

A theme of freedom  
in "song of myself" by  
walt whitman and  
"how it feels to be  
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Freedom is beautifully illustrated in an endless amount of modern American literature. Freedom can be represented in different forms, by different artists, from completely different time periods. " Song of Myself," by Walt Whitman was first published in 1855. Whitman's version of freedom plays a huge part in " Song of Myself." Another work that portrays freedom is Zora Neale Hurston's " How It Feels to Be Colored Me." Both works, though they differ, illustrate the freedom of both authors in unique ways.

Walt Whitman was known for being quite frank in his discussions of sex and bodily functions which, during his time, was quite revolutionary. However, Walt didn't solely discuss these things. In " Song of Myself," the narrator himself and human kind are huge aspects. Whitman feels he is connected to all people. " I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe, and am not contained between my hat and my boots / ... I am not an Earth nor an adjunct of an earth, / I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself ... " Walt Whitman explains that he is one with the dying, as well as with newly born infants. He is not contained by himself and his body. He is the same as all people, and he is all people.

Whitman is mortal, and he wonders when death will approach. However, it seems as though Whitman finds freedom in this feeling instead of feeling trapped by it. The feeling of being one with mankind is liberating for him.

Additionally, Whitman finds freedom in himself. He finds freedom in being himself, and knowing that he is human. As Ted Genoways put it in his essay

" Inventing Walt Whitman," "... we see the earliest example of that most American trick: self-invention. Walt had been born in a humble family of

Quakers on Long Island, and his social standing had allowed him to rise no

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further than fleeting stints as editor of various small-time newspapers.”

Whitman was born into a simple family, not wealthy but not in poverty. He found himself unable to improve his social standing, and therefore fashioned himself a dandy, complete with cane and boutonniere, trying to boost his status. Whitman rid himself of the fancy clothes in favor of the clothes of a common man, with his broad hat tipped back, beard thick and messy. “... he stood defiantly , one hand crooked at his hip, the other thrust in his pocket... he posed with his collar open, revealing a workingman’s undershirt. And this new persona required a new name; Walter became Walt.” Whitman finally came to embrace himself in 1855, for the frontispiece of *Leaves of Grass*. And it seems as though he found some freedom in this- in embracing himself, his social status, and where he came from. As the opening stanza of “ *Song of Myself*” reads, “ I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you / ..... / 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 ...” Whitman celebrates being himself and owns his background. He finds freedom in knowing and accepting these things.

Walt Whitman also revels in the freedom of natural world throughout “ *Song of Myself*.” However, there seems to be little to no separation between humans and the natural world for Walt Whitman. He consistently compares and intertwines the two as though they’re one in the same. Whitman writes, “ I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked, / I am mad for it to be in contact with me. / The smoke of my own breath, / Echoes, ripples, buzz’d whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine, / My

respiration and inspiration, the beating of my own heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs, / The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color'd sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn ... " Whitman illustrates the beauty of the natural world in the smallest details. He also includes humans, himself, and human structures, the barn, when describing the nature he loves so much. Nature is freeing for Walt in the way that it's natural, and yet still so magnificent and beautiful.

Another author who wrote of freedom is Zora Neale Hurston. Specifically, her essay entitled " How It Feels to Be Colored Me." Hurston finds freedom in a couple different things. One place in which Hurston finds freedom is in her home town, Eatonville, Florida. In " How It Feels to Be Colored Me," she writes of her town and the people there. She captures the mannerisms, mind-sets, and dialects of those from her home town. Hurston finds freedom in being part of her community. However, community is not the main source of Hurston's freedom.

The main object of Zora Neale Hurston's freedom is simply herself. Much like Walt Whitman, Hurston knows, loves, and embraces her background and herself. " Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me... I have paid through my ancestors for it." She recognizes the price her ancestors have paid for her to be part of civilization, for her to be free.

However, Zora Neale Hurston doesn't need her race to define her. " At certain times I have no race, I am me. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance. So far as my

feelings are concerned, Peggy Hopkins Joyce... has nothing on me. The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads." Zora Neale Hurston empowers and frees herself. She is her own person, cosmic and beautiful and snooty regardless of her race.

Freedom isn't an uncommon topic in American literature. However, it can be illustrated in many different ways. Walt Whitman and Zora Neale Hurston have both authored pieces that encapsulate their freedom. Walt Whitman, in " Song of Myself," finds freedom in nature, the human experience, and himself. Zora Neale Hurston is empowered by her community and simply being her. Both " Song of Myself" and " How It Feels to Be Colored Me" illustrate the respective authors' senses of freedom.