

# Before You Read

## *from* Song of Myself, Number 52

by Walt Whitman

### LITERARY FOCUS: THEME

Walt Whitman’s revelations about human experience are his **themes**. Whitman, like most good writers, never states his themes directly.

To discover the theme in one of Whitman’s poems, follow these steps:

- Read the poem carefully. Be sure you understand all its figures of speech.
- Identify the subject of the poem—what is it “about”?
- Think about the language in the poem: Is there a particular line that seems very important, or a word that seems key to the poem?
- Think about the title of the poem. Is it significant?
- Ask yourself: “What does this poem say to me about our human experience?”
- Try out several statements of theme. There is no one correct way to express a theme. In fact, different readers will almost always come up with different statements of theme.

Keep in mind that a theme is different from a work’s subject, or topic. A theme comments on the topic in some way. See below:

Sample Topics	Sample Themes
baseball	The game of baseball is like the game of life.
mountain climbing	We find what we are capable of when faced with deadly obstacles.
art	Imagination is the quality that makes us human.

### READING SKILLS: COMPARING THEMES ACROSS TEXTS

“Song of Myself, Number 52” is the final section of Walt Whitman’s long poem. This conclusion is a **coda**, a summing up and restatement of the different themes running throughout the poem. Once you’ve read this selection, think about Whitman’s “Song of Myself, Number 33.” Find passages of “Song of Myself, Number 52” that echo ideas you read about in “Song of Myself, Number 33.” Then compare the themes of the two poems.

#### SKILLS FOCUS

**Literary Skills**  
Understand theme.

**Reading Skills**  
Compare themes across texts.

# from *Song of Myself*

Walt Whitman

52

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<sup>1</sup> of day holds back for me,  
5 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<sup>2</sup> my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
10 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,  
15 Missing me one place search another,  
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

1. **scud** *n.*: windblown mist and low clouds.
2. **effuse** *v.*: spread out.



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## CLARIFY

Re-read lines 1–3. What is the speaker comparing himself to? Underline the words in line 2 that alert you to the comparison.

## INTERPRET

Where does the speaker tell us to look for him (lines 9–10)? Why is that? What larger meaning might the **images** in this line have?

## INTERPRET

In what way can Whitman be “good health” to the reader (line 12)?

## Song of Myself, Number 52

**Reading Skills: Comparing Themes Across Texts** The chart below lists some details from “Song of Myself, Number 33” and “Song of Myself, Number 52.” For each selection, fill in a **theme** the details suggest to you. When you finish, think about the themes you have listed. Are they the same or similar? Write your response on the lines below the chart.

Details from “Song of Myself, Number 33”	Possible Theme
“All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine,” (line 10)	
“All these I feel or am.” (line 16)	
“I take part, I see and hear the whole,” (line 42)	
Details from “Song of Myself, Number 52”	Possible Theme
“I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.” (line 3)	
“I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,” (line 9)	
“I stop somewhere waiting for you.” (line 16)	

**Comparing Themes** In what way are the themes in the two poems similar or the same?

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## Before You Read

### from Song of Myself, Number 52

by Walt Whitman

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**Reading Skills**  
Compare across texts.

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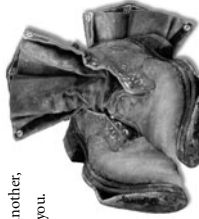
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#### CLARIFY

Re-read lines 1–3. What is the speaker comparing himself to? Underline the words in line 2 that alert you to the comparison.

**He compares himself to the spotted hawk.**

#### INTERPRET

Where does the speaker tell us to look for him (lines 9–10)? Why is that? What larger meaning might the images in this line have?

**He tells us to look for him under our boot-soles because he will be grass. He intends for his poetry to be as accessible as the earth.**

#### INTERPRET

In what way can Whitman be “good health” to the reader (line 12)?

**Sample response: The ideas in his poetry will spiritually enrich the reader.**

## Before You Read

### Full Powers by Pablo Neruda

#### LITERARY FOCUS: METAPHOR

Which description is more exciting to read: *Many ants ate the picnic food* or *An army of ants attacked the picnic basket*? You probably preferred the second sentence, in which ants are compared to an attacking army. This comparison is an example of a metaphor. A **metaphor** is a figure of speech that makes a comparison between two unlike things without using a word such as *like*, *than*, *as*, or *resembles*.

As you read Pablo Neruda's "Full Powers," think about the metaphors he creates. Then, think about why he chose to make those comparisons and how they add meaning to the poem.

#### READING SKILLS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING POEMS

Walt Whitman, an American, and Pablo Neruda, a Chilean, came from different parts of the world and lived in different centuries, yet their writing shares certain similarities in style and theme. In fact, Neruda has said he was inspired by Whitman and owed him "this marvelous debt that has helped me to live."

When you compare and contrast poems, you look for ways in which they are similar and ways in which they differ. Some of the elements of poetry you should consider in making comparisons and contrasts are these:

**Subject:** What is each poem about?

**Sounds:** What sound devices does each poet use? Are the poems written with strict regard for meter and rhyme, or are they written in free verse?

**Imagery:** What pictures does each poem create?

**Figures of speech:** What metaphors and similes are found in each poem?

**Tone:** What is the tone of each poem, or its attitude toward life or toward its subject?

**Theme:** What does the poem reveal about human life or human experience?



**Literary Skills**  
Understand metaphor.

**Reading Skills**  
Compare and contrast poems.

Full Powers 139

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## SKILLS PRACTICE

### Song of Myself, Number 52

**Reading Skills: Comparing Themes Across Texts** The chart below lists some details from "Song of Myself, Number 33" and "Song of Myself, Number 52." For each selection, fill in a **theme** the details suggest to you. When you finish, think about the themes you have listed. Are they the same or similar? Write your response on the lines below the chart.

**Sample responses appear below.**

Details from "Song of Myself, Number 33"	Possible Theme
"All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine," (line 10)	
"All these I feel or am," (line 16)	
"I take part, I see and hear the whole," (line 42)	
<b>All of life's experiences are part of us; we are a part of all things; we are part of everything.</b>	
Details from "Song of Myself, Number 52"	Possible Theme
"I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world," (line 3)	
"I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love," (line 9)	
<b>The poet writes for the whole world; even in death we are part of life; we experience the world together.</b>	
"I stop somewhere waiting for you," (line 16)	

**Comparing Themes** In what way are the themes in the two poems similar or the same?

**Sample response:** Whitman seems to be saying that to live fully

you must absorb the experiences of others and become one with the natural world.

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Collection 3: American Masters: Whitman and Dickinson

## Free Verse

**Free verse** is poetry that does not conform to regular meter or rhyme scheme. Free verse does use the traditional poetic elements of imagery, figures of speech, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, and parallel structure.

DIRECTIONS: Complete the chart by writing examples from the selection of each poetic element listed.

Poetic Element	Example from Selection
<b>Imagery</b> —language that appeals to one or more of the five senses	
<b>Figures of speech</b> —words and phrases that describe one thing in terms of another, very different, thing	
<b>Alliteration</b> —repetition of similar consonant sounds in words close together	
<b>Assonance</b> —repetition of similar vowel sounds in words close together	
<b>Onomatopoeia</b> —use of words whose sounds imitate their meaning, such as <i>bang</i> and <i>buzz</i>	
<b>Parallel structure</b> —repetition of the same or similar words, phrases, clauses, or sentences	