

American Literature

Walt Whitman

“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”

The poem has great poise and balanced movement. Whitman’s symbols never trample his ideas, and the ideas are never forced from the symbols. In the image of the ferry and its journey from shore to shore lies Whitman’s philosophy of the great flow of all things through life toward immortality. The past and future are limited to the present in this concept, and the chain is infinite and timeless.

Walt Whitman was able to translate these sensations into poetry that reflected not only the immediate pleasure he derived from his trips across the open water, but the deeper philosophical symbols that this passage from shore to shore contained for him. We can see Whitman’s persistent ideas on the eternal forward movement of all things through life, death and rebirth, and his notions of an interrelationship of all people that transcends time and place. We have seen him reach back to acknowledge the past or look forward to greeting the wonderful future. The idea of the ferry’s passage from shore to shore fits well symbolically with the poet’s notions of an evolving and forward movement in all of nature. The ferry, the people that cross on it, and the rushing water beneath, loom up for Whitman as mystical symbols of a perpetual and unified flow humanity from the present into the future.

“Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”

The poem represents essentially the passage from childhood questioning and curiosity to a philosophic and poetic maturity. As a adult, the poet recalls the song and translates into words the emotion that the bird’s lamentation conveyed to him. The cry of “lonesome love” inspired in him in a love “tumultuously bursting” like that of the mocking bird, and awakened in him his vocation of poet.

However, an understanding of this kind of love was not sufficient. The bird’s lament was for a lost love, death and life in his “carol,” The final and complete understanding of the life-death rhythm and cyclic pattern of existence is whispered by the sea.

The maternal sea utters a message of death, which is only understood years later in the poet’s manhood. Thus, Whitman sees that death and life are bound together and are not opposites in the order things. The poet sees what the bird could not in its’ song—that in death there is life, and a loss to death is ultimately a movement to life in rebirth. This is the meaning of life for Whitman, and it brings him to full poetic

maturity. As the sea whispered “death,” it also whispered a message of life. At the end of the poem, this yearning for understanding revolves into calm assurance. In the final comprehension of life’s meaning, there is no longer any anxiety for the poet.

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed”



Through the symbolic use of a star, a lilac and a bird, the poet journeys through grieving love to a final acceptance of death. The acceptance of Lincoln’s death, as well as an understanding of death’s place in the human pattern, and attained only after an encounter with love and grief. Whitman does not forsake the mournful sense of loss once the full meaning of immortality and peace in death is understood. He discovers them to be compatible parts of a more complete realization, just as he found love and death to be interlocking parts of existence in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.” In “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed, Whitman appears more sober and well balanced. In all three poems there is an optimistic acceptance of death, and an understanding of its desirable place in the natural cycle of regeneration we have seen Whitman announce so often.