

from Song of Myself

Walt Whitman

from 33

I understand the large hearts of heroes,
The courage of present times and all times,
How the skipper saw the crowded and rudderless wreck of the
steam-ship, and Death chasing it up and down the storm,
How he knuckled tight and gave not back an inch, and was faithful
of days and faithful of nights,

And chalk'd in large letters on a board, *Be of good cheer, we will not
desert you;*
How he follow'd with them and tack'd with them three days and
would not give it up,
How he saved the drifting company at last,
How the lank loose-gown'd women look'd when boated from the
side of their prepared graves,
How the silent old-faced infants and the lifted sick, and the sharp-
lipp'd unshaved men;
All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine,
I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there.°

The disdain and calmness of martyrs,
The mother of old, condemn'd for a witch, burnt with dry wood,
her children gazing on,
The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the fence,
blowing, cover'd with sweat,
The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck, the
murderous buckshot and the bullets,
All these I feel or am.

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the
marksmen,

1-11. **I understand . . . I was there:** This stanza was inspired by an incident that occurred in 1853. According to reports in the *New York Weekly Tribune* of January 21, 1854, the ship *San Francisco* sailed from New York City on December 22, 1853, destined for South America. A violent storm hit the ship several hundred miles out of port, washing many passengers overboard. The captain of another ship helped rescue the survivors. A copy of the newspaper story was found among Whitman's papers after his death.

I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs,^o thinn'd with the gore *19. dribs n. pl. dribbles.*
of my skin,
20 I fall on the weeds and stones,
The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,
Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with
whip-stocks.

Agonies are one of my changes of garments,
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the
wounded person,
25 My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.

I am the mash'd fireman with breast-bone broken,
Tumbling walls buried me in their debris,
Heat and smoke I inspired,^o I heard the yelling shouts of my *28. inspired v.; breathed in.*
comrades,
I heard the distant click of their picks and shovels,
30 They have clear'd the beams away, they tenderly lift me forth.

I lie in the night air in my red shirt, the pervading hush is for
my sake,
Painless after all I lie exhausted but not so unhappy,
White and beautiful are the faces around me, the heads are bared
of their fire-caps,
The kneeling crowd fades with the light of the torches.

35 Distant and dead resuscitate,
They show as the dial or move as the hands of me, I am the clock
myself.

I am an old artilleryist, I tell of my fort's bombardment,
I am there again.

40 Again the long roll of the drummers,
Again the attacking cannon, mortars,
Again to my listening ears the cannon responsive.

I take part, I see and hear the whole,
The cries, curses, roar, the plaudits for well-aim'd shots,
The ambulanza^o slowly passing trailing its red drip, *44. ambulanza (am-bū-lan't'sa)*
5 Workmen searching after damages, making indispensable repairs, *Italian for "ambulance."*
The fall of grenades through the rent roof, the fan-shaped
explosion,
The whizz of limbs, heads, stone, wood, iron, high in the air.

Again gurgles the mouth of my dying general, he furiously waves
with his hand,
He gasps through the clot *Mind not me—mind—the entrenchments.*

Song of Myself, Number 10

Thinking Critically

1. In the five stanzas of this poem, the **speaker** observes and participates in five American scenes. Describe the scene in each stanza. What emotion does each scene evoke?
2. Identify at least three **images** of sight, sound, or touch in the poem that are most vivid to you.
3. **Tone** is the attitude a writer takes toward a subject. A writer can change tone by manipulating language. Whitman changes the **tone** of this poem in the fourth and fifth scenes. Identify the tone of the first three scenes. Then, tell how the tones of the fourth and fifth scenes are different. What effect do you think the poet hoped to create by changing tones?
4. Read this **free-verse** poem aloud. What repetitions of sentence patterns help to create a **cadence**—a rhythmic rise and fall of your voice as the lines are spoken aloud? How does the sound of the poem contribute to its meaning?
5. In the last scene the “runaway slave” is one of thousands who entrusted their lives to those who would help them escape. What do you think this stanza shows about the speaker’s relationship with his guest?

from Song of Myself, Number 33

Thinking Critically

1. As in number 10, the **speaker** in number 33 observes and participates in several American scenes. Identify the scenes, and describe the emotions they evoke in the speaker.

2. One of Whitman’s most famous lines is found in number 33. At what moments does the speaker restate the point that “I am the man, I suffer’d, I was there”? What is the effect of these restatements?
3. To see how Whitman uses various poetic devices in his poems, fill out a chart like the following one. Quote lines from the poem that illustrate his use of these devices.

Poetic Device	Quotations
Alliteration	
Assonance	
Imagery	
Onomatopoeia	
Parallel structure	

4. How would you describe the speaker’s **tone** in this song? In other words, how does he feel about the heroes he describes?
5. Find examples of very long lines and very short lines. Read the poem aloud to feel the effects of these long and short lines. How do they force you to vary your rate of reading and your emphasis?
6. Based on the scenes in this section of *Song of Myself*, how do you think Whitman defines heroism?
7. If you were to add a contemporary hero (or heroes) to this poem, whom would you choose? Why?

