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### The Duality of Man and River

Whether separated by a river or a paper thin wall, one's search for self or inclusion in the larger social arena can be daunting, and across the ages, many writers have turned to nature as a natural barrier to this search, allowing one's mind to isolate itself in nature's beauty. In his poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," however, Walt Whitman's poetic elements illustrate the simultaneous connection and alienation of society when it comes into contact with this isolating force, underscoring the complex and faulted beauty of man and nature combined.

The first three sections of the poem emphasize the abrupt alienation that Whitman's speaker feels while crossing the river, one that eventually gives way to an uneasy feeling of connection. Repetition in section one highlights this feeling as the speaker declares in both the first and second line that "I see you face to face." This intimate admission is directed towards the "flood-tide" and "clouds off the West," collectively symbolizing nature, while directed away from mankind, as if the speaker actively rejects civilization (1-2). The speaker's rejection builds in the last three lines of the section as he admits that the "crowds of men and women," the "hundreds and hundreds that cross [the river]," and those "that shall cross from shore to shore" are all "more curious than you [nature]...might suppose" (5-7). The repetition of the speaker accepting nature "face to face" while rejecting humanity and labelling it "curious" generates the speaker's sense of alienation which has been forced by the beauty of nature flushed against the curiosity of man. David Kelly comments on the speaker's complex reaction to mankind as the observations made in the first section "drive the poet toward acute awareness of the differences between people, even as he tries to proclaim their unity."

Kelly identifies the speaker's slow recognition of similarity while maintaining a feeling of solitude (Kelly). Section two continues this feeling of isolation, but tempers it as the speaker concedes the existence of "the similitudes of the past and those of the future," as well as the fact that "others," (repeated in lines 17-21) will experience the same alienation and be struck by the same natural beauty (10-21). "Others" will "watch the run of the flood tide" and "see [the men and women] as they cross" just as the speaker has. Through this repetition in the first section of the poem, Whitman's speaker therefore arrives at an uneasy sense of connectedness as his alienation from society is tempered by the shared isolation felt by the huddled masses that cross the river with him. By creating this seemingly contradictory unity, the speaker characterizes the river as a dividing line while retaining its natural ability to restore unity.

The middle third of the poem sees the speaker embrace the natural qualities of the river and the people crossing it while questioning the uneasy feelings he felt in the first portion. In the fourth section, the speaker shifts the antecedent of "you" from nature, as it was in the first third of the poem, to humanity as he states "these and all else were to me the same as they were to you." Referring to "cities," "the stately and rapid river," and "the men and women near me," the speaker explores the natural commonalities he feels towards man, departing from the alienation in the prior sections. The speaker emphasizes the capacity and desire of the soul to seek beauty and company (51-56). Section five finds the speaker questioning outright the separation he felt before, beginning "what is it then between us?" (57). This and the following question places doubt on the river's ability to isolate, or even one's own ability to be isolated from mankind, leaving only the natural force of connectedness. The speaker "lived," "walked," and "felt" along with the "crowds of people" and he too "bathed in the waters," felt "struck by the flood-tide" and "reiv'd identity by [his body]." The speaker's admissions about his shared experiences, both natural and societal, expand the "questions" that "stir[red] within [the speaker]" about the possibility of alienation, whether distance, time, or even a river separates man

from each other and nature (61-68). Critic Patricia Rudden cites this unity as a “type of immortality” that is “manifested through the repeated phenomena of daily life that show forth eternity” (Rudden). Analyzing the repetitious actions of the crowds as timeless and immortal, Rudden stresses Whitman’s speaker’s gradual, yet unstoppable progression towards a feeling of unity. Therefore, by the end of the middle sections of the poem, the speaker has progressed from an uneasy feeling of connectedness to an absolute sense of unity.

By the final third of the poem, the speaker’s wrestling with the ambiguity of his feelings of alienation and connectedness come to an end as the speaker rejects alienation, focusing on shared joy. The final third begins “closer yet I approach you,” illustrating that as the ferry reaches the opposite shore, the speaker feels increasingly connected to the world around him (89). The eighth section emphasizes natural beauty combined with society, reflecting the speaker’s conclusions. He states “what can be more stately and admirable than...Manhattan,” with “rivers and sunset,” and the “fuses” made between people (101-107). The poem then ends with the speaker joyously imploring listeners to “live, old life” and reject feelings of isolation in favor of recognizing the unity between mankind through nature, emphasizing the unifying force behind the river while rejecting its ability to divide (120). Dana Brand writes on Whitman's meshing of nature and society in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” stating “[Whitman] explored the way in which the urban crowd and urban objects could become as important to an urban poet as natural objects had been to Wordsworth and the Romantics.” Brand not only identifies Whitman’s departure from the Romantic emphasis and nature against society, but rather a mixture that produced “an awareness of human life in the context of time” (Brand). Whitman therefore utilizes Romantic elements which emphasize the beauty of nature with a unique focus on humanity, highlighting the greatness of society with nature, rather than the squalor of society against it.

Standing at a crossroad between the naive glorification of the Romantics and cynical pronouncements of the Realists, Whitman chose to forge his own path, celebrating the beauty and

unifying power of man and nature combined and using Manhattan as a muse and the river as his medium.

## Works Cited

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