

One and the Same

Walt Whitman asks himself and the reader of the poem, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," what significance a person's life holds in the scope of densely populated planet. The poem explores the difficulties of discovering the relevance of life. The methods that helped Whitman grasp his own idea of the importance of life are defined with some simple yet insightful and convincing observations. By living under and for the standards of others, a person can never live a fulfilling life. Distinguishing oneself from the mobs of society can be next to impossible when every other human is competing for the same recognition with their own similar accomplishments. The suggestion that Whitman offers as a means of becoming distinguished, or obtaining an identity, is to live a life of self-satisfaction. The persuasive devices in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" successfully communicate Whitman's own theory of breaking the molds of society by living as a self-satisfying individual.

What makes one person's life different from the next? Whitman leaves the apprehension that the distinguishing characteristics are few. Whitman informs the audience that he has lead the same life as they, who lead the same life as their children will and their ancestors did. The poet questions the significance of a person's achievements by asking, "My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre [sic]?" It would be hard for any person to measure their self-accomplishments on the planetary scale which Whitman is speaking of. The second verse of the poem introduces the metaphor of the world being a "simple, compact, well-joined scheme" with the people dissolved into the "eternal float of solution." Like the mechanical "scheme" that Whitman refers to, much of the poem consists of topics that possess a repetitive or mechanical quality. Sunrises, sunsets, tides, seasons, circling birds, the daily New York commute on the Brooklyn Ferry, and the cycling of generations are woven into the poem. A substantial amount of stanzas in the poem all begin with the same word. The continuous use of repetitive imagery conveys the feeling that our existence is in fact part of an infinitely moving machine that has no purpose or destination. By using these devices, Whitman shakes his audience with the convincing notion that life as it is normally perceived is not important. To assist these devices, lines that bring sudden tension into the poem further disturb the preconceptions of the audience: "Closer yet I approach you, / What thought you have of me now..." Whitman now has the readers of his poem in a vulnerable state - where their minds can be easily swayed and he can preach his theory.

Towards the middle of the poem, Whitman enters a passage that speaks of the "dark patches" that fall upon all people. The evil traits of guile, anger, lust, greed, cowardice, and hate that he, like all people, possess. These evils cause him to live a solitary existence where he did not interact with even the things that he loved.

Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly,
yet never I told them a word,

Lived the same life as the rest, the same old laughing, gnawing,
sleeping,

Following his comments about the bad parts of his life, he goes on to tell about what he enjoyed in his life. The things that gave him pleasure were in fact the sensory pleasures. What he saw in the world, the voices and sounds of the people, the accomplishments that he felt, and memories that he made were his justifications for living. Living his life to the fullest and cherishing the things that he did for himself gave him an identity.

There is a key difference between living a meaningless life and a leading a rewarding life with a purpose. In the first case, the goal in life is to work hard to be accepted by the standards of others. As a result, a life will most likely be wasted on work that gives no meaning or reward to the person. In the second case, a person can live for their own standards and behave in a way that is enjoyable to themselves.

I too had receiv'd identity by my body,

That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I
should be of my body. . . .

About my body for me, and your body for you. . .

The interiority as Whitman describes, guarantees that an individual can find meaning in life without comparing themselves against others and bringing out the evil and deceitful qualities of humans. In an ideal model of Whitman's social behavior, everyone would be content and there would be no evil in the world. The final two lines of the poem set his conclusion regarding the importance of interiority its results on the world.

You furnish your parts toward eternity,

Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

Whitman himself ignored the social standards of his day and by doing what fulfilled his personal goals, he established his own eternal identity as one of the greatest American poets.

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" communicates Whitman's ideas about life in a discrete but highly effective manner.

