

# Walt Whitman || "The Sleepers"

---



# *The Sleepers*

---

**The theme** encompasses the notion the Sleep, like Death, is a Great Equalizer

- Eight sections, 184 lines in the 1855 edition
- Predates notions of twentieth century psychological studies, utilizing an early attempt at a collective “stream of consciousness.”
- As a whole, it celebrates the diversity in life, diversity of humanity *and*
- reaffirms the Transcendental ideologies,
- *and* reconfirms his own Transcendental themes in his other poems.
- The poem exists as another example of Whitman’s use of **free verse**.
- The theme plays off the notion that Death (Thanatos) & Sleep (Hypnos) were twin brothers for Ancient Greeks—
- Both Death and Sleep are states of suspension from reality: Sleep is a temporary limbo, whereas Death is a permanent condition of the body.
- The Dead, the Living, and the Sleeping are all equal in class and spirit.

# *The Sleepers*

---

**The persona-narrator** is again an idealized, dramatized figure: an Everyman who shares with the reader his vision and experiences.

**The structure** follows Whitman's other works:

- often utilizes present tense, –ing verb forms by doing this the reader is placed in the action as a participant as the poet-narrator travels across the landscape
- the narrator includes everyone/anyone is his litany of diverse examples of the American experience
- As in “Song of Myself,” this piece makes a random collection of eclectic people and situations; in appearance the themes modulate by in a wave-like tempo; the shifts are by random associations, not by compatible designs.
- Due to the large diverse examples, both poems promote the concept of individualism; a celebration of unique personalities.

# *The Sleepers*

---

- In lines 7-10 he moves quickly from the realm of innocence to the realm of adult experience.
- Notice the catalog is *not* set in a hierarchal, linear fashion:
  - > little children
  - > ennuyés—individuals lost in utter loneliness, based off “ennui”
  - > corpses
  - > drunkards
  - > onanists—masturbation
  - > those who have fallen in battle
  - > the insane
- These individuals are all in a different and extreme state of emotive being
- Specifically in line 9, the poet-narrator shows the cycle of life:  
as one enters into the world, another one exits.

# *The Sleepers*

---

- The narrator will show a connection of equality in the violence of murder:
  - > The murderer and the murdered have a bond of common history of violence between them.
  - > This is not to justify the act of killing, but rather show even in this extreme situation, there exists a level of commonality.
- Likewise those who suffer in a situation of unrequited love:  
the structure of the line inverts the noun and adjective— in a normal situation the phrase would read: “the female who experiences unrequited love sleeps...”
- As in “Song of Myself,” the narrator acts again as an omnipotent being, in this case, rather than just witnessing the diverse aspects of life, he also acts in a consoling and inspiring manner (ll 23-25).
- He lies down next to them individually.

# The Sleepers

---

- In lines 29-31, a new psychological level is applied to the theme:

I go from bedside to bedside... I sleep close with the other sleepers,

each in turn,

I dream in my dream all the dreams of the of the dreamers,

And I become the other dreamers.

- This acts as a transpositional moment; the poem equals a dream.
- This mirrors the 1849 poem written by E.A. Poe, “A Dream Within A Dream.”
- When compared side by side, despite the parallel phrasing, the two themes are radically different in approach to the metaphysical topic.
- The main difference which exists, Whitman is showing how collectively we are a cluster of individuals *with* a common bond. In Poe’s poem, the narrator is an individual isolated and *without* any connection to God, or to another person.

# *E. A. Poe || A Dream Within A Dream*

---

**This is another creative example of Poe's use of duality.**

- The first stanza is spoken to a loved one who has recently passed away.

The kiss upon the brow is significant; it is not on the lips or cheek or hand.

- > This section is delivered in a personal, depressed and morose tone.
- > Questions the notion of reality; questions the temporal state of living and of hopes and desires.
- > Life is fleeting; life appears to have no real meaning and seems as a dream.
- > The depression of losing a loved one causes him to lose meaning in life.

- The second stanza addresses an abstract idea of God in a Job-like moment.

- > The theme shifts here to a higher metaphysical level, using a metaphor of a handful of sand to represent the loss of loved ones.
- > As the persona addresses God, his isolation deepens, not lessens.
- > *Or* the speaker is swearing, and there is no God.

# *E. A. Poe || A Dream Within A Dream*

---

- His isolation parallels basic human experience; we relate to his feelings.
- With the emotive states in both stanzas, the reader builds a connection to the narrator in a paradoxical contradictory manner: a commonality is built, but unacknowledged.
- Poe's narrator suffers a complete loss within his individuality; it tears down connections to any other human near him. He becomes lost in a moment of angst and despair similar to the experiences of the Existentialist heroes of the twentieth century.
- The duality theme heightens with his realization that his isolation is locked in an additional dream-reality, a “doubled” mirror world of disillusion.
- As in “Sonnet—Silence,” Poe will use the shore/sea duality here to reinforce his concept of reality/dream.



# *E. A. Poe || A Dream Within A Dream*

---

- In this case, the grains of sand are symbols of the loved ones,  
*or* happy moments from the poet-narrator's life,  
*or* his unattained goals of future happiness.
- The more he tries to hold on to these symbols, to more he tries to keep them  
as a permanent fixture in his life, the more they slip away.
- Ultimately, his main theme is nothing lasts forever in the natural world.
- The poet-speaker laments and torments himself with an obsession to  
understand the meaning of life and humanity's placement in the universe.
- The poet-speaker is without a strong faith for support—
- whereas Poe's speaker falls into atheistic nightmare;  
Whitman's speaker shows a strengthening system of belief in God.

# *The Sleepers*

---

- Whitman's first sequence ends with a homo-centric event, ranging ll. 46-59; Whitman dissolves into a woman's physique experiencing an union transcending gender—
- *or*, due to the line break, the situation is made to *appear as if* he transpositioned himself.
- Either way, the remaining lines are charged with a tender, erotic sensibility.

## **As a whole the entire poem shows an universal acceptance**

of every person, every creed, every notion—the typical Whitmanisque Democracy and empathy for diversity of life.

- At night, bodies blur with the darkness— reality and spirituality blur.
- Where Poe likes to place divisions, Whitman blurs the lines.

# *The Sleepers*

---

**Section 2 introduces a new brief transpositional scene.**

- In this case the speaker becomes both the recent widow and the deceased.
- Not as a morbid reanimation of the flesh, but an acknowledgment of the process of death.
- The living and dead share a common representative “I” voice— and thus share the experiences of either state, and relate to one another.

# *The Sleepers*

---

## **Section 3 introduces another transpositional scene.**

- In this case the speaker makes connections with a drowning swimmer.
- The swimmer is represented as a middle-aged man, violently tossed in sea.
- This sequence acts as an example of a dying process, capturing a violent scene which the reader can empathize easily.
- The swimmer is not an allegory. However he symbolizes the nature of death. The notion that anyone can be taken unawares, at any time.
- The swimmer is wrestling with Nature; this is the process of life.

# *The Sleepers*

---

## **Section 7 and 8 shift to stronger metaphysical concepts.**

- New litany of names shown.
- Whitman shifts focus to include a wide range of *global* characters.
- Section 7 prepares the reader for the next phase: elements of mending.  
In ll. 147-148 he states “Peace is always beautiful./ The myth of heaven indicates peace and night.”
- Myth in this case is not to be read as “untrue” or “fiction,” but rather as a mystical experience, an explanation of the unknowable Divine Element.

# *The Sleepers*

---

- Section 8, the poem’s closing stanzas, heightens the theme by showing a massive dream of people dreaming, an equality of dualities in order to create forgiveness and reconciliation:  
father/son, mother/daughter, scholar/student, master/slave.
- At two specific intervals, both Darkness and Night each are personified as two different entities, shifting attention away from the reader.
  - > Close of section 1, the poet-speaker addresses Darkness—male (ll. 53-59).
  - > Close of section 8, the poet-speaker address Night—female (ll. 179-184).
- In the case of Night, she is represented in a maternal fashion; directly addressed as “O my mother” in the last line.
- In the poet-narrator’s analogy, the Night is a womb and a tomb, a temporary phase, a period of transition to the next incarnation.