

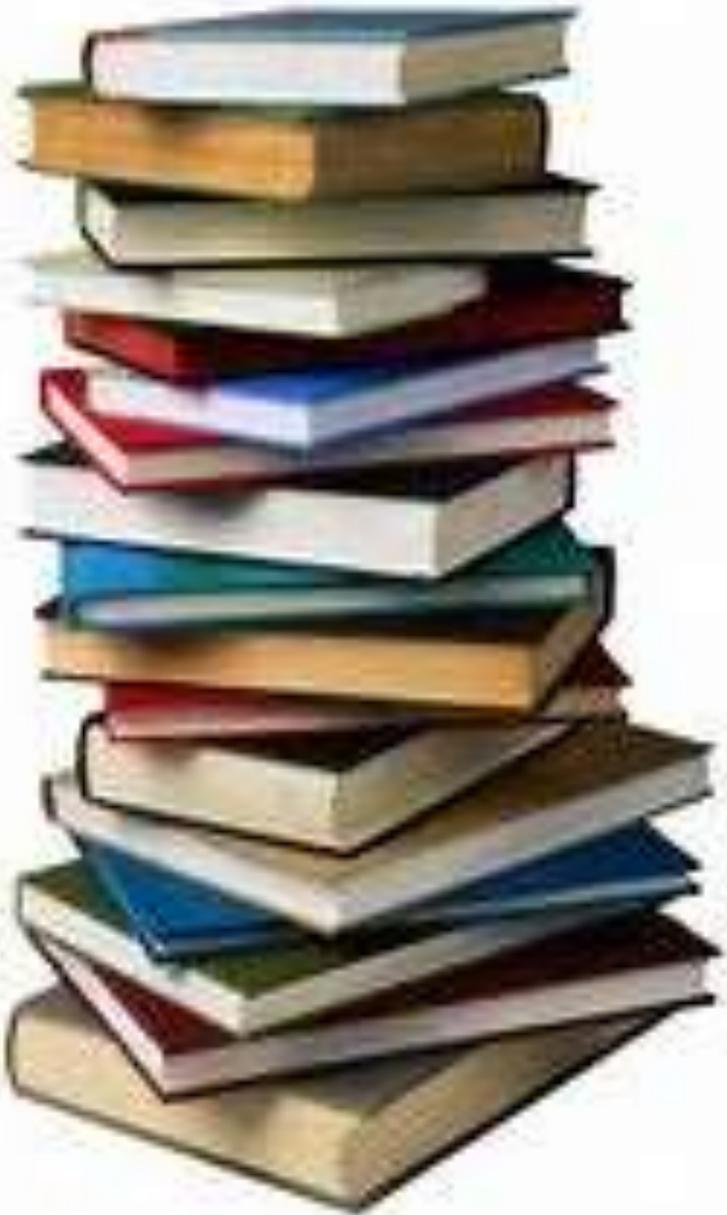
EC - 1 (B)
American Literature
Unit -III

Walt Whitman
Songs of Myself

(A Critical Analysis - 1 to 5)

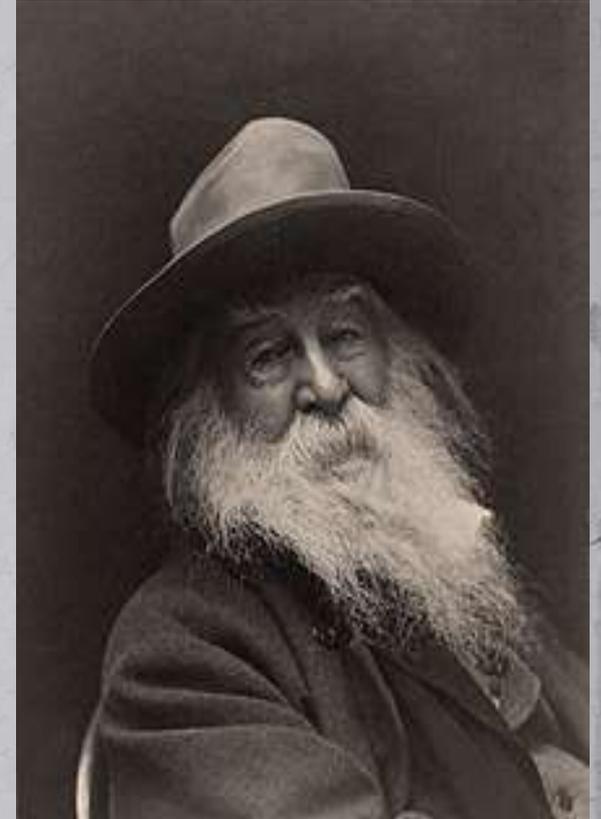
[Part - I]

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Walt Whitman: Introduction

- ❑ Walt Whitman was an American poet, essayist, and journalist.
- ❑ He was a part of the transition between transcendentalism and realism.
- ❑ He is often credited as the father of free verse.
- ❑ He is among the most influential poet in the American canon.
- ❑ Whitman is America's first democratic poet.
- ❑ His overarching themes - the individual, the nation, the body, the soul, and everyday life and work - mirror the primary values of America's founding.
- ❑ His poetry is for everyone.



Born: May 31, 1819
Died: March 26, 1892

Songs of Myself: An Introduction

Songs of Myself had no title in the first (1855) edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In 1856 it was called "A Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" and in 1860 it was simply termed "Walt Whitman." Whitman changed the title to "Song of Myself" in 1881. The changes in the title are significant in indicating the growth of the meaning of the poem.

There are three important themes:

- a) the idea of the self,
- b) the identification of the self with other selves, and
- c) the poet's relationship with the elements of nature and the universe.

Song of Myself, the longest poem in *Leaves of Grass*, is a joyous celebration of the human self in its most expanded, spontaneous, self-sufficient, and all-embracing state as it observes and interacts with everything in creation and ranges freely over time and space. The bard of the poem, speaking in the oracular tones of the prophet, affirms the divinity and sacredness of the entire universe, including the human body, and he asserts that no part of the universe is separate from himself—he flows into all things and is all things.





This "I" is immortal and persists through numberless human generations and through all the changing cycles of creation and destruction in the universe. It cannot be measured or circumscribed; it is blissful, serenely content with itself, and needs nothing beyond or outside itself for its own fulfilment.

'Song of Myself' is a good example of the stylistic features of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's style reflects his individualism. Words, for Whitman, have both a "natural" and a "spiritual" significance. Colloquial words unite the natural with the spiritual, and therefore he uses many colloquial expressions. He is also fond of using foreign words.

The catalog is another special characteristic of Whitman's poetic technique. He uses numerous images, usually drawn from nature, to suggest and heighten the impression of a poetic idea. These images appear to have no clear organization; yet, in effect, they have a basic underlying unity, usually involving a spiritual concept, which gives meaning and coherence to the apparently disconnected images or scenes.

Total 52 sections of *Songs of Myself* published in 1892.

Songs of Myself

(Section – 1)

- ❑ Whitman states that he is going to celebrate himself. It turns out, that he's celebrating not only himself, but all of humanity.
- ❑ He lays out some of his ground rules: we're going to believe ("assume") whatever he believes. At another level, we're going to "take on" whatever roles or personalities the speaker takes on.
- ❑ He offers up the atoms of his body as our own.
- ❑ He introduces us with his "soul." In this poem, the speaker and his soul are two slightly different things.
- ❑ So, Whitman hangs out with his soul, and they look at a blade of summer grass. (The title of the poetry collection to which this poem belongs is *Leaves of Grass*.)
- ❑ Whitman describes the air as perfume and says he could get drunk on it, but he won't let himself.
- ❑ He wants to get naked and go to the riverbank. He is in love with the air.

Songs of Myself

(Section – 2)

- ❑ Whitman makes a list of other things with which he loves to be in contact. Many of these things are also pretty sexy-sounding, like "loveroot" and "crotch."
- ❑ Imagine a happy dog running around the hills and fields and sniffing everything and barking with delight, that's what Whitman is doing.
- ❑ He views himself as a part of nature.
- ❑ He discusses the morning and sunrise. The beginning of the poem has a sunny, airy freshness that suggests the morning.
- ❑ He is singing a "song," which refers both to the poem and to music in the conventional sense.
- ❑ He asks about our sense of size and proportion. He wants to know what we would consider to be "a lot."
- ❑ He asks us about our reading habits, and we get the impression that he is being sly. He doesn't think we should be taking so much pride in book learning and in finding the "meaning" of poetry.
- ❑ He's going to teach us a lesson that could be right out of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance".

Songs of Myself

(Section – 3)

- ❑ Whitman says he doesn't have much faith in talk and "talkers."
- ❑ Talk is cheap, particularly when people talk about history. He might be referring to religious dogmas about how the world began and how it will end.
- ❑ For Whitman, all history is the history of the present moment. There is no before or after. For Whitman, erotic desire – the desire for new forms and new life – defines the world.
- ❑ He describes some of the "mysteries" of the world, like the way "opposites" can be "equals." The world is like a well-built house or a well-bred horse.
- ❑ Whitman is a raging optimist. For him, it's not a question of whether the glass is half empty or half full: the glass is under a waterfall.
- ❑ Speaking of water, while the talkers discuss things like metaphysics and the nature of the spiritual world, Whitman takes a bath.
- ❑ While "admiring" himself in the bath, he says that every inch of him is beautiful. He seems to be contrasting his view with the Puritan sense of shame in some "dirty" body parts or functions.
- ❑ Whitman is a healthy, and the world seems healthy to him. He wants to tell his eyes not to look into the future, but instead to figure out ("cipher") himself.

Songs of Myself

(Section – 4)

- ❑ Having disposed of the "talkers," Whitman moves on to the "trippers and askers."
- ❑ His days are filled with questions and other thoughts that "trip" him up. These are just normal social issues and worries, like the news and whether his friends like him.
- ❑ These things are part of his (and everyone's life), but "they are not the Me myself."
- ❑ It seems we might have another character on our hands, like the "Soul."
- ❑ The Me Myself is Whitman's most inner nature. This guy doesn't care about all these worldly concerns. He stands apart from them, looking on with curiosity.
- ❑ Still, there were times when Whitman used to get involved in day-to-day concerns, when he used to argue and compete with people. But the Me Myself doesn't argue, he just observes.

Songs of Myself

(Section – 5)

- ❑ He tells his soul he believes in it, and that his "other" nature (the one concerned with day-to-day worries) must be kept in its place.
- ❑ Again he invites the soul to hang out in the grass. He wants the soul to hum a pleasant tune.
- ❑ Whitman talks about having an erotic encounter with his own soul.
- ❑ They were lying in the grass together in June, when suddenly Whitman's soul gave him the most soulful kiss you can imagine. The kiss reaches all the way to the speaker's heart.
- ❑ At the end of the section, we get a flavour of Whitman's religious beliefs. He thinks that God is a part of his own nature and not a separate being. This would have been considered blasphemy by most Christians of his time.
- ❑ He has an epiphany about the world being limitless and everyone being his brother or sister.
- ❑ Love is a "kelson of the creation." A kelson is a beam that helps to keep a ship steady. In other words, Whitman is saying that love helps to keep the world steady.