Connecting to the Essential Question

Write: The poetry of Walt Whitman is bold, adventurous, generous, and optimistic. Write a paragraph in which you discuss whether these qualities typify the American people as well.

Look for It: Note word choices that signal a sense of boldness, adventure, and optimism in Whitman's poems. This will help as you consider the Essential Question: What makes American Literature American?

Literary Analysis

Traditional epic poetry tells a long story about a hero whose adventures embody the values of a nation. Although many of his first readers were shocked by Whitman's Leaves of Grass, today the poem is considered a type of American epic that expresses national ideals. A true "poet of democracy," Whitman is broadly inclusive in his topics, which range from slavery and the Civil War to romantic love and immortality. Thrumming through these diverse subjects, though, is the constant echo of Whitman's epic theme—that all people of all times are connected by their shared experience of life. Whitman's style is marked by specific structural and poetic elements that contribute to a sense of epic sweep:

- **Free Verse:** Unlike formal verse, which has strict rules, free verse has irregular meter and line length and sounds like natural speech. Although free verse is as old as the Psalms in the Bible, Whitman was the first American poet to use it. It allows him to shape every line and stanza to suit his meaning, rather than fitting his message to a form:

  *Do I contradict myself?  
  Very well then I contradict myself. . . .*

- **Long Lines:** Whitman uses long, sprawling lines for various effects. They may reflect the idea being expressed, capture a broad scene, develop a complex idea, or string together a list of objects:

  *I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.*

- **Catalogues, or lists:** Whitman's use of catalogues, or lists, of people, objects, or situations, evokes the infinite range of elements that make up human experience. His catalogs create a colorful, inclusive parade of images while simultaneously suggesting that each element is of equal weight and worth. "I am enamor'd," he writes,

  *Of men that live among cattle . . .  
  Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes and mauls, and the drivers of horses...*
• **Anaphora**, or the repetition of phrases or sentences with similar structures or meanings: In the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes that America "perceives that the corpse" of old ideas is being moved out of the "house" of the national literature. His use of anaphora in this paragraph creates a tone and rhythm that is almost biblical, even as it delivers a message that is revolutionary:

    ... perceives that it waits a little while in the door ... that it was fittest for its days ... that its action has descended to the stalwart and well-shaped heir who approaches ... and that he shall be fittest for his days.

• **Diction**, or word choice: In the example used to illustrate anaphora above, the words fittest and heir enhance the passage's biblical quality. Whitman chooses other words for their clarity, precision, or sound quality.

• **Onomatopoeia**, or words whose sounds imitate their meanings: Whitman's use of words like grunting, gab, and yawp give his poetry an earthy quality, while also suggesting that his ideas transcend language itself.

**Comparing Literary Works** As you read, notice Whitman's use of these structural and poetic elements, and compare their effects in different poems. Think about the ideas or emotions individual elements help to emphasize.

**Reading Strategy**

To increase your understanding of Whitman's ideas, **adjust your reading rate.** When a poem's lines are long and dense, read slowly, and when you feel pulled by the rhythm of the verse, read more rapidly. **Read aloud** to hear the flow of Whitman's language and to better appreciate his sprawling lines, evocative sounds, and rhythmic repetitions. As you read, use a chart like the one shown to record passages you read slowly and to note how this strategy enhances your understanding.

**Vocabulary**

| **stirring** (ster' in) adj. busy; full of energy (p. 427) | **bequeath** (bē kwēth') v. to hand down or pass on (p. 431) |
| **abeyance** (ə bē' ans) n. temporary suspension (p. 428) | **stealthily** (stēlth' i lē) adv. slyly or secretly (p. 433) |
| **effuse** (ə fyōōz') v. to pour out (p. 431) | **robust** (rō bust') adj. strong and healthy; full of life (p. 435) |

Whitman sets aside what he was taught through formal education, but these things cannot be completely forgotten. He will speak openly and freely in the lines to follow.
FROM PREFACE TO THE 1855 EDITION OF LEAVES OF GRASS
WALT WHITMAN

BACKGROUND The 1855 edition of was the first edition of Whitman's opus. In the preface to his work, Whitman's prose sings much as his poetry does, full of poetic language, enthusiasm, and energy.

America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions. ... accepts the lesson with calmness ... is not so impatient as has been supposed that the slough still sticks to opinions and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms ... perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house ... perceives that it waits a little while in the door ... that it was fittest for its days ... that its action has descended to the stalwart and well-shaped heir who approaches ... and that he shall be fittest for his days.
The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes. . . . Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves. Here the performance disdaining the trivial unapproached in the tremendous audacity of its crowds and groupings and the push of its perspective spreads with crampless and flowing breadth and showers its prolific and splendid extravagance. One sees it must indeed own the riches of the summer and winter, and need never be bankrupt while corn grows from the ground or the orchards drop apples or the bays contain fish or men beget children upon women. . . .

Critical Reading

1. Respond: Do you think that Whitman’s characterization of the United States is still accurate? Why or why not?

2. (a) What subject does Whitman address in the first paragraph? (b) Interpret: What does Whitman mean when he says “the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house”?

3. (a) According to Whitman, what makes America different from all other nations? (b) Interpret: What is the meaning of Whitman’s notion that the United States is “a teeming nation of nations”?

4. (a) According to Whitman, what is the greatest of all poems? (b) Analyze: Based on this statement, how is Whitman redefining the idea of a poem?
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.

5
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, formed 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.

10 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.

6

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,
5 A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say Whose?

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,
10 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 anyone supposed, and luckier.

The big doors of the country barn stand open and ready,
The dried grass of the harvest-time loads the slow-drawn wagon.
The clear light plays on the brown gray and green intertinged,
The armfuls are pack'd to the sagging mow.

I am there, I help, I came stretch'd atop of the load,
I felt its soft jolts, one leg reclined on the other,
I jump from the crossbeams and seize the clover and timothy, And roll head over heels and tangle my hair full of wisps.

The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,
Ya-honk he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation,
The pert may suppose it meaningless, but I listening close, Find its purpose and place up there toward the wintry sky.

5 The sharp-hoof'd moose of the north, the cat on the house-sill, the chickadee, the prairie dog,
The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats, The brood of the turkey hen and she with her half-spread wings, I see in them and myself the same old law.

The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections, They scorn the best I can do to relate them.

---

1. remembrancer reminder.
I am enamor'd of growing outdoors,
Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods,
Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes and mauls, and the drivers of horses,
I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out.

16 What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me,
Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns,
Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me,
Not asking the sky to come down to my good will,
Scattering it freely forever.

17 These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands,
they are not original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing,
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing.
If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.

5 This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,
This is the common air that bathes the globe.

51 The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied them,
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening.  

(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)
I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab.

10 Who has done his day's work? who will soonest be through with his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?

2. snuff ... evening put out the hesitant last light of day, which is moving sideways across the sky.
3. nigh near.
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 scud⁴ 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 caddies, 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 fiber your blood.

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

---

4. scud low, dark, wind-driven clouds.

Vocabulary

**effuse** (əˈfyo͞oəs) v. to pour out

**bequeath** (bē kweth) v. to hand down or pass on
When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture room,

How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.
I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe
and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves
off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the
deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter¹
singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the
morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work,
or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young
fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

1. hatter person who makes, sells, or cleans hats.

Critical Viewing In this painting of farmwork, does the artist's style have
qualities in common with Whitman's style? Explain. [Compare and Contrast]
America’s Epic
James E. Miller, Jr.

James E. Miller, Jr. is the Helen A. Regenstein Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Chicago. He is the author of two important critical studies of Walt Whitman and another focusing on T. S. Eliot.

Did Whitman write the epic for modern America? There have been many who contend that Leaves of Grass is merely a collection of lyric poetry, some good, some bad, all of it of a peculiarly personal nature that disqualifies its attitudes and philosophy generally. There have been others who have defended Whitman’s book as the embodiment of the American reality and ideal, as superb fulfillment of all the genuine requirements of the national epic.

What did Whitman believe? The answer may be found in a number of prose works, beginning with the 1855 Preface. It is clear in this early work that Whitman desired Leaves of Grass to bear a unique relationship with America: “Here [in America] at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night... It awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it.” It is generally recognized that the entire Preface is a veiled account of Whitman’s concept of his own role as a poet. Certainly he includes himself in the category when he asserts: “The poets of the kosmos advance through all interpositions and coverings and turmoil and stratagems to first principles.” Although Whitman does not use the term, it is clear throughout the 1855 Preface that he believes his book to have the basic nature and general scope of the traditional national epic.

In Democratic Vistas, in the same indirect manner, Whitman again reveals his concept of the nature of his poetry: “Never was anything more wanted than, to-day, and here in the States, the poet of the modern is wanted, or the great literatus of the modern. At all times, perhaps, the central point in any nation, and that whence it is itself really sway’d the most and whence it sways others, is its national literature, especially its archetypal poems” (V, 54-55).

Whitman was by this time (1871) acutely aware that America had not accepted his book as he had planned and hoped. There can be little doubt that he conceived Leaves of Grass as an “archetypal” poem produced and offered to America at its “central point”—a book “sway’d” by the nation and written to sway others. Such a work as Whitman calls for in Democratic Vistas is surely the epic of America. And, basically, it is his own work which he desires to be recognized as such.

Check Your Comprehension

- What question about Whitman’s work does Miller pose?
- According to Miller, how does Whitman himself answer that question?
- What evidence does Miller provide to support this answer?