

Passage to India (from *Leaves of Grass*) – Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman - 1819-1892

Walt Whitman is both a major poet and an outstanding personality in the history of American literature. He is always to be recognized as a national figure. His achievement is great, although it has been sometimes defamed by hostile criticism. He is essentially a poet, though other aspects of his achievement — as philosopher, mystic, or critic — have also been stressed.

The poem

'Passage to India' by Walt Whitman is a free verse poem that was published as a part of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's seminal work. *Leaves of Grass* was published multiple times throughout Whitman's life, as he made changes and editions, until his death in 1892. It was this piece that would inspire E.M Forester to write his 1924 novel, *A Passage to India*.

The poem is a salute to the idea of the evolutionary progress of the human race; it celebrates the scientific achievements of the age, looks forward to the imminent dawning of an era in which all divisions and separations between people, and people and nature, will be eliminated, and heralds the spiritual voyage of every human soul into the depths of the inner universe.

The poem describes an imaginary journey that a speaker wants to take into fabled India. It begins with a description of the new marvel of the modern world and how they are part of God's plan. These works, **the Suez Canal**, **the great American Railway**, and the **transatlantic telegraph cable** allowed men and women to know one another in a new way.

He sees India as a mysterious and fabled place that once visited, will allow a rejuvenation of his soul. He will return to the birthplace of mankind and be renewed for the rest of his life.

The Passage to India is not easy, many have died on the way. That scares the speaker, but not so much so as to deter him from undertaking the voyage. The pull of exploration is like a current running through the human race and he is a part of it and wants to feel the connectivity of the earth. The speaker also takes the time to mourn the downfall of men, like Columbus, who ended their lives unhappily. He imagines that he is on this important journey with his soul and that the two of them are circumnavigating the earth together.

After asking himself if he is ready to go further on his journey, the reply is an eventual yes and he commands the anchor to be lifted. While the voyage might seem like a terrifying one, he is protected by God.

Summary and Analysis of Passage to India

Section 1: The speaker of the poem is singing of the great achievements of the present. He praises the engineers for their strong yet light works. He says the present wonders outdo the ancient wonders. He praises the mighty railroads, the wires laid through the sea and the Suez Canal. But then he cries out, along with a soul about the past.

He then speaks of the past in great detail. He calls it an abyss of shadows and sleepers, dark and unfathomable. The past has infinite greatness. The present is but an outgrowth of the past. In this section 1 alone, we see multiple poetic devices like free verse, personification, and apostrophe.

Section 2: The speaker then tells the soul to travel to India, to explain the myths and fables surrounding it. The speaker says that he welcomes these myths and fables the same way he welcomes the proud truths of the world and facts of modern science. He describes them as beams of light, as unloosened dreams. He uses some imagery to describe the temples and towers. We see before us fair temples, with the rising sun behind, pouring its rays of lights, making it a

dazzling site. We see red and gold towers. He says these fables are made immortal by the mortal's (human's) dreams.

Section 3: The speaker asks the soul did it not see through God's purpose from the beginning. The earth exists to be spanned, connected by networks, people are meant to become brothers and sisters, marriages are meant to be diverse, the oceans exist to be crossed and the distances exist to be overcome. And all this is already seen in India, a land of unified diversity.

The speaker starts a new worship to all the voyagers, explorers, engineers and machinists. They do not just trade and transport but connect for the sake of Souls.

Section 4: The speaker sees two tableaux, two paintings in which he sees two modern great achievements and again, these are all for the soul. In the first one, he sees Suez Canal, newly opened, with steamships passing through it, led by Empress Eugenie. Empress Eugenie was the wife of Napoleon III and the last Empress Consort of the French. The speaker now imagines himself in that tableau, on the deck of a ship, seeing the landscape, the sky, and the sand. He passes the workmen and machines.

In the second tableau, he sees a different picture. Yet it was same as it belonged to the soul. In it, he sees the Pacific Railroad breaking every barrier. He then goes on at great length to describe what all he says when he's on that train. He covers a vast number of places over a wide, wide range of land. He means to say that all these places, so far away from each other, are now so close and connected. The road connects the western and the eastern sea and acts as the road between Europe and Asia.

Genoa is an important port in Italy. Its people are called Genoese. The Genoese dreamt of connecting places across seas and now, it has become reality.

Section 5: The passage, the journey isn't easy. Captains struggle and sailors die over the journey. These deaths rains over the mood of the speaker like the clouds which spread above in the sky. But like the rivulets which sink down only to rise again, throughout history the plans, the voyages and the expeditions are made again and again. It is by this process that lands are found, nations are born. The example of America is given here, a land found by Columbus on such an expedition. Such expeditions bust myths and find facts like the earth is round and not hemispherical.

Section 6: The speaker now speaks of the earth. He calls it a vast round object covered with power and beauty. He then goes on to speak of all that earth covers and has like trees, mountains, water. He says these are all with some unknown intention and the speaker's thoughts spread across the earth now. He speaks of Adam and Eve, and their descendants and of their questioning, feverish hearts

Section 7: The speaker sees that day coming when all the continents are joined, all the oceans merged and all the climates united. This unification is unlike that of a mere Doge of Venice and Adriatic, the speaker says. Doges are elected officials in Venice. One of their ceremonial duties is to celebrate the symbolic marriage of Venice with the sea, Adriatic. The unification of all that is on earth is grander than this ceremony, which is grand in itself, making the unification the speaker sees that much grander. The lands are likened to a bride and bridegrooms holding a garland festival.

Section 8: The speaker returns to the passage to India now. He speaks of Caucasus, the region at the border of Europe and Asia, and river Euphrates, implying that he is drawing closer to India. He speaks of India, in retrospection, as the most populous and wealthiest of Earth's lands. He then goes on to describe its geography, its history, and religion in great detail. India is the land of many diverse occupations and origins. There is much to do there; maps to be expanded, blanks to

be filled, doubts to be solved. Never is anyone found to rest. The speaker says that soul will find itself right at home in this place.

Section 9: In this section, the poet returns to his home, America. He speaks of the year 1492 in which America was discovered. The Admiral mentioned here is Columbus and his situation and plight is described in great detail here. The way his journey started, the great fame he got in discovering new lands, of how he faced misfortunes (due to his differences with Spanish crown and its colonial administrators), of how he lost everything he gained and died in poverty and dejection.

The speaker ends the section by noting the efforts of the heroes. Though they are slandered when alive, face conspired poverty and unceremonious death, their stories will always be passed on. And after a sufficient time passes on, their stories grow again and fill the earth with knowledge and inspiration. 'Use' and 'beauty' are used as symbols for knowledge and inspiration in this section.

Section 10: The speaker now returns to the ancient times when thought was new, Bible was still in creation and wisdom was just born. The speaker imagines himself and the soul journeying this earth together, going in a complete circle. They go to the time when everything was fair, and creation was new.

Section 11: The speaker cannot wait for any longer after he thinks of all of this. He tells the soul that they should immediately take a ship and happily go out on the vast seas. They should take this journey fearless singing songs of God and think of their pleasant exploration. 'Though others weep for any reason, we shall be a happy soul, let us be happy, soul', says the speaker.

The soul pleases the speaker and the speaker pleases the soul. They both go on their journey through space, time and death. They explore all the places on earth. At the beginning of the journey, the speaker shrivels at the thought of God and Nature and at their vastness and transcendental-ness. But he believes the soul will bridge this gap. At the end of the journey, when they see all and experience, and when they finally go before God, it will be like meeting an elder brother. The meeting would be filled with friendship and love; nothing to shrivel at anymore.

Section 12: Now the speaker is ready to journey beyond India. He asks the soul if it was ready to go on greater journeys, to venture into the unknown, to 'aged enigmas' and 'strangling problems' which have the skeletons all around them. The speaker means to say that no one reached them before, that all those who tried to, died before they could reach. The whole poem is one body of massive metaphorical verse.

Section 13: The speaker is now ready to let go of the past. As said in the beginning, India is but a metaphor for past. And now the speaker is ready to go beyond all that is know, to go beyond the books into the unknown. The speaker is with the soul and the soul with him and together they will venture only into the deepest of waters. No more mere lives of brutes; the blood of the speaker has awakened, boiling. He will risk the ship, himself and everything to go to that unknown. The soul is brave, so is he and they will sail farther and farther from the known, from safety; but they will be happy since all the seas are but seas of God.

The long poem ends with the sentence 'O farther, farther, farther sail!' The repetition tells the reader that the speaker and the soul are now on a journey to unreached places.

Central Idea of the poem: The central idea of the poem is to take one on a path of past, of adventure, of reality and ultimately to God.

Tone of Passage to India: The tone of the poem varies but it always maintains a trace of wonder. It is hopeful at times, dejected in others; hopeful at some, taking hope away at others. But at the end, all of this is replaced by a sense of exploration and a tone of hope and adventure. Conclusion: Whitman takes the reader on a journey which is both factual and spiritual in this long piece of verse; he leads one to the past, the present and the future and shows us a way to God. He also shows the true greatness of exploration using actual places and events and telling them in a beautiful verse.

