

○ Me! ○ Life! – Walt Whitman

○ me! ○ life!... of the questions of these recurring;
Of the endless trains of the faithless – of cities fill'd with the foolish;
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light – of the objects mean – of the struggle ever renew'd;
Of the poor results of all – of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me;
Of the empty and useless years of the rest – with the rest me intertwined;
The question, ○ me! so sad, recurring – What good amid these, ○ me, ○ life?

Answer.

That you are here – that life exists, and identity;
That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse.

– Walt Whitman,
1891

Questions

On a separate sheet of paper, answer the following questions with thoughtful, complete sentences.

1. Read the poem closely and summarize the first seven lines into just one sentence, using your own words. Then, summarize the message of the last two lines, again using just one sentence and your own words.

2. This poem is built in free verse, meaning it doesn't rhyme and reads more like prose than poetry. Notice, though, the unique structure and Whitman's dramatic use of white space between the two sections. What is his reason for physically structuring the poem in this way?

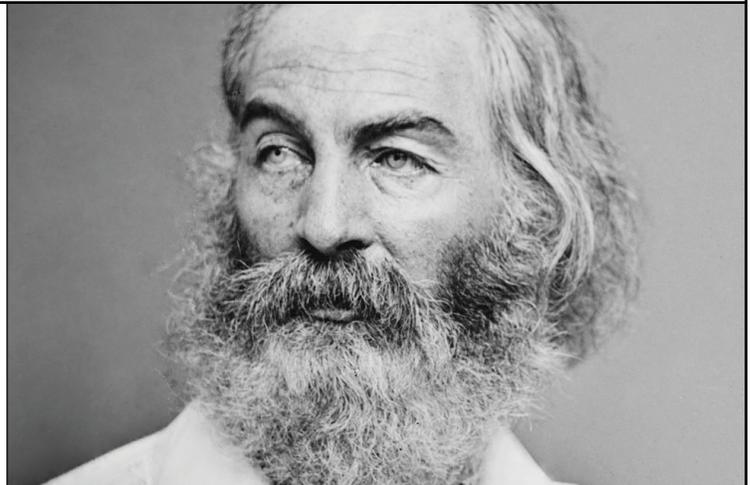
3. In the third line, the speaker adds himself to the pathetic crowd of the "faithless" and "foolish." What effect does this have on the reader?

4. In a thesaurus, look up the word "sordid" and write down two synonyms. In your experience, do you think this word is appropriate to describe large groups of people? Why or why not? Be sure to give an example from our modern lives as you explain your answer.

5. In line four, the speaker says that our eyes "vainly crave the light." This is an example of symbolism. What does "light" refer to here?

6. Also in line four, the speaker mentions "the objects mean." To what, do you suppose, this phrase refers?

7. Walt Whitman is one of the most celebrated poets in the canon of American literature. After examining this poem, what do you think Whitman's verse has turned out to be? What do you want your verse to be?



Walt Whitman, 1819-1892