

Whitman



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

" Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" summary This poem first appeared in the 1856 edition and received its final modifications for the 1881 edition. While " Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," like most of Whitman's poems, contains little in the way of a describable formal structure, it features a great deal of random internal patternings created by the repetition of words and phrases. This sense of repetition and revisiting reinforces the thematic content of the poem, which looks at the possibility of continuity within humanity based on common experiences." Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" commentary

This poem seeks to determine the relationship of human beings to one another across time and space. Whitman wonders what he means (not as a poet but as another anonymous individual) to the crowds of strangers he sees every day. He assumes that they see the same things he does, and that they react in the same way, and that this brings them together in a very real sense. This is different than the " what I assume you shall assume" credo of " Song of Myself." Here Whitman's sense of shared spaces and shared experiences is akin to that of the Romantics, namely Wordsworth and Coleridge. This poem can be profitably compared to Wordsworth's " Tintern Abbey" and Coleridge's " This Lime-tree Bower." In both of those poems someone important to the poet—Wordsworth's sister, Coleridge's friend—is taken to a place that has been important to the poet. Wordsworth accompanies his sister, and is able to take delight in seeing her repeat his experience. Coleridge is not able to go with his friend, however, and he sits at home, wondering if his friend's experience will have any meaning for either of them. While Wordsworth is more concerned with the idea of the power of place, Coleridge, like Whitman, is more interested in the relevance

of shared experience, and its ability to potentially transcend barriers of space and mortality.

In the end Whitman seems to give more credence to shared experience than Coleridge does. Reminding himself that others have seen, and fifty years from now will still be seeing, the islands of New York City, he realizes that others have also shared his range of emotional and spiritual experience. This makes him significant as an individual but also part of a larger whole.

Curiously this leads Whitman to turn to the physical as a locus for identity: " I too had receiv'd identity by my body, / That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I should be of my body." The body is both a vehicle for individual specificity and a means by which to partake of common experience: it is where the self and the world come together.

In his description of the New York waterfront Whitman does not differentiate between the natural and the man-made. Steamships and buildings are described in the same terms as seagulls and waves. This seems to be Whitman's nod to historical specificity, which can disrupt continuity of experience. Fifty years before Whitman's ferry crossing, the steamships and the skyline were not there, and he knows this. It is these minor changes that enable him to be specific, and that allow perspective on human existence.

" Song of Myself" summary

This most famous of Whitman's works was one of This most famous of Whitman's works was one of the original twelve pieces in the 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Like most of the other poems, it too was revised extensively, reaching its final permutation in 1881. " Song of Myself" is a <https://assignbuster.com/whitman/>

sprawling combination of biography, sermon, and poetic meditation. It is not nearly as heavy-handed in its pronouncements as "Starting at Paumanok"; rather, Whitman uses symbols and sly commentary to get at important issues. "Song of Myself" is composed more of vignettes than lists: Whitman uses small, precisely drawn scenes to do his work here.

This poem did not take on the title "Song of Myself" until the 1881 edition. Previous to that it had been titled "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" and, in the 1860, 1867, and 1871 editions, simply "Walt Whitman." The poem's shifting title suggests something of what Whitman was about in this piece. As Walt Whitman, the specific individual, melts away into the abstract "Myself," the poem explores the possibilities for communion between individuals. Starting from the premise that "what I assume you shall assume" Whitman tries to prove that he both encompasses and is indistinguishable from the universe.

"Song of Myself" commentary

Whitman's grand poem is, in its way, an American epic. Beginning in medias res—in the middle of the poet's life—it loosely follows a quest pattern. "Missing me one place search another," he tells his reader, "I stop somewhere waiting for you." In its catalogues of American life and its constant search for the boundaries of the self "Song of Myself" has much in common with classical epic. This epic sense of purpose, though, is coupled with an almost Keatsian valorization of repose and passive perception. Since for Whitman the birthplace of poetry is in the self, the best way to learn about poetry is to relax and watch the workings of one's own mind.

While " Song of Myself" is crammed with significant detail, there are three key episodes that must be examined. The first of these is found in the sixth section of the poem. A child asks the narrator " What is the grass?" and the narrator is forced to explore his own use of symbolism and his inability to break things down to essential principles. The bunches of grass in the child's hands become a symbol of the regeneration in nature. But they also signify a common material that links disparate people all over the United States together: grass, the ultimate symbol of democracy, grows everywhere. In the wake of the Civil War the grass reminds Whitman of graves: grass feeds on the bodies of the dead. Everyone must die eventually, and so the natural roots of democracy are therefore in mortality, whether due to natural causes or to the bloodshed of internecine warfare. While Whitman normally revels in this kind of symbolic indeterminacy, here it troubles him a bit. " I wish I could translate the hints," he says, suggesting that the boundary between encompassing everything and saying nothing is easily crossed.

The second episode is more optimistic. The famous " twenty-ninth bather" can be found in the eleventh section of the poem. In this section a woman watches twenty-eight young men bathing in the ocean. She fantasizes about joining them unseen, and describes their semi-nude bodies in some detail. The invisible twenty-ninth bather offers a model of being much like that of Emerson's " transparent eyeball": to truly experience the world one must be fully in it and of it, yet distinct enough from it to have some perspective, and invisible so as not to interfere with it unduly. This paradoxical set of conditions describes perfectly the poetic stance Whitman tries to assume. The lavish eroticism of this section reinforces this idea: sexual contact allows

two people to become one yet not one—it offers a moment of transcendence. As the female spectator introduced in the beginning of the section fades away, and Whitman's voice takes over, the eroticism becomes homoeroticism. Again this is not so much the expression of a sexual preference as it is the longing for communion with every living being and a connection that makes use of both the body and the soul (although Whitman is certainly using the homoerotic sincerely, and in other ways too, particularly for shock value).

Having worked through some of the conditions of perception and creation, Whitman arrives, in the third key episode, at a moment where speech becomes necessary. In the twenty-fifth section he notes that " Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself, / It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically, / Walt you contain enough, why don't you let it out then?" Having already established that he can have a sympathetic experience when he encounters others (" I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person"), he must find a way to re-transmit that experience without falsifying or diminishing it. Resisting easy answers, he later vows he " will never translate [him]self at all." Instead he takes a philosophically more rigorous stance: " What is known I strip away." Again Whitman's position is similar to that of Emerson, who says of himself, " I am the unsettle." Whitman, however, is a poet, and he must reassemble after unsettling: he must " let it out then." Having catalogued a continent and encompassed its multitudes, he finally decides: " I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." " Song of Myself" thus ends with a sound—a yawp—that could be

described as either pre- or post-linguistic. Lacking any of the normal communicative properties of language, Whitman's yawp is the release of the "kosmos" within him, a sound at the borderline between saying everything and saying nothing. More than anything, the yawp is an invitation to the next Walt Whitman, to read into the yawp, to have a sympathetic experience, to absorb it as part of a new multitude.

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" summary This 1865 poem is part of a series of pieces written after Lincoln's assassination. While it does not display all the conventions of the form, this is nevertheless considered to be a pastoral elegy: a poem of mourning that makes use of elaborate conventions drawn from the natural world and rustic human society. Virgil is the most prominent classical practitioner of the form; Milton's "Lycidas" and Shelley's "Adonais" are the two best-known examples in the English tradition. One of the most important features of the pastoral elegy is the depiction of the deceased and the poet who mourns him as shepherds. While the association is not specifically made in this poem, it must surely have been in Whitman's mind as he wrote: Lincoln, in many ways, was the "shepherd" of the American people during wartime, and his loss left the North in the position of a flock without a leader. As in traditional pastoral elegies, nature mourns Lincoln's death in this poem, although it does so in some rather unconventional ways (more on that in a moment). The poem also makes reference to the problems of modern times in its brief, shadowy depictions of Civil War battles. The natural order is contrasted with the human one, and Whitman goes so far as to suggest that those who have died violent deaths in war are actually the lucky ones, since they are now

beyond suffering. Above all this is a public poem of private mourning. In it Whitman tries to determine the best way to mourn a public figure, and the best way to mourn in a modern world. In his resignation at the end of the poem, and in his use of disconnected motifs, he suggests that the kind of ceremonial poetry a pastoral elegy represents may no longer have a place in society; instead, symbolic, intensely personal forms must take over." When Lilacs last in the dooryard Bloom'd" commentary

" When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is composed of three separate yet simultaneous poems. One follows the progress of Lincoln's coffin on its way to the president's burial. The second stays with the poet and his sprig of lilac, meant to be laid on the coffin in tribute, as he ruminates on death and mourning. The third uses the symbols of a bird and a star to develop an idea of a nature sympathetic to yet separate from humanity. The progression of the coffin is followed by a sad irony. Mourners, dressed in black and holding offerings of flowers, turn out in the streets to see Lincoln's corpse pass by. The Civil War is raging, though, and many of these people have surely lost loved ones of their own. Yet their losses are subsumed in a greater national tragedy, which in its publicness and in the fact that this poem is being written as part of the mourning process, is set up to be a far greater loss than that of their own family members. In this way the poem implicitly asks the question, " What is the worth of a man? Are some men worth more than others?" The poet's eventual inability to mourn, and the depictions of anonymous death on the battlefields, suggest that something is wrong here.

The poet vacillates on the nature of symbolic mourning. At times he seems to see his offering of the lilac blossom as being symbolically given to all the



dead; at other moments he sees it as futile, merely a broken twig. He wonders how best to do honor to the dead, asking how he would decorate the tomb. He suggests that he would fill it with portraits of everyday life and everyday men. This is a far cry from the classical statuary and elaborate floral arrangements usually associated with tombs. The language in the poem follows a similar shift. In the first stanzas the language is formal and at times even archaic, filled with exhortations and rhetorical devices. By the end much of the ceremoniousness has been stripped away; the poet offers only "lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of [his] soul." Eventually the poet simply leaves behind the sprig of lilac, and "cease[s] from [his] song," still unsure of just how to mourn properly.

The final image of the poem is of "the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim." All has been worked through save nature, which remains separate and beyond. The death-song of the bird expresses an understanding and a beauty that Whitman, even while he incorporates it into his poem, cannot quite master for himself. Unlike the pastoral elegies of old, which use a temporary rift with nature to comment on modernity, this one shows a profound and permanent disconnection between the human and natural worlds. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" mourns for Lincoln in a way that is all the more profound for seeing the president's death as only a smaller, albeit highly symbolic, tragedy in the midst of a world of confusion and sadness.

selections from democratic vistas" the wound-dresser" ONWHITMAN

SPECIFICALLY FOR YOU FOR ONLY \$13.90/PAGE Order Now