

excerpts from 1892 Edition of *Leaves of Grass* || Walt Whitman
“Song of Myself”

1 (from first sequence)

I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume 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 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:

- Opens with the poet-narrator moving from an enclosed space to the wilderness, a private area. Pastoral themes: human mixed with nature in a common communal bond. Sensuous in words and outlook.
- The opening celebrates the concept of just *being* rather than the materialistic *having*.
- We need to change our ways from wanting materialistic possessions.

- It is important to note that his language throughout is in present tense:
An obsessive/compulsive emphasis on the moment of “now,” a Buddhist philosophy.
The past is gone and cannot be returned to us. The future does not exist yet, it cannot be obtained. All that exists in the moment unfolding around us.
He is addicted to present tense because it shows people in the very act of living in a contemporary society. The common man/woman transcended into something greater.

Evidence shows that Whitman did not know of Eastern Indian philosophies first hand until after he composed his book *Leaves of Grass*. However, he might have gleaned the material from another transcendentalist and used the same principles (sub)consciously. An absorption from his environment in other words. On the other hand, Jungians believe we all share common background/memories/creativity, and it could be by accident Whitman channelled a common idea parallel to the Eastern ideas.

- The narrator invites the reader to participate in the acknowledgement of higher order; we are all equal in God's eyes, every atom /DNA strand has no preference over the other.
- Line 4 mentions the word "loafe" as in relaxing, not lazily avoiding work, but rather as in meditation and release of daily stress—Whitman came from a working class background and understood the value of earning a honest wage—but this theme he will return to more often here and in other poems.
- He reclines just *being*, relaxing, then notices a "spear of summer grass."

- Scholars of the Renaissance believed in an order to the Universe from God to base Earth materials with Humanity somewhere in the middle. Whitman is changing the order.
- All objects, all living souls have equal standing. He and the grass blade are equal to one another.
- Traditionally it was believed God created humanity from mud / dirt / clay; Whitman is declaring that the common ground is as holy as himself.
- line 8 he shows his age 37 years in perfect health
- line 10: abeyance means: *temporary inactivity, cessation, or suspension*
 at this time of life he is finished with academic knowledge, scholarly pursuits;
 but their importance is not forgotten, they sufficed for the time in the past;
 the last two lines become slightly confusing: however his intentions (good or bad) take in, shelters, likewise he allows or does not suppress Nature, the Natural Process, become a part of that natural original energy.

5 (*from second sequence*)

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.
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 valved voice.

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

- Body and soul are equal. Neither should abase or lower themselves to the other.
- Here he is asking the personified soul to lie down with him in the grass.
- “Loose the stop from your throat”: in other words, this is a metaphor for releasing the cork from a bottle, release the soul from within your self.
- The language charges with sexuality: physical and representational.
- **pokeweed**: non-medicinal plant, tall with flowers and berries.
- **worm fence**: Americana fences: snake fences covered in moss, natural barriers of plant and stone, not brick and mortar notice, an agreement between human and nature.
- **kelson**: beam fastened to keel of boat for strength
- This should be viewed as a mystical experience.
- Whitman believed knowledge could be gained not solely through the senses, nor just the intellect, but rather through a strong union with the Self.
- Union with Self can be obtained by surrendering to the senses.
- This is contrary to the Eastern philosophies which believe you must release notions of self and senses in order to find the moment of eternal *now*.
- Everyone has a divine self.

11 *(from third sequence)*

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.

Section 11

- Categorizes people throughout this sequence, but in this section he isolates a parable of sorts of a young woman watching twenty-eight young boys skinny dipping in the nearby riverbanks.
- By isolating their images, in a video camera approach, he shows them without motive, or consequence—creating an idealized form for both urban/rural worlds.
He transcends America into a psalm of living, a metaphor for the world to follow.
- Human imagination glorified. Common man glorified.

- Ironically, Whitman is a contemporary of Karl Marx who glorified the common laborer who is struggling for the higher class' benefit and not their own benefit.
A great revolution would occur to equal out the balance of material goods.
- Interesting how one is demonized by capitalism and the other is shown as a saint for capitalistic ideals. Whitman is known for his secondary themes which show a celebration of the contemporary progression of democracy.
- Both Whitman and Marx are of poor working class backgrounds.

Whitman: May 31, 1819 to March 26, 1892

Marx May 05, 1818 to March 14, 1883

51 (*final sequence*)

The past and present wilt - I have fill'd them, emptied them.
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab.

Who has done his day's work? who will soonest be through with his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?
Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?