

Walt whitman and transcendentalism

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Transcendentalism was a movement that focused on the examination of humanity as a whole. Transcendentalists believed that the human senses could not communicate profound truths; they were limited to knowledge of only the physical aspects of life.

They also believed that it was through the observation and appreciation of nature that the human soul was enlightened. The last main Transcendental belief was that humans shared one common over-soul with God. These ideas of Transcendentalism were started by influential poets such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The ideas these men wrote about inspired countless others to continue what they had started and made into what it is today. Among these pupils of Emerson and Thoreau was Walt Whitman. Over the course of his life, Walt Whitman wrote poetry based on the Transcendental ideas of his predecessors.

For most of his life, Whitman lived in New York and New Jersey. Although he lived mostly in the city, Whitman was fascinated by Transcendental ideas such as nature and the common man. Walt Whitman's use of nature and the common man connects to Transcendentalism in his poems "I Saw in Louisiana a Live Oak Growing," "A Noiseless Patient Spider," and "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer." In Whitman's poem "I Saw in Louisiana a Live Oak Growing," he focuses on the ideas of companionship and isolation by telling a story about a tree that the speaker of the poem sees in Louisiana. In the poem, he stresses the need humans have for companionship by stating, "Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend a lover near/I know very well I could not"(Whitman).

The difference between humans and nature is reflected when the speaker notes that although the tree is completely alone, it still “ utters” its leaves even without companionship. The speaker also notes that a human requires such companionship to feel creative, happy, and get things done. At the start of the poem, readers are shown that the speaker is relating the tree’s life to that of his own by describing the trees ‘ rude’ and ‘ lusty’ look. This theme is then brought back: “ In this restatement, the live oak’s isolation is still more strongly emphasized ‘ solidarity/ in a wide flat space’..

. Furthermore, the poet is again awe at the memory of the tree ‘ uttering joyous leaves’ in its isolation. The poet’s response is reaffirmed in the last line of the poem ‘ I know very well that I could not”(Kenney 1879). The speaker realizes that his motivation comes from the likes of companions such as friends and lovers and that humanity can never be happy on his own like the tree. It is through his companions that the speakers’ will to utter their leaves rises from. This deep reflection on the behavior of humans by observing nature emulates the main element of Transcendentalism that states nature illuminates the soul.

Through the observation and reflection on nature, the speaker grows to have a better understanding of his own self, his soul is illuminated. “ I Saw in Louisiana a Live Oak Growing” conveys themes of nature and humans’ need for companionship. “ A Noiseless, Patient Spider” is a poem by Walt Whitman where he relates his soul to that of a spider found in nature. In the poem, the speaker watches and ponders on a spider that he sees. First person is frequently used in lyric poetry, but the speaker directly communing with his own soul is an aspect unique to Whitman’s poetry. The reader sees this <https://assignbuster.com/walt-whitman-and-transcendentalism/>

conversation between man and soul in the second stanza where the speaker says “ And you O my soul where you stand,/ surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space”(Whitman).

In the poem, Whitman is reflecting on the insignificance that he felt about his life and the desire for one’s life to have meaning. He uses the small insignificant spider making a web out into the unknown as almost a metaphor for this desire. This connects to the idea of the common man and the common man’s desire to have a purpose throughout life. It is also a poem about loneliness, and the infatuation of becoming something of higher order: “ This is a loneliness that grows out of an inherent tendency of the body and soul to attempt to unite with an elusive divine entity in order to gain immortality” (Scherle 2705). The poem’s theme of trying to become immortal and the desire to be one with divine being’s shows one of the main themes of transcendentalism.

The idea that all humans share one Over-soul with God echoes in this poem (Scherle). Whitman uses the spider in its habitat to relate his situation to an aspect in nature. The poem has also been described as showing that Whitman’s poetry is continuous like that of a spider web that spans everywhere and shows everything (“ Criticism: ‘ A Noiseless Patient Spider’”). The themes of nature and the common man are prevalent in this work: the relation of humans and the spider, and the examination of one’s own conscience. Whitman uses alliteration in this poem to stress the relationship between sense and sound.

He also used repetition, repeating things like “ O my soul” to emphasize the sorrow that the speaker felt over the insignificance of his soul. This repetition stresses the Transcendental belief of having an over-soul. Whitman was stressing to the speaker’s desire to have a connection to a higher power to the reader. Whitman’s poem emulates the Transcendental ideas of nature and the over-soul in “ A Noiseless Patient Spider.” Whitman’s poem “ When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” is about the speaker hearing an astronomer talk about things like math and feeling like it is all very superficial.

The reader sees this in the poem when the speaker says, “ How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,/ Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself” (Whitman). The speaker looks up at the stars and mulls over them. The speaker describes wandering off alone, which suggests that the speaker is directionless and undirected. The idea that the speaker does unstructured things on a whim separates the speaker from the “ learn’d” astronomer. This shows the separation of the common man who only thinks creatively. This also emulates the Transcendental belief that people should appreciate nature and learn from it.

The speaker is trying to construe that human senses could not teach anything meaningful and that only nature could enlighten humanity. Another theme of Transcendentalism that is reflected in this poem is self reliance:

“(The poem) is invested in the concept of self-reliance, and Whitman consistently explored and tested the transcendental as a source of knowledge and meaning” (Hacht). Whitman uses his own style called personalism, which was Whitman’s altered idea of individualism. Personalism says that humans should live life how they choose and not how others say

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they should. This idea is reflected in “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” when the speaker leaves where the astronomer was teaching to be on his own. This was not what everyone else was doing and therefore reflects the ideas of personalism.

There are also aspects of Romanticism shown in this poem. It is shown in the poem when Whitman contrasts the value of sensory imagination and the method of the scientific process. Whitman also wrote this poem to appeal to the current events at the time it was written. At the time, astronomy was a very popular topic for people because of all the innovations in that field. Whitman uses his poetry to show that people needed to focus more on the beauty of nature instead in addition to science and math. Also, Whitman not only used space to convey multiple themes, but also wanted to comment on space as a whole.

He alludes to the general enthusiasm about discoveries in space that the people had. Whitman’s word choice is very intentional and stresses science and mathematics. He also personifies the sky, describing it as “rising” and “gliding.” These words were calculated because he felt this would resonate more in the minds of his readers. Lastly, Whitman uses repetition in this poem.

In the final lines, Whitman uses alliteration to stress the musical aspect of the stars and how the speaker was admiring them (Hacht). Whitman used themes of self-reliance and the common man in “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer.” Walt Whitman shows Transcendental themes such as nature and the common man in his poems “I Saw in Louisiana a Live Oak Growing,”

“A Noiseless Patient Spider,” and “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer.” In “I Saw in Louisiana a Live Oak Growing,” Whitman reflects Transcendentalism through his comparison of the common man to nature and the observation of the need humans have for companionship. The speaker observes the tree and wonders how it can appear joyful even if it is completely isolated.

“A Noiseless Patient Spider” shows Transcendentalism through the relation of man and nature and the idea that humans share an Over-Soul with God. The speaker ponders on a small spider spinning its web, noting the loneliness of it. The speaker relates the spider’s insignificance to the insignificance of his own life. Lastly, the poem “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” emulates the theme of the common man, nature, and self-reliance. The speaker walks away from the learn’d astronomer because he is bored by what he is saying.

The poem stresses the importance of beauty in nature over factual things such as science and math. All of these factors contribute to the overall Transcendental theme in Whitman’s poems. Works Cited “Criticism: A Noiseless, Patient Spider.” EXPLORING Poetry, Gale, 2003. Student Resources in Context.

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