I Sing the Body Electric

POEM TEXT

1

I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul.

Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves?
And if those who defile the living are as bad as they who defile the dead?
And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?
And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?

2

The love of the body of man or woman balks account, the body itself balks account,
That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect.

The expression of the face balks account,
But the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face,
It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists,
It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees, dress does not hide him,
The strong sweet quality he has strikes through the cotton and broadcloth,
To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more,
You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side.

The sprawl and fulness of babes, the bosoms and heads of women, the folds of their dress, their style as we pass in the street, the contour of their shape downwards,
The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims through the transparent green-shine, or lies with his face up and rolls silently to and fro in the heave of the water,
The bending forward and backward of rowers in row-boats, the horseman in his saddle,
Girls, mothers, house-keepers, in all their performances,
The group of laborers seated at noon-time with their open dinner-kettles, and their wives waiting,
The female soothing a child, the farmer's daughter in the garden or cow-yard,
The young fellow hoeing corn, the sleigh-driver driving his six horses through the crowd,
The wrestle of wrestlers, two apprentice-boys, quite grown, lusty, good-natured, native-born, out on the vacant lot at sun-down after work,
The coats and caps thrown down, the embrace of love and resistance,
The upper-hold and under-hold, the hair rumpled over and blinding the eyes;
The march of firemen in their own costumes, the play of masculine muscle through clean-setting trowsers and waist-straps,
The slow return from the fire, the pause when the bell strikes suddenly again, and the listening on the alert,
The natural, perfect, varied attitudes, the bent head, the curv'd neck and the counting;
Such-like I love—I loosen myself, pass freely, am at the mother's breast with the little child,
Swim with the swimmers, wrestle with wrestlers, march in line with the firemen, and pause, listen, count.

3

I knew a man, a common farmer, the father of five sons,
And in them the fathers of sons, and in them the fathers of sons.

This man was of wonderful vigor, calmness, beauty of person,
The shape of his head, the pale yellow and white of his hair and beard, the immeasurable meaning of his black eyes, the richness and breadth of his manners,
These I used to go and visit him to see, he was wise also,
He was six feet tall, he was over eighty years old, his sons were massive, clean, bearded, tan-faced, handsome,

They and his daughters loved him, all who saw him loved him,
They did not love him by allowance, they loved him with personal love,
He drank water only, the blood show'd like scarlet through the clear-brown skin of his face,
He was a frequent gunner and fisher, he sail'd his boat himself, he had a fine one presented to him by a ship-joiner, he had fowling-pieces presented to him by men that loved him,
When he went with his five sons and many grand-sons to hunt or fish, you would pick him out as the most beautiful and vigorous of the gang,
You would wish long and long to be with him, you would wish to sit by him in the boat that you and he might touch each other.

4

I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough,
To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,
To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?
I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.

There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well,
All things please the soul, but these please the soul well.

5

This is the female form,
A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction,
I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than a helpless vapor, all falls aside but myself and it,
Books, art, religion, time, the visible and solid earth, and what was expected of heaven or fear'd of hell, are now consumed,
Mad filaments, ungovernable shoots play out of it, the response likewise ungovernable,
Hair, bosom, hips, bend of legs, negligent falling hands all diffused, mine too diffused,
Ebb stung by the flow and flow stung by the ebb, love-flesh swelling and deliciously aching,
Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous, quivering jelly of love, white-blow and delirious juice,
Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly into the prostrate dawn,
Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-flesh'd day.

This the nucleus—after the child is born of woman, man is born of woman,
This the bath of birth, this the merge of small and large, and the outlet again.

Be not ashamed women, your privilege encloses the rest, and is the exit of the rest,
You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul.

The female contains all qualities and tempers them,
She is in her place and moves with perfect balance,
She is all things duly veil'd, she is both passive and active,
She is to conceive daughters as well as sons, and sons as well as daughters.

As I see my soul reflected in Nature,
As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible completeness, sanity, beauty,
See the bent head and arms folded over the breast, the Female I see.

6

The male is not less the soul nor more, he too is in his place,
He too is all qualities, he is action and power,
The flush of the known universe is in him,
Scorn becomes him well, and appetite and defiance become him well,
The wildest largest passions, bliss that is utmost, sorrow that is utmost become him well, pride is for him,
The full-spread pride of man is calming and excellent to the soul,
Knowledge becomes him, he likes it always, he brings every thing to the test of himself,
Whatever the survey, whatever the sea and the sail he strikes soundings at last only here,
(Where else does he strike soundings except here?)

The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred,
No matter who it is, it is sacred—is it the meanest one

in the laborers' gang?
Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants just landed on the wharf?
Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off, just as much as you,
Each has his or her place in the procession.

(All is a procession,
The universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion.)

Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest ignorant?
Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has no right to a sight?
Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffuse float, and the soil is on the surface, and water runs and vegetation sprouts,
For you only, and not for him and her?

7

A man's body at auction,
(For before the war I often go to the slave-mart and watch the sale,)
I help the auctioneer, the sloven does not half know his business.

Gentlemen look on this wonder,
Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it,
For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or plant,
For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily roll'd.

In this head the all-baffling brain,
In it and below it the makings of heroes.

Examine these limbs, red, black, or white, they are cunning in tendon and nerve,
They shall be stript that you may see them.

Exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition,
Flakes of breast-muscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby, good-sized arms and legs,
And wonders within there yet.

Within there runs blood,
The same old blood! the same red-running blood!
There swells and jets a heart, there all passions, desires, reachings, aspirations,
(Do you think they are not there because they are not express'd in parlors and lecture-rooms?)

This is not only one man, this the father of those who shall be fathers in their turns,
In him the start of populous states and rich republics,
Of him countless immortal lives with countless embodiments and enjoyments.

How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his offspring through the centuries?
(Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you could trace back through the centuries?)

8

A woman's body at auction,
She too is not only herself, she is the teeming mother of mothers,
She is the bearer of them that shall grow and be mates to the mothers.

Have you ever loved the body of a woman?
Have you ever loved the body of a man?
Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth?

If any thing is sacred the human body is sacred,
And the glory and sweet of a man is the token of manhood untainted,
And in man or woman a clean, strong, firm-fibred body, is more beautiful than the most beautiful face.

Have you seen the fool that corrupted his own live body? or the fool that corrupted her own live body?
For they do not conceal themselves, and cannot conceal themselves.

9

O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and women, nor the likes of the parts of you,
I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of the soul, (and that they are the soul,)
I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems, and that they are my poems,
Man's, woman's, child's, youth's, wife's, husband's, mother's, father's, young man's, young woman's poems,
Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears,
Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eyebrows, and the

waking or sleeping of the lids,
Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and the jaw-hinges,
Nose, nostrils of the nose, and the partition,
Cheeks, temples, forehead, chin, throat, back of the neck, neck-slue,
Strong shoulders, manly beard, scapula, hind-shoulders, and the ample side-round of the chest,
Upper-arm, armpit, elbow-socket, lower-arm, arm-sinews, arm-bones,
Wrist and wrist-joints, hand, palm, knuckles, thumb, forefinger, finger-joints, finger-nails,
Broad breast-front, curling hair of the breast, breast-bone, breast-side,
Ribs, belly, backbone, joints of the backbone,
Hips, hip-sockets, hip-strength, inward and outward round, man-balls, man-root,
Strong set of thighs, well carrying the trunk above,
Leg fibres, knee, knee-pan, upper-leg, under-leg,
Ankles, instep, foot-ball, toes, toe-joints, the heel;
All attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my or your body or of any one's body, male or female,
The lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and clean,
The brain in its folds inside the skull-frame,
Sympathies, heart-valves, palate-valves, sexuality, maternity,
Womanhood, and all that is a woman, and the man that comes from woman,
The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears, laughter, weeping, love-looks, love-perturbations and risings,
The voice, articulation, language, whispering, shouting aloud,
Food, drink, pulse, digestion, sweat, sleep, walking, swimming,
Poise on the hips, leaping, reclining, embracing, arm-curving and tightening,
The continual changes of the flex of the mouth, and around the eyes,
The skin, the sunburnt shade, freckles, hair,
The curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the naked meat of the body,
The circling rivers the breath, and breathing it in and out,
The beauty of the waist, and thence of the hips, and thence downward toward the knees,
The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and the marrow in the bones,
The exquisite realization of health;
O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,
O I say now these are the soul!

SUMMARY

1

I sing the praises of the electric body. I'm surrounded by mighty crowds of the people I love, and I surround them, too. They won't release me until I follow them, answer them, purify them, and fill them up with the electric current of the spirit.

Has anyone ever doubted that people who do harm to their bodies are disguising something true about themselves? Or that those who do harm to living people are just as bad as people who desecrate dead bodies? Or that the body is just as important as the soul? Because if the body isn't the soul itself, what is the soul at all?

2

There's no way to describe what it's like to love a man's or a woman's body. There's no way to even describe the body itself! Men's bodies are perfect, and women's bodies are perfect.

There's no way to describe the way a person's face expresses their personality. But a well-built man's expression isn't just in his face: it's also in his arms and legs, and, strangely, in the way his hips and wrists bend. It's in the way he walks, the way he holds his neck, the bending of his waist and his knees. Clothes don't conceal this kind of expression: its powerful loveliness comes right through the rough fabric of the man's outfit. Watching him walk by reveals just as much wisdom as the greatest poem can—or maybe even more. You hang around to watch his back, and the back of his neck, and the sides of his shoulders.

The relaxed pudginess of babies, women's breasts and heads, the way women's dresses hang, the way they look as we go past each other in the street, the curves of their lower bodies; the naked swimmer in the pool, whom I see as he moves through the shining green water, or as he floats on his back and lets the water rock him; the back-and-forth movement of rowers, the horseback rider astride his horse; young girls, mothers, and housekeepers, all doing the characteristic things they do; the workers sitting down to their lunchboxes at noon while their wives wait for them; the woman calming a crying child, the farmer's daughter on her land; the young man hoeing a field of corn, the coachman steering a six-horse sleigh through busy streets; two young hearty wrestlers having a friendly grapple in a vacant lot after work, with their coats and hats thrown to the

ground, showing affection and strength in their wrestling, grabbing each other above and below, with their hair falling into their eyes; firemen with their muscles showing through their uniforms, returning from fighting a fire only to attentively listen as the fire-bell rings again; all these different, beautiful ways of holding one's body—with one's head bent down, one's neck curved—and me counting all these different ways of being: I love all of these. I let go of my own identity and freely inhabit each of these people, nursing with the baby, swimming with the swimmers, wrestling with the wrestlers, marching with the firemen. And I stop to listen to their sounds, and count all their different ways of being.

3

I once knew a guy—just a regular farmer, who had five sons. And the sons of his sons will one day have sons, and those sons will have sons, too.

This farmer was amazingly strong, calm, and beautiful. His well-formed head, his pale blonde and white hair and beard, his profound and eloquent black eyes, his wonderful way of being in general—I used to go visit him to enjoy all these parts of him. He was also a wise man. He was six feet tall, older than eighty, and his sons were all huge, clean, healthy, masculine men. His sons and his daughters all loved this old man; everyone who met him loved him, not just because they thought they should, but because they really felt connected to him. He only ever drank water, and his face was flushed with health through his brown skin. He used to love shooting and fishing; he'd go out sailing alone on an excellent boat a boatbuilder had made for him. People who loved him had given him bird-hunting guns, too. When he and his sons and grandsons went out hunting or fishing, anyone would have said he was the most handsome and strongest of them all. You'd just want to be near him: you'd want to sit next to him in the boat so you could touch him.

4

I've come to understand that being with people I like is all I need. It's enough for me to get to relax among my friends in the evenings; to sit among lovely, thoughtful, inquisitive, delighted human bodies; to walk among living people and touch them, or embrace them just for a moment—why is this so wonderful? I don't need anything more than this pleasure: it's as deep as the ocean, so deep I swim in it.

There's something about being close with people and looking at them, touching and smelling them, that makes the human soul very happy. Everything makes the soul happy, but this makes the soul especially happy.

5

Here is the female body. From top to bottom, it breathes out a holy glowing cloud. It's powerfully, irresistibly magnetic. I'm attracted to its magic breath as if I were just a wisp of gas myself: I forget about everything but myself and the woman's body. Every scrap of human thought, effort, and belief—including any thought of an afterlife—gets burnt away by my attraction. Wild, uncontrollable little sprigs and tendrils shoot out of that cloud, and I respond just as uncontrollably. A woman's hair, her breasts, the bending of her legs, her carelessly moving hands, all become vaporous, like my body. With a pulsing rhythm, genitals swollen and aching with pleasure, I overflow in an endless orgasm. Male myself, I feel like night fading into the female dawn that lies moving enthusiastically beneath me, merged with her as her body sweetly holds me.

This is the center of things: women have babies, and so men come from women. Sex is the pool from which life emerges, the mixture of the tiny and the huge, and the connection between the inner and the outer.

Don't be ashamed of your sexuality, women: your bodies' gifts embrace all gifts and give birth to all gifts. Your body is the gateway through which bodies come, and thus the gateway through which souls come.

The female body contains everything there is and balances it all. She is exactly where she should be, and is in equilibrium. She conceals what she contains; she is both a receiver and a doer; she will give birth to girls as well as boys, boys as well as girls.

When I see the shape of my own soul reflected in the natural world around me; when I see, through a fog, a unified Being of unspeakable wholeness, wisdom, and beauty, with its head bent and its arms crossed over its chest—it's a female figure that I envision.

6

But the man's body isn't more or less a soul than the woman's is. He's also exactly where he should be; he also contains everything; he's full of energetic force; he's full of the lively color of our understanding of the universe. Anger suits him, and so do hunger and resistance. Huge, untamed feelings of ultimate delight and misery suit him; pride is a good look for him. A man's complete, rich pride is soothing to see. Wisdom suits him; he likes to know things and tests what he learns against his own instincts. Whatever he investigates, whatever metaphorical seas he sails, he finally measures truth only by his inner knowing: how else *could* he measure truth?

Men's bodies are holy, and women's bodies are holy. It doesn't matter whose body it is, it's still holy. Is it the lowliest of a motley bunch of working men? Is it a confused-looking immigrant just stepping off the boat? Every one of them has a right to be here—or anywhere!—exactly as much as the wealthy, and exactly as much as you, reader. Each person has their own sacred place in the long ceremonial parade.

(Everything is a ceremonial parade: the universe itself is a ceremonial parade proceeding at an even, perfect pace.)

What makes you think you're so smart, that you can call even the lowliest person foolish? Do you think that you have the

right to a particularly pleasant position in the world and that other people don't have the right to a position at all? Do you think that existence emerged, and that the dirt lies on the ground, and that water flows and plants grow, only for you, and not for other people?

7

There's a man standing on the auction block. (You see, before the Civil War, I used to go to the slave market to watch the sales.) I'll help the auctioneer out: that careless guy doesn't know what he's doing.

Gentlemen! Behold this amazing miracle. Whatever you bid, you can never bid enough for this man's astonishing body. The earth went through whole epochs without life to prepare to welcome this man; the cycles of the planets and the seasons went round and round to create him.

In his head, there's the flabbergasting miracle of the brain; in his brain, and in his body beneath his brain, the material that will make generations of heroic descendants.

Look at his arms and legs: whatever color the flesh, they're amazingly wrought, with ingenious musculature and nerves. Those limbs will stand naked here so that you can appreciate them.

This man has beautifully crafted senses, eyes full of energetic life, spirit, willpower; plates of chest muscle, a flexible spine, tight and healthy flesh, well-proportioned limbs—and there are yet more amazing things inside him.

Inside him, there's blood—blood exactly the same as yours, as red and as swift! And inside him, there's a beating heart, full of strong feelings, wishes, hopes, and dreams. Do you think he *doesn't* have those just because he doesn't have access to fancy salons and universities?

And this man isn't just one man. He's the father of sons who will be the fathers of sons. He's the generation point of whole vast and noble countries, the ancestor of an infinity of eternal lives, uncountable numbers of human bodies who will take pleasure in life.

Who knows what amazing people might be among his descendants in the centuries to come? And who do you think you might find out your own ancestors were, if you could look back through history?

8

And here's a woman standing on the auction block. She's also not just one person: she's the fertile mother of daughters who will be mothers, and the mother of sons who will be fathers.

Have you ever loved a woman's body? Have you ever loved a man's body? Can't you see that all bodies are loved, and connected, in just the same way in every time and place?

If anything in the world is holy, it's the human body. And the crowning glory of a man is his unblemished masculinity. And for either a man or a woman, a healthy, strong, muscular body is lovelier than even the prettiest of faces.

Have you ever seen a man who's blemished his own living body? Or a woman who's done the same thing? They don't hide themselves: they *can't* hide themselves, they're marked.

9

Oh, my own body! I can't abandon other bodies like you or any part of you. I believe that all bodies are connected to the triumph or failure of the soul (and, in fact, that the body **is** the soul). I believe that all bodies will triumph or fail just like my poems—and that bodies **are** my poems. My poems are made for every single kind of person, and for all their complex bodies: their heads, necks, hair, ears, and eardrums; their eyes, eyelashes, irises, and eyelids that open and close; every part of their mouths and jaws; their noses, with each nostril and the cartilage in between; their cheeks, temples, forehead, chin, throat, the back and arch of their necks; their buff shoulders, masculine beards, shoulder blades, and prominent chests; every part of their arms, wrists, hands, fingers; their wide chests, chest hair, chest-bones, and their sides; their ribs, bellies, and spines; their strong hips with rounded muscles, their testicles and penises; their muscular thighs, holding up their torsos; all the parts of their legs, feet, and toes; all the ways a person can hold themselves, all the shapes they can be, all the parts of my body, your body, or anyone's body, whether they're a man or a woman; the spongy lungs, the bag of the stomach, the healthy intestines; the wrinkly brain inside the skull; feelings, the valves of the heart and throat, sexuality, motherhood; femaleness, and everything feminine, and men who are born from women's bodies; the uterus, the breasts, the nipples, breast-milk, tears, laughing, crying, loving glances, loving feelings and responses; voices, the ability to speak, language itself, whispers, yells; food and drink, heartbeats, digestion, sweat, sleeping, walking, swimming; the body's graceful balance over the hips, jumping, lying down, hugging, wrapping your arm around someone; the constant movements of the mouth and the eyes; the skin, its tanned color, freckles, hair; the strange fellow-feeling one gets when one touches someone else's naked flesh; the spiraling, flowing motion of the breath as one breathes; the loveliness of the lower half of the body as you look down from the waist; the delicate tissues inside you and me, the skeleton and the bone-marrow; the delicious feeling of being healthy; every part of the body, I declare, is not just part of the body, but part of the soul: the body **is** the soul!

THEMES

THE BODY AS THE SOUL

The speaker of “I Sing the Body Electric” is in

delighted awe of the human body. The sheer fact that the body exists, he says, is a miracle beyond description: the body is a "perfect" phenomenon that he can't even begin to explain. What's more, having a body, in this speaker's eyes, is the same thing as having a *soul*: embodiment is what makes people into distinct, individual beings with their own identity. In other words, bodies are what make people *themselves*—and the speaker believes that there's something inherently miraculous, wonderful, and beautiful about that.

The speaker spends much of the poem delighting in the fact that the human body exists at all. To him, the body is a work of astonishing art, and he praises it piece by piece. The poem ends with a catalog of all the body's intricate parts, from the "head" to the innards, the "thin red jellies within you or within me." To this speaker, the plain old *existence* of something as complex and lovely as the body is a wonder.

The body isn't just amazing because of its beauty or strength, either: it's amazing because it gives every human being their own separate identity. Observing mothers, farm girls, swimmers, and firemen, the speaker relishes the particular qualities their bodies give them: their "vigor," "beauty," and "good-natured" charm. Their bodies, in other words, express their inner selves. These people's bodies speak not just of health and beauty, but also of their characters.

To the speaker, the body thus doesn't just seem like a physical container for people's souls, but like just another way of actually *describing* the soul: the special, indescribable something that makes every individual person who they uniquely are.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 35-44
- Lines 50-51
- Lines 66-67
- Lines 72-74
- Lines 75-83
- Lines 129-162
- Lines 163-164

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN HUMANITY AND THE UNIVERSE

For this speaker, recognizing the miraculousness of the human body also means recognizing that *every* human body is a miracle. By reveling in the wonder of the body, the speaker also revels in a sense of camaraderie and connection with every person in the world—and with the universe itself. Merely by *existing*, the speaker says, people are intimately linked to everything *else* that exists.

Simply having a body reminds people that they're just like everyone else, part of the same amazing phenomenon called life. And since every person has one of these incredible bodies, everyone is connected and related, playing an equal part in the miracle that is existence. Bodies serve as a reminder, the speaker says, that every person "belongs" on earth, no matter how distant or alien a stranger might seem at first. The fact that every human has a body should thus allow every person to see every other person as equally special and important, part of a miraculous shared existence.

The poem also suggests that there's something lovely about the fact that bodies *appear* separate—that people are all distinct individuals. The fact that people have separate bodies is ironically what encourages—and, indeed, *allows*—people to *reach out* to each other. Part of the joy of existence is being "surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh."

By existing in a body, the speaker continues, every single person becomes part of the "procession" (or parade) that is the "universe" itself. If the universe is a "procession," it's one single thing made of many distinct parts, all joining together. In other words, by *existing* separately, people become a part of *existence* collectively. The body thus makes every individual human part of the mystical unity of the universe, connected to everything that is.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 18-32
- Lines 84-94
- Lines 95-117
- Lines 118-128

THE BEAUTY OF SEX

To this poem's speaker, sex and sexuality are ways of understanding one's place in the interwoven tapestry of humanity. Sex has the power to unite people both physically and spiritually—and also connects them to past and future generations through reproduction. For these reasons, the speaker insists, sex should never be seen as shameful: it's a holy and miraculous thing, an experience that connects people to each other and to eternity.

Sexual desire, the speaker says, is "ungovernable" and overwhelming, and sex unites two different bodies in one single overpowering experience, until one person is "lost" in the other. Sex is thus capable of reminding people that they're part of a unified, shared human experience—that having a body and meeting other bodies makes them part of the universe's beautiful "procession," its ordered parade through time.

The speaker also argues that the mortal human body is a vessel of immortality, of endless life, thanks to reproduction. Through sexuality and reproduction, the speaker says, every human

being is linked to both the past and the future: everyone is the child of many ancestors, and may *become* the ancestor of many future generations of children. When, for instance, the speaker describes his visit with an old man who is "the father of five sons," he observes that each of those sons has "in them the fathers of sons, and in them the fathers of sons." Every woman, too, is the "mother of mothers." There's a sense here that both being a child and having children is the way that mortal people come into contact with eternity: reproduction makes people part of a grand, ongoing, and beautiful web of life.

For all these reasons, sexuality isn't something to hide or be ashamed of, but a sacred form of connection between everyone who has ever lived.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 33-34
- Lines 52-74
- Lines 113-117
- Lines 118-120
- Line 143
- Lines 150-152

THE EVILS OF SLAVERY

The speaker believes that there's something inherently amazing and miraculous about the body, and that the shared experience of having a body connects all human beings to each other. This belief, in turn, leads to a powerful condemnation of slavery: because slavery treats Black bodies as lesser than white ones, it's an affront to the sacred dignity that every person shares simply by *having* a body. Seeing Black bodies as mere objects to be sold, the speaker insists, is thus both a delusion and a shameful moral failing.

First drafted in 1855, when slavery was still legal in the United States, the poem makes it clear that slavery is a deep evil. If every human body is equally sacred, the speaker suggests, slavery is in fact absurd: it's based on a false distinction between Black bodies and white bodies, a difference that simply doesn't exist.

In an ironic passage, the speaker volunteers to "run" a slave auction: describing the Black man and woman on the block, he presents them as mindboggling marvels, a culmination of "quintillions of years" of the universe's efforts. The enslaved people, like everyone else, have majestic bodies, "life-lit" and full of "passions"; their bodies, like everyone else's, are part of the universe's eternal "procession," containing future generations and "rich republics." It's an affront to this deep truth, the speaker suggests, to treat these people like objects to be bought and sold. No possible bid can be "high enough" to purchase a miraculous human life.

Slavery, the speaker goes on, is an affront to all humanity, precisely because all of humanity is connected and related. Those who participate in the slave trade thus don't just do deep injury to enslaved people, they "corrupt" their *own* bodies. Failing to see that the human body is a point of connection that links us all, the white enslavers can't understand that abusing one person means abusing *all* people, themselves included. Slavery, the speaker says, is thus a matter for deep and enduring shame.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 95-117
- Between Lines 117-118
- Lines 118-128

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul.

"I Sing the Body Electric" begins with a crackle of energy. As the speaker proclaims, "I sing the body electric," there's a sense of both excitement and mystery: it seems as if this poem will be a "s[o]ng" of praise. But what exactly is the "body electric" it'll be praising?

That line might have felt even more striking when this poem was first written in the 19th century—when people were only just starting to harness electricity:

- Nowadays, electricity has connotations of sparkling, lively, vibrant, and potentially dangerous energy (think of how people will sometimes use the word "electricity" to describe sexual attraction). But for this poem's original audience, electricity might also have felt novel, inventive, and astonishing. Whitman's first readers wouldn't have thought of electricity as a utility bill, but as a just-barely-contained force of nature: more lightning than lightbulb!
- Electricity might also have been seen as a force that could bring things to life. Only a few decades before this poem was written, scientists like Luigi Galvani and Alessandro Volta discovered that they could make dead worms wiggle and dead frogs kick by applying electrical currents to their muscles—discoveries that led many to speculate that electricity might be the key to reviving the dead (and that were a direct inspiration for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*).

If this speaker is about to "sing the body electric," then, he's about to praise the human body as something that practically shoots sparks—something charged up with a mysterious, enlivening, and awe-inspiring force. Life itself, to this speaker, is "electric."

He's been inspired to sing this song by "the armies of those [he] love[s]," who "engirth" (or encircle) him. He, in turn, engirths them: it seems as if he's at once surrounded by and, somehow, surrounding all these beloved people.

There's something magical about this image, and something metaphorical about those "armies." The speaker's loved ones aren't all *literally* soldiers. But they feel to him like a mighty force, ready to fight for a cause. And they're both inside him and outside him. He can "engirth" them with his imagination and his affection, holding them inside himself just as they can literally hold him from the outside.

In other words, it's as if the strength of the "love" the speaker feels for these people fills him up and gives him courage—as if, in singing this song in praise of the body, he's about to set off on an epic quest or fight a battle. Clearly, he feels that there's a cause he needs to stand up for, here.

And the "armies" of his beloveds aren't going to let him get away with ***not*** standing up for that cause! "They will not let [him] off" until he "respond[s] to them": something about the force of their mutual love also means he ***has*** to "sing the body electric." Singing this song will also make the bodies of his loved ones even ***more*** "electric": he must "charge them full with the charge of the soul." Doing so will "discorrupt" them, purify them somehow.

All of this suggests that this song of the "body electric" won't just be a song of delight. It will be a song about something special about the body: the way it's "charge[d]" with the soul, animated with the soul's electrical energy. Defending that belief will be an act of purification, a way to "discorrupt" the speaker's loved ones. And it will, apparently, take a good deal of courage.

In other words: this won't just be a poem about how the body is lively, brilliant, exciting, and soulful. It'll be a poem about what that belief ***means***, and how it should change the way that people live.

LINES 5-8

> *Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves?*
> *And if those who defile the living are as bad as they who defile the dead?*
> *And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?*
> *And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?*

After the dramatic first stanza, the speaker goes on to ask a series of what seem to be rhetorical questions. But even if these questions don't exactly ask for an answer, they don't exactly *provide* answers, either: there's something mysterious about each one of them. First, the speaker asks:

> Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves?

He's phrasing this as if there's absolutely no "doubt[]" that people who "corrupt" their bodies are somehow disguising or hiding themselves. This, the speaker suggests with his rhetorical question, is just a plain and obvious fact. But readers might go on to wonder: what does that actually *mean*? How do people "corrupt" their bodies, and how does that equate to concealment?

His next question at first seems just as mysterious:

> And if those who defile the living are as bad as they who defile the dead?

Here, readers might feel taken aback: wouldn't most people say that harming the living is *worse* than harming the dead? But, on reflection, readers might see the speaker's point—especially considering that this poem was first drafted in 1855, when slavery was still legal in the U.S. In fact, there are plenty of ways in which abusing other living people *is* more societally acceptable than desecrating a grave: ways in which society turns a blind eye to terrible cruelty, or even sanctions it.

Now, the reader might begin to see what the speaker is up to. He's getting at the truth through the back door, startling readers into questioning their own comfortable assumptions. He's interested in showing readers how the world *really* is, revealing unexpected truths.

His next lines do this even more directly:

> And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?
> And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?

These, the closing lines of the first stanza, make a pretty big claim: that the body is just as important as the soul—and, in fact, that the body and the soul are exactly the same thing!

This idea would have flown in the face of the dominant Protestant Christianity of the 19th-century U.S.:

- In that stream of Christian thought—and especially in the U.S., whose earliest Christian colonists were often strict Puritans—the body and soul were seen as separate, with the body playing a decidedly inferior role. The soul and its afterlife were what mattered, and the body's earthly pleasures were mostly just sinful distractions from eternity.
- In claiming that the body ***is*** the soul, the speaker is thus saying something iconoclastic—and also something cryptic. If the body and the soul are the

same thing, what might *either* of those words even mean? What is a soul, if it's the same thing as a body?

In short, the closing lines of the poem's first section raise more questions than they answer, even if they're rhetorical! In the rest of the poem, the speaker won't so much directly *explain* what he means by these questions: he'll *demonstrate* what he means, reveling in the wonder of the human body and the big philosophical conclusions he draws from that wonder.

And, subtly, he's *already* demonstrating his wonder through his poem's sounds. Take a look back at the first line of the poem:

I sing the body electric,

Here, assonance on a long /ee/ means that "body" flows straight into "electric," making them sound as if they're one long word. The sounds here reflect exactly what the speaker is getting at when he describes "the charge of the soul": the body and its "electric" soul truly seem to be the same thing, here.

In this short opening section, the speaker has already established his vibrant first-person voice: he speaks like a prophet, using bold, declarative, end-stopped lines. This will be a poem full of deeply-felt personal conviction.

LINES 9-10

The love of the body of man or woman balks account, the body itself balks account,
That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect.

Having declared that he's about to "sing the body electric," the speaker begins the second section of the poem by claiming that he can do no such thing! He can't even begin to *describe* the wonders of the body: it "balks account," it's impossible to put into words. All he can say about the body, for now, is that it's utterly "perfect."

The speaker's language here suggests that the difficulty of putting the body into words is partly to do with the body's own lively energy. The word "balks" can just mean "refuses," but it's also sometimes used to describe a horse that won't go forward—an animal that won't submit to human will. The body's very moving, breathing, animal aliveness can throw off any description.

The idea that the body is "perfect" and "balks description" also ties into a long tradition of mystical visions. Writers from Dante to Melville have struggled with the same wonderful problem Whitman is struggling with here: some experiences are just too amazing to put into plain old words, and can only be described indirectly, either through metaphor or by admitting that one can't quite describe them! By saying that the body "balks account," the speaker is also saying that he's so consumed by marvel over the body's existence that he doesn't know how to begin to tell readers about it.

Putting his inarticulable wonder right up front, the speaker also invites the reader to see bodies the way he does. Perhaps he's even trying to startle readers out of their complacency: after all, what feels more normal than having a body? Because people live their whole lives in their bodies, they get used to them!

But the speaker is here encouraging readers to step back and think about how strange, miraculous, and beautiful the human body really is. In his eyes, it's even a wonder that people go around in a body every day without realizing how incredible it is to be alive and embodied at all. (This is one of Whitman's favorite themes, in fact.)

His language here also suggests that he has a broad, egalitarian vision of what makes bodies special. Take a look at his parallelism here:

That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect.

The male and female bodies are perfectly balanced here, praised in just the same language. And there's also a sense here that the *combination* of male and female bodies will be important: sexual reproduction, after all, is how we get *more* amazing bodies.

LINES 11-17

The expression of the face balks account,
But the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face,
It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists,
It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees, dress does not hide him,
The strong sweet quality he has strikes through the cotton and broadcloth,
To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more,
You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side.

The speaker has just finished declaring the incommunicable perfection of the human body. But he's not going to leave things at that. In this stanza, he begins to explore the body's wonders, not by trying to explain what makes the body perfect, but merely by describing how the body *is*.

He begins with another moment of parallelism, echoing his earlier words: now it's the "expression of the face" that "balks account." He can't describe expression, but he can examine the ways in which it "appears." In a "well-made man," expression isn't just a matter of the look on a guy's face, it's something he does with his whole body.

In these lines, the speaker tries to get at the way this imagined man's body is, its hard-to-express reality. A lot of what strikes

him seems to be to do with the way the man bends and moves:

> But the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face,
> It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists,
> It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees, dress does not hide him,

In other words, this man's "expression" comes from the whole way he carries himself. His body's movement says something about who he *is*. The "strong sweet quality" of his powerful physicality can cut right through "cotton and broadcloth," right through the clothes that mark him out as a guy in a particular place and time, wearing contemporary fashions and fabrics. There's something *timeless* about this "expression."

And more than that, this kind of bodily "expression" communicates what words can't! After all those lines about how the body "balks account," the speaker here seems to be trying to let the body speak for itself. And it has a lot to say: it can "convey[] as much as the best poem, maybe more." Coming from a poet, that's really saying something.

This passage invites readers to consider how poetry and the body are both forms of "expression." Remember, the speaker set out to "sing the body electric" as a way to "discorrupt" his loved ones and to "charge them full with the charge of the soul." In his eyes, poetry has serious power: it can purify, it can enliven, it can connect people with their very souls.

But poetry does all those things, in this speaker's eyes, by directing people to notice what's really there around them: to pay attention to the reality of the world, which can say more than even the best poem. Just observing the way a "well-made man" moves his body, the speaker seems to suggest, can remind people that existence is miraculous—and delightful.

There's also something tempting and erotic about this "well-made man." The speaker is so struck by his beauty that he wants to hang around to watch him pass, admiring him from the back as well as the front. And he invites readers along for the ride, reaching out in the second person:

> You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side.

Here, the speaker seems to be making a bigger point. Everyone, he suggests, can share in the feeling of being struck by a handsome person's sheer being. Everyone is connected not just because they *have* a body, but because they can *appreciate* bodies.

LINES 18-24

> *The sprawl and fulness of babes, the bosoms and heads of women, the folds of their dress, their style as we pass in the street, the contour of their shape downwards,*
> *The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims through the transparent green-shine, or lies with his face up and rolls silently to and fro in the heave of the water,*
> *The bending forward and backward of rowers in row-boats, the horseman in his saddle,*
> *Girls, mothers, house-keepers, in all their performances,*
> *The group of laborers seated at noon-time with their open dinner-kettles, and their wives waiting,*
> *The female soothing a child, the farmer's daughter in the garden or cow-yard,*
> *The young fellow hoeing corn, the sleigh-driver driving his six horses through the crowd,*

From admiring one specific "well-made man," the speaker turns to a rapturous appreciation of different *kinds* of people. From pudgy babies dozing after nursing to working men sitting down to lunch, all of these figures are active, vivid, and specific—real-life people whom the speaker would have seen around a normal 19th-century American town. But they're also no longer just individuals: they're *types*, categorized by the shapes of their bodies and the things they do with those bodies.

Babies, for instance, have been lying around looking chubby and content as long as there have been babies. People have been sitting down to eat lunch as long as lunch has existed. Women have soothed crying children as long as there have been children; "young fellow[s]" have hoed corn as long as there have been hoes and corn.

These people are thus specific and universal at once. Like the "well-made man" whose "expression" shines out in the previous stanza, they're all distinct, embodied individuals with their own special selfhood. But they're also doing the same things with their bodies that humans have always done, and thus transcend their own time and place.

Thinking about the beauty of individual bodies has already given the speaker a broad, mystical vision of human connection and continuity. These people are all themselves, but they're also *more* than just themselves. They sit at the intersection of the specific and the universal.

But besides linking people across time, the body can also link one living individual to another. That kind of connection feels especially clear in this passage, where the speaker admires a swimmer. Listen to the way he immerses himself in this experience through sound:

> The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims through the transparent green-shine, or lies with his face up and rolls silently to and fro in the heave of the water,

The speaker's steady polyptoton on "swimmer," "swimming," and "swims," and the hushed sibilance that runs all through

these lines, vividly evoke the experience of solitary swimming: the repetitive motions, the soft swish of the water around arms and legs. The speaker's visual imagery is no less bright: the "transparent green-shine" of the water seems to glow.

All in all, it's as if the speaker isn't just absorbed by the beauty of this single swimmer, but as if he has actually *become* this swimmer, feeling the same things that the swimmer feels, basking in the same "green-shine." Taking pleasure in the sight of the swimmer's body, he also shares in the delicious experience that body is having.

In other words, to this speaker, having a body connects people in more ways than one:

- Just by being a person, doing the kinds of things with one's body that people do, people are somehow connected to all the other people who have ever done those things. For instance, a person can at once be an individual swimmer—Fred the swimmer, let's say, alive in 1855, with brown eyes, a pet dog, and one missing tooth—and an avatar of every swimmer who's ever swum.
- But having a body means people can also intensely relate to the bodies of the other people who are right in front of them, sharing in their experience and feeling what they feel. Bodies have the power to create *empathy*.

The movement between connectedness and separateness, shared experience and individual identity, will be a central part of the speaker's developing ideas about how the body and the soul are the same miraculous thing.

LINES 25-30

> *The wrestle of wrestlers, two apprentice-boys, quite grown, lusty, good-natured, native-born, out on the vacant lot at sun-down after work,*
> *The coats and caps thrown down, the embrace of love and resistance,*
> *The upper-hold and under-hold, the hair rumpled over and blinding the eyes;*
> *The march of firemen in their own costumes, the play of masculine muscle through clean-setting trowsers and waist-straps,*
> *The slow return from the fire, the pause when the bell strikes suddenly again, and the listening on the alert,*
> *The natural, perfect, varied attitudes, the bent head, the curv'd neck and the counting;*

As the speaker goes on thinking about the people he sees around him, he pauses to linger a little longer on two particular scenes: young men wrestling, and firemen marching back from a quenched fire.

The speaker gives a lot more detail here than he did in lines 18-24. Where before the speaker looked at any given person for a line at most, now he spends three whole lines watching the hearty young "apprentice-boys" wrestling, and two lines watching the firemen. He observes in detail not just what they're doing and what kinds of people they are, but how their characters strike him and how they look: the wrestlers are "quite grown, lusty, good-natured, native-born," and the firemen's strong bodies show "through clean-setting trowsers and waist-straps."

These lines might take readers back to lines 11-17, where the speaker's eye also "linger[ed]" on the body of a passing "well-made man." There's even an echo of the language of those lines when the firemen's "masculine muscle" shows through their clothes, just as the well-made man's "strong sweet quality [...] strikes through the cotton and broadcloth."

For this speaker, there's clearly something especially captivating and erotic about watching strong male bodies at play and at work. He gets caught up in these sights for a longer time, not just observing them in passing, but stopping to watch and to describe in detail. Asyndeton helps to evoke his fascination: linked together without conjunctions, these lines feel continuous and hypnotic, as if the speaker is utterly entranced by these beautiful men.

And this is yet another way that the body can make people feel connected to each other! In the earlier lines of this stanza, the speaker's descriptions showed how people can be connected by habitual human activities, and by empathy. Now, he seems interested in how people can be connected by *attraction* to each other's bodies, too. Bodily desire also brings people together: it makes people want to pay attention to other bodies, to look lovingly at them, and touch them.

The specific things these men are doing are all about physical connection and community, as well. The wrestlers are caught up in an "embrace of love and resistance," a joyful, friendly, exuberant, and very bodily struggle. And the firemen have just returned from working with their bodies, too, banding together to fight a fire, protecting their community.

As this stanza moves toward its end, then, there's a sense that the speaker has been caught up in shared human experiences in all kinds of different ways: through behavior, through empathy, through community, through desire. Having a body is what allows for all of these different kinds of connection.

At last, the speaker sums up everything he's just described:

> The natural, perfect, varied attitudes, the bent head,
> the curv'd neck and the counting;

Those "natural, perfect, varied attitudes" are all the different "attitudes" of the people he's just seen, all the ways of being he's described. But the "bent head" and the "curv'd neck" feel more mysterious.

There's something reverent about the posture these words describe: the "bent head" and "curv'd neck" might suggest someone lowering their head to pray. But perhaps they also evoke the posture of the poet who sits writing these words—especially in combination with the "counting." Counting is, in a sense, exactly what the speaker has been doing: enumerating all the bodies and souls he sees around him. His body, too, is right in the midst of this scene.

LINES 31-32

> *Such-like I love—I loosen myself, pass freely, am at the mother's breast with the little child,*
> *Swim with the swimmers, wrestle with wrestlers, march in line with the firemen, and pause, listen, count.*

At the end of his long catalogue of all the beautiful people he can see around him, the speaker reminds the reader that he's there, too, a body among all these bodies. Returning to the first person, he says, "Such-like I love": in other words, "I love all of these people I've just mentioned, and all their ways of being."

This line might take readers back to the "armies of those I love" in the first section of the poem. Maybe the speaker's loved ones, the "armies" whom he vowed to "discorrupt," aren't just his families and friends, but every single person in the world! This speaker's loving vision takes in all of humanity.

The long, fluid, hypnotic list of different people above has revealed a whole spectrum of ways the speaker experiences human connection through the body. Now, he introduces that idea even more directly. Loving all these people, he says, means he can "loosen" himself, flowing empathetically into the experience of everyone he sees.

Listen to the way the sounds of his language here evoke that "loosen[ing]":

> Such-like I love—I loosen myself, pass freely, am at the mother's breast with the little child,
> Swim with the swimmers, wrestle with wrestlers, march in line with the firemen, and pause, listen, count.

Long alliterative and consonant /l/ sounds weave all through these lines, evoking the very connection the speaker describes. And the polyptoton of "swim with the swimmers, wrestle with the wrestlers" stresses how immersed the speaker feels in the experiences of the people he watches.

But he's also still a separate person: he can "pause, listen, count," observing at the same time that he experiences. Again, there's a beautiful, paradoxical tension here between individual and collective experience: being a separate soul, a "listen[er]" and "count[er]," is precisely what allows the speaker to imaginatively inhabit *other* people, and to be among them.

These lines bring the second section of the poem to a close. By now, the reader has a sense of how the poem will be shaped: each new section will look at the speaker's ideas about the body and soul from a slightly different angle. It's as if the speaker is turning around a single jewel to look at all its facets.

LINES 33-40

> *I knew a man, a common farmer, the father of five sons,*
> *And in them the fathers of sons, and in them the fathers of sons.*
> *This man was of wonderful vigor, calmness, beauty of person,*
> *The shape of his head, the pale yellow and white of his hair and beard, the immeasurable meaning of his black eyes, the richness and breadth of his manners,*
> *These I used to go and visit him to see, he was wise also,*
> *He was six feet tall, he was over eighty years old, his sons were massive, clean, bearded, tan-faced, handsome,*
> *They and his daughters loved him, all who saw him loved him,*
> *They did not love him by allowance, they loved him with personal love,*

The speaker begins the third section of his poem by thinking of yet another person: this time not some lovely stranger, but a man he knew personally, a farmer with five sons.

But even as he introduces this "common farmer," the speaker casts him in a grand and mystical light. He's an ordinary guy, sure, but he's also the paterfamilias of whole generations. Each of his five sons will have sons, and those sons will be "the fathers of sons," and *those* sons will be "the fathers of sons." In other words, when the speaker looks at this farmer, he sees not just a man, but an unfolding, infinite, fractal pattern of humanity.

Take a look at the way his language reflects that sense of eternity:

> I knew a man, a common farmer, the father of five sons,
> And in them the fathers of sons, and in them the fathers of sons.

The echoing diacope and parallelism here evoke the speaker's feeling that, in thinking of this one old farmer, he can also see far into the future, looking down a continuous, branching family tree.

These lines thus introduce yet *another* way that the body connects people: through reproduction. Having children (and being someone's child) means that people can feel linked to the generations of the future and the past, not just the people around them.

The speaker closes these two initial lines off with a firm end-stop, which comes as a surprise. The first line might have made readers expect that they were about to hear a story about the speaker's friend—but then the second line shoots them off into the infinite, and leaves them hanging there, full stop!

But after letting that first grand idea sink in for a moment, the speaker returns to the story of the "common farmer," an old man the speaker remembers with tremendous love. Yet again, that love seems to have something to do with all that's wonderful and inexpressible about the *body*:

> This man was of wonderful vigor, calmness, beauty of person,
> The shape of his head, the pale yellow and white of his hair and beard, the immeasurable meaning of his black eyes, the richness and breadth of his manners,
> These I used to go and visit him to see, he was wise also,

Once again, there's a sense that the old man's body has something to say about who he is—something that won't quite fit into words:

- The speaker tells readers that "the shape of his head" was worth a visit on its own, but not what that shape was *like*, exactly—not what was so great about it. The simple fact that the farmer's head was the way it *was* is what compels the speaker.
- Something similar is going on with the "immeasurable meaning of his black eyes": the old man's eyes are full of "expression," full of the sense of his character, in a way that can't simply be quantified or explained.

After all this beautiful bodily expression, the feeling that the old man "was wise also" gets thrown in almost as an afterthought! All the old man's wisdom seems to be expressed in his simple being.

LINES 38-44

> *He was six feet tall, he was over eighty years old, his sons were massive, clean, bearded, tan-faced, handsome,*
> *They and his daughters loved him, all who saw him loved him,*
> *They did not love him by allowance, they loved him with personal love,*
> *He drank water only, the blood show'd like scarlet through the clear-brown skin of his face,*
> *He was a frequent gunner and fisher, he sail'd his boat himself, he had a fine one presented to him by a ship-joiner, he had fowling-pieces presented to him by men that loved him,*
> *When he went with his five sons and many grand-sons to hunt or fish, you would pick him out as the most beautiful and vigorous of the gang,*
> *You would wish long and long to be with him, you would wish to sit by him in the boat that you and he might touch each other.*

Continuing his reminiscences of the beautiful old farmer, the speaker also remembers him as a figure full of the same "vigor" that he singled out in the strong, handsome men of section 2. Even at the age of 80, the old man is "six feet tall" and strapping, and all his sons are similarly huge and "handsome." The speaker's admiration here seems to combine his sense of pleasure in healthy male bodies with his delight in people being fully and "immeasurabl[y]" themselves.

And in fact, this old man seems to unite *all* the different kinds of bodily wonder the speaker examined in section 2. Like the "wrestlers" and "swimmers," he's an active man, who goes out shooting, fishing, and sailing. Like the "firemen" and "mother[s]," he's deeply connected to other people, part of a loving family and a community. And like the "well-made man," he's physically desirable: everyone who knows him "wish[es] long and long to be with him," to be close to him, to sit next to him.

In short, this old man expresses everything about the body that the speaker finds moving, beautiful, and fascinating. He's a person who's experiencing bodily life to its fullest. And if the body is, as the speaker argues, the same thing as the soul, then this old man's soul—that quality that makes him himself—is rich and complete.

There's something deeply attractive about this kind of embodiment, the speaker suggests. Just because the old man *is* the way he *is*, his sons, his daughters, and "all who [see] him" love him intensely. And they don't just love him "by allowance," because love is what you're meant to feel for your dad or for nice old guys. They love him "with personal love," feeling genuinely connected to him.

In this speaker's eyes, inspiring this kind of love is a real achievement. Perhaps this is what he means when he says he wants to charge his loved ones "full with the charge of the soul" in section 1: he wants *every* person's body to fully, completely, and beautifully express who that person is.

The sense that the old man's body expresses his full self comes through in an odd simile:

> He drank water only, the blood show'd like scarlet through the clear-brown skin of his face,

The idea of blood showing "like scarlet" through the man's skin might take readers back to the passages in sections 1 and 2 in which the "strong sweet quality" of men's bodies "strikes" right through their clothes. As the old man's blood, intensely red, shows vividly in his face, it's as if something *inside* him shows in his *outsides*: his body communicates his "vigor," his vitality, and his very identity.

The speaker lets his description of this wonderful old man speak for itself—just as the old man's body speaks for itself. The stanza ends with the speaker's simple longing to be near the old man, appreciating his presence.

That sense of presence will be central to the next section of the

poem.

LINES 45-51

I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough,
To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,
To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?
I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.
There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well,
All things please the soul, but these please the soul well.

The fourth section of this poem is a quiet hymn to the joy of being around other people. Perhaps inspired by his thoughts of how wonderful it was to be with the old farmer, the speaker sings the praises of good company. All he needs in the world, he says, is the simple delight of being among "those I like."

Listen to the way that anaphora and parallelism shape the first lines of this section:

> I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough,
> To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,
> To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,
> To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?

These similarly-built lines make it sound as if the speaker is singing a song, or praying. There might even be an echo of a seder here: in a traditional Passover song that enumerates the miracles that freed the Jewish people from slavery, each line ends with the word "dayenu" (meaning, roughly, "that would have been enough").

In other words, every single one of the ways of being with people the speaker mentions here feels so fulfilling, so miraculous, that it's "enough" for him.

His imagery makes his gratitude and wonder feel even clearer. When, for instance, he imagines "rest[ing] my arm ever so lightly" around his friends' necks one by one, the reader gets a tangible sense of this gentle, affectionate embrace. The speaker is just imagining fond little hugs, little "moment[s]" of human contact. But that simple contact is all he needs.

And again, the speaker seems to have a strong sense that the pleasure of being around friends is deeply rooted in the body:

> I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.

In this powerful simile, the simple joy of human contact becomes a "sea" of delight in which the speaker's whole body is immersed. (Perhaps this will take readers back to his awestruck vision of the swimmer in the "green-shine" in line 19.) This feeling carries the speaker right up to the edge of what he can express. Take a look at how he uses aporia in line 48:

> To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?

This concluding question falls where the words "is enough" have landed in all the lines before it. Perhaps that encourages the reader to chime in, supplying the answer: "This is enough!" And perhaps it also suggests that there's something so wonderful about being among friends that it goes beyond language.

LINES 50-51

There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well,
All things please the soul, but these please the soul well.

In the closing lines of section 4, the speaker reflects that there is "something in staying close to men and women [...] that pleases the soul well." Whatever that "something" is, the speaker isn't about to try to describe it directly. It's as "immeasurable" as the "meaning" in the old farmer's eyes; like the body itself, it "balks account."

Once more, the speaker insists that to have a body, and to be around other bodies, is a miracle: a matter of profound and beautiful mystery. By juxtaposing the everyday pleasure of being around friends with "sea[s]" of "delight" and the deep pleasures of the "soul" itself, the speaker reminds readers that the things people take for granted are the origins of life's greatest joys.

The stanza closes with a cryptic line:

> All things please the soul, but these please the soul well.

This idea might at first strike readers as curiously broad: *Really?* "All things please the soul"? But in saying these words, the speaker takes a god's-eye view of the world, as he did back when he imagined generations unfolding from the old farmer in lines 33-34. Perhaps to the soul that sees things on a cosmic scale, "all things" *are* "pleas[ing]," part of a huge and beautiful dance.

And in this speaker's eyes, being around the solid, fleshly, physical "contact and odor" of other living, breathing, human bodies is the most beautiful thing of all. His parallelism here—"All things please the soul, but these please the soul well"—marks out the delight of the body as a special category of

pleasure.

LINES 52-58

This is the female form,
A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction,
I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than a helpless vapor, all falls aside but myself and it,
Books, art, religion, time, the visible and solid earth, and what was expected of heaven or fear'd of hell, are now consumed,
Mad filaments, ungovernable shoots play out of it, the response likewise ungovernable,
Hair, bosom, hips, bend of legs, negligent falling hands all diffused, mine too diffused,

Over the course of the past four sections, the speaker has been inching closer and closer to the bodies he describes. First, he's looking at bodies from afar; then he's remembering one body in particular, the old farmer's; then he's imagining being among a whole crowd of bodies, "lightly" embracing them all in turn. Now, in section 5, that embrace is about to get a lot more intimate.

In this section, the speaker has an intense, erotic experience, not with one woman in particular, but with the very idea of femininity. "This," he declares, "is the female form": the archetypal woman's body.

This "form" has an intense and sacred power. It "exhales" a "divine nimbus," a glowing cloud or halo that seems to turn the speaker into a cloud himself, a "helpless vapor" irresistibly drawn toward the female body. Under its spell, nothing that once mattered to the speaker is relevant anymore: all the things people usually care about or worry about, from "art" to the afterlife itself, are "consumed" by this form's incredible power.

In other words: as the speaker confronts "the female form," he's both devoured and dissolved by desire. He feels as if his body is completely out of his own power, evaporating.

And the "female form" itself seems to sprout like a wild vine:

> Mad filaments, ungovernable shoots play out of it,
> the response likewise ungovernable,

This metaphor suggests that something as "ungovernable" (or uncontrollable), organic, and instinctive as the growth of plants is happening between the speaker and the female body here.

All through the poem's earlier stanzas, the speaker has explored a paradox of the human body: having a body makes you a separate, distinct person, but it also allows you to feel closely connected to other people, empathizing with them or reaching out to touch them. Now, a new kind of union is happening. The speaker feels that his body and this goddess-like female body are becoming "diffused," dissolving into each other through the sheer strength of sexual attraction. This kind of dissolving, he suggests, is a force so powerful it can sweep everything else away.

Where the section about the old farmer suggested that people are linked to each other through reproduction, this section is interested in the way that sex itself can draw people together, making them feel like they share a single, ecstatic body.

But the speaker also isn't talking about sex with a particular lover. He's imagining the "female form" itself, the essence of womanhood. This feels like a sharp contrast with the erotic specificity of the "well-made man," the lovely swimmer, the lusty wrestlers, and the handsome old farmer. Where before the speaker was captivated by the particular bodies of individual men, here he's interested in the Idea of Woman. This section of the poem will explore sex, not as an everyday bodily experience, but as a universal and cosmic kind of connection.

LINES 59-63

Ebb stung by the flow and flow stung by the ebb, love-flesh swelling and deliciously aching,
Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous, quivering jelly of love, white-blow and delirious juice,
Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly into the prostrate dawn,
Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-flesh'd day.

As the fascinated speaker and the "female form" come together, the speaker gets lost in an intense passage of imagery, describing sex in terms that are both cosmic and explicit.

On the one hand, the speaker imagines sex as a natural force, like the tides, rhythmically "ebb[ing]" and "flow[ing]." On the other, he unabashedly describes "love-flesh swelling" and "white-blow and delirious juice"—images of genitals and ejaculation so frank that they embarrassed Whitman's first readers!

The point, to this speaker, is that the earthy, physical realities of sex aren't any different from the grand, mystical connection that sex creates between lovers. To him, orgasm feels "limitless," with the power to take him past the boundaries of his usual self and merge him with that "diffused" female body.

That sense of mystical unity coming about through sex gets even clearer in the speaker's long metaphor:

> Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly into the prostrate dawn,
> Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
> Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-flesh'd day.

Here, the speaker imagines himself as the "bridegroom night"

uniting with the "willing and yielding day," a metaphor that suggests he and his lover have become huge, godlike forces as they have sex. They're the Day and Night themselves. But this metaphor also hints that they're deeply connected: the night *isn't* the day, but the night *becomes* the day—and even gets "lost" in it.

The speaker's lavish asyndeton in this passage makes that sense of connection even clearer. All through the poem, the speaker has used asyndeton to suggest an overwhelming accumulation of impressions and sensations. Here, the lack of conjunctions also evokes how seamlessly the male and female bodies slide together, becoming one joyful creature.

Sex, in other words, in all its fleshy, physical reality, has the power to do something magical: to make two distinct people feel as if they're sharing one body. This is yet another way in which having a separate body (and thus a separate soul) actually leads to a deep connection between people.

LINES 64-67

This the nucleus—after the child is born of woman, man is born of woman,
This the bath of birth, this the merge of small and large, and the outlet again.
Be not ashamed women, your privilege encloses the rest, and is the exit of the rest,
You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul.

Sex, the speaker rejoices, can make two bodies feel like one body. In these stanzas, he goes further: sex is also what makes women's bodies into "the gates of the soul," the place through which even more joyful, interconnected human bodies can enter the world.

Sex, to this speaker, is "the nucleus," the center of all existence, the place where people are most deeply linked. In parallel language that echoes the endless generations of "fathers of sons" back in section 3, he here makes the point that:

> [...] after the child **is born of woman**, man **is born of woman**.

And that's what makes the "female form" in particular so miraculous and special. It's the "bath of birth," the origin of all new lives, male and female.

Now, the speaker seems to return to ideas from the very beginning of the poem, when he proclaimed that he would "discorrupt" his loved ones (and judging by section 2, it sure seems like his loved ones include everyone in the world!). Reaching out in a direct apostrophe, he says:

> **Be not ashamed women**, **your** privilege encloses the rest, and is the exit of the rest,
> **You** are the gates of the body, and **you** are the gates of the soul.

Here, the speaker is addressing one of the ways in which the body might become "corrupt[ed]": through shame. And in speaking to women in particular, he's addressing a social problem that's as real in the 21st century as it was in the 19th: the idea that women's bodies are somehow unclean or "wrong," and that women should be held to different sexual standards than men, preserving their "purity" or being shamed for promiscuity.

To Whitman's contemporaries, these lines might have felt especially loaded coming right after the speaker's frank depictions of sex and orgasm. He hasn't merely been talking about how it's cool that women can have babies (though that's certainly a central idea here, too). He's been talking about sex for the sake of pleasure, not just reproduction. And women, he declares, shouldn't be any more "ashamed" of sexuality than they are of their reproductive powers. Women's sexuality is exactly as sacred as men's; there's nothing shameful about it, no matter what the wider world might want women to believe.

Perhaps this also sheds some light on that cryptic question from back in section 1: "Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves?" Maybe one form of "corruption" is shame—and maybe what shame "conceal[s]" is the rich connectedness of the sexual soul.

LINES 68-74

The female contains all qualities and tempers them,
She is in her place and moves with perfect balance,
She is all things duly veil'd, she is both passive and active,
She is to conceive daughters as well as sons, and sons as well as daughters.
As I see my soul reflected in Nature,
As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible completeness, sanity, beauty,
See the bent head and arms folded over the breast, the Female I see.

The speaker ends section 5 with a reflection on the idea, not just of the "female form" and its sexual power, but of how that relates to a broader and more mystical idea of *femininity*.

The speaker seems to be building on the idea that the "female form" produces both male and female children, moving from that notion into the idea that the idea of the "female" thus contains a little bit of *everything*, every aspect of life. And as the even chiasmus on "**daughters** as well as **sons**, and **sons** as well as **daughters**" suggests, the "female" keeps everything in perfect equilibrium. The "female," in his eyes—that is, not one woman, but the personified Idea of Womanhood—is, therefore, a spirit of balance, totality, and completeness: an image of natural harmony.

Take a look at the way the speaker uses anaphora here:

> She is in her place and moves with perfect balance,
> She is all things duly veil'd, she is both passive and active,
> She is to conceive daughters as well as sons, and sons as well as daughters.

That repeated "She is" once again makes the speaker sound like a prophet, declaring great truths. But it also emphasizes the word "is," stressing the idea of reality and wholeness: like the wonderful old farmer in section 3, the "female" has her own complete and lovely identity.

Because the "female" has the power to contain "all things" and to "temper" them, holding them together in balance, she's also an image of "Nature" itself. The speaker ends this stanza with a vision of nature personified as "One with inexpressible completeness, sanity, beauty"—a calm, gentle, and powerful "Female."

But it's not just "Nature" he's seeing here: it's his "soul reflected in Nature." In other words, there's something feminine about the *soul*, too—whether it belongs to a man or a woman.

The speaker thus ties many of his biggest ideas into an elaborate bow in these lines:

- Because women's bodies create both men and women, femininity is an image of natural completeness and balance, holding different things together.
- Because the embodied soul can connect and even merge with other souls—through love, empathy, sex, reproduction—the soul is *also* feminine this way, able to contain a little bit of everything and everyone.
- And because "Nature" *also* contains all these different souls, it's *also* feminine: it's like a big shared female over-soul that everyone participates in.

Exploring the "Female," the speaker thus experiences his deepest sense of universal human connection yet.

LINES 75-83

> *The male is not less the soul nor more, he too is in his place,*
> *He too is all qualities, he is action and power,*
> *The flush of the known universe is in him,*
> *Scorn becomes him well, and appetite and defiance become him well,*
> *The wildest largest passions, bliss that is utmost, sorrow that is utmost become him well, pride is for him,*
> *The full-spread pride of man is calming and excellent to the soul,*
> *Knowledge becomes him, he likes it always, he brings every thing to the test of himself,*
> *Whatever the survey, whatever the sea and the sail he strikes soundings at last only here,*
> *(Where else does he strike soundings except here?)*

Having concluded his examination of the balanced, powerful "female form" with a mystical flourish, the speaker now turns to the "male." The male body and maleness, he says, are exactly as soulful as the female, also containing "all qualities." But the way maleness *expresses* those qualities is different.

Everything the speaker ascribes to the "male" in this stanza is an *action* or *attitude*: maleness is full of "passions," "pride," "appetite," and "knowledge." In other words, in this speaker's eyes, the male aspect of the soul is to do with "action and power," doing, feeling, and knowing.

It's also to do with a sense of independent selfhood. Take a look at the metaphor the speaker uses here:

> Knowledge becomes him, he likes it always, he brings every thing to the test of himself,
> Whatever the survey, whatever the sea and the sail he strikes soundings at last only here,
> (Where else does he strike soundings except here?)

In these lines, the speaker uses the metaphor of a wandering sailor "strik[ing] soundings" (or measuring the depth of the water) to suggest that maleness is about self-reliance. Whatever the male is doing, he finds real truth in his independent inner knowing: he measures whatever he learns against "the test of himself," reaching into his own depths.

This idea of independence and self-knowledge was a big deal among the 19th-century Transcendentalists whom Whitman hung out with. (See his buddy Emerson's essay on "Self-Reliance" for one famous example.) To these thinkers, broad, shared understandings of the world could only go so far: the ultimate test of truth was each individual person's inner knowing, born of their sense of selfhood.

The "male" aspect of the soul, then, seems to be the part of the soul that makes it *separate* and *distinct*, that makes it a *self*. This idea might take readers back to the old farmer in section 3, whose selfhood was so complete and wonderful. That farmer had a strong and independent identity—and that was what made him so great! His selfhood shone in his body like the blood glowing in his cheeks.

In examining the "female," the speaker celebrated ideas of merging, balance, and unity—the mystical beauty of the soul's connection to the whole world. In examining the "male," the speaker looks at the *other* side of being a person and having a soul: being independent and unique. In other words, the "male" and "female" become an extended metaphor for the paradoxical qualities of the human soul. In this speaker's eyes, having a body (and thus a soul) means that people are at once unique/distinct, and unified/connected.

The speaker isn't making a reductive point about men and

women here, trying to say that men are all one way and women are all another way. Instead, he's drawing on ancient images of "maleness" and "femaleness" as two sides of a coin: distinct qualities that form one inseparable and fruitful whole. Remember, he sees his own soul as both "female" and "male" in these ways.

LINES 84-90

The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred,
No matter who it is, it is sacred—is it the meanest one in the laborers' gang?
Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants just landed on the wharf?
Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off, just as much as you,
Each has his or her place in the procession.
(All is a procession,
The universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion.)

By this point in the poem, the speaker has explored the glories of the body, and the way the "female" and "male" express the paradoxical connectedness and uniqueness of the human soul. Now, he's prepared to make a broader point. Since all bodies are sacred, he says in these stanzas, every single living person is *also* sacred. And here, the thrust of the poem starts to sound not just mystical, but political.

Take a look at the way the speaker uses aporia and apostrophe in this passage:

> No matter who it is, it is sacred—is it the meanest one in the laborers' gang?
> Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants just landed on the wharf?
> Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off, just as much as you,

Reaching out directly to the reader, the speaker asks some pretty pointed questions. Look around you, he suggests, for the people whom society thinks of as the least important, the least worthy: the lowliest of workers, the most dazed and helpless of recent immigrants. Those people—the people society is likeliest to write off—"belong[] here" in this world, no less than "you" do.

Phrasing things this way, the speaker makes it pretty clear that he has a sense of who his readers might be—and that they're more likely to be among the "well-off" than the "laborers' gang"! People who have the leisure and education to sit around reading poetry, he hints, might also be people who are inclined to see themselves as better and worthier than others.

These lines bring the poem firmly down to earth. The mystical connectedness and beauty of human bodies, the speaker insists, aren't just nice ideas to dreamily toy with. These ideas have real-world consequences and make real-world demands: *If the body is the soul, and the soul is sacred, then "you"—yes, "you"!—need to act accordingly, changing the way you see (and treat) other people.*

There's an echo here of the balance between the cosmic and the fleshy in section 5, where the speaker describes sex both as a magical moment of union and a matter of "quivering jell[ies]" and "love-flesh." The everyday physical world and the spiritual world aren't "lower" and "higher" spheres, he insists: they're exactly the same thing. He makes that point even clearer when he closes this section with one of the poem's most powerful metaphors:

> Each has his or her place in the procession.
> (All is a procession,
> The universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion.)

Reading the "universe" itself as a "procession" (a grand, ceremonial parade), the speaker imagines everything that exists as a single entity made up of many individuals.

There's an echo here of his ideas about "male" individuality and "female" connectedness:

- Every single body/soul has a "masculine" and a "feminine" side—an *individual* identity and an intimate *connection* with everything else.
- If that's true, the "procession" of the universe seems to be one big body/soul itself! A "procession" is both one big thing, and a zillion different connected and collaborative parts, at exactly the same time.
- In other words: the body is an image of the universe, and the universe is an image of the body.

Every ordinary human body thus contains the universe and is contained by the universe: a mutual "engirth[ing]" just like the speaker described back in the poem's earliest lines.

Every body, in the speaker's eyes, is a necessary part of the universe's "measured and perfect motion," a sacred piece of the onward flow of existence. To see any person as "lesser" is thus to utterly misunderstand the nature of reality.

LINES 91-94

Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest ignorant?
Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has no right to a sight?
Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffuse float, and the soil is on the surface, and water runs and vegetation sprouts,
For you only, and not for him and her?

The speaker closes this section of the poem with prophetic fury, asking an intense series of rhetorical questions directly to the

reader. The anaphora that opens these apostrophes feels overwhelming: that repeated "Do you" makes it feel as if the speaker is preaching a fiery sermon directly at his readers, warning them of the folly of seeing themselves as better than (or separate from!) anyone else:

> Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest ignorant?
> Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has no right to a sight?
> Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffuse float [...]

But perhaps there's also a sense here that the speaker is hectoring *himself*, too. After all, if all humanity is connected, then all humanity also shares flaws. And if the speaker is taking this time to remind all of his readers that they have no "right" to feel they deserve better than anyone else in the world, he must feel that this is a pretty common human failing!

His emphasis on "a good sight" here makes that point particularly clear. "Sight" is one of the oldest metaphors for "understanding," and this whole poem has been about opening readers' eyes to a different kind of perception: a vision of the human body that reveals its deep spiritual power. The ideas the speaker is trying to communicate, he insists, are also for everyone, not just clever folks who read poetry.

LINES 95-103

> *A man's body at auction,*
> *(For before the war I often go to the slave-mart and watch the sale,)*
> *I help the auctioneer, the sloven does not half know his business.*
> *Gentlemen look on this wonder,*
> *Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it,*
> *For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or plant,*
> *For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily roll'd.*
> *In this head the all-baffling brain,*
> *In it and below it the makings of heroes.*

The speaker has drawn connections between the universal and the everyday, the individual and the communal, the personal and the political. Now, he digs deeper into the politics of his specific time and place—and into one of history's worst atrocities. In this section of the poem, he'll visit a slave auction.

This version of the poem was published in 1867, only two years after the U.S. ratified the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery. Here, the speaker seems to be looking back to the time before the 13th Amendment, a time "before" the American Civil War.

Back then, the speaker says, he used to go and watch slave auctions. (And indeed, Whitman, a staunch abolitionist, *did* watch such auctions, with horror.) But in the world of the poem, he time-travels, visiting the "slave-mart" in the present tense. There, in a voice dripping with irony, he says he'll "help the auctioneer": that careless "sloven" has no idea what he's doing.

In another dramatic apostrophe, the speaker turns to an imagined crowd of white bidders and begins to describe the enslaved Black man standing on the block. But he doesn't describe him as a piece of meat, an object to be bought and sold: he describes him as an out-and-out miracle.

Here, the speaker takes a literal stand for his beliefs. If any human body is sacred, then *every* human body is sacred—and the very idea of slavery, which draws a distinction between Black and white bodies, is thus inherently absurd. More than that, the speaker argues, it's a crime against all humanity: injure one person in the interconnected web of being, and you injure everyone.

Listen to the speaker's characteristic anaphora here:

> For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or plant,
> For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily roll'd.
> In this head the all-baffling brain,
> In it and below it the makings of heroes.

These rumbling repetitions again give the speaker the tone of a prophet, a fearsome figure lecturing a cowering crowd.

Notice, here, that the speaker is turning some of the characteristic language of slavery against itself. Referring to the Black man's body as an "it" rather than a "he," the speaker ironically objectifies him. But this is an *intentional* irony. Rather than suggesting that the man's body is an object to be sold, the speaker describes it instead as an object of *wonder:* the Black man's miraculous body is an avatar for *every* miraculous human body, and that's exactly the point.

The speaker begins this passage by imagining the Black man's body as a work of Nature's art: the whole "globe" labored for "quintillions of years" to bring him here. He's the culmination of an astonishing process.

And he himself *contains* the astonishing, too. He has a brain so miraculous it defies description. That punchy alliterative /b/ in "all-baffling brain" suggests the speaker feels physically knocked back by his awe of this mighty organ.

What's more, that brain—and the body "below it"—contain "the makings of heroes." Here, the speaker draws on ideas he's explored before: that part of what's amazing and miraculous about the body is its ability to make *more* bodies. Now, he imagines not just that whole generations will descend from this man, but that they'll be "heroes"—mighty figures.

In other words, this man is a sort of icon of humanity, an

outstanding, powerful figure. But the same things the speaker says about him could be said of *any* human body. The speaker is again stressing human connection here: this man's body, he insists, is a miracle—just like the bodies of the people who inhumanly claim they have a right to own him.

LINES 104-112

> *Examine these limbs, red, black, or white, they are cunning in tendon and nerve,*
> *They shall be stript that you may see them.*
> *Exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition,*
> *Flakes of breast-muscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby, good-sized arms and legs,*
> *And wonders within there yet.*
> *Within there runs blood,*
> *The same old blood! the same red-running blood!*
> *There swells and jets a heart, there all passions, desires, reachings, aspirations,*
> *(Do you think they are not there because they are not express'd in parlors and lecture-rooms?)*

The speaker continues to ironically appropriate the language of slavery here, displaying the Black man on the block not as an object to be bought, but as a representative for the beauty and universality of the human body.

Here, he imagines that the man will be "stript," displayed naked. This was something that literally happened at slave auctions: enslaved people were forced to stand naked before the crowd so the bidders could examine their bodies. But here, the speaker uses nakedness as a metaphor for revelation. He'll invite the white onlookers not just to stare at this man's flesh, but to imagine their way right inside his body—and see that it's the same as their own.

The speaker first invites the watchers to admire the man from the outside, noticing his well-built body, with its "good-sized arms and legs" and its "flesh not flabby" (lines that might take readers back to the "well-made man" of section 2). But he also encourages the watchers to look past the outside and consider the workings of the man's "limbs," which are "cunning in tendon and nerve," ingeniously constructed. The man is indeed "stript" here: the speaker is looking not just past clothes, but past "red, black, or white" skin to the workings beneath.

And if the watchers look even deeper, the speaker goes on, they'll see "the same red-running blood" that pumps through their own veins. He emphasizes that point through strong diacope and anaphora:

> Within there runs blood,
> The same old blood! the same red-running blood!

That blood is always "the same," person to person—and so are the things it represents. The "heart" that pumps that blood is full of "passions, desires, reachings, aspirations"—all the same human feelings that the watchers share.

Now the speaker recalls lines from the end of section 6, when he thundered at readers like a prophet, asking them a series of rhetorical questions:

> (Do you think they are not there because they are not express'd in parlors and lecture-rooms?)

There's a sense here that the "you" the speaker is addressing in this apostrophe isn't just the imagined audience at the auction, but the reader! Just as he did in lines 84-88, the speaker assumes that his 19th-century readers are likely to be literate white people with a relatively comfortable position in society. And again, the speaker wants to rattle these readers' complacency. Aspiration, intellect, feeling, and selfhood, he insists, aren't the purview of the "well-off" in their comfortable "parlors" and prestigious "lecture-rooms." These are all just part of being human.

LINES 113-117, BETWEEN LINES 117-118, LINES 118-120

> *This is not only one man, this the father of those who shall be fathers in their turns,*
> *In him the start of populous states and rich republics,*
> *Of him countless immortal lives with countless embodiments and enjoyments.*
> *How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his offspring through the centuries?*
> *(Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you could trace back through the centuries?)*
> *8*
> *A woman's body at auction,*
> *She too is not only herself, she is the teeming mother of mothers,*
> *She is the bearer of them that shall grow and be mates to the mothers.*

The speaker concludes his ironic "auction" by reaching out into generations to come, imagining the descendants of the enslaved man he's been describing—and, in the beginning of the next section of the poem, the descendants of an enslaved woman, as well.

There's an obvious echo here of section 3, where the speaker imagined the infinite generations of "fathers of sons" branching out from the old farmer. But the speaker takes things one step further here, describing not just the enslaved man's children, but the *societies* those children might build. This man's descendants, the speaker imagines, might found "populous states and rich republics."

This new idea reminds readers of yet *another* way all humanity is connected: through civilization and culture. And by pointing out that the children of an enslaved Black man in particular might create "rich republics," the speaker is also asking his

American readers to think about the "rich republic" they *currently* live in: one that has systematically abused Black people.

Here, the speaker turns to the listeners with another pointed apostrophe:

> How do **you** know who shall come from the offspring of his offspring through the centuries?
> (Who might **you** find **you** have come from **yourself**, if **you** could trace back through the centuries?)

Once again, he's inviting his readers to question their sense of their own specialness, status, and difference. Seeing this man only in the light of his enslavement, he insists, is absurd in more than one way. Not only is this man's very life a miracle in just the same way as every other life, his current "lowly" social status says nothing about who he is or what he might go on to do. The white people in the audience, currently sitting pretty, have no reason to think that *they* aren't the descendants of people who were once considered just as "degraded" as the enslaved.

Any idea of one kind of person being inherently better or more valuable than another, then, isn't just cruel: it's absurd. And a "republic" that upholds such ideas is a republic built on a lie.

The speaker underlines all these ideas with the brief passage at the beginning of section 8 in which he imagines an enslaved woman being auctioned. "She too," he says, "is not only herself." He's referring specifically to the idea that women's bodies contain future generations. But he's also making a broader point: *no one* is "only [his or] herself." Everyone is deeply connected.

The speaker's examination of slavery thus roots his cosmic ideas about human interconnection, not just in bodily pleasure, but in politics and society. If one accepts the idea that the body is a sacred "expression" of the soul, the speaker argues, one must struggle against any system that *denies* that truth.

LINES 121-128

> *Have you ever loved the body of a woman?*
> *Have you ever loved the body of a man?*
> *Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth?*
> *If any thing is sacred the human body is sacred,*
> *And the glory and sweet of a man is the token of manhood untainted,*
> *And in man or woman a clean, strong, firm-fibred body, is more beautiful than the most beautiful face.*
> *Have you seen the fool that corrupted his own live body? or the fool that corrupted her own live body?*
> *For they do not conceal themselves, and cannot conceal themselves.*

In the rest of section 8, the speaker leaps off from his discussion of slavery into a broader proclamation of the body's holiness, stating directly what he's been implying all through section 7: every body, everywhere, in every time, is equally sacred.

Once more, his direct apostrophes (and his pointed rhetorical questions) make him sound like a prophet or a preacher:

> Have you ever loved the body of a woman?
> Have you ever loved the body of a man?
> Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth?

Here, he unites ideas from across the poem. To have "loved" the body of a woman or a man—to have looked on someone with desire and awe (as in section 2), or to have had sex with them (as in section 7)—here is the *reason* one should be able to understand that human bodies are sacred in every form.

Not only are all human bodies connected, in other words: all the ways that one *understands* that connection are connected. Desire, affection, awe, and community all bleed into each other.

As the speaker proclaims once more that "the human body is sacred," "glor[ious]," and "beautiful" in lines 124-126, he also starts to imagine the ways in which this sacred body can be harmed: when he describes "manhood untainted," he raises the possibility that "manhood" can also be *tainted*. And in context, it's clear that one of the ways that a body can be tainted is through slavery.

But it's not the bodies of enslaved people that slavery taints! Something more complex is going on here. Now, finally, the speaker begins to unpack the mysterious idea he introduced back in section 1, where he asked: "Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves?" Take a look at how he repeats that language here:

> Have you seen the fool that corrupted his own live body? or the fool that corrupted her own live body?
> For they do not conceal themselves, and cannot conceal themselves.

There's something complex going on here. Back at the beginning of the poem, the speaker suggested that "corruption" was a kind of concealment, in a way that was past "doubt[]." Here, he seems to suggest the opposite: those who "corrupt[]" their "own live bod[ies]" absolutely *can't* conceal themselves.

But there's a way in which, paradoxically, both of these things can be true at once:

- Since all human bodies are intrinsically connected, harming one body is harming any other body. Harming someone else is therefore harming

yourself—and harming yourself is harming someone else. To harm any human body is thus a kind of "conceal[ment]" because it obscures the truth of human connection.
- On the other hand, though, those who cause harm to human bodies "cannot conceal themselves," both because the evidence of that harm might show on their own bodies, and because, in the speaker's eyes, they're mysteriously marked, as if they're branded by their own folly.

While the speaker doesn't directly link the "corrupt[ion]" of the body to slavery, the implied connection feels pretty clear. To injure any human body is to injury every human body—and slavery is a grave and unconcealable injury.

LINES 129-132

O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and women, nor the likes of the parts of you,
I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of the soul, (and that they are the soul,)
I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems, and that they are my poems,
Man's, woman's, child's, youth's, wife's, husband's, mother's, father's, young man's, young woman's poems,

The speaker begins the last section of his poem with a final, impassioned apostrophe—this time, to his own body:

> O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and women, nor the likes of the parts of you,

Once more, he'll "sing" the connected, universal, beautiful body—and vow not to "desert" it, as he similarly vowed way back in section 1. But now, he'll also introduce a subtle new idea: the relationship of the body to poetry, and to this very poem.

Take a look at the way he uses parallelism here:

> I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of the soul, (and that they are the soul,)
> I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems, and that they are my poems,

The close repetitions here evoke the connections—between all people, and between body and soul—that the speaker has proclaimed throughout the poem. But they also suggest there's yet another connection here: the body and *poetry* are also the same thing.

The last time the speaker mentioned poetry was back in section 2, when he imagined the "well-made man" strolling past him in the street. Then, he said that "to see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more." What that man's body "convey[ed]" was his "expression": his selfhood, his hard-to-describe thus-ness.

And, of course, poetry is also a kind of "expression"—a way to communicate deep truths. One might even see written poetry as a kind of "body": it gives shape, form, and location to ideas and sounds. Perhaps it even resembles the "procession" of the universe, which—like a great poem—moves through time with "measured and perfect motion," not putting a foot out of place.

In other words: here at the end of the poem, all the speaker's ideas about the body start to dance around each other. This poem is a body; the body is the universe; the universe is a poem! And as he's said many times before, every single person—"man[]," "woman[]," and "child[]"—participates in this universal poem of the body.

In the rest of this section, the speaker will make this point even clearer when he moves from these macro-scale lines about connection into a minute examination of all the *pieces* of the body. As he said back in section 5, this is the "merge of large and small": looking at the body right up close, for this speaker, is just another way of staring into the depths of the universe.

LINES 133-147

Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears,
Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eyebrows, and the waking or sleeping of the lids,
Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and the jaw-hinges,
Nose, nostrils of the nose, and the partition,
Cheeks, temples, forehead, chin, throat, back of the neck, neck-slue,
Strong shoulders, manly beard, scapula, hind-shoulders, and the ample side-round of the chest,
Upper-arm, armpit, elbow-socket, lower-arm, arm-sinews, arm-bones,
Wrist and wrist-joints, hand, palm, knuckles, thumb, forefinger, finger-joints, finger-nails,
Broad breast-front, curling hair of the breast, breast-bone, breast-side,
Ribs, belly, backbone, joints of the backbone,
Hips, hip-sockets, hip-strength, inward and outward round, man-balls, man-root,
Strong set of thighs, well carrying the trunk above,
Leg fibres, knee, knee-pan, upper-leg, under-leg,
Ankles, instep, foot-ball, toes, toe-joints, the heel;
All attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my or your body or of any one's body, male or female,

All through this poem, the speaker has praised the human body as a whole. Now, he's going to look at it piece by tiny piece—and see each of those pieces as little "poems" in and of themselves.

In this dizzyingly detailed section of the poem, the speaker might seem at first merely to be listing every part of the body he can think of. His asyndeton makes this anatomical catalog

feel overwhelming, as if his language is spilling out uncontrollably. Take lines 133-135:

> Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears,
> Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eyebrows, and the waking or sleeping of the lids,
> Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and the jaw-hinges,

The speaker's tone also subtly changes from moment to moment as he mixes simple words like "nose" and "jaws" with more fanciful descriptions like "neck-slue" (suggesting the way the neck turns) and "man-root" (or penis).

The mixture of tones and registers here makes this list feel at once universal and personal. Everyone's got a "head" and "ribs": they're the "belongings of my or your body or of any one's body." But it's this specific speaker who looks at an eardrum and sees a "tympan," or feels compelled to comment approvingly on the "manl[iness]" of the beard.

This rapturous catalogue of body parts is thus more than just a catalogue: it's an inch-by-inch appreciation of all the things that go into building up the human body, seen through the eyes of one idiosyncratic speaker. That hearkens back to the speaker's ideas about the dance between the individual soul and the shared human experience. Only this unique speaker would see the body this particular way—and yet, the body he describes is universal.

In fact, while he singles out some distinctly male body parts in this passage, the body the speaker is describing will eventually seem to belong to *everybody*, "male or female." It's as if, by cataloguing all these parts, he's portraying a single, complete human form—one that unites the male and the female, the personal and the universal, the general and the specific.

LINES 148-162

> *The lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and clean,*
> *The brain in its folds inside the skull-frame,*
> *Sympathies, heart-valves, palate-valves, sexuality, maternity,*
> *Womanhood, and all that is a woman, and the man that comes from woman,*
> *The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears, laughter, weeping, love-looks, love-perturbations and risings,*
> *The voice, articulation, language, whispering, shouting aloud,*
> *Food, drink, pulse, digestion, sweat, sleep, walking, swimming,*
> *Poise on the hips, leaping, reclining, embracing, arm-curving and tightening,*
> *The continual changes of the flex of the mouth, and around the eyes,*
> *The skin, the sunburnt shade, freckles, hair,*
> *The curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the naked meat of the body,*
> *The circling rivers the breath, and breathing it in and out,*
> *The beauty of the waist, and thence of the hips, and thence downward toward the knees,*
> *The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and the marrow in the bones,*
> *The exquisite realization of health;*

The first part of the speaker's map of the body focused on outer features, from "head" to "heel." As he goes on, he turns inward to examine the organs, and then looks at the things the body can do and the ways it can feel. Now he's interested not only in "heart-valves" and "stomach-sac[s]," but in "love-looks," "curious sympathy," and "the continual changes of the flex of the mouth."

In the first lines of this passage, the speaker enumerated some distinctly male parts of the body, like the "manly beard" and "man-balls." Now, he includes some distinctly female parts, like the "womb" and "breast-milk." Echoing section 5, in which he discussed the way women's bodies contain every possibility and every quality, he also returns to the idea of "man that comes from woman" here. But now there's a feeling that "man" and "woman" are fully united. Putting all these male and female qualities right next to each other and imagining them as "the belongings of my or your body or of any one's body," the speaker seems to be building a kind of complete human, a human that is all humans.

In other words: this long passage evokes a universal human body, one that seems to contain every quality at once. "Weeping" at the same time as it "laugh[s]," male at the same time as it's female, the creature the speaker describes here is everyone and every experience. In short, this description of the body returns to the speaker's big idea that all bodies are deeply connected and interwoven with the universe: the body being described here is an *image* of the universe, containing everything at once!

And this universal body also has the ability to take delight in itself. Take a look at the way these lines juxtapose feelings *between* bodies and feelings *inside* bodies:

> The curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the naked meat of the body,
> The circling rivers the breath, and breathing it in and out,

The "curious sympathy" the speaker describes feeling when touching the "naked meat of the body" is a feeling one separate body has for another—but one that comes from feeling the *same* as the other, "sympath[etic]" to it. And the metaphor of the breath as "circling rivers" similarly works in two ways at once: it's possible to feel those rivers circling inside one's own body, and inside the body of someone whose "naked meat" one is touching.

The speaker closes this rapturous passage with the line, "the exquisite realization of health"—that is, the sudden and wonderful understanding that one is healthy. That line might give the reader cause to reflect that it's not all that easy to have such a "realization"! Only when one is sick does one really understand what it means and feels like to be well; for those fortunate enough to be healthy, the physical sensation of health fades into the background.

Perhaps, by closing with this line, the speaker invites readers into another "exquisite" (and often difficult) "realization": the realization that they, right now, are participating in the same miraculous and universal body the speaker has so lovingly described.

LINES 163-164

O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,
O I say now these are the soul!

As "I Sing the Body Electric" at last comes to its conclusion, the speaker's voice rises into an exuberant cry. Once more, his anaphora gives him the tone of a prophet declaring a mighty wonder:

> O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,
> O I say now these are the soul!

The parts, attitudes, and abilities of the body, in other words, aren't just parts of the body, but parts of the soul. And they're also *poems* of the body and soul, beautiful "expression[s]" that speak the truth.

In these last lines, the reader might want to take a moment to consider a very simple and unobtrusive word: "the." When the speaker at last concludes that "the body" and all its parts *are* "the soul," he means something more than that every individual body is an expression of every individual soul. The word "the" also suggests the single, shared body of the universe itself: the unified "procession" made of many parts. This description of the soulful body can take in everything that exists. To this joyful, mystical speaker, to contemplate any one human body—or any *part* of a human body—is thus to see into the infinite.

That perspective is demanding: it asks every living person to see every other living person as a part of their own soul, and to act accordingly. It requires everyone to stand up to cruelty and injustice wherever they find it—in society or in their own hearts.

But that perspective is also profoundly beautiful and awe-inspiring. To know that the body is the soul, in this speaker's view, is to live in an eternal loving embrace, understanding that everyone both "engirths" and is "engirth[ed]" by the universe itself.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration fills the poem with music and elevates its language, helping to communicate the speaker's profound feelings of wonder, gratitude, and joy.

The sounds the speaker emphasizes reflect his experience of the world. For instance, listen to the /s/ and /w/ alliteration in the passage where the speaker watches a swimmer:

> The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims through the transparent green-shine, or lies with his face up and rolls silently to and fro in the heave of the water,

The repeated sounds here evoke the gentle swish of water moving around the swimmer's limbs. But these quiet sounds also give this passage a hushed, reverent feeling: it's as if the speaker is so awed by the swimmer's beauty that he has to hold his breath.

Not too long after, the speaker reflects on all the beautiful human bodies he's been observing, and drops in an alliterative /l/:

> Such-like I love—I loosen myself, pass freely, am at the mother's breast with the little child,

Here, the long, liquid /l/ sound again evokes what the speaker is feeling and experiencing: it's a luxurious, languorous sound, and it evokes the pleasure the speaker takes in the people around him. (Note that consonance adds to the effect, with those internal /l/ sounds in "myself," "freely," and "child.")

But this moment of alliteration also tells readers something about the speaker's philosophy. The /l/ connects his "love" to his "loosen[ing]," for instance—suggesting that, for the speaker, part of love is a feeling that he can let go of his own separate personality and inhabit other people's experiences, not just admiring but *becoming* that "little child."

(Note that we've mapped alliteration only in the first two sections of the poem here—there's plenty more to find!)

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "corrupt," "conceal"
- **Line 6:** "defile," "dead"
- **Line 9:** "body," "balks," "body," "balks"
- **Line 15:** "strong," "sweet," "strikes"
- **Line 16:** "pass," "poem," "perhaps"
- **Line 18:** "sprawl," "style," "street"
- **Line 19:** "swimmer," "swimming," "seen," "swims," "silently"
- **Line 20:** "bending," "backward," "boats"

- **Line 22:** “wives,” “waiting”
- **Line 23:** “female,” “farmer’s”
- **Line 25:** “natured,” “native”
- **Line 26:** “coats,” “caps”
- **Line 27:** “upper,” “under”
- **Line 28:** “march,” “masculine,” “muscle”
- **Line 29:** “slow,” “strikes,” “suddenly”
- **Line 30:** “curv’d,” “counting”
- **Line 31:** “like,” “love,” “loosen,” “little”

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration, assonance evokes the speaker's rich, passionate experience of the world. For example, take a look at the very first line:

> I sing the body electric,

Here, the long /ee/ sound at the end of "body" flows right into the /ee/ sound at the beginning of "electric," making it sound as if the body and its soulful "electric[ity]" are truly one and the same.

Later, listen to the echoing vowel sounds in the lines where the speaker imagines "Nature" as a female spirit in lines 73-74:

> As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible completeness, sanity, beauty,
> See the bent head and arms folded over the breast, the Female I see.

The echoing /eh/, /oh/, and /ee/ sounds here give these lines a harmony that reflects what the speaker describes: a female figure of marvelous balance, calm, and wholeness. The sibilance of the lines adds to the effect, all those hushed /s/ sounds adding to the image of "Nature" as gentle and calm.

> As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible completeness, sanity, beauty,
> See the bent head and arms folded over the breast, the Female I see.

Assonance, consonance, and alliteration work together like this throughout the poem to bring the speaker's language to vivid life for readers. (Note that we've mapped a representative sample here—there's assonance all through the poem!)

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “body,” “electric”
- **Line 5:** “bodies,” “conceal”
- **Line 9:** “body,” “balks,” “body,” “balks”
- **Line 13:** “It is in his limbs,” “it is,” “in,” “his hips,” “wrists”
- **Line 15:** “cotton,” “broadcloth”
- **Line 18:** “we,” “street”
- **Line 19:** “shine,” “lies,” “silently”
- **Line 55:** “all,” “falls,” “aside,” “myself”
- **Line 56:** “religion,” “visible,” “solid,” “expected,” “heaven”
- **Line 58:** “bend,” “legs,” “negligent,” “falling,” “all,” “too,” “diffused”
- **Line 59:** “stung,” “ebb,” “love,” “flesh,” “swelling”
- **Line 60:** “Limitless,” “limpid,” “quivering”
- **Line 61:** “Bridegroom,” “night,” “softly,” “dawn”
- **Line 63:** “cleave,” “sweet”
- **Line 64:** “after,” “man”
- **Line 65:** “birth,” “merge”
- **Line 66:** “encloses,” “rest,” “exit,” “rest”
- **Line 69:** “moves”
- **Line 70:** “duly,” “passive,” “active”
- **Line 73:** “inexpressible,” “completeness”
- **Line 74:** “bent,” “head,” “breast”

APORIA

The moments of aporia in "I Sing the Body Electric" pose some of the poem's most profound philosophical questions—and often seem to provide their own mysterious answers.

The earliest moments of aporia appear in the first section, where the speaker asks:

> Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves?
> And if those who defile the living are as bad as they who defile the dead?
> And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?
> And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?

These questions introduce a number of the themes that the poem will go on to explore—albeit in pretty cryptic ways. The speaker's link between the "corrupt[ion]" and the "conceal[ment]" of the body, for instance, might not be totally clear at first. But it hints at his later idea that the body and the soul are the same thing—and that to abuse one's body is thus somehow to misrepresent one's *self*, one's spirit, in some deeper way.

But these aren't just questions: they're statements. The speaker isn't merely asking these questions, he's asking whether anyone has ever "doubted" the *answers* to these questions. In other words, these questions are ways for the speaker to declare his *beliefs* about the body, presenting them as obvious. In his eyes, for instance, the body and the soul *must* be identical.

This is a clever rhetorical technique! Of course, plenty of people—especially in a predominantly Protestant Christian 19th-century U.S.—*wouldn't* agree with the speaker's

declarations about body and soul here. But by presenting his views as past doubt, the speaker gives himself firm ground to stand on. His rhetorical questions make him sound like a prophet, declaring mysterious truths.

Elsewhere, aporia evokes the speaker's plain old marvel at existence. For instance, take a look at line 48, where the speaker reflects on the joys of being among friends:

> To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm
> ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment,
> what is this then?

The quiet question "what is this then?" makes it sound as if the speaker is overcome with wonder at the very fact he *can* be among friends—that his miraculous body allows him to touch and love other miraculous bodies.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves? / And if those who defile the living are as bad as they who defile the dead? / And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul? / And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?"
- **Line 48:** "To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?"
- **Line 83:** "(Where else does he strike soundings except here?)"
- **Lines 85-86:** "No matter who it is, it is sacred—is it the meanest one in the laborers' gang? / Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants just landed on the wharf?"
- **Line 91:** "Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest ignorant?"
- **Lines 92-94:** "Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has no right to a sight? / Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffuse float, and the soil is on the surface, and water runs and vegetation sprouts, / For you only, and not for him and her?"
- **Line 112:** "(Do you think they are not there because they are not express'd in parlors and lecture-rooms?)"
- **Line 116:** "How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his offspring through the centuries?"
- **Line 117:** "(Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you could trace back through the centuries?)"
- **Lines 121-123:** "Have you ever loved the body of a woman? / Have you ever loved the body of a man? / Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth?"
- **Line 127:** "Have you seen the fool that corrupted his own live body? or the fool that corrupted her own live body?"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker's use of apostrophes invites readers to take this poem to heart—and suggests that the speaker has a particular audience in mind as he writes!

For instance, take a look at this passage from lines 85-88, in which the speaker admonishes readers that every single human life is equally sacred:

> No matter who it is, it is sacred—is it the meanest one
> in the laborers' gang?
> Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants just landed on
> the wharf?
> Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the
> well-off, just as much as you,
> Each has his or her place in the procession.

Here, the speaker seems to imply that the reader *isn't* the "meanest" (or lowliest) person in a crowd of workers, or a perplexed recent "immigrant[]." In other words, he suggests that he has some idea of who's reading this poem—and thinks they're pretty likely to be among the "well-off," a comfortable, established, and literate class of people with time to lounge around reading poetry!

Something similar happens in the passages where the speaker rails against slavery. Here, he's addressing an imagined crowd of bidders at a slave auction, describing the miraculous and sacred life of the enslaved man on the block:

> Within there runs blood,
> The same old blood! the same red-running blood!
> There swells and jets a heart, there all passions,
> desires, reachings, aspirations
> (Do you think they are not there because they are
> not express'd in parlors and lecture-rooms?)

The implied audience is even clearer: the crowd the speaker imagines is made up of white people, here to bid for Black people. And again, there's a sense that these white people are complacent and well-to-do, smug about the comfortable "parlors and lecture-rooms" where they can exchange their lofty thoughts.

A lot of the apostrophe in this poem is thus about bringing the wealthy and privileged down to earth. But the speaker's motive isn't just to disabuse powerful people of their illusions of specialness. It's to invite all people to see themselves as part of humanity as a whole—and thus as part of a mystical, beautiful, and sacred "universe."

That mood appears even more clearly in the moments when the speaker puts the reader in his own place, as he does in this passage where he recounts his visit to a wonderful old man:

> When he went with his five sons and many grand-sons to hunt or fish, you would pick him out as the most beautiful and vigorous of the gang,
> You would wish long and long to be with him, you would wish to sit by him in the boat that you and he might touch each other.

Here, the second-person "you" really describes the speaker's own experience of loving this old man. But by presenting his own feelings as the reader's, the speaker suggests that human experience is shared, and shareable.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side."
- **Lines 43-44:** "When he went with his five sons and many grand-sons to hunt or fish, you would pick him out as the most beautiful and vigorous of the gang, / You would wish long and long to be with him, you would wish to sit by him in the boat that you and he might touch each other."
- **Lines 66-67:** "Be not ashamed women, your privilege encloses the rest, and is the exit of the rest, / You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul."
- **Line 87:** "Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off, just as much as you,"
- **Lines 91-94:** "Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest ignorant? / Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has no right to a sight? / Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffuse float, and the soil is on the surface, and water runs and vegetation sprouts, / For you only, and not for him and her?"
- **Line 105:** "They shall be stript that you may see them."
- **Line 112:** "(Do you think they are not there because they are not express'd in parlors and lecture-rooms?)"
- **Lines 116-117:** "How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his offspring through the centuries? / (Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you could trace back through the centuries?)"
- **Lines 121-123:** "Have you ever loved the body of a woman? / Have you ever loved the body of a man? / Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth?"
- **Line 127:** "Have you seen the fool that corrupted his own live body? or the fool that corrupted her own live body?"
- **Lines 129-130:** "O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and women, nor the likes of the parts of you, / I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of the soul, (and that they are the soul,)"
- **Line 131:** "I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems, and that they are my poems,"
- **Line 161:** "The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and the marrow in the bones,"

ASYNDETON

Long passages of asyndeton appear throughout the poem and make the speaker sound as if he's lost in rapture over the beauty of the human body.

One of the most dramatic passages of asyndeton comes at the very end of the poem, where the speaker enumerates just about every bit of the body he can think of:

> Upper-arm, armpit, elbow-socket, lower-arm, arm-sinews, arm-bones,
> Wrist and wrist-joints, hand, palm, knuckles, thumb, forefinger, finger-joints, finger-nails,
> Broad breast-front, curling hair of the breast, breast-bone, breast-side,
> Ribs, belly, backbone, joints of the backbone,

...and the list goes on! Asyndeton here evokes the body's overwhelming complexity and richness: with few conjunctions to get in the way, the speaker can just keep piling example on example, building an inch-by-inch picture of the human form.

Asyndeton also evokes the speaker's feeling of connection and communion with his fellow human beings:

> Girls, mothers, house-keepers, in all their performances,
> The group of laborers seated at noon-time with their open dinner-kettles, and their wives waiting,
> The female soothing a child, the farmer's daughter in the garden or cow-yard,
> The young fellow hoeing corn, the sleigh-driver driving his six horses through the crowd,

The asyndeton here makes these different kinds of people feel, literally, *close*, one following on another's heels. It also suggests just how many people (and types of people) there are in the world, making the speaker's eventual declaration that all of humanity "belongs" together on earth feel even more powerful.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- Line 9
- Lines 13-17
- Lines 18-32
- Lines 35-44
- Lines 52-63
- Line 70
- Lines 73-74
- Line 79

- Line 81
- Lines 106-107
- Line 111
- Lines 132-162

END-STOPPED LINE

The many (many!) dramatic end-stopped lines in "I Sing the Body Electric" give the poem a feeling of weight, drama, and grandeur. For instance, take a look at the way end-stops make these early lines move:

> The love of the body of man or woman balks account,
> the body itself balks account,
> That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect.
> The expression of the face balks account,
> But the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face,
> It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists,

Each of these lines makes a firm, self-contained statement: they sound grand and declarative, as if the speaker is preaching a sermon or delivering a prophecy.

But the speaker also uses commas at the ends of these firm lines, suggesting that there's continuity here as well as separation. The combination of self-contained lines and connective commas makes it feel as if the speaker is building a sort of continuous tower of meaning, cementing one idea to the next like bricks in a wall.

That effect comes to a head in the poem's very last lines:

> O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,
> O I say now these are the soul!

Here, the speaker wraps his whole poem up with a final exuberant declaration. His last line arrives with a jubilant exclamation point: it's as if he's gotten to the top of his tower of thought, and cries out in delight over the view.

(Note that we've only marked the end-stopped lines in the first two sections of the poem here; there are many more to find.)

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "electric,"
- **Line 2:** "them,"
- **Line 3:** "them,"
- **Line 4:** "soul."
- **Line 5:** "themselves?"
- **Line 6:** "dead?"
- **Line 7:** "soul?"
- **Line 8:** "soul?"
- **Line 9:** "account,"
- **Line 10:** "perfect."
- **Line 11:** "account,"
- **Line 12:** "face,"
- **Line 13:** "wrists,"
- **Line 14:** "him,"
- **Line 15:** "broadcloth,"
- **Line 16:** "more,"
- **Line 17:** "side."
- **Line 18:** "downwards,"
- **Line 19:** "water,"
- **Line 20:** "saddle,"
- **Line 21:** "performances,"
- **Line 22:** "waiting,"
- **Line 23:** "yard,"
- **Line 24:** "crowd,"
- **Line 25:** "work,"
- **Line 26:** "resistance,"
- **Line 27:** "eyes;"
- **Line 28:** "straps,"
- **Line 29:** "alert,"
- **Line 30:** "counting;"
- **Line 31:** "child,"
- **Line 32:** "count."

IRONY

When the speaker says he'll teach a slave auctioneer "his business" in section 7, his voice drips with irony. He's not planning on being a better auctioneer than this "sloven[ly]" character: rather, he's going to show him everything that's wrong (and absurd!) about slavery.

To this speaker, the evil of slavery is rooted in the harm it does to the majestic human body. Every single human body, he insists over and over, is a miracle, a living soul with its own innate beauty and dignity. Slavery, then, isn't just cruel and horrific: it's founded on a fundamental misunderstanding of how the world works. Since everyone takes part in the shared "procession" of the universe, the speaker argues, one person can't be injured without harm to everyone. A Black body and a white body are indistinguishably sacred—and deeply connected on a mystical level.

The speaker makes all these points in an ironic speech in which he claims to be "selling" the Black man and woman on the auction block. But rather than describing them as commodities, he imagines them as wonders of creation: "quintillions" of years of the universe's efforts made them, they're vibrantly "life-lit," their hearts are full of "passions, desires, reachings, aspirations"—and they'll be the ancestors of generations of other miraculous souls.

The speaker's irony here makes it clear that he sees slavery, not just as an evil, but as a truly absurd blindness to universal human connection.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 95-97:** "A man's body at auction, / (For before the war I often go to the slave-mart and watch the sale,) / I help the auctioneer, the sloven does not half know his business."
- **Lines 98-101:** "Gentlemen look on this wonder, / Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it, / For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or plant, / For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily roll'd."

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery evokes the speaker's rapturous, sensuous feelings about the human body (and life in general). For instance, consider the passage in which the speaker imagines relaxing in the evening among a crowd of friends:

> To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,
> To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?

The speaker's imagery here is careful and specific: he doesn't merely envision embracing people, but "rest[ing] my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment." It's as if part of his enjoyment is in how easy and fleeting this contact feels. These aren't bear-hugs, but gentle acknowledgments of each person in turn. The lightness of his touch makes this image feel affectionate, simple, and vivid.

Elsewhere, though, his imagery gets a lot more heated. Listen to his wild description of having an orgasm:

> Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous, quivering jelly of love, white-blow and delirious juice,

Here, the speaker's imagination is wrapped up in his sense of touch: he feels overwhelmed by "limitless[ness]," heat, and "quivering." His tangible imagery makes it feel as if his whole self is caught up in this one ecstatic moment.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-15:** "It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists, / It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees, dress does not hide him, / The strong sweet quality he has strikes through the cotton and broadcloth,"
- **Line 18:** "The sprawl and fulness of babes, the bosoms and heads of women, the folds of their dress, their style as we pass in the street, the contour of their shape downwards,"
- **Line 19:** "The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims through the transparent green-shine, or lies with his face up and rolls silently to and fro in the heave of the water,"
- **Line 20:** "The bending forward and backward of rowers in row-boats,"
- **Line 22:** "The group of laborers seated at noon-time with their open dinner-kettles, and their wives waiting,"
- **Lines 26-27:** "The coats and caps thrown down, the embrace of love and resistance, / The upper-hold and under-hold, the hair rumpled over and blinding the eyes;"
- **Line 28:** "The march of firemen in their own costumes, the play of masculine muscle through clean-setting trowsers and waist-straps,"
- **Line 30:** "The natural, perfect, varied attitudes, the bent head, the curv'd neck and the counting;"
- **Line 36:** "The shape of his head, the pale yellow and white of his hair and beard, the immeasurable meaning of his black eyes, the richness and breadth of his manners,"
- **Line 38:** "He was six feet tall, he was over eighty years old, his sons were massive, clean, bearded, tan-faced, handsome,"
- **Line 41:** "He drank water only, the blood show'd like scarlet through the clear-brown skin of his face,"
- **Line 48:** "To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?"
- **Line 53:** "A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,"
- **Line 57:** "Mad filaments, ungovernable shoots play out of it, the response likewise ungovernable,"
- **Line 60:** "Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous, quivering jelly of love, white-blow and delirious juice,"
- **Lines 61-63:** "Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly into the prostrate dawn, / Undulating into the willing and yielding day, / Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-flesh'd day."
- **Lines 72-74:** "As I see my soul reflected in Nature, / As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible completeness, sanity, beauty, / See the bent head and arms folded over the breast, the Female I see."
- **Line 86:** "Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants just landed on the wharf?"
- **Line 90:** "The universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion.)"
- **Line 93:** "Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffuse float, and the soil is on the surface, and water runs and vegetation sprouts,"

- **Line 104:** "Examine these limbs, red, black, or white, they are cunning in tendon and nerve,"
- **Line 107:** "Flakes of breast-muscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby, good-sized arms and legs,"
- **Line 110:** "The same old blood! the same red-running blood!"
- **Line 126:** "And in man or woman a clean, strong, firm-fibred body, is more beautiful than the most beautiful face."

REPETITION

The speaker's many repetitions often reflect his amazement over the miracle of the human body—and the powerful philosophical conclusions he bases on that amazement.

For instance, take a look at the way the speaker uses polyptoton to evoke his connection to all the people around him:

> Swim with the swimmers, wrestle with wrestlers, march in line with the firemen, and pause, listen, count.

The speaker's repetitions here put him right alongside the "swimmers" and the "wrestlers," doing what they do, feeling a close empathetic connection with them. Polyptoton also draws attention to the way the speaker identifies these people with the things they're doing—an active way of looking at people that suggests the body (and the things it can do) are central to identity.

Not long afterward, diacope (and parallelism) help to evoke the speaker's awestruck sense of eternity:

> I knew a man, a common farmer, the father of five sons,
> And in them the fathers of sons, and in them the fathers of sons.

Here, looking at just one person—an admirable, hearty old farmer—makes the speaker think generations and generations into the future. His repetitions here help the reader to share his sense of human life stretching out into infinity.

All these forms of repetition help to give the poem its grand, ringing, awestruck tone. (Note that we've only highlighted a small representative sample of the poem's use of repetition here—and see the separate entries on Parallelism and Anaphora for even more.)

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "charge," "charge"
- **Line 7:** "body," "soul"
- **Line 8:** "body," "soul," "soul"
- **Line 11:** "face"
- **Line 12:** "face"
- **Line 13:** "joints," "joints"
- **Line 17:** "back," "back"
- **Line 25:** "wrestle," "wrestlers"
- **Line 27:** "upper-hold," "under-hold"
- **Line 32:** "Swim," "swimmers," "wrestle," "wrestlers"
- **Lines 33-34:** "the father of five sons, / And in them the fathers of sons, and in them the fathers of sons."
- **Line 69:** "She is"
- **Line 70:** "She is"
- **Line 71:** "She is"
- **Line 72:** "As I see"
- **Line 73:** "As I see"
- **Line 74:** "See," "see"

METAPHOR

"I Sing the Body Electric" is filled with metaphors. All this intense figurative language helps the speaker to capture just how glorious, transcendent, and astonishing he finds the human body.

The poem's first line (and title!) itself is a metaphor—and one that would have been even more strange and striking to Whitman's contemporaries than it is to modern-day readers:

> I sing the body electric,

The idea of the body as "electric" evokes a body crackling with powerful energy—practically shooting sparks. To one of Whitman's contemporaries, this electric body might even have suggested novelty and invention: remember, widespread electric lighting (just for instance) was decades away when Whitman wrote the first version of this poem in 1855. The "body electric" might thus be a body that seems to contain an almost miraculous power.

That electrical body has all kinds of strange powers, in fact. Take a look at the way the speaker imagines a woman's body in the fifth section of the poem:

> Mad filaments, ungovernable shoots play out of it,
> the response likewise ungovernable,

Here, a woman's sheer femininity seems to sprout "mad filaments" and "ungovernable shoots," as if her attractiveness is physically reaching out to grab the speaker with vine-like tendrils. Even the *idea* of the body seems to have its own physical strength.

And in fact, when the speaker imagines having sex with this almost divine female figure, the experience is so profoundly powerful that the couple seems to become godlike:

> Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly
> into the prostrate dawn,

Here, the male speaker becomes the "bridegroom night," and the female figure the "prostrate dawn." Besides making the couple feel like massive forces, the Day and Night themselves, these images suggest a kind of blending of opposites into one thing. Night *isn't* day, but night *turns into* day. This metaphor gets at one of the speaker's favorite ideas: that every human is profoundly connected in a strange, mystical oneness, no matter how different they might look on the outside. Sex, to him, is one of the most readily available ways to really *feel* that deeper truth.

These—only a few of the speaker's many metaphors—all help to shape his overarching vision: the body, to this speaker, is a force of huge spiritual power.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I sing the body electric,"
- **Line 2:** "The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,"
- **Line 61:** "Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly into the prostrate dawn,"
- **Line 67:** "You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul."
- **Line 70:** "She is all things duly veil'd,"
- **Lines 72-74:** "As I see my soul reflected in Nature, / As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible completeness, sanity, beauty, / See the bent head and arms folded over the breast, the Female I see."
- **Lines 88-90:** "Each has his or her place in the procession. / (All is a procession, / The universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion.)"
- **Line 131:** "I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems, and that they are my poems,"

SIMILE

The speaker's similes help the reader to understand his wonderstruck view of the world, and the joy he takes in his own embodiment.

When the speaker hangs out with his friends one evening, for instance, his love for the experience seems to transport him:

> I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.

Here, his plain pleasure at being among people he likes becomes a whole ocean of "delight." There's nothing ordinary about spending time with friends, the speaker seems to say: think about it for a minute, and simple human companionship is an amazing miracle.

This is also a very bodily simile: there's something sensuous and tangible about the idea of swimming in pleasure as if it were a "sea." That tangibility reminds readers that it's the miraculous human body that allows people to experience connection and love.

A few lines later, as the speaker falls under the spell of "the female form," his body is again swept up in a powerful simile:

> I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than a
> helpless vapor, all falls aside but myself and it,

In this simile, sexual attraction seems to make the speaker a "vapor," lighter than air and ready to completely mingle himself with a woman's body. There's a sense of exhilaration in this simile—a sense that the speaker feels blissfully overpowered, dissolved by desire.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 49:** "I swim in it as in a sea."
- **Line 55:** "I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than a helpless vapor,"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism is the strongest flavor of repetition in "I Sing the Body Electric." The speaker uses repeated sentence structures to emphasize one of his major points: the mere fact that every human being has a body means that all human beings are mysteriously connected.

The first of many moments of parallelism arrives in the second line of the poem:

> The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth
> them,

Here, the speaker uses parallelism to make a mystical point. He's surrounded by everyone he loves, he says—and at the exact same time, he *surrounds* everyone he loves, containing them in his own consciousness. This repeated phrasing suggests that people are connected from the inside out as well as the outside in: loving people, in this speaker's view, means holding them inside you as much as being held by them.

Only a few lines later, parallelism evokes the speaker's marvel over the sheer existence of the body:

> The love of the body of man or woman balks account,
> the body itself balks account,
> That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is
> perfect.

Here, the speaker uses two moments of parallelism right in a row. In the first, he expands from amazement at "the love of the body" to amazement at "the body" itself: both "balk account,"

too astonishing for words. In the second, he establishes an ongoing mood of balance and equality: the male and female body, his phrasing suggests, are equally "perfect" and equally wondrous.

And there are many, many more examples of parallelism to find all through the poem. Parallelism's power to suggest comparisons, evoke balance and order, and expand on an initial thought all fit right into the speaker's sweeping hymn to the body's wonders.

(Note that we've only marked examples of parallelism in sections 1 and 2 of the poem; there are many more to find.)

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,"
- **Lines 6-8:** "And if those who defile the living are as bad as they who defile the dead? / And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul? / And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?"
- **Line 9:** "The love of the body of man or woman balks account, the body itself balks account,"
- **Line 10:** "That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect."
- **Line 12:** "But the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face,"
- **Lines 13-14:** "It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists, / It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees, dress does not hide him,"
- **Lines 18-20:** "The sprawl and fulness of babes, the bosoms and heads of women, the folds of their dress, their style as we pass in the street, the contour of their shape downwards, / The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims through the transparent green-shine, or lies with his face up and rolls silently to and fro in the heave of the water, / The bending forward and backward of rowers in row-boats, the horseman in his saddle,"
- **Lines 22-27:** "The group of laborers seated at noon-time with their open dinner-kettles, and their wives waiting, / The female soothing a child, the farmer's daughter in the garden or cow-yard, / The young fellow hoeing corn, the sleigh-driver driving his six horses through the crowd, / The wrestle of wrestlers, two apprentice-boys, quite grown, lusty, good-natured, native-born, out on the vacant lot at sun-down after work, / The coats and caps thrown down, the embrace of love and resistance, / The upper-hold and under-hold, the hair rumpled over and blinding the eyes;"
- **Lines 28-30:** "The march of firemen in their own costumes, the play of masculine muscle through clean-setting trowsers and waist-straps, / The slow return from the fire, the pause when the bell strikes suddenly again, and the listening on the alert, / The natural, perfect, varied attitudes, the bent head, the curv'd neck and the counting;"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is one of the most frequent and distinctive devices in "I Sing the Body Electric," and it helps to give the poem its grand, prophetic tone. The poem is filled with lists, formed using parallel grammatical phrases and often starting with the exact same words. This gives the poem a feeling of building momentum and epic grandeur.

For instance, listen to the anaphora in this passage, where the speaker sings the praises of the female body:

> She is in her place and moves with perfect balance,
> She is all things duly veil'd, she is both passive and active,
> She is to conceive daughters as well as sons, and sons as well as daughters.

The speaker's repetition of the words "she is" here makes each of these lines feel like an independent and profound declaration—and also draws attention to the sheer "is-ness," the plain and amazing reality, of women's bodies.

Anaphora also emphasizes moments of strong emotion. Listen to the outrage in the speaker's voice here:

> Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest ignorant?
> Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has no right to a sight?
> Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffuse float, and the soil is on the surface, and water runs and vegetation sprouts,
> For you only, and not for him and her?

Starting each of these lines with the same forceful apostrophe, the speaker sounds like a prophet in the old-school sense: a seer who has come to warn people that they're behaving very badly indeed. That repeated address makes it sound as if the speaker is hectoring an abashed listener—though also, to be fair, as if he's telling himself off for the same petty self-centeredness! Anaphora here reminds the reader that everyone can be this kind of selfish "you," and that everyone is responsible for breaking out of their own solipsistic view of the world.

(Note that we've only highlighted some illustrative examples of anaphora here—there's plenty more to find.)

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** “And if”
- **Line 7:** “And if the body”
- **Line 8:** “And if the body”
- **Line 9:** “The,” “the”
- **Line 10:** “That of the,” “that of the”
- **Line 11:** “The”
- **Line 12:** “the”
- **Line 13:** “It is in his,” “it is”
- **Line 14:** “It is in his,” “the,” “the”
- **Line 18:** “The,” “the,” “the,” “the”
- **Line 19:** “The”
- **Line 20:** “The,” “the”
- **Line 22:** “The”
- **Line 23:** “The”
- **Line 24:** “The”
- **Line 25:** “The”
- **Line 26:** “The,” “the”
- **Line 27:** “The,” “the”
- **Line 28:** “The,” “the”
- **Line 29:** “The,” “the”
- **Line 30:** “The”
- **Line 64:** “This the”
- **Line 65:** “This the”
- **Line 69:** “She is”
- **Line 70:** “She is”
- **Line 71:** “She is”
- **Line 72:** “As I see”
- **Line 73:** “As I see”
- **Line 87:** “Each”
- **Line 88:** “Each”
- **Line 91:** “Do you”
- **Line 92:** “Do you”
- **Line 93:** “Do you”

VOCABULARY

Engirth (Line 2) - Surround, encircle.

Discorrupt (Line 4) - Cleanse; free from errors or evils.

Defile (Line 6) - Desecrate or make dirty.

Balks Account (Line 9, Line 11) - Can't be described or put into words.

Carriage (Line 14) - The way someone holds their body; posture, bearing.

Broadcloth (Line 15) - A kind of strong woven cloth often used for jackets and pants.

Fulness (Line 18) - Roundedness, plumpness.

Dinner-Kettles (Line 22) - Lunchpails.

Upper-hold and Under-hold (Line 27) - Wrestling moves.

Trowsers (Line 28) - Another spelling of "trousers," or pants.

Vigor (Line 35) - Energetic strength.

By Allowance (Line 40) - Whitman here means something like "they didn't love him just because they felt like they were supposed to."

Ship-joiner (Line 42) - A boat-builder.

Fowling-pieces (Line 42) - Guns for hunting birds.

Nimbus (Line 53) - A shining cloud or a halo.

Vapor (Line 55) - A mist or gas.

Filament (Line 57) - A fiber or thread.

Ungovernable (Line 57) - Uncontrollable.

Shoots (Line 57) - Sprouts or vines.

Negligent (Line 58) - Neglectful, careless.

Diffused (Line 58) - Spreading out and getting less solid; evaporating.

Ebb Stung By the Flow (Line 59) - In this line, Whitman is evoking a rhythmic pulsing sensation using tides as a metaphor: when the tide "ebbs," the ocean pulls away from the shore, and when it "flows," it rushes in. If the ebb and flow "st[i]ng" each other, they provoke each other to come back: the low ebb transforms into the high flow.

Limpid (Line 60) - Clear and pure.

White-blow and Delirious Juice (Line 60) - Semen.

Delirious (Line 60) - Crazily joyful; ecstatic.

Prostrate (Line 61) - Lying sprawled out, face-downward.

Undulating (Line 62) - Moving like a wave.

Cleave (Line 63) - This word is usually a verb meaning "to split," but here Whitman uses it as a noun meaning a crevice, split, or crack—a metaphor for female genitals.

Nucleus (Line 64) - The center, the heart of something.

Tempers (Line 68) - Moderates, evenly balances.

Duly Veil'd (Line 70) - Appropriately concealed.

Conceive (Line 71) - Become pregnant with.

Becomes Him (Line 78, Line 79, Line 81) - Suits him, looks good on him.

Utmost (Line 79) - Maximal, greatest.

Strikes Soundings (Line 82, Line 83) - Measures the depth of the sea—here used metaphorically to mean "figures out what's true."

Meanest (Line 85, Line 91) - Lowliest, shabbiest.

Cohered (Line 93) - Come together into one big solid mass.

Slave-mart (Line 96) - A place where enslaved people were sold.

Sloven (Line 97) - A sloppy, incompetent person.

Quintillions (Line 100) - Millions of millions—in other words,

an incomprehensibly long time.

Baffling (Line 102) - Confusing, perplexing, impossible to grasp. In other words, the brain is so amazing one can't even understand it.

Cunning (Line 104) - Cleverly made, ingenious.

Pluck (Line 106) - Spirited energy.

Pliant (Line 107) - Flexible, supple.

Teeming (Line 119) - Fertile. To "teem" can mean to be pregnant, or to be crowded with people: the idea here is that the woman the speaker praises might give birth to a whole lot of children!

Drop and Tympan (Line 133) - Parts of the ear: likely the hammer and the eardrum, respectively.

Eye-fringes (Line 134) - Eyelashes.

Partition (Line 136) - The flesh that divides the nostrils from each other.

Neck-slue (Line 137) - The way the neck turns.

Scapula (Line 138) - The shoulderblade.

Man-balls, Man-root (Line 143) - The testicles and penis.

Palate-valves (Line 150) - The flesh in the throat that directs food/water to the stomach and air to the lungs.

Love-perturbations (Line 152) - Bodily stirrings or disturbances caused by feelings of love (for instance, butterflies in the stomach!).

Articulation (Line 153) - The ability to say words.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like most of Whitman's poems, "I Sing the Body Electric" is written in free verse. That means it doesn't use a regular meter or a rhyme scheme: it takes whatever shape the poet fancies in the moment! This loose, free-roaming, organic form suits the poem's exuberant mood.

Whitman also divides this poem into nine numbered sections of all different lengths, each exploring the beauty and meaning of the human body in different ways. Most of those sections are broken down into several smaller stanzas, which reflect the speaker's evolving thoughts: a new stanza will introduce a new dimension of a section's central idea. But the final section is one long unbroken chant, and it makes it feel as if the speaker is getting swept away by his sheer enthusiasm for every part of the body he enumerates.

METER

"I Sing the Body Electric" is written in free verse, which means it doesn't use meter. Instead, the lines unroll at just the pace the speaker chooses.

Free verse sometimes sounds conversational or easy, but here, it feels pretty grand. The speaker often seems to luxuriate in long, long lines, as in lines 18-20:

> The sprawl and fulness of babes, the bosoms and heads of women, the folds of their dress, their style as we pass in the street, the contour of their shape downwards,
> The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims through the transparent green-shine, or lies with his face up and rolls silently to and fro in the heave of the water,
> The bending forward and backward of rowers in row-boats, the horseman in his saddle,

The lack of a strict meter here means the speaker can spend as much time with each of these rich images as he wishes.

He can also make short, clear statements like those in lines 68-69:

> The female contains all qualities and tempers them,
> She is in her place and moves with perfect balance,

The poem's varied, stately pace thus lets the speaker rejoice at length over the beauty of the human body—and firmly declare the philosophical conclusions he draws from that beauty.

RHYME SCHEME

Written in Whitman's characteristic free verse, "I Sing the Body Electric" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. Instead of using rhyme, the poem creates sweeping patterns of sound through sonic devices like alliteration, assonance, and consonance, and through striking repetitions.

For instance, listen to the music of the lines in which the speaker describes a swimmer:

> The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims through the transparent green-shine, or lies with his face up and rolls silently to and fro in the heave of the water,

Here, the combination of polyptoton on variations of the word "swim," sibilant /s/ sounds, and assonant long /i/ sounds evokes exactly what it describes: the line sounds just like the repetitive, rhythmic swish of water around swimming limbs. The speaker uses sound and repetition like this throughout the poem, filling it with music and motion despite its lack of rhyme.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "I Sing the Body Electric" is often read as Walt Whitman himself. *Leaves of Grass*, the collection from which this poem comes, is almost always written in the first person, from Whitman's own perspective.

Whether or not the reader interprets this speaker as Whitman, he's certainly a lot *like* Whitman: ecstatic, exuberant, mystical, and earthy, all at once. He's as excited about the sight of some guy taking a swim as he is at the thought of the "quintillions of years" it took for the miracle of human life to emerge. In fact, he sees close links between the everyday and the divine: to him, every human body is mysteriously sacred and perfect, a single marcher in a beautiful, eternal parade.

This speaker is not just full of passion for the human body and the beauty of existence, he's a person of conviction. His visions of human connection, for instance, lead him to take a powerful stand against slavery.

SETTING

The setting of "I Sing the Body Electric" is both the everyday 19th-century world around the speaker and the entire universe.

When the speaker describes the people around him, he seems to be looking at folks from Whitman's own 19th-century American world. He observes workmen pausing for lunch, farm girls in their yards, women nursing babies, and young men having a friendly wrestle.

All these images feel pretty specific, calling up a rustic setting in the countryside, a place of farms and green pools. But they also feel timeless: people have been nursing babies and eating lunch as long as there have been babies and lunches. Having a human body, Whitman's setting suggests, means being grounded firmly in one time and place—but also mysteriously connected to the past and future, to all other humans who have ever lived. This particular setting, in other words, is only one facet of the gem of existence.

One passage, though, places this poem firmly in a time. In sections 7 and 8, the speaker visits a slave auction—an event that makes it clear this poem is set not just in the 19th-century U.S., but in the years before the 13th Amendment made slavery illegal in 1865. (In fact, in the version of the poem we're looking at here, the speaker seems to be visiting this time "before the [Civil W]ar" in memory.) The speaker's ironic "advertisement" for the enslaved man and woman on the block makes it clear that he sees slavery as a great evil: an affront to the human dignity that every living person shares.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) wrote "I Sing the Body Electric" around 1855 as part of his major collection *Leaves of Grass*. He would revise and revisit *Leaves of Grass* many times. "I Sing the Body Electric," for instance, didn't get the title it's known by today (or its famous first line!) until 1867.

Whitman was a poet unlike any other. A pioneer of free verse, he struck out on his own stylistic path when most of the poets around him were still using strict meters and rhyme schemes. He was a huge inspiration to writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who shared some of his ideas about the spiritual power of nature and the holiness of the individual body and spirit. But he was also influential on a broader scale: even Abraham Lincoln approvingly quoted Whitman's poetry!

Today, Whitman is celebrated for being a distinctly American voice, whose poetry presented a passionate vision of democracy and fellowship even in the midst of the Civil War. Along with his contemporaries Emily Dickinson and Oscar Wilde, he's also an important figure in LGBTQ literature: his erotic poetry celebrates the bodies of men and women alike.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Many of Whitman's beliefs about the holiness of the individual soul and body draw on American Quakerism, a branch of Protestant Christianity that believes every person is guided and illuminated by their own "inner light," a personal connection with God. Quakers reject elaborate church rituals and hierarchies and prefer to worship by sitting together in silence. Persecuted in England, Quakers started migrating to the American colonies in the 17th century and were an established and active religious group in the U.S. by the time Whitman was born. Many of Whitman's family members were Quakers.

While Whitman was skeptical about organized religious groups in general, Quakerism's humanistic attitudes—and its reverence for the individual—were all deep influences on his thought. Whitman was influenced in particular by the famous Quaker thinker Elias Hicks, the leader of a progressive splinter group and a friend of Whitman's grandfather. The young Whitman was deeply impressed by hearing Hicks's sermons as a child, and he took to heart Hicks's belief that people need to look inward to come in contact with the deepest truths (and can trust their own inner knowing over any outer wisdom).

Like Whitman, the Quakers were also staunch abolitionists; in fact, they were one of the earliest groups to collectively denounce slavery. Quakers actively campaigned against slavery on the basis that all humans carry a sacred inner light—an argument much like the one that Whitman makes in "I Sing the Body Electric."

The abolitionist movement became especially active, important, and influential during the American Civil War: slavery was the key issue that led the southern Confederate states to secede from the northern Union states. The pacifistic Whitman was profoundly marked by this long and bloody conflict. Believing deeply in human unity, he was horrified both by the institution of slavery and by the war's appalling violence.

Whitman's first-hand experience of slave auctions, his volunteer work in military hospitals, and his deep grief over the death of Abraham Lincoln would shape the rest of his poetic career: all this suffering only strengthened his belief in a deep, mysterious, and beautiful connection between all of humanity.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem's History — Read some background on the poem—and on Whitman's determination to include even the sections that made his early readers uncomfortable! (https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_9.html)
- The Poem Out Loud — Hear the poem read aloud. (https://youtu.be/zZF_3RhHoiM)
- The Whitman Archive — Visit the Walt Whitman Archive to learn more about Whitman's work (and to compare different versions of this much-revised poem). (https://whitmanarchive.org/)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Whitman's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walt-whitman)
- Whitman's Legacy — Learn more about the history—and enduring influence—of Whitman's Leaves of Grass. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/12/walt-whitman-bicentennial-exhibitions-new-york)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALT WHITMAN POEMS

- A Noiseless Patient Spider
- Beat! Beat! Drums!
- I Hear America Singing
- O Captain! My Captain!
- O Me! O Life!
- The Voice of the Rain
- When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer
- When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*I Sing the Body Electric.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 24 Mar 2020. Web. 28 Apr 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*I Sing the Body Electric.*" LitCharts LLC, March 24, 2020. Retrieved April 28, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/walt-whitman/i-sing-the-body-electric.