

## **PASSAGE TO INDIA (lines 1-68)**

**By Walt Whitman**

**About Walt Whitman:** Born in 1819 in Long Island, Walt Whitman was the second child of nine. At the time he began writing his poems, there was coming a transition between transcendentalism and realism, and as a result both of these themes appear in many of his works. He published his major work, *Leaves of Grass*, in the year 1855. Considered obscene by many, this piece of work was controversial upon its release. Whitman's poetry is mostly in free verse and he is often called the father of the form. A humanist, author and poet, Whitman died in the year 1892 at the age of 72 in Camden, New Jersey.

**About Passage to India:** *Passage to India* is a prime example of Whitman's transcendentalism and realism themes in his poems. It is wholly written in free verse and is considered one of his finest works.

**Setting of the poem:** The title suggests that the setting of the poem may be India. But it isn't. India is but a metaphor. The poem is set throughout time. From the beginning of time, to ancient history, to modern wonders and to the unexplored future; the poem covers and traverses it all.

### **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.

**Central Idea of Passage to India:** 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.

### Poetic Devices in Passage to India

The poetic devices in this poem are too many and too scattered and varied in frequency. So only some instances of their appearance can be listed.

**Free Verse:** The whole poem is written in a free verse. It has neither rhyme nor rhythm.

**Oxymoron:** In section 1, the speaker sings of strong, light works. Strong makes us think of something heavy, bulky. But in contradiction, it is actually light. Adjoining contradictory terms is an oxymoron.

**Repetition:** There is a lot of repetition in this poem. In the first section itself, the words 'singing' and 'The Past!' are repeated numerous times. In section 2, 'you' and in section 3, 'you' and 'your' are repeated multiple times. Repetitions pop out continuously as one goes through the whole poem.

**Apostrophe:** Letters are skipped in many words. In the first section, letters from the words 'spanned', 'unfathomed', 'formed', 'impelled' and 'formed' are skipped using an apostrophe. This many in the first section itself. As you read on, you will find much more such apostrophes.

**Personification:** In the first section, the speaker is starting a sound, a cry along with the soul implying that the soul was making that sound too, giving it human characters. This here is personification.

**Alliteration:** In section 2, the speaker uses the sentence  
*'the deep diving bibles and legends;  
the daring plots...'*

The repeated use of the letter 'd' makes this an alliteration. Many such alliterations are seen throughout the poem; like 'red roses', 'become brothers', 'trade or transportation' etc.

**Imagery:** Imagery is seen in section 2, used to describe the temples and the towers; and then gain in section 4.

**Metaphor:** The passage to India in the poem does not really mean a passage in some cases. India is a land of many cultures and ancient history. Passage to India means a journey to the past in these cases. India is but a metaphor for the past.