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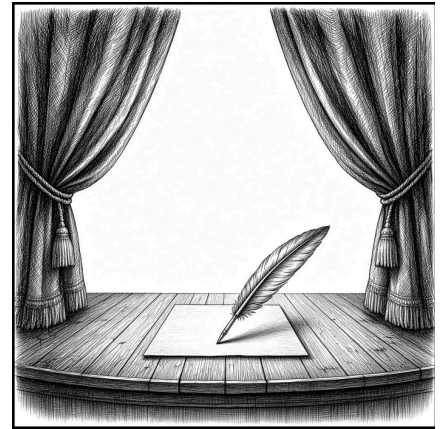
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O Me! O Life!

by Walt Whitman

Grades 8–12 · Common Core RL.9–10.4, RL.9–10.2, RL.9–10.5

“O Me! O Life!” appeared in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1867 edition). Like most of Whitman’s work, it is free verse: no fixed meter or rhyme. It is built as a long question followed by a short “Answer.”



THE POEM

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,
5 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,
10 That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

VOCABULARY

recurring — happening again and again**faithless** — lacking faith or loyalty**reproaching** — blaming, criticizing**vainly** — without success**sordid** — dirty, dishonest or shameful**plodding** — moving slowly and heavily**identity** — who a person is

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What word begins most of the lines in the first part? What is this repetition called, and what effect does it have?

2. List three things that trouble the speaker.

3. How does the speaker include himself in the problem?

4. What is the question he finally asks?

5. What is the “Answer”? What does “you may contribute a verse” mean?

WRITING PROMPT

Whitman says “the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.” Write a paragraph or poem describing the “verse” you hope to contribute to the world.

[illegible]

O Me! O Life! — Answer Key

1. “Of” (anaphora). It piles up complaints, making the despair feel endless and overwhelming.
2. Any three: “the faithless,” “cities fill’d with the foolish,” his own failings, the “struggle ever renew’d,” “the plodding and sordid crowds,” “the empty and useless years.”
3. “Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)”: he admits he is as foolish as anyone.
4. “What good amid these, O me, O life?”: what is the point of living?
5. “That you are here—that life exists and identity”: life matters simply because you exist, and everyone can add their own part to the ongoing story (the “powerful play”) of the world.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/o-me-o-life-walt-whitman/