Walt Whitman || Edgar Allan Poe
Whitman “The Sleepers”

The theme encompasses the notion that 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 of the diversity in life, the diversity of humanity and reaffirms the Transcendental ideologies,
  plus 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.
Whitman “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.
Whitman “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.
Whitman “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 24-26).
- He lies down next to them individually.
Whitman “The Sleepers”

- **In lines 30-32**, 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 other dreamers,

  And I become the other dreamers.

- This acts as a transpositional moment; the poem equals a dream.

- This mirrors the 1849 poem written earlier by **Edgar Allan 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.
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.
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 heros 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.
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.
Whitman “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.
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.
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.
Whitman “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.
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- 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 54-60).
  > 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.