits, observing with ear and touch as well as eye—trusting in the inner capacity of each thing to make itself new. One essential element is patience. Those who loiter instead of rushing by see the "butcher-boy [put] off his killing clothes" and dance "his shuffle and breakdown." Another is compassion, which Walt exercises without the pity that reduces sufferers to their pain, whether it is the "child that peeped in at the door and then drew back and was never seen again" or a man "in the poorhouse tubercled by rum." But the most important is trust. To readers, Walt says:

> [...] each man and woman of you I lead upon a knoll,
> My left hand hooks you round the waist,
> My right hand points to landscapes of continents, and a plain public road.
>
> Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,
> You must travel it for yourself.

Source: William Birmingham, "Whitman's Song of the Possible American Self," in *Cross Currents*, Association for Religious and Intellectual Life, Vol. 43, No. 3, Fall 1993, pp. 324-57.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

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Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

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The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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