

Whitman and manhattan



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The birthplace of Walt Whitman, New York is where the poet spent much of his life and became the inspiration for much of Whitman's poetry. Living in an era where mass industrialization and modernization began to change and shape the New York, Whitman wrote "Mannahatta" as an acknowledgement and acceptance of this shift to an urban society. By first drawing attention to the aboriginal name, Whitman references the pure, natural origins of the city and how the formation of Manhattan is from the soil makes it seem alive.

After that, Whitman looks at the cityscape, the detached yet beautiful aesthetic of the city, but does not condemn it for taking over the environment around it, because the city and the earth has formed together into one system. Finally, Whitman hones in on the lives of the people in the city, treasuring each of their lives and appreciating each of them as human beings that add to the individuality and liveliness of Manhattan. "Mannahatta" is Walt Whitman's homage to New York City; it is a celebration of the union of the urbanized metropolis and the organic natural world as well as a recognition of the humanity that brings life to his beloved city.

Whitman's search for a name that describes New York and his love for his city leads him to the original name, Mannahatta, and subsequently brings attention to the organic and fundamental parts of the city; he shows that the city is natural and alive, from its creation to its current development.

Referencing the original name for the island, Whitman writes:

I was asking for something specific and perfect for my city,

Whereupon, lo! upsprang the aboriginal name!

Whereupon, lo! upsprang the aboriginal name!

Now I see what there is a name, a word, liquid, sane, unruly, musical, self-sufficient;

I see that the word of my city is that word up there (1-4).

Whitman sees the original name, Mannahatta, as the “ perfect” name for his city, suggesting that life in New York is as organic and free it had been hundreds of years ago. Mannahatta, meaning “ land of many hills,” was the name that the Lenni Lenape Indians gave the city when they first arrived upon its shores. The fact that the name still fits the city, even though it has now become an industrial metropolis, shows that at its very roots, the city is still primitive. Through using the native name, Whitman references the nomadic tendencies of the native Indians, which also makes the city appear restless and yearning . In the next lines of the poem, Whitman draws attention to the name as “ liquid, sane, unruly, musical, self-sufficient” (3). By using words such as “ liquid” and “ unruly,” Whitman makes the city appear as a fluid object, one that can form and meld without breaking or snapping. He sees New York as an autonomous being, a place where things are freewheeling and subject to change, viewing the city as a living, breathing being of its own, chaotic in its own existence. By going back to its original name, Whitman seems to suggest that Manhattan is not an unnatural system and not just an industrial structure; it is as primitive and animated as it was when it was discovered.

Despite being called “ aboriginal” in the first part of the poem, Whitman still draws attention to the industrial aspects of the city, showing that he accepts the urbanization of Manhattan and that the melding together of nature and

technology is welcome and appreciated. First, Whitman draws attention to the skyscrapers: "Numberless crowded streets - high growths of iron, slender, strong, light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies; / Tide swift and ample, well-loved by me, toward sundown" (6-8). Whitman creates the image of the iron of the skyscrapers meeting the sky; the use of "light" and "clear skies" is preceded with the mention of "numberless crowded streets - high growths of iron," (6). This seems to show that the city is "strong" and stable enough to triumphantly reach the sky and join together with the natural world. From its natural roots, New York has built itself up higher and higher until it reconnected with the sky, an ideal marriage of metal and the environment. However, Whitman does not only write about the sky as meeting with city, but he also mentions the water as another joint that the city connects to. For example, Whitman writes:

The countless masts, the white shore-steamers, the lighters, the

Ferry-boats, the black sea-steamers well-model'd,

The downtown streets, the jobbers' houses of business, the houses

Of business of the ship-merchants and money-brokers, the

River-streets (10-11).

Whitman uses enjambment to allow the poem to flow fluidly, as if the words were tumbling into one another. In fact, save for the first two lines and last two lines, there are no full endstops in the entire poem. Even lines where there seems to be an end are marked by a comma or a dash, making the poem seem like one long thought, streaming and unceasing. This structure

reinforces the image of the city meeting and becoming the river, cascading from one point to another. Through imagery and poetic devices, Whitman describes the union of the city with the sea and the sky to show his appreciation for this combination of modernity and the Earth that New York has become.

However, what Whitman seems to love most about Manhattan is the variety of people that live there; he seems to want to seek out the lives of each and every one of these people, imagining the possibilities within them. Whitman highlights the importance of humanity in the poem by using repetition in the majority of the poem, following a list-like form: “ The carts hauling goods, the manly race of drivers of horses, the brown-faced sailors, / The summer air, the bright sun shining, and the sailing clouds aloft” (14-15). This repetitive form brings attention to the homogeneity of these objects, from the consistency of the sun and clouds, to the mechanical carts, to the uniformity of the groups of sailors and drivers. The repetition ends at the line that reads, “ The mechanics of the city, the masters, well-form’d, beautiful-faced, looking you straight in the eyes” (16). By breaking out of repetition, Whitman allows the reader to pay more attention to the line, just as he prepares to pay more attention to the lives of these individuals. In the case of the citizens, there are no limitations in regards to intimacy, which Whitman seems to marvel over: “ A million people — manners free and superb — open voices — hospitality — the most courageous and friendly young men...The city of such women, I am mad to be with them! I will return after death to be with them! / The city of such young men, I swear I cannot live happy, without I often go talk, walk, eat, drink, sleep, with them!” (19-24). What sets the

humans apart from the rest of the city is the difference in their structure — the city is made of concrete and steel, and no matter how hard one tries to understand it, the pure industrial character of it prevents anyone from getting too close to it. However, the people are generous and hospital, “courageous and friendly,” giving off a warmth that the cool mechanics of the city cannot have. Despite the beauty of the city, Whitman seems to suggest that without the men and women in the city, he cannot live happily in it, showing that even in the most brilliant and promising of cities, it is humanity and life that defines its worth, and so the mingling crowds of people in Manhattan is what brings worth to the city.

“Mannahatta” is Whitman’s ode to a city he loved and lived in. He takes the reader through the lives and experiences of those who live in New York, as if putting them in his shoes as he takes a stroll through the city. Living in a time when the city around him was changing, Whitman seems to embrace the modernity and industrialization of Manhattan, but does so tentatively. Although he starts with the very roots of the city and the organic origins that it was built upon, Whitman suggests that the industrial development of New York does not disrupt this naturalness, but in fact, adds to it. As the poem progresses, Whitman seems to focus in on the lives of the inhabitants of New York. He describes them just as he describes his beloved city: natural and endless. Whitman seems to suggest that without the lives and the humanity that people bring to a place, he cannot truly love this city, and in fact, his love for Manhattan is, fundamentally, a love for the people and the possibilities that lie in their existences.