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## Taoist Principles in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"

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**Taoist Principles in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"**

By

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A culminating thesis, submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelors in English

Dominican University of California

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### Abstract

One of the most influential and well recognized writers of the 19th century is Walt Whitman. He created works that changed the way that individuals saw the world around them and themselves. Walt Whitman was vocal about the absolute originality of his work and that he never took ideas from outside influence, but regardless of his own claims, his work presents a clear allusion to Eastern thought that particularly resembles that of the *Tao te Ching*. Some of the concepts that he underlines in his own work include but are not limited to simplicity, compassion, and patience. These aren't the only principles he relates to, as he also has a clear understanding of the universe and the divine.

Walt Whitman was an extremely well read individual, meaning that even though he claimed to never have read the *Tao te Ching*, its influence for "Song of Myself" is plausible. This essay seeks to reveal the underlying Taoist concepts and ideals that are present in Walt Whitman's 1855 publication "Song of Myself." Whitman tended to write in ways that forced the reader to come to their own conclusions, and discussing the similarities of these two works helps critics to better understand him. Knowing these similarities allows readers to understand where the ideas could have come from.

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## Introduction

Walt Whitman is described as one of the most influential and well recognized writers in American history. He chose not to utilize typical writing styles and some of his works were considered controversial. He placed an emphasis on the natural world and had a tendency to write in free verse, and thus was labeled as the father of free verse itself. Additionally, his poetry typically contained erotic images which caused readers to criticize his work. He was influenced by a multitude of things that include but are not limited to literature, science, religion, politics, and philosophy. When Whitman wrote the first of many editions of his epic poem "Song of Myself" in 1855, it was deemed a work that was extremely radical for its time period.

Radicalism is defined as "the beliefs or actions of people who advocate thorough or complete political or social reform," and a worthy example of this outlook is Whitman's attitude towards slavery as a whole. Simply put, Walt Whitman felt men should be treated as equals. Not surprisingly, his viewpoint was different than most Americans, his America was on the brink of civil war. He stood up for the rights of those at a disadvantage and was a huge advocate for a true democracy.

While it's evident in the work that he was undoubtedly influenced by the political unrest in America, Whitman's writing also stems from an influence of eastern thought. Despite some obvious points, it is possible it was unintentional in some aspects. Whitman heavily emphasizes religion and spirituality in "Song of Myself," and the underlying characteristics from other religions is evident in the text, particularly resembling ideas from the *Tao te Ching*. While it has since been discussed and widely believed that Whitman never read the *Tao te Ching*, he nevertheless discusses concepts of reincarnation, his identification with the Creator (Whitman

did not identify with a specific church, thus not referring to this supreme being as “God”), and his goal to achieve a higher consciousness and true knowledge.

Whitman’s conception of reincarnation and higher consciousness echo key ideas stemming from Eastern philosophers centuries before him. Because of these ideals, the allusion to outside influence from other religions and philosophies is plausible as he expresses his attitude towards different religions in his poem “With Antecedents.” He writes in lines twenty eight and twenty nine “I adopt each theory, myth, god, and demi-god, / I see that the old accounts, bibles, genealogies, are true, without exception.” Thus, some evidence can be interpreted that Whitman was discretely referencing eastern thought and ideas in the piece. Whether or not these connections were intentional by the author, this essay seeks to identify and reveal the underlying Taoist concepts of simplicity, compassion, reincarnation, and the achievement of a higher consciousness that are voiced in Walt Whitman’s 1855 publication of “Song of Myself.”

### **Influences**

The influences that stem from Eastern philosophy are also noted in the way that Walt Whitman is intimately connected to his own soul. In “Song of Myself,” he allows his soul to guide him through the workings of the universe. Essentially, Whitman goes on a metaphorical journey with his soul throughout the work’s entirety. This idea can be attributed or at the very least connected to the *Tao te Ching*, as “tao” (or “dao”) means “way” or “path.” The “soul searching” journey that Whitman embarks on can be viewed as a path to a form of higher consciousness, similar to ideas stemming from Eastern philosophy. To further this claim, an English translation of the word “dao” is “God,” so it is, again, possible Whitman was unconsciously referencing Taoist thought through his writing.

Whitman began writing *Song of Myself* during a wave of transcendentalism in America, a movement which began in the 1830's and was a reaction to intellectualism. Followers of this movement strived for intense spiritual experiences and yearned to move beyond the material world. A simple definition of transcendentalism is the belief in the inherent goodness of both people and nature. Transcendentalists, like Whitman, believed that while humans were fundamentally good, they were simply corrupted by society. Whitman echoed the concepts stemming from transcendentalism in his writing such as the idea that we are all part of the same energy, which is also a principle of his conscious beliefs as a whole. Additionally, transcendentalists view the world in ways very similar to Taoists. The surge of Transcendentalism in the United States was predominantly why Whitman sided with those that desired to abolish slavery, as many of these individuals had become consumed in the fight to do so. Because this movement believed in the goodness of individuals, people like Whitman felt all individuals should be treated as equals.

While "Song of Myself" was deemed radical at the time, it's now described as "monumental work [that] chanted praises to the body as well as to the soul, and found beauty and reassurance even in death" (Poetry Foundation). Criticism of the piece was to be expected being that this work particularly contained a multitude of allusions to erotic images when it celebrated both the body and nature. In a vast majority of his works, sexuality is a common theme. His work was labeled radical because of the fact that some found his writing unnerving and detested the sexual allusions and descriptions. Despite this argument, some believed that the erotic images were a means for Whitman to communicate his homosexuality to his readers, yet another valid explanation for the erotic images is because he uses sexual experience as a means to communicate spiritual experience.

According to *The Longman Anthology of Poetry*, “Whitman received little public acclaim for his poems during his lifetime for several reasons: this openness regarding sex, his self-presentation as a rough working man, and his stylistic innovations” (as cited from Poetry Foundation); however, some if not most of these erotic passages were omitted by its final publication potentially due to such criticisms. James Thomson declared that “he sings himself with long-unequaled arrogance” (as cited in Haviland Miller, 75). Edmund Goss had a similar opinion to Thomson, and he clarified that contrary to popular belief Whitman “was not [respectable]; he rolled on the carpet of the world like a grown-up naked baby” (as cited in Haviland Miller, 75). Other famous writers were among those who did not agree with Whitman’s work. Emily Dickinson revealed her true feelings in a letter that exclaimed: “you speak of Mr. Whitman- I never read his book- but was told it was disgraceful” (Emily Dickinson Archive).

Despite a multitude of negative reactions to Whitman's work, other’s celebrated the new and different voice. An anonymous review after the first publication of “Song of Myself” expressed that:

“It is indeed a strange voice! Critics and lovers and readers of poetry as hitherto written, may well be excused the chilly and unpleasant shudders which will assuredly run through them, to their very blood and bones, when they first read Whitman's poems” (as cited in Haviland Miller, 75).

Some critics believe that the anonymous review was Whitman himself, furthering Thomson’s claim of his apparent arrogance. This review was among others that were deemed Whitman himself praising his own work. In 1855, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a letter to Whitman about the epic. Emerson was one of the founders of the Transcendentalist Movement, and wrote “I

greet you at the beginning of a great career.” Another of Whitman’s supposedly “anonymous” reviews stated:

"The body, he teaches, is beautiful. Sex is also beautiful. . . . Sex will not be put aside; it is a great ordination of the universe. He works the muscle of the male and the teeming fibre of the female throughout his writings, as wholesome realities, impure only by deliberate intention and effort" (*Poetry and Prose* 535).

While it’s not proven that either review was in fact Whitman, not all of his critics viewed the epic to be problematic. Many of his readers did find Whitman’s work appealing from the start. Additionally, not all that praised the work were Americans either, as the work was well received in England potentially due to its celebration of the human body.

Nathaniel Preston and other scholars agree that “Walt Whitman’s insistence on the absolute originality of his poetry often led him to deny or obscure the intellectual and literary influences on his work” regardless of their clear underlying presence (Preston, 1). Whitman even went as far as to clarify that he “makes no allusions to books or writers; their spirits do not seem to have touched [him]” (“Leaves of Grass: A Volume of Poems Just Published”). Thus, it’s hard to pinpoint exactly who or what influenced Whitman and where the ideas originated from. In addition to the inability to identify his influences, some of his ideas were very openly Christian. Nevertheless there is a clear depiction of Eastern philosophy in his writing of *Song of Myself*. Furthermore, many scholars are also in agreement that there is evidence within the text of concepts stemming specifically from the *Tao te Ching* regardless of whether Whitman intended to have them there or not.

After evaluation of Whitman’s work, some scholars have also declared the concept of pantheism to be present in the poem. This term is defined as being a concept which identifies

God with the universe, and “this is because pantheism’s many forms share key ideas with Taoism” (as cited in Whitman East and West, 23). As stated previously, a lot of Eastern thought concentrated on the idea of reincarnation or the “return” of one’s soul and is a belief that Whitman concentrates upon heavily in “Song of Myself.” It is reminiscent of a line of the *TTC* that describes:

“The Tao is infinite, eternal.  
 Why is it eternal?  
 It was never born;  
 thus it can never die.  
 Why is it infinite?  
 It has no desires for itself;  
 thus it is present for all beings” (*Tao te Ching*, 7).

The presence of Taoist ideas is comprehensible enough in Whitman’s writing that Chinese poet Guo Moruo claimed that Whitman’s work, particularly “Song of Myself,” “reattached [him] to his Taoist roots in the ancient texts of Lao-Tzu and Chuang-Tzu” (as cited in Whitman East and West, 23). Whitman’s references to pantheism had stirred childhood memories in Moruo that reattached him back to Chuang-Tzu, a fourth-century B.C. Chinese philosopher who was responsible for writing the most important early book of Taoism. Furthermore, Moruo is among a multitude of other Chinese scholars that also identified these connections. Whitman has maintained a Chinese following for nearly a century, and they have described him to be not only a force of modernism but also an advocate for the lower and middle classes.

In his work, Walt Whitman heavily emphasized that he felt learning derived from empiricism. Empiricism conceptualized that knowledge came from sensory experience. This

concept supports his intimate connection to nature and the world around him in addition to the interpretation of concepts from the *Tao te Ching*. Seton Hall scholar Priya Patel describes these ideas by exclaiming that “one of the reasons Whitman celebrates elements of the natural world [in “Song of Myself”] is because he believed that human beings were already a part of nature and they would continue their journey with nature after death” (Patel, 1). This again echoes reincarnation and a key belief stemming from eastern thought, and according to Malcolm Cowley Whitman “[identifies] himself with every object and with every person living or dead.” He does not see any one person as less than or greater than another, and feels each person plays an important and necessary role in society. This is a common similarity to Taoism, as the *Tao te Ching* asks individuals not to compare themselves to one another or strive to be better than another.

One of the many goals of “Song of Myself” is that Whitman aims to have his readers see the world as he sees it. He felt that a person’s religion, political stance, career, and philosophy are all key aspects that play a major role in how they see the world. Another very fitting description of the work comes from scholar Adam C. Syverstern, who describes that ““Song of Myself” is not only concerned with questioning boundaries between the physical and metaphysical, but also between bodies and the more-than-human world.” This statement serves as an example of why he constantly references God and the universe and his connection to both. He makes reference to the divine throughout the epic, among other aspects of spirituality that classify under that which is more than human.

### **Christian References**

A secondary goal of the piece was to help unify the American people, and to do so he asked them to celebrate their diversity from one another rather than concentrate on their differences.

As discussed, one of the ways he achieved this was through his emphasis on religion. While there are underlying Taoist characteristics in “Song of Myself,” it’s important not to overlook the clear references to Christianity as well, especially due to the fact that its influence on Whitman’s poetry has been recognized for a long time. It is the faith he most clearly references, and some of the images he describes are obviously from the bible. Some called him a prophet of the Old Testament due to the fact that this book in the bible is where many of these images came from. For starters, he mentions that we are all “forme’d from this soil, this air,” (“Song of Myself (1892), 1) which echos the Christian Creation story of Adam and Eve. The true creation story describes that Adam was formed from the dust on the ground and then given the breath of life to awaken him. Since Whitman does not identify as a Christian, he puts it in a different way with his own words.

Whitman continues to make references to Old Testament images of the Bible, as he also describes later on a “meal pleasantly set” and mentions that “I will not have a single person slighted or left away” (“Song of Myself,” 19). This alludes to an image of the last supper, where Jesus hosted all of his disciples including Judas, the one who betrayed him, as well as others who had sinned. In this scenario, Whitman is acting as the “godly” figure who accepts all who come his way regardless of social status or their past sins and forgives them for their wrongdoings. Another image is referenced on page forty six where he asks to “forget the trickling tears and the blows of the bludgeons and hammers!/ That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion and bloody crowning!” (“Song of Myself,” 46). It’s very obviously an image of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In this case he’s again referencing himself as a godly figure.

Furthermore, the title itself can be interpreted as a reference to “Song of Solomon,” a story of two lovers in the Old Testament. It’s comparable in the beginning of the poem when Whitman

references his intimate connection to his soul and even going as far as to say he is in love with it. In fact, large pieces of the work actually focus on this connection between Whitman and his soul, most of which are displayed erotically like two lovers. As stated, *Song of Myself* is an excerpt from a longer piece, titled *Leaves of Grass*, and some feel that its title is the reference to the line in Isaiah that says that “all flesh is grass and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass” (Isaiah 40:6-7). The grass proves to be important, and becomes a constant reference in the poem and is something that will be discussed more in depth later on.

To add to the multitude of biblical references, Whitman also finds his own way to echo the Ten Commandments. He states:

“You shall possess the good of the earth and sun... there are millions  
of suns left,  
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand... nor look through the  
eyes of the dead... nor feed on the spectres in books,  
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter them for yourself” (“Song of Myself,” 2).

Even though it does not necessarily state the same things as the Ten Commandments, it follows the same rhythm and overall idea. It is, again, his own spin on them since he does not view himself as a Christian. Because of this and unlike Christianity, he does not emphasize his readers to follow the points directly. While he is somewhat acting as a godly being again, he still asks the readers not to follow these principles exactly. Instead, he wants them to keep these guidelines in the back of their mind while still coming to their own truth and conclusions.

While there is a clear presence of Christian images and concepts, some of the passages in “Song of Myself” can actually be interpreted as a mockery of Christian principles. Walt Whitman claims that he “does not despise [the] priests.” He does not despise anyone but instead feels they are misguided. Nonetheless, it is also crucial to again acknowledge that he does not solely identify with Christianity. He rejected the general rules of Christianity while still referencing the bible and holy scripture within “Song of Myself.” Lewis Mumford proclaimed that “it mocks at the testimony of bibles, for it is itself the source of such testimony” (as cited by Zitter). As discussed, some of the passages can be interpreted as him seeing himself as a prophet. Further this idea, some of the language and tone used was sometimes described as Whitman speaking to the readers directly and viewing them as his “disciples.” The way the entire work is written resembles an incredibly long sermon. It’s hypnotic, and a feature of typical preachers is that of repetition and asking questions that are often rhetorical. These rhetorical questions are a tactic Whitman uses constantly in his poem in an attempt to get his readers to think for themselves. He also rejects the idea of heaven and hell, as he mentions that “I have heard what the talkers were talking..... the talk of the beginning and the end,/ But I do not talk of the beginning or end” (*Song of Myself*, 2). He further rejects this idea throughout the epic in that he believes more firmly in reincarnation.

It’s necessary to clarify that while Walt Whitman accepted all churches and religions and did not identify himself as a Christian, he was not a firm believer in any faith. Even though he does consistently make reference to God, the purpose of this is to emphasize that one can see divinity everywhere and in everything. He does so by making an effort to see the beauty in all things. Because of this, he views them all as a work of God and thus makes the world around him seem holy and worthy of worship. Therefore, he also believed that while there is truth found

in religion, there is not just one truth. He circles back to the concept of empiricism in this way because he feels while religion can guide an individual, the only way to truly attain knowledge is something that books and scriptures cannot teach. To Whitman, learning comes best from going out into the world and experiencing things for ourselves.

While “Song of Myself” has religious images and tendencies, it is still a rejection of the truth found in scripture. In this piece Whitman wants his readers to understand that while they can follow and practice the concepts within scripture, they do not need to live and breathe it. He feels that while he can explain things to his audience, even he cannot teach them everything. He asks them to even reject *his* truth, and come to a conclusion on their own. This connects back to the *Tao te Ching*, the teachings within it are more like guidelines on how to live rather than rules. Unlike the *TTC*, Whitman feels the priests force individuals to live a certain way.

### **Introduction: The *Tao te Ching* and Analysis**

Unlike priests, the *Tao te Ching* does not force individuals to live a certain way. Instead, it offers guidelines on how to live a life that creates the utmost good. This could be why he seemed to have a fondness for similar beliefs that he references in “Song of Myself.” There are a lot of similarities between the two works, but what is known about the *Tao te Ching’s* origins is limited. While it’s unclear the exact and definite origins of the work, it is believed to have been written in 400BC by a Laozi, which means “old master.” Some believe that this means that the true identity of the author, or authors, is unknown while most believe that the author is none other than Lao-tzu. Unfortunately, there is just as little known about Lao-tzu as the work itself. Therefore, it is not even confirmed whether or not he was a fourth or sixth century Chinese philosopher the same way the exact “publication” of the *Tao te Ching* is not certain. Yet two things that the majority agree on is that he was a contemporary of Confucious and the founder of

Taoism itself. Steven Mitchell describes the general belief about Lao-tzu to be “a hermit, a dropout from society, dwelling serenely in a mountain hut, unvisited except perhaps by the occasional traveler arriving from a ‘60’s joke to ask ‘What is the meaning of life?’” (Mitchell). He clarifies that this was far from the truth, as the teachings within the work implied that he deeply cared about society and the general welfare of individuals.

The title of the *Tao te Ching* translates to “the way of integrity,” and most of the lessons contained within pertain to self awareness and how to live with this integrity while performing the utmost good in the world. Like most Chinese philosophers, it’s written using things like paradox, analogy, and symmetry. Similarly to the work that it’s being compared to, a lot of *Song of Myself* is written using paradox, analogy, and symmetry as well. As stated prior, the *Tao te Ching* describes the “tao” as the way of the universe and the source of all existence, it is something unseen yet not supreme. The Tao is the root of all things, it is extremely powerful yet vastly humble all the same. It’s important to remember that there are many different translations of the work and thus many different outlooks on the meanings within. For the sake of this essay the translation used comes from Steven Mitchell, who describes it as “the classic manual on the art of living” (Mitchell).

The *Tao te Ching* can be based off of three main principles, to put it a little more simply. It describes these three principles to be:

“simplicity, patience, and compassion.

These three are your greatest treasures.

Simple in actions and in thoughts,

you return to the source of being.

Patient with both friends and enemies,

you accord with the way things are.

Compassionate toward yourself,

you reconcile all beings in the world” (*Tao te Ching*, 67).

Nevertheless, these are not the *only* concepts in the *TTC*, but are instead some of the more prominent ideas that aid to break it down a little more easily. While the work focuses on much more than just these principles, some are described more in depth and constantly than others. Thus, while each of these ideals are presented in Whitman’s work, they are never explicitly referenced as ideas originating from the *TTC*. However, each of the passages in Whitman’s own work that are comparable to the *TTC* help to better convey the meaning of his writing as well as understand his style as a whole.

The *Tao te Ching* introduces the idea of simplicity by asking an individual to surrender themselves to the present moment. It begins by reminding individuals that there is a time for everything, stating that:

“The Master sees things as they are,

without trying to control them.

She lets them go their own way,

and resides at the center of the circle” (*Tao te Ching*, 29).

To further one’s consciousness of the present moment, the *Tao te Ching* asks an individual not to concern themselves with material things and create greed. Acting rapacious makes it impossible to find contentment and thus impossible to live in the present, creating a vicious cycle of greed.

It instead asks individuals to:

“Be content with what you have,

rejoice in the way things are.

When you realize there is nothing lacking,  
the whole world belongs to you” (*Tao te Ching*, 44).

One will constantly be in a state of want should they always desire more, but living in the present and appreciating the world for what it is creates contempt. By keeping things simple, they are able to remain at the center of the circle and not follow things that they cannot control.

The second chapter is where the discussion on the idea of living in the present begins, which builds off of the idea of simplicity. The *TTC* notes that:

“Things arise and she lets them come;  
things disappear and she lets them go.  
She has but doesn’t possess,  
acts but doesn’t expect.

When her work is done, she forgets it” (*Tao te Ching*, 2).

As Whitman will also describe, what has already happened or what will happen is not important. Focusing on the past will distract an individual from what is currently happening around them. Anything that is of importance happens in the present, and one cannot learn if they are not present. The last line enforces the idea that if one does not dwell on success, success never actually fades. By dwelling too much on past success, it once again becomes easy to lose consciousness of the current moment. The concept of being present is another ideal that proves to be very important throughout the work, and will heavily connect to *SoM*.

The *Tao te Ching* consistently emphasizes the cycle of the universe and everything within it. It informs that nothing ever truly “disappears” from the universe itself, but instead is used to create something else. It states that “each separate being in the universe/ returns to the common source./ Returning to the source is serenity” (*Tao te Ching*, 14). Nothing in the world is

permanent, yet everything is somehow reborn into something else eventually after returning to the source which, again, also further reinstates the idea of living in the present. Human beings are only “human” for a relatively short time before they become something else. Energy in anything is never used up, but instead is constantly recycled. There is transformation all the time, and an example is the changing of the seasons. Flowers grow and bloom in the spring, die in the winter, and are “reborn” again when spring returns. Their source is the ground, and after they return to it when they die, they’re reborn and the cycle continues.

The *TTC* is very concerned with the idea of compassion and the relationship of one individual to another by simply treating others with respect. As discussed, compassion is one of the three main principles of the work. It asks that an individual is humble and sympathetic to others while still focusing on the self, noting that:

“Knowing others is intelligence,  
 knowing yourself is true wisdom.  
 Mastering others is strength;  
 mastering yourself is true power” (*Tao te Ching*, 34).

This passage stresses the difference between mastering oneself versus being selfish and only focusing on oneself. To put it more simply, it encourages an individual to go on a journey of self discovery. In the forty ninth chapter, it connects back to respecting one another as it states that:

“She is good to people who are good.  
 She is also good to people who aren’t good.  
 This is true goodness.  
 She trusts people who are trustworthy.  
 She also trusts people who are untrustworthy.

This is true trust” (*Tao te Ching*, 49).

The master loves all and does not devalue anyone for how they live their lives, including if they have sinned or if it differs from the way she lives hers.

The work continues on with this concept of the self. Line twenty seven reads that “master is available to all people/ and doesn’t reject anyone./ He is ready to use all situations/ and doesn’t waste anything” (*Tao te Ching*). This section describes Taoists as being open to learn from anyone regardless of who they are, just as Whitman tries to learn from those around him. Willingness to learn from others and the ability to be curious is how we attain the highest forms of knowledge, because everyone knows more about something than we do. A true Master does not waste an opportunity to learn from someone else, because by rejecting someone he misses out on a moment to gain knowledge. It also reverts back to the idea of learning from the world around us. We can take truth from someone, but it does not have to be the only truth because there is always more to discover. Whitman wants everyone to expand their horizons as much as they can.

### **Taoist Principles in “Song of Myself”**

When discussing the images in “Song of Myself,” it’s crucial to again remember that Whitman was believed to have never read the *Tao te Ching*. Even if the ideas almost mirror one another in similarity and meaning, that point was never confirmed. The opening lines of the poem brings in one of the first major concepts of Taoism which is reincarnation. Whitman states that “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (“Song of Myself,” 1). Everything in the world is connected, as an individual never truly departs from the universe itself. Energy in the universe will never disappear or be destroyed. Everything that makes up an individual is recycled constantly and then assembled into something else. Thus, every atom belonging to one

individual will also eventually belong to another. Like Whitman, Taoist thought believes that everything in the universe is recycled, and this process will continue on for eternity. Individuals are born, they eventually die, and are reborn constantly.

Whitman introduces how individuals are constantly being reborn through the grass, as he calls it “the uncut hair of graves” (“Song of Myself,” 6). This is where the metaphor of the grass begins to cycle back to the line in Isaiah as well. He reminisces on all of the people who lived before him, and all of those who are buried underneath the grass. He considers it as one of the smallest things that connects individuals to one another, as the grass grows in every area.

Whitman describes the connection of the grass by describing it as:

“a uniform hieroglyphic,  
 And it means sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,  
 Growing among black folks as among white,  
 Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, [he gives] them the same, [he receives]  
 them the same" (*Song of Myself*, 6).

He reminds the readers that every human being comes from the grass and eventually will return to it. The body serves as a “fertilizer” to the grass and enables it to continue to grow. This idea mirrors the lines in the *TTC* that state that “each separate being in the universe/ returns to the common source./ Returning to the source is serenity” (*Tao te Ching*, 14) and “in the beginning was the Tao./ All things issue from it,/ and all things return to it” (*Tao te Ching*, 32). To Whitman, the grass is this “source” that the *TTC* describes as the tao itself, and he does not believe that an individual truly dies because when someone dies they’re buried beneath the grass. The grass continues to grow and thus an individual is reincarnated through this element of nature.

Whitman connects to the grass in various sections throughout the entirety of the poem. In the beginning he describes that all dead men, women and children are “alive and well somewhere;/ The smallest sprout shows there really is no death,/ and if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it” (“Song of Myself,” 6-7). It circles back to the idea that everything in the universe is recycled and used in something else. The energy can never be destroyed, and is similar to the line that states that “the Tao is like a well:/ used but never used up” (*Tao te Ching*, 4). The body may be used up when an individual dies, but the soul never disappears. Grass may die in the winter, but grows again in the spring. While death is the final outcome, it is not the end.

This concept explains his statement that he “is deathless/ [he knows] that this orbit of [his] cannot be swept by a carpenter’s compass” (“Song of Myself,” 20). After death one will return to the Tao, or in Whitman’s case the grass, and then be made into something else. He even goes as far as to state that he is not afraid due to the fact that he, no doubt, “has died [himself] ten thousand times before” (“Song of Myself,” 62). This notion brings back the idea of living in the present moment, as the Tao asks. Similarly, it’s parallel to the seventy fourth passage in the *Tao te Ching* that explains:

“If you realize that all things change  
 there is nothing you will try to hold on to.  
 If you aren’t afraid of dying,  
 there is nothing you can’t achieve” (*Tao te Ching*, 74).

Living in the present is partially a reason why Whitman asks us not to fear death: it’s something typically distant into the future and something that is inevitable just as much as it’s unplanned. Aside from that, he wants to get the point across not to be afraid because the soul itself never

dies, even though the body does. Parallel to Whitman's statement, the *TTC* conceptualizes the same principle. Every individual will die regardless, and not being afraid of it will allow one to achieve the highest form of knowledge and potential in their lifetime.

Walt Whitman begins the poem with reincarnation and finishes it in the same fashion, by explaining to the readers in the end that:

“I depart as air... I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,

I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,

If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles” (*Song of Myself*, 64).

He dies and his body will fertilize the grass, and in this way he will continue to live in some form. He makes an effort to remind his readers that death is not something to be feared, as to Whitman it opens a door to a new beginning rather than being an end. Even in death, he can be found again as his soul blossoms in the grass and his body fertilizes it. While the body itself will not be reborn, Whitman will be regardless. One interpretation of Whitman's consistent reference to grass could be that it can be seen in some ways as his “tao.” The tao is something that is consistently described throughout the entirety of the *Tao te Ching* and the different ways it connects the world and flows through it. It is also described as something that can never be destroyed. Similarly enough, grass grows everywhere, and while like the Tao it does not physically create us, all individuals will eventually return to it.

Walt Whitman is equally as concerned about living in the present moment as the *Tao te Ching*, as he feels that true knowledge comes from the world around an individual. To him, the natural world can educate them more than books and teachers would ever be

able to. This idea is partially why he rejects the idea of religion. He notes: "I have heard what the talkers were talking . . . . the talk of the beginning and

the end,

But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,

Nor any more youth or age than there is now;

And will never be any more perfection than there is now,

Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now" ("Song of Myself," 2).

In this quote, he's referring to the priests as those that he labels as the "talkers". Heaven and hell are moments of the future after an individual dies, and if one is too concentrated on entering heaven they'll never learn by making mistakes through sin. As noted previously, focusing on the future and thus focusing on heaven or hell means one is not living in the present moment.

Heaven and hell are both mentioned in relation to this point later on as well when Whitman tells his readers that:

"I am the poet of the body,

And I am the poet of the Soul.

The pleasures of heaven are with me, and the pains of hell are with me,

The first I graft and increase upon myself . . . . the latter I translate into

a new tongue" (*Song of Myself*, 21).

In the poem he's trying to take the ideas of religion and put them into a different light. He does this instead by making them into the spirituality of the present moment, and because of this he is capable of seeing divinity everywhere.

The spirituality of the present moment is best described in chapter thirty four of the *TTC*, stating that “the great Tao flows everywhere./ All things are born from it,/ yet it doesn’t create them” (*Tao te Ching*, 34). Because the tao does not create us it does not try to rule over us in the way that Whitman feels religion rules over an individual. For example, the priests make an individual so fearful of not going to heaven that they forget that knowledge comes from making mistakes. Additionally, while he appreciates all religions, he knows they come from earlier ages. He feels the principles within are outdated, and people must discover these divine truths for themselves rather than through someone like a priest. The reason he does not necessarily trust the priests is he feels they tell people how or what to think. Instead, he wants individuals to practice self reliance, meaning they think for themselves instead of relying on books and others. This echoes a line in the *Tao te Ching* that teaches readers that “the Master is content/ to serve as an example/ and not impose her will” (*Tao te Ching*, 58). To Whitman, the priests should be more like the masters. Unlike priests, they do not criticise those that live differently from them or who do not hold the ideologies of the tao. They also do not tell them how to think, but instead act as examples on how they *can* think.

In comparison to the *TTC*'s view on individuals, Whitman feels that all humans have a place in the world and add value regardless of status, occupation, race, etc. To him, an individual's roles are known as if it was their name. In his eyes, everyone has an essential job to fill that helps society to function properly. He states that:

“The pure contralto sings in the organloft,

The carpenter dresses his plank . . . . the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild

ascending lisp,

The married and unmarried children ride home to their thanksgiving dinner,

The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,  
 The mate stands braced in the whaleboat, lance and harpoon are ready,  
 The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,  
 The deacons are ordained with crossed hands at the altar,  
 The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,  
 The farmer stops by the bars of a Sunday and looks at the oats and rye,  
 The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirmed case.” (“Song of Myself,” 15)

Even the lunatic is important to a functioning society. Yet even the list he has composed does not portray just one type of individual. It portrays all different backgrounds: rich, poor, urban, rural. It is a means for Whitman to vocalize that everyone is vital to society’s proper function, no role can be left out to him. This line can also be seen as a way for Whitman to get his readers to perceive these individuals as he does: equal and important.

In conjunction with Whitman accepting all, he trusts all as well. Identically to the way the *Tao* mentions to trust individuals even if they’re considered untrustworthy, Whitman does the same. It is reminiscent of the idea that Jesus forgave all in the Bible, thus making it hard to decide which work Whitman used this idea from, but nevertheless they are parallel concepts. On page ten, he describes the occasion of a runaway slave that arrives at his house, recalling:

“I gave him a room that entered 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 staid with me a week before he was recuperated and passed north,  
 I had him sit next to me at table... my firelock leaned in the corner” (*Song of Myself* 10).

The lines embody the *TTC* in the way it requests individuals to treat others. During the time of *SoM*, it was common for individuals not to trust runaway slaves due to the fact that it could get individuals like Whitman killed for housing them. On top of that, he is fully aware that the slave likely does not trust him either. Nonetheless, he feels men should be treated equally, and even lacks the fear that the slave will take his rifle. It falls back to the line in the *TTC* that states, “[he] trusts people who are trustworthy./ [he] also trusts people who are untrustworthy./ This is true trust” (*Tao te Ching*, 49). Whitman is encompassing transcendentalism and choosing to see the inherent goodness in the slave. Everyone will sin, yet he chooses to look past that.

In addition to his encounter with a runaway slave, the conversation can also revert back to his image of the last supper. As he describes a meal between himself and numerous individuals of different backgrounds, he notes that:

“I will not have a single person slighted or left away,  
 The keptwoman and sponger and thief are hereby invited...  
 the heavy-lipped slave is invited... the venerealee is invited,  
 There shall be no difference between them and the rest” (“Song of Myself,” 19).

In this section, Whitman conveys an image of individuals who are simultaneously both evil and good, and like a true Master still views them in the same light. He refuses to exclude anyone and gives everyone both a literal and metaphorical seat at his table. Everyone can have an opinion and he will not reject it. He makes no judgments of others based on how they have or currently live their lives. Additionally, Whitman describes a multitude of different people and scenarios throughout the work. It can essentially be seen as Whitman finding a way to identify with everyone. He feels that the only real sin one can commit is to not have sympathy and regard for others. In comparison to this line, the *TTC* states that:

“The Tao doesn’t take sides;  
 it gives birth to both good and evil.  
 The Master doesn’t take sides;  
 she welcomes both saints and sinners” (*Tao te Ching*, 5).

Whitman asks his readers to do the same as the *TTC* by asking them to have sympathy and walk humbly. Similarly, the Taoist Masters are enlightened, but they refuse to hold themselves on pedestals above others.

Walt Whitman also utilizes animals as another means to not only unify America but identify with others. He has an appreciation for them because they are far more simple than humans and have consistent compassion for one another. He states that:

“I think I could turn and live awhile with the animals... they are so placid and  
 self-contain’d,  
 I stand and look at them sometimes half the day long.  
 They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
 They do not lie awake and weep in the dark for their sins,  
 They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,  
 Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,  
 Not one kneels to another nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,  
 Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth.” (*Song of Myself*, 33)

In this section Whitman directly references slavery when speaking of the “mania of owning things.” He calls slave owners demented, and he does not forget about corrupt Christians. Some advocates for slavery used religion to justify it, thus the reason that the two lines follow one another. The duty to God that he references is owning slaves, and he’s making one last effort to

“prevent” the war by asking everyone to be more like animals. This quote relates to an idea in the *TTC*, which states that “When a country is in harmony with the Tao,/ the factories make trucks and tractors./ When a country goes counter to the Tao,/ warheads are stockpiled outside the city” (*Tao te Ching*, 46). This line does not seem to reference the same idea as Whitman. The only time a different translation is referenced is for this connection, as Derek Lin’s describes that “When the world has the Tao/ Fast horses are retired to till the soil/ When the world lacks the Tao/ Warhorses give birth on the battlefield” (*Tao te Ching*, 46). This line from the *TTC* can be interpreted as a way to portray that war disrupts the natural way of the Tao and the world. This is also exactly what Whitman is trying to help prevent for his own America.

While it’s been said that Whitman claims absolute originality in his poems, this statement is somewhat contradicted by the author himself in “Song of Myself.” He explains that “these are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me,/ If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing” (*Song of Myself*, 18). While it’s not explicitly said, this could be a subtle reference to works like the *Tao te Ching* or the Bible especially since he alludes to images and passages from both throughout the work’s entirety. Yet even this line is reminiscent of the *Tao* because it describes that Masters take opportunity to learn from everything and every individual. Therefore it’s possible that he is discretely referencing this work and potential others without stating it. However, it can also be viewed as an example of Whitman following his own advice and discovering the divine truths completely on his own. This can also partially explain why Whitman never adopted one specific religion; he felt that he could learn something from each one of them.

One of the final connections that Whitman makes to the *TTC* originates from the idea of yin and yang. It is not something that he explicitly references, but the general concept does surface.

The idea of yin and yang is described as “ a concept of dualism, describing how seemingly opposite or contrary forces may actually be complementary, interconnected, and interdependent in the natural world.” Whitman connects this idea when he asks his readers “do I contradict myself? I am large, I contain multitudes” (“Song of Myself,” 63). The *TTC* is very keen on the idea of self discovery, as is Whitman. As noted, he feels this is achieved through the natural world around an individual. The idea of self discovery begins when one recognizes that their body and soul are equal, the same is true for oneself with the rest of the world. This is something that Whitman is well aware of, as the soul is portrayed separately than Whitman himself in the work.

The equality of the body and soul is recognized in the fifty fifth chapter of the *TTC*, by clarifying that being in harmony with the Tao allows one to be virtuous. As discussed, Whitman is in harmony with his own soul, and recognizes its equality with his body. He is aware of his own mortality, but also aware that the energy that makes up his physical being will one day be transferred to something else. This allows Whitman to be able to obtain a sense of identity. Furthermore, Whitman understands that he is one with God because heaven and earth are parallels as well as humans and the divine. Everything has a balance in the world with something else and is a principle that Whitman explains that he is consciously aware.

### **Analysis: Why Does it Matter?**

Walt Whitman has been described in numerous different ways based upon the concepts and ideas within his work. Some feel that while his work came from the west, his personality and soul came from the east. The remark is a valid assertion, as “Song of Myself” is not the only thing he’s written that deeply reflects and mirrors Taoist principles. In fact, a great deal of what he’s published can be deemed reflections of Taoism primarily because of how he connects with

his own soul and the rest of the world. Walt Whitman views both as separate things that still remain equal to one another. Even though Whitman never admitted to reading or studying the *TTC*, it does help readers and critics get a better understanding of him and his work. One way to interpret *Song of Myself* is an illustration of his appreciation for life through Taoism.

To begin with, knowing that Whitman does not identify as a Christian makes the presence of Taoism far more plausible. In addition to that, his insistence on the originality of his own work also explains why the concepts are never explicitly referenced as Taoist. The work aids readers in their understanding of why he sees divinity everywhere and why he appreciates a multitude of faiths. He embraces all different religions and viewpoints because they allow him to see the bigger picture in life and attain the highest forms of knowledge. On top of that, it allows him to connect with every aspect of each because it means there is not just one truth. As noted, Taoists believe there is an opportunity to learn everywhere. Whitman agrees with this point, and this is because there's knowledge everywhere he looks. He identifies with every person and being on Earth somehow, and looks at them all in the same light.

Applying Taoist thoughts and ideas to "Song of Myself" illustrates Whitman's appreciation of life and all things according to it. For example, it is not easy to be not only unafraid but unbothered by death and the uncertainty that comes with it, yet he almost completely disregards this. By bringing Taoist ideas to the surface in this work it conveys that the reason that Whitman does not fear death is because he's fully aware that his soul is eternal in nature. While his body is only temporary, his soul will be transferred to numerous things throughout eternity. Walt Whitman makes it clear that he has a harmony with the universe that connects to yin and yang. He was successful in creating his own style of writing based on his connection of nature to emotion and the balance of the two. Emily Baksic describes Whitman's influence by saying

“even though *Tao Te Ching* and *Leaves of Grass* are from completely different time periods, both texts refuse to sit still, which makes them similar. Moreover, the views on faith and nature in the text blend homogeneously” (Giant Steps). Even today, Whitman’s work is still influential and talked about constantly.

Whitman’s connection to Taoist thought also helps to reveal one of the largest and most crucial goals of “Song of Myself.” During the time period it was written, he was attempting to unify the American people. The *TTC* sees all individuals as equal to another and grants everyone a place in society. As discussed, at the first publication of the work the North and South were battling on whether or not to abolish slavery. Applying the knowledge of Lao Tzu to this piece helped Whitman to explain why he felt that all individuals should be treated equally. Embracing the world and the individuals within it helped him embrace love of other individuals, and in this case especially those who were not white. Because of this he’s clearly able to explain why he sees all individuals equally and why he writes himself as a multitude of different people in “Song of Myself.” He writes himself as different people in an effort to encompass a voice that spoke for all, especially those who could not speak for themselves.

Whitman’s stance on slavery also aids to explain the reason he chose to mock certain Christian principles in *SoM*. Some used the Bible as a way to justify slavery. There were pamphlets that stated that a good Christian could in fact own slaves, and other authors during the time even used biblical passages to justify the owning of slaves. This further clarifies why Whitman potentially used the ideas present in the *Tao te Ching*. The principle of compassion was consistently conveyed in both works and was relevant to the time period Whitman wrote *SoM* in. Using the depiction of the runaway slave, Whitman attempted to illustrate the need for equality among individuals. In his case, religion was not working because as noted, some saw

the Bible as a means of justification. Instead, he seemed to allude to passages in the *TTC* in an effort to get his point across in a different way. Due to the fact that the Tao runs through all, Whitman found his own way to find something that connects everyone which was the grass.

Whitman did his best to express humility and selflessness in his work, just like the *Tao te Ching* asks. The closest English translation for the Chinese character “te” is “virtue.” Virtue refers to different qualities like generosity, humility, and compassion. Each of these qualities were presented at various points in Whitman’s piece. These concepts are precisely why he accepts all and utilizes his own epic to unify people. He was selfless by inviting the slave into his home, and humble by making it apparent that he is aware he does not know everything. Yet he also expresses his compassion with a multitude of other individuals that he highlights. Whitman references both lunatics and prostitutes at different points in the work, and it is a moment of compassion to both. Whitman remarks “miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you” (“Song of Myself,” 15). He appreciates their existence and encompasses Taoist thought by doing so. Whitman may have used its teachings because within it contains something for everyone. It does not judge, nor does it overpower, but instead it is mere guidelines. The *Tao te Ching* was intended to be a guide on how to live life, thus mirroring Whitman’s intentions for “Song of Myself.”

Walt Whitman’s writing style effectively changed poetry. Whitman himself declared that he did not elevate himself above the common man. While it’s clear in his writing that he viewed himself equal to all, this principle is one of the things closest to the center of the ideas presented in the *Tao te Ching*. He was not necessarily looking for any individuals to agree with his work, but instead wanted it to resonate with them and provide them something to think about. Yet like the *TTC* he challenged those who thought close mindedly and chose to limit themselves through

ideologies like religion and discrimination. The central goal of “Song of Myself” was to encourage individuals to see the world the way he viewed it: something to gain knowledge from and rejoice in the presence of. The same was evident in the *Tao te Ching*, and seeing these similarities allow readers to achieve Whitman’s goal of not only being able to view the world the same way that he does, but also to attain the highest form of knowledge.

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