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Professor Galvin

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Get on My Lawn: Old Mr. Whitman's *Song of Myself*

In his quest to be appointed America's bard, poet Walt Whitman rewrote the 19th century boundaries of poetic style and content. One avant-garde poem which helped him to earn this title is *Song of Myself* nestled within his volume of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman revised this poem over a period of decades from the 1850's to the 1890's. While a modern-day reader may find *Song of Myself* to be rather conservative at face-value, genuine consideration must account for the historical context in which it was written. In this manner one can fully appreciate how Whitman's unique skills and influences, combined with his determination to persevere despite critical reception, succeeded in his becoming a powerful influence in American literature for generations that followed.

From a stylistic perspective, *Song of Myself* embraces many of the influences for which Whitman was known. At first glance, the poem is massive with a length of 1,346 lines. One could suspect that a poem of such length might be fraught with convoluted verbosity. To the contrary, Whitman was known for his love of informality including American slang, which is peppered throughout. While his contemporaries articulated "thees" and "thous" Whitman eructed, "The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the / wind," (lines 24 -25). Readers were able to identify with this rustic manner of speech which defied the European influence of Old English and helped to solidify the poem's underlying theme of a shared experience among all Americans.

Commented [A1]: An interview with author Jonathon:*How long did it take you to write this?*

J.K.: Twelve to fifteen hours. I spend a lot of time re-writing. It's tough for me to get started, so I created a three-paragraph essay format in an outline. Then I worked on the introduction for the first day. Once I have the main ideas, I go through and create the basic points and the quotes I was going to use. Then I move on to sentences and better way of saying this or that -- and I look for better word choices using a thesaurus.

What was the feedback you received from Prof. Galvin?

J.K.: I submitted to Galvin for review, and she gave me some citation / grammatical issues. She also suggested I add another source. You have to go through it multiple times and not be afraid to make changes. I read it out loud as well to see if the ideas flow. My paper would not have been the same if I was worked totally independent.

Commented [A2]:**PROF DIRECTIONS:** 2-3 pages, typed, double spaced, 12 point font, 1 inch margins.

Choose any one or two reading assignments from the syllabus covered so far in class (that you are **not** presenting on). Discuss how the work(s) reflect social/historical issues from its period and analyze how the writing style or major themes reflects these concerns. Make sure you use specific examples from the text, with some (about 3) direct quotations.

Do not summarize the work, and **do not use sources outside of your textbook and class notes**. This is not a research paper. This is to be primarily an analysis/close reading focused on the work itself. Use MLA style for in-text citations. No works cited page is needed, since I know the citations originate from our textbook.

Perhaps as an extension of his refusal to be constrained by a formal lexicon, Whitman was known as the father of free verse. At times *Song of Myself* reads as a political speech would and at others in operatic rhythm. Whitman found inspiration in both. The Italian opera influence is often most evident surrounding usage of exclamation marks. In “O span of youth! ever-push’d elasticity! / O manhood, balanced, florid and full” (lines 1170-1171), even a reader with modest choral experience will find that the words can be sung aloud with ease. Nineteenth century readers accustomed to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s manicured verses may have found Whitman’s often ambiguous delineations frustrating as they filtered through the unkempt *Leaves of Grass* looking for pause.

If Whitman’s stylistic liberties were not enough to upset the applecart of 19th century poetry his libertine licenses certainly were. Naturally, the toppled applecart drew attention, especially that of critics who bravely donned their pince-nez and followed the stench of Whitman’s belched poetry into his sordid grassy fields. Whether fueled by envy, jealousy, or perhaps a genuine concern for their fellow Americans these critics warned others to not become unwilling voyeurs themselves. One can imagine the cigar dropping shock of a 19th century industrialist reading, “And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to / my bare-stript heart” (90) aloud in the smoking room. Even Emerson, who could probably appreciate what Whitman was trying to accomplish more than most, advised that he abstain from the sexual and corporeal in his writing. However, any press can be good press in a world where many writers failed to become well-known enough to be forgotten. An experienced journalist, Whitman likely knew this and seemed unperturbed by even his harshest and most vocal critics. In poetically gleaning the root of human nature and its propagative bond between all Americans

Commented [A3]: Here, and throughout, K. connects the time period directly with the style of Whitman. The connections between era and the work are evident.

he refused to disingenuously present lust as chivalry to conform to the conservative standards of the day.

By writing *Song of Myself*, Whitman embodied the concept of manifest destiny. *Song of Myself* is a portion of the vast claim he staked upon 19th century American literature reshaping the landscape for generations to come. As the poem closes he promises, “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.”

(1340). Here it becomes evident that Whitman’s claim was also our claim and he truly did earn his title of America’s bard. As we can look down and find the grass all around us, we find Whitman’s influence time and again in successive American literature. While he’s long since dead, Old Mr. Whitman continues to invite new readers to his American lawn year after year. Those new readers may find contradiction that a poem titled *Song of Myself* is a song of the shared experience of all Americans and find irony that reading the poem is a shared American experience itself.

Commented [A4]: Notice each para contains a citation from the text as required. Nowhere does K. use summary only; he consistently shows how his commentary is reflected in the text itself.