



## Self, Transcendence and Temporality: A Philosophical Reading of Whitman's "Song of Myself"

Dr. Anumula Sreedevi

English and Foreign Languages University

Email: [asreedevi@efluniversity.ac.in](mailto:asreedevi@efluniversity.ac.in)

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.2.109](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.2.109)



### Article info

Article Received: 04/04/2025  
Article Accepted: 11/05/2025  
Published online: 15/05/2025

### Abstract

In "Song of Myself", Walt Whitman deals with the themes of temporality, transcendence, and the self through his poetic vision. He demonstrates his lifelong search for physical, intellectual, and spiritual freedom by unifying individual experience with a transcendent universal soul by merging boundaries between self, nature, and time. This paper explores how Whitman doesn't confer to linear temporality but takes up cyclical and expansive notion of time that supports his transcendental vision. The subject of the poem is mainly drawn from the philosophy propagated by the New England philosophers, Emerson, Thoreau and Fuller. Following this transcendental philosophical tradition, Whitman manifests the spiritual quality of his poetic persona, 'I' that dissolves the boundaries between self and other, mortal and eternal, serving as a passage for spiritual and temporal transcendence. Finally, the analysis shows that this 'song' is the song of one ness where the poetic persona and the reader merge into a universal soul.

**Key Words:** Transcendentalism, self, temporality, democracy. physicality, philosophy, truth.

### Introduction

Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" demonstrates his life long search for physical, intellectual and spiritual freedom. He championed for the rights of freedom against the rigid social, religious structures. Whitman holds an authentic expression for nature as the supreme healer that is charged with electric powers, and directly or indirectly aims to address the relations of man and nature. Nature

depurated him, reciprocated to his call and journeyed with him for the final of spiritual revelations.

"Song of Myself" written in 52 sections, refers to many ideas such as religion, society and cosmos. The poem embodies both physical and philosophical notions as Whitman encompasses the simple (leaf of grass) to magnanimous (star) filtering through his intense experience. Throughout the poem, he expresses his deep

love and respect for his nation's ideals such as liberalism, laissez-faire, democracy, egalitarianism and classless society. The poet masterfully crafts the poem "Song of Myself," with powerful images and symbols, to give a call to the fellow Americans for the celebration of life. Whitman's projection of the 'self' in its originality, uniqueness and variety is seen throughout "Song of Myself". And in its true nature this poem establishes a common ground between the poet and the reader through mystical affiliations.

### Methodology

The methodology used in this research paper is broadly theoretical, and it includes a close reading of the poem chosen for the study. A reference to the transcendental philosophy (which is the inspirational source for the composition of the poem) and critical studies is made. Data has been collected from relevant research articles, both online and library sources.

### Discussion

Harold Bloom, researching Whitman's "Song of Myself," found that the poem widely discusses the notions of physical, metaphorical and spiritual ideas within the poet's personality and in humanity at large. He says:

In "Song of Myself", Whitman proclaims the divine equality of all things, an equality that includes the poet's own self. The poem is, above all, a celebration of the individual, but it is also a declaration that the self, once liberated, is part of an all-encompassing spiritual unity. (Bloom 10)

Bloom focused on the themes of "Song of Myself" that propagate the ideas of self-exploration and a spiritual connection to the world. The theme of self-discovery within "Song of Myself" is deeply connected to the broader notions of love of humanity, brotherhood and spiritual oneness. As Bloom argues "Song of Myself" was fundamental to the new poetical voices in America, Whitman's unique blend of free verse with lyrical style set

new trend in writing poetry, that came free from the European tradition. (following the call of his predecessor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who advised his fellow American writers to not to follow European artistic models). Bloom wrote:

Whitman is the first American poet who truly understood what it meant to be American. He turned the self into the very centre of the universe. (Bloom 14)

Whitman wrote on the themes of nature, body and self in blank verse, establishing the new trend that suits the modern literary needs. Advocating for the greater democratic spirit, he presents these new trends in his poetry by a unique mix of syntax and semantics that challenge conventional interpretation.

Whitman's poem "Song of Myself" presents the first-person singular, 'I' which show its mysterious nature and the quality. There are many studies that confirm the meaning of the 'I' as a oversoul, or the word that represents a narcissic self of the poet, but the first-person singular 'I' is neither philosophical entity nor a physical property but instead it's a highly complex fusion of the two.

'I' in the poem "Song of Myself" is not like a character in a novel which is caught up in a set of circumstances and moves through a variety of forces and changes, and in the journey becomes a fully developed character at the end. Rather it is a well-developed phenomenon right from the beginning. It is very important to define the nature of mysticity in the presentation of 'I' in "Song of Myself". 'I' mostly represents an unusual temperament, and refuses to confirm to an accepted pattern of mystic experience. The 'I' doesn't surrender himself completely to the mystical experience but merges into the transcendent absolute. There is a celebration of the 'I' from both sensual and philosophical perspectives. In this regard James E. Miller says,

Attitudes towards the senses constitutes the basic paradox in the

poem. Whereas normally the mystical state is achieved only through a mortification or an escape from the senses, the poet of "Song of Myself" asserts that it is through transfigured senses that he reaches mystical consciousness. (Miller 23)

Another most important factor of the 'self' that Whitman discusses in the poem is mystical detachment of it. From the being 'I' that believes itself as being measured "by the effect upon me of my early life," he mentions that the surroundings with "flora" and "fauna" do not constitute for "the me myself." The "I" of the "Song of Myself" is universal and so appears to be detached. Whitman's 'self' doesn't surpass love and transcend into calm of truth. It is not completely withdrawn from its attachments like love and life but it moves on into a realm of absolute truth still with some connections to earth and its belongings. Thus the 'self' is not truly detached but vibrates with the vitality of life.

The second facet of the ego that is apparent in the poem is, it is horizontal, democratic and visible. There is no clear-cut mark between the inner and the outer and individual and collective. It is the product of the new society built with the ideas of equality, democracy as opposed to the class ridden, privileged European society. 'I' at this level is a result of the economic and social scenario of a frontier society. In this regard Oscar Corgill says that "Whitman as the natural voice of breeding and prolific America, as the Priapus of the New Continent." (Corgill 18)

In the next section of the poem, there is a third dimension of the concept 'I' where Whitman realises the universal quality of the 'self' and displays its cosmic nature. He mentions about the common differences men observe in the society, and shows how he can surpass them with the transcendental vision. At this juncture the poet's 'self' is convinced of the other important truth that is mortality. In all its

meaning, the 'I' persona that transcends the physical and reaches the higher realm, is very much attached to earthly matters. Floyd Stovall, a prominent researcher, of Whitman's poetry, providing his critique on "Song of Myself" says that

The poem is a trilogy encompassing three dominant themes, Democracy, Love and Religion. Whitman's celebration of the body and the soul as equals challenged traditional religious hierarchies, aligning with the poet's democratic ideals. (Stovall 7)

Stovall takes Whitman's lines literally and superficially and declares that 'ego' in Whitman's 'self' as a separate entity. But it is to be remembered that Whitman doesn't entirely dismiss the concept of equality with other beings in the universe. Readers also get participation in the idea of 'I' and are gradually led into the acceptance of it, and see the status of it for themselves.

Whitman advocates on the divine quality of selfhood inherent in all beings, he is quite aware of the difference between the sacred self and the mortal man. The 'duplicate' or 'counterfeit' self is a problem to humanity. From the times of Buddha, Confucius, Christ and Plato, many ethical, and humanistic methods have been proposed to control the 'counterfeit self', but all of them fell back into a familial routine, that offer the comfort of habitual life thus rejecting the sacred or divine.

Kierkegaard, D.H. Lawrence and E.E. Cummings viewed this phenomenon of the self from a modern and pragmatic point of view. Whereas Whitman views the 'duplicate self' as a depersonalization from that of the societal role. He gives upon the character of flippant and libidinous, stating that this 'duplicate self' is unnatural. Inspired by the teachings of Emerson, Whitman finally confirms that man is essentially God. He makes continuous efforts for the right knowledge to overcome this 'duplicate self' and refers to man of his divinity.

Whitman preached right knowledge and natural behaviour combining it with mystique of India. He made this shift from of the 'counterfeit self' by observing a life of self-reliance, wisdom and truth. His "Leaves of Grass" is a record of this transformation.

In the later sections of the poem, Whitman presents the 'I' implicating itself in human suffering. It is presented as having identification with Christ that has the voice of authenticity. This journey into the underworld cannot be seen as a voyage taken up by the protagonist of Dante's "Divine Comedy" into the Inferno nor should be confused with the dark night of the soul, but as an experience of alienation from the mystic with whom he seeks a union.

At this point, the 'I' is in a state of self-transcendence. Here, Whitman offers the 'I' as a being who doesn't confer to happiness, but as a powerful soul that chooses to suffer with others. He organises fetters for himself and makes himself vulnerable to human destiny, that is tied to the destiny of others.

My face is ash coloured,  
My sinews gnarl, away from me  
People treat  
Askers embody themselves in me  
And I am embodied in them  
I project my hat, sit shame faced,  
And beg (Whitman 33, 6-12)

The 'self' is alienated from the absolute knowledge of man's predicament besides having profound knowledge of tragedy of life, it refuses to give way to despair and nihilism. Since the 'I' of Whitman is connected to love of Christ, it refuses to join ranks with disillusionment, and finally emerges as a being that is "replenished with supreme power." In this phase the final form of the 'self' is revealed as the character, and later its suffering of

crucifixion is left behind and merges with men and women as a sage, messiah.

Previously the poet's 'self' wandered on a journey with quest for identification with humanity, through a prodigious act of sympathy, but now the poetic persona is sought after. In his continuous journey of life men and women invite and own him. People express their feelings and desire that he should love them, converse with them and be connected with them. Now the 'I' has reached the mystical pinnacle and proclaims its identification with the creator in its new avatar, the self now transcends the mythic and the physical incarnations of the past.

Taking myself the exact dimension of  
Jehovah

By my life - lumps! Becoming already a  
creator,

Putting myself here and now to the  
ambushed womb of shadows. (Whitman  
41,1-7)

Whitman's 'self' in his final phase, imagines the cosmos as an endless process that has no beginning or the end - Using the imagery of astronomy, he envisions time passed and time future. In this grand design he includes vast cyclical movements and his own 'self' for the ceaseless continuum.

In sections, 46, 47, 48 of the poems, he presents the teacher student imagery where the themes of evolution, physics and astronomy are discussed. "Song of Myself" is a poem where Whitman presents the 'I' playing various roles of mysticism, kinship, sympathy, suffering and prophecy in its relation to life. The self of the poet has to be given credence since Whitman speaks from the vantage point of a certitude that he had experienced. In so far as this 'I' is referred to as mystical and substantiated with authenticity of vividness and ecstasy.

The conceptualization of the 'I' that receives cosmic consciousness, a spiritual dimension of oneness and communion with all,



is presented in the last sections of the poem. This is a phenomenon that doesn't come from outside, but inherent in its own nature. Hence, this 'I' can be understood as both spiritual and physical and in the final stage can have the communion with God. Many critics have observed that, there have been resemblances between the 'I' of Whitman and the concept of 'Brahman' as presented in Indian Upanishads.

A serious reader of Whitman's "Song of Myself", who observes the transcendental and supernatural character of the 'I', understands that it has a sense of freedom and energy since it is merged with divinity. The origins of this concept can be found in not only the transcendental philosophical tradition but also in the notion of English Romanticism that opened new doors for human spirit in terms of both mystical and empirical.

Whitman's vision of 'self' portrayed as mystical is put for re-examination in the present rational, existential age. In the present technologically driven age, it is difficult to comprehend Whitman's vision of 'self' in its manifestation of mystical phenomenon. hence it is put to re-examination repeatedly. In section 21 of the poem Whitman declares himself as "the poet of the body" and "the poet of the soul" reinforcing the idea of the communion of both elements of the 'self'. Further, in section 48, he once again promotes his vision by stating that body and soul coexist in democracy, not hierarchy.

Prior to Whitman, many Platonists, Gnostics and Christians termed body as the 'animal' and the soul as 'divine'. Plato discussing about the body/soul relationship in his "Dialogue" says, "rational and reason is associated with head and divine part of the self is with heart". (Plato 31) But for Whitman both the soul and body are inseparable entities of the self. They exist in a continuous flux, work together for the life process. Glorifying his physical and spiritual side in its togetherness he says,

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 5, 1-3)

Whitman's thoughts on body/soul complexity is an important theme in "Song of Myself". He proclaimed that Christian religion preached human kind how to live life on earth with all the harsh code in order to claim a position in heaven. Christ's 'Sermon on the Mount' teaches about the acquisition of the good for the assurance of sacred place in heaven.

Famous American 20<sup>th</sup> Century poet Wallace Stevens, a successor of Whitman too advocates the similar principle in his poetry. He condones advice for human beings to not to reject the joys of the Earth in favour of the heaven. In his poems, "Sunday Morning" and "Emperor of Ice Cream", he discusses the two parts of the self as a harmonious blend within a personality.

In "Song of Myself", Whitman's persona attempts to examine the notion of his body empirically. He brings open the dark side of his character and there by tear open the mask that many individuals wear to protect themselves from the societal rigid structures.

Evil propels me and reform of evil

Propels me,

I stand indifferent

I moisten the roots of all that has grown  
(Whitman 8, 3-5)

Whitman's persona enjoys all pleasures of the body exuberantly. His vision of life is in tune with the world at large. At this point he transcends spatial and temporal and invites the reader into this grand design. Time past and present, inner and outer character, reader and the poet and the entire cosmos becomes synonymous with the poet's 'self'.

Stop this day and night with me and  
You shall possess the origin of all  
You shall listen to all sides and  
Filter them from yourself. (Whitman 6,  
1-5)

Whitman's persona displays great intensity to participate in the greater scheme of life like 'Brahma', the creator in Hindu religion. This Vedic knowledge inspired the New England writers and philosophers in the 1830s. The transcendentalists Emerson, Thoreau and Fuller influenced Whitman with their philosophical ideology, and Whitman incorporated these ideals in not only "Song of Myself" but also in other poems like "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", "I Sing the body Electric", and "Kosmos".

The statement from Hindu Upanishads "Divine am I inside out" influences Whitman and he says that his imagination has more power to visualize the truth and can journey to the ends of the worlds for knowledge, that helps him for the composition of his poetry. "My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach/ with the twirl of my tongue/I encompass worldly and volumes of worlds (Whitman 5, 18-21). This is another important notion in Hindu Vedic tradition, which proclaim that poets can reach certain spiritual realms and speak with the gift of language. The poet is like 'Brahma'- the creator. Whitman is offering the poem to the humanity in an attempt to remove the false barriers built by a narrow sense of separateness. He observes that by permitting oneself to understand the connectedness of life, one can experience the mystic nature of God. Whitman's persona doesn't confer to God strictly, nor confines himself to the idea of 'holier than thou' persona, but helps audience experience the soul for themselves.

Whitman further makes an attempt to elaborate on the idea of 'you'. He addresses several objects as 'you' like 'curling grass', 'lonely spinster' an 'ox' etc., and starts

imagining their emotion. With the help of these poetical tropes, he manages to blur the word 'you' to demonstrate the idea that 'you' and 'he' are not separate but connected. This idea stems from transcendental notion 'Atman' that brings the presence of God into the connection of living beings. Whitman carries this idea into his poem by making the small 'blade of grass' equal to that of a 'star', emphasising the fact that the 'over soul' unites all the atoms of the universe. Whitman establishes this all-encompassing transcendental vision in the "Song of Myself" through the recording of diverse personas. Michael Warner, famous researcher of Whitman, mentions that "this technique is a social montage and thumbnail characterization. Whitman offers this montage of life in two ways. First, he involves in a scene as a watcher and then secondly moves aside and beholds the scene as a keen observer". (Warner 52) With this kind of a method, he obtains the roles of both a participant of the experience and the listener who documents the experience.

Time is another important phenomenon in "Song of Myself". Whitman experiences time within and outside of him. Time in his poetry doesn't flow in linear movement like past, present, future. He often speaks from a place outside of linear time. "What is the present after all but a growth out of the past" (Whitman 10 7-9). He suggests that the present contains all that is past and future, much like in the Vedantic tradition that the self ((Atman) is beyond time. Henri Bergson, a French philosopher, deeply explored the nature of time in his works. The two types of time concepts he discusses are: 'Mechanique' (clock time) and 'La durée' (duration). 'Mechanique' time is linear flow where present past and future are clearly divided, but the 'La durée' is subjective and it is a flow of consciousness. Whitman too wrote about time as a human consciousness. Time for him has the power to awaken language within him that in turn connects him with the grandeur of the cosmic design, "The clock indicates the

movement / But what does eternity indicate".  
(Whitman 33, 21-22).

Whitman glimpses at the eternal quality of cosmos that doesn't disappear with death but shifts its form and shape following the tradition of Xenophanes. Whitman propagated the view that all organisms coming from the ground returns to it, fuelling it with more of life energy, thus giving credence to the idea of universality. He holds the thoughts of permanence and temporary, the death/ rebirth rotation, as an eternal evolution. For him, the tiniest object of nature (blade of grass) to the magnificent (star) are both in the same ever evolving trajectory, since the grass blade and the star are in the similar movement, they are considered one.

F.O. Matthiessen, in his seminal work "American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman," offers a profound analysis of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." He says,

Whitman's work embodies the spirit of the American Renaissance, reflecting a period of profound cultural and intellectual transformation. Through "Song of Myself", Whitman articulates a vision of American identity that is inclusive, democratic, and spiritually expansive.

## Conclusion

Thus, for Whitman, God is a totality, who is light and darkness that is ever pervasive in all the objects of nature. According to Whitman, the experience of life journey offers a path to each individual through which he/she discovers the meaning of the journey.

Whitman's persona brings out the concept of body/soul throughout the poem. Rejecting the traditional notions of dualism, that separates body and soul, Whitman propagates the idea of body and soul in a communion, celebrating their unity as an essential entity to the human experience. This mystical communism for the body and soul is established

in a transcendental realm, and is experienced not only by the persona but is passed on to the reader, a gift of empathetic consciousness. Finally, Whitman casts a magic spell over the readers with his 'song' of oneness of the body and soul.

## References

- Bloom Herold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*,. Harcourt brace, 1994.
- Bloom, Herold. *Walt Whitman*. Chelsea House, 2003 (Modern Critical Views series).
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*: Edited by David S. Reynolds, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Modern Library, 2002.
- Cargill, Oscar. *Intellectual America: Ideas on the March* (New York,1941).
- James E. Miller Jr. "Song of Myself as Invention of Mystical Experience. BMLA, LXX (1955).
- Stovall, Floyd. Editor "Song of Myself": A Mosaic of Interpretations. New York University Press, 1964.
- Plato. *Plato: Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper. Hacket Publishing. 1997.
- Warner, Michael. *Introduction. The Portable Walt Whitman*. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance; Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. Oxford University Press.1941.