From Song of Myself, Numbers 10, 33, and 52

**Literary Focus: Free Verse**

Many of the poems you’ve read probably use a regular rhyme scheme and meter. (Roses are red. / Violets are blue. / I feel hungry. / How about you?) But some poems don’t use a regular rhyme and meter. These poems are written in **free verse**. Although they do not follow a regular rhyme or meter, free verse poems use other poetic elements, such as

- **alliteration**—repetition of similar consonant sounds
- **assonance**—repetition of similar vowel sounds
- **imagery**—language that appeals to the senses
- **onomatopoeia**—use of words whose sounds echo their meaning
- **parallel structure**—repetition of phrases or sentences that have the same grammatical structure
- **cadence**—musical rise and fall of the voice

Look for these poetic elements as you read Whitman’s poems.

**Reading Skill: Making Inferences**

Making inferences is a lot like being a detective. You use your own experiences and knowledge as well as evidence from the text to make inferences, or educated guesses, about what is happening and why.

**Into the Poem**

Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself* is a long exploration of feelings about what it means to be American. The poem lovingly examines the lives and activities of all kinds of people from across the nation.

As you read the following selections from the poem, watch closely for Whitman’s insights into the emotions and experiences of the people he describes.
In Song of Myself, the poet Walt Whitman shares in the thoughts and feelings of a variety of American characters, from slaves to military generals.

Whitman felt that looking into the lives of other Americans could connect citizens to each other in a powerful way. He wanted Americans to see their nation as a single, wonderful whole.

Alone far in the wilds and mountains I hunt,
Wandering amazed at my own lightness and glee,
In the late afternoon choosing a safe spot to pass the night,
Kindling¹ a fire and broiling the fresh-kill’d game,²
Falling asleep on the gather’d leaves with my dog and gun by my side.

The Yankee clipper is under her sky-sails,³ she cuts the sparkle and scud,⁴
My eyes settle the land, I bend at her prow⁵ or shout joyously from the deck.

The boatmen and clam-diggers arose early and stopt for me,
I tuck’d my trowser-ends in my boots and went and had a good time;
You should have been with us that day round the chowder-kettle.

First, the speaker adopts the voice of a hunter. Although he hunts alone, he is amazed at how happy he is. He enjoys his simple life in the wilderness.

Next, the speaker adopts the voice of a seaman. He shouts joyfully when he sees land. Later, he and other sailors have an excellent time together and at dinner.

1. kindling: setting a fire.
2. game: wild animals hunted for food or sport.
3. sky-sails: small sails atop a ship’s mast.
4. scud: windblown sea spray or foam.
5. her prow: the pointed front of the ship.
I saw the marriage of the trapper in the open air in the far west, the bride was a red girl,
Her father and his friends sat near cross-legged and dumbly smoking, they had moccasins to their feet and large thick blankets hanging from their shoulders,
On a bank lounged the trapper, he was drest mostly in skins, his luxuriant beard and curls protected his neck, he held his bride by the hand,
She had long eyelashes, her head was bare, her coarse straight locks descended upon her voluptuous limbs and reach’d to her feet.

The runaway slave came to my house and stopt outside,
I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,
Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsy and weak,
And went where he sat on a log and led him in and assured him,
And brought water and fill’d a tub for his sweated body and bruised feet,
And gave him a room that enter’d from my own, and gave him some coarse clean clothes,
And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,
And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles;
He stayed with me a week before he was recuperated and pass’d north,
I had him sit next me at table, my fire-lock lean’d in the corner.

6. moccasins (MOK uh suhnz): soft shoes made of deer leather.
7. locks: hair.
8. limpsy: limp; exhausted.
9. plasters: medical ointment spread on a cloth, used to relieve pain.
10. galls: sores.
11. recuperated (rih KYOO puh rayt uhd): restored to health.
12. fire-lock: gun, such as a flintlock.
In line 4, the speaker says the skipper “knuckled tight and gave not back an inch.” That’s kind of weird. So I thought about times when my own knuckles got tight. Right away I remembered riding a roller coaster last summer. I grabbed the bar and held on so tightly that my knuckles turned white. I’ll bet that’s what he means: The sea’s throwing the ships around like roller-coaster cars, but the skipper is hanging on tight, refusing to give up.

In lines 1–9, the speaker describes the brave actions of a sea captain. Then, in line 11, he says, “I am the man, I suffer’d, I was there.” Do you think the speaker was really there, or does he mean something else? What do you think he means?

First, the speaker tells of watching the outdoor wedding of a fur trapper and a Native American girl. He describes the bride’s father, the wedding guests, and the groom and bride.

Next, he talks about finding an escaped slave outside his home. He brings the runaway slave inside, allows him to wash, and gives him a room in which to stay. He helps the runaway slave recover from his wounds, gives him clean clothes, and feeds him. After a week, the man continues his journey north.

I understand the large hearts of heroes,
The courage of present times and all times,
How the skipper saw the crowded and rudderless¹ 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’d² with them three days and would not give it up,
How he saved the drifting company at last,
How the lank³ 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.⁴

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1. rudderless: missing the steering portion of the ship.
2. tack’d: sailed against the wind in a zigzag course.
3. lank: slender.
4. I understand . . . I was there: A copy of a newspaper story about a similar incident was found among Whitman’s papers after his death. A violent storm hit a ship, washing many passengers overboard. The captain of another ship helped rescue the survivors.
The speaker says he understands heroism. He tells the story of a wrecked ship. Despite a dangerous storm, another ship followed it for three days. The captain of the rescuing ship held up a sign telling people aboard the wreck that he would stay with them. The speaker knows what the passengers and crew experienced.

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, 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.

5. disdain (dihs TAYN): scorn.
6. martyrs (MAHR tuhrz): people put to death for their beliefs.
7. flags: grows weak and tired.
8. buckshot (BUHK shot): lead shot used to shoot large animals.
9. gore dribs: dribbles of thick blood.
10. livid (LIHV id): pale or black and blue, the color of a bruise.
I am the mash’d fireman with breast-bone broken,
Tumbling walls buried me in their debris,\textsuperscript{11}
Heat and smoke I inspired,\textsuperscript{12} I heard the yelling shouts of my
comrades,
I heard the distant click of their picks and shovels,
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.

Distant and dead resuscitate,\textsuperscript{13}
They show as the dial or move as the hands of me, I am the
clock myself.

I am an old artillerist,\textsuperscript{14} I tell of my fort’s bombardment,\textsuperscript{15}
I am there again.

Again the long roll of the drummers,
Again the attacking cannon, mortars,\textsuperscript{16}
Again to my listening ears the cannon responsive.

I take part, I see and hear the whole,
The cries, curses, roar, the plaudits\textsuperscript{17} for well-aim’d shots,
The ambulanza slowly passing trailing its red drip,
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.

\textsuperscript{11} debris (duh BREE): scattered pieces.
\textsuperscript{12} inspired: breathed.
\textsuperscript{13} resuscitate (rih SUHS uh tayt): revive.
\textsuperscript{14} artillerist (ahr IHL uhr ihats): soldier with the artillery, gunner.
\textsuperscript{15} bombardment (bom BAHRD muhnht): bombing with artillery shells.
\textsuperscript{16} mortars (MAWR tuhrz): short cannons.
\textsuperscript{17} plaudits (PLA W dihtz): expressions of support.
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.\(^{18}\)

**IN OTHER WORDS** The speaker describes the courage of martyrs, people who have suffered and died for a cause. He tells of a woman burned as a witch. Then he describes the agonies of a runaway slave who has been shot and beaten to death. He talks of a fireman who has been killed by a falling wall, and he describes his funeral. Finally, he tells the story of a dying general. As one of the general's men tries to help him, the general scolds the soldier, telling him to worry about the battle, instead.

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The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.\(^1\)

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\(^2\) 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\(^3\) my flesh in eddies,\(^4\) and drift it in lacy jags.\(^5\)

I bequeath\(^6\) myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,

If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

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1. *loitering* (LOY tuhr ihng): lazy or frivolous lingering.
2. *scud*: windblown sea spray or foam.
5. *jags*: uneven tears, as in cloth.
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.

**IN OTHER WORDS**  The speaker says that a hawk objects to his meaningless talk and laziness. Then he points out his similarities to the hawk. He is wild, hard to understand, and shouts out to the world. He says that he is like the clouds at sunset and like the soil under our feet, hardly noticed but good for us all. He says that we may not catch him at first, but we should keep looking for him. Finally, he says that he is out there somewhere, waiting for us to meet him.
Free Verse

Free verse does not follow a regular meter or rhyme scheme, but that does not mean that anything goes. Free-verse poems contain many other elements of poetry.

In the chart below, elements of poetry are listed in the left-hand column. Quotations from “Song of Myself” are listed in the right-hand column. Draw connecting lines showing which element of poetry each quotation is an example of. Some quotes contain more than one element. Choose the one you think the quote most strongly represents. One has been done for you.

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