

when was song of myself written

When was "Song of Myself" written, is a question that delves into the life and times of one of America's most influential poets, Walt Whitman. This poem, which is a part of his larger work "Leaves of Grass," embodies the spirit of the 19th century and reflects Whitman's philosophical and artistic evolution. Written during a period of great social and political upheaval in the United States, "Song of Myself" captures the essence of individualism, democracy, and the interconnectedness of all people. To fully appreciate this remarkable poem, it is crucial to explore not only its composition but also the context in which it was written.

Background of Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, in West Hills, New York. He grew up during a time when the United States was experiencing rapid changes, including industrialization, westward expansion, and the intensifying debate over slavery. Whitman's experiences in the bustling metropolis of New York City profoundly shaped his worldview. He worked as a journalist, teacher, and printer, all of which influenced his writing style and thematic concerns.

The Emergence of "Leaves of Grass"

"Leaves of Grass" was first published in 1855, featuring a collection of poems that celebrated the individual and the collective human experience. It was a groundbreaking work that defied traditional poetic structures and embraced free verse. The first edition of "Leaves of Grass" contained only twelve poems, with "Song of Myself" being the centerpiece.

The poem underwent several revisions and expansions throughout Whitman's life, reflecting his evolving thoughts and experiences. The original version of "Song of Myself" was penned in 1855, and over the years, Whitman continued to revise it, ultimately publishing a version in 1892 that contained 52 sections.

The Historical Context of Composition

To understand when "Song of Myself" was written, it is essential to consider the historical context of mid-19th century America. This era was marked by:

1. Expansion and Manifest Destiny: The belief that the United States was destined to expand across the continent influenced Whitman's ideas about democracy and individualism.

2. Social Reform Movements: The abolitionist movement, women's rights, and labor rights were gaining momentum, and Whitman's poetry often reflects these themes.

3. The Civil War: The tumultuous years leading up to and during the Civil War (1861-1865) deeply impacted Whitman, who famously volunteered as a nurse and wrote about the experiences of soldiers and the nature of human suffering and resilience.

These historical factors played a significant role in shaping the content and themes of "Song of Myself."

The Writing Process

Whitman's writing process for "Song of Myself" was both iterative and reflective. The following points detail how he approached the composition:

- Intense Personal Reflection: Whitman drew from his own experiences, beliefs, and observations of the world around him.
- Emphasis on Free Verse: Rejecting traditional meter and rhyme, Whitman utilized free verse to convey a more natural flow of thought and emotion.
- Incorporation of Various Voices: Whitman wrote in the first person, allowing him to explore multiple perspectives and the idea of a collective self.

The writing of "Song of Myself" was not confined to a specific timeframe but was a continuous process that evolved over several years.

Significant Editions of "Song of Myself"

As mentioned, "Song of Myself" was part of "Leaves of Grass," which underwent multiple editions. Each edition marks a significant point in Whitman's career and thought process.

1855 Edition

- Initial Publication: The first version of "Song of Myself" was included in the original 1855 edition of "Leaves of Grass."
- Impact: This edition was self-published, with only 795 copies printed. Whitman's bold exploration of themes like sexuality, democracy, and the human experience was revolutionary.

1860 Edition

- Revisions: The 1860 edition included substantial revisions and additional poems, showcasing Whitman's growth as a poet.
- Expansion of Themes: The themes of unity and the interconnectedness of humanity became more pronounced.

1892 Edition

- Final Version: The final version of "Song of Myself" was published in the 1892 edition of "Leaves of Grass."
- Legacy: This edition is often regarded as the definitive version, incorporating Whitman's mature reflections on life, death, and the human spirit.

Thematic Elements of "Song of Myself"

"Song of Myself" is rich with themes that resonate with readers to this day. Some of the most prominent themes include:

1. Individualism: Whitman celebrates the individual and the unique experiences that shape each person's identity.
2. Unity and Democracy: The poem emphasizes the interconnection of all people, advocating for equality and democratic ideals.
3. Nature: Whitman often draws parallels between humanity and the natural world, suggesting that the two are intricately connected.
4. Transcendentalism: Influenced by transcendentalist thought, Whitman explores the idea of the self transcending the physical body and connecting with a larger universal spirit.
5. Sexuality: The poem is notable for its candid exploration of sexuality, challenging societal norms of the time.

Critical Reception and Legacy

The initial reception of "Leaves of Grass" and "Song of Myself" was mixed. Some praised Whitman for his innovative style and depth of thought, while others criticized him for his perceived obscenity and radical ideas. Over time, however, Whitman's work gained recognition and respect, influencing countless poets and writers.

Influence on Modern Poetry

Whitman's innovative use of free verse and his exploration of personal and collective identity laid the groundwork for modern poetry. Many poets, including:

- Langston Hughes
- Allen Ginsberg
- Sylvia Plath

have cited Whitman as a significant influence on their work.

Conclusion

Understanding when "Song of Myself" was written is not merely about the dates but rather a reflection of the profound changes occurring in society at that time. Whitman's ability to capture the essence of the human experience in a rapidly changing world speaks to his genius as a poet. His work transcended the boundaries of time, influencing generations and leaving an indelible mark on American literature. As readers engage with "Song of Myself," they are invited to explore the depths of their own identities while celebrating the shared human experience that Whitman so passionately articulated. The poem remains a testament to the enduring power of poetry to inspire, challenge, and connect us all.

Frequently Asked Questions

When was 'Song of Myself' first published?

'Song of Myself' was first published in 1855 as part of Walt Whitman's collection 'Leaves of Grass'.

What year did Walt Whitman write 'Song of Myself'?

Walt Whitman began writing 'Song of Myself' in 1850, but it was first published in 1855.

How many times was 'Song of Myself' revised?

'Song of Myself' was revised several times, with notable revisions occurring in the editions of 1860, 1867, and 1892.

What inspired Walt Whitman to write 'Song of Myself'?

Walt Whitman was inspired by his experiences in America and his desire to express the human experience and individual identity.

Is 'Song of Myself' a part of a larger work?

Yes, 'Song of Myself' is part of Walt Whitman's larger work titled 'Leaves of

Grass'.

What themes are explored in 'Song of Myself'?

Themes in 'Song of Myself' include individuality, democracy, nature, and the interconnectedness of all people.

What is the significance of the year 1855 for 'Song of Myself'?

The year 1855 is significant because it marks the initial publication of 'Song of Myself' and the launch of 'Leaves of Grass'.

Did 'Song of Myself' receive immediate acclaim upon publication?

No, 'Song of Myself' faced criticism and mixed reviews initially but later gained recognition as a groundbreaking work.

How long is 'Song of Myself'?

'Song of Myself' is composed of 52 sections and is approximately 1,345 lines long.

Has 'Song of Myself' influenced modern poetry?

Yes, 'Song of Myself' has had a profound impact on modern poetry, inspiring countless poets with its free verse and themes of self and nature.

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