

# Passage to India

## by Walt Whitman

'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. Forster to write his 1924 novel, *A Passage to India*.

### Summary of *Passage to India*

"Passage to India" by Walt Whitman describes an imaginary journey that a [speaker](#) wants to take into fabled India.

Passage to India 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 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.

### Analysis of '*Passage to India*'

#### Section 1

Singing my days,  
Singing the great achievements of the present,  
Singing the strong, light works of engineers,  
Our modern wonders, (the antique ponderous Seven outvied,)  
In the Old World, the east, the Suez canal,  
The New by its mighty railroad spann'd,

The seas inlaid with eloquent, gentle wires,  
I sound, to commence, the cry, with thee, O soul,  
The Past! the Past! the Past!  
The Past! the dark, unfathom'd retrospect!

The teeming gulf! the sleepers and the shadows!  
The past! the infinite greatness of the past!  
For what is the present, after all, but a growth out of the past?  
(As a projectile, form'd, impell'd, passing a certain line, still keeps  
on,  
So the present, utterly form'd, impell'd by the past.)

In the first stanza of *Passage to India*, before his travels begin, the speaker is describing joyously, the “achievements” of the present time. He is celebrating the “strong, light works of engineers” who are responsible for what he considers, “modern wonders” that outshine the seven ancient wonders of the world.

The three “wonders” that the speaker is so excited about are the “Suez Canal” in the “Old World” of Egypt, the “mighty railroad,” or the great American railroad in the “New” world and finally the transatlantic cable that connected “the seas.”

The second stanza of this section celebrates the past for the part it played in spawning the present. It is described as “The teeming gulf, “the infinite greatness,” and as playing host to the “sleepers and the shadows.”

The past is mysterious in its own unknowable darkness and is nothing if not the place from which the present grows. The present is like a “projectile” that is sent into the future by the past, it continues on without end for all of time. There will always be a present moment spawned by the past.

## Section 2

Passage, O soul, to India!  
Eclaircise the myths Asiatic—the primitive fables.

Not you alone, proud truths of the world!  
Nor you alone, ye facts of modern science!  
But myths and fables of eld—Asia's, Africa's fables!

The far-darting beams of the spirit!—the unloos'd dreams!  
The deep diving bibles and legends;  
The daring plots of the poets—the elder religions;  
—O you temples fairer than lilies, pour'd over by the rising sun!  
O you fables, spurning the known, eluding the hold of the known,  
mounting to heaven!

You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd  
with gold!

Towers of fables immortal, fashion'd from mortal dreams!

You too I welcome, and fully, the same as the rest;

You too with joy I sing.

The second section begins with a description of the speaker's envisioned *passage to India*. This trip is enhanced by the speaker's assumptions of what the "Asiatic" will be like. He is well read in it's "fables."

This stanza is used to make sure the reader understands that the passage that the narrator is undertaking is one that is illuminated by the modern marvels of the world as well as the ancient legends and stories. It is equally important to recognize the "far-darting beams of the spirit" and the "deep diving bibles and legends" These stories of the East provide one with a spiritual guide on one's travels. They are as necessary "as the rest."

These stories, just like the physical sights the narrator will see, are beautiful. They are of "temples fairer than lilies" that are washed by the "rising sun" and of "dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd with gold!"

## Section 3

Passage to India!

Lo, soul! seest thou not God's purpose from the first?

The earth to be spann'd, connected by net-work,

The people to become brothers and sisters,

The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,

The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,

The lands to be welded together.

(A worship new, I sing;

You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours!

You engineers! you architects, machinists, your!

You, not for trade or transportation only,

But in God's name, and for thy sake, O soul.)

The speaker is asking the reader, and his own soul, whether it is understood that God's purpose is in the connections the world is making. It is part of his plan that "The earth...be spann'd" and that "people...become brothers and sisters." He wants all types of people to intermingle, marry, and become neighbors. The oceans are meant to be "cross'd [and] the distant brought near / the lands to be welded together."

In the joyous song and poem that the speaker is singing he "worships" the creators and "voyagers" who made these technological marvels a reality. He worships them for their works and for the way in which they have helped to complete God's plan.