

—◆—

“PIONEERS! O PIONEERS!”

WALT WHITMAN

	Text		Translation
1	<p>Come my tan-faced children, Follow well in order, get your weapons ready, Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes? Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>		<p>Come my children with tan faces. Follow in order. Get your weapons ready. Do you have your pistols? Do you have your sharp-edged axes? Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>
5	<p>For we cannot tarry here, We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger, We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend, Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>	<p>tarry: to wait, delay sinewy: muscular, strong</p>	<p>We cannot wait here. We must march. We must take on the danger. We are young and strong people. All the rest of the people depend on us. Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>
10	<p>O you youths, Western youths, So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship, Plain I see you Western youths, see you tramping with the foremost, Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>		<p>O you Western youths! You are so impatient. You are full of action, manly pride, and friendship. I see you marching ahead of all the others. Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>
15	<p>Have the elder races halted? Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas? We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson, Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>		<p>Have our predecessors from the Old World (Europe) stopped? Are they tired over there across the Atlantic Ocean? We take up their task and their burden. Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>
20	<p>All the past we leave behind, We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world, Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the march, Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>	<p>debouch: to emerge</p>	<p>We leave behind all the past. We emerge upon a newer, mightier, varied world. We seize the world fresh and strong. This world of labor and the march. Pioneers! O</p>
25	<p>We detachments steady throwing, Down the edges, through the passes, up the mountains steep, Conquering, holding, daring, venturing as we go the unknown ways, Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>	<p>detachment: the dispatch of a military unit</p>	<p>Pioneers. As part of the dispatch of a military unit, we are steadily throwing— down the edges, through the passes, up the steep mountains. We are conquering, holding, daring, venturing as we go the unknown ways. Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>
30	<p>We primeval forests felling, We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing deep the mines within, We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving, Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>	<p>primeval: original or ancient upheaving: to thrust upward</p>	<p>We cut down ancient forests. We dam the rivers. We pierce deep within the mines. We broadly survey the surface. We thrust up the untouched soil. Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>
35	<p>Colorado men are we, From the peaks gigantic, from the great sierras and the high plateaus, From the mine and from the gully, from the hunting trail we come, Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>	<p>gully: a deep ditch</p>	<p>We are Colorado men. We come from the gigantic peaks, from the great sierras, from the high plateaus, from the mine, from the deep ditch, from the hunting trail. Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>
40	<p>From Nebraska, from Arkansas, Central inland race are we, from Missouri, with the continental blood intervein'd, All the hands of comrades clasping, all the Southern, all the Northern, Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>		<p>We are central inland people, from Nebraska, from Arkansas, and from Missouri with continental blood in our veins. All of the Southerners</p>
	<p>O resistless restless race! O beloved race in all! O my breast aches with tender love for all! O I mourn and yet exult, I am rapt with love for all, Pioneers! O Pioneers!</p>	<p>exult: to rejoice greatly</p>	

Raise the mighty mother mistress,
Waving high the delicate mistress, over all the starry mistress, (bend your head all),
Raise the fang'd and warlike mistress, stern, impassive, weapon'd mistress,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

45 See my children, **resolute** children,
By those swarms upon our rear we must never yield or falter,
Ages back in ghostly millions frowning there behind us urging,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

On and on the compact ranks,
50 With **accessions** ever waiting, with the places of the dead quickly fill'd,
Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet and never stopping,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

O to die advancing on!
Are there some of us to droop and die? has the hour come?
55 Then upon the march we fittest die, soon and sure the gap is fill'd.
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

All the pulses of the world,
Falling in they beat for us, with the Western movement beat,
Holding single or together, steady moving to the front, all for us,
60 Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Life's involv'd and varied pageants,
All the forms and shows, all the workmen at their work,
All the seamen and the landsmen, all the masters with their slaves,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

65 All the **hapless** silent lovers,
All the prisoners in the prisons, all the righteous and the wicked,
All the joyous, all the sorrowing, all the living, all the dying,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

I too with my soul and body,
70 We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way,
Through these shores amid the shadows, with the apparitions pressing,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Lo, the darting bowling **orb**!
Lo, the brother orbs around, all the clustering suns and planets,
75 All the dazzling days, all the mystic nights with dreams,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

These are of us, they are with us,
All for primal needed work, while the followers there in embryo wait behind,
We to-day's procession heading, we the route for travel clearing,
80 Pioneers! O Pioneers!

O you daughters of the West!
O you young and elder daughters! O you mothers and you wives!
Never must you be divided, in our ranks you move united,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

85 **Minstrels** latent on the prairies!
(Shrouded bards of other lands, you may rest, you have done your work.)
Soon I hear you coming warbling, soon you rise and tramp amid us,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Not for **delectations** sweet,
90 Not the cushion and the slipper, not the peaceful and the studious,
Not the riches safe and **palling**, not for us the tame enjoyment,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

rapt:
enchanted

resolute:
determined

accession: an
addition

hapless:
unfortunate

orb: a
spherical
object

minstrel: a
lyric poet

delectation:
pleasure
palling:
boring

and all of the Northerners—all of the comrades clasping hands together. Pioneers! O Pioneers! O restless people, who are impossible to resist. O all beloved people! O my heart aches with love for all of you! O I mourn, but yet I rejoice. I am enchanted with love for all. Pioneers! O Pioneers! I call on the Mother-figure. She is like the night sky. I call on her to extend her natural expansiveness and maternal protection over the pioneers. Pioneers! O Pioneers! See my determined children. We must never yield or falter by those swarms behind us. Millions of frowning ghosts from ages ago are urging us from behind. Pioneers! O Pioneers!

The compact ranks go on and on. Reinforcements are always waiting. The places of the dead soldiers are quickly filled. Through battle or through defeat, they are always moving and never stopping. Pioneers! O Pioneers!

O to die while advancing on! Are there some of us who will droop and die? Has our hour come? If the fittest of us should die upon the march, soon and surely their gap will be filled. Pioneers! O Pioneers! All of the pulses of the world beat for us with the beat of Western expansion. Alone or together, they move steadily to the front, all for us. Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Life's involved and varied pageants. All the forms and shows. All of the workmen at their work. All of the seamen and the landsmen, all of the masters and their slaves. Pioneers! O Pioneers!

All of the unfortunate, silent lovers. All of the prisoners in the prisons, all of the righteous and the wicked, all of the joyous and the sorrowing, all of the living and the dying. Pioneers! O Pioneers!

I with my soul and my body—we are a strange trio. We are picking our way and wandering our way through these shores among the shadows with the ghosts pressing behind us. Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Look! The moving, bowling sphere! Look! The brother spheres are all around. All of the suns and planets cluster around. All of the dazzling days. All of the mystic nights with dreams. Pioneers! O Pioneers!

These are of us, and they are with us. It is all for the most necessary work, while the followers in their embryo state wait behind. We head

Do the feasters gluttonous feast?
 Do the **corpulent** sleepers sleep? have they lock'd and bolted doors?
 95 Still be ours the diet hard, and the blanket on the ground,
 Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Has the night descended?
 Was the road of late so toilsome? did we stop discouraged nodding on our way?
 Yet a passing hour I yield you in your tracks to pause oblivious,
 100 Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Till with sound of trumpet,
 Far, far off the daybreak call-hark! how loud and clear I hear it wind,
 Swift! to the head of the army!-swift! spring to your places,
 Pioneers! O Pioneers!

corpulent:
 very fat

today's procession. We travel the route for clearing. Pioneers! O Pioneers!
 O you daughters of the West. O you young and elder daughters. O you mothers and you wives. You must never be divided. In our ranks, you all move united. Pioneers! O Pioneers!
 Lyric poets dormant on the prairies! (Poets from other lands, you may rest, you have done your work.) Soon I hear you singing. Soon you will rise and will march with us. Pioneers! O Pioneers!
 Not for sweet pleasures. Not for the cushion and the slipper. Not for the peaceful and the studious. Not for the riches, safe and boring, not for tame enjoyment. Pioneers! O Pioneers!
 Do the feasters feast excessively? Do the fat sleepers sleep? Have they locked and bolted their doors. Our diet is hard and we sleep on the ground. Pioneers! O Pioneers.
 Has the night come? Was the road so hard? Did we stop discouraged nodding on our way? Yet in a passing hour, I stop you in your tracks to pause oblivious. Pioneers! O Pioneers!
 Till with the sound of the trumpet. Far off in the daybreak it calls. Hark! I hear it sound loud and clear. Quick! To the head of the army! Spring to your places. Pioneers! O Pioneers!

BIOGRAPHY AND BACKGROUND

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was born on May 31, 1819 at West Hills, Long Island in New York. His father Walter Whitman, a carpenter and farmer, moved the family to Brooklyn when the poet was four in hopes of finding better opportunities for employment. In Brooklyn, Whitman attended the compulsory six years of public school. When he left school at the age of eleven, he began working as an office boy. One of his employers took a liking to him and gave him a subscription to a local lending library, where the young Whitman was able to devour the writings of Sir Walter Scott and other great poets.

In 1831, Whitman began working for a weekly newspaper, the *Long Island Patriot*. It was here that he first broke into print with a few sentimental pieces of filler material. After a series of jobs in the printing and newspaper businesses, and even a stint teaching school, he started his own newspaper, the weekly *Long Islander*, in 1838. However, after only a year, Whitman sold the newspaper and went back to working for other publications. For the next decade or so, Whitman worked as a journalist or editor for various

WHITMAN: BIO IN BRIEF

- Birth: May 31, 1819, Long Island, NY
- Little formal education
- Worked a series of jobs in the printing and newspaper businesses
- Journeyed to New Orleans in 1848
- Deeply affected by the Civil War
- Death: March 26, 1892
- Poetry was under-appreciated during lifetime

newspapers in New York City and Brooklyn. He changed jobs often because his liberal opinions and his support for Democratic Party politics often got him in trouble. In 1848, Whitman traveled to New Orleans by riverboat on the Mississippi River to work for the *New Orleans Daily Crescent*. For a poet who would later write about the American experience, this was his only notable experience of travel until much later in his life. He returned to New York via the Great Lakes after only a few months.

During the next five years, from 1850-55, Whitman seemed to do little outwardly, but this half decade constituted the most important period of the poet’s inner life, for it was during this time that he composed the poems in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. This small volume of poetry, published in 1855, was Whitman’s first book of verse, but it was to change the face of American poetry. (Whitman had previously published a few mediocre pieces of didactic poetry, but none came close to the quality of the poems in *Leaves of Grass*.) The book contained twelve untitled poems and a preface that called for an American literature and an American poet. The public did not know what to make of Whitman’s poetry—his poems were about America, but some of them contained shocking language and even more shocking themes, and moreover, they were not written in traditional poetic forms with stanzas, rhyme, and meter. Some critics attacked the poetry, while others, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, congratulated the poet. *Leaves of Grass* went through a total of nine editions¹⁷ (some of which were reprintings of previous editions), as Whitman added pieces to the collection as well as reorganized and revised previous poems. Critics consider the third edition published in 1860 to be the most significant and successful volume, as it exhibited the heights of Whitman’s experiments with the English language.

Whitman was deeply affected by the Civil War. When his brother George was wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg, he left for Washington D.C. to find his brother. After being reunited with George, the poet remained in Washington where he worked for the government and visited wounded soldiers in area hospitals. Whitman published the collection *Drum-Taps*, a response to the war, in 1865; he later added *Sequel to Drum-Taps* to the volume. *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel* contained the poems “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” (the poem chosen in this year’s curriculum) as well as “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” and “O Captain! My Captain!”¹⁸ (two poems written as a tribute to President Lincoln after his assassination).

In 1873, Whitman suffered a stroke that left his left side paralyzed. He was forced to move in with his brother George who now lived in Camden, New Jersey. However, the poet continued to write and publish. Whitman died in 1892 and was buried in Camden, New Jersey. At the time of his death, he still had not received the recognition that he deserved as an innovator of language and a prophet of American poetry.

SELECTED WORKS OF WHITMAN

- Leaves of Grass* (1855, first edition, poetry)
- Drum-Taps* (1865, poetry)

OVERVIEW AND CLASSIFICATION

The poem “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” first appeared in 1865 in the volume *Drum-Taps*, but it was later republished in a collection called *Birds of Passage*. The poem is written mostly in the **first-person plural** perspective (using the word “we”). It is a rather unusual poem for Whitman because it consists of a more traditional structure with stanzas, meter, and a refrain. (Whitman pioneered, excuse the pun, verse written in free form.) However, both the spirited, rousing **tone** and the **theme** of American expansion are common characteristics of Whitman’s work. The **diction** (language) is eloquent.

CLASSIFICATION

- First-person plural perspective
- Stanzas, meter, refrain
- Spirited, rousing tone
- Eloquent diction
- Theme: American expansion

FORM AND METER

“Pioneers! O Pioneers!” consists of twenty-six stanzas. A **stanza** is a set of lines that makes up a section of a poem, just as paragraphs create separate sections in prose. Each stanza contains four lines, two long lines sandwiched between two short lines. The short lines are all about the same length; however, the long lines vary from stanza to stanza. The lines are unrhymed.

Now let’s analyze the poem for its meter. This is called **scansion**. We will mark the stressed syllable with the “/” symbol and the unstressed syllable with the “U” symbol. We will also divide each **foot**, or basic unit of meter, with the “|” symbol. In the first stanza:

1	/ U / U / U Come my tan-faced children,
2	/ U / U / U / U / U / U Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,
3	/ U U / U / U U / U / U Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?
4	/ U / U / U / Pio neers! O Pioneers!

FORM AND METER

- Four-line stanzas
- Unrhymed
- Trochaic meter
- Refrain
- End-stopped lines
- Caesura
- Elision

In the second stanza:

5	/ U / U / U U For we cannot tarry here,
6	/ U / U / U / U / U / U / U We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,
7	/ U / U / UU / U / U / U / We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
8	/ U / U / U / Pio neers! O Pioneers!

Already we can tell that most feet in the poem are trochees. A **trochee** is a unit of meter that contains one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed syllable. According to the official curriculum the trochaic meter is suitable for direct address. However, Whitman does not maintain the trochaic meter throughout the lines. There are a few **dactyl** feet, each with one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables. There are also a few other variations, such as a final stressed sound at the end of some lines.

Nevertheless, the rhythm of the poem is strong and regular. The energetic rhythm creates a sense of urgency that is appropriate to a piece that is a rousing call to action. Along with the **refrain**, or repeated line at the end of each stanza—“Pioneers! O Pioneers!”—the poem presents a martial beat suitable for a march.

All of the lines in the poem are **end-stopped** lines. That is they all end with a grammatical pause. The poet uses many instances of **caesura**, or pause found within a line. The caesuras help break up the longer lines. (Or else you couldn’t say them in one breath.) Shorter lines help convey the sense of urgency. The poet also uses **elision**, in which a syllable of a word is left out. Examples include: “fang’d” (line 43), “fill’d” (line 50), and “involv’d” (line 61). Elision helps to make a word fit the meter of the line.

SOUND PATTERNS

Whitman uses traditional sound patterns such as alliteration, consonance, assonance, and onomatopoeia. **Alliteration** is the repetition of beginning consonant sounds. **Consonance** is the repetition of consonant sounds. **Assonance** is the repetition of vowel sounds. **Onomatopoeia** is the use of a word that imitates the sound that the word represents. Let's find some examples of each in the poem.

SOUND PATTERNS
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alliteration
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Consonance
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Assonance
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Onomatopoeia

Alliteration:

- 6 We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger
37 O resistless restless race
41 Raise the mighty mother mistress

Consonance:

- 14 Do they droop and end their lesson, weariedd over there beyondd the seas
23 Conquering, holding, daring, venturing as we go the unknown ways
78 All for primall needed work, while the followers there in embryo wait behind

Assonance:

- 6 We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger
62 All the forms and shows, all the workmen at their work
83 Never must you be divided, in our ranks you move united

Onomatopoeia:

- 87 Soon I hear you coming warbling, soon you rise and tramp amid us

FIGURATIVE SPEECH AND OTHER POETIC DEVICES

Whitman begins the poem with an **apostrophe**, which is a direct address to someone who is not present. The poet says, "Come my tan-faced children" (line 1). He then asks several **rhetorical questions**, or questions to which no answers are expected. He inquires, "Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?" (line 3). This also an instance of **anaphora**, a special type of **repetition** in which the same word or words are repeated in the beginning of several lines or sections. The poet ends the first stanza with the refrain, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" which is another apostrophe. Whitman continues to use these devices throughout the rest of the poem.

POETIC DEVICES
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Apostrophe
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Rhetorical question
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Anaphora, repetition
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Subject-verb/adjective-noun inversion
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Imagery from the American West

The poet also uses **inversion**—that is he switches the order of subject and verb or adjective and noun. In the English language, the subject usually comes before the verb, and the adjective usually comes before the noun that it modifies. Good examples of inversion can be found in the seventh stanza. For instance, "We primeval forests felling" (line 25) demonstrates subject-verb inversion and "surface broad" (line 27) shows adjective-noun inversion.

The **imagery**, or the use of descriptive language to achieve a poetic effect, that Whitman employs has to do with the scenery of the American West and the characteristics that are associated with westward expansion. The poet mentions "peaks gigantic," "great sierras," and "high plateaus." He talks about clearing the "primeval forests" and tilling the "virgin soil." Whitman also uses words that are related to the military, such as "weapons," "surveying," "comrades," and "compact ranks." In fact in the last stanza, he calls, "Swift! to the head of the army!-swift! spring to your places" (line 103). This is a vigorous call to action for the youths that are "full of action, full of manly pride and friendship" (line 10).

CONTENT AND MEANING

The **theme** of America was very important to Whitman. To the poet, America was much more than a nation; it was a concept, a manifestation of the democratic ideal. He believed that democracy was the greatest system a society could adopt. Therefore, his celebrations of “America” are really more than just patriotic anthems; they are joyous proclamations in favor of a democratic ideal, under which all citizens could be equal.

“Pioneers! O Pioneers!” encourages a Westward expansion of American terrain, an endorsement of the policy of Manifest Destiny, which held that America had a God-given right to expand westward. Yet on a deeper level, “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” advocates much more than just territorial expansion; it indicates hope that the American ideal of democracy and equality might extend to other lands and peoples. Thus, when Whitman’s narrator proclaims, “We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend” (line 7), he speaks in terms of both territorial expansion and democratic idealism.

Another implicit theme in “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” is the need for a post-Civil War reconciliation. Having treated wounded soldiers from both the North and the South, Whitman felt great sympathy for both sides. How might these two factions be united once again in the aftermath of such a brutal war? Whitman felt that the West was an ideal that could unite the North and the South. Instead of fighting one another, they could mend the damaged bonds between them by taking part in the common goal of Westward exploration and expansion. Lines such as “On and on the compact ranks, / With accessions ever waiting, with the places of the dead quickly fill'd, / Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet and never stopping, / Pioneers! O Pioneers!” (lines 49-52) remind us of the Civil War and yet they assert that the memories of the war can be overcome by the “never stopping” movement westward.

A final theme we shall consider in this poem is one very crucial to Whitman’s poetry in general: the relationship between the individual and the external world. Notice how the subject of the poem sometimes shifts from the collective “we” to the individual “I” of the narrator, most conspicuously in lines 69-72: “I too with my soul and body, / We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way, / Through these shores amid the shadows, with the apparitions pressing, / Pioneers! O Pioneers!” The narrator looks inward for a moment here, and considers his own sense of self amidst the thronging crowd. In a secularized trinity, he counts his self, soul, and body as a “curious trio,” all of which combine to form the “I” which began the stanza. This may be difficult to comprehend, but it is common of Whitman’s narrator to shift the focus from the group to the individual, and then to consider that individual in terms of its component parts, becoming an individualized “we.” Although the significance of this technique may evade us, we can interpret it as a conscientious attempt to analyze the relationship between the group and the individual, inciting us to ask, “How does an individual change once he or she becomes a member of a group?” and “Are there, in fact, opposing groups *within* an individual person?”

MEANING
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Theme of America
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Territorial expansion and democratic idealism
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Post-Civil War reconciliation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Relationship between the individual and the external world

A CLOSING NOTE: LONGFELLOW VS. WHITMAN

Although Longfellow and Whitman were contemporaries, Longfellow was much more highly regarded during his lifetime. Longfellow enjoyed a professorship as well as financial security from his poetry; whereas, Whitman frequently changed jobs and did not gain much financial reward from his writing. However, in the long run, Whitman’s work is the one that has lasted. In fact, Whitman is now regarded as one of the greatest American poets, while Longfellow’s star has long since faded.

Let’s look at a passage from Latin American writer and poet Borges. His writing brings us a critical opinion of the Longfellow vs. Whitman comparison:

Two memorable books appeared in New York in the year 1855, both of an experimental nature, though very different from one another. The first, instantly famous and today relegated to textbook anthologies or the curiosity of scholars and children, was Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*. Longfellow wanted to give the Indians who once lived in New England a prophetic and mythical epic poem in English. In quest of meter that would not bring the ordinary ones to mind and that might seem native, he turned to the Finnish *Kalevala*