

Literature and writing

[Literature](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Nature, as seen and depicted by Walt Whitman in “Leaves of Grass” is vast and sweeping in its grandeur, like a giant movie screen, where he unloads scenes upon scenes of grand vistas in living color. If it were a theatrical performance, he would create lavish scenes of epic proportions : majestic skies, billowing waves, golden fields of grain extending to the horizon. They would be the exact opposite of the languid seascapes captured on canvas in Virginia Woolf’s “To the Lighthouse”. Describing the sea, Whitman writes:

Behold, the sea itself,

And on its limitless, heaving breast, the ships;

See, where their white sails, bellying in the wind, speckle

The

green and blue,

See, dusky and undulating, the long pennants of smoke (33. 30-37).

To Whitman, nature perpetually calls attention unto itself, but man ordinarily ignores it or is not sensitive enough to perceive its charms. Thus, the poet continually exhorts the onlooker to behold the beauty unfolding before his eyes. For him, a leaf of grass is “no less than the journey work of the stars” and that “the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven”(31. 1-8).

As in theatre, the poet conjures images to create moods as would suit his purpose. Whitman’s poems overflow with robustness and energy as he writes about the pioneers of a new nation leaving the sanctuary of their

homes to tame the great frontiers. In the process he is overwhelmed by the magnificent beauty of the outdoors as well as the great cities and industries built by man's labor.

If his medium were a film screen, Whitman would come up with glorious takes of canyons and sunsets and deserts in Cinemascope, of buffalo herds grazing the plains, interspersed with the creaking wheels of industry. When Whitman hears America singing, the songs he hears are those of vigorous workmen as they go about their daily tasks.

For him, America is one vast theatre with the American common man as hero. For him, life consists of " Victory, union, faith, identity, time,/ The indissoluble compacts, riches, mystery,/ eternal progress, the kosmos, and the modern reports". (Book II. 2. 4) These are abstract terms, vague and incomprehensible, but the reader follows the thread of his thoughts when the poet writes about " sturdy blacksmiths swinging their sledges", " cheerful axemen, wielding all day their axes", and of " how the ash writhes under the muscular arms" of oarsmen on the lakes (33. 39-43). For Walt, commonplace things in nature become the stuff of legend.

Nature is likewise a common theme in a ballet performance. Because no lines are spoken, the audience rely on the setting, the music, and the language of the bodies in motion. That there is no dialogue seems to enhance rather than detract from the performance, for the dancers themselves with their seemingly effortless leaps, twists and turns, their graceful flowing motions tell the story; no words are necessary.

Sometime ago I had the opportunity to watch a ballet performance at the Metropolitan Opera House. The experience was fascinating. It impressed on me the beauty of the human body in motion, so long immortalized in poem and marble, but more usually ignored.

The classic ballet Apollo, where the sun-god is offered the gifts of poetry, dance and music, began with the stage decked in black with haunting music in the background to create a somber mood. The ballerinas, clad in contrasting white, were seen distinctly on stage as they retold one of mythology's enduring tales.

Jeu de Cartes was a modern ballet that featured poker hands, each being shuffled until the last card became a royal flush. Modern and very lively, Jeu de Cartes was very entertaining.

Petrouchka, a classic Russian ballet, made use of lavish costumes and contrivances and four changes of scene. Set in a Russian village, it made use of puppets and costumed characters.

Watching a ballet performance makes one appreciate the tremendous work and resources needed to stage it. It also makes one realize how beautiful the human body is, how graceful its gestures, its subtle flowing and gliding motions, as it tries to mimic life or capture its essence, in the same way that an artist tries to transfer the colors of sunset into canvas, or a poet his ruminations about life into rhyme.

The poet, like the ballet dancer, tells a story by the subtle use of words, of symbols, of everyday things that ring a bell in the reader's mind, or strike a

chord in his heart. The cast of a ballet and its creators also reach out to an audience by the use of movement synchronized with music in the midst of an appropriate setting to define mood. In both arts, appreciation and enjoyment are the just rewards.

WORKS CITED

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*.