

Notes on I Celebrate Myself and Sing Myself by Walt Whitman:

"Song of Myself" might be the most egotistical poem ever written: it's all about me, myself, and I. In the first line, American poet Walt Whitman kindly informs us that he is going to celebrate himself, and throughout 52 glorious sections, he does just that. It takes guts to write a long epic poem about yourself, and Whitman was nothing if not gutsy.

First published in 1855, without a title, as part of his collection *Leaves of Grass*, the work we now call "Song of Myself" just might be the most important and influential American poem out there. For one thing, it represents a huge break from the formal traditions of the past. Whitman wrote his verses without a regular form, meter, or rhythm. His lines are highly rhythmic, and they have a mesmerizing chant-like quality. Few poems are as fun to read aloud as this one.

The poem has also helped shape the idea of what it means to be an American. It is a "democratic" poem that draws all different kinds of people and places into itself and tries to forge them into a unity. As you read "Song of Myself, you might wonder why Whitman is so eager to be friends with, literally, every single person he has ever met. It might help to remember that the poem was written only a few years before the outbreak of the Civil War, and Whitman viewed friendship as the last hope to save a fractured union.

The 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* was Whitman's first published book of poems, and he kept revising and adding to this book throughout his life. Before becoming a published poet, Whitman had worked as schoolteacher and a journalist. He didn't go to fancy schools, and he taught himself writing by soaking up Shakespeare and other classics on his own. Whitman, and this poem especially, embody the ideal of "self-reliance." This principle was famously described by the American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson and is marked by a nonconformist spirit and a belief that the best way to do things is to go your own way. No surprise, then, that when Emerson read the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he became one of Whitman's biggest fans. He famously wrote Whitman a letter that began, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career."

But "Song of Myself" wasn't without its controversies. The poem's frank depictions of sexuality and eroticism earned it a somewhat scandalous reputation. Whitman's contemporary, the equally influential poet Emily Dickinson, wrote about Whitman in one her letters, saying: "You speak of Mr. Whitman. I never read his book, but was told it was disgraceful." When Whitman became more famous later in his career, he edited out some of the juiciest bits of "Song of Myself," which is why many readers, including Shmoop, prefer the first edition. (Whitman also tended to get a little long-winded in his later years.)

"Song of Myself" is an American classic, but we encourage you to exercise your own "self-reliance" by being open in your own reading of it. The poem means so many things to so many different people, and its diversity and openness are its greatest strength. It has influenced almost every major American poet of the 20th century, including T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Langston Hughes, Allen Ginsberg, and John Ashbery. It has also been profoundly important to writers of other nationalities, especially Latin American writers like Pablo Neruda and Jorge Luis Borges. In many ways, "Song of Myself" represents the best that American poetry has to offer.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

If you are an American or know anything about America, you will likely know and understand this poem even before you read a single line. No other poem so perfectly encapsulates all the noise, confusion, and grandeur of the American idea as well as this one. Put simply, you should care about "Song of Myself" because it's about you.

That's right, Whitman wasn't only writing about himself, a guy from Long Island named Walt Whitman. At a deeper level, he meant this poem to be universal. His poetic persona is like a big vacuum sucking up everyone and everything into itself. When, after September 11, 2001, the French newspaper *Le Monde* wrote the headline, "We Are All Americans," Whitman would have cheered, because that's exactly how he felt. He didn't mean in the narrow sense that everyone is or should be like the people living inside the borders of a single country. Nope, for Whitman, "America" was an ideal that anyone could strive for, an ideal of independence, equality, optimism, and brotherly love. (We'll just note in passing that Whitman's poetry has been an important source of wisdom for both Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama.)

Just look at how "Song of Myself" begins:

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

Now, the word "assume" can be mean "believe" or "take for granted," but it can also mean, "to take on" or "become." This second meaning becomes increasingly important throughout the poem, as Whitman tries to unite his identity with all different kinds of people, including you, the reader. He never judges and rarely criticizes. He is someone to whom you could tell your deepest, darkest secrets, and he'd probably chuckle, pat you on the back, and invite you for a walk. There's something comforting and uplifting about the way he tries to bring people together using words.

Unfortunately, Whitman didn't succeed in making all of his fellow Americans see the common bonds between them: the Civil War started five years after this poem (included in *Leaves of Grass*) was first published. But Whitman was endlessly optimistic, and he believed that the real "America" and the real "democracy" were still around the bend. As the end of the poem states, Whitman is still out there, somewhere, waiting for the rest of us to catch up with him.