

Poem analysis:
"facing west from
california's shores" by
walt whitman essay
sampl...



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Poem Analysis: “ Facing West from California’s Shores” by Walt Whitman Essay Sample

When I read a poem, I get an idea of what the author is trying to convey.

When I read it again, it touches something within. The more times a poem is read, the more it grows within, until its very idea takes ground in some part or other in our mind, and only then is it fully understood. But because we all have different holds for the poem to grab on to, we all come from different backgrounds and even different times, how can we ever say “ this is the correct way (to interpret it)”? The answer is we cannot, and so I can only do my best to argue my point of view in the following text, and hope that you, the reader, will bear with me.

After having read Facing West from California’s Shores I induced the following thesis statement: Facing West from California’s Shores is a poem about American identity in the world. It aims to promote American patriotism, while at the same time setting the nature of human psychology in focus, and make us wander about our future.

“ Walt Whitman revolutionised American poetry”, discussing topics considered, if not taboo, then most inappropriate. It is however not only what he wrote, but how he wrote. He is often considered to be the father of the free verse, a form which allows the poet to write more freely, as if speaking, without thought to rhyme, metre or other traditional techniques. This does not mean that free verse is without rules; on the contrary, they have but changed. In this form one might use recurrence with variation of phrases,

images and syntactical patterns. The choice of exact words and associations are just some factors that contribute to the beauty of the free verse.

If one considers the words used in Facing West from California's Shores, one may find the words that are chosen, and which of these Whitman has chosen to repeat, are painting a (metaphorical) picture. Phrases like "facing", "Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound", "almost" and "long having wander'd" all give us a sense of an on-going search; a longing for something we cannot find. "The circle almost circled" tell us something has come to an end, so does the past tense of "wander'd", but in between these two verses Whitman tells us where we come from. The "from" s lull us into a rhythm, and in a way this has a stronger effect than the traditional rhymes in conveying this message, always shifting our focus from one place to the next; ever flowing gently. In traditional poems the language is pretty, the rhymes and rhythms; here we perceive the images painted by the words in our minds (both those induced as well as those native to our mind-set).

One image in particular stands out in this poem: "Facing West from California's Shores". Why is this such strong an image? To gain an understanding of this we must first have an understanding of the history of the white man in America:

From the moment the white man set foot in America, conquest and treasure hunting has been his main quest. People wanted to settle in this "land of opportunities", and soon expansion began westward in search of new land. This western frontier for long was the very image of civilisation conquering the wilderness—of progress with clear results. In short, we had a goal. Then,

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in 1850, California became the 31st state of the USA. The gold rush had come and gone (1848-1855), and it would seem that all that could be discovered had been so. With no terra incognita left to discover, no more land to conquer, where should they go? Any further west and it would be east again.

This is quite brilliantly done by Whitman: "The circle almost circled", "very old", an on-going journey about to come to an end. While at the same time "a child", "Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound", "the house of maternity", a new beginning. He places the beginning at the end, and the end at the beginning; a beautiful ambiguity, placing America both at the beginning and end of our history. This brings us to the part of history Whitman is trying to convey.

Whitman is telling us about our ancestry; after all, to know where one is going, one must know whence one is coming. What can we take pride in? In answering this, it is rather obvious that not all of history is equally relevant, at least not if you want a particular perspective. Further, which parts of history one includes may define our identity. Do we want to be defined as those who come from the ancient Greeks; the very cradle of western civilisation? Or do we want to be of the ancient warriors from China? Whitman does neither. In his days, Asia was considered to be the birthplace of civilisation; he starts there. What he tells us of is exotic: "from the vales of Kashmere", "from the flowery peninsulas, and the spice islands".

However, what he doesn't include is just as important: Whitman excludes everything that has to do with Europe, even though most Americans

emigrated from thence. Why would he do this? Why does he not want to give the reader a European feeling of identity? To me, the answer is far from obvious. He could be trying to facilitate a more exotic feeling, as Asia often feels to Europeans; or he could simply omit it to promote a separate American identity, as America wanted to be independent from Europe. Either way, with no reminders of Europe and its greatness—America had as of yet not had many great accomplishments of their own—the American identity is stronger.

Identities are important, and how we perceive and analyse a conversation or a poem depends on who the speaker is. In *Facing West from California's Shores* the "I" is described but vaguely. At first it seems to be about a person; a traveller or a journeyman, perhaps even Whitman himself. In the oxymoron "I, a child, very old..." he could be referring to how he was of old age, but still open, inquiring, like a child. For Whitman himself travelled quite a lot, but it could also be a journey of the mind—a journey in which he tries to find a way to express himself, to be accepted; or a journey like the transcendentalists of the time undertook. These are mere speculations, but Whitman's work is most certainly controversial.

He was inspired by Emerson to write about themes which during Whitman's time were highly polarised, and it has been discussed whether he might have been bisexual, a topic not less negatively viewed then than it is now by some people. The "circle almost circled" could refer to his life, he was after all 41 years old, and mid-life crisis are not un-normal. I do however consider this to be the least likely of all the interpretations one might have of the poem in question. Rather, as the "I" in this poem says "Look of the shores of my
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Western sea", it could be America herself, or the spirit of humanity that speaks to us. If America is the orator, it makes great sense for her to be " a child, very old", for she was both old as a land and new as a country.

Furthermore, as Whitman was patriotic, he might use the grandiose and overwhelming feeling the poem gives the reader to inspire patriotism.

Although this in some ways makes sense, America herself has never travelled anywhere geographically. Therefore I believe the self of this text to be humanity, or civilisation; possibly only the American part of humanity, but humanity nevertheless. This makes sense in light of their thoughts on how civilisation sprung into existence in Asia (as mentioned above), and now stands on California's shores, looking west towards the place where we all began.

Having looked only on the main body of the poem thus far, it is time to consider the last two verses (in parentheses). The poem has, in my opinion, hitherto been rather optimistic. At first we get the image of a search, almost complete. Then we move on to all the wonderful places we originate from. He ends it all with saying that he is " very pleas'd and joyous", giving the impression that after all this travelling, we have reached what we wanted. Had the poem ended there, we might not have thought more about it; but it does not. For even though we have wandered, " round the earth having wander'd", even though we " face home again, very pleas'd and joyous", there is somewhat of a longing still. For now that we have discovered all of the terra incognita, what else are we to do?

We have had a great journey, but maybe the journey was a destination in itself. And even after all these accomplishments, still there is unease and <https://assignbuster.com/poem-analysis-facing-west-from-californias-shores-by-walt-whitman-essay-sample/>

searching for something greater. For now, what else is there to extinguish our tireless inquiring? What is it that humanity wants to do; to find? We have now populated all the (metaphorical) corners of this world, so what now? This is what Whitman asks us, showing that behind the happy surface lies a doubt, a questioning afterthought. This could be considered somewhat pessimistically, as in " what are we doing here on earth? Do we have a purpose? Does anything we do really make a difference?", but the imagery does its work in making the poem bright and hoping.

This is the way the human mind seems, to me at least, to work. I think most people remember a time in their life when they wondered about life, death, how stuff works, if the universe has a boundary. It seems to be in our nature to inquire, to " seeking what is yet unfound". But what happens when we found it all? The poem urges the reader to appreciate the importance of these questions. To sum it up: Facing West from California's Shores is a poem placing America at the completion of our history thus far (when it was written), and yet at the start of it all, facing optimism. Giving America such an important role in history is rather patriotic of Whitman, and the way he simultaneously credits the rest of the world, makes it a good sort of patriotic. He is, though, questioning it all at the same time, making us reconsider what our purpose here is. He has discovered an important point in the human psyche; that which drives us forward. All this is done elegantly with pleasant imagery, leaving the reader, not with a depressive afterthought, but rather satisfied, but questioning at heart; a seed of thought is planted, and the poet has completed his mission.

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