

Final Literary Analysis
Literary Work: "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman
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Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" is like a guidebook that encourages the love of self and nature. Whitman felt that we are all connected to each other and to the natural world by a divine presence or spirit that runs through us. Much like the idea of transcendentalism, this piece by Walt Whitman suggests "that humans shared one common over-soul with God," (Walt Whitman and Transcendentalism). Be that as it may, it may come as a shock that Walt Whitman was not a transcendentalist. In fact, it has been argued that Whitman was a nonconformist who actually "made great use of subjective individualism, a sense of 'communion' with nature, and the subject matter of some of his poems is strongly naturalistic," (Walt Whitman). Even if Whitman did not identify as a transcendentalist, that does not mean he did not draw inspiration from the movement when carving out a niche for himself as the prophet of a new and improved religion through his writing. The goal of this analysis is to present a comprehensive deconstruction of the concepts of power and experiences related to nature and self with a particular emphasis on their manifestation of transcendentalism in Whitman's timeless work, *Song of Myself*.

Before diving in, it is important to understand transcendentalism, and more importantly, how these beliefs found their way into the psyche of Whitman. The most iconic individual behind the movement that took off during the early nineteenth century was Ralph Waldo Emerson. He and other members of the movement were "critics of their contemporary society for its unthinking conformity," (Goodman). As Emerson put it, people owed themselves a duty to

find “an original relation to the universe,” (Goodman). In other words, to feel truly connected to the natural world, transcendentalists believe that people should not find their solace in organized religion like Christianity or their place in politics. They held the view that all people, regardless of their upbringing, have inherent goodness, can develop their own sense of spiritual self-reliance, should have a profound appreciation for nature, and should focus more on discovering their own unique path in life, rather than conforming to societal expectations. Individualism, idealism, and the divine presence of nature are considered the three major concepts of transcendentalism mainly because these are considered experiences and not practices that most religions encourage. Walt Whitman already had ideals that aligned with transcendentalism, but Emerson’s work was described as “the fountain-spring of Whitman’s poetry,” (Asselineau, Transcendentalism). In a letter that Emerson wrote to Whitman, he even complimented Whitman and expressed his gratitude for Whitman’s dedication and to wish him the best of luck at the start of his writing career:

I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire.

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. (Emerson, qtd, in Genius).

In “The Poet,” a well-known essay written by Emerson, he expresses his beliefs involving how the word structure of poems should focus on the passion and overall message trying to be conveyed rather than trying to rhyme or how long it was. Whitman took this quite literally when writing the freely formed Song of Myself. Even though Whitman never actually read any of Emerson’s works, he still felt compelled by his acknowledgement in his similar if not identical

beliefs. In Whitman's own words, Emerson's critique of his work left him "simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil," (Asselineau, Transcendentalism). He also "freely admitted he could never have written his poems if he had not first 'come to himself' and that Emerson helped him to 'find himself,'" (Asselineau, Transcendentalism). Overall, the beauty of Whitman's realization was that unlike Emerson, Whitman truly believed that through his writing, his purpose in life was to act as a poet encouraging readers to discover the truth within themselves, life, and the nature around them.

Moving on, another similarity between Whitman and Emerson would be their shared spiritual awakening. Emerson and Whitman both "had the revelation of the existence of God in the course of a mystical experience," (Asselineau, Transcendentalism). In *Song of Myself*, Whitman expressed that he suddenly was encompassed in the presence of God. In contrast to a more popular religion like Christianity, Whitman expressed feeling one with God. He experienced the "peace and knowledge that pass all argument of the earth," (Whitman, Section 5 line 10), and stated that he considered both the hand and spirit of God as his own. Just like transcendentalism proclaims, *Song of Myself* says that the idea that there is a God is neither harmful nor damaging, but only if the reader thinks of this being as bigger than themselves, because all beings are the same. Whitman also seems very determined to tell the reader not to fall into the trap that religion seems to have on society. He wanted people to think more freely, since they can be their own source of advice, love, and acceptance and shouldn't look for it elsewhere:

They do not sweat and whine 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,

Not one is dissatisfied, 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,

Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth (Whitman, Section 32 lines 3-8).

Like transcendentalists, Whitman believed in the purity of self and the divine sense of purpose that each person has in the eternal cycle of life. It only made sense that Whitman encouraged people to think for themselves because in a way, everyone was their own God. Without a corruption of the spirit, we can be free to think on a higher scale. Without the influence of society, Whitman believed we could get over things that hindered society like racial superiority, war, and more emphasized, organized religion that did nothing but act as a blockade on a higher way of thinking.

Another important concept of transcendentalism found in Song of Myself is housing a spiritual connection to nature. Nature, God, and humans are all interconnected according to Whitman. However, Song of Myself emphasizes the eternal cycle of life and how nothing happens accidentally. We are a part of nature and must treat it with reverence; without it, we would be lost, and life would be not only meaningless, but confusing and more challenging than it should be:

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,

I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,

Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,

Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,

(Whitman, Section 1 lines 6-11).

As Whitman suggests, in the life we are currently living, forming a genuine connection with nature is essential, because one day we will return to the soil and be repurposed for our next journey in a continuous cycle of life. His work suggests that the idea that man and nature are meant to be separated was just another lie that society encouraged in a world inching closer to modernization. Whitman celebrates himself and brags about his sense of enlightenment in knowing that his true natural self is more than enough. It's in this poem that Whitman expresses a transcendent experience involving the union of himself and not just nature, but the universe. In the beginning of the poem, Whitman even takes the opportunity to connect with the reader by describing the essence of what a soul is and by the end of the poem, he reassures the reader that goodbyes or death isn't a bad thing nor is it forever. Whitman says that he "bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles," (Whitman, Section 52 line 9-10). Meaning, when we pass away, we can expect to become one with nature as we humbly await the next phase of the journey. Much like transcendentalism suggests, there is no point in worrying about Heaven or Hell, our earthly possessions, or how much we contributed to society because we are destined to the same fate. The outlook Whitman expresses simply looks to Nature as the ultimate guidance for what lies ahead:

"Song of Myself" starts us out on what the poet will call "a perpetual journey," one that turns into an escape narrative for all readers of the poem, who need to liberate themselves from all the enslaving beliefs and possessions that prevent individual growth, who need to put "Creeds and schools in abeyance" and risk a journey that will take us beyond preconceived notions of "good"

and “bad,” a journey that will allow us to confront the “original energy” of nature unchecked, nature freed of the restraints that we have all been taught to put on it (F.E.)

To conclude, transcendentalism may have impacted Walt Whitman significantly, but further studies suggest that Whitman was not entirely a follower. Nonetheless, Whitman's prophetic goals in *Song of Myself* aim to spare readers the bother of contemplating their ultimate purpose in life. Life, to Whitman, was about experiences over status because we are all destined for greater. To be one with ourselves and nature is the ultimate practice of transcendentalism. A timeless manual, *Song of Myself* encourages those who read it to live in harmony with the natural world, not as separate entities but as equals destined to be reunited one day.

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