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Period 1 ATP English

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Literary Analysis of Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman is considered to be one of the most famous American Poets of all time, and for justifiable reasoning. Born on May 31st, 1819, Whitman was born in the West Hills of Long Island, New York (Loving [World Book Online]). Born into a large family of nine, Whitman discovered his love for poetry and printing at the young age of twelve, and had pursued a career in such rather quickly (“Walt Whitman [Online]). During his long and eventful career, Whitman used his poetry as a way to convey his feelings about several topics during the Civil War, rise and fall of slavery and much more. Such topics that could be seen in most of his poems are darkness and reality of death, or on a lighter note, individualism and democracy, and supporting of the United States (Loving [World Book Online]). How did such a career take off though, and how did Walt Whitman place his name upon the most famous author and poets of all time?

Whitman’s poetic journey started in New York City, Whitman pursuing his dreams by founding and working for several different printing companies. He had started off by founding *The Long Islander*, later leaving this opportunity for another one at *the New Orleans Crescent*. Eventually, after seeing first hand accounts of slavery, Whitman had decided to found the

Brooklyn Freeman, a newspaper that had obviously addressed such topics (“Walt Whitman” [Online]). In 1855 is when his “big break” came, with his most famous work “Leaves of Grass” being published and eventually edited over the years to add more poems to what would be later known as one of the best works of poetry of all time (“Walt Whitman” [Online]).

Being a skilled poet had not let him avoid the war, though, as Whitman too had participated in various aspects of the Civil War, with much of his poetry reflecting such experiences (Loving [World Book Online]). During the war, he had lived in New York City, as he had most of his life, where he had tried his best to volunteer in as many military hospitals as he could, doing his best to help in the war effort. Afterwards this poet/journalist traveled to Washington D.C., where he had worked as a government clerk to support his family. This had made him especially poor, as most of his money had been given to either his widowed mother or his brother, who had been injured in the war. Towards the end of his life, towards the 1870’s, Whitman moved into a small two story house in Camden, New Jersey, so that he could visit and support his dying mother. Here he worked on his final poems until his death on March 26th, 1892 (“Walt Whitman” [Online]).

Whitman’s life and experiences provided great inspiration for most of his works, with poems such as “A Noiseless Patient Spider” being reflective of the more dark yet creative parts of his life, while lighter poems and books such as “Songs of Myself” and *Leaves of Grass* pertaining more to the lighter and more individualistic side of things (Loving [World Book Online]). Finally, poems such as “Cavalry Crossing a Ford” and “Drum taps” all reference Whitman’s experience of the Civil War, and the reality of its brutality. Through all of this, the

poet Walt Whitman displays his life experiences, including the darker sides and brighter sides, along with his Civil War experience and his love for the individual, throughout his poetry.

Individuality and the creativity of humankind are two of the major underlying themes of many of Whitman's poems and poetic books, with his famous work "A Noiseless Patient Spider" being no exception. In a nutshell, the poem depicts a spider at work with its web, with the narrator recording its actions and reflecting on them. Through these actions, the author decides to reflect upon his soul and his life, with many different uses of imagery, symbolism, and eventually personal reflection being used to convey this tone (Casale 212). What are these uses of imagery, symbolism, and more, though, and how are they used to convey the theme of the poem and allow the reader to take valuable lessons from it?

First, the images as used in the poem must be discussed. Whilst reading the poem, it is easy to analyze how the imagery affects not only the darker tone of the story, but also the theme and how it pertains to the world. To understand his use of imagery, both stanzas of the poem must be examined. In the first stanza, the spider is depicted quite realistically, almost giving off a dark tone in the most beautiful of ways. In the second stanza though, the use of imagery shifts, as the imagery begins to be more imaginative, instead of being realistic as it was in the first stanza (Casale 212-213). This change in imagery, therefore, led to a drastic change in tone, from a darker more realistic view of things to a more idealistic and deeper view of the author himself. This in turn changed the perspective and subject of the poem, going from what had seemed to be an innocent poem depicting a spider with its web to a more reflective view of the human mind and soul, and the creativity and art that can come from it (Casale 213-214).

Next the vast amounts of symbolism as used in the poem must be delved into, starting with the spider itself. By this point in the poem the reader knows that the spider and its web is more symbolic than what it is literally, but the question is what is it and why is it chosen like this? The author first starts to answer these questions through his vivid description of the spider and how it is lonely, quietly waiting for the time to be right. This could be interpreted in several different ways, most likely symbolizing the idle mind and soul of the creative human, and how desolate life can be for that type of personality. The spider's sudden spinning of his web, however, shows how its ideas had sprung to action, just as the mind of a creative and inspired human ("A Noiseless Patient Spider" 189-191). The absence of the web at the beginning of the stanza can most accurately represent the absence of a creative thought in the world (as well as the absence of people and loneliness of the people who think this way). The spider's action of filling this absence is symbolic of a special type of human's need to fill an absence with their own creative ideas, providing the world with what their mind has to offer (Casale 213). All of this combined leads to the overall picture and how the themes are conveyed by the author in the second stanza.

As discussed before, the second stanza of the poem switches from focusing on the spider to now focusing on the poet himself. Through this connection the reader fully understands the connections between the poem and the author, and how representative the spider is of the life of the poet. This switch in focus reveals the true character in which Whitman had made the poem, letting the reader truly understand what the spider is doing in comparison to what the author is doing with his life, and how creativity and the life of someone who is different can drastically affect that person's loneliness and even death (Casale 212-214).

Now that the theme has been established, which is the loneliness and creativity someone of such talents can face in their life, how does this pertain to Whitman's life in particular? In many ways, Whitman can be considered the noiseless patient spider, a quiet man who had remained lonely throughout his life, expressing his creativity in poems such as this one (Casale 214-215). What had caused this loneliness, though? Although he was born into a large family of nine, he does not engage in much other social interaction with others he is close to. In fact, Whitman would often go to various social events in crowds just so he could be able to talk to others, truly showing his loneliness. He had never gotten married, and he had quickly spread further from his family after the death of his father, the eventual sickness and death of his mother, and the injury of his brother George. Since his life was this lonely, in much ways he is the "Noiseless Patient Spider", with his web representing the only thing he truly has in life, which is his poetic works. Otherwise, like the spider is, he is very lonely, and can only use his creativity as an outlet for his woes ("Walt Whitman" [Online]).

As stated before, Whitman had played a role in the Civil War, helping when he could at various military hospitals throughout New York City. From this, Whitman had taken away much of the devastation and terror of the Civil War, inspiring several poems that would play larger roles in his career. One of these poems is called "Cavalry Crossing a Ford", part of the Drum taps section of Whitman's masterpiece "Leaves of Grass". Here various themes are shown in the same way other poems of his had been, through vivid imagery and symbolism, all tying into one large underlying theme, which in this case would be the horrible realism of war (Casale 147-149).

First, the interesting imagery as depicted in the poem must be discussed. In the poem, the style of writing chosen to not describe Civil War and its start or end, but rather describes a minor scene in which cavalry are travelling by a river. Why describe such a minor scene, and in such enormous detail? It all ties into the theme, and the point that Whitman is trying to get across to the reader. What is this point, though? Although there are many themes present in the poem, one that is most likely shown due to this imagery is individualism, and how every human that had participated in this war was indeed human, and had emotions just as everyone else, even though they are forced to conform into singular segments (Casale 147-150). Also, another theme apparent in the poem is the theme of nature, and how humans interact with it, through examples such as the horses slurping from the water and by describing the men as “Brown-faced”, giving a more natural tone (“Cavalry Crossing a Ford” 53).

The symbolism as found in the poem would most likely be of the soldiers that are being described in the poem, and how they relate to the universal themes of the poem. In the poem, the soldiers are shown doing normal things as one, being described as each being a “picture upon their saddle”. They are described as being one for several reasons, one being to set an almost ominous tone due to the lack of individual personality and happiness (Casale 148-149). Also, the theme of non-individuality is shown through this symbolism through the lack of attention to specific soldiers, and rather just focus on the entire group as a unit (“Cavalry Crossing a Ford” Page 49).

Several themes can be extracted from the poem, with several different meanings all tying into one universal truth. This universal truth, as described above, is the lack of personality and individualism of the soldiers, who throughout the poem are described vividly as being only one

unit who does everything as one (Casale 147-149). In general, this poem celebrates yet also cruelly depicts life, and how lifeless humans can be when forced to rid of their individualism (“Cavalry Crossing a Ford” 52-53).

Now that the themes of the poem have been established, one last main question has to be asked; how does this pertain to Whitman’s life, and his experiences through the Civil War? Well, as had previously been discussed, during the Civil War Whitman had been in New York City, helping out at various hospitals and seeing all of the carnage of the Civil War for himself. The individualist aspect would most likely be due to two things; the people he had met in the hospital and his brother who had been injured during the war. First, as stated before, Whitman had volunteered in around nine different military hospitals in New York City, most likely learning about several soldiers on a personal level, showing his roots for individualism. Secondly, his brother George, a soldier in the Civil War, had been severely wounded on the 16th of December in 1862, in Fredericksburg, Maryland. When Whitman had learned of this, he urgently looked across Maryland hospitals to find his brother, finally finding him still on the battlefield with shrapnel blasted through his cheek. While in this battlefield, Whitman had witnessed the true terrors of war, while witnessing the dead bodies littered throughout the battlefield and the absolute carnage of war (Hutchinson [Online]). All of this had formed Whitman’s opinion on war, and his true thoughts about individual personalities that have been compressed into groups because of the Civil War, describing them as “Brown-Faced men” and as people who worked as one, hence why he mentions the soldiers as one single organism (Casale 147).

Continuing with the theme of individualism, one of Whitman’s longest poems, titled “Songs of Myself”, celebrates just that, along with several underlying themes pertaining to the

reality of life itself (Casale 87). Although most of the poem is a straightforward format, there are still few examples of symbolism and several underlying themes being conveyed in the poem, all pertaining to Whitman's view on various different aspects of life. Among such can include the celebration of the self, the use of American democracy, and other smaller themes such as death (Casale 88-89).

The symbolism in the large poem "Songs of Myself" is few but still important in understanding the main messages of the poem. The first would be the narrator of the poem, which would be Whitman himself, or more specifically his sort of theatrical alter ego. Through this he shows his more enthusiastic side, and how charismatic he is about the individual. Overall, this persona is more of what Whitman wishes he could be, and not what he is in reality. Also, his constantly referring to "myself" throughout the poem symbolizes the common man in it's best form, allowing the reader to place themselves in the shoes of the people expressed in the poem. This allows the reader to fully understand the concepts as they are shown throughout the poem, and allows them to celebrate themselves as well as the world they are placed in (Casale 84).

The next most important piece of information to analyze from this poem is the way in which it was written, or more specifically, the different "modes" of writing that are present in the poem. Amongst these different modes includes the visionary modes, elegiac mode, imagistic mode, and more. The visionary modes of the poem represent the more dreamy and idealistic aspects of Whitman's writing, while the elegiac mode is present when the visionary mode is at a sort of loss. What does all of this mean though, and why does it matter? The best conclusion that could come from this style most likely results from Whitman's different outlooks on life, from the dreamier and more idealistic view present in the visionary mode to the more dreary outlook

present in the elegiac mode (Casale 83-85). These modes also resemble the ways in which Whitman writes many of his other poems, with some, like “Songs of Myself” having a generally more positive look and others like “Cavalry Crossing a Ford” and “A Noiseless Patient Spider” having a drearier outlook.

The themes that are present in the poem can vary based upon interpretation, but two general viewpoints reign on throughout most of the poem. These two themes would be the celebration of the individual and the use of democracy in the United States. The first theme present in his writing would be the celebration of himself and the common man. This is present mostly in his use of the words “You” and “Myself” throughout the poem, letting the readers feel as if he is directly addressing them instead of a figurative audience. Also, through the line “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” he truly shows his feeling about the individual, and how every common man has as much good in them as the heroes that lead their country (Casale 87). On the other hand, the use of democracy and the importance of the common individual in government is also shown throughout the poem, claiming that everyone has the right to have a voice in the government (Casale 87-88).

At this point, it has been established that the poem “Songs of Myself” is Whitman’s way of celebrating life and the human spirit in the most enthusiastic of ways (“Leaves of Grass” [World Book Online]). How does this pertain to Whitman, though? Where did his love for the common man come from, and why does he push it so much in his poems? To understand this, first his political viewpoints must be discussed. Whitman had long throughout his life had a disliking and distrust for his government, recognizing all presidents before Abraham Lincoln as “deformed, mediocre...false hearted men”. He had not believed in the political view of reform,

but rather reform through the process of individual regeneration and morals; the spirit of the human is what was most important, not the politics (Blume 55). “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem”, one of his most famous lines from the poem, shows this greatly by telling the reader how in his opinion the citizens of the United States together create something spectacular. On the other hand, one of his more contradictory forms of expression throughout the poem would be his general use of eccentricity and enthusiasm as displayed by himself in the role of the narrator. In reality, Whitman is a quiet man who had not been enthusiastic throughout his life, mostly just “going with the flow” and involving himself in large crowds of people so that he could blend in. Why the sudden change of tone? Although it may be just to accentuate his message to get it across to the reader, other possible suggestions bring the idea that he uses this as a sort of outlet for his true emotions on life, for he has no one else to release them to. As stated before, much of his life had been ruled over by loneliness and a lack of family, making it quite possible that this is one one place in which he can show his true persona to the world (Casale 82-86). Overall, Whitman was a dreamer, who loved the individual and, although had trouble expressing it, loved to celebrate life itself, as reflected in “Songs of Myself” (Donoghue [EBSCO]).

Just as every musician has their greatest hits, every author/poet has their greatest works. In the case of Walt Whitman, this would be his greatest work *Leaves of Grass*, a large compilation of most of his poems that he has completed over the years. Many of the poems featured in the volumes are different, pertaining to different smaller themes and symbolic of different things. Through closer look, though, much of what Whitman has written has many universal themes, all pertaining to different points in his life and how he feels about such

experiences. Some like the poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” pertain more to his idealistic view of life and focus on the individual human, while other poems such as “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” pertain more to the emotional struggle and accepting loss, and how that can affect the human being. (Puckett [SalemPress]). Both poems mentioned have the symbolism and writing style that gives every Whitman poem it’s charm, but what are the real truths behind these poems?

To understand both poems as mentioned in the book, it is a necessity to know what they are about, first. The first poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is a medium-length poem that depicts a man waiting on a ferry in Brooklyn. What is to be most closely noted about this poem is how the setting revolves around the man, for it appears as if time is still and the poem only focuses on that one second in time (Casale 179-181). Through this poem he uses plentiful techniques as to portray the mood and tone of the poem, as well as using symbolism and other styles of writing to convey his universal truth about the human individual and their place in the world (Puckett [SalemPress]).

First off, the setting of the poem is important, for it depicts only a small moment in time instead of the “bigger picture”. This is done to give the readers a sense of, in a sense, enjoying the little things, and noticing individual life at any point in time instead of focusing on it as a whole (Puckett [SalemPress]). This is not the first time he has focused on such in one of his poems, though, for previously he has written poems such as “Cavalry Crossing a ford” which does around the same thing, focusing only on one moment of the Civil War instead of it as a whole. Secondly, the way in which he depicts various objects and animals interacting with the environment is also of much importance. He depicts the waves as a “Swift current” yet gives no

sense of overall progression, and explains the seagulls as having “Motionless wings” to give even more of a sense of being frozen in time (Puckett [SalemPress]). All of these are symbolic of the theme of enjoying life as it comes and experiencing being human.

Also to be importantly noted is the usage of pronouns in the poem, and how they change over time. At the beginning of the poem, he constantly differentiates between the reader and himself, using the pronouns “I” and “You”. As the poem progresses however, he also uses the word “You” to describe himself, and later on uses the term “we” to unite himself, the reader and humanity in order to correctly show his theme (Puckett [SalemPress]). This is, as stated before, is the celebration of the individual as well as connecting with other humans and enjoying life with such people (Casale 180-182). This is not the first time that Whitman had done this, though, as previously Whitman had used the pronouns of “Myself” and “You” as symbolism of one of his previous poems, “Songs of Myself”.

Now that the styles, symbolism, and other features of the poem have been discussed, the overall themes must be understood. The poem overall has a sense of unity to it, whether it be with nature or other humans, and also gives a sense of embracing life and the small moments it contains (Casale 182). Why these themes, though, and why conveyed like this? To look at the bigger picture, Whitman always had an apparent love for noticing the individual, as present in poems such as “Songs of Myself”, “Cavalry Crossing a Ford”, and plenty more. His sense of unity with others had also been apparent in some of these poems, as well as it had in his life. Throughout his life, Whitman had always been one to seek out unity, for he could rarely find it in his family due to the amount of deaths and separation. To do this, Whitman would attend large gatherings, ride coaches, and attend festivals just so he could talk to people. One of his favorite

places to meet and talk to people would be the ferry, in which he would ride for hours, loving to get to know people and about how interesting their lives could be (“Walt Whitman” [Online]). Much of this could be why Whitman chooses to focus on general unity of humans in the poem, and especially why he chooses to use the ferry in Brooklyn, in which he lived, as a setting for the poem. Throughout his life he appreciated the people, as reflected in his poems.

Many of the poems that had been written by Whitman were reflective of certain events that were going on during his time period, and how he interpreted them using his own morals and beliefs. This can be greatly shown in his poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”, in which Whitman reflects on the death of his favorite president Abraham Lincoln, and how it resembles the characteristics of death as a whole and how it pertains to poetry. Just as he had done with many of his poems, Whitman again uses poetic devices such as imagery and symbolism in order to convey his thoughts, and then connects it all back together to successfully deliver the message of the story, which in this case would be looking at the more “pleasant” side of death, and learning to accept it as a sort of form of art (Casale 171-173).

First, the imagery and overall setting of the poem must be noted. For a poem that is addressing a relatively dark subject matter, the setting and the mood set by it is relatively peaceful, with almost no sense of darkness and sadness present. Only few references to darker subjects such as coffins are mentioned, while more lines such as “All over bouquets of roses” and “Pictures of growing spring farms and houses” are present, giving the poem a more peaceful tone. Instead of darkness and night, sunshine and flowers (specifically lilacs) are brought up an abundance of times, describing scenes of peace and joy much more than anything else of any sort of dark nature. All of such was certainly done on purpose, for here Whitman was trying to

convey the general message of how death does not necessarily have to be dark but can indeed be peaceful and almost artistic (Casale 172-173).

Also like most of his other poems, he uses plentiful examples of symbolism to keep to reader intrigued while also successfully conveying his message. For example, at the beginning of the poem he talks about how he misses the “Western fallen star”. This is obvious symbolism towards Abraham Lincoln, using the term “Western” due to Lincoln’s origin of living in the western United States. On a less literal note, throughout the poem he also makes reference to flowers spread throughout various areas, or more specifically lilacs. Although less apparent, this constant use of including flowers references two things; the acceptance and beauty that can be in relation to death, two of the main themes of the poem (Casale 171-174). Finally, one of the most important uses of symbolism in the poem is the bird, and the harmonious song that it sings to the narrator. The bird’s song, and the narrator understanding it, is symbolic of the narrator coming to accept death as a natural way of life, and how in a certain way it can be truly beautiful. Whitman used a peaceful animal such as the harmonious bird to stick with the theme of peace coming from death, making the reader fully understand the message in which Whitman was attempting to convey (Puckett [SalemPress]).

As stated several times before, the theme of the story is not only accepting death as it is (using Lincoln as his primary example) but also finding the beauty in it, and realizing how poetic it can truly be (Casale 172). Learning about this theme begs the question of why Whitman had chosen to write about such a dark tone in a lighter sense, and why death does not seem to bother him. To answer such a question, Whitman’s life has to be looked at in great detail, especially the chapters of it that pertain to death in chaos. Throughout his life Whitman had been no stranger to

death and violence. Whether it be the sickness faced by his mother, the death of his father, the injury of his brother George, the death of his favorite president Abraham Lincoln, or the countless injuries he had been a part of during his volunteering at military hospitals, Whitman had been faced with countless examples of death (“Walt Whitman” [Online]). Although it is sad to have dealt with all of that throughout his life, what must really be understood is his reaction to this mess he was thrown into. Many others may fall into a depression, or maybe even go to commit suicide to end the constant pain they are in. Whitman did not do this, though, and in fact chose the exact opposite approach. He continued to live around many others in the city of New York and, although being lonely at many times (as apparent from his other poems) he still found the time to walk about, explore, and meet new people just for the sake of conversation. In a way, this is perfectly reflective of the poem, for in it the narrator chooses to accept and even embrace death, just like how Whitman had embraced life (“Walt Whitman” [Online]). Instead of looking at the darker sides of things, he chooses to depict images of countrysides and “bouquets of roses”, and instead of horrible creatures he uses harmonious birds, singing beautiful songs. Whitman has accepted life and death as a true form of art (Casale 171-173).

Through all of his works, the poet Walt Whitman displays his life experiences, including the darker sides and brighter sides, along with his Civil War experience and his love for the individual, throughout his poetry. In the poem “A Noiseless Patient Spider” he does this by showing the lonelier side of being an artistic type, and how in many ways Whitman is the noiseless patient spider (Casale 212-214). In another one of his works “Cavalry Crossing a Ford” Whitman combines his experience with the Civil War along with his individualistic thought, and by doing this creates a masterpiece of a poem with a perfect theme (“Cavalry Crossing a Ford”

pg 49). One of his longest poems “Songs of Myself” celebrates the individual and democracy as a whole, two morals that Whitman had reflected not only in his poems but in his life as a whole (Casale 87-88). In one of his several poems from his masterpiece *Leaves of Grass*, called “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, Whitman continues to stress the importance of the individual, as well as their unity with others, using one of his most favorite places, the ferry, to convey this theme (Puckett [SalemPress]). Finally, in Whitman’s poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”, Whitman tackles the subject of the death of Abraham Lincoln, and instead of mourning him he tries to find the positivity and beauty in death, for it surrounds us all (Puckett [SalemPress]).

From death to happiness, and from Civil War woes to democratic pursuits, Whitman’s career had long been one of the most influential in the history of not only American literature but history as a whole (“Walt Whitman [Online]). Long times from now, after history has forgotten much of what had shaped it previously, Whitman’s legacy will stand tall and forever reign as one of the best in history. Now, all there is to do is remember his name, his messages, his legacy, and overall his aspirations of what America should be in the future, in hope of one day achieving this dream and having a country truly by the people, for the people.

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