

Crossing brooklyn ferry

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



Crossing Brooklyn Ferry Whitman's poem " Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" seeks to determine the relationship of human beings to one another across time and space. Whitman wonders what he means (not as a poet but as another anonymous individual) to the crowds of strangers he sees every day. In stanza 3 the speaker says, " I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many/ generations hence". He assumes that they see the same things he does, and that they react in the same way, and that this brings them together in a very real sense. The ferry symbolizes this spatial and earthly movement. It is also associated with the groups of men and women who ride it, who have ridden it, and who will ride it. The coming together of these men and women symbolizes the spiritual unity of men in this world. The poet first addresses the elements - the tide, the clouds, and the sun - saying, " I see you face to face." He next observes the crowds of men and women on the ferryboats: " How curious you are to me" he says, for he thinks of these people in relation to those who " shall cross from shore to shore years hence." The poet meditates on the relationships between the various generations of men. This first section establishes the setting of the poem. The poet first responds to natural objects and then to people with the ultimate aim of bringing about an connection between himself and the reader. In the second section, the men and women on the ferryboat become the eternal " impalpable sustenance" of the poet. He thinks of " the simple, compact, well-join'd scheme" of the universe and believes himself to be " disintegrated yet part of the scheme." He thinks again about all the people of the future who will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore." The poet thinks about his role in relation to the nature of the

universe. To him, the universe seems compact, harmonious, and well-adjusted. He is part of the multitude of men, part of the eternal processes of birth, life, and death. Whitman reaches into the future and identifies himself with persons who will cross the river " a hundred years hence." Therefore a link is established between the poet and the " others" - including future readers. In section 3, Whitman declares that neither time nor place really matter, for he is part of this generation and of many generations hence. He speaks to future generations and tells them that their experiences are not new: " I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old,/Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, . . . /Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water." He, too, saw the ships arriving, " the sailors at work," and " the flags of all nations." He, too, saw " the fires from the foundry chimneys burning high and glaringly into the night." This third section reveals the poet's desire to establish contact with people of future generations. His own experience is similar to that of the reader years from now. In section 4, Whitman declares his deep love for the cities, the river, and the people. This section is transitional and marks the beginning of the change of the poet's attitude toward men and objects. For the first time (in this poem) he becomes emotionally involved in his relationships with other people and things. The poet, in section 5, poses a question about the relationship between himself and the generations to come. Even if there are hundreds of years between them, they are united by things which do not change. He, too, lived in Brooklyn and walked the Manhattan streets. He, too, " felt the curious abrupt questionings" stir within him. He believes that his body, his physical existence, has become a ferry uniting him with all mankind. The poet, in

seeking his own physical and spiritual identity, seeks to unite his sensibility with that of his reader. His quest now becomes more intellectual than before; the "curious abrupt questionings" are no longer emotional. Wishing to suggest the quality of spiritual unification, Whitman has used the metaphor of a chemical solution: "The float forever held in solution" is the infinite ocean of spiritual life which contains the "potential" of all life. The spiritual solution is the source of one's being. The use of the term "solution" is significant because it indicates the merging of man's existence with his spirit. Spiritually, he is united with future generations and with all of mankind. In section 6 the poet tells us that he has been engulfed by the same "dark patches" of doubt which have engulfed the reader. His best actions have appeared "blank" and "suspicious." He, too, has known "what it was to be evil" and he, too, "blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,/Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak." But life, finally, is what we make it - "the same old role . . . as great as we like,/Or as small as we like." The "old knot of contrariety" the poet has experienced refers to Satan and his evil influence on man, which creates the condition of contraries, of moral evil and good in human life. The poet suffered from these evil influences, as have all men. So, the poet implies, do not feel alone because you have been this way - one must accept both the pure and the impure elements of life. In section 7, the poet, addressing his reader, says: "Closer yet I approach you." The poet is thinking as much of the reader-yet-unborn as the reader, while he reads, is now thinking of the poet. And perhaps now, though he cannot be seen, the poet is watching the reader. The poet is trying to establish a link between himself and his future readers.

The link is not only of location (as on the ferry) but of thought processes as well. In section 8, Whitman describes the beauty of the Manhattan harbor, the sunset on the river, the seagulls, and the twilight. He realizes that the bonds between himself and other people are subtle but enduring. Between himself and the person who "looks in my face" is the subtlest bond. The union between himself and others cannot be understood in ordinary terms, by teaching, or by preaching - it is more mystical and intuitive. Recalling the scene of the river and the people with whom he was associated, he evokes the spiritual bond that links man with his fellow men. The reference to fusion ("which fuses me into you now") is the basic ideal the poet sought in the beginning. The union with the reader is mystical and beyond the bounds of rational thought or philosophy. In section 9, the poet invokes the river to flow "with the flood-tide," the clouds to shower upon him and the other passengers, and the "tall masts of Mannahatta" to stand up. He calls on everything - the bird, the sky, and the water - to keep on fulfilling their function with splendor, for everything is part of the universal life flow. The poet desires that the "eternal float of solution" should suspend itself everywhere. Physical objects, like "dumb, beautiful ministers," wait for their union with the poet's soul. Thus, at the end of the poem, Whitman addresses himself to material objects, which are also part of the life process because they are useful to man.