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# Natural Elements Representing the Cycle of Life and Death through Whitman's "Song of Myself" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"

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**Natural Elements Representing the Cycle of Life and Death through Whitman's "Song of Myself" and  
"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"**

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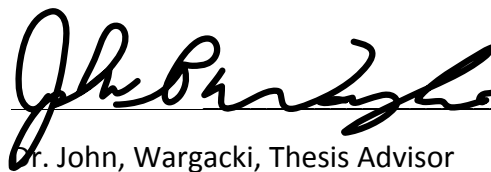
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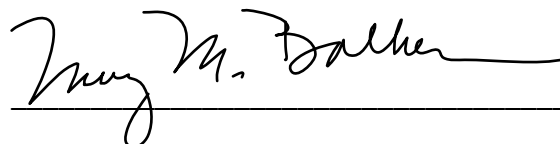
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Approved by:

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**Natural Elements Representing the Cycle of Life and Death through Whitman's "Song of Myself" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"**

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* explores many themes, symbols, and ideas, but the one common factor that each of his poems reflect is the natural world, whether it is the season, landscapes, animals, plants, flowers, or grass. One of the reasons Whitman celebrates elements of the natural world is because he believed that human beings were already a part of nature and they would continue their journey with nature after death. Two of his poems, "Song of Myself" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," reflect this idea. "Song of Myself" explores the idea of grass while "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" explores flowers, specifically lilacs. While these two poems discuss different parts of nature, Whitman still incorporates and explores the cycle of life and death, hope and faith, and rebirth.

Unlike other authors, who would preserve their drafts, rewrite them, use clean crisp paper, and keep a nice book to write in, Whitman was the exact opposite. In Robert Atwan's article, "...Observing a Spear of Summer Grass," he writes, "Paper was paper. He scribbled and scrawled and scratched away on anything he could lay his hands on—loose slops, stray sheets of all shapes and sizes, pink paper, yellow paper, green paper, paper already torn, odd scraps pasted together, old tax forms, the backs of letters and envelopes, pages ripped out of books, the backs of receipts and bills, the backs of even leaves of wallpaper" (17). It did not matter what Whitman wrote his poems on, as long as he wrote them down.

The idea of nature is not only represented in the title of his book or poems, but in the pages as well. The pages of *Leaves of Grass* represent actual leaves. It can be considered that the title highlights how each page or each blade of grass depicts its own beauty. Once the pages of the book are combined or the blades of grass come together, they become a whole, representing unity.

Whitman's method of writing his poems reflects nature's dynamics. Just as Whitman did not care about the kind of paper he wrote on or what his final draft looked like, nature too does not care what or how it produces things like grass or flowers. For example, while grass can be a bright green color, sharp like blades, and complete the ambience of a park or house, it can also be hard to maintain, and grow between driveway cracks and in other places where it is not wanted. Another example of this is a tree. While trees are nice to look at, just like a nice clean draft, their roots are not as nice. A tree's roots are capable of tearing up a sidewalk, falling over during storms, and may not always look pretty after a certain number of years. Whitman's method of writing is like grass and trees. It may not always be easy to prepare or be the nicest to look at, but once it is understood, it is as sharp as a blade of grass or shines just as a flower does when the sun reflects off of it.

Atwan describes what Whitman's book looked like, stating,

“...*albot Wilson*, possibly the most valuable notebook in American literary history...is now the official title of the little book Whitman kept during the years that “Song of Myself” was struggling to be born. . . A cheap green notebook...with ruled columns, it locked by means of a pencil inserted through three homemade leather loops. Pages have been ripped out, much is casually crossed out . . . He seems to have rarely used an eraser.” (18).

Judging from how Atwan describes Whitman's book, it was not the easiest to understand. He crossed things out and did not always replace them with something else. His method was unique, but it worked for him. He felt that he was a part of nature and gave himself to nature; his writing and notebook reflected how nature works. Nature does not erase what it produces, something that Whitman's notebook imitated.

### **America's Shakespeare and Center of the American Canon**

Whitman was a disciple of Ralph Waldo Emerson and was so inspired by his writings that he began to write various poems, which would later be published as *Leaves of Grass*. In 1855, Whitman mailed Emerson a copy of his book and Emerson responded back to Whitman with a letter. In the letter, Emerson writes, "I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift with and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy . . . I give you joy of your free and brave thought . . . I greet you at the beginning of a great career" (Whitman 637). This letter allowed Whitman to feel like he was doing something right and was on track to becoming someone that America would one day embrace.

Emerson soon became one of Whitman's readers. In his essay, *Nature*, he writes, "The universe is composed of nature and the soul" (Emerson 3). Emerson explains to readers how nature is universal and is more than something that provides oxygen; he uses the concept of nature to portray the kind of relationship that should exist between an individual and nature. Many of Whitman's poems reflect this theory. However, it was not until Emerson published his essay entitled "The Poet," in 1844, that Whitman emerged, publishing *Leaves of Grass* in 1855.

In "The Poet," Emerson writes that we have "no genius in America" and that we need to find a poet who can be America's Shakespeare. He continues to say that "America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination..." Not long after Emerson published

“The Poet,” Walt Whitman emerged, trying to become “The Poet” that Emerson was seeking. Whitman soon became the “one who would sing of the new country in a new voice.”

Harold Bloom’s book *The Western Canon* discusses how Whitman portrayed Emerson’s idea of America needing a Shakespeare by publishing *Leaves of Grass*. Bloom writes, “Shakespeare centers the Western Canon because he changes cognition by changing the representation of cognition. Whitman centers the American canon because he changes the American self and the American religion by changing the representation of our unofficial selves” (265). He explains how Whitman did for America what Shakespeare did for England. Whitman can be referred to as America’s Shakespeare, since he not only emerged as “The Poet” that Emerson spoke about in his essay but he also did for America what Shakespeare did for England.

Bloom refers to Whitman as the “Center of the American Canon” (245) and claims, “no Western poet, in the past century and a half, not even Browning or Leopardi or Baudelaire, overshadows Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson” (245). Whitman’s first edition of *Leaves of Grass* emphasizes how human beings do not appreciate the beauty that nature has to offer. People get so caught up in getting from one place to another that they do not stop to see the beautiful flowers or the wonderful landscapes. Instead, they walk past the blooming flowers because they are so caught up in things that they believe are more important, such as careers. It is through this one idea that Whitman is able to go into specifics and focus on something as simple as a “spear of grass.”

### **“Song of Myself” represented through Grass**

One of the things apparent in *Leaves of Grass* is how Whitman is using nature as a metaphor to show readers how it serves a universal purpose. He uses grass to depict how nature is not only universal but is also found everywhere in different environments all year round.



“[T]he grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is” (line 359) was usually found throughout the year and did not rely on a tree or fence to grow. Whitman’s universal purpose of nature is to connect not only the human living self but the dead as well. He achieves this by giving the dead a purpose and explaining how they help nature. For example, one of the lines in the poem is “And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves” (line 101). Whitman is referring to grass and all of the possibilities as to what grass can be. One of the things that comes to his mind is how grass can be the hair of those who are laid to rest. Another line is “And as to you Corpse I think you are good manure . . .” (line 1285). Here, Whitman believes that a corpse can serve as good fertilizer, which results in healthy grass and flowers.

Janice Law Trecker writes, “given Whitman's philosophical ideas, his [bold approach] is neither so egotistical nor so eccentric as it might seem . . . Whitman announces the motifs that will appear throughout, the air and the grass, and the celebration of the body, the human voice, the natural world, and the city” (Trecker 1). Whitman’s ecocritical approach presents readers with a new way of looking at grass and how one element of nature can be so powerful. For Whitman, grass played an important role in the cycle of life and death being continuous. Many of his poems refer to grass or flowers, death vs. life, the physical body, and embracing natural landscapes.

“Song of Myself” expresses the need for individuals to feel at one with nature. One of the main ideas that Whitman discusses in his poem is how human beings are out of touch with nature when it is the one constant they have in their lives. This is why he is celebrating the idea of being a part of nature and continuing his journey with nature after death. He does not fear the idea of death or even death itself because he questions nature and the dead while connecting them to the physical world. In section six of “Song of Myself,” Whitman writes:

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any  
more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful  
green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord. (lines 90-93)

While Whitman's sixth section is all about grass, it is also about him trying to figure out its purpose. When a child asks him what grass is, he has no answer; however, he does have a number of possibilities. Grass could be a representation of hope, since the color green stands for hope. Whitman uses grass as a metaphor, comparing it to "the beautiful uncut hair of graves" (line 101). The earth serves as a grave because the soil is made up of dead bodies. After death, the bodies remain on earth and they become a part of the soil that we used to grow grass. The dead support new life and provide this new life with hope.

Diane Kepner explains how the shape of a single piece of grass plays an important role. Whitman sees the shape of grass as something that is flexible. He says it can be God's handkerchief; something that was left on earth by God so people can remember him. Kepner continues, "Combined with the property of smell (and with the way the [grass] bends into a "J" or "C" shape), it shows that it could once have been" (199) used as God's handkerchief. Kepner explains how grass can bend into the shape of a "J" and a "C," which represents Jesus Christ. This revelation portrays how one simple element, such as grass, signifies more than something that is a part of nature. Grass in this case signifies religion. The idea that grass can bend into different letters means that the possibilities of what it can represent are endless. However, Whitman uses a "J" and "C" in "Song of Myself" to represent religion. Although he did not

believe in what religions preached, he still respected them. Whitman's idea that grass signifies religion comes from the theory that a simple substance such as grass can represent so much. For starters, it is the one thing that divides the things/people who are alive from the dead.

Underneath the grass lays dirt and dead people.

However, above grass lies life, something that Whitman describes not through people but through landscapes and scenery. While Whitman discusses what grass can symbolize and what lies below the grass, he also highlights everything that goes on above grass. The life that exists above grass consists of human beings, animals, and other natural elements, such as flowers. Above grass is where people make memories, have adventures, and experience the beauty of nature. Just as Christianity, Hinduism, Jewish and many other religions are practiced all around the world, different types of grasses are also found all around the world. A leaf or spear of grass can be read just like a Bible, Scripture, or any other sacred text to uncover the nature of one's existence. A religious sacred text consists of beliefs, stories and usually provides a list of dos and don'ts. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* does something very similar to this. One of the things that "Song of Myself" includes is the idea of grass playing a larger role in society than people would expect. The grass itself tells and hears stories, it teaches Whitman to think about everything it could represent, and it is through the grass that Whitman is able to express his beliefs. The title of the book itself indicates that Whitman writes his beliefs on the leaves of grass or in other words, on the pages of the book. He creates his own scripture through *Leaves of Grass*.

While Whitman did not practice a religion, he practiced what he believed in and followed himself rather than religious figures. *Leaves of Grass* became Whitman's version of a bible and he would follow his writings religiously. However, he did respect those who practiced different

religions. In “Song of Myself,” he says, “I do not despise you priests, all time, the world over, / My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, / Enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern” (lines 1092-1094). While he does not agree with the teachings of religions, he still respects them. Beatrice Marovich says that Whitman “...simply found their sacred traditions too small, too limited, too particular” (Marovich 354). Instead, Whitman believed in his own faith and he followed himself rather than a religious figure. He believed that his faith was the greatest because it combined all the other religions, but it was also the least because he could not practice all of the religions that are mentioned throughout “Song of Myself.”

Dr. Indu Bora says, “According to [Whitman] life has a meaning only when viewed as God’s plan and in nature nothing is lost or is in vain, for all things move imperceptibly through infinite cycle of growth and decay to some ultimate goal” (Bora 35). She explains how Whitman believes in his faith and that of nature because it does not come with a plan. The idea of nature, the way nature works, and the way that nature is perceived does not come with a list of commandments, it does not come with limits, but instead, it works together to create. It grows in unity and continues to do so without following any rules. Each element of nature is different and many of the elements work differently, but they are still a part of nature.

As a result of this, Marovich discusses how the use of religious themes and symbols in “Song of Myself” caused people to treat Whitman as a “true poet/prophet” (351). She says,

“Michael Robertson’s new study calls the early followers of Whitman his disciples (a prestigious group including members of the intellectual elite, such as Oscar Wilde).

Many believed that Whitman was the prophet of a new religion. A note to Whitman from Harvard Divinity School dropout William Sloane Kennedy queried: ‘Do you

suppose a thousand years from now people will be celebrating the birth of Walt Whitman as they are now the birth of Christ?' There are still Americans who, to this day, read Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* as a sort of scripture" (351).

The ideas that Whitman discusses in his poems are so profound that he can be compared to a religious figure. Whitman celebrating America and events that changed the nation such as Abraham Lincoln's assassination all in one book serves as a "sort of scripture." The book essentially gives insight to America and voices opinions and ideas that human beings should implement in their lives, such as noticing the natural elements that shine daily.

While Marovich discusses how Whitman himself represents his own religion, Harold Bloom's study *The Western Canon* discusses how Whitman's literature serves as its own religion. He writes, "Whitman has a profound understanding that his country required its own religion as well as its own literature" (267), explaining how Whitman creates a religion and literature for America.

However, Whitman not only creates a religion for America but he breaks down elements of nature and creates subcategories. Just as subcategories are created in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, many religions around the world have different branches. When Bloom discusses Whitman's idea of his country needing a religion and its own literature, he implies that Whitman was able to achieve this religion through his literature. He hints at the idea that Whitman's literature was so new and different at the time that the literature itself became a religion: "Whitman is a great religious poet, though the religion is the American religion and not Christianity, just as Emerson's transcendentalism is post-Christian" (268).

Whitman was viewed as a "religious poet" (Bloom 268) for America because he was the first American poet to creatively get his ideas across by breaking the rules. His poems did not

rhyme and did not consist of the structure that people were used to seeing during the time period. Coincidentally, one of the things that Whitman preaches about in “Song of Myself” is how the most important thing about grass is its shape. One of the ideas explored in James E. Miller Jr.’s book, *Walt Whitman*, is how rebirth is a reoccurring image in most of Whitman’s works. Miller says that just “as in ‘Song of Myself,’ there is a rebirth in ‘Children of Adam’ – or simply a continuation of that reawakening begun earlier. It is, again, a birth of the consciousness to new intensities of awareness, new perceptions into the meaning of human relationships. And this birth of a new consciousness continues into the cluster of companion poems ‘Calamus,’ the male replacing the female in the central role” (80). Miller makes a valid point when he explains that the idea of rebirth is portrayed throughout most of Whitman’s poems. One of the poems Miller mentions is “Calamus,” which translates to sweet grass. The series of poems mentioned in “Calamus” are interesting because not only do they depict the man-to-man relationships and comradeship but also they are compared to nature, such as plants and grass.

“Song of Myself” expresses the idea of rebirth through the dead and how the individual is still found “under boot soles” (line 1330) after death. The “Calamus” poems also express rebirth through men taking over female roles and the rebirth of a new idea of “manly attachment.” Lastly, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” expresses the rebirth of spring and flowers that bloom.

When Whitman was asked about the plant calamus, his response was

“Calamus is the very large and aromatic grass, or rush, growing about water ponds in the valleys—spears about three feet high; often called Sweet Flag; grows all over the Northern and Middle States. The *recherché* or ethereal sense of the term, as used in my

book, arises probably from the actual Calamus presenting the biggest and hardiest kind of spears of grass, and their fresh, aquatic, pungent bouquet” (Miller 116).

It is this kind of natural element that Whitman compares to men.

Similarly, Robert Atwan says, “the roots of sweet flag had entangled themselves in Whitman’s soul from the start” (Atwan18). Whitman grew up by the shore in Long Island and sweet flag was always found there. It was not only part of his childhood, but it recalled memories. The grass was one of the constant things that was always present in his life and he could find it no matter where he went during the hot summer days or cold winter mornings.

### **Connecting Human Beings to Nature**

In the middle of section six of “Song of Myself,” Whitman incorporates the idea of nature and humans being connected. He writes:

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.  
Tenderly will I use you curling grass,  
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,  
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,  
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their  
mothers' laps. (lines 101-105)

Whitman creatively turns to grass as a form of the dead. He wonders if the grass is simply a way of covering up the graves, since there are so many dead on earth. This idea leads Whitman to think about the people who may be buried under the grass, whether they be young men, women, or small children who left too soon and how the soil is what decomposes them. The connection between the dead and nature is portrayed in this section.

Whitman's examination of the different types of people buried under the grass shows how nature serves a universal purpose for the dead. He claims that people will never really disappear and they will always remain on earth providing their resources. For Whitman, even the dead can provide resources. He depicts dead people as a form of providing resources to produce healthy grass, providing nutrients to the soil, and serving as fertilization:

And as to you Corpse I think you are good manure, but that does not offend me,  
 I smell the white roses sweet-scented and growing,  
 I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish'd breasts of melons.  
 And as to you Life I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths,  
 No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before. (lines 1285-1289)

His poem shows how the dead and nature, specifically grass, work together to keep the grass healthy and green. The idea that dead people keep the grass growing proves Whitman's theory that the cycle of life and death are continuously working within nature.

In section fifteen of "Song of Myself," Whitman portrays nature's purpose through people. Robert C. Sickels says it best when he says that Whitman's "poetry doesn't merely sing the songs of the beautiful, for not everything in the natural world is attractive; because prostitution and vice exist" (20). He explains in his review that just as nature is not always beautiful, people are the same way. He discusses how some natural elements are not always easy on the eyes and how the same things occur with human beings. He relates this idea to evil. Not everyone is good; some people are known to be evil. Just as some people are said to be cruel and evil, nature can work the same way.



While Sickels points out the differences and similarities between humans and nature, Whitman relates the different types of nature and human beings together. For example, in “Song of Myself,” he writes,

Patriarchs sit at supper with sons and grandsons and great-grandsons around them,

In walls of adobe, in canvas tents, rest hunters and trappers after their day's sport,

The city sleeps and the country sleeps,

The living sleep for their time, the dead sleep for their time,

The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young husband sleeps by his wife.

(lines 319-323)

Whitman is able to relate different types of people and different types of nature to one another. The husbands may be different in age, but they still sleep next to their wives. The city may look different than the country, but they still sleep. The idea that Whitman is trying to get across here is the same idea that Sickles is trying to get across: just because things look different and some are older than others does not mean that they are different. The good represent the good and the evil represents the evil in Sickles case. And in Whitman’s case, people may be different in age or looks, but they will still sleep and the country may look different than the city, but some of the routines will stay the same.

It is through the idea of grass that Whitman is able to come up with the countless analogies that he provides, making it relatable to the individual self. The concept of a natural element, such as grass or flowers, relates to humans in the sense that both are living things that

eventually die and encounter rebirth. In section twenty-four, Whitman compares the human body to elements of nature, such as hay, flowers, and wheat. He writes,

Mix'd tussled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be you!  
 Trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat, it shall be you!  
 Sun so generous it shall be you!  
 Vapors lighting and shading my face it shall be you!  
 You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you! (lines 537-541)

He compares human body parts to elements of nature here to depict how the two are more connected than people believe them to be. Whitman compares the wind to “soft-tickling genitals” (line 542) and compares hay to hairy elements, such as a beard, and views muscles as braches.

Whitman’s connection between the human being and nature is truly portrayed in this section and he makes it clear by specifically stating natural elements and body parts. While the connection is obvious in section twenty-four, he seems to be doing this all throughout “Song of Myself.” For example, Whitman compares animals to the human self in thirty-two hinting that he is jealous that the animals are allowed to spend so much time with nature. He says,

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd,  
 I stand and look at them long and long.  
 They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
 They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,  
 They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God. (lines 684-688)

Whitman believes that he would fit in better with animals than he does with human beings because animals appreciate what nature has to offer and they live outdoors with nature. They live

simple lives in the sense that they do not complain and try to discuss their moral views with others.

By the time Whitman begins to approach the end of the section, he states once again that anyone can learn more from nature than they can from studying out of books. It is hard to experience things or touch, smell and feel natural elements through a book. He says, “A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books” (line 551). This leads him to be specific and he begins to connect humans to plants and flowers.

Whitman continues to connect elements of nature to the human being. However, in section thirty, he connects the concept of humans telling the truth and nature holding all truths. Whitman has no condition, truth cannot be said; it must be shown. The section highlights how knowledge can be gained through experience. He claims that nature holds absolute truth because it does what it wants. Nature does not come with schedules and has no need to learn from its mistakes. as human beings do. It will just do its thing and possess its beauty during the process. Through this, he begins to compare people to plants and flowers that grow out of soil:

I believe the soggy clods shall become lovers and lamps,  
 And a compend of compends is the meat of a man or woman,  
 And a summit and flower there is the feeling they have for each other,  
 And they are to branch boundlessly out of that lesson until it becomes omnific,  
 And until one and all shall delight us, and we them. (lines 657-661)

He compares plants to people and says that they extend their branches because that comes with the concept of truth. Similarly, plants that grow from soil are usually branch or stem based and they extent their branches representing arms. Essentially, he is relating the arms of a human to the arms of a tree or the stems that flowers lay on. His connection between the individual and

flowers leads him into the idea that nature is actually the powerful force that controls everything going on. For example, rather than referring to grass as a piece of grass, Whitman chooses to call it a leaf of grass, not only because of the shape but because it allows readers to believe that grass plays more of an important role.

Kepner explains how Whitman changes the name of grass in order to highlight the “ability of every particular object to tell the meaning of life” (Kepner 199). She also discusses how Whitman changes the name to a “spear” because of the shape and how it serves a purpose. Lastly, she states “by changing the metaphor implicit in the name from "spears" to "leaves," Whitman shifts the focus from shape alone to shape plus purpose. For Whitman, "spear"=body; "leaf"=body+soul in- separable” (Kepner 200). While Kepner makes a valid point, she fails to mention that the shape of sweet flag depicts a spear and what Whitman is really trying to do is change the direction of the poem. He is trying to shift the focus of grass and move to flowers. He does this because he is trying to portray how flowers also play a role in the cycle of life and death, just as grass does. However, he offers a different perspective on the role that flowers play.

Whitman’s connection to the human self goes beyond a leaf of grass. In section nine, he goes to the countryside and rolls around in grass and is one with nature to show how grass and flowers serve as a universal purpose once again. He spends time with everything that the countryside has to offer such as hay and leaves. This section depicts Whitman re-experiencing the world for the first time, portraying innocence and what a small child might view nature as. He reintroduces readers to the idea that nature can bring happiness regardless of the location, since it is everywhere.

Another thing that was represented through grass was what lay underneath it and above it. In “Song of Myself” Whitman says, “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,

“If you want me again, look for me under your boot-soles” (lines 1329-1330). Below grass lay dirt, roots, soil, and most importantly, the dead while flowers, greens, and life was found above grass. Whitman makes it clear that he will be found all around the world, just as grass is found all around the world. Shoes are exposed to nature, particularly dirt, and anything that grows from the ground up more than anything else.

Denis Donoghue’s *Leaves of Grass and American Culture* mentions how Whitman worshipped soil because it “was part of the universe to be especially worshipped” (354). Donoghue explains how it is the soil that serves as a common denominator for plants to grow. The soil serves as a foundation for all the possibilities that can come from it.

Another thing that intertwines with nature and the earth are human beings. All three of these elements cause the cycle of life and death, especially for Whitman. After death, humans become apart of nature and as they start to become a part of the dirt that allows grass and flowers to grow, they begin to gain a higher appreciation of how nature and the earth work together to create such beauty.

In order for grass, flowers, plants, and tree’s to grow, they all need the resources that earth provides, such as sun, water, and air. The beautiful natural landscapes that consist of mountains are created through earth, but the trees and flowers seen on those mountains and the weeds and grass that complete the scenery are grown from dirt and soil. The landscapes consist of water surrounding things such as rocks, trees, bushes, animals, flowers and grass. The swamps where the lilly pads and lotus flowers are found are there because of the resources that earth provides. These natural landscapes possess more of a beauty than manmade landscapes, such as skylines, because they are created from dirt and other natural elements that the earth has to offer.

These are the kinds of landscapes that human beings will be exposed to after death as they travel around under boot soles.

Whitman saying that he can be found under shoes is fitting because the relationship he has with nature is so direct and interactive. If there is one thing that readers learn by the end of “Song of Myself,” it is how Whitman is not afraid to become one with nature because we already belong to nature. Also, he did not fear death because he believed that he would continue his journey with nature allowing him to travel and explore the world in further detail. He would get to experience things that he may have missed when he was alive.

### **Abraham Lincoln’s Funeral through “Lilacs”**

The concept of life and death is intertwined, according to Whitman. In “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” he says “Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring” (line 47) and “O death, I cover you with roses and early lilies” (line 50). Bringing flowers to a funeral is connected, just as the grass that grows on the dirt in which the dead lay is connected. Whitman’s poem gives readers insight to Abraham Lincoln’s funeral and how people would bring lilacs to his funeral to throw as his coffin passed by or to place on his coffin before the burial. The poem details events of the funeral and depicts how death and living things come together through lilacs.

President Lincoln’s assassination in April 1865 impacted the nation tremendously, including Whitman. He had shared many beliefs with Lincoln, some of which included equality and freedom. Walt Whitman was at home in Brooklyn:

“when he heard the news. His mother prepared their breakfast, as usual, but it was left untouched and unnoticed, as were the rest of the day’s meals. He sipped a half a cup of coffee, and after pushing his plate of food away, he scoured every

newspaper, silently passing them back and forth with his mother. Then he crossed over to Manhattan and, to darkening skies and driving rain, trudged up Broadway, past shuttered stores hung with black” (Winik 355). The way Whitman felt the day he found out Lincoln had been assassinated was how so many people across the nation felt. “‘Lincoln’s death,’ he wrote in his notebook, ‘—black, black, black—as you look toward the sky—long broad black, like great serpents’” (Winik 356).

Whitman’s way of mourning Lincoln’s death consisted of him writing in his notebook and producing poems that reflected not only his feelings about Lincoln’s death but how the nation felt.

While Whitman expressed his grief by writing in his notebook, Emerson addressed the people in Concord, Massachusetts. In his address, he stated: “Rarely was [a] man so fitted to events...Only Washington can compare with him in the future” (Winik 356). Other poets, such as Juila Ward Howe, Oliver Holmes, Cullen Bryant, and Herman Melville, paid tribute to Lincoln by writing poems about him.

### **Nature of Life and Death**

It was the murder of Lincoln that inspired Whitman to write “O Captain! My Captain” and “Hush’d Be the Camps To-Day.” However, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” stands out the most and is the most impactful. Whitman shows how the nation was mourning at the time and his personal experience. One thing that stands out is how Whitman gives flowers double meaning and uses them as a way to represent the continuous cycle of life and death. The speaker’s confusion about his feelings towards that president’s death is depicted through the vivid spring landscape, “ever-returning” spring, and the lilac bush, stating:

Now while I sat in the day and look'd forth,  
 In the close of the day with its light and the fields of spring, and the farmers  
 preparing their crops,  
 In the large unconscious scenery of my land with its lakes and forests,  
 In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb'd winds and the storms,)

Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the voices of  
 children and women,  
 The many-moving sea-tides, and I saw the ships how they sail'd,  
 And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all busy with labor,  
 And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on, each with its meals and  
 minutia of daily usages,  
 And the streets how their throbbings throb'd, and the cities pent—lo, then and  
 there,  
 Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest,  
 Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,  
 And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death (lines 108-  
 119).

His description of the spring weather and landscape is mesmerizing and way he brings the idea of death into the description towards the end is so natural, as if the two concepts he mentions coincide when in fact, they are truly opposites. The beauty of the above passage is that Whitman incorporates an entire landscape within the first few lines. He includes the spring fields, farmland, skies, lakes, and forests. His landscape consists of everything that is seen during spring. However, after the first few lines, he begins to include images of movement, such as “moving sea-tides”



and ships. The idea of moving into summer and leaving spring behind depicts how the mourning process works. Just as the season is beginning to change and summer is approaching, people are beginning to move on with the aftermath of Lincoln's assassination. One of the last few lines of the passage refers to Whitman and his philosophy of people continuing their journey with nature after death. The speaker of the poem claims that he "knew death," which suggests that he has no reason to fear it. The reason that Whitman did not fear death was because he knew that he was already a part of nature and that he would continue his journey with nature after death.

However, Whitman pairs up nature and death in both "Song of Myself" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" as a way to show not only the relationship that the human being and nature have but that something as simple as grass or flowers can play a role in the cycle of life and death. "Song of Myself" expresses Whitman's relationship with different elements of nature and the universe. Throughout the poem, it is nature that leads him into deep thoughts.

The idea of a child asking him about grass causes Whitman to imagine all the possibilities that grass can represent. The same idea is presented in "Lilacs" when Whitman questions how to grieve in section ten, stating: "O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved? / And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone? / And what shall my perfume be for the grave of him I love?" (lines 71-73)

Another idea that Whitman incorporates is how grass and flowers represent hope in both "Song of Myself" and "Lilacs." From the beginning, it becomes clear that lilacs not only represent the rebirth of spring, but also hope and perseverance. Grass and lilacs are very similar in the two poems. The lilac that the speaker of the poem lays on the coffin as it passes is shared

with all the other people doing the same thing. This shared bond not only represents hope for the people who are coming together to grief over Lincoln's death but hope for the nation as well.

In Frank D. Casale's book, *Bloom's How To Write About Walt Whitman*, he states, "in the sixth section of 'Song of Myself,' Whitman's thoughts about the nature and grass lead him to consider the nature of life and what happens when it ends" (100). He also does this in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" by questioning how one deals with grief. The death of Lincoln causes readers to question what happens after death and how the dead play a role in society. Whitman says that people become a part of nature after death, which is better than anything else.

In "Song of Myself," Whitman addresses the grass through "grass of graves" (line 1291), explaining how the graves allow the bodies to serve as "good manure" (line 1285), causing flowers to grow and smell good. However, this time he is giving himself to the grass that he loves which returns to the image of the grass as graves. This idea fits into the concept of lilacs because the corpses are the reason that the flowers are growing back. The cycle of life and death continues with the corpse and the flowers. It is the dead people that serve as "good manure" allowing the flowers to come to life every spring. Whitman is able to intertwine the idea of "grass as graves" and corpse as "good manure" in "Song of Myself" with flowers that bloom in the spring and the idea of rebirth in "Lilacs."

Whitman does not directly mention Lincoln in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," but the symbols and purple lilacs hint at the idea that it is an elegy poem for him. Abraham Lincoln was shot in Washington D.C. by John Wilkes Booth on April 14, 1865, dying the following day. Lincoln's body was sent from Washington D.C to Springfield, Illinois by train. As his body crossed the continent, many Americans saluted him (Bloom page number?)

Whitman not only uses men and women in the poem to salute President Lincoln, he also uses objects. Using objects such as the landscape and the “high-spread sky” (line 153) allows Whitman to portray how these natural elements are within death’s reach.

### **The Star, Lilac, and Bird**

Whitman’s first four sections of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” offers a clear perspective and image as to everything going on. Whitman uses flowers, specifically lilacs blooming as spring returns. These first four sections are crucial as they introduce three key symbols that are seen throughout the poem: lilacs, the star, and the bird. The lilac represents spring returning and a symbol of resurrection, while its heart-shaped leaves symbolize love. The star is identified with Lincoln and it also represents the poet’s grief for the dead. Lastly, the bird symbolizes reconciliation with the dead.

All three of these symbols also play some role in the universe. For the universe, the lilacs represent nature, the star represents the cosmos, and the bird represents the song that is sung after death and the idea of moving on. Whitman creatively connects the lilacs, star, and bird together. The poem starts off with the mention of the star, moves on to the lilac, introduces the singing bird, and mentions the star again. By doing this, he not only suggests that natural elements work together but he suggests the cycle of life and death.

In *Walt Whitman*, Miller explains how “the structure of the poem is cyclic in nature, moving from star to lilac to bird, and back to star again, to repeat the circle—but eventually settling with the hermit-thrush” (100). Whitman depicts how humans encounter the cycle of life and dead through the star, lilac, and bird. By bringing the star back at the end, he portrays how the cycle continues regardless of the people who come and go.

Miller goes on to give his own interpretation of what the star, lilac and bird symbolize.

He says,

“the western star is Abraham Lincoln, its fixed position in the heavens suggesting his steady leadership of the nation. The ‘harsh surrounding cloud’ represents death and the tragic loss it leaves in its wake. The lilacs, returning every spring, symbolize the eternal memory of the President and the strong love of the poet for him. The hermit-thrush represents the voice of spirituality, his song “Death’s outlet song of life” (100).

Miller zones in on President Lincoln more and related each symbol to him specifically.

Bloom gives an interesting insight on Whitman’s elegiac power. He starts off by informing his readers that

“nothing in the second half of the nineteenth century or in our now almost completed century matches Whitman’s work in direct power and sublimity, except perhaps for Dickinson. It is an unhappy paradox that we have never got Whitman right, because he is a very difficult, immensely subtle poet who is usually at work doing almost the precise opposite of what he asserts himself to be doing” (Bloom 248).

He explains how it is a shame that people do not understand Whitman the way he should be understood and how very few people are able to appreciate him for what he really was.

Bloom continues to discuss Whitman’s greatness and he talks about “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” playing an important role for the American culture. “Whitman has a profound understanding that his country required its own religion as well as its own literature” (267). He explains how Whitman creates a religion and literature for America through “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” With all of the Lincoln references and the images of landscape and the symbols intertwining together, a unique America is portrayed in “Lilacs.”

Bloom describes “Lilacs” as “The bird sing[ing] a carol of death and reconciliation in which the taboo of mother-incest is figuratively broken apart.” (268). “Lilacs” is described as the poem that gives people the opportunity to say that Whitman is the center of the American canon or America’s Shakespeare. The reason for this is because Whitman uses “Lilacs” and connects it not only to the rest of the poem but to all of the other poems in *Leaves of Grass*.” Bloom’s idea that this one poem can intertwine with all the other poems and ideas that are discussed in *Leaves of Grass* is what makes Whitman as the center of the American Canon.

Whitman’s use of lilacs, specifically “violet and purple” (line 94) and “heart shaped leaves” (line 193), becomes a funeral flower during the time. While purple lilacs are associated with the language of flowers and represent early love today, it was a mourning flower during the 1800s. The flower was also one of the first flowers that would begin to bloom as soon as spring arrived. The use of lilacs being placed on Lincoln’s coffin also symbolizes how these flowers played a role in bringing a nation together.

While lilacs play an important role in Whitman’s poem, there are other flowers that Whitman mentions. He says,

Nor for you, for one alone,  
 Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,  
 For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you O sane and sacred  
 death.  
 All over bouquets of roses,  
 O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,  
 But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,  
 Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,

With loaded arms I come, pouring for you. (lines 46-53)

As Winik mentions in his book the tradition of bringing flowers to funerals began with Lincoln: “A nine car funeral train bore Lincoln from the capital. It would make journey of fourteen days and 1,662 miles, back to Illinois, retracing the route that a freshly elected United States president had taken to Washington four years earlier” (357). During this journey, people would gather along the route and watch in silence as they watched the train pass by with the spring landscape in the background.

In this section, Winik emphasizes how it was during this journey that people slowed down and started to appreciate what they had rather than what they didn't. Whitman speaks about this idea in “Song of Myself.” The reason the bird in the “Lilacs” poem is singing is because Whitman is referencing “Song of Myself.” Winik mentions how people began to appreciate what they had. In “Song of Myself” Whitman emphasizes the need for human beings to slow down and become one with nature. He discusses the importance of noticing nature and appreciating everything that it has to offer. Winik continues to explain how neighbors who didn't get along were now standing next to each other waiting for the train to pass by while holding flowers. The idea of unity and a nation coming together was portrayed through Lincoln's journey back home. This plays into Whitman's idea that people need to appreciate the beauty that surrounds them and learn to take notice to something as small as the blooming flowers in spring or the sharp blade like grass in summer:

In Philadelphia... a double line of mourners stretched three miles deep... In New York City, the procession continued for four hours. Eighty-five thousand mourners accompanied the funeral hearse through the streets beneath a thicket of signs... A tearful Walt Whitman would never forget this moment: from that

time on, every spring, with its lilacs blooming and the season blossoming, would remind him of the coffin passing in the street. (Winik 357-358).

Once they finally reached Lincoln's home in Springfield, he was laid to rest and "countless Americans gravitated to bouquets of flowers: lilies, lilacs, roses, and orange blossoms, anything that was in bloom across the land. Thus was born a new American tradition: laying flowers at a funeral" (Winik 359). One of the interesting things that Winik says when discussing Lincoln's funeral is how the tradition of bringing flowers to funerals began with Lincoln and how people would bring any kind of flowers that bloomed. The idea that people brought flowers that bloom is associated with Whitman's idea of life and death. The irony of this is that people are bringing flowers to leave on Lincoln's coffin, which will soon be buried. Just as the cycle of life and death is one for the individual self, the same applies to nature or natural elements such as grass and flowers. Charles M. Oliver says that there is "the parallel relationship between life and death, between the rebirth imagery of the spring described along the train's route and the coffin itself, carrying the body of the president" (237). He discusses how the rebirth of spring coincides with the rebirth after the death. When the rebirth or renewal of springs occurs the flowers that bloom are renewed as well. Flowers die once they are cut, but continue to grow or regrow, representing the ongoing cycle of life death.

Whitman's three key symbols by the end of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" intertwine, representing rebirth and the cycle of life and death. Both Miller and Bloom discuss how Whitman represents the cycle of life and death through the symbols and the order in which they appear and reappear. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" starts off with the star and ends with the star, representing the cycle that Miller and Bloom discuss in their books. By the end of the poem, Whitman had readers thinking about rebirth and how Lincoln's spirit

will be born again. The sprig that was broken off of the lilac bush will be reborn and sprout and bloom again at the beginning of spring. The plants and flowers that were picked to place on Lincoln's coffin will be reborn and their cycle of life and death will continue. Whitman uses flowers, bushes, trees, etc. to suggest that the possibility of rebirth can occur after death and it is at the end of the poem that everything this idea comes together.

Bloom says "this extraordinary closure, probably the finest in Whitman or indeed in American poetry, is intricately woven from the many strands of imagery that have made up the poem. It twines together more than the elegy's dominate emblems" (Bloom 269). It is the imagery that Whitman incorporates into his poem that comes together with the symbols at the end of the poem when he writes:

Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever to keep, for the dead  
I loved so well,  
For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands—and this for his dear  
sake,  
Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,  
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim. (lines 203-206)

According to Bloom, the closure of this poem is one of "the finest in Whitman or indeed in American poetry" (269). He goes on to explain that this is the greatest ending in American poetry because it is "intricately woven from the many strands of imagery that have made up the poem. It twines together more than the elegy's dominate emblems. All of Whitman's poetry comes together here"(269). The notion that all of Whitman's poems come together in one poem and that they all intertwine together represents the idea of nature in a way.



The soul that Whitman mentions in the above section refers to “character or ethos as opposed to the self, but which he means personality or pathos . . . The Whitmanian soul is unknown nature, a kind of blank” (Bloom 253). One of the points that Whitman makes in his poetry is that the soul and body disappear once the human dies, but the human will always remain. In “Song of Myself,” he says “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles” (lines 1229-1330).

Bloom continues this idea of the soul by explaining how “Character *acts*, but personality *suffers*, even if it is the pleasurable suffering of passion, high or low. So when Whitman writes ‘my soul’ he means his own dark side, the estranged or alienated component in his nature” (253). While Whitman’s dark side can refer to a number of different things, it is most likely a reference to his excitement or his willingness to encounter death. He does not fear the idea of death because he celebrates it. Whitman’s philosophy is that human beings are a part of nature and so, therefore, he views it as his journey continuing with nature after death. The idea that Whitman can be found under boot soles hints at the idea that despite human beings encountering death, they are still present through nature, specifically dirt which is used to grow grass, flowers, and plants.

In his article, “The Poet, Thropoetics, and Theopolitics,” Scott Holland compares Emerson, Whitman, and Moncure Daniel Conway’s work. He states: “all wrote and lived beyond and eventually completely out of organized religion. Each took both nature and spirit seriously, and each understood that in nature and in spirit every moment is new” (508). Holland explains how these three poets works reflect the idea of nature and how everything that is experienced in nature is a different experience.

Just as Whitman's poetry reflects the appreciation of nature's beauty, every moment that the human being shares with nature, every moment taken to notice the colorful flowers and sharp blade of grass, every beauty that the human being notices, will be different and new. This is something that they will never get to experience again, but new moments will be made as many times as we allow them. This is the power of nature; we are guaranteed to experience something new every time we have a moment with it.

While every moment shared with nature and the spirit is new, Whitman's poetry depicts this same concept. He is constantly introducing new ideas throughout his poems, but they all come together in the end, not only in each individual poem but throughout *Leaves of Grass* as well. Whitman "sees a unity in the universe that reveals itself in every particular object at every instant in time" (Kepner 197). This unity that Kepner talks about comes in many different forms. One of the ways that Whitman's poems in *Leaves of Grass* come together is through the idea of life and death. The second form is through nature and the third is that the poems highlight Whitman's philosophy of life. Whitman celebrated nature and the role that human beings played in it. *Leaves of Grass* portrays how nature is connected to the cycle of life and death, making it continuous through his use of "hopeful green stuff woven" (line 101), such as spears of grass and flowers, especially in "Song of Myself" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

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