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Walt Whitman

Transcendentalism at its core is a mirror into one's innate self. It rejects the scriptural definition of spirituality and asserts that piety originates in the self and not in organized religion. It emphasizes the importance of "inherent goodness," placing the onus of moral debasement on society while celebrating the confluence of nature and humans. Walt Whitman, the American poet, was heavily influenced by this school of thought.

In the epic "Song of Myself," the speaker celebrates his existence and point to a fete of a shared experience claiming, "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (Whitman). The speaker exemplifies his intrinsic bond with nature, "My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, /this air" (Whitman). Despite assimilating moral lessons from churches and schools, the speaker points to the end of his tryst with such institutions and their confines.

Continuing his cerebration, the speaker detaches himself from the scent of synthetic perfumes, a metaphor for his desire to unite with nature. The speaker describes nature of being bereft with an odor, an allusion to its permanence. He then speaks of his wish to become one with nature, stressing on his intimacy with its various entities while paying a tribute to its benevolence, "It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it, /I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked, /I am mad for it to be in contact with me" (Whitman).

The speaker appeals to the reader to refrain from taking things at their face value, including his abstractions; but wishes for them to experience things firsthand and only then decide on their merits or the lack thereof.

In later sections of the poem, the speaker uses the motif of a curious child and his inquisitiveness to contend with the ephemerality of life and the inevitability of death. The speaker's tone turns somber when he describes the neutrality of grass, which he ascribes to an extension of nature. The grass continues its growth while being impartial to class or race, "And it means, sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones, /Growing among black folks as among white" (Whitman).

Marking a shift, the speaker adopts an optimistic tone and concludes that a sprouting grass is a sign of life, and that the world marches on independent of its inhabitants and their peregrinations. Perceiving that his presence in nature is an intrusion to its sundry entities, the speaker begins to wrap up his stay, departing from his beloved company of nature. The lines, "Missing me one place search another, /I stop somewhere waiting for you" (Whitman) are a salute to the speaker's hope that he shall meet the reader again. The symbolism of grass used throughout evokes themes of birth, life, and death.

In the poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," the speaker details his city experience following a journey on the Brooklyn ferry. Despite enjoying the city's vibrance, he recognizes that his experience isn't unique, "And you that shall cross from shore-to-shore years hence are more, /to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose" (Whitman 1). The speaker extols praise for the meandering East River and feels one with nature amidst the urban busyness. The speaker professes his love for the organized chaos of New York City, repeatedly noting his experience isn't unique; but in sharing it with the men and women, makes it a collectively meaningful experience.

The speaker then highlights the sense of belonginess he feels while walking on the streets of Brooklyn and Manhattan. He then shifts to a dreary tone, commenting on the apathy of city

life, forcing him to pause and reflect, feeling detachment from his soul. However, the speaker remarks that while the city experience has its limitations, downsides and all the noisy emotions in between, he urges the reader to recognize they aren't solitary proponents of such an experience.

While acknowledging a dichotomy exists, the speaker can't help but feel a connection to the wondrous metropolis as described in the lines, "Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-hemm'd Manhattan?" (Whitman). In parting, the speaker urges the people alongside the natural elements to propel the city forward and not be bogged down by the ruling class who intend to divide and conquer. However, the speaker says that despite detesting their behavior; in the spirit of brotherhood, he loves them (the ruling class).

In the poem "A Noiseless, Patient Spider," the speaker observes a stationary spider intent on exploring its surroundings. The speaker notices the incessant weave in its web, "It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself; /Ever unreeling them—ever tirelessly speeding them" (Whitman) and equates it to the unabated reflection of his soul which like the spider's web is interminably stuck without an end in sight. The speaker hopes that his soul will find stability as will the spider.

In the poem "When I heard the Learned Astronomer," the speaker describes his experience attending an astronomer's lecture. The astronomer defends his theories with scientific facts and proof but fail to impress the speaker. The speaker's interest gradually wanes and even the audience's thunderous reactions cannot mend his plummeting attention. Upon exiting the venue, the speaker takes a walk in nature and discovers that in rejecting the institutional sermon, the speaker is able to appreciate stars and nature, "In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time, Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars" (Whitman).

Walt Whitman's poetry encapsulates the beauty of human existence through transcendentalism. For instance, "Songs of Myself" is a celebration of one's existence and a homage to the unsullied beauty of nature. He disengages from the confines of traditional institutions, and repeatedly calls for the celebration of brotherhood. Whitman appeals to his brethren to remain resolute, and not to bemoan the crests and troughs of life.

Works Cited

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