
Crossing Brooklyn Ferry: Equality Through Differences

Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is a poem that not only exposes the differences within the people and the geography of the nation, but also shows the theme of equality that unites these differences. Incorporating his experience with the Civil War as well as the industrial revolution of the United States, Whitman threads together the past and the future, promoting equality not only within time and distance, but in its attitude and thought. By examining the use of parallel structure and repetition, Whitman plays with the relationship between difference and equality. By focusing on the figurative language of rhetorical questioning, imagery in addition to the rhythm of action and movements, Whitman shows how equality can be established against the passing of time and the advancing nation. Ultimately, by examining the structure and the verb tenses utilized in the poem, Whitman shows how each part of the difference, whether it be people or landmarks, contributes to the perfected unity of the whole.

Focusing specifically on the first two sections of Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," one can see how the poet utilizes repetition of specific phrases in order to create a sense of overwhelming inequality, but also to establish a feeling of unity and equality. By repeating "how curious you are to me" in two subsequent lines, the poet reveals the two different scenes and subjects; not only are there "crowds of men and women," but there are also ferry-boats that "cross from shore to shore" (lines 3-5). However, even though the poet is fascinated by the differences of subjects he sees on the "flood-tide below [him]," he claims that the people and the ferry boats both create the same effect of curiosity. Similarly, when the poet is thinking of his role with respect to the world, he expresses that even in "the simple, compact, well-join'd scheme," he finds "[himself] disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme" (line 7). Although the repeated word "disintegrated" means separation from the whole, the word creates unity in that it follows the subject of the poet himself as well as everyone else in the universe. Therefore, although he is a separate entity, he is also a part of everyone else, partaking in "part of the scheme." The repetition of specific word choices and phrases establishes a link between the poet and everyone else in the world, thereby blurring the relationship of differences and equality and intertwining the differences into something unifying. Not only so, the parallel structure of form also plays with the relationship of the difference and the equality. In lines 13-16, the poet begins each line with the phrase "others will," and follows it with an action verb: "enter the gates," "watch the run," "see the shipping." Even after the passing of time as represented by the "fifty years hence," and "a hundred years hence," the repeated phrase of "others will" shows that despite the varying groups of people and the passing generations, in the end, they will all experience the same sight of seeing the ferry cross. The poet transcends time and location by showing how "the others" are united by the same vision even with the passing of time and the rise of many generations.

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By examining the symbols, imageries, metaphors, and rhetorical questionings Whitman places throughout "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," one can see that Whitman's loyalty to the democratic ideal of equality seems to go against that specific era. Because the poem is written in the period of the Second Industrial Revolution, one can see the technological and economic progress of the United States through the developments and advancements of steam-powered ships and railways. One of the most transparent images used is the ferry, which symbolizes not only the continual action of "crossing from shore to shore," but also the invisible motion of passing time. The vivid imagery of the river "with the swift current" and the "bright flow," then parallels the motion of the ferry, unifying nature's response to the Industrial Revolution (lines 23-24). More importantly, Whitman shows that equality can be established against the passing of time and the advancing nation by purposely not differentiating between the natural elements and the artificially created advancements. When depicting the scenery of New York, Whitman writes in details of "the river and sunset and scallop-edg'd waves of flood tide, the sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the twilight, and the belated lighter," therefore putting the ferries and the buildings on the same level as the crashing waves and the sea-gulls (line 94). On the other hand, in Lydia Maria Child's Letters from New York, the revealing delineations of New York City as the nation's leading urban center do not exude the same glory and majesty as revealed by Whitman. In fact, Child's letters addresses the poverty among women and children "is the misery of a city like New-York, that a kindly spirit not only suffers continual pain, but is obliged to do itself perpetual wrong" (page 1093). Whereas Whitman claims that there is a unifying effect of nature and the industrial progression, Child claims that there is a dividing effect in which the lower class suffers due to the repression of sympathies. Similarly, the technique of rhetorical questioning is used by both Whitman and Child, but again, produces a differing effect. When speaking of "deeds of gentleness and mercy," Child asks, "Why are such scenes so uncommon? Why do we thus repress our sympathies, and chill the genial current of nature, by formal observances and restraints" (1093-94)?" The sentiments of loss, hopelessness, and despair seem to result from these rhetorical questions as the city is depicted as one that is selfish and self-centered. However, for Whitman, as the use of rhetorical questioning, such as "What is it then between us? What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us," becomes more frequent, there is a feeling of comfort that produces a calming effect for the readers. The poet reassures its readers that years, distance, and place, will not separate him from the generations to come, through the repetition of the phrase "I too" because equality has been established through shared experiences. Ultimately, Whitman specifically employs symbols, imageries, and rhetorical questioning, to show how equality is established against the passing of time and the advancing nation in the Second Industrial Revolution era.

Lastly, by analyzing the structure and the verb tenses employed in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," one can see how Whitman intentionally generates a paradoxical case of movement and stasis to ultimately reflect the ideal of equality transcendent throughout the poem. The inception of the poem begins with the present tense as the poet declares, "I see you face to face" (line 1), but

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quickly shifts to the future tense of “others will” (line 13). Similarly, there is a subtle transition of verb tenses from the present tense of “I am with you,” to the past tense of “I too many and many a time cross’d the river of old” within one section (lines 21, 26). By constantly changing verb tenses throughout each of the nine segments of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” the poet blurs the past, the present, and the future, to show not the passing of time, but rather the surpassing of time. As readers, we know that with the “men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,” there will be changes and developments in the culture and the way of life. In fact, nothing ever remains constant. However, it is through this kind of timelessness that Whitman can present the overarching theme of equality within the differences. Furthermore, the structure of the poem is in sections: there are nine distinct sections that form this poem each with varying lengths. Immediately, the appearance of the poem hints at disjointedness and separation. Despite this, however, Whitman’s underlying theme is unity and equality. To achieve this, Whitman utilizes juxtapositions in order to declare that all differences can coexist. For example, the poet reveals that the people who “stand and lean on the rail” also “hurry with the swift current” (line 24). In the same way, the poet juxtaposes the theme of rest and activity as the seagulls that have “motionless wings,” are able to “oscillat[e] their bodies” (line 27). Overall, the most evident juxtaposition is represented by the image of the river; even though the river is constantly flowing, “stately and rapid,” it will always appear the same (line 50). Each of the differences is important because it contributes to the overall unity of the whole.

“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is a poem that brings to its appearance differences that will never coexist. However, it is through the use of repetition, parallel structure, and figurative languages of metaphors and imageries, that enable Whitman to thread together generations of people within an era of rapid growth and change. On the whole, the mood the poem creates is one of optimism, hope, and happiness. As the Second Industrial Revolution is taking effect on the city, the poem offers a bright optimism in which the fluid crossing over of the ferry manifests the easy transition from the old to the new. By establishing the coexistence of opposing forces in his timeless world, Whitman gladly anticipates and praises change, reaffirming his ideal of equality and unity.

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