

WALT WHITMAN’S “SONG AT SUNSET”: BROAD LOVE FOR NATURE, AMERICA AND PEOPLE.

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Introduction

Composed in free verse, Walt Whitman’s “Song at Sunset” is a poem which eulogizes the wonder of everything and emphasizes the equality of everyone. By extolling all the objects and events in the universe alike, Walt Whitman demonstrates his positive attitude to the future of the emergent America and the future of all the human beings. This passage will provide a detailed analysis of this poem from two aspects: themes and poetic techniques.

Themes

In the beginning of this 60-line poem, Walt Whitman first wonders at the grandeur of sunset and is completely overwhelmed by it, saying “Splendor of the ended day, floating and filling me”. Unlike many people who feel sad about sunset for they see it as a symbol of end and death, Whitman shows his gladness towards it for he perceives the end of day as the transition from the past to the predictable and promising future. Then the spectacular sunset draws forth his belief in equality of everything, which is described as “divine average” in the poem. By saying that “till the last ray gleams, I sing”, Whitman indicates he will hold the belief that every life on the earth is equal till the last minute of his life.

In the third stanza, Whitman uses seven parallelism sentences to emphasize that everyone and every object is illustrious, from “all beings” to “tiniest insect”, from “speeches” to “senses”. Whatever he sees, hears and touches are illustrious to the end of eternity. And also, in concert with “divine average” in the first stanza, “unnumbered spirits” in the second line suggests that all the souls in space are the same and equal.

While the third stanza illustrates that everything is glorious from the dimension of space, the

forth stanza states that every period is good from the dimension of time. Whether it is “spring” or “winter”, whether it is “youth” or “old age” or “even death”, they are all splendid. “The superb vistas of Death” implies that Whitman has optimistic attitude towards death. Just like he views the end of day as the link between the past and future, for him, death is more like the path to immortality than the final end of life.

Then, Whitman conveys his utter satisfaction with himself. When he breathes, speaks, walks, and even sleeps, he can always feel the enormous strength stored in his body. Whatever he does, he feels empowered to take control of everything just like God. “To have gone forth with other Gods, these men and women I love.” Saying this, Whitman shows great confidence in himself and all the Americans. Besides, this line is a clear illustration of his brotherly love towards people and the firm belief that all the people have equal rights to construct the country.

In the following stanza, Whitman again extols the amazement of natural objects like “clouds”, “earth”, “moon”, “stars”, “water” and “tree”. Unlike other poems which demonstrate only the external beauty of nature, in this poem, all the objects are alive and have souls inside. “How the trees rise and stand up—with strong trunks—with branches and leaves!” In this line, the tree symbolizes the emergent America that will have a prosperous future and stand up to a giant in the world. And similarly, in the next stanza, from “O strain musical, flowing through ages and continents—now reaching me and America! I take your strong chords—I intersperse them, and cheerfully pass them forward”, we could see Whitman has great expectation for the development of America.

Later, Whitman enumerates the places he has been to, like “the Mississippi”, “the Eastern sea”, “the Western sea” and “Chicago”, showing his unfailing love for the land of America. The line “Or cities, or silent woods, or peace, or even amid the sights of war; wherever I have been, I have charged myself with contentment and triumph” demonstrates his optimistic attitude to adversity and triumphalism.

In the last part of this poem, by stating straightly “I sing the Equalities, modern or old, I sing

the endless finales of things”, Whitman strongly expresses his faith that everyone is equal throughout the history of human civilization, and everything is wonderful and never goes away. He praises every object and every event in the universe with “electric voice”, from which we could feel that his emotion is so intense that could shock others like lightning. In the end, Whitman again stresses his “unmitigated adoration” for the mighty setting sun, indulging the readers into the endless fascination of both the sunset and his thoughts.

Poetic techniques

As a typical free verse poem, “Song at Sunset” has no fixed beat or regular rhythm scheme and is filled with the use of parallelism and contrasts.

The poem expresses the theme that everyone is equal and everything is good, which somewhat goes against the stream and is quite unacceptable back then. However, having no fixed beat or regular rhythm scheme could make the poem express its opinions more freely and boldly, which ensures a way deeper impression on readers’ mind. Moreover, Whitman use large amount of parallelism in this poem to voice his ideas progressively and coherently. For example, in the fourth stanza, “In the annual return of the seasons” points out there is full of good in the passing time, then the poem develops with the whole life of human being, from “youth” and “manhood” to “old age” and “death”, demonstrating that every period is good and enjoyable. And in the last but second stanza, Whitman names plenty of places he has been to, from “the sea” to “the inland”, from “cities” to “the silent woods”, from “peace” to “war”. These images show sharp contrast, forcefully emphasizing that “wherever I have been, I charged myself with contentment and triumph”, showing great confidence and undefeated faith.

By all means, the free verse poetic style and poetic techniques used in “Song at Sunset” are aimed to unravel the theme effectively. The ideas hit on the ground in a lively and bold way in free verse style, and repeated demonstration by parallelism and contrasts perfectly stress the theme.

Conclusion

“Song at Sunset” is a typical free verse poem of Walt Whitman. Through large amount of use of parallelism and contrasts, Whitman’s firm faith in “divine average” and enthusiasm about everything in the universe flood the readers in waves. From this poem, we could strongly feel his innocent love for nature, loyal love for America and brotherly love for people. He is a sensitive poet who savors and cherishes everything in nature; a faithful patriot who foresees the bright future of America and is determined to witness it; and moreover, a democrat who cares for all the people and devotes himself into achieving the equality of everyone. Under the splendor of sunset, Whitman warbles with great confidence and enthusiasm. Overwhelmed by his epic “Song at Sunset”, we worship and salute this great poet in American history.