O Me! O Life!

POEM TEXT

O me! O life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew'd,
Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,
Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

SUMMARY

Oh, me! Oh, life! Oh, the questions about existence that I grapple with over and over. I think about the infinite processions of people who don't believe in anything, about whole cities filled with silly, thoughtless people. I think about how I'm always scolding myself (because who's more of an unbelieving fool than I am?). I think about how people desperately (and fruitlessly) long for understanding, about how our goals are lowly and petty, about how we're always pointlessly striving. I think about how little ever comes of all our efforts, and about the unsavory people I see moving slowly around me. I think about all those peoples' pointless lives, and about how I'm caught up in their pointless lives, too. So the tragic question keeps coming back to me: what possible good can I find in this existence?

Answer: the good is that you exist at all; that life is real, and selfhood is real; that the grand drama of life keeps on going, and that you've been given the privilege of writing some lines for it.

THEMES

THE MEANING OF LIFE

The speaker of "O Me! O Life!" is profoundly fed up with the world. Looking around, all the speaker sees is foolishness, sorrow, suffering, and regret. What, the speaker thus wonders, is the point of being alive at all? But in the depths of this despair, the speaker receives a mysterious "Answer": merely being part of the grand "play" of existence, a mysterious voice tells him, is enough reason to carry on. In other words, to this speaker, the fact that life simply *exists* is reason enough to feel wonder and awe—even when the world is at its most dispiriting.

The world often feels like one big disappointment to the speaker—like a failed experiment that's getting nowhere. The world is full of "foolish" people, "sordid" (or dirty and unsavory) crowds who seem only to get "poor results" in whatever they try to do. The speaker doesn't exempt themselves from this judgment, either, but is quick to note that they're just as foolish as the rest of the population. In the depths of despair, the speaker sees the world as "empty and useless," and longs in "vain[]" for the "light"—that is, for some kind of wisdom, hope, joy, or understanding that never seems to arrive.

The resolution to this problem, the speaker suggests, isn't to pretend that life *isn't* hard and sad, or to console oneself with false optimism. Rather, it's to be amazed that life exists *at all*.

This insight arrives in the form of an "Answer" from a mysterious voice, which tells the speaker that the "good" of life is that it *is*—and that the speaker, who also *is*, has the amazing chance to play a part in existence. There's the feeling that life *itself* is answering the speaker here, responding by simply asserting its own miraculous reality. And the speaker's own soul is a part of this life, sharing in its power and beauty.

In short, the plain fact that there's *something* rather than *nothing* is enough of a "light" of hope and wonder to making living worthwhile. In this speaker's view, pausing to consider how unlikely and miraculous it is that one exists at all can give one enough energy to keep on living in a world of pains and disappointments—and even to feel pretty good about it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-7
- Between Lines 7-8
- Lines 8-9

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

O me! O life! of the questions of these recurring,

The speaker launches into this poem with an exasperated outburst: "O me! O life!"

Right off the bat, the reader might find something a little odd in the exclamation "O me!" This now-unusual expression was once a common lament, along the lines of "Aw, man!" It turns up in Shakespeare, for instance, when Juliet is sighing on her balcony. But by the time Whitman was writing in the 19th century, this turn of phrase (technically an example of apostrophe) would already have felt old-fashioned.

That dramatic "O" makes the speaker's outburst feel even more loaded. "O" is a grand word, the kind of word one would use to address a goddess (as Keats does in his "Ode to Psyche," for instance). There's something big and serious going on here, then, not just a minor complaint. This speaker is having powerful feelings, grappling with something difficult.

That serious thing might be both "me"—the speaker's self—and "life" in general. For it's "the questions of these" that "recur[]" to the speaker, repeating themselves over and over. In other words, not only does this speaker have big questions, those questions don't seem to have clear answers: the poor speaker has to ask them again and again, struggling with a mystery.

Much of the rest of this free verse poem will investigate that mystery in rhythmic, free-form lines.

LINES 2-3

Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)

Looking around, the speaker's weary eye takes in all of humanity—and doesn't find much to like. Every city, the speaker observes, is filled with an endless procession of cynics and fools. And the speaker feels like the biggest cynical fool of them all!

Here, parallelism (and, more specifically, anaphora) suggests just how overwhelming and "endless" human folly appears to this speaker:

> Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,
> Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)

The anaphora here makes it seem as though the speaker could go on listing lousy things about life all day.

The speaker can't even get a break from this mess in their own head: they're "forever reproaching," or scolding, themselves, telling themselves off for being just as "foolish" and "faithless" as all the other faithless fools. Even though the speaker can see the world's failings (and be miserable about them), the speaker can't overcome those same failings inside.

The speaker's unhappiness here suggests a kind of wounded idealism. If the speaker is disappointed that people are "faithless," then there must be something that people could or should put their faith in. And if the speaker is upset that people are "foolish," there must be wisdom somewhere in the world.

But the grand reference to entire "cities fill'd with the foolish" suggests that these failures are big and serious: failures of the whole history of civilization, not just of one time or place.

LINES 4-6

Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew'd,
Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,
Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,

The speaker is far from done with this list of all the things that are wrong with life! These next lines carry on the anaphora lines 2-3 introduced, starting each new clause with a new "of." Again, the speaker has nothing good to add to this pile of charges against existence: people seek understanding and can't find it, or strive after silly things, and inevitably fail at the things they strive after anyway. And this "struggle" is "ever renew'd": the whole mess just keeps going on and on.

Here, the speaker's jaded, disappointed idealism becomes even clearer through a bright metaphor. In spite of all the mess and nonsense of life, the speaker says, people still "crave the light." That light isn't mere sunshine, either: it's enlightenment, a kind wisdom that might make sense of life's chaos.

Unfortunately for such seekers, that craving is always in vain—futile and doomed to be thwarted. The assonant /ay/ sound that links these words ("vainly crave") suggests that longing and disappointment go hand in hand: no sooner do people seek understanding than they're let down by their inability to find it.

Some of the speaker's suffering here also seems to come from a sense of being alone in a crowd. This speaker has nothing but harsh words for the "objects mean" (that is, the lowly goals) of the "plodding and sordid crowds" living out "empty and useless years" in those cities of fools. In other words, the speaker judges the rest of humanity, and judges it harshly.

While the speaker has already admitted to being just as "foolish" and "faithless" as the next person, the speaker also seems tormented by this ability to *see* all this folly and faithlessness. Perceiving that everything is lousy makes the speaker feel lonely, too. At the same time, however, the speaker

also knows that their own life is "intertwined" with the lives of the people around them, no matter how disgusting that reality feels. In fact, that "intertwin[ing]" is its own kind of torture.

Take a look at the way the speaker shapes line 6 to reflect that suffering:

> Of the empty and useless years of **the rest, with the rest** me intertwined,

The chiasmus here evokes exactly what it describes: the speaker's feeling that their own life is tangled up in the lives of "the rest," whether anyone likes it or not.

LINE 7

> *The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?*

The speaker is suffering from a weary, disgusted, and prolonged despair, which the repetitions in this line makes crystal clear:

> **The question, O me!** so sad, **recurring**—What good amid these, **O me, O life**?

Almost every word here echoes the first line of the poem:

> **O me! O life!** of the **questions** of these **recurring**,

Even the word "recurring" recurs (that is, repeats or reappears). The speaker has obviously been struggling with these questions for a very, very long time.

But something has changed by this point in them. Now, the speaker acknowledges not just that these problems are annoying and intractable, but that they're also "sad." There's not just rage and disdain here, then, but also hurt and sorrow. And this time, the words "O me" and "O life" don't feel so much like outbursts. Now, they sound a lot more like apostrophes. The speaker seems to be asking a genuine question here: *what "good" is there to be found in a world like this?*

This question is addressed to figures who seem unlikely to reply: "me" and "life." Judging by the first lines of the poem, the "me" here doesn't seem to have a clue about what might be a "good" reason to live: the speaker feels too "foolish" to find helpful answers. And "life" itself certainly hasn't provided any answers yet, either: the speaker has "vainly crav[ed]" enlightenment, but received none.

And yet: here at the end of the poem, something is about to change.

BETWEEN LINES 7-8, LINES 8-9

> *Answer.*
>
> *That you are here—that life exists and identity,*
> *That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.*

Throughout the first seven lines of the poem, the speaker has been struggling with problems they've clearly grappled with many times before. Tormented by "recurring" questions about why life is so sad, disappointing, and futile, the speaker has at last asked: what possible "good" can I find in this world?

Strangely enough, in the last two lines, the speaker gets an "Answer." It's not clear exactly who *delivers* this answer. But since the speaker has just addressed both "me" and "life," maybe the reply comes from one of those sources—or both. In some strange way, the voice seems to come both from outside the speaker (it uses the second person) and inside them. Perhaps, the closing lines will suggest, listening to "life" and listening to one's own soul aren't so different.

This mysterious voice tells the speaker that the "good" of life is that it exists at all. The mere fact that life *is*—and that the speaker has been given the privilege of a self, an "identity"—is a mind-boggling miracle. Existence is itself a good, in other words, and the speaker's existence is a good among goods.

This is an answer that invites the speaker to feel, not judgment and sorrow, but rather profound awe. The message here is basically: *remember that being alive is itself a miracle, a mystery.*

In giving this reply, the mysterious voice seems right in tune with ancient tradition. What the voice is saying here is a lot like what God says to Moses in the biblical Book of Exodus: when Moses asks God's name, God only replies, "I am what I am." Existence itself, in other words, is a self-justifying miracle. Human beings can both find comfort in remembering how strange and beautiful it is to be alive at all—and perhaps in opening themselves up to a sense that more might be going on in the world than any one human mind can take in.

The mysterious voice makes that point through metaphor:

> [...] the **powerful play goes on**, and you may contribute a verse.

If life is a "powerful play," then perhaps there's even some kind of deeper reality that transcends what people can see. After all, when a play ends, reality doesn't evaporate: the actors go back to their lives in the "real world."

This metaphor also suggests that life can be seen, not just as a miracle, but as a work of creative art. Everyone is invited to contribute to this play, to write a few lines for it. Human lives are thus indeed "intertwined": everyone has a "verse" to give to the great collective artwork.

And of course, in writing this realization down, Whitman is contributing a literal "verse" of his own to the world, too.

SYMBOLS

CITIES

Cities, in this poem, symbolize civilization itself.

When this poem's speaker looks around and sees "cities fill'd with the foolish," there's the suggestion that *every* city—every place where people get together—is inevitably full of fools, because *everyone* is a fool. Cities, like civilization, might outwardly seem grand, impressive, and, well, civilized. But deep down, to this speaker, all human effort feels ultimately "empty and useless." The huge, crowded, "sordid" cities of this poem thus suggest the speaker's grand-scale disgust with humanity and its failings.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "cities fill'd with the foolish,"
- **Line 5:** "the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The alliteration in "O Me! O Life!" evokes the speaker's despair—and the calm power of the voice that responds to that despair. Take a look at lines 2-3, for instance:

> Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd
> with the foolish,
> Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more
> foolish than I, and who more faithless?)

The muffled alliterative /f/ sounds in these lines make it sound as if the speaker is practically spitting these words in disgust and defeat. (That effect is only heightened by the fact that the speaker repeats the words "foolish" and "faithless.")

The /p/ sounds in line 5 do something similar:

> Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid
> crowds I see around me,

That sharp, plosive /p/ also makes it sound a little as if the speaker is spitting in disgust—and evokes the heavy "plodding" this line describes.

But when the speaker's questions get a reply, the answering voice uses /p/ alliteration rather differently:

> That the powerful play goes on, and you may
> contribute a verse.

Here, the strong /p/ of "powerful play" feels, well, powerful! And in linking the words "powerful" and "play," /p/ alliteration makes it sound as if power is an inherent quality of that play. Life's mere existence, in other words, is a mighty force.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "faithless," "fill'd," "foolish"
- **Line 3:** "forever," "for," "foolish," "faithless"
- **Line 5:** "poor," "plodding"
- **Line 9:** "powerful," "play"

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration, assonance helps to evoke the speaker's feelings—particularly claustrophobic despair.

For instance, look at the patterns of assonance in line 2:

> Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd
> with the foolish,

The long /ay/ sound that links "trains" and "faithless" evokes just how long those cynical processions feel to the watching speaker. And the tightly matching short /ih/ sounds of "cities fill'd with the foolish" make those cities feel truly jam-packed (an effect enhanced by the alliterative /f/ in "fill'd with the foolish"). Taken together, these two one-two punches of assonance make the speaker's world feel constricted and depressing.

Assonance can also suggest thematic connections between words. For example, note the assonance of the phrase "vainly crave," which links longing (craving) with disappointment (in the sense of that craving being fruitless, or in vain) .

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "me," "these"
- **Line 2:** "trains," "faithless," "cities," "fill'd"
- **Line 3:** "who," "foolish," "who"
- **Line 4:** "vainly," "crave"
- **Line 5:** "poor," "sordid"
- **Line 6:** "years," "me"
- **Line 7:** "these," "me"
- **Line 9:** "play," "may"

APORIA

A couple of moments of aporia set this poem's whole tone. After all, "O Me! O Life!" is all about the "questions [...] recurring" that plague the speaker (and just about everyone who's ever thought too long about why life is the way it is).

The central question here only comes at the end of the speaker's tormented outburst. After enumerating all the parts of life that feel foolish, depressing, and disappointing, the

speaker finally asks:

> The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

In other words: among all this suffering and stupidity, what possible good can people find in life?

Notice, here, the way that the speaker *addresses* this question.

- At the beginning of the poem, when the speaker cried, "O me! O life!" it seemed like a mere exclamation, sort of the way you might say "Oh man!"
- But by the time the question appears, the speaker seems to be addressing an honored listener, the way you might invoke a god with an "O!"

In other words: by the time line 7 rolls around, the speaker is genuinely posing this question: to their own soul, and to Life itself. And they're lucky enough to get a direct answer!

The poem's other question is more purely rhetorical:

> Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)

Here, the speaker's merely saying: listen, I know I'm giving everyone in the whole world a hard time, but I'm well aware that I'm a bigger fool than all of them. But phrasing this point as a question makes the speaker sound even more weary and despairing.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "(for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)"
- **Line 7:** "The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?"

APOSTROPHE

The apostrophe in this poem forms a conversation of sorts: the speaker asks a tortured question, and a mysterious voice answers it.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker cries "O me! O life!" in general exasperation, the way you might say "Oh dang! Oh man!" But by the time those words repeat in line 7, they've subtly changed; now they seem more like a direct address, the way that the poet Keats cries "O Goddess!" at the beginning of his "Ode to Psyche":

> The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

In other words, the speaker is now directly questioning "me" and "life" as if they're separate entities. What on earth, the speaker asks them, is the "good" of being alive, when being alive is this rough?

Then, a voice that seems to belong both to "me" and "life" answers directly:

> That you are here—that life exists and identity,
> That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

Calling the speaker "you," this voice indeed feels like a being with its own separate thoughts. But it also seems to be the speaker's "me," part of the speaker's own soul—*and* an expression of "life" itself.

And that's exactly the point! No matter how down the speaker feels about life, they can't help but be a part of it, simply by existing—and the poem suggests that there's something miraculous about that.

The apostrophes in this poem thus help to suggest that the speaker *knows* the answer to their own question, in some deep-down part of their soul: life is its own answer.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "O me! O life!"
- **Line 7:** "The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?"
- **Lines 8-9:** "That you are here—that life exists and identity, / That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse."

END-STOPPED LINE

Every single line in this poem is end-stopped: that is, each line is a complete and self-contained thought. But each of these lines is *also* a continuation of a single ongoing idea, and many even look the same, using parallelism to echo each other's language. This contrast between separation and continuity helps to evoke the speaker's anguish: all the separate problems these lines list are also part of the great big intractable problem of human suffering.

For instance, take a look at the way the speaker uses end stops to shape lines 5-6:

> Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,
> Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,

These parallel lines both come to a complete stop at logical breaking points. But look again: these separate lines are both describing slightly different angles on the same basic problems.

The "poor results of all" have a lot in common with "empty and useless years," and the "plodding and sordid crowds" return as "the rest" the speaker is helplessly "intertwined" with.

By bringing these lines to firm closes, end-stops thus help to shape the speaker's evolving thoughts. In one line, the speaker thinks about how badly most efforts work out and how foolish and awful most people are. In the next line, the speaker *unites* these ideas, thinking about how the stupid awful crowds *produce* useless work, and how the speaker is trapped among them, just as stupid and awful as they.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "recurring,"
- **Line 2:** "foolish,"
- **Line 3:** "faithless?)"
- **Line 4:** "renew'd,"
- **Line 5:** "me,"
- **Line 6:** "intertwined,"
- **Line 7:** "life?"
- **Line 8:** "identity,"
- **Line 9:** "verse."

REPETITION

The poem's many emphatic repetitions evoke a mood of endless, futile struggle. But they also suggest that there's a calmer, grander way to look at that struggle than the speaker sees at first.

Anaphora and more general parallelism are the strongest flavors of repetition here. As the speaker enumerates all the terrible things about being alive, the speaker starts most of their thoughts in the same way:

> Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew'd,
> Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,

All these accumulating "o"fs make it seem as if the speaker is building a dreadful pile of evidence that life is pain, one example at a time.

The speaker's diacope, meanwhile, suggests that the speaker is not only surrounded by evidence of life's horrors, but is also constantly struggling with the same *questions* about those horrors. Notice how the speaker begins and ends their lament with the same crop of words:

> Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
> [...]
> The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

Here, the speaker drives their point home by repeating the word "recurring"—in other words, repeating a repetition!

But the original speaker isn't the only one using repetition, here. The eventual "Answer" uses anaphora, too:

> That you are here—that life exists and identity,
> That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

Where, before, the speaker's repetitions have suggested torment and confusion, this answer's repetitions suggest a calm, steady continuity. Just like the "powerful play" of life that these lines describe, these repetitions "go[] on." Life might seem to be one endless struggle, this anaphora suggests—but its grand momentum is also beautiful.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "O me! O life! of the questions of these recurring,"
- **Line 2:** "Of," "faithless," "of," "foolish"
- **Line 3:** "Of," "myself," "myself," "foolish," "faithless"
- **Line 4:** "Of," "of," "of"
- **Line 5:** "Of," "of"
- **Line 6:** "Of," "of"
- **Line 7:** "The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?"
- **Line 8:** "That," "that"
- **Line 9:** "That"

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors evoke both the speaker's dreadful sorrow and the answering voice's wisdom. The speaker's metaphors are both to do with ways of seeking (or rejecting) meaning:

- First, the speaker looks wearily at "endless trains of the faithless." A "train" might be a long procession—but it might also be one of the steam engines that were beginning to cross the U.S. when Whitman was writing. In either case, there's a sense that the "trains of the faithless" aren't able to think for themselves: they're just mechanically following what the person in front of them does, unable to seek any deeper understanding of life.
- Meanwhile, those who *do* search for meaning don't have an easier time of it. When the speaker thinks of "eyes that vainly crave the light," that light suggests *enlightenment*: spiritual or intellectual illumination, not just a sunny day. But the speaker seeks that light in "vain[]": no new insight seems to be forthcoming.

And yet, at the end of the poem, a mysterious voice *does* give

the speaker a glimmer of understanding. That voice uses a metaphor of its own. One reason to go on living, it says, is:

> That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

If life is a "powerful play," it's not just a meaningless series of depressing events: it's a work of art, and one that every living person is invited to write a few lines for, just by living their lives. (Of course, Whitman is also literally contributing a "verse" by writing this very poem.)

The metaphor of the play also suggests that there might be something *beyond* this life. When a play ends, after all, the world doesn't end: the audience goes back to its regular life. There's a hint of transcendence in this final image.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "endless trains of the faithless"
- **Line 4:** "eyes that vainly crave the light"
- **Line 9:** "the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse."

VOCABULARY

Recurring (Line 1, Line 7) - Arising again and again.

Trains (Line 2) - Lines or processions—though this might also suggest "trains" as in "steam engines."

Reproaching (Line 3) - Telling off, scolding.

Vainly (Line 4) - Futilely.

Objects (Line 4) - Goals, intentions.

Mean (Line 4) - Lowly, petty, or unworthy.

Plodding (Line 5) - Here, "plodding" could mean both "trudging" and "slow-witted."

Sordid (Line 5) - Lowly, squalid, or contemptible.

Intertwined (Line 6) - Woven together.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"O Me! O Life!" is a free verse poem and doesn't use any standard form, like the sonnet or the villanelle. But it does have a meaningful shape.

The poem is broken into two parts: the speaker's initial seven-line cry of anguish, and a mysterious voice's two-line "Answer."

After all the speaker's "recurring" and agonized questions about why people are so stupid and life is so disappointing, the other voice's reply feels awfully brief. And that's exactly the point. The "Answer"—that the mere existence of life is a matter for deep wonder—is at once profound and as simple as can be.

METER

As a free verse poem, "O Me! O Life!" doesn't use a regular meter. It feels urgent and intimate, free from the rigid constraints of metered verse. That said, the poem is still powerfully rhythmic, using bold stresses to evoke the depth of the speaker's torment. Take the opening spondees (feet consisting of two stressed beats in a row) of "O me! O life!"

Driving stresses like these evoke the urgency and pain of the speaker's questions about life all through the poem: the lines seem to pound like a troubled heart.

RHYME SCHEME

Like a lot of free verse poems, "O Me! O Life!" doesn't use rhyme. The poem's music instead comes from patterns of sound within the lines, like assonance and alliteration. The lack of steady, plodding rhyme keeps things feeling urgent and intimate, like a call directly from the speaker's heart.

SPEAKER

The first-person speaker of this poem feels alone in a crowd—but also stuck in it. Tormented by the futility of most human efforts, the speaker writes off whole populations as fools. But the speaker is also quick to note that they themselves might be the biggest fool of them all. From where the speaker sits at the beginning of the poem, life looks like a pointless and ugly struggle.

This speaker isn't in *total* despair, though. They're still striving for meaning, desperately asking "What good" life might possibly have to offer. And the speaker is a thoughtful enough listener that they even get an "Answer" to that huge question. A mysterious voice that might belong to some deeper, wiser part of the speaker—or even to "Life" itself—replies that the mere fact that life exists is enough of a miracle to make being alive worthwhile.

Readers might suspect that the speaker here is Whitman himself: much of Whitman's poetry is written from his own perspective, and this speaker's grand, emotive, mystical tone is extremely Whitmanesque. But this speaker could also be anyone who's ever wondered about the meaning of life.

SETTING

"O Me! O Life!" is set in a bustling, grimy, and dispiriting city. Over and over, the speaker emphasizes just how many people there are around—and not one of them isn't a total fool, the speaker very much included. In fact, the speaker feels that it's not just the city they're stuck in that's miserable, but cities in

general: every town is "fill'd with the foolish."

The speaker thus makes a sweeping denouncement of civilization in general. The setting here isn't any city in particular: it's *every* city, everywhere that people have ever gathered to do the silly, pointless things that they seem eternally to do.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"O Me! O Life!" first appeared in the 1867 edition of Walt Whitman's magnum opus, *Leaves of Grass*. This sprawling collection of poems grew and evolved all through Whitman's life. The first edition appeared in 1855, but by the time Whitman died in 1892, he'd revised and reprinted it seven times, and every edition sprouted a few new poems. "O Me! O Life!" is textbook Whitman: a free-verse, first-person reflection on life's biggest questions, delivered in plain clear language.

Whitman is often seen as a founding father of the 19th-century American Transcendentalist movement. Both imbued with mysticism and firmly rooted in the natural landscape, his poetry was an inspiration to fellow American writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

But, like his contemporary Emily Dickinson, Whitman was also one of a kind, standing apart from the literary world around him with an inimitable style. Whitman pioneered free verse at a time when most poetry was still bound by metrical convention, and he remains acknowledged as a master of the form.

More than 200 years after his death, Whitman is still one of the world's best-known and most beloved poets. Some of his poems are so famous they're almost proverbial: for instance, "I am large, I contain multitudes" is a line from his "Song of Myself."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1867, when this poem was first printed, Walt Whitman had every reason to feel pretty disgusted and weary with humanity. The American Civil War had ended only two years before. While Whitman didn't fight in that war himself—one of his friends once said that imagining the pacifistic Whitman on a battlefield was as incongruous as imagining Jesus Christ holding a gun—he saw plenty of its horrors when he volunteered in military hospitals.

A firm opponent of slavery, Whitman felt great hope and relief when the Union won the war. But that relief was short-lived: he was devastated when, shortly after the end of the war, Lincoln was assassinated. Whitman had deeply admired and sympathized with Lincoln. (And the feeling was mutual: Lincoln is known to have read poems from *Leaves of Grass* aloud.)

But Whitman's grief became his muse. Whitman's sorrow over Lincoln's death and the Civil War in general inspired poems like "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," and pushed Whitman into deeper spiritual waters. His conclusion in "O Me! O Life!"—that existence is inherently miraculous—is all part of the transcendent understanding of life that he developed in the wake of terrible times.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poem read aloud. (https://youtu.be/MmlCKsiNzu8)
- A First Edition — See an image of the first published edition of the poem at the Whitman Archive, and learn more about Whitman's poetry. (https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1881/poems/127)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Whitman's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walt-whitman)
- The Whitman Museum — Visit the website of the Walt Whitman museum, where you can learn more about the world in which Whitman lived and wrote. (https://www.waltwhitman.org/)
- The Whitman Bicentennial — Read about Whitman's enduring legacy. Over 200 years after his birth, he remains one of the world's most influential and beloved poets. (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!
- 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. "*O Me! O Life!*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Mar 2021. Web. 12 Apr 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*O Me! O Life!*." LitCharts LLC, March 28, 2021. Retrieved April 12, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/walt-whitman/o-me-o-life.