

Before You Read

from Song of Myself, Number 33 by Walt Whitman

LITERARY FOCUS: FREE VERSE

Free verse is poetry that does not follow a regular meter (a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables) or rhyme scheme. Instead of having a set number of syllables, for example, a line in a free verse poem can be of any length. Although free verse abandons some elements of traditional poetry, it uses many others. As you read the excerpt from “Song of Myself, Number 33,” which is written in free verse, notice how the following devices add to the power and the message of the poem.

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| alliteration | The repetition of consonant sounds: “I understand the large h earts of h eroes,” |
| assonance | The repetition of vowel sounds: “How the silent old-faced infants and the lifted sick,” |
| onomatopoeia | The use of words whose sounds echo their meanings: “Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen,” |
| parallel structure | The repetition of phrases, clauses, or sentences that have the same grammatical structure: “ Again the long roll of the drummers, Again the attacking cannon, mortars,” |

REVIEW SKILLS

Look for examples of **figurative language** as you read the following poem.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Words or phrases that describe one thing in terms of another, very different thing, and are not meant to be taken literally. Figures of speech include similes, metaphors, and personification.

READING SKILLS: PARAPHRASING

When you **paraphrase**, you restate a writer’s ideas in your own words. A paraphrase should include all the details of the original. It is unlike a **summary**, which includes only the most important details. Paraphrasing is a useful skill for explaining difficult terms or ideas. It can also help you check your comprehension of what you’ve read. Here is an example:

Original Line: “I understand the large hearts of heroes, / The courage of present times and all times, . . . ”

Sample Paraphrase: “I know that heroes have enormous compassion. Their courage is everlasting.”

Use the Skill As you read this excerpt from the poem, paraphrase passages you have trouble understanding.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills
Understand the characteristics of free verse.

Reading Skills
Paraphrase to clarify a writer’s ideas.

Review Skills
Understand figurative language.

from *Song of Myself*

Walt Whitman

PARAPHRASE

Locate and circle the example of **personification** in line 3. Then, paraphrase the line. (*Review Skill*)

IDENTIFY

Imagery is the use of language that appeals to the senses. Circle the imagery Whitman uses to describe the people who were rescued (lines 8–9). To what sense do these images mostly appeal?

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*
5 *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;
10 All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine,
I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there.¹

1. **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.

WORD STUDY

Artillery is a noun meaning “weapons.” What might an *artillerist* (line 37) be?

FLUENCY

Read aloud the boxed passage that tells about the gruesome experiences of an artillery soldier. Note that *plaudits* means “applause,” *rent* means “torn,” and *entrenchments* means “a fortification of trenches.” Look up in a dictionary any other words you don’t know. Mark up examples of parallel structures. Then, see how smoothly and dramatically you can read these stanzas, being careful to let the parallel structures create a rhythm.

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 artillerist, 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 ambulanza⁴ slowly passing trailing its red drip,
45 Workmen searching after damages, making indispensable
repairs,
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.

4. *ambulanza* (äm·bōō·länt’sə): Italian for “ambulance.”

from Song of Myself, Number 33

Reading Skills: Paraphrasing In the left-hand column of the chart below are passages from “Song of Myself, Number 33.” Paraphrase each in the space at the right. Remember to include all details of the original; paraphrases are not summaries. Once you’ve finished paraphrasing, answer the final question that appears below the chart.

| Passage from Poem | Paraphrase |
|--|------------|
| <p>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, I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinn'd with the ooze of my skin, 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. (lines 17–22)</p> | |
| <p>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. (lines 31–34)</p> | |

Evaluate Compare your paraphrases with the original verses from the poem. What is “lost” in translation?

SKILLS PRACTICE

I Hear America Singing

Reading Skills: Identifying Parallel Structure "I Hear America Singing" is full of parallel structures. In the chart below, list examples of parallel words, phrases, and sentence structures in the spaces provided.

| Parallel Structure | Examples from the Poem |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Repetition of words | The word "singing" |
| Repetition of phrases | The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing |
| Repetition of sentence patterns | The carpenter singing his as he . . . / The mason singing his as he . . . / The boatman singing, etc. |

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Before You Read

from Song of Myself, Number 33 by Walt Whitman

LITERARY FOCUS: FREE VERSE

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|---------------------------|--|
| alliteration | The repetition of consonant sounds: "I understand the large hearts of heroes," |
| assonance | The repetition of vowel sounds: "How the silent old-faced infants and the lifted sick," |
| onomatopoeia | The use of words whose sounds echo their meanings: "Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen," |
| parallel structure | The repetition of phrases, clauses, or sentences that have the same grammatical structure: "Again the long roll of the drummers, Again the attacking cannon, mortars," |

REVIEW SKILLS
Look for examples of figurative language as you read the following poem.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE
Words or phrases that describe things in terms of another, different thing, and are not meant to be taken literally. Figures of speech include similes, metaphors, and personification.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills
Understand the characteristics of free verse.

Reading Skills
Use context to clarify a writer's ideas.

Review Skills
Understand figurative language.

READING SKILLS: PARAPHRASING

When you **paraphrase**, you restate a writer's ideas in your own words. A paraphrase should include all the details of the original. It is unlike a **summary**, which includes only the most important details. Paraphrasing is a useful skill for explaining difficult terms or ideas. It can also help you check your comprehension of what you've read. Here is an example:

Original Line: "I understand the large hearts of heroes, / The courage of present times and all times, . . ."

Sample Paraphrase: "I know that heroes have enormous compassion. Their courage is everlasting."

Use the Skill As you read this excerpt from the poem, paraphrase passages you have trouble understanding.

from Song of Myself

Walt Whitman

from 33

PARAPHRASE

Locate and circle the example of personification in line 3. Then, paraphrase the line. (Review Skill)

Possible response:

The skipper saw a wrecked steamship that couldn't be steered, filled with passengers who were in danger of death.

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.¹

IDENTIFY

Imagery is the use of language that appeals to the senses. Circle the imagery Whitman uses to describe the people who were rescued (lines 8–9). To what sense do these images mostly appeal? They appeal to the sense of sight.

1. 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.

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,
I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs,² thinn'd with the ooze of my skin,

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,

My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.

I am the mash'd fireman with breastbone broken,
Tumbling walls buried me in their debris,
Heat and smoke inspired,³ I heard the yelling shouts of my comrades,
I heard the distant clatter of their picks and shovels,

They have clear'd the beams away, they tenderly lift me forth.

2. dribs *n.*, *pl.*: dribbles.
3. inspired *v.*: breathed in.

IDENTIFY

Underline the two martyrs the speaker mentions in lines 12–16.

INTERPRET

A metaphor is a comparison of unlike things that does not include connecting words such as *like* or *as*. Circle the metaphor in line 23, and explain its meaning. (Review Skill)

Agony is one type of empathy, or shared emotion, that I can feel or experience.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 26–30, and find examples of sound devices. Circle examples of alliteration. Underline examples of assonance. Put a box around repeated words.

SKILLS PRACTICE

from Song of Myself, Number 33

Reading Skill: Paraphrasing In the left-hand column of the chart below are passages from “Song of Myself, Number 33.” Paraphrase each in the space at the right. Remember to include all details of the original; paraphrases are not summaries. Once you’ve finished paraphrasing, answer the final question that appears below the chart.

Sample responses appear below.

| Passage from Poem | Paraphrase |
|---|---|
| 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, I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinn'd with the ooze of my skin, 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. (lines 17–22) | I am a tortured slave. Dogs attack me, and I feel pain at their bite. I am full of despair. Gunmen use me as a target. I hang on the fence for support as blood oozes over my skin. I fall on the ground. The gunmen pull close on their horses and taunt me, beating me on the head with the handles of their whips. |
| 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. (lines 31–34) | They pulled me outside in the night. I am wearing my red shirt. Everyone is quiet. I am not in pain or unhappy, but I am tired. The firemen who rescued me gather around, with their hats off. I can't see their faces because their lights are blinding me. |

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Evaluate Compare your paraphrases with the original verses from the poem.

What is “lost” in translation?

Most students will say that sound devices and imagery are lost in the paraphrase.

from Song of Myself, Number 33 135

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

40 I take part, I see and hear the whole,
The cries, curses, roar, the plaudits for well-aim'd shots,
The ambulanza's slowly passing trailing its red drip,
Workmen searching after damages, making indispensable repairs.

45 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 dot. *Mind not me—mind—the entrenchments.*

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WORD STUDY

Artillery is a noun meaning “weapons.” What might an **artilleryist** (line 37) be?

An artilleryist is a

person who fires

weapons.

FLUENCY

Read aloud the boxed passage that tells about the gruesome experiences of an artillery soldier. Note that **plaudits** means “applause,” **rent** means “torn,” and **entrenchments** means “a fortification of trenches.” Look up in a dictionary any other words you don't know. Mark up examples of parallel structures. Then, see how smoothly and dramatically you can read these stanzas, being careful to let the parallel structures create a rhythm.

4. **ambulanza** (ám-bù-lán'tsə): Italian for “ambulance.”

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