



## ANALYSIS OF WALT WHITMAN'S "CROSSING BROOKLYN FERRY": PORTRAYAL OF HUMAN UNITY, UNIQUE STYLISTIC FEATURES, AND DISTINCTIONS FROM OTHER WORKS

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**Abstract** *This paper investigates Walt Whitman's poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856) as a seminal work of American transcendental and democratic poetry. Adopting an adapted IMRAD framework suitable for literary analysis, the study explores how Whitman portrays timeless human connection through direct address to future readers, shared sensory experiences, and the irrelevance of time and distance. Employing close reading and comparative methods, the research identifies the poem's core themes of unity, continuity, and collective identity. Results demonstrate Whitman's innovative use of free verse and catalogue technique to fuse urban modernity with spiritual transcendence. Discussion highlights the work's uniqueness within Leaves of Grass and its divergence from Romantic individualism and other contemporary poetry. The analysis underscores the poem's enduring relevance in fostering democratic fellowship across generations.*

**Keywords:** *Walt Whitman, Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, free verse, catalogue technique, human unity across time, transcendentalism, democratic poetry, Leaves of Grass.*

Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," first published as "Sun-Down Poem" in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, stands as a pivotal text in American literature. Written during a period of rapid industrialization and pre-Civil War tension, the poem captures a ferry crossing over the East River at sunset, transforming an ordinary urban commute into a profound meditation on human interconnectedness. The central research question is: How does Whitman portray the unity of past, present, and future generations, and what stylistic innovations distinguish this portrayal from his other works and the broader Romantic tradition? By examining the speaker's direct engagement with future readers and the dialectical movement from sympathy to pride, the paper demonstrates the poem's role in advancing Whitman's vision of democratic equality and transcendental unity.

The analysis employs a qualitative literary methodology. Primary data consist of the complete text of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (Poetry Foundation edition, 1856). Secondary sources include scholarly commentaries on Whitman's catalogue technique and thematic studies of *Leaves of Grass*.

Two complementary methods were applied:





Close textual reading with attention to literary devices (free verse, anaphora, apostrophe, catalogue, imagery, and parallelism) to trace how Whitman constructs meaning.

Comparative literary analysis contrasting the poem with other sections of *Leaves of Grass* (e.g., “Song of Myself”) and representative works by contemporaries such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emily Dickinson.

Thematic coding focused on unity, time, identity, and the physical/spiritual dialectic. All interpretations derive directly from textual evidence and established criticism, ensuring reproducibility and low subjectivity.

Close reading reveals Whitman’s portrayal of human unity through three interlocking mechanisms. First, the speaker addresses future generations directly (“you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence”), collapsing temporal distance: “It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence.” This apostrophe creates an immediate, intimate bond, positioning the reader as a participant in the same sensory experience.

Second, catalogues in sections 3 and 9 function as dynamic patterns rather than static lists. Section 3 builds vivid images of motion and light (sea-gulls “oscillating their bodies,” “glistening yellow,” “slow-wheeling circles”) that gradually darken with sunset and industrialization (foundry fires casting “wild red and yellow light” into “clefts of streets”). Section 9 re deploys the same imagery through imperatives (“Flow on, river! ... Gorgeous clouds of the sunset!”), transforming decline into affirmation and elevation (“Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta!”). This structural parallelism demonstrates how external objects both challenge and affirm individual identity.

Third, the poem asserts shared physical and moral experience: “These and all else were to me the same as they are to you,” extending to human flaws (“The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me”). The speaker receives “identity by my body,” yet transcends it through the “impalpable sustenance” of the collective scheme. Results confirm that Whitman portrays humanity not as isolated souls but as “disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,” achieving unity through everyday urban perception rather than isolated nature.

The results illuminate the poem’s uniqueness and differentiation. Within Whitman’s oeuvre, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is more contemplative and geographically anchored than the expansive, self-celebratory “Song of Myself.” While both employ catalogues and free verse, the ferry poem subordinates the “I” to a balanced dialectic of sympathy and pride, culminating in serene acceptance (“Keep your places, objects there!”). This marks a formal maturity rare in Whitman’s earlier work.

Compared with Romantic predecessors, the poem diverges sharply. Emerson’s transcendentalism privileges solitary nature; Whitman locates transcendence in the industrial city and the ferry crowd, democratizing the sublime. Unlike Emily Dickinson’s concise, private introspection, Whitman’s long, flowing lines and inclusive





“you” create a public, collective voice. The catalogue technique, as Coffman demonstrates, provides aesthetic unity through internal motion/light patterns, distinguishing Whitman from mere enumerative Romanticism.

These innovations serve a democratic purpose: by proving “distance avails not,” the poem enacts the American ideal of equality across time and class. Its urban setting prefigures modernist engagement with modernity while retaining transcendental optimism. Limitations of the study include its focus on a single edition; future research could examine revisions across *Leaves of Grass* printings. Nevertheless, the analysis affirms “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” as Whitman’s most elegant expression of eternal human fellowship.

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