

## **The Balance in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”**

Rachel Carazo

**Course:** English 295

**Instructor:** Christine Mitchell

Aristotle, a famous philosopher of the ancient world, once commented, "The best condition of anything in relation to the best condition of any other thing is commensurate in point of superiority with the relationship between the things themselves" (Aristotle 392). In other words, there must be balance in every act which man endeavors to perform, as there are always two opposites being held together by a point in the middle. The ancients realized this, as do many modern writers who continue to expound such principles. The same notion also applies to poetry through its characteristics of rhyme scheme, rhythm, and especially, thematic imagery. Walt Whitman's poem, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," contains such an example. The poem itself is as Roger Gilbert describes, "one of his most sustained, difficult, and finally triumphant confrontations with the knowledge of [ ... ] death," and from the detailed use of language, Whitman creates a balanced statement of the journey from life to death through his use of society, its opposite, spirituality, and water, the tie that connects them both for its relationship to life and death (Gilbert 339).

Before one can experience death, one must experience life, and in the poem, the narrator faces several facts of the social, human world. When the narrator first describes humanity, he sees "[t]he certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others" (Whitman, line 12). Mankind has emotions; mankind has dreams. And, mankind has failings. Immediately, the narrator finds the humanity in the material world, the intrinsic element striving to find its way through one's personal emotions and companions. For the narrator, this human interaction is what makes people human, fallible, and yet extraordinary. Consequently, from this unchanging

view of humanity, the narrator states that in "[a] hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see" the very same city the narrator sees from the ferry, the very same methods of life which he describes (18). Therefore, humanity is the presence of life and everything which comes with it.

The narrator describes the harbor as he sails by its myriad of activities which also strike him as a perfect representation of the living world. From here he takes "notice [of] the vessels arriving," large ships and smaller ones all entering into the port to do their business (136). Such energy is also the way of humanity. Men and women are born into the world, as if sailing into port, and upon embarkation, a thousand faces and sounds rise up to greet them. The narrator also surveys "[t]he flags of all nations, [and] the falling of them at sunset" (43). The lowering and rising of the flags is a custom, bringing into prominence another characteristic of humanity—habits. At the harbor, as in life, countless differences abound along the waterside. Yet humans still find ways to regulate their activities to ensure a continual flow of interaction. Sometimes, these rules can be beneficial to maintaining order; sometimes, they stifle the very creativity inherent in a human soul by dictating the bounds of its functions. Nevertheless, life goes on, from the beginning of the day until the end, just as the flags predictably rise and lower. Therefore, the narrator finds another testament to the versatile, yet unchanging, nature of humanity.

This notion of continuity, however, should not be disturbing, for as the narrator admits, it is "one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest" (Whitman 78). Every man goes through the very same things. Life is a shared experience even though each individual acts upon his own. This is the dual role of humanity: to be oneself and to be a companion of the world. Despite the presence of habits and rituals, an individual still commands a large degree of choice in his fate.

The narrator explains this when he declares "[T]he same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we like, / Or as small as we like, or both great and small" (84-5). Every man or woman can play a role in a quiet, conforming manner, or one can make a statement and break the barriers of custom. Sometimes, and probably most often, the narrator feels men and women take a middle path since not every event requires bold intervention. Still, the choice exists, and life is greatly in the hands of the man living it.

Unfortunately, as it first seems to a living man, he or she must cross over into the realm of the dead. And upon the first experience of the crossing of the ferry and entering a spiritual existence, a man gazes upon the receding "[c]rowds of men and women [...] in the usual costumes, [and ponders] how curious [they] are" (3). Surveying the life one has lost is the first step in the acceptance of death. Longing enters one's thoughts, but as the narrator describes, the world of the living begins to seem strange and uncomfortable. This is natural since the man's spirit no longer resides there. Yet, as this revelation strikes as one initially crosses the water, "curious abrupt questionings stir within" (59). How can any man reconcile his old life with his new fate? What in a man's life and spirit is most important? Is there anything unchanging within?

The narrator, who experiences this transition, offers the advice that "[o]thers will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore" (13). The questions the newly departed spirit debates are no more unfamiliar to men initiated into the spirit world as are questions concerning death are for the living. As the narrator explains, "[j]ust as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried" (25). Every man who shares human experiences in life will also share them in death. Every soul will gaze upon the waters and the receding shoreline and wonder what is next.

Nevertheless, "[d]istance avails not, and place avails not" (56). The regret for departing

the world of the living and the uncertainties this germinates are fleeting, just like human life. Once a man dies, the affairs of the world no longer matter. There is a life to share in the spirit world, a common experience, and it is an unchanging experience. Therefore, spirituality will become the center of man's afterlife. Only once the questions of the new spirit are overcome can one then glance back into the passing water and proclaim, "[D]iverge, fines spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's head, in the sunlit water" (116). Just because one's life ends does not mean life cannot continue in another state of being. The water is a reflection, a mirror image of what has been left behind, and of what is still apparent. From this, death becomes as acceptable as life, and the true nature of water begins to take shape.

The narrator describes the water as "[t]he simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme" (7). In other words, water is the most basic entity which allows for life. It is also the very entity which carries the soul after death. In both of these functions, it ever remains one unit, with all of the smaller particles working together and making the whole. Because of this truth, the ability of water to participate in both the living and spiritual realms can be discerned. Hence the basic character of the human world, which passes from one generation to the next unchanged, becomes compatible with water, which carries men into life and takes them away with complete predictability. The narrator confirms this intertwining life and death ability when he notes, "I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution" (62). Water allowed him his human form and his life, keeping him afloat in the living realm until his time ended; now it carries him along, across the waters, and to the opposing shore. Water gives each person, each life, its own way to flow and experience the multiple facts of the world, and it also carries all lives away.

In death, water next imparts the spirit on its second journey toward a unified, spiritual

experience in a "desire to forge a continuity between the present and the future" (Gilbert 344). The narrator states that water is that "[w]hich fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you" (Whitman 97). All of those who once lived now live together in death, just as the particles of the water all come together to form a single unit. The spiritual realm is just the next state of existence, one which everyone experiences together and follows along in the same current. This is why, upon the acceptance of death, a man cries, "Flow on, river! Flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!" (101). After death, the spirit can finally consent to the entire process of life. Death is no longer a burden to a man's thoughts; it is a reality. And the outcome is not a life in solitude from other spirits. Therefore, the cry for life and death to continue is the ultimate acceptance of the human and spiritual being, neither of which could ever exist without the other. Eventually, then, the narrator and every man who follows him, reaches the other side of the water, a place where one "furnish[es] [one's] parts toward eternity, / Great or small, [one] furnish[es] [one's] parts toward the soul" (131-2). In the spirit world, the soul realizes life is important to live and is a special moment in time. However, it is in the soul where one houses one's truest being, and after death, this life, like the ever flowing water, can never be diverted.

The great extent to which Whitman employs images of human nature, the inevitability and experience of death, and the flow of water which binds both modes of existence together contributes to the powerful imagery of the poem as well as to the balanced position it takes in accepting both life and death as necessary states of being. This presence makes "death a ubiquitous and inescapable presence throughout the poem, finding covert expression in various figurative and allusive details [...] being represented most saliently by language itself" (Gilbert 341). And because the narrator of the poem can remind the reader that "[i]t is not upon you alone [that] the dark patches fall," it is possible to find comfort in both the life and death experiences

that one encounters (Whitman 65). This acceptance allows a man or woman in any step of the journey to not only appreciate the extraordinary process itself, but to understand and enjoy the importance of each and every emotion, action, and thought which connects one life with the rest of the extant and spiritual worlds. Hence, Whitman's poem is a great representative of two themes of his writing career, since "[i]n the second period he was moved chiefly by the thought of death, and in the third period by the hope of immortality," both subjects which fully emerge in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (Stovall 21).

#### Works Cited

Aristotle. *The Politics*. Trans. T. A. Sinclair. London: Penguin Books, 1992.

Gilbert, Roger. "From Anxiety to Power: Grammar and Crisis in 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry'."

*Nineteenth-Century Literature* 42.3 (1987): 339-361.

Stovall, Floyd. "Main Drifts in Whitman's Poetry." *American Literature* 4.1 (1932): 321.

Whitman, Walt. "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature:*

*American Literature 1820-1865*. Ed. Nina Baym. New York: Norton, 2003. 2189-93.