

# Walt Whitman || Transcendentalism

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# *Transcendentalism* || *Whitman*

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## **System of thought, belief in essential unity of all creation**

- God exists in all of us — no matter who you are; even sinners or murderers, still contain the spark of godliness within themselves. No need for guilt.
- Personal insight is stronger than logic or experience: through insight a deeper inner truth can be found
- They encourage humanity to transcend the material world of experience and facts, and become aware of the spirit of the universe.
- Influenced by German Trans. Immanuel Kant, Platonic and neo-platonic thought, Eastern Philosophies
- Part of the Romantic Movement in Europe and the Abolitionist Movement
- Heavily involved in humanitarian causes

# Walt Whitman

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**If Transcendentalism needed a Bible, Whitman would have written it.**

- celebration of the diversity in life, diversity of God
- his style overall mirrors biblical passages
- parables throughout
- God here is an abstract principle of energy that is manifested in every living creature, as well as in every product of the Earth
- Whitman's major work is the long poem "Song of Myself"
- The entire piece is composed of 52 sections, 1346 lines.
- The poem exists without a formula or determination of regulations for line length or stanzas.
- It is believed he sat down and wrote it in one burst of inspiration.

# *Song of Myself overview*

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- despite the title, the theme is not limited to an ego-centric self, a solo being;  
the theme motions
  - > opens with poet-narrator
  - > encompasses America
  - > the world
  - > and then the full Universe
- The “I” does not reflect the poet Walt Whitman himself—  
the “I” is an idealized dramatized figure: an American workman without family background, an Everyman.
- Each section runs its course by subject.
- Originally the entire piece was published as one long poem in the 1856 edition, before the Civil War.

# *Song of Myself overview*

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- In future editions, 1867 (after the Civil War) he broke it into sections as it is normally taught in schools today.
- Although the full poem modulates in themes, in a wave-like tempo, the shifts are by associations not compatible designs.
- It flows as a psychological, *musical progression* rather than *analytic* sequence.
- The poem exists as an emotional narrative. Literary Critic Wynn Thomas compares the poem to symphony by Beethoven. The work shifts in moods and temperament, yet contains an optimistic overtone, optimistic message: everything will turn out well in the end.
- Realize this was written during a severe economic slump in America in 1856. Large amounts of jobs were lost. Northern and Southern states were in the middle of a chaotic argument soon to escalate into the Civil War—during the years 1861-1865.

# *Song of Myself overview*

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**Whitman celebrates the ordinary experience, the contemporary life in the 19th Century.**

- He celebrates the diverse people, the collective that make up the American landscape.

- In a sense this epic poem is a love song to humanity.

It is designed to demonstrate in a complex fashion that he does not belong to himself, any more than you belong to yourself. Humanity cannot exist as property.

# *Song of Myself overview*

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**Critic Malcolm Cowley groups the poems complete 52 sections into nine thematic sequences or movements (like classical music).**

- **First sequence:** (1-4)

The opening introduction presents the narrator as common worker.

Establishes the theme of worship of the Soul-Self; this element is a representation of individualism, not the emotional, reactionary personality.

- **Second sequence:** (5)

Establishes a theme of multi-levelled ecstasy; reaches aspects of a religious, sexual, metaphysical union. He talks to his Soul as a personified being.

He connects with God through union.

# *Song of Myself overview*

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- **Third sequence:** (6-19)

Here the narrator celebrates the miracle of common things, ordinary people.

He observes men and women in daily activities. He is a part of this life.

The persona begins a running theme of observation or witness—he is shown watching people *being* human.

- **Fourth:** (20-25)

Adam-like image persists here: the poet presented nude in nature. This acts as a symbolic representation of humanity as well as glorification of human physique.

- **Fifth:** (26-29)

This section presents a listing of the ecstasy of sensory:

sound, touch, results in a sexual union by the ending section of 29.



# *Song of Myself overview*

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- **Sixth:** (30-38)

Power of identification: relating self to spiritual space and time.

The world is mirror to the universe.

The Universal-Soul is identified. Included within the Soul of the universe are every thing living or dead, Hero or Criminal.

Crowley stresses Whitman did not deny evil as a presence infiltrating our lives, however, in another incarnation a person would have better opportunities for recognizing the strife.

Life and the Universe are both a *process*, not a analytical *structure*.

Neither element is static, non-changing.

Everything in the is in continual transformation.

# *Song of Myself overview*

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- **Seventh:** (39-41)

Superman concept: hero becomes healer, in a sense omnipotent, a positive force within the process of the Universe.

- **Eighth:** (42-50)

The poem begins to read more as a sermon with numerous prophecies.

Whitman uses increased notions of Biblical tones for proclamations.

- **Ninth:** (51-52)

The Poet bids farewell. Prepares for a unforeseen, future death.

He will wait for his future incarnation, whatever shape it will take.