

I Hear America Singing I Sit and Look Out

from *Song of Myself*

Poetry by WALT WHITMAN



“I sound my
barbaric yawp
over the roofs
of the world.”

Connect to Your Life

Images of America Many of Walt Whitman’s poems contain vivid images of America in the mid-1800s. What images do you think capture the spirit and reality of America today? Share descriptions or sketches with a small group of classmates.

Build Background

A Revolution in Poetry Walt Whitman’s first book of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, was so revolutionary in content and form that publishers would not publish it. After Whitman printed the book himself in 1855, many established poets and critics disparaged it. In 1856, the *Saturday Review* suggested that “if the *Leaves of Grass* should come into anybody’s possession, our advice is to throw them instantly behind the fire.”

Doubtless Whitman was shocked and hurt by such a reception, for he saw himself as capturing the spirit of his country and his times. In the preface to *Leaves of Grass* he wrote, “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” Whitman’s images encompass all of American life, including the common and “vulgar.” His lines are long and rambling, like the vastly expanding country. His language reflects the vigor and tang of American speech, resounding with new, distinctively American, rhythms. Most of his poems are marked by optimism, vitality, and a love of nature, free expression, and democracy—values often associated with the America of his day.



LaserLinks: Background for Reading
Biographical Connection

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS FREE VERSE Walt Whitman is generally credited with bringing free verse to American poetry. **Free verse** is poetry without regular patterns of rhyme and meter. Whitman, however, does use the following poetic devices to create rhythm:

Catalog There are frequent lists of people, things, and attributes.

Repetition Words or phrases are repeated at the beginning of two or more lines.

Parallelism Related ideas are phrased in similar ways.

ACTIVE READING STRATEGIES FOR READING FREE VERSE

Use the following strategies as you read Whitman’s free verse:

- Read the poems aloud, and listen to the rhythm of the lines.
- Notice where he uses the devices of catalog, repetition, and parallelism.
- Do not spend too much time on any one line; instead, appreciate the sweep of his images and ideas.
- The speaker can be identified with Whitman himself. Build a mental image of the speaker, particularly as you read “Song of Myself.”

I Hear America Singing

W A L T W H I T M A N

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe¹ and
strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
5 The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand
singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as
he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or
at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or
of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
10 The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows,
robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

I Sit and

Look Out

W A L T W H I T M A N

I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and
upon all oppression and shame,
I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men at anguish
with themselves, remorseful after deeds done,
I see in low life the mother misused by her children, dying,
neglected, gaunt, desperate,
I see the wife misused by her husband, I see the
treacherous seducer of young women,
5 I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequited love
attempted to be hid, I see these sights on the earth,
I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tyranny, I see
martyrs and prisoners,
I observe a famine at sea, I observe the sailors casting lots
who shall be kill'd to preserve the lives of the rest,
I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons
upon laborers, the poor, and upon negroes, and the like;
All these—all the meanness and agony without end I
sitting look out upon,
10 See, hear, and am silent.

GUIDE FOR READING

2 **convulsive**: intense and uncontrolled.

2–8 Notice how many sorrows the speaker lists in this poem. **What effect might this have on a reader?**

3 **low life**: the life of the lower classes.

5 **ranklings**: bitter feelings or resentments; **unrequited**: not returned.

7 **casting lots**: deciding by means of a random choice of objects (as in drawing straws).

Thinking Through the Literature

1. **Comprehension Check** Name one of the social injustices described in this poem.
2. How do you evaluate the speaker's response to the sorrows of the world?

THINK ABOUT

- what the speaker sees and hears
- why the speaker might respond with silence
- whether you think silence is the appropriate response

3. If Whitman were to write this poem today, do you think he would list the same sorrows or different ones? Explain your opinion.

from

Song of Myself

W A L T W H I T M A N

1

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

5 I loaf and invite my soul,
I lean and loaf 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.

10 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.

GUIDE FOR READING

1-3 Why do you think the speaker identifies the reader with himself at the very beginning of the poem?

10 in abeyance (ə-bā'əns): temporarily set aside.

11 sufficed at: satisfied with.

6

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands,

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,

Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.

16-25 What metaphors does the speaker use to describe what grass means to him?

18 remembrancer designedly dropt: a purposely dropped token of affection.

21 hieroglyphic: a system of symbols that represent meanings or speech sounds.

24 Kanuck, Tuckahoe, . . . Cuff: slang terms for various groups of people. A Kanuck (now spelled Canuck) is a Canadian, especially a French Canadian; a Tuckahoe is someone from the coast of Virginia; and a Cuff is an African American.

25-33 The speaker presents the grass as "the uncut hair of graves." Who are the dead that he includes in this extended metaphor?

27 transpire: emerge; ooze out.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old
mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
35 And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths
for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young
men and women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the
offspring taken soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and
children?

38-45 What concept of
the speaker express in th

40 They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait
at the end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
45 And to die is different from what any one supposed, and
luckier.

45 Why does the speaker
that to die is "luckier" th
people suppose?

52

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains
of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

48 **yawp**: loud, rough speech.

The last scud of day holds back for me,
50 It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the
shadow'd wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

49 **scud**: wind-blown cloud.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

53 **effuse . . . eddies**: scatter my
flesh in swirling currents.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
55 If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

54 **bequeath**: hand over, as if
in a will.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
60 Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

61 Why do you think the speaker
says he's "waiting for you"?

Writing Options

1. Literary Review Write a short review of the three Whitman poems, explaining whether you see consistency or contradiction in them. Read or display your review in class.

2. Free-Verse Poem Using Whitman's three poems as a model, write a free-verse poem about America

"I Hear America Singing"

"I Sit and Look Out"

"Song of Myself"

today. As a starting point, you might develop one or more of the images you came up with for the Connect to Your Life activity on page 396. Share your poem with the class.

Activities & Explorations

1. Collage of Images Using photos, drawings, or other images, create a collage that captures the spirit of one of the Whitman poems you have read. If

you have a drawing program on your computer and access to a scanner, you can combine images you create with ones scanned from magazines or other sources. You might even include lines from the poem in your collage. Display your work in the classroom.

~ VIEWING AND REPRESENTING

2. Interpretive Dance Create and perform a dance interpretation of one of Whitman's poems. Let the movements of the dance suggest the mood and content of the poem. ~ PERFORMING



Walt Whitman

1819–1892

Other Works

Democratic Vistas
Specimen Days

Early Experiences "I am large. I contain multitudes," says Walt Whitman in "Song of Myself." It is a fitting description of a man whose writing touches on all aspects of life—the unique and the commonplace, the beautiful and the ugly. Whitman knew country life as well as city life, having grown up in rural Long Island and then in crowded Brooklyn. His varied work life included jobs as an office boy, a typesetter and printer, a school teacher, a carpenter, a newspaper editor and journalist, a nurse during the Civil War, and a government clerk in the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Revolutionary Poetry His true life's work, however, was a book of poems called *Leaves of Grass*, which he began to work on in 1848. Whitman quit his job, moved in with his parents, and worked part-time as a carpenter while writing his poems. In 1855, unable to find a firm that

would publish his 12-poem book, he had it printed at his own expense. Throughout his lifetime, Whitman rewrote, revised, and expanded *Leaves of Grass*; the ninth and final edition in 1891 contained nearly 400 poems.

Literary Recognition Many critics thought the poems in *Leaves of Grass* "barbaric" and "noxious." They were shocked by the poems' radical style and suspicious of the poems' subject matter, particularly the vivid sexual imagery. Other readers, most notably Ralph Waldo Emerson, praised Whitman. Gradually, the literary world recognized the brilliance of the book. By the time the fifth edition was published in 1871, many well-known writers in England and America were traveling to Whitman's home in Camden, New Jersey, to visit him. Today *Leaves of Grass* is often regarded as the greatest, most influential book of poetry in American literature.

Author Activity

Neruda's Whitman Point out lines from the three Whitman poems that support Pablo Neruda's view of Whitman as a friend to the downtrodden and a promoter of "brotherhood on earth."