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## UNIT 8: WALT WHITMAN'S *SONG OF MYSELF*

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### 8.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit, you will be able to

- Know in detail about Walt Whitman's Life and his only book of poems, *Leaves of Grass*
- Comprehend the poem *Song of Myself* in critical detail
- Understand "Song of Myself" as an epic
- Locate biographical elements in the poem vis-à-vis the poet's life
- Draw connections between the society and the poem (democracy, nature, religion)
- Understand the structure of the poem through the use of unconventional language

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### 8.1 INTRODUCTION

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#### 8.1.1 Biography of Walt Whitman

In 1816, John Keats, while attending his dying brother Tom wrote to his brother George who had emigrated to Kentucky: "If I had a prayer to make for any great good next to Tom's recovery, it should be that one of your children should be the first American poet. I have a great mind to make a prophecy and they say prophecies work out their own fulfilment." (*Voices*

and Visions IX.) Tom did not recover and George's "little child /o' / western child" as Keats called the expected child in his accompanying poem, did not become a poet. But the earnest hope of Keats for a poetic lineage in America has remained unfulfilled. The new world produced, in its own time, a new kind of poetry; one not yet fully understood or easily comprehensible.

The poets who initiated the art of writing in America knew that a new land and a new language needed new rhythms, new genres, and "new thresholds, new anatomies," as Hart Crane puts it in *Voices and Visions*. Keats' England was a long-tamed agricultural land describable in terms of lambs and robins, apples and swallows. America possessed a different kind of wilderness. It exhibited new varieties of flora and fauna as Wallace Stevens beautifully explains in these lines, "Deer walk upon our mountains"/"Sweet berries ripening the wilderness" in their new land (*Voices and Visions X*). Although the English literary inheritance seemed seductive and was a towering presence in comparison with American poetry, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson began a new chapter in the history of American poetry, at par with English poetry. While poets like Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane and Robert Lowell looked at their autobiography in their poetry, it was Whitman who concentrated on writing about his own country and its people.

Whitman was born in a farming community near Huntington, Long Island, and was the second child among nine children. When he was four, the family moved to Brooklyn, a town of about 7,000 people which transformed into a large city during his lifetime. Whitman continued to spend much of his time visiting his grandparents in rural Long Island becoming familiar with the country-side and with the shores of the Atlantic Ocean nearby. In Brooklyn, he lived at the edge of a great harbour and a ferry ride across it took him to Manhattan Island, the Metropolis of New York City.

Whitman's father worked, never successfully, as a carpenter. The senior Whitman was not an educated man, but he did read the political essays of Tom Paine, one of the guiding spirits behind the American Revolution. The family personally knew Paine, then an old man living in Brooklyn. Another friend was Elias Hicks, a leader of the Quaker religious sect whose doctrine was that the true worship of the Divinity must be experienced as an "inner light" within the individual worshipper. Walt Whitman idolized both of these independent-spirited men.

After only six years of formal education, Whitman left school at the age of eleven to work as an apprentice printer. He worked as a printer till 1835 and from 1836 to 1838 he worked as a schoolteacher in a number of Long Island schools. In 1838, he began a career in journalism which he pursued intermittently for over twenty years. At the same time, he began writing poems and stories which were sentimental, imitative, and unimaginative. Many of the editorials he wrote for Brooklyn, New York, and Long Island have more spirit and originality; particularly in his espousal of partisan political causes and in his opposition to slavery. But when one reads even the best of Whitman's journalistic writings through the 1840's and early 1850's and then turns to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, it is as if "a poet had been born overnight" to write this remarkable book. (Michael 282).

From 1855 until his death in 1892, Whitman devoted himself to the “growth” of his only book *Leaves of Grass*. He tried his hand at some other professions too. He was a newspaper editor from 1857 to 1859. Then, during the Civil War, he visited soldiers in the hospitals of Washington bringing them solace and companionship. From 1865 to 1873 he worked in government agencies in Washington. But his main efforts were in the continuous revision of poems already published in the writing of new ones which he added to each subsequent edition of *Leaves of Grass* and also in the re-ordering of the book each time to form a new organic whole. During his lifetime, nine books appeared with the title *Leaves of Grass*, seven of them markedly different in content and organisation. Whitman completed work on the final volume while he was on his deathbed. Our prescribed poem, “Song of Myself” is one of the poems from the book *Leaves of Grass*. Some of the other significant poems are “Crossing Brooklyn Bridge,” “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” “A Passage to India” and “A Song of the Open Road.”

### **8.1.2 Whitman’s friends**

Bronson Alcott and Thoreau were first in a long line of friends who saw Whitman as he wanted to be seen: free of social niceties, toweringly physical yet observant and gentle, healthy, innocent; a man acting and dressing as he pleased, who was in all things the man of his poems. A young Boston clergyman Moncure Conway had rightly said in 1855: “His eye can kindle strangely; and his words are ruddy with health. He is clearly his Book” (Zweig 266). Another remarkable friend that Whitman won through his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was on his way toward being canonized as America’s best-known and most high-minded man of letters. Emerson could not have missed the words of a reviewer, an unfriendly critic Rufus Griswold about the book: “the bolder results of a certain transcendental kind of thinking” (Zweig 267). Immediately, he wrote a letter to Whitman in which he expressed his joy about his “free and brave thought”. He also added: “I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. But the expression “I greet you at the beginning of a career” enchanted Whitman so much that he embossed it on the spine of his second edition of the book (Zweig 266).

Whitman’s friend John Burroughs was awed by his cold blue eyes which resembled apertures of empty sky. Maurice Bucke described someone; probably himself only, experiencing a euphoric glow for months after meeting Whitman. After the Civil War, soldiers described the magnetic effect of his presence in the hospital wards. By the sheer power of his personality, he seemed to haul the sick bodies to safety like the healer in “Song of Myself”: “To anyone dying...thither I speed and twist the knob of the door,/ Turn the bedclothes toward the foot of the bed,/ Let the physician and the priest go home” (Whitman, 1007-1009).

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## **8.2 “SONG OF MYSELF” AS AN EPIC**

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The great epic poems have been masterpieces of inclusion. To the classical Greeks *Iliad* was a kind of Bible, not only because of its solemn heroic code but because the poem moved in expanding circles of knowledge. While

depicting Troy and Helen, Hector and Achilles, it scrupulously caught up quantities of knowledge about rituals and the gods, techniques of warfare, a medically exact description of serious wounds, weapons making, and in the extended similes, countless tableaux of ordinary living. In this sense, "Song of Myself" is an epic too. It is a masterpiece of inclusion, although it deliberately inverts the familiar epic ambition, it does not tell a story. Its hero has not accomplished any grand actions; rather, his grand action is the poem itself. The hero of "Song of Myself" is an ordinary man who has led a remarkably commonplace life.

### 8.2.1 Whitman's Identity

Whitman's catalogues extend across half the poem in a broad associative flow. They are the very workings of self-change. The digestive and devouring action of the poem passes through them. The open road is also an open mind, an open body, and an open mouth. The singer emerges from the journey, fleshed with his increased substance: "Who goes there! Hankering, gross, mystical, nude?/ How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?" (Whitman 389-390). We know that he has been eating the very world. We hear the boastful American voice that Whitman extracted from the booster journalism of his day. It included the tall stories and the folklore that American glamour of exaggeration which had made Mike Finn and Daniel Boone into frontier giants and the Founding Fathers into saints. Whitman's fleshed and awakened self speaks American on a large scale:

"One world is aware and by far the largest tome, and that is myself/ And whether I come to my own today or in ten thousand or ten million years,/ I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheerfulness I can wait" (Whitman 416-418).

The shy solitary self, observing a spear of grass in the earlier lines of the poem has extracted strength from his 'beef' and now he will shout his name: "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,/ Disorderly fleshy and sensual...eating drinking and breeding,/ No sentimentalist... no stander above men and women or apart from them... no more modest than immodest" (Whitman 497-499). The anonymity is broken; the singer reveals himself as an American, 'one of the roughs'. He has eaten and drank; he has lain naked on the grass and travelled along an open road of appetizing sensations. He has also made this poem and now his name bursts from his lips. Like Odysseus crowing his name to the blinded Cyclops, Whitman's singer has made a name for himself. In the line 499 of the first poem in his first book, the name Walt Whitman enters literature. For more than a decade, he had been signing his short stories: "Walter Whitman", and his editorials, 'WW' or 'Paumanok', when they were signed at all. His by-line in James J. Brenton's 1849 anthology, *Voices from the Press*, had been "Walter Whitman". The receipts from his contractual work as late as 1854 were usually signed "Walter Whitman, Jr." To his family and friends on the other hand, he had been Walt all along, probably because his father was Walter, George Whitman remembered.

Now he would be Walt to everyone, as Emerson had decided to be Waldo instead of the hated Ralph, and Thoreau had decided to be Henry David instead of the David Henry he had been born with. While these are not



new names, they are not quite the old ones either. Whitman chose to make his life and his work speak with one voice and to name that voice Walt Whitman. Unlike "Walter Whitman, Jr", Walt Whitman did not claim to be a professional anything. He was simply himself: a public man created by his poems, who lived in his words and was nourished by them.

### **8.2.2 Freedom**

The poem "Song of Myself" in its amorphous structure and in its arrogant tone, exemplifies the dominant principle it incorporates: the love of freedom. "I wear my hat as I please," he boasts, "indoors or out" (Whitman 40). He approves what he calls the pioneer's "boundless impatience of restraint" (Whitman, 157) and declares himself as the spokesman of those "whose laws, theories, convention can never master" (Whitman 297). For this assumption of freedom he finds authority and examples in nature: "I see that the elementary laws never apologize" (Whitman 411)

He sometimes envies the animals because he attributes their apparent happiness to their freedom from social responsibility: "They do not sweat and whine and shout about their condition / They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins/ They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God" (Whitman 686-688). Nature, he believes, is not only free but also good. "How perfect is the earth," he exclaims, "and the most minute thing upon it" (Whitman 298). He imagines that man might be similarly perfect if he were equally free and therefore, resolves to throw away man-made standards and habits and to live like nature: "I harbour for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard / Nature without check with original energy" (Whitman 11-12).

America's dream of liberation had seemed to be concentrated in Whitman: liberation from the feudal past, from English manners, liberation from social roles and the artificial distinctions conferred by the tailor. Also, liberation from sexual prudishness, the fear of death and death itself. His cultural ancestors had been Gargantua and Pantagruel and Rousseau's "natural man", and Wordsworth's country poet. His road was William Blake's "road of excess." The mystical German shoemaker Jacob Boehme had come before; and those self-reliant Christian heretics who were ruled by the "inner light" and by the anarchic purity of impulse. Then there were those antinomians, who as Quakers, had become so improbably respectable in Whitman's America. All of these and more had contributed to Walt Whitman's larger-than-life voice.

### **8.2.3 Lover of nature and the present world**

As a votary of freedom, Whitman was a lover of nature. He was really enamoured of the day-break: "The little light fades the immense and diaphanous shadows (Whitman, 551). In fact "A morning glory" at his window satisfies him "more than the metaphysics of books" (Whitman 549). Equally, he is thrilled with the pleasures of the "Earth of departed sunset earth of the mountain misty-top! / Earth of vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue" (Whitman 440-441). He is attracted towards the sea too. Beholding the "crooked inviting fingers' of the sea, he addresses the sea, "Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse" (Whitman 449-452). Whitman's passionate love for earth compelled the author M. Jimmie

Killing to include Whitman in the list of “eco-friendly poets” in his book on *Walt Whitman and the Earth*. Whitman’s poetry forms a powerful record of life in an aging, war-torn nation in an increasingly troubled landscape.

Since everything in nature is perfect in its time and place, Whitman accepted his own world as the best possible world under the circumstances: “I will show,” he declares, “that there is no imperfection in the present and can be none in future,” (Whitman 18). If the world was reduced again to its primordial condition, it would “surely bring up again where we now stand and surely go as much farther” (Whitman 70). The human race shares the same blessing of irrepressible progress (Ibidp.71). This view of the world is closer to the eighteenth century conception of progress than to the evolutionism of Darwin. For having outgrown the past, Whitman seems to think he can dispense with it and forget it. He examines his inheritance, admires it and then dismisses it to stand in his own place in the present.

#### 8.2.4 Sex

Since all natural things are equally good, the body is for him an object of reverence as much as the soul is. Every part and function of this body shares in this holiness. “Not an inch”, he remarks, “nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest” (Whitman 57). He adds he is “the poet of the Body” and he is also the “poet of the Soul” (Whitman 422). Since he loves his body so much he observes, “I dote on myself” (Whitman 544). Whatever happens in his body excites him so much with joy. He wonders and remarks, “I cannot tell how my ankles bend” (Whitman 546). This love for the body did not deter him from writing about sex. According to him it is “Always the procreant urge of the world” and “Always a knit of identity, always a distinction, always a breed of life” (Whitman 45-47). Due to his free treatment of sex in his poems, he received critical remarks. The author is “as unacquainted with art as a hog is with mathematics,” read a review of *Leaves of Grass*, reminiscent of the response to that other unconventional work of the 1850’s, Melville’s *Moby Dick*. In 1865, he was abruptly dismissed from a government position as his superior happened to read some pages which he considered obscene. Yet his friends got him another position and an admirer wrote a biography praising the poet and his poetry, attacking the literary censorship on principle.

#### 8.2.5 Love for democracy

Referring to America, Whitman remarked, “Here is not merely a nation but a teeming of nations” (Whitman 2). Further, he adds that “the genius of the United States is not best in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlours, nor even in the newspapers or inventors...but always most in the common people” (Whitman 10). A similar idea is portrayed in “Song of Myself” when he cites his country as “One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest the same,” (234). He sings of all disparate people: “Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion / A farmer, a mechanic, artist, gentleman. sailor, quaker, / Prisoner, ferryman, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest” (247-249). He has no disparity for people as the “common air that bathes the globe” (360). He gives food and warmth to the “runaway slave” (189) and also glorifies “The negro that drives the long dray of the stone-

yard” (225). Likewise, along with the pedlar who “sweats with his pack on his back” and the prostitute who “draggles her shawl” Whitman also enumerates “The President holding a cabinet council” (302,305, 308).

Whitman adopted the spirit of agitation popularized by reformers to arouse the moral conscience of the nation. The Brooklyn preacher he most admired, Henry Ward Breecher, declared in an antislavery speech of 1851: “Agitation is the thing in these days for any good” (Paxton Hibben 187). Whitman came to think that he, above all, was the one chosen to agitate the country, “I think agitation is the most important factor of all,” he once declared (Traubel 30). In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, he announced that in a morally slothful age, the poet is better equipped to “make every word he speaks draw blood... he never stagnates” (9). Key lines in his poems chose this zestful tone: “I am he who walks the States with a barb’d tongue, questioning everyone I meet”; “Let others praise eminent men and hold up peace, I hold up agitation and conflict” (Fischer 356, 401).

The poet was appalled not only by slavery but also by the growing corruption in government. Corruption in the 1850s became entrenched in American politics, especially in Whitman’s New York. In 1852 the infamous board of aldermen known as the “Forty Thieves” took power in Manhattan. In his 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman condemns the “swarms of cringers, suckers, dough faces, lice of politics, and planners of sly involutions for their own preferment to city offices” (10).

Another alarming social phenomenon was the growing inequality between the rich and the poor. With the rise of market capitalism, class differences in America widened far more rapidly between 1825 and 1860 than either before or after. Novels by George Lippard, George Thompson, and Ned Buntline depicted upper-crust figures like bankers and lawyers in nefarious schemes while poor people starved. Whitman absorbed the language of working-class protest. In “Song of Myself”, he repeated the oft-made charge that the ‘idle’ rich cruelly appropriated the products of the hard-working poor: “Many sweating and ploughing and thrashing and then the chaff for payment receiving, / A few idly owning, and they the wheat continually claiming” (580-588).

### 8.2.6 Religion and ethics

Whitman was not coming after the pioneering thought of Emerson about American democracy and the experimental living of Thoreau to practice democracy with the opportunity to give them a settled creedal expression but was actually attempting to void the deadening influence of a fixed creed. He strove to remain closer to the soul of man than the Over-Soul of Emerson would permit and to stay near the company of men than the solitude of Thoreau could endure. The scholarly and polite Emerson was superior to Whitman in terms of elegance. But Emerson did not have the wide range of human sympathies that Whitman had. Of course, Thoreau knew much more about the out-of-doors than Whitman did, but Thoreau was not congenial to human fellowships like Whitman was. He had no particular religion or philosophy as he insists in his “Song of Myself”: “I have no chair, no church, no philosophy” (1203). Whitman’s religious philosophy has as little use for the escapism of Nirvana as the other worldliness of the Christian Heaven.

What is unique in his religion is that it is man-centred, it is wholly humanist. To quote again from "Song of Myself": "And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own, / And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own" (92-93).

Similarly, his morality and his ethics are not straight-laced Puritanism, nor are they anything like the Nietzschean code of aristocracy; it is not better than man at his worst still struggling for survival. It therefore includes promethean ethics. It is not a morality quenching desire in the yearning for peace and tranquillity; it has nothing in common with the morals of the religions of despair. His exhortation to man is to accept life as such:

"Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever and doubtful news, the fitful events, "Those come to me days and nights and go from me gain,/ But they are not of Me myself" (73-74).

In fact, the acceptance of life's trials and tribulations will strengthen our mind. Whitman's effort to be inclusive, to recognize and give a place to everything, to be the poet of evil as well as of good did not make him immoral or moral. It actually gave his morality and his ethics a much larger and universal content.

### 8.2.7 Out of doors scenes

As Whitman had abundant love for man and this universe, he liked to be out-of doors always. In the American idiom, progress and personal betterment were not merely hopeful ideas. Actual roads led to their fulfillment: roads heading from New England's rocky fields to the "valley of Democracy" in Ohio, from country to city and city to country. The Whitman family's decades-long swing in Whit's youth between their West Hills, Long Island farm and Brooklyn was a small reflection of the mobility that Americans considered a privilege. Thomas Hart Benton's obsession with a transcontinental railroad was thinking raised to a higher power. Thoreau chose to walk a mere mile out of town and then wrote about his "journey", using images of wilderness and vast travel.

America's obsession with the out-of-doors drove Poe to imagine his heroes locked up in coffins, vaults, and thickly draped rooms as if to escape the din of the national temperament. But Whitman did something more difficult. Having heard the din, he took the vulgar symbols and filled them with his own meanings. Not only did Whitman unhouse himself in his poems, he unhoused the poems. Here is another measure of the complexity he was capable of in managing symbols. His "perfumes" and "shuttered houses" stand for the distilled language and closed forms his poems forsake, as they openly expand on their "road". In Whitman's view, his poems are a kind of out-of-doors; they are language at one with nature, not set against it with "chains" of rhyme and formal rhythm. They are leaves of grass, not the leaves of books: "The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form" (Whitman 5)



## 8.2.8 Unconventional form in language

Another reason for the unpopularity of Whitman's poetry was its thoroughly unconventional form. To the readers of his time, accustomed to regular rhymes and rhythms, it did not look like poetry with its unpredictably long lines in free verse, its reiteration of words and phrases and its catalogues of names. But it had won the applause of Emerson. He recognized in Whitman an answer to his earlier call for a self-reliant American poet who could shrug aside the fetters of traditional metre in favour of a "metre-making argument" (Zweig 267).

All poetry is language to be sure but no other poetry is so importantly *oral* language in its motivation and style. Throughout the poem, the strong relationship between the poet 'I', and the reader "you" is maintained well. In "Song of Myself", the 'I' as speaker organizes the communication in relation to his presence. In line 8, when he observes "I, now thirty-seven years old...begin," he means that he was that old when the poem-utterance was printed and he remains thirty seven while we are reading the poem. This poem is like a play. In Whitman's dramatization he dies at the end of this poem (and revives to die again in "So Long!"). But along the way, he speaks to us as our contemporary. A passage near the end of the poem reads; "Listener up there! What have you to confide to me? (Whitman 1321). The listener is you who are now reading this sentence. Whitman writes as though he were talking to his readers directly. That is why he calls you 'Listener' rather than 'Reader'.

While all other poets had been content with the stock paraphernalia of the poet, he surpassed them all in his unique difference of his symbolism. In the first place, he took himself as a symbol. He extols: "I celebrate myself and sing myself" (Whitman, line1). Secondly, he conceived the two selves, one symbolized by the body, and the other the roving spirit, or that personality which my take on the almost infinite variety of forms, not only of human characters, but transfigured in the endless situations and experiences that man may have. The abundance of those images were the occasion for Whitman's extraordinary catalogues of things and persons, which in their human perspective are more significant and sublime than Homer's catalogue of the ships, a much praised passage. In Section 24, he identifies himself with numerous things: "trickling sap of maple," "fibre of manly wheat," "sweaty brooks and dews," "sun so generous," and "Vapors lighting and shading my face" (536,537,538,539). In section 15, he catalogues varied people: "the married and unmarried children," "the carpenter," the duck-shooter," "the farmer," "the spinning-girl," and "the lunatic" (271,272, 273). These are only a few examples. Both sections 15 and 33 are famous as catalogues and are often mentioned by Whitman's critics. Referred to as "inventory" by Emerson and as "thousand of brick" by Thoreau, the catalogues carry a language comparable to the extant lists in oral literature of the ancient times (Hollis 52).

Whitman rejects the contrivances of rhyme and metre and replaces them with other devices drawn from oratorical rhetorics. His lines are not prose paragraphs cut up into segments of uneven length but, rather, fervent expressions of a would-be Jacksonian prophet speaking with "professional"

skill and energy. Repetition of words, phrases, and syntactical groupings is another linguistic and artistic feature in which Whitman follows an oratorical tradition going back to classical and biblical periods. He insists on man's goodness in his nature. Hence he remarks, "The wonder is always and always how there can be a mean man or an infidel" by repeating the word "always" (Section 22 Line 476). He extols his greatness by repeating "I know" time and again: "I know I am solid and sound," "I know I am deathless," "I know I am August" (Section 20-Lines-403, 404, 407). Another linguistic feature that Whitman as poet- speaker adopts is the usage of deictic words i.e. indexical words. When the poet refers to the listener, he calls, "Listener up there!" (Section 51-Lines 1321). He points out the different scientists: "This is the lexicographer, this the chemist," "This is the geologist," "this is a mathematician" (Section 23-Lines 487,489). The deictic words and phrases give the text an immediacy and everyday reality rarely found in the elevated, formal, refined and distanced poetry of Whitman's contemporaries.

A major linguistic factor, speech act, is appropriately named for "Song of Myself" is more speech than conventional poem. The term refers to an utterance that carries out what it is saying as it is being said. When the judge utters, "I sentence you to five years," he performs the legal function with his statement. Such statements are called performatives and they are distinguished from connotative or declarative statements. In "Song of Myself" the first and last lines are both speech acts: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself", "I stop somewhere waiting for you." A speech act proposes and imposes on the listener some action or reaction. Early in "Song of Myself" the speech acts are fairly mild, as "Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems" (33). But the opening questions in section 20 set up the now stronger speech act: "All I mark as my own you shall offset it with your own, / Else it were time lost listening to me" (Lines 392-93). These speech acts continue and grow in strength and intensify. Indeed after section 42, where the poet announces, "My own voice, orotund sweeping and final" (Line 1055), the rest of this longest of his poems is almost a series of speech acts.

One other linguistic feature that Whitman uses skilfully and rhetorically in the poem "Song of Myself" is negation. Surprisingly, Whitman inserts many more negatives than any other American or English poet although he is accepted as the most optimistic writer of them all. The lines 40-43, in the oratorical passage delight in the balance of thought and expression as does the most artful poem:

There was never any more inception than there is now,  
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,  
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,  
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

The memorable passage is that about the animals: "Not one is dissatisfied with, not one is demented with the mania of owning things, /Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago" (689-690). In fact, it is about the "civilized" people whose limitations are thus brilliantly excoriated. A precedent in this concept appears in seventeenth century

English prose work *The Centuries* by Thomas Treherne, who argues that “the barbarous opinions, and monstrous apprehensions, which we nickname civility” make modern people more barbarous than the “rude and barbarous Indians” who “gonaked and drink water and live upon roots” but “are like Adam or Angels in comparison to us” (1660).

There are also more questions in “Song of Myself” than in any comparable poem on record. Like the negatives, the interrogatives support and emphasize the positive response Whitman hopes for. In lines 30-32 the questions are directed to the reader-listener: “Have you reckon’d a thousand acres mush? Have you reckon’d the earth much? / Have you practis’d so long to learn to read? / Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems? But some questions are inserted in a narrative sketch and thus are addressed only indirectly to us. The questions in the famous catalogue Section 33 would break the spell of the amazing enumeration.

The intentions of “Song of Myself” is the dramatization of the poet. He is speaking about himself and presenting himself in numerous episodes, but his professed purpose is to get us, the reader-listeners to understand and accept life as he does. He cannot come into our world nor can we truly join his. But through his bold and dexterous use of deixis, speech acts, negatives, and questions, he has created a middle world; the imaginary world we inhabit while reading his poem, in which we can meet and interact.

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### **8.3 CONCLUSION**

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The poem “Song of Myself” is an evidence to prove that Whitman was a model of Goethe’s words: “What a man wishes for in his youth, he obtains abundantly in his old age” (Zweig 274). For years the Whitman family had been obsessed with health due to their pitiable declining fortunes, their sicknesses, and their unravelling heredity. The family’s flawed heredity affected Whitman too. At forty, he looked like an old man. Even before going to Washington, he had begun to suffer from dizzy spells and periodic weaknesses which he attributed to sunstroke. By his mid-forties his health had permanently failed and a few years later, he was partly paralyzed by a stroke. But in 1855 and 1856, he sang about his “magnetism” and his radiant bodily health and offered to pull his readers and all of America up to his gigantic level. It was because he wished powerfully that he could be a new man. He also wished that he could transcend the limits of the ordinary, while yet remaining a representative, ordinary man. He wished to be the focus of a vast flow of personalities, lovers, bodies, skills, voices, and he called this flow “democracy”. And there were private wishes too. He wished to be his mother’s champion, a father to his brothers and sisters; to wrench himself free of his family’s aura of failure and ill-health. These wishes were a lens concentrating his will. And now it seemed he had gotten what he wished for.

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### **8.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : POSSIBLE QUESTIONS**

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1. Give Whitman’s ideas expressed in his poem “Song of Myself.”

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2. Compare Whitman's views on Religion and Ethics with that of Emerson and Thoreau.

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3. Write an essay on the linguistic techniques used in the poem "Song of Myself".

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