

Song of myself essay sample



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Written in 1881 by Walt Whitman, " Song of Myself", is known to " represent the core of Whitman's poetic vision" (Greenspan). To many people, this poem is confusing and complex because of the wordplay and symbolism. This poem " requires a large perspective; you must not get your face too near the book. You must bring to it a magnanimity of spirit, a charity and faith equal to its own." (Burroughs) Whitman starts out by introducing the subject the poem, himself, and continues to celebrate this topic. He uses terms such as " I", " myself" and his inner soul to create a sense of being and description in certain parts of the poem. Although the main theme seems to be himself, himself is actually a symbol for the American humanity as whole. Whitman believes that everyone, even animals, share each other's experiences. For him, there is no single person that stands alone with their own thoughts and feelings. " No single person is the subject of Whitman's song, or can be; the individual suggests a group, and the group a multitude, each a unit of which is as interesting as every other unit, and possesses equal claims to recognition. Hence the recurring tendency of his poems to become catalogues of person and things" (qtd. in Mason) Overall, he believes that everything and everyone shares an understanding and connection. Throughout " Song of Myself", Walt Whitman connects himself with others by using his own identity as a symbol for the American people, making everyone equal in every sense of their being, and the form of friendship.

One way Whitman connects himself to others is by using terms associated with his own personal identity as a symbolic representation for the American people. One term used for this concept is the term " I". At first glance, many

assume that “ I” is Whitman himself, but “ I” is referring to everyone in America. For example, in stanza one, Whitman writes “ I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/ And what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”(Whitman) Whitman starts out this stanza by “ I” then transitions into the word “ you”, portraying that he is not alone in his celebration and thoughts. Also by stating that “ every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (Whitman), he is emphasizing that there is a greater entity of the human race that he is connected too. Another stanza where he emphasizes the term “ I” as connection to society is in stanza

fifty-one. “ I am large, I contain multitudes” (Whitman). In this stanza, he is pointing out that there are many different aspects and factors in America as a whole.

Another term Whitman used to make a connection to the American people was the word “ myself”. The first time people see the word “ myself” in this poem is in the title. My making the title “ Song of Myself”, instead of “ Song of Walt Whitman”, it focuses on Whitman’s theory that everything is connected to everything. Although he uses the term “ myself” in the title, he also uses in throughout the poem. For example, in stanza two, Whitman writes how he “ determines to keep free of the influence of the other individual selves, symbolized as “ perfumes” and “ frequencies””(Cooke) by using the term “ myself” to represent wholeness. “ Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes,/ I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,/ The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it. (Whitman). Another example of using the term “

myself” to identify with other is in stanza seven. “ I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and/ fathomless as myself,” (Whitman). In this stanza, he transitions from the word “ I” to “ myself” to “ escape from the individual to the universal” (Cooke). The persona of the inner soul is also another self-identity term that Whitman uses to connect with others.

For example, in stanza five, Whitman uses the word soul as a whole different person than himself. “ I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,/ And you must not be abased to the other.” (Whitman) In this stanza, he connects to others by representing them as the soul and is putting out the message “ do on to others, as you would want to be done to you”. Another example of using the inner soul for connection is in stanza twenty-one. “ I am the poet of the Body and I am the Poet of the Soul,/ The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,” (Whitman). A significant part of this line is the capitalization. The capitalization in the word body and soul represent that Whitman is making them out to be two different people. Also by making them two different beings, he is saying that not only has he experienced pleasures and pains of his own experiences but others too. Overall, the self-identity terms, such as “ I”, “ myself”, and the being of the inner soul, serve as a representation of “ unity through diversity” (Mason). According to a scholar named Alice Cook, “ The key to the understanding of this poem is the concept of self as both individual and universal” (Cooke).

Another way Walt Whitman connects and identifies himself with everyone is by making everyone equal. During the time period Whitman was brought up

in, equality was scarce. He did not have the same beliefs as most people though, he believed that everyone is unique and should take pride in themselves. A scholar named David S. Reynolds believed that Whitman “presumed interracial harmony” and wanted to “represent national destiny as a collection of individuals” (Reynolds). “Whitman averages up the race, but the whole push and stress of his work is to raise the average” (Burroughs). A stanza where Whitman equals himself with others is in stanza twenty. In this stanza, Whitman states that “In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barley-corn less,/ And the good or bad I say of myself I say to them.” (Whitman). No matter the virtue of the person, Whitman sees a reflection of himself in each person. Whitman also equalizes everyone in stanza twenty-one. He says, “I am the poet of the women the same as the man,/ And I say it is as great to be a women as to be a man,/ And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.” (Whitman) In these lines, Whitman is “lifting things out of a corner, out of a class, and showing it its universal relationship” (Burroughs). Not only is Whitman equaling himself with the common man or women, he is also equalizing himself with animals. “I think I could turn and live with the animals, they are so placid and/ self-contain’d,/ I stand and look at them long and long...Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth./ So, they show their relation to me and I accept them,/ They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession.” (Whitman) In this stanza, Whitman is suggesting that animals live in a relaxed and utopian world. He is equalizing himself with animals by comparing their lives and views of the world. Society, as a whole, strives to live an easy, yet meaningful life, like the animals. Throughout “

Song of Myself", Whitman " photographs proslavery types and puts them on exhibition" (Reynolds) Thus by viewing everyone as an equal, Whitman connects to the societally image of America's " aspiration for culture and refinement" (Burroughs).

Finally, Whitman connects to the American civilization by the idea of friendship. Throughout " Song of Myself", Whitman uses a friendly and inviting tone. He seems eager to become close and help everyone he meets. In stanza forty, Whitman uses a nondiscriminatory tone in an attempt to be a shoulder to lean on and a protector. " Man or woman, I might tell how I like you, but cannot...I do not ask who you are, that is not important to me,/ You can do nothing and be nothing but what I will infold you...Sleep-I and they keep guard all night,/ Not doubt not decease shall dare to lay finger upon you,/ I have embraced you, and henceforth posses you to myself"

(Whitman). In this stanza, he is ignoring what the general public thinks of the stranger in this poem and is throwing out a helpful hand to them. Another stanza where Whitman portrays friendship in a non judgmental tone is in stanza nineteen. " This is the meal equally set, this is the meal for the natural hunger,/ It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous, I make appointments/ with all,/ I will not have a single person slighted or left away," By analyzing this stanza, it is believed that Whitman is trying to connect to others by the gesture of a friendly dinner invitation. He is inviting people regardless of color, appeal, or status.

In this stanza, he continues to describe the differences of his guests then comments that " there shall be no difference between them and the rest." (Whitman). Also in this stanza, he makes another friendly connection by

telling the subject of this poem secrets he would not discuss with others. “ This hour I tell things in confidence,/ I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you.” (Whitman) As stated before, Whitman develops an understanding with animals and in stanza thirty-two he makes a friendly connection with one. “ Picking out here one that I love, and now go with him in brotherly terms./ A gigantic beauty of a stallion, fresh and responsive to my caresses” (Whitman) By expressing his feelings with the word “ love” and “ brotherly” and caressing the stallion, it shows that Whitman is creating a true bond with this horse. In conclusion, Whitman is “ the poet of democracy” (Burroughs); and in order to form a genuine democracy, one must establish bonds with everything and everyone.

Throughout “ Song of Myself”, Whitman undoubtedly becomes the people (Burroughs). By using the terms “ I”, “ myself”, and “ soul” to refer to others, equalizing the aspects of every being, and forming bonds, Walt Whitman builds connections with the “ common humanity” (Burroughs). “ The lesson of this poem is not merely on in the philanthropy or benevolence, it is one in practical democracy, in the value and sacredness of the common, the near, the universal; it is that the quality of common humanity.” (Burroughs) This poem, is to show the American people the quality of each and individual American person. Whitman has so many beliefs that would create the “ American dream” society is looking for. Some of these opinions being, everyone is equal and everyone has an understanding and connection with one another. As a result of these views, “ Song of Myself” is described as “ a kind of wondrous filtration system, absorbing all the disturbing, vicious aspects of American Life and creatively combining them with other more

positive ones” (Reynolds) In sum, Walt Whitman’s beliefs about humanity are voiced through the poem, “ Song of Myself”, and as a result of these opinions, he makes a connection with the American people to create a better life. “ Whitman would not be the schoolmaster of the people, he would be their prophet and savior” (Burroughs)

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