

Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*

A Study of Two Contrasting Sections: Section 6 and Section 52

Introduction

Song of Myself, first published as part of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and later revised and divided into fifty-two numbered sections, is central to Walt Whitman's poetic achievement. The poem is expansive in subject and form. It moves between the body and the soul, individual identity and democratic community, sexuality and spirituality, nature and urban life, life and death. Rather than developing a conventional narrative, it proceeds through association, catalogue, repetition, direct address, meditation, and sudden changes of scene.

Two sections are especially useful for showing the poem's range. **Section 6** begins with a child's simple question about grass and develops into a meditation on nature, equality, death, and renewal. **Section 52**, the conclusion of the poem, is concerned with departure, transformation, the continuing presence of the poet, and the reader's search for him. The two passages therefore have different immediate subjects, but together they reveal Whitman's larger belief that individual existence participates in a continuous natural and spiritual process.

1. Section 6: Grass, Death, and Democratic Equality

Section 6 begins when a child asks the speaker, "What is the grass?" The apparent simplicity of the question is important because the speaker cannot provide a single final answer. Instead, he offers a sequence of possible meanings. Grass becomes a sign of hope, a divine token, a child of vegetation, a form of shared identity, and eventually a sign connected with the dead. Whitman therefore turns an ordinary natural object into a field of meanings.

The uncertainty of the response is characteristic of Whitman. He does not treat uncertainty as intellectual failure. The question opens the imagination. Each proposed answer enlarges the significance of grass rather than cancelling the previous interpretation. The ordinary world, in this sense, is inexhaustible: a common object can connect the individual mind with nature, society, history, and mortality.

Grass also carries a democratic meaning. It grows widely and without regard to social rank. Whitman associates it with different kinds of people and refuses to make distinctions between socially privileged and marginal lives. The image thus suits his democratic imagination. What is physically common becomes poetically significant precisely because it is common.

The section gradually darkens as the speaker imagines grass growing from graves. He wonders about the young men and women who have died and about older people and children taken from life. Yet death is not represented simply as extinction. The grass suggests that physical death enters another process of life. Whitman can therefore say that "the smallest sprout shows there is really no death." The statement is not a scientific claim; within the poem it expresses a spiritual and imaginative confidence in continuity.

The movement from a child's question to burial and renewal is one reason Section 6 is so effective. Whitman refuses the usual opposition between life and death. Grass belongs to both. It grows among the living but also rises from the earth containing the dead. The natural cycle makes death part of transformation rather than a final disappearance.

This idea has a clear relationship with transcendentalist thought. Nature is not passive scenery. It becomes a means of perceiving relationships that ordinary categories conceal. Individual bodies disappear, but nature suggests continuity and participation in a larger whole. At the same time, Whitman's treatment is more physical than an abstract philosophical statement: his argument comes through soil, leaves, bodies, graves, and growing grass.

The poetic form reinforces these ideas. Repetition, parallel constructions, questions, and accumulations of possible meanings prevent the passage from settling into a single definition. The grass keeps changing because the speaker's perception keeps expanding. Form and subject therefore work together: the object is common, but the poem refuses to reduce it to one meaning.

2. Section 52: Departure, Transformation, and the Continuing Self

Section 52 has a very different atmosphere. It is the poem's final section, and instead of beginning with a child and an object in nature, it begins dramatically with the spotted hawk. The bird appears to challenge or accuse the speaker, as though Whitman's language has become too elaborate or too distant from the direct energies of the natural world. The speaker answers by asserting his own wildness and his connection with nature.

The famous declaration "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world" presents poetry as a bodily act of utterance rather than polite literary speech. "Yawp" suggests a cry that is primitive, uncontrolled, and difficult to translate into conventional language. The line is therefore appropriate to Whitman's attempt to create an American poetic voice less dependent on inherited decorum.

The section then turns towards disappearance. The speaker says that he departs "as air" and gives himself to the earth. Yet this departure is not presented as simple absence. Like the dead in Section 6, the poetic self is redistributed into the natural world. The speaker imagines himself becoming part of the grass and the soil. The body changes form, but presence continues.

This transformation also changes the relationship between poet and reader. Whitman tells the reader that if he is not immediately found, the search should continue elsewhere. The ending therefore resists complete closure. The poem ends, but the speaker imagines that the encounter with him can continue beyond the printed page—in nature, in future reading, and in the reader's own experience.

The final words, "I stop somewhere waiting for you," are particularly significant. The poet simultaneously disappears and remains available. The ending converts reading into a continuing search. Whitman does not present himself merely as an author whose voice belongs to a finished text; he constructs a poetic identity that attempts to survive its own conclusion.

3. Two Different Subjects, One Larger Vision

The immediate subjects of Sections 6 and 52 are clearly different. Section 6 develops from the meaning of **grass** and becomes a meditation on mortality, equality, and regeneration. Section 52 concentrates on the **poet's departure**, poetic voice, transformation, and his continuing relationship with the reader. The first begins with another person's question; the second closes with the poet addressing the reader directly.

Nevertheless, the sections are connected by Whitman's refusal to treat identity as fixed. In Section 6, the dead become inseparable from the grass that grows from the earth. In Section 52, the speaker imagines himself becoming air, soil, and grass. The self is therefore not enclosed permanently within one body. Death and disappearance become changes in relation rather than absolute endings.

The two sections also illuminate Whitman's transcendental inheritance. Like Emerson, Whitman repeatedly moves from the particular towards a larger unity. A single blade of grass can disclose connections among people, nature, death, and spiritual continuity. An individual poet can imagine his identity passing into the material world and remaining accessible to others. Yet Whitman gives these ideas an unusually bodily form. His spirituality is grounded in physical objects and sensations rather than separated from them.

4. Language and Form

Whitman's free verse is essential to the meaning of *Song of Myself*. The long lines, irregular rhythms, catalogues, repetitions, and direct addresses allow the voice to expand and contract according to the movement of thought. There is no conventional stanzaic pattern controlling the whole poem. This formal freedom corresponds to Whitman's interest in intellectual independence and democratic inclusiveness.

Section 6 relies strongly on questions and multiple definitions. Its language imitates a mind discovering possibilities. Section 52, by contrast, contains dramatic assertions, imperatives, bodily sounds, and direct address. The change in rhetorical manner suits the difference in subject: one section investigates an object; the other stages departure and leaves a final challenge to the reader.

Whitman's pronoun "I" must also be handled carefully. It can refer to an individual speaker, but throughout *Song of Myself* it repeatedly expands beyond a narrowly autobiographical identity. The speaker absorbs other voices and experiences and seeks identification with strangers. The poem's "self" is consequently both personal and representative, although the tension between those two functions is never completely resolved.

5. A Note on the Title *Song of Myself*

The title can initially suggest a poem concerned only with self-celebration. In practice, Whitman uses the self as a point of departure for encounters with other people and with the physical world. "Myself" continually becomes difficult to separate from "you," from other bodies, and from nature. The title therefore contains one of the poem's central paradoxes: the stronger the speaker asserts the self, the more extensively that self attempts to cross its own boundaries.

Conclusion

Sections 6 and 52 demonstrate the breadth of *Song of Myself* without requiring the two passages to address the same subject. Section 6 takes the grass as its central object and turns it into a meditation on democratic equality, death, and renewal. Section 52 concentrates on poetic voice, departure, transformation, and the continuing bond between speaker and reader. Their subjects differ, but both passages challenge the idea of absolute separation—between life and death, self and nature, poet and reader.

Whitman's importance lies partly in his ability to make philosophical questions emerge from ordinary physical experience. He does not simply state that all existence is interconnected; he repeatedly tries to make the reader feel such connection through rhythm, accumulation, image, address, and the movement of the poetic voice. This combination of transcendental thought, bodily experience, democratic aspiration, and formal experiment makes *Song of Myself* one of the defining poems of nineteenth-century American literature.

Questions for Further Study

A close reading of these sections can be developed by considering several questions: Why does Whitman answer the child's question with many possibilities rather than one definition? How does grass connect democracy with mortality? Why does the poet describe his final utterance as a "barbaric yawp"? Does the conclusion represent death, poetic immortality, spiritual transformation, or all three? Finally, how does Whitman's free verse help him express ideas of freedom and inclusiveness?

Primary Text and Brief Reading Note

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. The analysis above refers to the final fifty-two-section arrangement of "Song of Myself," especially Sections 6 and 52. Students should consult an authoritative edition when quoting the poem in assessed work, since Whitman revised *Leaves of Grass* repeatedly across his career.