

# “Song of Myself” Translation

American Literature

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Americans have read many great works of literature in translation: *The Odyssey*, *Madame Bovary*, *Don Quixote*, *One-Hundred Years of Solitude*. Likewise, others have read many of our great English-language books in translation (Did you know that *Twilight* has been translated into over twenty languages?). Every big publishing house hires a variety of translators to carefully pore over scores of foreign-language books and to translate each one into English. The best translators are able to retain the tone and voice of the book’s native author. Poetry, however, can be a language unto itself . . . even when written in English. Now I’m hiring you as a translator. As such, it is your job to translate Walt Whitman’s classic American poem “Song of Myself” into modern English, paying special attention not to lose Whitman’s particular tone and voice.

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I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

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I loaf and invite my soul,  
I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

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My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,  
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,  
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,  
Hoping to cease not till death.

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Creeds and schools in abeyance,  
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,  
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,  
Nature without check with original energy.

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A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;  
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

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

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Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,  
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,  
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

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What do you think has become of the young and old men?  
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,  
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,  
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,  
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

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All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,  
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

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The big doors of the country barn stand open and ready,  
 The dried grass of the harvest-time loads the slow-drawn wagon,  
 The clear light plays on the brown gray and green intertinged,  
 The armfuls are pack'd to the sagging mow.

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I am there, I help, I came stretch'd atop of the load,  
 I felt its soft jolts, one leg reclined on the other,  
 I jump from the cross-beams and seize the clover and timothy,  
 And roll head over heels and tangle my hair full of wisps.

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The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,  
 Ya-honk he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation,  
 The pert may suppose it meaningless, but I listening close,  
 Find its purpose and place up there toward the wintry sky.

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The sharp-hoof'd moose of the north, the cat on the house-sill, the chickadee, the prairie-dog,  
 The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats,  
 The brood of the turkey-hen and she with her half-spread wings,  
 I see in them and myself the same old law.

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The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections,  
They scorn the best I can do to relate them.

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I am enamour'd of growing out-doors,  
Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods,  
Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes and mauls, and the drivers of horses,  
I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out.

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What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me,  
Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns,  
Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me,  
Not asking the sky to come down to my good will,  
Scattering it freely forever.

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These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me,  
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing,  
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,  
If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,  
This is the common air that bathes the globe.

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The past and present wilt--I have fill'd them, emptied them.  
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

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Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?  
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,  
(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)

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Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

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I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab.

Who has done his day's work? who will soonest be through with his supper?  
Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?

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The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,  
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

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The last scud of day holds back for me,  
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds,  
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,  
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

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You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,  
And filter and fibre your blood.

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Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

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