

Opposing religious  
perspectives:  
edwards' personal  
narrative and  
whitman's song o...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Upon reading Jonathan Edwards' Personal Narrative, one would undoubtedly find that Edwards' descriptions and expressions of his insurmountable love for God (and all things in relation to the Christian faith) are of an extreme degree uncommon to that of the ordinary believer. It is therefore justifiable to pinpoint one of the themes in Personal Narrative as being intense emotionalism towards religion, or, to be more precise, towards his Puritan faith. In addition to examining aspects of his work with regard to this theme, this essay will also compare Personal Narrative to a section of Walt Whitman's Song of Myself; section 48, as this part of Whitman's influential and historic poem details his own strong, differing opinions about religion and God.

As a child, Edwards initially found the doctrine of God's sovereignty as horrible and abhorrent. He used to be repulsed by the idea that God chooses "whom He would to eternal life and rejecting whom He pleased". However, his point of view was completely altered at some point, which he describes as a "wonderful alteration", and from that moment on he continued to have very little to hardly any doubts and objections towards this doctrine. In fact, God's absolute sovereignty is what his mind was so rest assured of, and had come to often appear to him as "exceedingly pleasant, bright and sweet". He then began to have great longings after God and holiness – finding all that revolves around his faith as extremely "sweet" and full of "delight". His passionate love for God thus lead him to feel "a burning desire to be in everything a complete Christian".

This conviction, however, meant that he repulsed all notions of pleasure on Earth so that he may instead direct all his attention, love and energy onto

<https://assignbuster.com/opposing-religious-perspectives-edwards-personal-narrative-and-whitmans-song-of-myself/>

being with Christ in the afterlife. He therefore made “ a solemn dedication to God” in which he states: “...in giving up myself and all that I had to God; to be for the future in no respect my own; to act as one that had no right to himself, in any respect”. It is this extreme devotion to God that emphasises his emotionalism, to the point where he places himself in a position so humble, especially as he vowed to look on nothing else as any part of his own happiness, believing that he had no right to feel delight in earthly matters. This is proven as Edwards declares to have vowed to “ fight with all [his] might, against the world, the flesh and the devil”.

From his words, it can be discerned that Edwards’ love and commitment to God and his Puritan faith made him a strong believer of orthodox Christian ideologies of that era, whereby the soul is seen as an eternal, transcendental creation and thus superior to the temporal human body. This belief had been a catalyst in shaping Edwards’ opinion to strongly divide the soul and the body by objecting to any pleasures of the flesh, and focusing only on all that would benefit the soul, particularly for the hereafter. His determination to “ fight... against the world, the flesh and the devil” exemplifies his attitude towards the body and the Earth as being creations related to sin, and so should not be allowed the least bit of mercy.

These strict, ardent ideals contrast greatly to those of Walt Whitman’s, which can be deduced from section 48 of his renowned poem: Song of Myself. In this small fraction of Whitman’s long Song, the poet openly dictates his views on God and spirituality. By this segment, Whitman had become courageous enough to boldly declare, “ I have said that the soul is not more than the body / And I have said that the body is not more than the soul / And nothing, <https://assignbuster.com/opposing-religious-perspectives-edwards-personal-narrative-and-whitmans-song-of-myself/>

not God, is greater to one that one's self is". This does not mean that Whitman was so indifferent of God, or that he was an atheist. On the contrary, Whitman was a spiritual person himself, and believed in the Christian faith, yet not in the same context as traditional teachings of the church. Whitman's version of Christianity was more in favour of nature, and was overall a democratic one. He believed that the soul and body should both be equally glorified and therefore refusing the body of its happiness would be an unchristian thing to do. On top of that, he firmly believed that God was not a being so exalted and high above human beings, but rather an existing presence in everyone and everything: " I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least / Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself".

For this reason, Whitman did not see the world and all that existed within it as unworthy of beauty, as opposed to Edwards, who claimed that, " I do certainly know that I love holiness... It appeared to me, to be the highest beauty and amiableness, above all other beauties: ... and that everything else, was like mire, filth and defilement in comparison of it". Certainly, this does not mean that Edwards found the rest of the world so unsightly, but rather saw that all the beauty in the world was so low in comparison to that of holiness, and so ultimately unworthy of it.

Jonathan Edwards possessed a love so intense towards God and saintliness, that he could not appreciate and admire the world and all that existed in its mortal realm, whereas Walt Whitman was a firm believer in equality. The soul, the body and God are all equal to him. In Whitman's work, he

celebrates humanity, while Edwards celebrates divinity, and is more than <https://assignbuster.com/opposing-religious-perspectives-edwards-personal-narrative-and-whitmans-song-of-myself/>

content that there is a Creator so exalted and in control of human fate. Thus, Whitman's ideologies can be considered modern and highly democratic for his time, and Edwards' were of a firm traditionalists'. Both of these contrasting opinions ended up to be greatly influential works within America and defining literary pieces in American history.