

How to Read a Poem

There's really only one reason that poetry has gotten a reputation for being so darned "difficult": it demands your full attention and won't settle for less. Unlike a novel, where you can drift in and out and still follow the plot, poems are generally shorter and more intense, with less of a conventional story to follow. If you don't make room for the *experience*, you probably won't have one. However, the rewards can be high. To make an analogy with rock and roll, it's the difference between a two and a half minute pop song with a hook that you get sick of after the third listen, and a slow-building tour de force that sounds fresh and different every time you hear it. Once you've gotten a taste of the really rich stuff, you just want to listen to it over and over again and figure out: how'd they do that?

Aside from its demands on your attention, there's nothing too tricky about reading a poem. Like anything, it's a matter of practice. But in case you haven't read much (or any) poetry before, we've put together a short list of tips that will make it a whole lot more enjoyable.

- **Follow Your Ears.** It's okay to ask, "What does it mean?" when reading a poem. But it's even better to ask, "How does it sound?" If all else fails, treat it like a song. Even if you can't understand a single thing about a poem's "subject" or "theme," you can always say something – anything – about the sound of the words. Does the poem move fast or slow? Does it sound awkward in sections or does it have an even flow? Do certain words stick out more than others? Trust your inner ear: if the poem sounds strange, it doesn't mean you're reading it wrong. In fact, you probably just discovered one of the poem's secret tricks! If you get stuck at any point, just look for Shmoop's "Sound Check" section. We'll help you listen!
- **Read It Aloud.** OK, we're not saying you have to shout it from the rooftops. If you're embarrassed and want to lock yourself in the attic and read the poem in the faintest whisper possible, go ahead. Do whatever it takes, because reading even part of poem aloud can totally change your perspective on how it works.
- **Become an Archaeologist.** When you've drunk in the poem enough times, experiencing the sound and images found there, it is sometimes fun to switch gears and to become an archaeologist (you know -- someone who digs up the past and uncovers layers of history). Treat the poem like a room you have just entered. Perhaps it's a strange room that you've never seen before, filled with objects or people that you don't really recognize. Maybe you feel a bit like Alice in Wonderland. Assume your role as an archaeologist and take some measurements. What's the weather like? Are there people there? What kind of objects do you find? Are there more verbs than adjectives? Do you detect a rhythm? Can you hear music? Is there furniture? Are there portraits of past poets on the walls? Are there traces of other poems or historical references to be found? Check out Shmoop's "Setting," "Symbols, Imagery, Wordplay," and "Speaker" sections to help you get started.
- **Don't Skim.** Unlike the newspaper or a textbook, the point of poetry isn't to cram information into your brain. We can't repeat it enough: poetry is an experience. If you don't have the patience to get through a long poem, no worries, just start with a really short poem. Understanding poetry is like getting a suntan: you have to let it sink in. When you glance at Shmoop's "Detailed Summary," you'll see just how loaded each line of poetry can be.
- **Memorize!** "Memorize" is such a scary word, isn't it? It reminds us of multiplication tables. Maybe we should have said: "Tuck the poem into your snuggly memory-space." Or maybe not. At any rate, don't tax yourself: if you memorize one or two lines of a poem, or even just a single cool-sounding phrase, it will start to work on you in ways you didn't know possible. You'll be walking through the mall one day, and all of a sudden, you'll shout, "I get it!" Just not too loud, or you'll get mall security on your case.
- **Be Patient.** You can't really understand a poem that you've only read once. You just can't. So if you don't get it, set the poem aside and come back to it later. And by "later" we mean days, months, or even years. Don't rush it. It's a much bigger accomplishment to actually *enjoy* a poem than it is to be able to explain every line of it. Treat the first reading as an investment – your effort might not pay off until well into the future, but when it does, it will totally be worth it. Trust us.

- **Read in Crazy Places.** Just like music, the experience of poetry changes depending on your mood and the environment. Read in as many different places as possible: at the beach, on a mountain, in the subway. Sometimes all it takes is a change of scenery for a poem to really come alive.
- **Think Like a Poet.** Here's a fun exercise. Go through the poem one line at a time, covering up the next line with your hand so you can't see it. Put yourself in the poet's shoes: If I had to write a line to come after this line, what would I put? If you start to think like this, you'll be able to appreciate all the different choices that go into making a poem. It can also be pretty humbling – at least we think so. Shmoop's "Calling Card" section will help you become acquainted with a poet's particular, unique style. Soon, you'll be able to decipher a T.S. Elliot poem from a Wallace Stevens poem, sight unseen. Everyone will be so jealous.
- **"Look Who's Talking."** Ask the most basic questions possible of the poem. Two of the most important are: "Who's talking?" and "Who are they talking to?" If it's a Shakespeare sonnet, don't just assume that the speaker is Shakespeare. The speaker of every poem is kind of fictional creation, and so is the audience. Ask yourself: what would it be like to meet this person? What would they look like? What's their "deal," anyway? Shmoop will help you get to know a poem's speaker through the "Speaker" section found in each study guide.
- And, most importantly, **Never Be Intimidated.** Regardless of what your experience with poetry in the classroom has been, no poet wants to make his or her audience feel stupid. It's just not good business, if you know what we mean. Sure, there might be tricky parts, but it's not like you're trying to unlock the secrets of the universe. Heck, if you want to ignore the "meaning" entirely, then go ahead. Why not? If you're still feeling a little timid, let Shmoop's "Why Should I Care" section help you realize just how much you have to bring to the poetry table.

Poetry is about freedom and exposing yourself to new things. In fact, if you find yourself stuck in a poem, just remember that the poet, 9 times out of 10, was a bit of a rebel and was trying to make his friends look at life in a completely different way. Find your inner rebel too. There isn't a single poem out there that's "too difficult" to try out – right now, today.

Summary - Whitman begins this poem by naming its subject – himself. He says that he celebrates himself and that all parts of him are also parts of the reader. He is thirty-seven years old and "in perfect health" and begins his journey "Hoping to cease not till death." He puts all "Creeds and schools in abeyance" hoping to set out on his own, though he admits he will not forget these things. Whitman then describes a house in which "the shelves are / crowded with perfumes" and he breathes in the fragrance though he refuses to let himself become intoxicated with it. Instead, he seeks to "go to the bank by the wood" and become naked and undisguised where he can hear all of nature around him.

Whitman says that he has heard "what the talkers were talking, the talk of the / beginning and the end," but he refuses to talk of either. Instead, he rejects talk of the past or future for an experience in the now. This is the "urge" of the world which calls to him. Whitman sees all the things around him – "The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old / and new," but he knows that "they are not the Me myself." He remembers in his own past that he once "sweated through fog" with fashionable arguments. He no longer holds these pretensions, however.

Whitman then describes an encounter between his body and soul. He invites his soul to "loafe with me on the grass" and to lull him with its "valved voice." He tells his soul to settle upon him, "your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd / over upon me...." He invites his soul to undress him and reach inside him until the soul feels his feet. This will bring him perfect peace "that pass all the argument of the earth...." This peace is the promise of God and is what allows all people to become his brothers and sisters.

Whitman recalls a scene in which a child came to him with a handful of grass and asked him what it was. Whitman has no answer for the child. The grass is "the flag of my disposition" and it is the "handkerchief of the Lord...." It is also the child or a symbol for all of humanity. Whitman sees the grass sprouting from

the chests of young men, the heads of old women, and the beards of old men. He remembers all those that have died and recalls that each sprout of grass is a memorial to those that have come before. Whitman reflects that "...to die is different from what any one supposed, and / luckier."

Whitman then writes a parable. Twenty-eight young men bathe on a sea shore while a young woman, "richly drest" hides behind the blinds of her house on the water's bank. She observes the men and finds that she loves the homeliest of them. She then goes down to the beach to bathe with them, though the men do not see her. "An unseen hand" also passes over the bodies of the young men but the young men do not think of who holds onto them or "whom they souse with spray."

Whitman describes groups of people that he stops to observe. The first is a "butcher-boy" sharpening his knife and dancing. He sees the blacksmiths taking on their "grimy" work with precision. Whitman then observes a "negro" as he works a team of horses at a construction site. Whitman admires his chiseled body and "his polish'd and perfect limbs." He sees and loves this "picturesque giant...." He admits in the next poem that he is "enamour'd...Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods, / Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes / and mauls... / I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out."

In a lengthy section, Whitman describes the work of all people of the land – the carpenter, the duck-shooter, the deacons of the church, the farmers, the machinist, and many more. They often have hard, ordinary lives, yet Whitman proclaims that these people "tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them" and they all "weave the song of myself."

Whitman describes himself as "old and young" and "foolish as much as...wise..." He is "Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man..." He is of all the land of North America from the South even into Canada. He notes that these are not his own original thoughts, however. These thoughts have been a part of the human condition for all of time. These thoughts are "the grass that grows wherever the land is...the common air that bathes the globe." His thoughts are for all people, even those that society has considered outcasts.

Whitman wonders why he should adhere to the old ways – prayer or ceremony. He claims that he has "pried through the strata, analyzed to a hair" and found that nothing is as true and sweet as "my own bones." Whitman understands himself. He is "august" and vindicated by his own nature. "I exist as I am, that is, enough." He does not have to explain his inconsistencies. Those are only to be accepted. "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" All pleasure and all pain are found within his own self. Whitman describes himself in the basest terms: "Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding," he does not feign interest in manners. He hears the "primeval" voices of democracy and mankind and gives himself over to these forbidden lusts. Above all, Whitman says, "I believe in the flesh and the appetites...."

Analysis

The first thing to note is that Whitman calls his poems "songs." This insinuates that Whitman feels there is an audible quality to his work; that the true meanings of his poems will not be understood if they are not heard by a listener. Thus, Whitman feels as though he will not be understood as an individual if he is not heard by the world. "Song of Myself," as the linchpin of this first half of *Leaves of Grass*, is his attempt to make himself heard.

Whitman's subject is himself, but it is clear that Whitman means more than just his physical self. Whitman calls himself a universe of meanings. He uses the symbol of his naked self in nature to symbolize his own fusion with the world around him. Whitman's self is the whole of America and the whole of nature. This is best seen in Whitman's use of the catalog. A catalog is a literary device used in

epic poetry as a rhetorical naming or inventory. Whitman uses a catalog in "Song of Myself" to name a variety of professions and people that he meets on his journey across the States. He says that he becomes part of these people and these people come to compose his own self.

In this section, Whitman first engages the idea of individuality and collectivity. The catalog is Whitman's example of the collective. This refers back to his opening inscription in which Whitman proclaimed that his work is of the self, both the individual self and the democratic self. The collection of all people in the land forms a self that is distinct from the individual self, yet is similar in that it has its own soul and being.

Whitman uses the metaphor of grass in the sixth section of "Songs of Myself" to try and explain the democratic self. His explanation, he admits, is incomplete. Whitman describes a child coming to him and asking him what is the grass. He has no real answer, meaning that he cannot fully describe the democratic self to those that do not inherently understand it. Whitman can only tell the child that he sees the democratic self in young men and old women, meaning that he sees it in all people. Whitman then takes the metaphor one step farther, telling the child that even the grass that has died and has gone back to the earth is a part of the whole. "Song of Myself" balances the themes of individuality and collectivity as two important ingredients for the democratic experiment of America. This is Whitman's political argument.

Whitman breaks up "Song of Myself" with a kind of parable. A parable is a short, succinct story that offers a moral or instructive lesson for its hearers. Whitman's lesson is an erotic one and it is instructive to see how Whitman's passion for democracy is equated with a sexual and erotic passion. A woman sees twenty-eight men bathing and lusts to be with them. When she joins them, they are together through the power of an "unseen hand." Whitman uses shocking erotic images of the men and spraying water, a reference to male ejaculation, to arouse the reader. Whitman is telling his readers that they must not only observe the democratic life but they must become one with it. This joining is both mysterious and erotic for those that take part.

Whitman closes "Song of Myself" by trying to name this large, democratic collectivity, yet he finds it impossible. He makes a point to let the reader know that he contradicts himself and that this democratic self is full of inconsistencies. Whitman understands very well that the democracy of America is imperfect, filled with injustice, self-serving, and undermined by the tyranny of the individual. He pares this democratic self down to its essentials: it is primal, the flesh and the appetites. Whitman continues *Leaves of Grass* with this carnal vision in the next sections.

Themes: **1. Identity** - The word "identity" occurs only a couple of times in "Song of Myself," but it is easily the central theme of this vast epic. Whitman sees his identity split into at least three components: his everyday personality, the more inner "self" or "Me Myself," and the universal "Soul." He was attracted to the American Transcendentalist idea of the "Oversoul," or the soul that is somehow part of or connected to all other souls in the world. For him, there is no such thing as "private experience." He experiences the pains and pleasure of all other people in the world, and even animals and inanimate natural phenomena, because he "identifies" with them. That is, his innermost identity is connected to all things in the world.

Questions about Identity

1. Do you find Whitman's attempts to identify with *everyone* believable? Do you think there are people he doesn't like, even if he doesn't say so?
2. Does Whitman have different identities at different points in the poem, or does he maintain the same basic identity throughout?
3. How does the project of "Song of Myself" relate to the political situation in 1850s America?
4. Why does Whitman call himself a "kosmos"? What is the origin of this word?

2. **Visions of America:** America was not just a place to Whitman; it was also an idea and a goal to shoot for. His America is a place where all people are equal, all jobs are equally important, and people feel for one another with a passionate, neighborly love. He views his identity as being so wrapped up in this American idea that the poem's title could easily have been "Song of America" instead of "Song of Myself." The poem celebrates the diversity of the nation. Beneath the surface, the poem is also a desperate attempt to remind his fellow Americans of their common bonds. Whitman was aware of the potential for violent bloodshed looming on the horizon. Tragically, the Civil War, which began a few years after he published the poem, proved that his worries were well founded.

Questions About Visions of America

1. What are the central elements of Whitman's ideal of America?
2. If he were alive today, what elements of American culture would Whitman be happy about, and in what elements would make him put on the old frowny-face?
3. Does Whitman ever criticize America, either directly or implicitly?
4. Why do you think this poem has often been considered the most representative American poem?

3. Whitman is the poet of democracy, and friendship is the one truly essential ingredient for a democracy. He wasn't the only one to realize this. His contemporary and literary inspiration Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote extensively on the subject of friendship, as did the philosopher of the original democracy in Ancient Greece, Aristotle. In "Song of Myself," Whitman addresses the reader like a close friend, and his tone is reassuring and non-judgmental. He wants to get closer to everyone he meets, to hug them and kiss them and provide them with a shoulder to lean on. He is eager to become fast friends with any kind of stranger.

Questions about Friendship

1. Do you think it's possible to become friends with people you've never met, as the speaker claims to be?
2. Are friendships more important in a democracy than in other forms of government? Why or why not?
3. Would you feel comfortable being as expressive about your affection for other people as Whitman is? Do you think it is more or less difficult to express feelings of friendship nowadays compared with Whitman's time?
4. The poem tries not to exclude anyone. Is it possible to have true friendship without exclusion?

4. **Spirituality** - Whitman's ambivalence about religion and spirituality is a major topic of "Song of Myself." He thinks that society has surpassed organized religion with its hierarchies and rules, but his language is full of Biblical references and talk of the soul and the spirit. In a nutshell, he thinks that the body and the soul are two sides of the same coin. Contrary to the Christian doctrine that the soul is greater than the body, Whitman thinks that both body and soul are immortal because they are connected to the larger patterns of nature. "Song of Myself" is meant to be a prophetic statement, but Whitman is careful to avoid the impression that he is trying to write a new kind of scripture and to make up new rules to follow.

Questions about Spirituality

1. How would you put the distinction between "priests" and "prophets" in your own words? If Whitman were to fall into one of these groups, which would it be?
2. What role does nature play in the spirituality of "Song of Myself"?
3. What does Whitman have against priests and other representatives of organized religion?
4. What are Whitman's thoughts on spiritual topics like eternity, death, and the afterlife?

5. **Sex** - "Song of Myself" became scandalous in some circles because of its frank discussion of sexuality, body parts, and bodily fluids. But Whitman is often so metaphorical and subtle in his discussion of sexuality that it can be hard to pin him down. For example, he uses the words "jetting" and "fatherstuff" to describe ejaculation and semen, respectively. Still, there's no question that he feels sex has gotten a bad rap in America, which after all was founded by Puritans. He believes that shame about sex is very harmful to society and that the body should be celebrated rather than feared.

Questions about Sex

6. How do you interpret the line, "I am the poet of the Body; and I am the poet of the Soul" (section 21)?
7. Why do you think scholars have focused so much on the poem's homoeroticism? Do you think this focus is justified?
8. Where and how does Whitman ascribe a sexual energy to the forces and elements of nature?
9. Do the descriptions of sexuality in "Song of Myself" still have the power to shock, or do they feel dated?