I Hear America Singing
I Sit and Look Out
from Song of Myself
Poetry by Walt Whitman

Connect to Your Life
Images of America Many of Walt Whitman's poems contain vivid images of America in the mid-1800s. What images do you think capture the spirit and reality of America today? Share descriptions or sketches with a small group of classmates.

Build Background
A Revolution in Poetry Walt Whitman's first book of poems, Leaves of Grass, was so revolutionary in content and form that publishers would not publish it. After Whitman printed the book himself in 1855, many established poets and critics disparaged it. In 1856, the Saturday Review suggested that "if the Leaves of Grass should come into anybody's possession, our advice is to throw them instantly behind the fire."

Doubtless Whitman was shocked and hurt by such a reception, for he saw himself as capturing the spirit of his country and his times. In the preface to Leaves of Grass he wrote, "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." Whitman's images encompass all of American life, including the common and "vulgar." His lines are long and rambling, like the vastly expanding country. His language reflects the vigor and tang of American speech, resounding with new, distinctively American rhythms. Most of his poems are marked by optimism, vitality, and a love of nature, free expression, and democracy—values often associated with the America of his day.

Focus Your Reading
LITERARY ANALYSIS FREE VERSE Walt Whitman is generally credited with bringing free verse to American poetry. Free verse is poetry without regular patterns of rhyme and meter. Whitman, however, does use the following poetic devices to create rhythm:

Catalog There are frequent lists of people, things, and attributes.
Repetition Words or phrases are repeated at the beginning of two or more lines.
Parallelism Related ideas are phrased in similar ways.

ACTIVE READING STRATEGIES FOR READING FREE VERSE Use the following strategies as you read Whitman's free verse:
• Read the poems aloud, and listen to the rhythm of the lines.
• Notice where he uses the devices of catalog, repetition, and parallelism.
• Do not spend too much time on any one line; instead, appreciate the sweep of his images and ideas.
• The speaker can be identified with Whitman himself. Build a mental image of the speaker, particularly as you read "Song of Myself."
from Song of Myself

WALT WHITMAN

1

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loaf and invite my soul,
I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

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,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every
hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

GUIDE FOR READING

1-3 Why do you think the speaker identifies the reader with himself at the very beginning of the poem?

10 in abeyance (e-bá’ans): temporarily set aside.

11 sufficed at: satisfied with.
A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands,

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.
Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.
This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers, 
Darker than the colorless beards of old men, 
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues, 
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths 
for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women, 
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men? 
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere, 
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death, 
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait 
at the end to arrest it, 
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, 
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.
The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me, It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds, It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun, I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

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.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean, But I shall be good health to you nevertheless, And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, Missing me one place search another, I stop somewhere waiting for you.