

# Overview of a poem when i heard the learn'd astronomer by walt whitman

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## An Overview of 'When I heard the Learn'd Astronomer' by Walt Whitman

The speaker in this poem recalls an event when he was attending a lecture on Astronomy. Pretty soon, he lost interest in the lecture based on scientific calculations and graphical presentations. He noticed that other people in the lecture-room were applauding the astronomer, while he quietly left the room. This shows that human beings respond in their individual ways under similar circumstances and this difference makes them unique from each other.

The experience that the poet narrates in this poem is strictly personal. He stresses upon the word 'I' five times in lines 1, 3, 4, 6 and 7, which shows that he is stressing upon one-to-one relationship of human beings with nature. "The proofs, the figures..." (2), and "the charts and diagrams" (3) explained by the astronomer might have been informative for the rest of the people attending the lecture, but the poet seemed to be looking for something else.

It was perhaps for this reason that he preferred leaving the lecture-room to search for the answers on his own. In this regard, Whitman hints at the individual's need to connect with nature on a personal level. To people like the speaker in this poem, man's connection with nature is not based upon the science of astronomy; in fact it is based upon simple experiences like looking "in perfect silence" (9) at the stars and mesmerizing in their beauty and mystery.

The speaker is rather inspired by the "mystical moist night-air" (8) where he feels a strong connection with nature. This is how Whitman explains that human relationship with nature is as mysterious as the mystery of stars and it cannot be explained by science.

The setting and mood of the poem change as the poem progresses. As the speaker goes outside from the crowded lecture room into the silence of the night, the mood of the poem also changes, when the speaker finds consolation under a starry sky, away from the lecture that made him “tired and sick” (6).

Several contrasting themes like science versus mysticism, crowd versus isolation, applause versus silence, calculation versus unaccountability, etc. highlight the differences between the personal experiences of people when exposed to identical situations. Thus, in this poem Whitman rejects the philosophy that the mystery of stars can be understood by mere scientific knowledge; and he asserts the fact that one needs to have a mystical approach to understand the complexities of nature.